



**COUP ATTEMPT IN TURKEY:
MANY FAILURES,
MANY PROSPECTS**

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COUP ATTEMPT IN TURKEY: MANY FAILURES, MANY PROSPECTS

What happened?

The days of July 15th and 16th have marked one of the most critical and significant landmarks in the history of Turkey. The nation was threatened with an extremely serious assault as a group from within the Armed Forces attempted a coup on last Friday evening. The first scenes the public witnessed were the blocked bridges overarching the Bosphorus by military tanks that were joined by F-16 fighter jets flying low over Istanbul and Ankara. Shortly after, a statement was read from the seized state TV channel TRT, announcing that the military took over the rule in the country and Yurtta Sulh Konseyi (Peace at Home Council) was in charge. A curfew was called until a second order. People were shocked, frozen, and in the dark; but only for a little while as thousands of them left their homes with a determination to fight back against the coup makers. Right around this moment, President Erdogan's call for unity and resistance added courage and confidence to thousands withstanding against the armed perpetrators.

While the coup plotters rushed into satellite and telecommunication headquarters to cut down all communication, people were already on the streets, standing in front of tanks, calling out that this is an illegal attempt and that the military should go back to barracks. The plotters had apparently imagined that they will have at least some sort of support from the public, but this was not the case. They totally miscalculated.

The way public stood against the coup (not just the AK Party voters as portrayed by many foreign commentators) defending the civilian rule was a historic act of solidarity. The determination and unity of the political leadership, political parties, members of the parliament, civil society organizations, main stream and social media, security personnel, and top military officials struggling to stop the coup stood tall and strong. The people were attacked by F16s and helicopters firing and bombing directly on them but they did not leave the streets. The National Assembly was bombed many times but the parliamentarians stayed in. The police headquarters were targeted by bombs but none could create a retreat.

Today, the majority of the people stand self-confident and proud that they could protect their nation and freedom collectively. Gratitude also goes to those army officials who resisted the coup. Police force and special security units have gained an immense respect in the eyes of all for the struggle they put forth in stopping the coup makers. The solidarity of the political parties is yet another scene not to forget. Leaving their differences aside, all parties aligned against the coup attempt and political leaders lost no time to make announcements in this regard. The coup plotters most likely did not foresee this either and counted on some groups' support, which did not come.

Majority of the mainstream media in Turkey deserved the applause of the public in general; first by putting all political positions aside and giving clear and accurate messages and news in their broadcasting. There was no hesitation on their part to also take a stance against the

junta uprising as they continued to broadcast, giving voice to political leaders, state and civic personnel and also military officials not partaking in the coup. The healthy and uninterrupted flow of broadcasting was one of the major game stoppers of the coup attempt.

Were the reactions from the “West” strong enough?

In such extraordinary circumstances, the expectation from other governments was to hear unconditional support for the democratically elected government and condemnation of the coup, without any reservations! This was not the case. The first statements coming from the West fell short of showing that they read Turkey well enough. The initial reaction from the US made by Secretary Kerry was too short and too vague as it emphasized only stability and peace. Later, they stated respect for the elected government but this was after the coup plot was partly suspended. The first reactions always matter.

Unfortunately, the US was not alone. The European Union waited too long to extend respect for the elected bodies, however was quick to warn Erdogan not to use the failed coup attempt for an authoritarian crack down. Rather than embracing people of Turkey, the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Mogherini, was too impatient to state a warning that the EU would stop talks for accession if death penalty were re-introduced in Turkey’s penal code. This did not read well.

Germany’s Merkel was maybe the only one to say that her country respected the elected representatives, and stop there. Some other European leaders still keep their silence to this day. Let aside a strong support from the European leaders against the coup attempt, declarations were predominantly full of ifs and buts. They were perceived as undermining the solidarity and losses in the country, jumping too quickly to bleak future scenarios followed by warnings. Had they showed a stance with the nation of Turkey against the coup, it would have been more possible to work together to minimize a possible damage to democracy and freedoms in the aftermath.

If the coup plotters were successful, then would the West be talking to them as legitimate representatives of Turkey? Would the US call the coup process as “restoring democracy” as they did in Egypt? It is unfortunate that answers are up in the air. They should not be. Or are we expecting too much? These questions remain in the minds of the public.

What about the media and analysts?

