

# WHAT ON EARTH HAS GONE SO WRONG IN TURKEY?



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**O**ne year after the mysterious coup attempt of July 15, the situation in Turkey has become much clearer. Unfortunately, it has also become much darker. In the confusing hours of

that terrible night, President Erdogan's declaration upon landing in Istanbul that, "This uprising is a gift from God to us because this will be a reason to cleanse our army," was both enigmatic and foreboding. In the hours that followed, he sought to bring clarity

to the confusion by alleging that a previously consistently pacifist civil society movement was in fact a terrorist organization and had been behind the coup attempt. At that moment, Erdogan had the empathy and attention of not just his nation but the global commu-

nity. No one wants to see a military coup succeed and a democracy toppled – especially not when this democracy represented the hopes of the greater Middle East and entire Muslim world.

Whatever the circumstances of the coup, the president’s insistence on needing to root out the shadowy forces behind it were hard to argue with. In the days that followed, however, it quickly became clear that whatever prior knowledge Erdogan might have had of moves against him, he was well prepared with a very long list of people and institutions that, he insisted, needed to be purged.

If his attribution of blame to an unlikely religious civil society network beggared belief, even stranger was the extent and scope of the post-coup purge. Almost half of the military flag officers, the generals and admirals, were purged, along with one third of the judiciary, and thousands of academics, including every single dean and university president. The rate of sackings, detentions, and arrests in the first ten days after the coup attempt was breathtaking. The regime made no pretense of needing to investigate; it simply asserted guilt by association with the “terrorists,” and quickly and methodically rounded up “known enemies.”

The purges began even as the coup attempt was being squashed, with the president urging crowds to take to the streets and stare-down the opposition. The response quickly took on the character of a witch hunt as neighbors, colleagues, and family members were urged to turn in the guilty, however slender the pretext. The accused were all declared guilty of supporting FETO, the pejorative term used to describe followers of exiled Sufi cleric Fethullah Gülen, even though many of those targeted in the purges, especially in the military, police, judiciary, and media were clearly Kemalist or

leftist secularists with no religious affiliations of any kind. In the months that followed the net was widened to include Kurdish activists and prominent dissidents of all stripes. Guilt simply required being linked, in some way, with the “FETO coup plotters,” but no evidence or explanation was given. By year’s end, when the parliamentary commission to investigate the events of July 15 would be abruptly disbanded leaving behind many unanswered questions, the contradictions had piled up in accounts from officials of what had occurred.

After a year, the numbers purged are staggering – and are still growing by the week: over 124,000 people have been sacked, and of these, more than 84,000 have been detained. Around 60,000 people have been formally arrested. The number of academics sacked is now around 7,000 and they are joined by over 4,300 judges and prosecutors. Almost all of Turkey’s independent media outlets, in excess of 195, have been shut down, and over 200 journalists arrested. More than 2,100 schools, universities and associated colleges and dormitories have been shut down. And over 550 businesses, with tens of billions of dollars in assets, have been seized.

Within days of the coup attempt, the extent to which president Erdogan would “make good” on his “God-given opportunity” to cleanse and purge became clear as he declared emergency rule and suspended parliamentary government. It soon became evident, however, that he was focused not on national security, but on consolidating personal power. A measure of how far Turkey has fallen came on the 21<sup>st</sup> of October, when the World Justice Project (WJP) *Rule of Law Index 2016* was released. Turkey had plummeted to 108th place out of all 113 countries surveyed in terms of constraints on government powers and fundamental rights.





Erdogan had begun to act in a more overtly authoritarian fashion after the Gezi Park protests of mid-2013 and the corruption allegations against him which surfaced in December 2013.

By November, all hope for a quick return to democracy was lost. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of November, nine parliamentarians from Turkey's third largest political party, the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP), were arrested in the wake of a series of purges against ethnic Kurdish organizations. Across the country, access to social media – Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp – was blocked, and in the Kurdish southeast access to the internet as a whole was cut-off.

