

Democracy under Fire: The July 15 coup and Turkish Authoritarianism

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Abbreviations

AKP	Justice and Development Party	<i>Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi</i>
ANAP	Motherland Party	<i>Anavatan Partisi</i>
AYM	Constitutional Court	<i>Anayasa Mahkemesi</i>
AP	Justice Party	<i>Adalet Partisi</i>
CHP	Republican People's Party	<i>Cumhuriyeti Halk Partisi</i>
DP	Democratic Party	<i>Demokrat Parti</i>
DYP	True Path Party	<i>Doğru Yol Partisi</i>
EEC	European Economic Community	
FETÖ	Fethullah Gülen Terrorist Organization	<i>Fethullahçı Terör Örgütü</i>
FP	Virtue Party	<i>Fazilet Partisi</i>
HDP	People's Democratic Party	<i>Halkların Demokratik Partisi</i>
MGK	National Security Council	<i>Milli Güvenlik Kurulu</i>
MHP	Nationalist Action Party	<i>Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi</i>
MİT	National Intelligence Organization	<i>Milli İstihbarat Teşkilatı</i>
MNP	National Outlook Party	<i>Milli Nizam Partisi</i>
MSP	National Salvation Party	<i>Milli Selamat Partisi</i>
MTTB	National Turkish Student Union	<i>Milli Türk Talebe Birliği</i>
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization	
PKK	Kurdistan Worker's Party	<i>Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan (Kurdish)</i>
RP	Welfare Party	<i>Refah Partisi</i>
SD	Felicity Party	<i>Saadet Partisi</i>
TBMM	Turkish Grand National Assembly	<i>Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi</i>
TRT	Turkish Radio and Television Corporation	<i>Türkiye Radyo Televizyon Kurumu</i>
TSK	Turkish Armed Forces	<i>Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri</i>

Introduction

The democratic history of the Republic of Turkey has lasted for over 60 years, since the peaceful transfer of power from President İsmet İnönü of the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP) to Adnan Menderes, the leader of the Democratic Party, following Menderes's victory in Turkey's second multiparty election. However, Turkish democracy has been interrupted by several military coups d'état, ostensibly to protect the secular character of the Turkish political system. The latest, on July 15, 2016, was a resounding failure as the Turkish people rallied around President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to protect democratic values.

Yet Erdoğan is no friend to democracy. The leader of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP), Erdoğan is undermining democratic institutions in favor of personal authoritarian rule, even as he continues to exploit democratic values to justify his activity. This is reflected in recent discourse in academic and political analyst circles. Therein, the era following Erdoğan's election to President in 2014 is referred to as a "New Turkey". This has seen the replacement of the political dominance of Kemalism, the pro-Western, republican and secular ideology of the nation's founder, Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) with a new Erdoğanist ideology which is populist, authoritarian, and "foster[s] young generations that are fully devoted to Islamic and national values".¹

¹ Oğuzhan Göksel, "Uneven Development and Non-Western Modernities: A Historical Sociology Guide to the New Turkey", *New Middle Eastern Studies*, 8:1 (2018), 63-64.

Though the people of Turkey resisted the 2016 attempted coup in hopes of preserving the nation's democratic institutions, Erdoğan exploited the coup to consolidate the authoritarian power of the Turkish presidency. He has controlled the narrative both during and following the coup to justify a state of emergency allowing him to crack down on his political opponents, particularly those supporting the religious leader Fethullah Gülen and his *Hizmet* movement. This crackdown has expanded widely, becoming a mass purge of civil society. Erdoğan also held a referendum on constitutional amendments in 2017, during the state of emergency, when it was easier for him to suppress opposition media. Still not satisfied with the 2017 amendments, Erdoğan is now pursuing a fresh constitution, one that he is branding as what would be Turkey's first non-military constitution.

This paper focuses on the 2016 coup as a point of transition from democracy to authoritarianism, though certainly this process began well before the coup. Chapter one gives a background into Turkish politics before the rise of the AKP and Erdoğan. There is a particular focus on the struggle between secularist and Islamist leaders seeking to impose their respective ideological frameworks on Turkish politics. Chapter two looks at Erdoğan's political career prior to the 2016 coup. During this period, he gained the public's trust through economic reforms and a commitment to preserving democracy in Turkey. This is followed by a third chapter detailing the events of the coup itself. This is important for understanding Erdoğan's actions following the coup, which is explored in the fourth and final chapter. This latter chapter includes the details of Erdoğan's post-coup actions, and an analysis of the impact of his shift toward an authoritarian Turkey.

Islamism is a central theme in Erdoğan's ideology, therefore it is worth examining what that means. Islamism, or political Islam, is difficult to define, particularly as there is no scholarly consensus. Nazih N. Ayubi describes Islamism as a "movement which contends that Islam possesses a theory of politics and the State".² Graham E. Fuller calls it "a body of faith [that] has something important to say about how politics and society should be ordered in the contemporary Muslim World and who sees to implement this idea in some fashion".³ Mehdi Mozaffari defines it more exclusively, requiring a movement to involve violence and a goal of "global conquest" for a movement to meet the criteria.⁴ However, that would exclude movements such as *Hizmet*, which abhors violence, and while it seeks to reach out to Muslims throughout the world, including the West, it seeks cooperation with non-Muslim societies, not domination. In short, Islamism is a type of political movement or ideology which seeks to form a social, political and/or legal system which is clearly structured around Islam or Islamic values.

A variety of English language news media sources, both domestic and international, are referenced in this paper to ensure a balanced view of the events. *Hürriyet Daily News*, the main domestic source, was considered neutral or even anti-AKP, until its parent company, Doğan Holding, was bought by the pro-AKP media company Demiroren Holdings in 2018. Doğan Holding also owns the Turkish-language media brands Hürriyet and CNN Türk.⁵ CNN Türk played a central role in facilitating communication between Erdoğan and the Turkish public during the coup. The *Daily Sabah* is a pro-AKP news source. Foreign Policy Magazine (FP)

² Nazih N. Ayubi, *Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Arab World*, viii. London, UK: Routledge, 1991.

³ Graham E. Fuller, *The Future of Political Islam*, xi. New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003.

⁴ Mehdi Mozaffari, "What is Islam? History and Definition of a Concept", *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 8:1 (2007), 21, 23-24. DOI: 10.1080.14690760601121622

⁵ Orhan Coskun, "Pro-Erdogan group agrees to buy owner of Hurriyet newspaper, CNN Türk" *Reuters*, March 21, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-dogan-holding-m-a-demiroren-idUSKBN1GX23R>

notes that *Daily Sabah* was established following Erdoğan's falling out with Fethullah Gülen, the religious leader of the moderate Islamist *Hizmet* movement accused by Erdoğan of being responsible for the failed coup. FP describes the *Daily Sabah* as both "composed of thinly-veiled government press releases" and "conspiratorial", but also calls it "an English language window into the AKP's thinking".⁶ Similarly, *Yeni Şafak* is another nominally independent news media outlet that supports the government, Erdoğan in particular.⁷ The Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (*Türkiye Radyo Televizyon Kurumu*, TRT) has been the state media body since the Corporation's founding in 1964.⁸ Its main English-language news media is called TRTWorld, and despite claims of autonomy, it is heavily biased toward the government.

⁶ William Armstrong, "Army of Spin", *Foreign Policy Magazine*, December 9, 2014. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/12/09/army-of-spin-turkey-media-erdogan/>

⁷ Timo Kivimäki, "State-Media Relations in Turkey: *Daily Sabah* and *Yeni Şafak* as a Tactical Arm of the AKP's Foreign Policy", *Asian Politics and Policy*, 7:2 (2015), 324.

⁸ Eylem Yanardağoğlu, "The Media and Media Policy", *The Routledge Handbook of Turkish Politics*, pp. 139. Edited by Alpaslan Özerdem and Matthew Whiting. London: Routledge, 2019.

Chapter One

Turkey Before Erdoğan

Throughout the entire history of republican Turkey, the country has been deeply divided politically. There is a scholarly consensus on this matter, though the nature of that divide is contested. For example, Ersin Kalaycıoğlu refers to a changing political “Center” and “Periphery”,⁹ while M. Hakan Yavuz portrays the conflict as being between neo-Ottomanism and Westernization, despite the two ideologies not always being in opposition.¹⁰ Additionally, Soner Çağaptay has a more current take on this division; he splits Turkey into Kemalist and Erdoğanist camps.¹¹ In reality this division cannot accurately be attributed to any one issue. It is much more complex, encompassing factors including class, economics, religion, culture, ethnicity, party allegiance, and political authority.

Regardless of the source of this divide, the beginning of the conflict is marked by the Tanzimat, a period in the mid-19th century when the Ottoman Empire made liberalizing reforms. Designed to unite the populace into a new national, Ottoman community, the Tanzimat was a response to increasing encroachments, both politically and territorially, by the European Great Powers, and domestic nationalist movements from ethnic minorities, particularly in the

⁹ Ersin Kalaycıoğlu, *Turkish Dynamics: Bridge Across Troubled Lands*, xii. New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005.

¹⁰ M. Hakan Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the Empire: The Politics of Neo-Ottomanism*, 3. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020.

¹¹ Soner Çağaptay, *The New Sultan: Erdoğan and the Crisis of Modern Turkey*, 8. London, UK: I. B. Tauris, 2017.

Balkans.¹² One of the major elements of the Tanzimat was increasing secularization of the government. The 1876 ratification of a constitution was reversed in 1878 when Sultan Abdulhamid II suspended the constitution. He sought to re-embodiment the Sultan's dual role as the Caliph, or global Islamic leader and legitimate successor to the Prophet Muhammed, thereby using Islam to legitimize his authoritarian rule. This lasted until 1908 when the clandestine group known as the Young Turks forced the restoration of the 1876 constitution, which lasted until the end of World War I.

The Empire lost the war, and in 1920 the victorious powers imposed the Treaty of Sèvres, which carved up what remained of the Empire into various nation-states and imperially-administered regions, leaving the Empire with a small part of Anatolia. Even Constantinople, capital of the Empire, and the Bosphorus Strait, both critical to the Ottoman economy, came under foreign administration. The other economic center of the Empire, Smyrna, and its surrounding areas on the western Anatolian coast, were given to Greece.

In response to Sèvres, Mustafa Kemal, the already famous general who led the Ottomans to victory at the Dardanelles in 1916, raised an army and led both the 1919-1922 Greco-Turkish War and a civil war against the Ottoman Empire itself. His victories had two major consequences. The first was in 1923 when Sèvres was replaced with the Treaty of Lausanne, which ended foreign intervention, restored Turkish control of Smyrna (now called İzmir), and established borders including all of Anatolia and Eastern Thrace. A year later he dissolved the Empire itself, declared a Turkish republic, moved the capital to the small central Anatolian city Ankara, and instituted several cultural reforms.

¹² Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the Empire*, 28-29.

