

Erdoğan's Counter-Coup Coup

August 2, 2016



When I was writing the following lines two years ago, I was almost able to see the smirk on the face of some of my comrades who would subsequently read them:

Traditionally in such impasses in Turkish politics the army has intervened. However, for the moment the military seems content with the more passive role assigned to it after the well-publicised trials involving its leading figures. That, of course, does not mean that a new military intervention is ruled out. So it seems to me that we are in for a bumpy ride.(1)

'These Turks,' I could imagine them sighing, 'they always exaggerate!' Alas, last year almost to the day I was forced to write about the massacre in Suruç, which was just one of the cascading violent atrocities committed against the popular resistance in Turkey since then.(2) And now we have to analyse how the botched military intervention of last week came about, and what the consequences will be.

The two principal factions of political Islam in Turkey after the 1960 military intervention were the National Vision (Millî Görüş) movement and the Fethullah Gülen Jamaat, the principal offspring of the Nur Jamaat (Community of Holy Light). They cooperated in the formation of the AKP (Justice and Development Party) as the new bastion of political Islam in the face of military tutelage.

Erdoğan and his close allies, who cut their teeth in the National Vision movement, do not have the necessary finesse to gain credibility in the eyes of the west and, although Gülen Jamaat had no political cadre with a similar calibre and reputation, it had managed to train a highly skilled cadre that infiltrated some of the principal institutions of state.

So the first phase of the AKP – the cooperation between two sides – was mutually beneficial. And during that phase the AKP gained recognition from the top brass of the armed forces. However, since 2004 the new phase of the relationship between the two components was marked by a rift that appeared between them – and the gap gradually widened under the pressures of political reality. In 2013 the relationship became unsustainable, and there was a very public divorce.

The trials initiated against the nationalist military junta on the basis of evidence that had been concocted, allegedly by the operatives of Gülen movement within the armed forces, suddenly lost the support of Erdoğan, and collapsed. The Gülen movement decided to counter this by publicising details of corruption and bribery involving Erdoğan's ministers and family members, and attempted

to use its influence in the judiciary to ensure the prosecution of some very prominent figures.

Erdogan distanced himself from the Gülen movement and started to demonise them. He sought support from the military top brass by letting them loose on the Kurds, and reversing the previous policy of seeking a solution to the 'Kurdish problem' through negotiations.

Kurdish war

The unexpected reversal of Erdogan's Kurdish policy was so sudden that even some of his closest associates were wrong-footed. The long period of tacit ceasefire ended abruptly and the period of extended and elaborate negotiations – that had reached the stage where Kurdish MPs and members of the government held a joint press conference and issued a joint declaration – was abandoned. A massive attack on Kurdish towns and cities was launched, comparable to the most ruthless of Sri Lankan actions against the Tamil Tigers: that is, to exterminate the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), to the last guerrilla.

The atrocities committed were unspeakable. One by one, the poorest districts of Kurdish towns and cities were surrounded by a ring of steel, and large swathes of the urban areas were obliterated by artillery and aerial bombardment aimed at defeating the well-entrenched guerrillas, who responded with improvised explosive devices.

The mounting police and military casualties led the government to adopt even more vicious tactics, such as blowing up or burning down any structure suspected of harbouring guerrillas, instead of attempting to enter and clear out such buildings. As a result civilian casualties increased substantially. One after another, almost all the principal districts showing support for the freedom movement within the cities of Kurdistan were attacked – and demolished.

However, these atrocities failed to produce the 'victory' hoped for – the 'pacification' of Kurdistan was not achieved. The utter failure of the military campaign, despite all whitewashing attempts, became apparent to all, and the strain on the military and police began to tell.

When these strains began to become obvious, western commentators were full of foreboding.⁽³⁾ It was clear that the ongoing war in Kurdistan, as well as Erdogan's Syria policy, which got bogged down in the sticky mud surrounding Islamic State, would inevitably force his government to adopt more authoritarian measures at home.

The government hoped that a series of such measures put in place after the 1980 coup would prevent any repeat. These included:

- The paramilitary Special Operations Police force under the control of the ministry of interior was strengthened to such a degree that the government believed it would be able to fend off an insurrection and if necessary challenge the military. They had been battle-hardened by their role in the Kurdish campaign side by side with the commando forces of the gendarmerie.
- The Special Forces Command was created within the army as a brigade of highly skilled, well equipped and mobile soldiers detached from the chief of staff. In that way they were able to operate independently of other main branches of the armed forces.
- The SOP and SFC were based near Ankara, the capital, within self-sufficient compounds, and in numbers believed to be sufficient to meet any contingencies.
- The intelligence services were also separated into military and police units, and each was run under the close supervision of the government itself. The traditional control of the national intelligence agency by the military was broken, and a civilian management team occupied the top positions.

- Great emphasis was placed on developing signal and image intelligence capabilities independent of the US, and in 2011 military-dominated signal intelligence was placed under the control of the national intelligence agency.