On the 8<sup>th</sup> of November, President Erdogan and his increasingly authoritarian and Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) lodged criminal complaints against Kemal Kilicdaroglu, leader of the country's second largest party, the secularist Republican People's Party (CHP), as well as other senior MPs. They were accused of making gross insults against the president. In a statement the previous day that had triggered the legal action the CHP said that, "Turkey is now going through a dark and authoritarian coup staged by the presidential palace." The hitherto compliant

left-of-center CHP issued the statement after an emergency party meeting called in response to the arrest of the HDP MPs and the October 31<sup>st</sup> detention of the editor-in-chief and eight other senior journalists of the sole remaining significant opposition newspaper, *Cumhuriyet* (the *Republic* – a paper closely aligned with the CHP). The statement added, "The current political situation poses a serious threat against the freedom of our people and future of our country."

On the same day, Luxembourg Foreign Minister Jean Asselborn said of the purges, "These are methods, one must say this bluntly, that were used during Nazi rule. And there has been a really, really bad evolution in Turkey since July that we as the European Union cannot simply accept."

Even before these events, on November 1<sup>st</sup>, the *New York Times* editorial team was sufficiently concerned about the situation in Turkey to write that, "The United States and Europe are horrified that Mr. Erdogan has strayed so completely from the track he was on when he first became the Turkish prime minister

in 2003 and was hailed for building a model Muslim democracy." In the eyes of one of the world's most respected newspapers, the situation was unambiguous:

"What is unnerving in President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's march to authoritarianism is how dismally familiar it is: the coup that becomes a pretext for a massive roundup of real and imagined enemies; the claims to be the one man who can withstand the onslaught of foreign foes; the invocation of purported historical slights; the silencing of the news media. The world has seen this before in other countries. The pattern is tried and true; the tough question is how to break it."

At the same time, German Minister of State for Europe Michael Roth said his country would willingly accept asylum requests from Turks. He said Germany is "open to all those politically persecuted as a matter of principle."

Finally, in its November 12<sup>th</sup> issue, *The Economist* published an article entitled 'While you were watching Trump...Turkey locks up dissidents: President Erdogan keeps on purging.' The article concluded with the line, "Turkey's democracy is on life support. Mr. Erdogan is holding the plug."

What was happening in Turkey was not lost upon friendly governments. Even as the coup-attempt was unfolding, there were reports of international intelligence agencies intercepting transmissions which suggested that the coup-attempt was being seized upon to consolidate the president's authority.

This was not entirely unexpected. Erdogan had for some years begun to act in a more overtly authoritarian fashion. The decline began with the Gezi Park protests of mid-2013 and the serious corruption allegations against Erdogan and his family which surfaced in December 2013.

In August 2014 Erdogan had transitioned from the office of

prime minister, where he had substantial formal authority, to the office of president, where his formal authority was largely symbolic and insubstantial. From the outset he made it clear that he intended to push through a constitutional referendum that would confer upon the office of president extensive executive authority. Achieving this required the AKP to perform strongly in the 2015 general election, held in June.

Despite Erdogan's creeping authoritarianism, as recently as these elections, most observers inside and outside of Turkey were optimistic that Turkey's democratic cultural institutions would overcome the turbulence caused by one man's ambitions, and would self-correct. Unfortunately for Erdogan – and, it turned out, Turkey – the June 2015 election results saw the AKP losing support and dropping to just 40% of the popular vote, whilst at the same time the HDP Kurdish party finally crossed the 10% threshold required to take seats in parliament.

Tensions between the government and the large Kurdish minority were already high. On June 5<sup>th</sup>, just two days before the election, four people were killed and dozens injured when twin bomb blasts rocked a HDP election rally in Diyarbakir in Turkey's Kurdish southeast. No actor claimed credit for the attacks but suspicions fell on both the PKK and ISIS. The next day, a young Kurd, Orhan Gonder, was arrested. He was from the southern Turkish town of Adiyaman, less than 200 km north of the ISIS capital of Raqqa. Later reports confirmed that he, like many in Adiyaman, had been recruited by ISIS, and, after spending months with terrorist group in Syria, had been sent back to carry out the bombing of the HDP rally. Erdogan responded to the provocation of the Diyarbakir attack by resuming hostilities against the PKK, as ISIS had hoped that he would do. The



Erdogan locked up many dissidents from all fronts, including members of parliament. Selahattin Demirtaş, the co-chair of the Kurdish People's Democratic Party and MP, is behind bars since November 4, 2016. More recently, Enis Berberoğlu, MP from the CHP party, and Celal Çelik, the attorney of CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, have been arrested.

resumption of open violence between the Republic and the Kurdistan workers party (PKK) was a clear harbinger of trouble to come.