Though not opposed to democracy in theory, Kemal, now known by the honorific *Atatürk* (“father of the Turks”), prioritized nation building embodied by his “six arrows” ideological goals, and established a one-party state led by his Republican People’s Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP).¹³ The “Six Arrows” were revolution, statism, republicanism, nationalism, secularism, and populism. Atatürk’s revolution was one of Westernization. This included distancing Turkey from its Ottoman past. This was symbolized by his ban on the fez, a cylindrical cap associated with the Empire.¹⁴ He also reformed the Turkish language, introducing a new Latin-based alphabet and replacing words with Arabic and Persian roots, in an effort to both “Turkify” the language and distance it from its Eastern roots. The CHP adopted a parliamentary system, establishing the Turkish Grand National Assembly (*Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi*, TBMM). The government emphasized that citizens of the Republic were Turks, even going so far as to erase Kurdish identity in particular, referring to them as “mountain Turks”.¹⁵ Religion was restricted to the private sphere, modeled on the restrictive French *laïcité* system, known for the principle *freedom from religion*.¹⁶ Finally, the Kemalists rejected the Ottoman class system, claiming to represent the interests of all Turks. For example, Mahmut Esat Bozkurt said that “parties [other than the CHP] defend the interests of various social classes and strata. For our part, we do not recognize the existence of these.”¹⁷

¹³ Kalaycıoğlu, *Turkish Dynamics*, 46.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁵ Welat Zeydanlıoğlu, “Turkey’s Kurdish Language Policy”, *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 2012 (217), 105. DOI: 10.1515/ijsl-2012-0051

¹⁶ Joshua D. Hendrick, “Globalization, Islamic Activism, and Passive Revolution in Turkey: the Case of Fethullah Gülen”, *Journal of Power*, 2:3, 347. DOI: 10.1080/17540290903345849

¹⁷ Dragoş C. Mateescu, “Kemalism in the Era of Totalitarianism: A Conceptual Analysis”, *Turkish Studies*, 7:2, 234-235.

One of the main goals of the CHP was to secularize Turkish society. The Caliphate was abolished, and in 1924 all aspects of religion were placed under government control via the establishment of *Diyanet*, the Directorate of Religious Affairs. İmams and other religious figures were to be appointed by the government. What the CHP couldn't control, such as the Sufi *tarikats* orders, they banned.¹⁸

Atatürk summed up the Republic's domestic and foreign policies with the phrase *yurtta sulh, cihanda sulh* ("peace at home, peace abroad").¹⁹ The CHP followed a foreign policy of cooperation with Turkey's neighbors. First, Turkey sought good relations with the nascent Soviet Union. The Ankara government signed a treaty with Russia in 1921, and another agreement made in 1925 with the USSR. These affirmed cooperation between the two states, and guaranteed Turkish neutrality in the USSR's relationship with the West. This relationship lasted until the end of World War II.²⁰ Turkey reached a settlement with Britain over Mosul in 1925, ceding it to Mandatory Iraq.²¹ Similarly, Alexandretta was ceded to French Syria until 1939 when a local plebiscite resulted in its transfer to Turkey, upon which it became Hatay Province.²² Following a population transfer as stipulated in the Treaty of Lausanne, Greece and Turkey settled their differences by 1933. Furthermore, as a regional hegemonic power, Turkey played a peacekeeping role in the Balkans.²³

¹⁸ Murat Somer, "Turkish Secularism: Looking Forward and Beyond the West", *The Routledge Handbook of Turkish Politics*, 46-47. Edited by Alpaslan Özerdem and Matthew Whiting. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2019.

¹⁹ Kalaycıoğlu, *Turkish Dynamics*, 47.

²⁰ Yücel Gülçü, "The Basic Principles and Practices of Turkish Foreign Policy under Atatürk", *Belleten (Türk Tarih Kurumu)*, 64:241 (2000), 951-953.

²¹ Lacin Idil Oztig and Mehmet Akif Okur, "Border Settlement Dynamics and Border Status Quo: A Comparative Analysis of Turkey's Borders", *Geopolitics*, 2022, preprint, 6-9. DOI: 10.1080/14650045.2022.2084385

²² Kalaycıoğlu, *Turkish Dynamics*, 39, 42.

²³ Gülçü, *Foreign Relations*, 955-957.

By the end of WWII, domestic and international pressures mounted for democratic reform. In 1946 the Democrat Party (*Demokrat Parti*, DP), led by Adnan Menderes and composed mainly of former CHP members, became the CHP's first opposition party. An election soon followed. However, the election was not free and fair, and the CHP won with over 80% of the seats in the TBMM.²⁴ Kalaycıoğlu notes that, driven by the Truman Doctrine, which sought to prevent the international spread of communism, in 1947 the US also used its Marshall Plan to encourage Turkey to democratize.²⁵ In the 1950 election, dubbed the “White Revolution”, fairer methods were instituted, and the DP won 53% of the vote. The DP remained in power for the next ten years with Menderes as Prime Minister.²⁶

During the early 1950s, Turkey experienced an economic boom under DP administration, and a pro-Western foreign policy shift, including gaining North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) membership in 1952. However, by the mid-1950s the economy fell, leading to large consumer goods shortages by 1956. Furthermore, the DP became more authoritarian. In the 1957 election, the DP engaged in the same vote-rigging activities as the CHP had a decade earlier. Speech became further restricted, including a ban in universities on discussion about inflation that led to student protests by April 1960. The CHP also led protests after the DP banned İsmet İnönü and other CHP party leaders from the TBMM.²⁷

A crackdown on protestors by the DP resulted in the deaths of some student protesters. Following this, on May 27, 1960 a faction of Kemalists and nationalists in the military

²⁴ Kalaycıoğlu, *Turkish Dynamics*, 71-73.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 75.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 81-84.

intervened to restore order.²⁸ Many senior DP officials were arrested, and Menderes was executed. A new constitution was established in 1961, which added new government institutions to balance out the TBMM. These included the Senate (*Cumhuriyet Senatosu*), Constitutional Court (*Anayasa Mahkemesi*, AYM), and most significantly, National Security Council (*Milli Güvenlik Kurulu*, MGK).²⁹ Composed of the president, prime minister, some senior ministers from the TBMM, and several high ranking military officers,³⁰ the MGK became the primary vehicle for the TSK to involve itself politically, and could give “opinions” to the TBMM.³¹ This marked the beginning of Turkey’s “tutelary” political framework, in which the MGK allowed the military to play a paternalistic political role. Under this context, democratic politics resumed shortly after ratifying the constitution, with an election held in October 1961.³² However, this political era was unstable. Kalaycıoğlu notes, “as young vigilantes who self-designated themselves to be the guardians of the regime, [the young officers] rose up in 1962 and once more in 1963”, though both attempts failed.³³

Even after 1963, instabilities remained. The 1961 constitution widened political rights, and the range of movements from the far right to the far left swelled. By the late 1960s, they devolved into violent confrontations. Economic difficulties made the situation worse.³⁴ In 1971, the government was led by Süleyman Demirel’s Justice Party (*Adalet Partisi*, AP). The MGK

²⁸ Kalaycıoğlu, *Turkish Dynamics*, 85.

²⁹ Metin Heper, “Civil-Military Relations”, *The Routledge Handbook of Turkish Politics*, 117. Edited by Alpaslan Özerdem and Matthew Whiting. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2019.

³⁰ Ayşegül Kars Kaynar, “Making of Military Tutelage in Turkey: the National Security Council in the 1961 and 1982 Constitutions” *Turkish Studies*, 19:3, 459-460. DOI: 10.1080/14683849.2017.1387055

³¹ Begüm Burak, “The Role of the Military in Turkish Politics: To Guard Whom and From What?” *European Journal of Economic and Political Studies*, 4:1 (2011), 157.

³² Kalaycıoğlu, *Turkish Dynamics*, 95.

³³ *Ibid.*, 98.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 103-105.

issued a communiqué to the government demanding that order be restored. Instead, seeing the writing on the wall, Demirel resigned, and his position was replaced by CHP member Nihat Erim in a new military government that would last for two years.³⁵ This event is now referred to as the “coup by memorandum”.³⁶

The 1971 coup failed to resolve the problems of previous decades. Instead, the instability got worse, as there were mass shortages of basic necessities. Extremist politics reached new heights, causing street violence as each group endeavored to shut down its opponents by force, leading to several thousand deaths.³⁷ The military stepped in once again in September 1980. Initially reluctant to do so, the military banned several mainstream political parties after they opposed the military régime. A new constitution was drafted, which was ratified in 1982.³⁸

The 1982 constitution remains in force today, with various amendments made over the years. The constitution preserved most of the institutions established from 1924 and 1961, though it abolished the Senate.³⁹ However, while keeping the parliamentary system, it also strengthened both the MGK’s tutelary role, and the dominance of the military within the MGK. The MGK was now able to set policy which the TBMM would be expected to abide by and implement, while four ministers were replaced with additional military officers.⁴⁰

The first post-coup election was held in 1983. The big winner of the election was the centre-right Motherland Party (*Anavatan Partisi*, ANAP), led by former World Bank economist

³⁵ Kalaycıoğlu, *Turkish Dynamics*, 106.

³⁶ Çağaptay, *The New Sultan*, 32.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 50-51.

³⁸ Heper, *Civil-Military Relations*, 118.

³⁹ Kalaycıoğlu, *Turkish Dynamics*, 131.

⁴⁰ Kaynar, *Military Tutelage*, 461.

Turgut Özal. His economic liberalization led to a new middle class.⁴¹ His pro-Western stance culminated in Turkey's applying to join the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1987, which also pushed Turkey to establish increased human rights. For example, capital punishment was ended, and new protections for Kurds were established.⁴²

However, Özal also introduced a moderate Islamist policy called "Turkish-Islamic Synthesis", which eased the strict secularism favored by the Kemalists. This was particularly popular among a faction of ANAP members who had joined the party after the shutdown of the National Salvation Party (*Milli Selamet Partisi*, MSP), a 1970s Islamist party. Islamic language re-entered political rhetoric, and the İmam Hatip schools received increased government financial support. The military allowed this because they viewed it as an effective counter to growth of left wing ideology.⁴³

Özal passed away suddenly in 1993. Following his death, ANAP allied with the True Path Party (*Doğru Yol Partisi*, DYP), but looming economic problems made the two parties drop in popularity.⁴⁴ This led to a coalition with the Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*, RP), an Islamist party led by Necmettin Erbakan, who became prime minister in 1996.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Çağaptay, *The New Sultan*, 59-60.

⁴² Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the Empire*, 110.

⁴³ Çağaptay, *The New Sultan*, 60-61.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 65-66.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 77-78.