Effective

Despite the feeble nature of previous measures taken to prevent a military coup, this time they proved to be effective. While the junta managed to maintain control of army, airforce and navy headquarters, they failed to take over the Special Forces Command.

On July 16 a lower rank officer shot and killed the general assigned by the top brass to take over the SFC after the general had declared his intentions. While he was killed there and then, that act created a chain reaction and the skeleton staff on night duty managed to fight back and hold on to their positions. That was one of the first failures of the night leading to the defeat of the coup.

The Special Operations Police had been recognised by the junta as a possible centre of resistance, so a stronger force attacked its main compound. One of the fiercest battles was fought there and – despite massive casualties when helicopter gunships opened fire – the operational control of the police remained in the hands of the government. Then those police units were reorganised and employed to recover lost positions at military headquarters.

Of course, the first casualty of such infighting is the truth, so it was not easy to distinguish the facts from the many lies, but gradually it was possible to piece together what had happened. Initially surprise was expressed at the apparent lack of intelligence regarding such a massive junta preparation. But 48 hours later it was clear that the national intelligence agency had forewarned the chief of general staff and army – there was a discreet meeting from which a series of orders were issued to stop any military move. Why these were not promptly implemented to stop the coup attempt in its tracks will no doubt become clearer over the coming days, but a few guesses can be made.

The junta is formed around a core of Gülenist diehards, who believed – or had actually been informed – that they would be kicked out of their top posts, or expelled from the army altogether at the annual High Military Council meeting due to be held at the end of August. There were also rumours that the government could have acted even earlier to remove important Gülenist personnel following their involvement in an ongoing court case.

Around that core, other layers of the junta were gathered from among those who opposed to the regime being created by the Erdogan government. And then there was a larger section consisting of those sitting on the fence, and waiting to jump according the fortunes of the junta without fully committing themselves in advance.

When the government-controlled top brass ordered countermeasures, the junta acted prematurely, abandoning the prearranged timing, consequently losing the expected support of the fence-sitters. Most probably there were betrayals and self-preservation acts of ‘repentance’, which will become known later. In any case, when a small cabal of officers acted against the military hierarchy, and was unable to carry the topmost echelons with them whether by persuasion or coercion, it was almost inevitable they would try to cover up their lack of control by the harshness of their actions. As the diehards became desperate, the fight became brutal and the casualties mounted.

When the government felt confident enough to appeal to the general population to block the units despatched by the junta to take over TV channels, municipal offices, police stations, and critical road junctions and bridges, the civilian casualties suddenly reached unheard-of levels.

Aftermath

Erdogan could well have been aware of the junta's intentions, and there is a strong possibility that the government actually managed to flush it out prematurely to further its own agenda.

And, looking at the speed and effectiveness with which it mobilised its supporters, the utilisation of mosques under the control of the state religious affairs department with its strong Islamist bias, and the paralysis of the opposition parties in defending parliamentary democracy against military intervention, it seems likely that these government moves had been pre-planned.

Furthermore, Erdogan was clearly better prepared for the aftermath than the junta. Thousands of military officers, including a third of all generals and admirals, have been detained; thousands and thousands of civil servants, including teachers, academics, prosecutors, judges and police officers have been sacked, while many have been arrested and charged.

Fifteen thousand teachers employed by the Ministry of National Education were sacked forthwith. The licences of 21,000 teachers working in the private education sector – a mainstay of the Gülen movement – have been revoked forthwith.

Almost 9,000 police officers were sacked, and 1,500 of them were detained and charged. Hundreds of health-sector employees were also dismissed, and some of them were also charged. It was the same with employees of the stock exchange and currency department. Even hundreds of imams, together with muftis employed by State Religious Affairs, were sacked. Top members of the judiciary were summarily removed without due legal process, and have also been charged.

Legal niceties were dispensed with, as the mobilised mass of Erdogan supporters occupied the main squares – they created the appropriate background noise by calling for the restoration of capital punishment. Any oppositionist is to be dubbed a 'Gülenist terrorist', as the legal system of 'checks and balances' over executive power is set aside.

There is a strong possibility that a state of emergency rule or martial law will be declared so as to dispense with any parliamentary scrutiny. A referendum on a constitutional amendment to bring in presidential rule has been mooted.

The powers of the State Religious Affairs department look set to be extended to occupy a more prominent role within the state – SRA support was crucial, since throughout the night of the coup the imams continued to call people onto the streets, mixing their exhortations with ceaseless prayer conveyed over the sound systems of the mosques.

So where will it end? Things will become clearer over the coming days, but one thing is apparent: stopping the counter-coup of the Erdogan government will require a prolonged fight. Are the forces of democracy and the working class up to the job?

Notes

1. 'On its last legs' *Weekly Worker* March 20 2014.
2. 'Solidarity targeted by IS bomber' *Weekly Worker* July 23 2015.
3. See, for example, *Newsweek* March 24 2016.

Originally posted here.