



THE WEEKEND MILITARY COUP ATTEMPT IN TURKEY: UNDERSTANDING THE CAUSES AND IMPLICATIONS

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Military coup is not a new phenomenon in Turkey as for the fifth time, a coup against the civilian leadership was attempted in Turkey on 15 July 2016 by members of the armed forces. The pretext for the uprising was 'restoration of democracy, human rights, constitutional mechanism and law and order'. Though the call for 'reforms' was assumed to be welcomed by the people of Turkey—a huge miscalculation on part of the military however pulverized the coup. The government immediately announced a state of emergency and began its purge on all plot suspects including judges, professors, the police, intelligence agencies and government workers.

The current evolution situation requires special attention to understand the future of civil-military equation in coming years. In an article titled 'Will There be a Coup against Erdogan in Turkey?'¹ by Micheal Rubin, has highlighted the unfavourable developments in Turkey and how the conduct of President Recep

Tayyib Erdogan has caused anxiety among the military personnel in particular. The factors can be summed up as:

- Deterioration of national security due to the growing threat from Islamist fundamentalism and Kurdish conflict.
- Monopolisation of power leading to an authoritarian rule.
- Lack of criticism by NATO and European countries against Turkey and its leader
- Economic crisis and rise in corruption.

Under such a precarious situation, the military saw an opportunity to dethrone the civilian government undeterred by consequences of failure and act of treason. However, the support of Turkish people cannot be ignored that the demography of the state is in agreement to the government's mandate and changes while the military challenged it.

In 2015, Erdogan planned to amend the constitution by granting himself indisputable presidential powers to make his authoritarian rule more constitutionally void. However, the opposition with a majority dismissed the amendment. Remarkably, this did not deter him from scaling down his authoritarian rule.

The economic performance is another factor that has contributed to the woes of Turkish government. The Justice and Peace Party (AKP) for almost a decade since 2003 has presented a positive growth but since 2011 (post election), the economic growth performance has nosedived.² Many of Erdogan's economic policies have on the contrary backfired, for instance; sex work in Turkey has long been legal and has been one of the main sources of economic revenue to the country. But over the past decade, AKP-affiliated officials have closed them down and stopped issuing licenses. Imposing its vision of morality on the country, the President has compromised with the country's economic conditions.

The other most crucial change that threatened the Turkish structure was its secularist approach as laid by its founder, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. Turkey has always been a unique Muslim nation as it has been more modern and liberal in respecting its citizen's rights and freedom compared to the rest of the Islamic world. But the AKP- a moderate Islamist party initiated reforms and policies that drifted

away from Kemal Ataturk's vision of a secular Turkey. In fact, the military has its core military prospectus based on Kemalist secular ideology. Ironically, the AKP has attempted to recruit state-employed imams and preachers who have graduated from imam-hatip schools and vocational schools. This call was resisted by the Turkish armed forces as they feared that it would permeate the spread of religion into the armed forces and would also give greater leverage to the government to control and monitor the activities of the military.³

Another aspect that challenged the civil-military equation was the appeasement of the Kurds by the AKP government. While the Kemalist hardliners within the Turkish military led operations against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the government had struck a chord (temporarily) with the PKK. However, the fighting between Turkey and the PKK resumed as a result of attacks by PKK on Turkish security personnel and renewed Turkish airstrikes against PKK bases inside Turkey and also in Iraqi Kurdistan.⁴ These developments once again led to an alliance between military and Turkish government. This also paved the way for the military to crawl back again in the internal and external decision making process of the country.⁵ Hence, the new gained confidence within the military sphere and AKP's Islamist ideology was ought to clash with the Kemalist hardliners in the military.

In fact, the decree signed post announcement of emergency targeted noted foundations such as, the Association of Judges and Prosecutors (YARSAV), a secular group that criticized a recent judicial law drafted by Erdogan's Islamist-rooted AK Party.⁶ The arrest of suspects and closure of educational institutions is seen by many as an act of catharsis to gain support of the Turkish populace (Hakimiyet Milletindir – the People Rule) to strengthen Erdogan's government and in squashing the rise of the military in political affairs. The President now has the support of his people and pro-government media despite the hue and cry about his Islamist lineage and authoritarian style of administration. However, the discord in the civil-military equation requires serious evaluation by the government of the day.