Chapter Two

Erdoğan before 2016

Born on February 6, 1956, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan grew up in Kasımpaşa, a rough neighborhood in the heart of İstanbul.⁴⁶ Kasımpaşa sat on the side of a hill which overlooked the Golden Horn, at the top of which sat Nişantaşı, one of the richest neighborhoods in the entire city. He grew up in a conservative religious family with an authoritarian father. His high piety relative to his peers earned him a placement at a local İmam Hatip school, where he studied until late adolescence.⁴⁷ At the İmam Hatip school, he joined the National Turkish Student Union (*Milli Türk Talebe Birliği*, MTTB) where he was exposed to Islamism and Turkish nationalism.⁴⁸

Erdoğan has two main ideological influences. The first is Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, whose work he discovered while studying at the İmam Hatip school. The other was Necmettin Erbakan, whom he met early in his political career. Kısakürek was an Islamist thinker and poet whose career spanned from the founding of the Republic to his death in 1983. Through his career, Erbakan had been the leader of three Islamist parties, the National Outlook Party (*Milli Nizam Partisi*, MNP), and the previously mentioned MSP and RP parties.⁴⁹

Born in 1904 in İstanbul, Kısakürek was Western-educated, though he did not complete a degree. Since returning to İstanbul from Paris, despite his faith and conservatism he lived a life

⁴⁶ Yavuz, *Making of an Autocrat*, 35.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 39-40.

⁴⁸ Çağaptay, *The New Sultan*, 49.

⁴⁹ Yavuz, *Making of an Autocrat*, 47-59.

of debauchery. He felt alienated by the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, which was compounded by the hardline secularism of the new Republican state.⁵⁰ Then by the mid-1930s, he connected with several Nakşibendi theologians and abandoned his decadent ways.⁵¹ From then on, his politics could be described as nationalist, anti-semitic, anti-Western, anti-democratic, totalitarian and fascist.⁵² Kısakürek's focus was on Turkish Islam, particularly in the Ottoman context. He opposed the Tanzimat reforms, and wished to see Turkey ruled by *Şeriat* (Islamic law). He saw the authoritarian Sultan Abdulhamid II as a moral leader who should be emulated.

Kısakürek's fascist beliefs deserve a closer analysis to understand Erdoğan. The elder saw the world as amounting to Turkish Muslims against the world. His enemies constituted a broad range, including Jews, the West, Kemalists, and the Left. Themes of anger and revenge came up time and again in Kısakürek's works. Also, he asserted that Islam should permeate society, in both the public and private spheres. Education was to be strictly controlled by the government to inculcate piety among Turks. Finally, he believed that such a state should be ruled by a *başyüce*, a single authoritarian leader who would lead the public to an ideal Islamic society.

Following his religious education, Erdoğan was drawn to the MSP and by 1976 had become a local youth leader in the party.⁵³ A year later he met Erbakan when Erdoğan performed in a play he had written and produced which had anti-semitic themes.⁵⁴ Erbakan was in the audience. Erbakan founded the *millî görüş* movement, which sought a redefinition of Turkish

⁵⁰ Kaya Genç, "Reading Between the Lines: The Slow Reveal of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Grandiose Vision", *World Policy Journal*, 35:2 (Summer 2018), 48. DOI: 10.1215/07402775-7085616

⁵¹ Yavuz, *Making of an Autocrat*, 48.

⁵² Yavuz, *Framework for Understanding*, 16.

⁵³ Çağptay, *The New Sultan*, 49.

⁵⁴ Yavuz, *Neo-Ottomanism*, 89.

identity that would center Islam as the primary unifying characteristic.⁵⁵ It focused on combatting secularism and seeking to impose an Islamic moral system while working within the existing democratic system.⁵⁶ It was also deeply anti-semitic.⁵⁷

Erbakan peppered his speeches with Ottoman nostalgia, invoking its historical place as a world power. He looked to Sultan Abdulhamid II as his ideological role model. He mobilized conservative youth, referring to them as *akıncılar* (“raiders”), referencing historical Ottoman frontier soldiers. Ottoman identity was wrapped up in Islamic identity, and vice versa.⁵⁸ Erdoğan took this neo-Ottomanism to heart, and it heavily influenced his politics.

Erdoğan’s political career got a big break when in 1994, he was elected mayor of İstanbul. At the time, the city was undergoing growing pains from rapid urbanization. This was compounded by a drought which ultimately brought down the previous mayor. Furthermore, İstanbul suffered from inadequate city services, a problem driven by bureaucratic corruption. Erdoğan ran on a populist campaign strategy: the RP, and therefore Erdoğan himself, were projected as the “voice of the silent masses”.⁵⁹ His campaign proposed a strategy for resolving the problems plaguing the city, promising what he called an “emergency action plan”.⁶⁰

Once in office, Erdoğan set to work. While corruption problems didn’t change, in his four years as mayor, he significantly improved the lives of his constituents, though some programs were continuations of those created by the previous mayor, the leftist Nurettin Süzen. Most

⁵⁵ Chen Yang & Changgang Guo, “‘National Outlook Movement’ in Turkey: A Study on the Rise and Development of Islamic Political Parties”, *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)*, 9:3 (2015), 2. DOI: 10.1080/19370679.2015.12023269

⁵⁶ Yavuz, *Making of an Autocrat*, 58-59.

⁵⁷ Çağaptay, *New Sultan*, 47-48.

⁵⁸ Yavuz, *Neo-Ottomanism*, 135-6.

⁵⁹ Çağaptay, *The New Sultan*, 70-73.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

notably, he improved water treatment, expanded transit, and oversaw the building of new schools and hospitals. He also improved the city's green spaces, including the replanting of a native tree species local to the city.⁶¹

Erdoğan's mayoral tenure came to an end in 1999 as a result of his having recited an Islamist poem two years earlier. Written by Ottoman poet Ziya Gökalp, a Turkish nationalist who heavily influenced Atatürk, the poem included the lines, "minarets are bayonets, domes helmets; mosques are our barracks, and the believers are soldiers." Erdoğan's recitation led to a incitement to hatred charge, connected to the anti-secular nature of the verse.⁶² He served a four month prison term and was banned from politics for life.⁶³

Erdoğan's party faced legal trouble as well. The RP was shut down by the AYM in 1997, as was its successor, the Virtue Party (*Fazilet Partisi*, FP) in 2001, for their overt Islamist rhetoric. Erbakan was also banned from politics.⁶⁴ These events convinced Erdoğan that he would need to conceal his Islamist politics to make a comeback, at least until he could eliminate such legal barriers. This caused a split between the former members of the FP. Those who wanted to retain the character of the RP created yet another overt *millî görüş* party, the Felicity Party (*Saadet Partisi*, SD).⁶⁵ Others, including Erdoğan, saw the need to tone down religious rhetoric to avoid yet another ban from the AYM. Led by Erdoğan behind the scenes despite his ban, this faction formed the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) in 2001.⁶⁶

⁶¹ Çağaptay, *The New Sultan*, 75.

⁶² Hootan Shambayati, "A Tale of Two Mayors: Courts and Politics in Iran and Turkey", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 36 (2004), 266-267. DOI: 10.1017.S0020743804362057

⁶³ Ibid., 267.

⁶⁴ Çağaptay, *The New Sultan*, 81.

⁶⁵ Yavuz, *Making of an Autocrat*, 4.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 127-128.

The AKP ran in the 2002 general election, minus Erdoğan. The campaign was led by the party's official leader, Abdullah Gül. The AKP won, making Gül prime minister.⁶⁷ Erdoğan's political ban was then lifted in March 2003 after the TBMM, now dominated by the AKP, made a constitutional amendment overriding the ban.⁶⁸ A by-election was held for Erdoğan, and upon winning, Gül stepped down, allowing Erdoğan to officially lead the party and the country.⁶⁹

The early political policy of the AKP was two-faced. The party could not, for fear of running into trouble with the AYM like its predecessors, pursue an overt Islamist agenda. It needed a strategy that would conceal its Islamist designs while reforming Turkey's political institutions to remove such barriers. During his first term as prime minister, Erdoğan focused on building political consensus. He achieved this by pursuing neoliberal economic policies and an apparent Western-oriented foreign policy, the latter leading to a re-emphasis on seeking membership in the European Union (EU). This was the strongest such attempt since Özal's.⁷⁰ However, despite using the accession process to push Turkey toward democratic and human rights reforms, some EU member states were reluctant to accept Turkey, seeing its Islamic identity as insufficiently European.⁷¹

Erdoğan courted many political interest groups. His neoliberalism attracted business interests, while efforts to resolve domestic ethnic conflicts appealed to Kurdish nationalists.⁷² However, Erdoğan built his success on the economic growth the country was undergoing. He

⁶⁷ Çağaptay, *The New Sultan*, 90.

⁶⁸ Shambayati, *Tale of Two Mayors*, 269.

⁶⁹ Çağaptay, *The New Sultan*, 90.

⁷⁰ Yavuz, *Making of an Autocrat*, 139-140.

⁷¹ Christoph Ramm, "The 'Sick Man' Beyond Europe: The Orientalization of Turkey and Turkish Immigrants in European Union Accession Discourses in Germany", *Racism Postcolonialism Europe*, 106-107. Edited by Graham Huggan and Ian Law. Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2009.

⁷² Ramm, *Orientalization of Turkey*, 140.

continued Özal's transition to a free market economy, while increasing access to credit and social services, focusing on health care and education. He also stabilized the Turkish lira, bringing inflation from above 50% to under 10%, before converting Turkey's currency in 2005 to a new lira equal to one million old lira. This boosted foreign trade as investors grew more confident in the Turkish economy. Domestic purchasing power increased as well.⁷³

The AKP's economic policies, as with its efforts at democratization, were largely motivated by the prospect of joining the EU. However, by the late 2000s, it became increasingly apparent to most Turks that the EU was not going to accept Turkey's membership.⁷⁴ At this point the AKP looked elsewhere for allies, seeking to boost relations with former Ottoman successor states in the Middle East instead. It was hoped that Turkey could exert its soft power through economic and cultural ties with its Asian neighbors. This became known as then-Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's "zero problems with neighbors" policy. However, the spread of the Arab Spring led to a civil war, in turn leading to the rise of the Islamic State in Syria by 2011, with much of the conflict being fought on Turkey's southern border, particularly between ISIS and Kurdish rebels in Eastern Syria and Northern Iraq.⁷⁵ Turkey's international problems were worse than ever. Turkish interventions in Syria soured relations with Russia as well, eventually leading to a 2015 international incident where Turkey shot down a Russian military jet violating Turkish airspace over Hatay province.⁷⁶

⁷³ Çağaptay, *New Sultan*, 91-93.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁷⁵ Mustafa Aydın, "Foreign Policy, 1923-2018" *The Routledge Handbook of Turkish Politics*, 373-375, edited by Alpaslan Özerdem and Matthew Whiting. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2019.

