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On an unsuccessful coup plot

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The coup of the 15th of July was a real coup and marked the most violent moment in the Erdogan-Gulen conflict. The event as such and its aftermath are complicated and multilevel analysis is needed. The character of the armed forces, the balance of power in the political and the military field, the political and social reality and the possible implications for the future are aspects to be studied.

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What exactly happened on the night of the 15th of July will possibly never be known to us. It is certain by now though that it was a real coup with main or sole perpetrators being followers of the Muslim preacher Fethullah Gulen. It was the most violent moment of the conflict between the President of the Republic Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Gulen, two former allies. The coup was (fortunately) unsuccessful. However, it carries great importance if we want to understand the balance of power in the armed forces, the interrelations in the Islamic front and the implications it may have in the future. The event as such and its aftermath are complicated and multilevel analysis is needed. The present article attempts to shed some light on some of these levels of analysis.

The armed forces as a field of rivalry

The army has always been playing a major role in the political affairs of the country, carrying its own ideological hegemony. It used to perceive itself as the guarantor of the principles of Kemalism holding the absolute right to intervene when it considered it necessary. The balance of power has been changing in the last years with the infiltration of members of the Gulen community into the armed forces. This infiltration appears to have started in the 1990s and intensified during the AKP rule, especially during the second term in office. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Gulen network cooperated towards the weakening of the Kemalist establishment within the armed forces in order to widen their sphere of influence. Instrumental to these interrelations were the Sledgehammer and Ergenekon trials. Dozens of army officers, among other suspects, were convicted in the first case in 2012 of planning a coup and of membership to an ultra-nationalist terror organisation in the second case in 2013. Both cases were considered to be part of the aforementioned Gulen-AKP cooperation. The conflict between them in the last three years led to the acquittal of all defendants and the consequent reshuffling of alliances rendering the Gulen community the common enemy of Erdogan and the traditional Kemalist groupings in the army.

The coup seems to have probably been the last attempt by the Gulenist faction to gain the total control of the state structures. The unsuccessful outcome was followed by the imposition of the state of emergency and a series of decrees that have the force of law aiming at a wide reorganisation of the armed forces. By the time of writing the dismissals in the armed forces has reached over four thousands.¹ At the same time, two decrees numbered 669 and 671 published in the government gazette on July 31 and August 17 respectively set out the total change of the structure of the armed forces, as well as of the military justice and education. They envisage, among other measures, the closure of the military academy, the military high schools and the schools for the non-commissioned officers. In their place the University of National Defence will be established, the rector of which will be appointed by the President of the Republic. Many of the responsibilities of the military judge have been transferred to the Ministry of Defence, while they also limit the responsibilities of the Chief of General Staff, strengthening the power of the President of the Republic and the Prime Minister. They also alter the numerical balance in the Supreme Military Council in favour of the political authority.

The above measures render, at least on paper certain military structures, under the political will and political ideology. As it has already been pointed out elsewhere they aim at restricting the autonomy the army used to enjoy.² Such changes mean interesting times ahead, as it is questionable whether they will be implemented with no opposition and whether the political guardianship they bring along will be welcomed.

Victorious (?) Erdogan

Erdogan indeed came out victorious in the battle. The great appeal his call had in the night of the

coup proved once again that he is a leader with a devoted mass. Millions of people came to the streets to defend their leader and their country under attack. Even if not all had pure democratic motives, and wanted to protect their “own” democracy, their role in the failure of the coup and Erdogan’s capacity to mobilise the masses should not be underestimated. A great number of people continued to gather in the streets and squares all over the country for around two weeks after the coup. According to a study³ conducted ten days after the coup the vast majority (84.1%) of the participants were AKP supporters and half of them went out to the streets after Erdogan’s appeal. In a “state of collective hyperventilation”⁴ which followed the successful deterrence of the coup the courageous crowd has been praised and heroised while Recep Tayyip Erdogan has confirmed his place as an unquestionable leader.

