

From a failed coup to state of emergency: democracy in Turkey today

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Turkey has been going through a shocking and strenuous year filled with unprecedented challenges. Its citizens are already used to living in fear as a result of the terrorist attacks of the Islamist State (ISIS) and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). But still, the night of 15 July was unforgettable. Beginning with posts on the social media asking about tanks on the Bosphorus bridges and continuing with the sound of low-flying jets in Ankara, for most people there was a new terrorist attack. They were wrong. **It was the beginning of a new era for Turkey.**

The concept of state intervention is nothing new in Turkey. Its political history is full of coups and attempted coups. Roughly **every 10 years the army has plotted to take over** and govern the country itself in place of its elected leaders. Since Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish Republic, military officers have felt that they are the country's real owners and the guardians of its secularist order. Four coups, and an additional 'e-coup' have changed the course of Turkey's history:

- **1960** – Led by a group of young, left-wing military officers outside the chain of command, the coup was directed against the democratically-elected Democrat Party. It cost the lives of the Prime Minister, Adnan Menderes, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Fatin Rüştü Zorlu, and the Minister of Finance, Hasan Polatkan.
- **1971** – Known as the 'coup by memorandum', the action was staged against the government of Süleyman Demirel. The military delivered an ultimatum, instead of sending out the tanks, to the Prime Minister, who stepped aside and was replaced by a technocratic government. The move cost the lives of three revolutionary student leaders –Deniz Gezmiş, Hüseyin Inan and Yusuf Aslan– who were killed in revenge for the deaths of the three right-wing politicians killed in the previous coup.
- **1980** – This attempt followed armed conflict between right and left-wing groups in the 1970s and was the bloodiest coup, marking the country's political future. Islam was offered as a cure to the possible threat from communism.
- **1997** – The 'post-modern coup' started with the Turkish army sending out a convoy of tanks and asking for the resignation of the Islamist Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan, who had been the mentor of the former Prime Minister and current President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. All these developments led to the establishment of the **Justice and Development Party (AKP)** and determined how the party initially positioned itself close to the West, with a pro-EU attitude.

- **2007** – The failed attempt became known as the ‘e-coup’ since the army posted a list of demands on its website. It was stifled by the popularity of Prime Minister Erdoğan.

Since Erdoğan came to power he has fought the army and the possibility of a coup. Ironically, the Gülenists –the followers of the cleric **Fethullah Gülen**, who lives in self-imposed exile in Pennsylvania– had been the main ally in this fight in the previous decade. There had been huge **purges** before in the *Ergenekon* and *Balyoz* cases, aimed at secularists in the armed forces that might have been tempted to intervene in the future. The vacant positions were filled with Gülenists, who are now implicated as the leaders of the failed attempt on Friday 15 July.

The purge today

The numbers involved in the Friday attempt are shocking. According to the Prime Minister’s final announcement, by 18 July up to 60 policemen, three soldiers and 145 civilians had been killed, with 1,491 injured. Including the soldiers who joined the coup, the death toll rises to 232. **A purge is now in full force: 8.860 individuals have been detained**, with 990 of them already under formal arrest. Another 2,745 members of the judiciary have been suspended. Turkey’s High Education Board has requested the resignation of 1,577 university deans. The process continues in schools and in the Ministry of Education. The licences of 21,000 teachers have been cancelled. The total rises to 60,000 when considering all the people are affected by the current situation.

The impact of religion

Ironically, if the 1980 coup had not killed so many leftists, permanently scarring the left’s ideology, and promoted Islam as a cure to the possible threat of communism, Islamists would not be as powerful as they are today. The AKP publicly disowned Islam in the first years of its government, underlining its differences from its predecessors. Erdoğan pushed for further EU reforms and tried to locate the party within the sphere of democratic governments such as the European christian democrats. However, that position has been subverted and religion is clearly being used to mobilise its supporters. The night of the attempted coup, mosques made calls for the public to take to the streets, while crowds continually shouted the name of God throughout the night in both Istanbul and Ankara. **In the ongoing protest, Islamist chants shut out all else.**

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Mass mobilisation

The key turning point on Friday was the live connections of President Erdoğan and other AKP officials via **FaceTime** to different TV channels encouraging mass mobilisation. While it was predominantly AKP supporters and Islamists who took to the streets, most secularists watched the developments from home. **Mass mobilisation was the key factor in defeating the coup, in addition to effective police resistance to the army.**

There have been protests every day since 15 July. Public transport is free in some cities and the public is encouraged to continue to remain on the streets. An important point related to mass mobilisation is the attitude of the participants, who are **willing to use any degree of force**, which in the future could be directed at other opposition groups. This has been a frightening development as the masses might well mobilise again.

What next?

A state of emergency was declared on 20 July for a duration of three months. Article 120 of the Constitution was invoked by the Security Council and the Council of Ministers – both led by President Erdoğan–. The clause governs the **state of emergency** and provides the government with the necessary powers to regulate the freedom of movement, expression, assembly and various other citizen rights. It also extends the legal periods of detention. Furthermore, it is possible to ban any books, art work (music, cinema, theatre and so on) or any other forms of communication, including press, radio and television.

After the state of emergency, one of the most important discussions on the table is the reintroduction of the **death penalty**. The idea is being encouraged and promoted in street protests. Erdoğan has announced that he will approve a bill to reinstate the death penalty if Parliament chooses to approve it. The attempt is sure to harm Turkey's **EU bid**. Monday's European Council meeting on Turkey underlined the importance of 'unequivocal rejection' of the death penalty. This, of course, leads to certain questions regarding not only the future of EU-Turkey relations but also the [refugee deal](#).

Turkey's relationship with the US is becoming problematic as well. Turkey has closed the Incirlik airbase –an important NATO facility for the US-led fight against ISIS– to US use and all flights between Turkey and the US have been suspended. Although both the bans have been lifted, Turkish government officials have since filed a request demanding Gülen's extradition, which will surely have an impact on the future of the two country's relations.

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Another important problem that requires further attention is **the definition of democracy in Turkey** –essentially the majoritarian understanding of democracy–. The latter is not value-based, rights-based or law-based. The definition of democracy and what it constitutes change according to time. If Turkey wants to be a democratic country, all basic rights and freedoms should be given to all its citizens without polarising society even further.

Finally, in light of Erdoğan's push for a move towards a presidential regime, it is clear that there has never been enough support for a regime change, either in Parliament or in society at large. This situation might well change once the opposition has been purged. Hence, we may also witness a regime change immediately after the chaos is over. One thing is clear: the coming months will be crucial for Turkey.