⁷⁶ Justin Bronk, "Analysis: Downing of Russian jet hardly a surprise", *Al Jazeera*, November 25, 2015. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/11/25/analysis-downing-of-russian-jet-hardly-a-surprise>

In May 2013, Erdoğan announced plans to demolish Gezi Park, a large green space in İstanbul next to Taksim Square. Built in 1940, it replaced the late Ottoman-era Taksim Military Barracks. Erdoğan wished to rebuild the barracks in its historical location, and turn it into a shopping mall.⁷⁷ The first resistance to the project came from environmentalists opposed to the destruction of the park, who occupied the space on May 27. The protest escalated as police intervened harshly, drawing even more protesters to the park, with a broader range of political interests. Some of the newer protesters took their anger out on nearby businesses and residential buildings. Others held peaceful demonstrations.⁷⁸

It escalated into general criticism of Erdoğan, particularly his movement toward authoritarianism. People demanded his resignation. While other party members, including President Abdullah Gül and Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç, aimed to negotiate with the protesters, radicals provoked Erdoğan into retaliation by insulting his family. Erdoğan appealed to conservatives to counterprotest in “Respect for the National Will” rallies, painting the protesters as undemocratic.⁷⁹

However, the damage was done. Erdoğan fully revealed his authoritarian side, demanding increased loyalty from his allies. He called the protestors *çapulcu* (“marauders”), an epithet which the protestors reclaimed as their own. Then, on June 15, authorities removed the protestors by force. This sparked widespread protests across the country. An estimated 2.5 million people participated and 4900 were arrested.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Yavuz, *Making of an Autocrat*, 173-174.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 179-180.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 182-185.

⁸⁰ Türkay Salim Nefes, “The Impacts of the Turkish Government’s Conspiratorial Framing of the Gezi Park Protests”, *Social Movement Studies*, 16:5 (2017), 614. DOI: 10.1080/14742837.2017.1319269

This marked a turning point for Erdoğan. Aside from his previous responses, he also escalated his rhetoric, including accusing the “interest rate lobby”, a Turkish right wing dogwhistle for Jews, of orchestrating the protests.⁸¹ Erdoğan also grew paranoid, and began seeking to suppress his opposition. Further protests were met with violence. He even attacked his allies within the AKP who had attempted to de-escalate the protests. A rift between Erdoğan and Gül formed, and a simmering conflict between Erdoğan and members of the *Hizmet* movement, a previous ally, escalated.⁸²

In the mid-1960s, a new Islamic movement had emerged which would later play a key role in 21st century Turkish politics. Fethullah Gülen was born in Erzurum. He began his career in İzmir, where he gained influence as a low-level cleric. Influenced by the popular religious leader Said Nursi, Gülen’s movement blended Islam, science, and Turkish nationalism.⁸³ By the late 1970s he had followers from across Turkey. Having been arrested in 1971 for leading a “secret religious community”, following the 1980 coup Gülen and his supporters sought to protect the movement’s assets. They did so by creating businesses, primarily in the educational sector. These ‘Gülen Schools’ abided by Turkey’s strict secularism laws, instead focusing on the sciences to prepare students for the national university entrance exam. Following the collapse of the USSR, the schools expanded internationally into the former Soviet states in Central Asia, the former Warsaw Pact countries in the Balkans,⁸⁴ and following the September 11 attacks in 2001, in Western countries as well.⁸⁵

⁸¹ Nefes, *Gezi Park Protests*, 614.

⁸² Yavuz, *Making of an Autocrat*, 187, 189.

⁸³ Yavuz, *Neo-Ottomanism*, 103-105.

⁸⁴ Hendrick, *Fethullah Gülen*, 345-346.

⁸⁵ Jonathan Lacey, “‘Turkish Islam’ as ‘Good Islam’: How the Gülen Movement Exploits Discursive Opportunities in a Post-9/11 Milieu”, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 34:2 (2014), 102. DOI: 10.1080/13602004.912861

It was at this point that the AKP and Gülen became allies. Gülen's popularity was helped by the al-Qaida terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. With Islamic extremism in the Western media spotlight, Gülen provided an alternative message, perceived by the West as "moderate". Sociologist Jonathan Lacey writes that Gülen gained popularity due to his movement being seen as "good Islam".⁸⁶ However, after a damning video exposing plans to infiltrate the civil service was revealed in 1999, leading to Gülen's facing anti-secularism charges, Gülen fled to the US in 2000.⁸⁷

Initially the Gülenists and AKP kept their distance from each other, so as to avoid the wrath of the TSK. The MGK already perceived the Gülenists as a threat by 2004, and requested the government to take precautions. Nevertheless, their interests aligned. Erdoğan and Gülen found themselves supporting each other, particularly on undermining the Kemalist power over state institutions. Erdoğan's pro-EU reforms allowed Gülen to dodge anti-secularism charges in 2006.⁸⁸ Gülen also helped Erdoğan beat anti-secular charges, in which the AKP very nearly got shut down by the AYM.⁸⁹ A public Gülenist endorsement also helped the AKP secure constitutional changes from a 2010 referendum, which expanded the AYM from eleven to fifteen judges, and ended the twelve year term limit.⁹⁰ This gave Erdoğan the opportunity to reshuffle the judiciary away from Kemalist control.⁹¹

⁸⁶ Lacey, *Good Islam*, 102.

⁸⁷ Hakkı Taş, "A History of Turkey's AKP-Gülen Conflict", *Mediterranean Politics*, 2017, 3. DOI: 10.1080/13629395.2017.1328766

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

⁸⁹ Yavuz, *Making of an Autocrat*, 156-157.

⁹⁰ Comparative Constitutions Project. *Turkey's Constitution of 1982 with Amendments through 2002*, 50. https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Turkey_2002.pdf?lang=en; Comparative Constitutions Project. *Turkey's Constitution of 1982 with Amendments through 2011*, 49-50. https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Turkey_2011.pdf?lang=en

⁹¹ Taş, *AKP-Gülen Conflict*, 4.

The relationship between Erdoğan and Gülen soured afterward. It started with the *Mavi Marmara*, a Turkish ship sent to interrupt Israel's Gaza blockade in 2010. Gülen, whose movement favored interfaith reconciliation, supported Israel. He also opposed Erdoğan's ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist party active in several Arab states.⁹²

However, the conflict reached a breaking point in 2013, when the falling out became public.⁹³ M. Hakan Yavuz calls this year Erdoğan's "*Annus Horribilis*".⁹⁴ First, Erdoğan moved to close down the Gülenist preparatory schools. Gülen retaliated with a corruption investigation against the AKP.⁹⁵ Surviving the probe, Erdoğan accused Gülen of creating what he termed a "parallel state".⁹⁶ The accusation was not without merit. In the 1999 leaked video, Gülen told his followers to:

move in the arteries of the system, without anyone noticing your existence, until you reach all the power centres... You must wait until such time as you have gotten all the state power, until you have brought to your side all the power of the constitutional institutions in Turkey.⁹⁷

By the time Gülen and Erdoğan had allied themselves, the membership of both the police and portions of the judiciary were dominated by Gülenists.⁹⁸

By 2014 the MGK once again saw the Gülenists as a national security threat, referring to them as an "illegal organization". That label got upgraded to a terrorist organization the next year in confidential documents, and in public by 2016, Gülen's movement was called the Fethullah

⁹² M. Hakan Yavuz. "A Framework for Understanding the Intra-Islamist Conflict Between the AK Party and the Gülen Movement" *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (2018), 24.

⁹³ Taş, *AKP-Gülen Conflict*, 6.

⁹⁴ Yavuz, *Making of an Autocrat*, 172.

⁹⁵ Yavuz, *Intra-Islamist Conflict*, 25.

⁹⁶ Taş, *AKP-Gülen Conflict*, 6.

⁹⁷ Hendrick, *Fethullah Gülen*, 346.

⁹⁸ Yavuz, *Making of an Autocrat*, 158-159.

Terrorist Organization (*Fethullahçı Terör Örgütü*, FETÖ). The last label gained wide acceptance after the July 15 coup failed.⁹⁹

Yavuz speculates that the Gülenists were driven to attempt the coup by an impending MGK meeting in August 2016. The meeting, which Yavuz describes as a “potentially critical event”, would be held to determine a reshuffling of senior military officers. This would almost certainly include the dismissal of Gülenist officers or other consequences for those involved in the movement. This fear escalated as rumors spread that this meeting would be a means for Erdoğan to crack down on Gülenists both in the military and otherwise. To avoid this the Gülenists would need to pre-empt the meeting, which they did on July 15.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Taş, *AKP-Gülen Conflict*, 7-8.

¹⁰⁰ Yavuz, *Intra-Islamist Conflict*, 26.

Chapter Three

How the Coup Unfolded

The night of July 15, 2016 set the tone for the future of Turkey. However, when the coup began, it was anything but pre-determined. It was communications, both public and private, which laid out the path of post-coup Turkey.

As shown from a phone obtained from a captured officer following the coup, senior military officers used WhatsApp, an instant messaging app, to coordinate strategic aims. A group chat named *Yurtta Sulh* was created at 9:15 PM (all times given in Turkish local time, UTC+3) by Major Murat Çelebioğlu, and several officers were added shortly after, ranking from Lieutenant to Brigadier General. The WhatsApp group was used both to issue orders to subordinates and report results to superiors. The first order to take public action was issued at 9:26 PM, to block surrounding highways to isolate İstanbul from the rest of the country.¹⁰¹

The first public reports of the coup appeared around 10 PM when several initial actions occurred. A military helicopter was seen flying over Ankara firing at people on the ground near the General Staff headquarters. Meanwhile in İstanbul, the Bosphorus and Fatih Sultan Mehmet bridges were blockaded by soldiers with tanks.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Christiaan Triebert, “‘We've shot four people. Everything's fine.’ The Turkish Coup through the Eyes of its Plotters” *Bellingcat*, July 24, 2016.

¹⁰² Hürriyet Daily News, “Timeline of Turkey’s Failed Coup Attempt”, July 17, 2016. <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/timeline-of-turkeys-failed-coup-attempt-101711>

Social media was the primary medium through which people learned that the coup was underway. Twitter and Facebook feeds informed the public faster than news outlets. Images and video of the blockades in İstanbul and the helicopter firing on people in Ankara flooded the Internet, as did reports of soldiers imposing a curfew. These events were initially met with much confusion and disbelief. Some people thought the military was responding to a terrorist threat. As reports of military activity in multiple cities and locations appeared, the reality that a coup was in progress began to set in.¹⁰³

At 11 PM, Yılmaz spoke to the press confirming the public's speculation that a coup was underway, and expressed the government's confidence that the military would be repelled. Another 20 minutes after Yılmaz, the military made a similar statement, asserting their control of the country, claiming that they were doing so "to reinstate constitutional order, human rights and freedoms, the rule of law and general security".¹⁰⁴

Following these early reports reaching the international press, world leaders expressed the the public their support for the AKP government. The first to reach out was United States Secretary of State John Kerry following a conversation with US President Barack Obama, saying that "all parties in Turkey should support the democratically-elected Government of Turkey, show restraint, and avoid any violence or bloodshed."¹⁰⁵ Kerry also expressed similar sentiments to his Turkish counterpart, Mehmet Çavuşoğlu. Russia called for order, stating that "events were

¹⁰³ Dreyfuss, Emily. "Watching the Attempted Turkish Coup Unfold on Twitter" *Wired*, July 15, 2016. <https://www.wired.com/2016/07/watching-attempted-turkish-coup-unfold-twitter/>