With the help of the media, which have been dominated by stories of heroism of the people and narratives against the “Gülenist terror organisation” (or FETÖ) the consolidation of the discourse that the country and the nation are under an eternal Gülenist threat is rather easy. The President’s discourse that himself and AKP once allied with the Gülen community because they had been deceived by the latter seems to have a strong appeal on the people. Gülen and his network have been demonised as the source of all evil, and new illegal activities are revealed every day. A great number of judicial and political scandals have been blamed on members of the community. The failed coup plot has offered the political authority a great opportunity to abdicate responsibility for scandals and human rights violations of the past, to legitimise authoritarian practices and the purge against oppositional voices. The recurrent theme in the political and media discourse which presents the country under threat by the FETÖ-PKK-ISIS terror triplet facilitates the authorities’ moves against anti-government and pro-Kurdish voice.

However, one can also argue that this is the one side of the coin. The feeling of almightiness is often accompanied by insecurity and the fear that if concentrated power is lost, everything will be lost. From the night of the coup Erdogan was reminded that even absolute power is fragile. It also became visible that Ankara does not enjoy the support they expected by the West. Solidarity messages came only after things started to develop in favour of Erdogan and the AKP government and as it was seen in the following days, even the accusation of a coup plot did not suffice to ruin Gülen’s positive one and to fix Erdogan’s negative one. Moreover, although the way things developed offers fertile ground for more authoritarian practices on the President’s side, the great size of dismissals and persecutions that have been taking place the last two months will not necessarily be without reactions and resistance in the short or the long term.

The state of affairs after the coup

In a period of almost two months eight decrees have been published within the framework of the state of emergency. Tens of thousands have been dismissed as followers of the Gülen movement from the judiciary, the armed forces, the law enforcement units, the academia and the public sector and some other tens of thousands have been taken into custody or arrested with the accusation of terrorism. The wave of persecutions and discharges is not limited to the alleged members of the Gülen community; dozens of academics, unionists and signatories of the January 2016 petition calling for an end to violence in the South-East have been removed from their positions in public higher education institutions. What is aimed at is a total change of the public sector, the ideological reorganization of the judiciary and military structures along the lines of the current ideological hegemony and the consolidation of AKP-Erdogan domination with the parallel weakening and silencing of dissidents.

Little opposition is being done by the other political parties. The unsuccessful coup attempt has brought a kind of unity among a segment of the political forces in the country. The far-right Nationalist Action Party (MHP) has long been acting as Erdogan’s crutch, expressing support to his authoritarian practices. The Kemalist Republican People’s Party (CHP), chose to join the nationalist-Islamist coalition –even with reservations, probably in an effort not to be excluded from the victorious democratic forces.

The leaders of all three parties, as well as the Chief of General Staff participated in the triumphant Meeting for Democracy and Commemoration of Martyrs (referring to the people who lost their lives the night of the coup) organised by the President of the Republic and held in Istanbul on the 7th of August. This atmosphere of unity could allow us to hope for a positive development if the slogan of “unity and togetherness” was not accompanied by the slogan “one homeland, one nation, one state, one flag.” What we witness instead is the exclusion of the pro-Kurdish Democratic People’s Party (HDP), currently the third largest party in the parliament. This intention had already been understood since the first days after the coup attempt when the President Erdogan invited the AKP, MHP and CHP leaders to the presidential palace excepting the HDP leaders. The selective unity in combination with the ongoing conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK and the multilevel war against the Kurds intensifies the polarisation and the anti-Kurdish sentiments in the society.

It becomes obvious that the utilisation of the post-coup atmosphere for further anti-democratic and authoritarian moves, the failure of CHP to opt clearly for more democratic solutions, the polarisation in the society with the consolidation of enemies and the wider insecurity do not leave much space for optimism for the future. Positive social and political developments are not to be expected in the short term in the country.

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