When a coalition government couldn't be formed – this “failure” was demanded by Erdogan – snap parliamentary elections were set for November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015. This vote was marred by irregularities and threats to free expression. The results, however, were very mixed for the AKP government. On the one hand, it succeeded in getting its popular vote back to almost 50%, where it had been at the height of its powers. On the other hand, the HDP, which the government accused of being closely linked with the PKK, managed to remain above the 10% threshold required to keep its parliamentarians in office. This meant that the path to a referendum that would confer upon Erdogan true executive powers continued to be blocked. It is not surprising then that the first half of 2016 witnessed a steady slide towards authoritarianism,

with major media outlets such as *Zaman* newspaper and *Samanyolu* television being seized by the government, while trustees were being assigned to schools and businesses. Many of the media outlets and schools were supposedly linked to the Hizmet movement, inspired by Fethullah Gülen, which Erdogan accused of trying to overthrow his government even before the coup attempt. By now it was very clear the Turkish democracy was ailing as Erdogan was determined to let nothing stop on his way. The crack-down on schools and businesses linked to the Gülen Hizmet movement surprised outside observers who simplistically described Gülen as “a former ally” of Erdogan sympathetic to his Islamist politics. In reality, Gülen was never close to Erdogan and resisted Erdogan's attempts to co-opt his support. He also rejected Islamism and advocated democracy as being more true to Islamic values.

Erdogan recognized that the Hizmet was far and away Turkey's

largest civil society movement and that respect for Gülen’s religious authority unparalleled. He was desperate for Gülen’s public support but knew that Gülen’s sufistic, apolitical orientation was at odds with his own fundamentalist, Islamist convictions. Nevertheless, Erdogan’s AKP attracted many of the same small-town conservative, religious Turks that were drawn to the Hizmet. And throughout its first decade of the AKP government benefited from strong support from the broader Hizmet community, who saw in it Turkey’s best hope for reform as well as respect for religious values.

The simmering tensions between the Hizmet and the AKP, which finally erupted in 2013 with the Gezi Park protests, came not from the grass-roots but from the highly educated intellectuals who served in Hizmet-linked universities, civil society organizations and media outlets. For ten years, they had uncritically promoted the AKP government but slowly came to recognize that it fell short of the commitment to clean government and democratic reform that they had projected on to it. As they began to speak out tensions gave way to open confrontation.

At the end of 2013 Erdogan was rocked by a ten-billion-dollar “gas for gold” scandal. On December 17, whilst the prime minister was on a state visit to Pakistan, 52 colleagues and associates were arrested, accused of assisting Iranian businessman Reza Zarrab in exchanging Iranian natural gas with gold bullion, in contravention of international sanctions. Four days later 14 further arrests were made and eventually a total of 91 were taken into detention. Prime Minister Erdogan, already smarting from critical reporting over the Gezi Park protests, was incensed by “treasonous” reporting on the corruption investigations by *Zaman* and *Samanyolu*. He responded by declaring the



Placard depicts Erdoğan allowing ISIS terrorists through Turkish borders to fight against Kurds in Syria.

corruption investigation to be a “judicial coup” and ordered the issuing of government decree on January 7 that saw 350 investigating police officers purged. He accused Fethullah Gülen and “international conspirators” of being a nefarious plot to destabilize his government.

Subsequent allegations of supplying weapons to jihadi fighters in Syria and of buying ISIS oil were also met with harsh crackdowns on the media outlets and journalists responsible. In 2015 it was the secular *Cumhuriyet* (Republic) newspaper that broke the news of the Turkish intelligence agency MIT being involved in the supply of weapons to jihadi militia in Syria.