¹⁰⁴ Alan Yuhas, Jamie Grierson, Claire Phipps, Sam Levin, Kevin Rawlinson, "Turkey Coup Attempt—As It Happens" *The Guardian*, July 15-16, 2016, 18. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2016/jul/15/turkey-coup-attempt-military-gunfire-ankara>

¹⁰⁵ Hürriyet Daily News, "Obama supports Turkish gov't against plotters, Kremlin gravely concerned", July 16, 2016. <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/obama-supports-turkish-govt-against-plotters-kremlin-gravely-concerned-101673>

moving too fast to fully understand what was happening”.¹⁰⁶ The NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg gave his support too, calling Turkey a “valued NATO ally.”¹⁰⁷

Communications became the next military target. Various social media sites were reported by the media watchdog Turkey Blocks as down or restricted, including Twitter, Facebook, and Youtube.¹⁰⁸ These restrictions lasted for approximately two hours.¹⁰⁹ Turkish news media were also military targets. TRT Radio in İstanbul was the first to be occupied.¹¹⁰

The coup was not supported by the entire military. Behind the scenes, the highest ranking officers in the TSK were initially unaware of the actions their subordinates had taken. These top generals became targets for detainment. According to exchanges from the WhatsApp group, their top priority was First Army Commander Ümit Dündar, though several other generals were also pursued.¹¹¹ The putschists were not always successful in restraining their targets (Dündar for example, was not captured), though they were successful with many others, most notably including taking hostage the Chief of General Staff Hulusi Akar.¹¹²

¹⁰⁶ Hürriyet Daily News, “Obama supports Turkish gov’t against plotters, Kremlin gravely concerned”, July 16, 2016. <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/obama-supports-turkish-govt-against-plotters-kremlin-gravely-concerned-101673>

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Turkey Block, Twitter Post, July 15, 2016, 1:04 PM PDT. <https://twitter.com/TurkeyBlocks/status/754043966547431424>

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., July 15, 2016, 3:34 PM PDT. <https://twitter.com/TurkeyBlocks/status/754081725970468865>

¹¹⁰ Triebert, *Eyes of its Plotters*.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Uğur Ercan, “Chief of Staff held at gunpoint, ordered to read coup declaration: Sources” *Hürriyet Daily News*, July 18, 2016.

Around 1:30 AM on the 16th, coup soldiers entered the TRT1 news studio. Anchor Tijen Karaş was on the air at the time. She was instructed, at gunpoint, to read a statement by the soldiers.¹¹³ The six minute statement played on a loop afterward.¹¹⁴

The statement opened with a claim that the rule of law had broken down, that “all institutions of the state have come to be designed with ideological principles”, and that these institutions “cannot perform their duty.”¹¹⁵ Furthermore, it said that the government had removed the checks and balances, particularly from the Judiciary, which protected Turkey’s constitutional system. Without naming specific instances, the statement asserted that the AKP, and Erdoğan in particular, committed human rights abuses, undermined democracy, and ended state secularism. The statement uses the archaic Turkish words *gavlet* (negligence), *dalalet* (heresy), and *hiyanet* (treason) to describe the crimes Erdoğan has committed, deliberately invoking the words used in a 1927 speech from Atatürk. As depicted by the statement, the AKP had chosen to prioritize consolidation of executive power over fighting corruption and terrorism.¹¹⁶

Then the statement declared that the TSK was invoking its right to intervene as the “guardian of the republic” to protect the Kemalist state. The army was ready to enforce the principle of *yurtta sulh, cihanda sulh*. The goal of this coup was to “reestablish the constitutional order”. To this end, the TSK was overthrowing, or “put[ting] a hand to” the AKP government.¹¹⁷

¹¹³ Yuhas, et al., *As It Happened*, 17.

¹¹⁴ Tijen Karaş & The Peace At Home Council. “Coup in Turkey: Putschists Statement (TRT Broadcast)” *Türkiye Radyo Televizyon Kurumu*, July 16, 2016. Posted on [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fjSgDNAZyaE) by RogueStatesMedia. Translated and annotated by netcap001. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fjSgDNAZyaE>

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

The statement then named the new administration, the *Yurtta Sulh Konseyi* (“Peace at Home Council”), saying that the current government has lost its legitimacy. A curfew was declared, as was the closure of borders, major ports and airports. Finally, it promised to maintain human rights and freedoms and to create a new constitution guaranteeing these rights “with no discrimination of religion, language, [or] race”.¹¹⁸

Meanwhile, the question on everybody’s mind at this point was, *where was President Erdoğan?* He had not been seen publicly since before the coup started. There was popular speculation that he had fled for Germany.¹¹⁹

Finally, shortly after the Peace at Home Council statement, CNN Türk news anchor Hande Fırat received an unexpected FaceTime call, the videoconferencing service on Apple devices, on her iPhone. The call, which was direct from Erdoğan, was shown live on television. People watched as Fırat held the phone to the camera while she and colleague Abdulkadir Selvi interviewed Erdoğan.¹²⁰ He began the call by minimizing the TSK’s responsibility for the coup by emphasizing that it was a “small minority within” the military, and promised that they would “pay a heavy price”.¹²¹ He pointed to the public ownership of military vehicles and equipment being used against the Turkish public.¹²²

¹¹⁸ Tijen Kardeş & The Peace At Home Council. “Coup in Turkey: Putschists Statement (TRT Broadcast)” *Türkiye Radyo Televizyon Kurumu*, July 16, 2016. Posted on [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fjSgDNAZyaE) by RogueStatesMedia. Translated and annotated by netcap001. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fjSgDNAZyaE>.

¹¹⁹ Twitter. “Twitter Search: where erdoğan since:2016-07-15 until:2016-07-16”. https://twitter.com/search?q=erdo%C3%97an%20where%20until%3A2016-07-16%20since%3A2016-07-15&src=typed_query&f=top

¹²⁰ Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Hande Fırat, Abdulkadir Selvi, “Erdoğan Calls His People” *CNN Türk*, July 16, 2016. Translated and posted on [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Brd2o-UwbM0) by *Yeni Şafak*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Brd2o-UwbM0>

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

After a brief interruption from an incoming call, Erdoğan reassured his audience that the troops would be defeated soon. Then, he made a plea to the public to resist and stand up to the military:

I would like to call out to our people. I am inviting them to the squares and airports of our provinces. Let's gather as a nation at airports and squares. Let this minority come with their tanks and weapons and do whatever they may. Until today, I have not seen a force greater than the people's will.¹²³

Firat then turned the interview over to Selvi. Selvi asked Erdoğan to remain on the air, then stated that “today is the day to protect democracy”.¹²⁴ Next, he asked about the current state of the military. Erdoğan responded that the military has broken down and was not following the chain of command. Firat asked about rumors that top commanders were being held hostage by the coup plotters, which Erdoğan confirmed were possible, but said he was unable to verify them.¹²⁵

Selvi said that CNN Türk supports Erdoğan's message to resist the military. In the rest of the conversation, much of the previous content was repeated, such as reassurances that the coup will fail, that those involved will be brought to justice, and that people should take to the streets. Erdoğan also stated that he would show up to a demonstration as well. Finally, Firat asked whether Erdoğan will go to the capital, which he affirmed that he would. Finally, there was an exchange of thank yous before the call ended.¹²⁶

People responded to the call to action. Though there were scattered protests even prior to Erdoğan's FaceTime call, afterward they increased exponentially. Soon images of large crowds

¹²³ Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Hande Firat, Abdulkadir Selvi, “Erdoğan Calls His People” *CNN Türk*, July 16, 2016. Translated and posted on [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Brd2o-UwbM0) by *Yeni Şafak*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Brd2o-UwbM0>

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

protesting in the streets, many of whom were displaying Turkish flags, appeared on social media. The protests in Taksim Square received particular attention in the international media, though there were protests across the country. The protests generally were focused at locations that the military had secured during the coup. These weren't simply passive demonstrations opposing the coup, however. Protesters actively resisted the military. Photos of civilians standing on tanks and soldiers trapped in large crowds were spread over the Internet, leading to further confidence in the protesters. While both the coup soldiers and the government claimed to be protecting democracy, the Turkish public overwhelmingly backed the latter.¹²⁷

However, the coup did not remain entirely peaceful. Though the military aimed to avoid attacking civilians, they were unsuccessful. Weapons fire was reported in both İstanbul and Ankara. Protesters on both the intercontinental bridges in İstanbul were shot.¹²⁸ Later, around 3:30 AM the TBMM was bombed in Ankara.¹²⁹ In all, 265 people died during the coup, including both protesters and soldiers.¹³⁰

Meanwhile, though Erdoğan had appeared on CNN Türk, his whereabouts were still unknown. He had called from an undisclosed location. That turned out to be Marmaris, a resort town on the southern Aegean coastline where he and his family had been on vacation. According to TRT World, after learning of the coup in progress, he attempted to hold a press conference, which failed due to technical problems, leading to his call to CNN Türk. Then, he and his family

¹²⁷ Yuhas, et. al., *As It Happens*, 15.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 14.

¹³⁰ Reuters Staff, "Death Toll Rises to 265 in Failed Turkey Coup: Official", *Reuters*, July 16, 2016. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-casualties-idUSKCN0ZW132>

flew by helicopter to nearby Dalaman, where he boarded a Turkish government plane.¹³¹

Rumours of fleeing the country turned out to be unfounded. Using live plane tracking websites, people on social media posted screenshots of his flight path, which showed it flying roughly along the Turkish Aegean coast before it entered a holding pattern circling above the south coast of the Sea of Marmara at 2:30 AM.¹³² Erdoğan was headed to İstanbul.¹³³

However, the Atatürk Airport in İstanbul, one of the world's largest hubs for international flights, had been under military control since 10:30 PM. Erdoğan's plane was not yet able to land. Already by 1 AM, the military was struggling to maintain control of the airport, and were requesting reinforcements. Though the order was given, the units dispatched to shore up the airport refused their orders.¹³⁴ Half an hour later, large crowds who had come earlier could be seen on video leading tanks out of the airport's main entrance.¹³⁵

Erdoğan's plane landed at Atatürk Airport at 3:30 AM, around the same time a military unit arrived at his Marmaris retreat, believing he was still there.¹³⁶ Speaking to a large crowd after disembarking from his plane, Erdoğan accused the coup plotters of "treason" and said they were "unable to stomach Turkey's unity".¹³⁷ Furthermore, he made his first claim that the coup plotters were Gülenists.¹³⁸ Though the military would still hold out for a few hours in some places, the

¹³¹ Zeynep Sahin, "How did Erdoğan handle the coup on the night of July 15?" *TRT World*, July 13, 2017. <https://www.trtworld.com/turkey/how-did-erdogan-handle-the-coup-on-the-night-of-july-15--8759>

¹³² David Cenciotti, Twitter Post, July 15, 2016, 4:28 PM GMT-8, <https://twitter.com/cencio4/status/754095381420642304>

¹³³ Sahin, *How did Erdoğan handle the coup*.

¹³⁴ Triebert, *Eyes of Its Plotters*.