A predominant part of American and European media outlets gave the initial signs of failing objectivity during the first twenty-four hours of the coup. Their accounts of events in the first few hours were full of vague and distant messages. There was a clear shortcoming in following and reporting the stream of events, President Erdoğan’s departure from his holiday location and the instant flooding of thousands of people to stand against the coup. Instead CNN International chose to portray Erdoğan as “Turkey’s beleaguered president” right at the moment when he was inviting everyone to the streets and announcing that he would soon meet them at the squares. Meanwhile, an MSNBC reporter published a tweet

citing “a US military source tells NBC News that Erdogan, refused landing rights in İstanbul, is reported to be seeking asylum in Germany.” It was no surprise that this quote was retweeted by hundreds as breaking news, encouragingly joined with more than many academics and analysts who are regarded as experts on Turkey. However, soon after, this news was falsified as the President addressed the nation in front of cameras in İstanbul. This kind of reporting by MSNBC, a mainstream American news outlet, can fairly be regarded as an example of irresponsible reporting if not a psychological operation, displaying the leader of the country as on the run, which is known to have a tremendous discouraging affect on people to give up their stance during such times.

As more detailed accounts followed in the wake of next morning, majority of western analysis consolidated around one position; falling short of supporting the democratic legitimacy of the people but rather preferring to put emphases on stability. A prompt analysis published on Fox News Opinion page on the next day (July 16th) declared that “Turkey’s Last Hope Dies” is a good representation of disappointment on the part of at least some western actors that the coup did actually fail. Rather than giving a full account of what was happening on the streets, they chose to portray the events as a fight between Erdoğan supporters and opponents. In an article posted on Sunday July 17th, BBC chose to throw its headline as “Recep Tayyip Erdoğan: Turkey’s ruthless president” to one of the few articles on its website reporting the coup. All these examples floundered in informing the world that people in Turkey were giving out an ornamental resistance to an illegal, undemocratic attack on their freedom.

It was also possible to read phrases from regional experts or researchers like “if news of the coup in Turkey is true, it would have major positive impact on the region.” Some of such analysis usually started out by a few sentences with quotes like “we stand by democracy and rule of law” and cut short by explaining the pros and cons of the coup’s failure. Some put it as a dilemma between supporting a coup or an authoritarian leader. A common trait in all these news and analyses is an open undermining of the social movement that has been detrimental to the coup attempt, failure to portray a clear account of happenings avoid of political positioning and a subtle trait towards cornering Turkey and the Turkish government with negative future scenarios.

A top-notch example solidifying the disrespect towards the public of Turkey came from the New York Times in the following days calling the Erdogan supporters “sheep” which seems to have wrapped up the western bias and oriental stance in the eyes of the people in Turkey.

The objective, well-intended efforts of reporting and analyzing should of course be applauded and set apart, and fortunately there are at least a few examples of these. However, the rest have taken their place in records by their prejudice, double standards and insincerity. Hopefully, self-criticism will prevail, and the free and independent media in the west will show a more acceptable performance in the coming days.

What lies ahead?

The early warnings of Turkey’s western friends regarding rule of law, freedoms and human rights are not overlooked in the public sphere anyhow. There are countless hours of

discussions on televisions and dozens of articles in newspapers about justice, human rights and social unity that should follow.

Capital punishment is one of these major issues regarding human rights. It is true that there is a part of the society that believe and demand capital punishment for terrorist acts of last weekend. It can also be assumed that the President and the Parliament can be justified to position themselves to be hearing these demands. Nevertheless, so far no government official showed a strong willingness to reintroduce death penalty. However, in the case that capital punishment is re-introduced into the justice system in Turkey, it would have detrimental repercussions. Not only it would hurt Turkey politically, also hampering its chances of attaining solution in the Kurdish issue, it would also severely hurt the public psyche if hundreds of people were executed in this day. This would be a roll-back for Turkey's democratic gains so far.

Another critical area is the vulnerability of Turkey during times like these for agitation to spark between different segments of the society. Turkey has seen many provocations resulting in deadly events that stem from the Alewite and Kurdish issues in the country. In order to prevent this, the political leadership should keep a unifying discourse, leaving harder statements behind, regarding all different ethnic and religious groups in Turkey. Furthermore, all democratization steps awaited from the government, now for a long time, should be taken without losing any time.

The government now has a huge responsibility to take the country out of this crisis. Reform is necessary in all sectors of the state; there is an urgent need of reform in justice and military institutions. The new constitution is now inescapable, more than ever.

People of Turkey have proved that they will not let their country to fall into chaos and will not tolerate freedom to be hampered by force. This is a new moral high ground which has united many groups in the society that have been at odds with each other for a long time. Turkey should not miss this opportunity for political consolidation and take the necessary steps for social peace.

If there is only one thing to underline boldly from this tragic experience, it should be the evolution of the social dynamic in Turkey that has proven to come to a point where it will no longer tolerate the extermination of its will and freedom by force. This is the most significant bottom line that the rest of the world should see and read carefully while commenting on Turkey.

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The views in this piece belong to the authors and they may not necessarily concur and/or represent the viewpoints of Podem.

PODEM (Public Policy and Democracy Studies Association) is an independent think tank established in February 2015 in Istanbul, Turkey.