Even without the “gift from God” that was the July 15<sup>th</sup> coup-attempt, President Erdogan had no trouble steadily consolidating his

power. His Western allies, though deeply concerned, had little choice but to watch on quietly and say little. The Turkish military, after all, was the second largest military in the NATO alliance – and this alliance was facing one of its greatest challenges in modern times, as it dealt with the horror of the civil war in Syria and the rise of ISIS in northern Syria and Iraq. Turkey was viewed as an important bulwark against the terrorist group.

This conflict, of course, not only saw hundreds of thousands of lives lost, but five million Syrians forced out of their homes. Turkey, to its credit, accommodated almost three million of these refugees. Nevertheless, many sought to find asylum in Europe, and Turkey became the key to regulating the flow of asylum seekers flooding across the continent.



At the same time, Russia, which had severed ties with Turkey over the shooting down of a Sukhoi Su-24M ground attack jet, by Turkish F16s above the Turkish-Syrian border on the 24<sup>th</sup> of November 2015, had begun to make overtures of rapprochement. In the wake of the July 15<sup>th</sup> coup attempt, Vladimir Putin reached out to Erdogan offering solidarity and practical friendship in the midst of trials. Suddenly, the prospect of Turkey turning its back upon Europe and the West became an immediate reality. The fact that most of the long serving Turkish generals working in NATO headquarters became victims of the purge along with fellow Western orientated generals back at home raises the real possibility that Turkey might even withdraw from NATO.

Given this precarious predicament, Turkey's Western allies have

been mostly muted in their criticism of the developments in Turkey – doing their utmost to keep the NATO alliance intact and to prevent everything from unraveling. By November, however, even this dynamic was not sufficient to mute the expressions of deep concern. The scale and nature of the purge was such that European officials began to draw parallels between what was happening in Turkey in 2016 and what had happened in Germany 80 years earlier.

When the civil war in Syria broke out in 2011, and al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) transitioned into the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Erdogan chose to turn a blind eye to the thousands of foreign terror fighters flooding through Turkey into Syria, believing that support for ISIS and other radical Islamist militia was the lesser of the evils so long as Bashar al-Assad, his erstwhile friend, refused to take his advice and step aside.

Under strong pressure from NATO partners, Turkey reversed its position in early 2015 and began to strongly oppose ISIS. Then, in mid-2016, Turkey swung again and aligned with Russia against the Salafi Jihadi militia in East Aleppo. This development in the second half of last year angered many in Turkey and appears to have been the motivation behind the December 19<sup>th</sup> assassination of the Russian ambassador to Turkey by a young police officer who reportedly had strong connections to Erdogan's AKP party and had worked on numerous occasions in the president's security detail. The incongruity of this is partly explained by the fact that even as Erdogan turned away from supporting Islamist extremists in Syria, he continued to use the rhetoric of Islamist extremism to bolster domestic support against those he accused of being behind the attempted coup.

This shooting wasn't the only attack, as the last year has seen

dozens of shootings and bombings committed by both ISIS and the PKK. Such attacks have been more frequent due to the shakeups in the Turkish military and police forces. The practical implication of these crackdowns has been that just as Turkey faces its severest challenges from both Kurdish and Islamist terrorist networks, it is at its weakest point in terms of capacity for counterterrorism.

This goes some way to explaining how the gunman at the Reina nightclub was able to not only shoot his way into the club and murder dozens, but was then able to make his escape and disappear before being confronted by police. The ruthless efficiency of this killing spree meant that he was in-and-out in 10 minutes. It suggests that the gunman likely had back-up support and almost certainly had combat experience.

On this occasion, and during the nine attacks previously thought to have been the work of ISIS, the primary victims were not from the more religious half of Turkish society that strongly supports AKP and Erdogan. Indeed, the first attack in June 2015 was on ethnic Kurds campaigning for the June elections and appears to have been designed to restart open conflict with the PKK.

There is every indication that Erdogan has used these attacks to justify his demand to be given strong executive powers, which he obtained with the referendum in April 2016. The media blackout that came immediately after this and previous attacks suggests that he would rather not confront the problem of radical Islamism. But if he thinks that ISIS can be contained and controlled, then he, and Turkey, are in for a year of further nasty surprises. The sad reality in Turkey today is that the collapse of democratic good-governance has made Turkey more vulnerable than ever to threats that even strong democracies struggle to contain. ▀