¹³⁵ BuzzFeed News, Twitter Post, July 15, 2016, 3:33 PM PDT. <https://twitter.com/BuzzFeedNews/status/754081488740556800>

¹³⁶ Sahin, *How did Erdoğan handle the coup*.

¹³⁷ Tim Arango and Ceylan Yeginsu, "Turkish President Returns to Istanbul in Sign Military Coup Is Faltering" *New York Times*, July 15, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/16/world/europe/military-attempts-coup-in-turkey-prime-minister-says.html>

¹³⁸ Yuhas, et. al., *As It Happened*, 13.

sight of a large crowd of protesters returning Atatürk Airport to civilian control, along with Erdoğan's public appearance at the airport, was the moment it was clear that the coup had failed.¹³⁹ It wasn't long before Çelebioğlu texted his soldiers to "surrender or flee".¹⁴⁰

The military faction involved in the coup received very little support. The government, law enforcement, citizenry, and the majority of the military all overwhelmingly opposed the coup. The protests weren't about defending Erdoğan, however. The public saw Turkey's democratic institutions under threat, and Erdoğan's call legitimized their resistance. Protestors came from a range of political persuasions, many of whom were vehemently opposed to Erdoğan and the AKP, because they feared a military junta even more.¹⁴¹ In the military itself, whole companies refused to participate, and of those who did, many believed they were doing a drill, surrendering once they learned the real purpose of their operations.¹⁴²

Furthermore, despite securing the TRT news studio and broadcasting the *Yurtta Sulh Konseyi* statement, this was the furthest extent of their civilian communication. The military was unable to establish effective public communications beyond this statement. However, the AKP was able to maintain contact with the public during the coup, starting with Yıldırım's statement confirming that a coup was in progress almost immediately after the coup began. The government relayed a consistent narrative throughout.¹⁴³ That narrative also continued and developed further long afterward.

¹³⁹ Paul Kirby, "Why did Turkish coup plot fail?" *BBC News*, 16 July 2016. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36814044>

¹⁴⁰ Triebert, *Eyes of Its Plotters*.

¹⁴¹ Constance Letsch, "Defiant Turks stood up for democracy – but not necessarily for Erdoğan" *Guardian*, July 16, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/16/turkey-failed-coup-attempt-public-resistance-president-erdogan>

¹⁴² Triebert, *Eyes of its Plotters*.

¹⁴³ Kirby, *Why did the Turkish coup plot fail?*

Significantly though, both for the government and the coup as a whole, Erdoğan's FaceTime call proved the most critical moment. The powerful visual of a grainy video of the President's face on a news anchor's phone, being held up close to a camera, addressing the Turkish people while under grave threat, provided the inspiration needed for the civilian uprising which delegitimized and foiled the coup. This call marked the turning point for the entire coup.

Chapter Four

After the Coup

Speculation as to who was behind the coup was rife almost from the moment the event became public knowledge. Initially, some people didn't even believe it was a coup at all. Turkey had struggled with a string of recent terrorist attacks attributed to the Kurdistan Worker's Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, PKK), a group seeking Kurdish independence. There was also speculation that the coup was staged by Erdoğan in a bid to consolidate power, or to justify a mass arrest of Gülenists. Almost immediately after the first photos of tanks spread on the Internet, there were predictions that there would be a crackdown following the coup should it fail. The word "purge" trended on Twitter as people anticipated Erdoğan's reaction to the military.¹⁴⁴ Even as the White House publicly supported Erdoğan, some believed the coup was backed by the US.¹⁴⁵

Ultimately the Twitter debate during the initial stages of the coup came down to whether the army officers leading the coup were Kemalist or Gülenist. Early evidence supported the former, particularly the *Yurtta Sulh Konseyi* statement on TRT, whose language was unambiguously Kemalist. Furthermore, every coup in modern Turkish history had been led by Kemalist officers, so people expected that this would be no different. This belief was further

¹⁴⁴ Twitter. "Twitter Search: turkey coup since:2016-07-15 until:2016-07-16". https://twitter.com/search?q=turkey%20purge%20until%3A2016-07-16%20since%3A2016-07-15&src=typed_query&f=top

¹⁴⁵ Twitter. "Twitter search: #turkeycoup obama since:2016-07-15 until:2016-07-16". https://twitter.com/search?q=%23TurkeyCoup%20obama%20until%3A2016-07-16%20since%3A2016-07-15&src=typed_query&f=top

cemented after Gülen himself denied any involvement and publicly condemned the officers involved.¹⁴⁶ As shown by Twitter searches using the keywords “kemalist” and “gulenist”, users largely doubted Gülen’s involvement, believing instead that a dwindling and increasingly desperate Kemalist faction of the military was behind the coup. However, it is worth noting that this opinion appears more prevalent among commenters outside Turkey.¹⁴⁷

The Kemalist theory lost popularity following the collapse of the coup. The debate shifted toward the possibility of an AKP-backed false flag operation. However, a Gülenist coup became the most popular theory. Pundits like Murat Yetkin from *Hürriyet Daily News*, for example, focused on the evidence for Gülen, while providing evidence against an Erdoğan conspiracy, but did not mention any possible involvement of Kemalists, either for or against.¹⁴⁸ Outside of Turkey the Kemalist hypothesis lost credibility, as well. For example, a short report written almost immediately after the coup by University of Cambridge political scientist Ayşe Zarakol, entitled “The Failed Attempt in Turkey: What We Know So Far”, only presented the Gülenist and Erdoğan hypotheses as possibilities, referring to the latter as “Erdoğan’s Reichstag Fire”.¹⁴⁹ The Kemalist hypothesis remains unpopular, to the point where in M. Hakan Yavuz’s 2021 book *Erdoğan: The Making of an Autocrat*, out of five different hypotheses, only one considers any

¹⁴⁶ Stephanie Saul, “An Exiled Cleric Denies Playing a Leading Role in Coup Attempt” *New York Times*, July 16, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/17/us/fethullah-gulen-turkey-coup-attempt.html>

¹⁴⁷ Twitter. “Twitter search: #turkeycoup gulen since:2016-07-15 until:2016-07-16”. https://twitter.com/search?q=%23TurkeyCoup%20gulenist%20until%3A2016-07-16%20since%3A2016-07-15&src=typed_query&f=top; Twitter. “Twitter search: #turkeycoup kemalist since:2016-07-15 until:2016-07-16”. https://twitter.com/search?q=%23TurkeyCoup%20kemalist%20until%3A2016-07-16%20since%3A2016-07-15&src=typed_query&f=top

¹⁴⁸ Murat Yetkin, “Who did it? Why now? And other questions about the coup attempt in Turkey”, *Hürriyet Daily News*, July 18, 2016. <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/opinion/murat-yetkin/who-did-it-why-now-and-other-questions-about-the-coup-attempt-in-turkey-101731>

¹⁴⁹ Ayşe Zarakol, “The Failed Coup in Turkey: What We Know So Far”, *Ponars Eurasia Policy Memo*, 433 (July 2016), 2-4.

Kemalist involvement, and even then, only as one of several factions in a Gülenist-dominated coalition.¹⁵⁰

Erdoğan's call for solidarity did not stop with the end of the coup. Even as soldiers surrendered, protesters were asked to remain where they were.¹⁵¹ The next night, they were asked to remain out in the squares to "defend democracy".¹⁵² Such rallies were continuously pushed by the government, culminating in the "Democracy and Martyr's Rally" in İstanbul on August 7. This rally was hosted by the AKP at Yenikapı Square, and included speakers from both the CHP and Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP), though the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP) was excluded.¹⁵³ Over a million attended, and the event was projected live at public locations across the country. It was themed around national unity, condemnation of Gülen and his supporters, and the martyrdom of protesters killed in the coup attempt.¹⁵⁴

Meanwhile, the government started arresting suspected Gülenists immediately after the coup failed. By July 17, over 2800 soldiers had been arrested, though the arrests weren't confined to the military. They also arrested almost as many judges, including Alparslan Altan and Erdal Tercan, sitting justices of the AYM.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁰ Yauvz, *Making of an Autocrat*, 231.

¹⁵¹ Hürriyet Daily News, "Thousands protest coup attempt in Turkey", July 16, 2016. <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/thousands-protest-coup-attempt-across-turkey-101703>

¹⁵² BBC News, "Turkish crowds rally to democracy calls after coup attempt", July 17, 2016. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36817980>

¹⁵³ France 24, "Turkey's Erdogan stages mass rally in response to coup attempt", August 8, 2016. <https://www.france24.com/en/20160807-turkey-erdogan-stages-mass-rally-response-coup-attempt>

¹⁵⁴ Guardian, "Turkish authorities hold anti-coup rally in İstanbul", August 7, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/07/turkish-authorities-hold-anti-coup-rally-in-istanbul>

¹⁵⁵ Hürriyet Daily News, "6,000 detained from Turkish army, judiciary in probe into failed coup attempt", July 15, 2016 (updated July 17, 2016). <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/6000-detained-from-turkish-army-judiciary-in-probe-into-failed-coup-attempt-101669>

Erdoğan's focus on Gülen and FETÖ as the central coup plotters also brought Turkish-US relations to the foreground. On July 19, a formal extradition request for Gülen was issued. The Deputy Prime Minister Numan Kurtulmuş compared the coup to the 9/11 attacks in New York City, with Gülen himself as a Turkish Osama bin Laden.¹⁵⁶ Even before the formal request, Secretary of State Kerry expressed a willingness to investigate Gülen's role in the coup attempt, but asserted that the US would only extradite him if they found incontrovertible evidence of his involvement.¹⁵⁷ Vice President Joe Biden told Erdoğan similarly while on a state visit to Ankara a month later. He emphasized that the rule of law must be followed in the process, but assured Erdoğan that the Obama administration was investigating thoroughly.¹⁵⁸ After Donald Trump was inaugurated President in January 2017 though, no such evidence had yet been made public, and Gülen remained in his Pennsylvania compound.