Incidentally, domestic politics has direct implications on its international affairs. Therefore, if the internal crisis of Turkey aggravates in coming times, one such blow might come to its accession to the European Union which is slated for consideration by 2020.⁷ However, Turkey's EU membership which has been languishing for years may continue as the country is marred by internal stability, economic crisis, discord with the military, rise of Kurdish threat and the growing IS influence which could be a major impediment to its full membership. Not to forget, France and Germany have been the major opponents of its membership and are the two most influential countries in the EU's

decision making process. Many members have also opposed arguing that the cultural, geopolitical and economic differences are too significant. There are also serious concerns over President Erdogan's growing authoritarianism and human rights violations⁸ including his shift from Kemalist vision of a secularist Turkey which often preferred to relate to European way of life than the rest of the Muslim countries.

Nevertheless, the EU is already in turmoil post the "Brexit", economic crisis and the series of terrorist attacks. Moreover, EU is not in a position to grant membership to a country like Turkey which is already struggling with its economic growth as it may further aggravate its economic concerns. Therefore, Turkish membership is still in a state of limbo once again.

North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) on the other hand has been a mute spectator to Turkish domestic and international affairs as Ankara has always been an ardent loyalist of the West camp since the Cold War period. But its recent handling of the IS threat and the shooting down of Russian warplane has only aggravated the tension between the US and Russia during the Syrian conflict. Ankara has done very little in curbing the IS threat and in shutting down its supply lines. Moreover, the Russian political elites are unhappy with the oil trade between Turkey and IS for a lesser rate than the market price. Russia-Turkey relations have thus come to a standstill due to its actions in the Syrian

conflict. Unfortunately, in its attempt to appease the West, Turkey has antagonised Russia which has now discouraged tourism and construction business. These sectors are a linked to its national economy thus giving a major blow to its economic revenue.

Summation:

- a) The Erdogan's policies and actions have many opposition and critics and may continue to do so but the defeat of the military coup has reinforced his position in Turkish politics.
- b) While many view the coup as a political gimmick, the support of the people has displayed that they agree to his policies and continue to have faith in his leadership. This also shows a shift in the attitude of the Turkish civil society which prefers to have a leader with leniency towards 'Islamist ideology'.
- c) Its international image will hold good as long as it has the support of its Western allies but its individual acts may not always be endorsed by NATO or European countries. Turkey has been a potential regional player and has time and again shown how significant its role is as an ally. But if the government turns a blind eye to its domestic crisis, its regional and global aspirations will have an impact in its march towards its goals.

The military coup is thus a wakeup call for President Erdogan as a country cannot function by ignoring or downsizing the role of the military. The military is an integral part of its national security and stability and hence the AKP needs to introspect its domestic policies and grievances that exist in institutions like military and address them by involving the concerned parties. This can lead to a balance in the civil-military equation.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ Michael Rubin, "Will There Be a Coup Against Erdogan in Turkey?", The Newsweek, March 24, 2016. <http://www.newsweek.com/will-there-be-coup-against-erdogan-turkey-439181>

² Zach Beauchamp, "A Guide To This Week's Shocking Election In Turkey — And What Happens Next", Vox Explainers, June 9, 2015. <http://www.vox.com/2015/6/9/8752763/turkey-election-2015>

³ Gonul Tol, "Turkey's Next Military Coup: How Empowering the Generals Could Backfire", Foreign Affairs, May 30, 2016. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-05-30/turkeys-next-military-coup> accessed on July 8, 2016.

⁴ Cale Salih, "Turkey, The Kurds and The Fight Against Islamic State", European Council on Foreign Relations, September 2015. <http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/Turkey-theKurds-IslamicState.pdf>

⁵ N.3

⁶ Gareth Jones and Ercan Gurses, "Turkey's Erdogan Shuts Schools, Charities in First State Of Emergency Decree", The Reuters, June 23, 2016. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-emergency-idUSKCN1030BC> accessed on July 18, 2016.

⁷ Turkey and the EU: The pros and cons of membership, The Week, June 22, 2016. <http://www.theweek.co.uk/24083/turkey-and-the-eu-the-pros-and-cons-of-membership> accessed on July 18, 2016.

⁸ Simon Tisdall, "Could Turkey Really Join the EU by 2020?", The Guardian, May 22, 2016. <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/may/22/vote-leave-turkey-warning-ignorance-european-realities> accessed on July 18, 2016.