On November 15, 2018, NBC News first broke a story that Trump had quietly attempted to find a way to legally extradite Gülen to ease Turkish-Saudi relations following the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi's murder at the Saudi Arabian consulate in İstanbul.¹⁵⁹ Trump issued a denial on the 17th,¹⁶⁰ but two years later a small scandal broke out when Trump's former National Security Advisor Michael Flynn was shown to have ties to Erdoğan, as part of a federal

¹⁵⁶ Angela Dewan, "Turkey formally requests extradition of cleric from U.S. as purge widens", *CNN*, July 19, 2016. <https://www.cnn.com/2016/07/19/europe/turkey-failed-coup-attempt/index.html>

¹⁵⁷ Elisha Fieldstadt and the Associated Press, "Attempted Turkey Coup: U.S. Would Consider Extradition Request for Blamed Cleric", *MSNBC News*, July 16, 2016. <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/turkey-military-coup/attempted-turkey-coup-u-s-would-consider-extradition-request-blamed-n610906>

¹⁵⁸ John Schuppe, "Biden to Turkey: 'We're Bound by the Law' on Pennsylvania Imam Wanted in Failed Coup", *MSNBC News*, August 25, 2016. <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/turkey-military-coup/biden-turkey-we-re-bound-law-pennsylvania-imam-wanted-failed-n637816>

¹⁵⁹ Carol E. Lee, Julia Ainsley, and Courtney Kube, "To ease Turkish pressure on Saudis over killing, White House weighs expelling Erdogan foe", *MSNBC News*, November 15, 2018. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/white-house-weighs-booting-erdogan-foe-u-s-appease-turkey-n933996>

¹⁶⁰ Veronica Stracqualursi, "Trump: Turkish cleric Fethullah Gulen 'not under consideration' for extradition 'at this point'", *CNN Politics*, December 17, 2018. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/11/17/politics/trump-fethullah-gulen-turkey/index.html>

investigation into the actions of Flynn.¹⁶¹ Two colleagues of Flynn were later charged for planning an attempt at an extraordinary rendition of Gülen back to Turkey.¹⁶²

On July 20, 2016, Erdoğan announced a three month state of emergency.¹⁶³ It invoked Article 120 of the constitution, “In the event of serious indications of widespread acts of violence aimed at the destruction of the free democratic order”, which allows for emergencies up to six months.¹⁶⁴ Erdoğan stated that it was “in order to eliminate the terror organization which attempted to make a coup, swiftly and completely”, referring to FETÖ.¹⁶⁵ Both Erdoğan and Yıldırım reassured that this would not impede on civil liberties. In the TBMM, it met approval only from the AKP and MHP. The CHP agreed there was legal justification for it, but ultimately deemed it unnecessary for pursuing FETÖ. The HDP opposed it, accusing the AKP of planning to abuse the declaration.¹⁶⁶

Once the state of emergency was in place, what is now called the “Turkey Purge” grew exponentially. *New York Times* correspondent Suzy Hansen writes, “In the A.K. Party’s view, anyone devoted to Gulen... is assumed to do whatever he says, and so all Gulenists, even teachers and tradesmen who couldn’t possibly have been involved, can also legally be considered terrorists, or members of FETO”.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶¹ Ron Wyden, “United States Senate Committee on Finance, letter to Attorney General William Barr and FBI Director Christopher A. Wray”, December 2, 2020.

¹⁶² Soo Rin Kim, “Two ex-business associates of Michael Flynn charged in plot centered on Turkish cleric”, *ABC News*, December 17, 2020. <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/business-associates-michael-flynn-charged-plot-centered-turkish/story?id=59865091>

¹⁶³ Hürriyet Daily News, “Turkey declares three-month state of emergency”, July 20, 2016. <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-declares-three-month-state-of-emergency-101896>

¹⁶⁴ *Constitution of 1982, with Amendments through 2011*, 41.

¹⁶⁵ Hürriyet Daily News, “Turkey declares three-month state of emergency”, July 20, 2016. <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-declares-three-month-state-of-emergency-101896>

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Hansen, Suzy. “Feature: Inside Turkey’s Purge” *New York Times*, April 13, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/13/magazine/inside-turkeys-purge.html>

Within nine months, the government invalidated 140,000 passports to prevent suspected Gülenists from leaving the country. Over 100,000 people were official suspects, some for evidence as weak as having an account with Gülenist-owned Bank Asya. Another 100,000 were imprisoned, many without charge. Of those still free, 50,000 public service workers, including military officers, academics, police, and judges were fired. The government shut down hundreds of institutions like universities, news media companies, publishers, and primary and secondary schools. Not all those affected were suspected of being Gülen supporters, either. Kurdish groups were targeted too, as were leftists later.¹⁶⁸

After his election to President in 2014, Erdoğan talked about changing the constitution to transform the Turkish government from a parliamentary system, which it had been since the Republic's founding constitution in 1924, to an executive presidential system. The president (*cumhurbaşkanı*) currently had few powers and could often be described as “ceremonial”. It was the prime minister (*başbakanı*) who governed the nation with the support of parliament.¹⁶⁹

There were several key changes that would shift that balance of power away from parliament. First, the president, already head of state, would become the head of government as well. This role would replace the prime minister, whose post would disappear. The president would be able to appoint their own cabinet and propose budgets. They would be immune to parliamentary review except in the case of impeachment, which would require a two thirds majority vote in the TBMM. States of emergency could only be declared by the president, who could also dismiss parliament. Finally, current constitutional law required that a president belong

¹⁶⁸ Hansen, *Inside Turkey's Purge*.

¹⁶⁹ BBC News, “Erdoğan urges Turkey's new parliament to address constitution”, November 4, 2015. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34720067>

to no political party—if they did, they must resign upon election to the post. Such political neutrality would no longer be necessary to hold the position anymore.¹⁷⁰

In January 2017, despite the state of emergency, the AKP formally proposed to the TBMM eighteen constitutional changes.¹⁷¹ The referendum was held on April 16, during which the state of emergency was still ongoing.¹⁷² It consisted of a single “yes” or “no” vote covering all eighteen amendments.¹⁷³ A report issued by election observers from the Organization for the Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) found numerous departures from free and fair election principles, including violations of Turkey’s own election laws. The most prominent was a severe imbalance in media coverage, with the “yes” campaign receiving over 75% of both airtime and print media space.¹⁷⁴ This was compounded by hyperbolic rhetoric, including Erdoğan’s accusing “no” campaigners of supporting FETÖ. There were many other problems with the referendum. For example, police were posted at polling stations in the Kurdish-dominated southeastern region.¹⁷⁵ The electoral body was not permitted to take action against media regulation violations due to an emergency decree.¹⁷⁶ Several people from the ‘no’ campaign were arrested on spurious charges.¹⁷⁷ The report further notes that prisoners were

¹⁷⁰ BBC News, “Why did Turkey hold a referendum?”, April 16, 2017. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-38883556>

¹⁷¹ BBC News, “Erdogan urges Turkey's new parliament to address constitution”, November 4, 2015. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34720067>

¹⁷² Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, “Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions” *International Referendum Observation Mission: Republic of Turkey — Constitutional Referendum, 16 April 2017*, 1, April 17, 2017. <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/f/6/311721.pdf>

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁷⁷ OSCE, *Constitutional Referendum*, 8.

ineligible to vote, as were those banned from civil service, these classes making up the bulk of those impacted by the post-coup purges.¹⁷⁸

Under these undemocratic circumstances, it is telling that the referendum passed by only a small margin. The ‘yes’ campaign won with 51.41%, versus 48.59% for “no”. Provinces where more voters approved the constitutional changes were spread throughout Central and Eastern Anatolia, with the exceptions of the southeast region where a large Kurdish minority lives. Voter turnout was 85%.¹⁷⁹ However, while most ballots had an official stamp, they were missing from a significant number of ballots. These were nevertheless counted as valid. The pro-Kurdish HDP reported three million ballots were missing stamps, and the OSCE election observers reported 2.5 million. The CHP called for the referendum to be deemed invalid.¹⁸⁰

The first election under the new presidential system was held a year later, on June 24, 2018, for both the president and parliament. With Turkey still under the state of emergency, the election had many of the same problems as the referendum.¹⁸¹ Most notably, the HDP presidential candidate, Selahattin Demirtaş, was in jail pending trial during the campaign. He was only granted two ten-minute slots of airtime on TRT, but because they were filmed together, he was unable to respond to continuing election debate. Any further media correspondence was prevented.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 5-6.

¹⁷⁹ BBC News, “Turkey referendum: The numbers that tell the story”, April 17, 2017. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39619354>

¹⁸⁰ Reuters Staff, “Observer says 2.5 million Turkish referendum votes could have been manipulated”, *Reuters*, April 17, 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-politics-referendum-observers-idUSKBN17K0JW>

¹⁸¹ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, “Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions” *International Election Observation Mission: Republic of Turkey — Early Presidential and Parliamentary Elections — 24 June 2018*, 1-2. June 25, 2018. <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/5/f/385671.pdf>

¹⁸² OSCE, *Elections*, 9, 11.

Furthermore, Erdoğan pursued insult charges against Muharram İnce, the CHP candidate, in response to İnce's saying that Gülen directly instructed Erdoğan's political activities. Meanwhile, Erdoğan once again portrayed his opponents as "supporters of terrorism".¹⁸³ OSCE election observers noted, however, that there was "genuine choice despite the lack of conditions for contestants to compete on an equal basis."¹⁸⁴

The election was dominated by two major party coalitions. The People's Alliance consisted of the AKP and MHP, while the Nation Alliance was between the CHP and İyi ("Good") Party. The HDP stood alone. Erdoğan was re-elected president with 52.6% of the vote, while the CHP candidate, Muharram İnce, received 30.6%. Despite his detention and lack of access to media, Demirtaş received 8.4%, which was not much less than his result in the 2014 election. The four opposition parties did better in the parliamentary elections. The AKP still came in first with 42.6%, and the CHP finished second with 22.6%. The MHP received 11.1%. İyi got 10.0%, just enough to gain their first parliamentary seats. The HDP result was 11.7%. The geographic distribution of votes was similar in both the presidential and parliamentary elections, and roughly reflected that of the previous year's referendum as well, though this time İstanbul and Ankara both favored Erdoğan and the AKP. Turnout was 84.3% and 86.23% in the presidential and parliamentary elections respectively.¹⁸⁵

The state of emergency finally came to an end almost exactly two years after the coup that prompted it. After being renewed seven times, it was allowed to expire on July 18th, 2018—less than a month following the election. At this point, the purges had been extensive: 100,000

¹⁸³ OSCE, *Elections*, 8-9.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁸⁵ Daily Sabah, *Elections 2018*, June 25, 2018. <https://www.dailysabah.com/election/june-24-2018-election-results>

criminal investigations, with a third of them leading to arrests, 130,000 professionals and public sector workers fired, and 1700 private organizations shut down, including 200 media companies. Furthermore, over a hundred laws were amended via thirty-five emergency decrees. The opposition has alleged that the AKP used the state of emergency beyond its scope, to political purpose too, in order to suppress dissent.¹⁸⁶

However, the AKP also proposed a new law which would allow the government to retain many of the emergency conditions.¹⁸⁷ On July 24th, four articles from the proposed law were approved. These would allow officials to restrict a person's movement, permit the retrial of suspects with convictions overturned by European Court of Human Rights rulings, and give local governments the authority to override freedom of assembly. These restrictions were hotly contested by opposition parties, resulting at one point in violence between parliamentarians from the AKP and HDP.¹⁸⁸

The COVID-19 pandemic reached Turkey on March 11, 2020. Turkey had already closed its border with Iran on March 3, which was one of the earliest countries to suffer an outbreak of the new virus.¹⁸⁹ By the 20th, Turkey's Health Minister Fahrettin Koca responded with a proposal for an "individual state of emergency" in which people in Turkey would be expected to self-isolate to prevent the virus's spread, but no government mandate was issued to require such

¹⁸⁶ Hürriyet Daily News, "State of emergency ends amid proposal of new anti-terror law", July 18, 2018. <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/state-of-emergency-ends-amid-proposal-of-new-anti-terror-law-134715>

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Hürriyet Daily News, "Four anti-terror articles passed in parliament amid brawl", July 24, 2018. <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/four-anti-terror-articles-passed-in-parliament-amid-brawl-134949>

¹⁸⁹ TRTWorld. "First coronavirus case diagnosed in Turkey" March 10, 2020. <https://www.trtworld.com/turkey/first-coronavirus-case-diagnosed-in-turkey-34449>

action.¹⁹⁰ Erdoğan spoke up a week later condemning the closing of international borders, which he referred to as “protectionism”, and insisted that trade links should be maintained throughout the pandemic.¹⁹¹

The AKP was skeptical about legal restrictions being effective for preventing the spread of COVID-19. Nevertheless, the strained health care system made it clear that some restrictions would be necessary if the government wanted to flatten the curve. As COVID-19 spread, small, regional lockdowns began. The first was from April 11 to 12, a 48 hour lockdown limited to 31 provinces with significant urban centres.¹⁹² Restrictions were limited by a number of factors intended to target the virus’s spread, including by activity and age. Total self-isolation for all seniors and youths was required, for example, and faithful Muslims were told to pray at home. Though testing was limited to people who exhibited symptoms, tracing was thorough. Three months into the pandemic, the number of reported deaths was under five thousand.¹⁹³

These localized restrictions continued until fall 2020. Until this point Turkey successfully kept a very flat curve. Soon after it was lifted however, cases skyrocketed to the highest they had been during the entire pandemic. Restrictions were reimplemented, and the curve flattened again, but this time not as much as before the original wave of lockdowns ended. This second wave lasted until March 2021, but when restrictions were lifted, the number of cases spiked again,

¹⁹⁰ Hürriyet Daily News, “Health minister urges every citizen to ‘declare own emergency rule’ amid COVID-19”, March 20, 2020. <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/health-minister-urges-every-citizen-to-declare-own-emergency-rule-amid-covid-19-153134>

¹⁹¹ Hürriyet Daily News, “Erdoğan warns G20 leaders against unilateral policies in COVID-19 fight”, March 27, 2020. <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/erdogan-warns-g20-leaders-against-unilateral-policies-in-covid-19-fight-153322>

¹⁹² Hürriyet Daily News, “Turkey imposes a two-day lockdown in 31 provinces from midnight”, April 10, 2020. <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-imposes-a-two-day-lockdown-in-31-provinces-from-midnight-153762>

¹⁹³ Guerin, Orla. “Coronavirus: How Turkey took control of Covid-19 emergency” *BBC News*, May 29, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52831017>

necessitating more lockdowns—including Turkey's first universal restrictions of the pandemic, which lasted through the first half of May.¹⁹⁴ Meanwhile, vaccines had become available by mid-January 2021. The first wave of vaccinations came from Sinovac, a Chinese drug company, followed by the German BioNTech. Vaccines were kept voluntary.¹⁹⁵ By the end of January 2022, Turkey had also developed its own vaccine, Turkovac, which was used as a booster shot for those who had already received two doses of the BioNTech vaccine. At this point, over half the population had already received two vaccine doses.¹⁹⁶

The lack of a new state of emergency does not mean that Erdoğan had softened his authoritarian rule, however. The 2017 constitutional changes already gave him an enormous amount of power. A state of emergency just wasn't necessary for Erdoğan. Instead, he used the existing legal system to increase his control over social media within Turkey. While focused on buoying the economy, he added provisions within amendments to existing laws to impose censorship on social media companies doing business in the country. The result was the ability to control the public narrative as it concerned the pandemic.¹⁹⁷ That narrative was one of paternalistic benevolence.

¹⁹⁴ Hamsici, Mahmut. "Covid: Turkey enters first full lockdown", April 29, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-56912668>

¹⁹⁵ Hürriyet Daily News, "Turkey rolls out mass COVID-19 vaccination", January 14, 2021. <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-approves-chinas-sinovac-jab-starts-vaccinations-with-health-care-staff-161617>

¹⁹⁶ Hürriyet Daily News, "Turkey starts giving Turkovac as booster shot to BioNTech recipients", January 25, 2021. <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-starts-giving-turkovac-as-booster-shot-to-biontech-recipients-171001>

¹⁹⁷ Orla Guerin. "Coronavirus: Is pandemic being used for power grab in Europe? Turkey: 'Moment of Opportunity' for Erdoğan" *BBC News*, April 18, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52308002>

Conclusion

President Erdoğan has, over the course of two decades, gone from being banned from politics altogether, to being Turkey's most powerful head of state since Atatürk. In that time he has transformed the political landscape in his image. The balance of power tips heavily toward the presidency, allowing Erdoğan to make his New Turkey a reality. Yet still, he is not satisfied. On February 1, 2021, Erdoğan announced plans to replace the current constitution.¹⁹⁸ If he succeeds, it will be the first republican constitution for Turkey that won't be imposed on the nation by the military.

Three months later, a completed draft constitution was presented by Devlet Bahçeli, the leader of the the MHP, the junior party in the government's People's Alliance. Symbolically, it has exactly 100 articles, and is intended to be ratified in 2023, the centennial of the founding of the republic. Erdoğan has made lofty claims about what he envisions for the fourth republic: a new liberal democracy. He promises that all parties can come to the table to contribute to the constitution.¹⁹⁹ In the pro-AKP newspaper *Daily Sabah*, there is no hint of the Islamism which anchors Erdoğan's politics, nor any suggestion of authoritarianism, nor his suspicion of the West. He successfully conceals it behind a veneer of freedom. *Hürriyet* reveals more details: the draft

¹⁹⁸ Daily Sabah, "It is time to draft a new constitution, Erdoğan says", February 1, 2021. <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/it-is-time-to-draft-a-new-constitution-erdogan-says/news>

¹⁹⁹ Daily Sabah, "Turkey's MHP reveals 100-article constitution draft", May 4, 2021. <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/legislation/turkeys-mhp-reveals-100-article-constitution-draft>

is based on the current presidential system, and replaces the AYM with a new judiciary body.²⁰⁰ Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, leader of the opposition CHP, won't budge though unless the new constitution were to restore the parliamentary system: "Erdoğan does not need a constitutional amendment. Everything he says is becoming law anyway."²⁰¹

Ratifying a brand new constitution is not Erdoğan's only challenge, though. The lira is going through very high inflation in the wake of the pandemic. Official reports in November 2022 place the inflation rate at 85.5%, higher than at any other time during AKP rule, though the rate may actually be significantly higher. This problem is being compounded by Erdoğan's insisting on lowering interest rates, the opposite strategy of other countries, and counter to current economic wisdom.²⁰² Erdoğan claims he is resisting the "interest rate lobby" by doing so.²⁰³

The real challenge for Erdoğan comes at the next general election, on June 18, 2023. In addition to the three major opposition parties the AKP has already contested in past elections, there is a new party founded by one of Erdoğan's former trusted allies. Ahmet Davutoğlu, formerly Minister of Foreign Affairs, and from 2014-2016, Erdoğan's Prime Minister, is the leader of the *Gelecek Partisi* ("Future Party"), founded in 2019. In many ways, the Future Party embodies an AKP revival of the early 2000s.²⁰⁴ Along with two smaller parties, it has joined the

²⁰⁰ Hürriyet Daily News, "MHP unveils 100-article draft of constitution, calls on other parties to join efforts", May 4, 2021. <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/mhp-unveils-100-article-draft-of-constitution-calls-on-other-parties-to-join-efforts-164458>

²⁰¹ Hürriyet Daily News, "CHP will not discuss new constitution with AKP: Kılıçdaroğlu", October 8, 2021. <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/chp-will-not-discuss-new-constitution-with-akp-kilicdaroglu-168482>

²⁰² Reuters, "Turkey's inflation hits 24-year high of 85.5% after rate cuts" November 3, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/markets/asia/turkeys-inflation-hits-24-year-high-855-after-rate-cuts-2022-11-03/>

²⁰³ Daily Sabah, "Erdoğan vows to save investors, citizens from 'interest rate oppression'", October 23, 2022. <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/finance/erdogan-vows-to-save-investors-citizens-from-interest-rate-oppression>

²⁰⁴ Hürriyet Daily News, "Former Turkish PM Davutoğlu launches 'Future Party'", December 13, 2019, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/former-turkish-pm-davutoglu-launches-future-party-149816>

Nation Alliance with the CHP, HDP and İyi parties. They are united by one goal—restore the parliamentary system.²⁰⁵ Meral Akşener, leader of İyi, has even declared her refusal to run for president, intending to seek the prime ministership once the position is re-established.²⁰⁶

The AKP has also been slipping steadily in the polls since they peaked in 2018, though they have regained approximately twelve points since August 2022, likely due to Erdoğan’s mediation in the Russo-Ukrainian War to agree on a grain export deal, and his opposition to Russian annexation of Ukrainian territory despite otherwise expressing a neutral foreign policy.²⁰⁷ Nevertheless, the combined popularity of the People's Alliance (AKP and MHP) only reaches 39.6%.²⁰⁸ A united Nation Alliance stands a very good chance of defeating Erdoğan in 2023. If they do, Erdoğan’s authoritarian system could meet a sudden end. As a leader who has ruthlessly suppressed his opposition, including Gülenists and Kurds, he will not likely respond well to an electoral defeat.

Like the 2013 Gezi Park protests before it, the July 15, 2016 attempted coup d’état marks a watershed moment in twenty-first century Turkish history. If 2013 was the beginning of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s path to authoritarianism, the July 15 coup was the event which secured it. Erdoğan exploited the coup in a way that exceeded the personal capacities of any past Turkish

²⁰⁵ Hürriyet Daily News, “Opposition puts first signature to system change”, February 28, 2022. <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/opposition-puts-first-signature-to-system-change-171874>

²⁰⁶ Hürriyet Daily News, “İYİ Party’s Akşener says she will run for prime minister not president”, September 26, 2021. <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/iyi-partys-aksener-says-she-will-run-for-prime-minister-not-president-168160>

²⁰⁷ Judy Woodruff, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, “Turkey President Erdoğan on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the future of NATO—Transcript”, *PBS News Hour*, September 19, 2022. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/turkey-president-erdogan-on-russias-invasion-of-ukraine-and-the-future-of-nato>

²⁰⁸ PolitPro, “Election trends and latest election polls for Turkey”, <https://politpro.eu/en/turkey/trends>. Accessed November 15, 2022.

leader. The coups of 1960, 1971 and 1980 could be seen as stabilizing moments. In each case, the Kemalist TSK responded to elevated civil unrest, and restored order.

However, each coup was followed by the restoration of democracy. In contrast, by 2016 Erdoğan and his AKP formed a highly successful, long-running stable government, facing far less political violence than previous leaders. They gained popularity due to their successful economic policies in the 2000s, improving the lives of millions. The TSK were no longer dominated by Kemalists, either. Gülenists successfully infiltrated the military and public service. Erdoğan had already been transforming Turkish political institutions, such as the MGK and judiciary, to suit his purposes well before the coup.

Then, when a faction of the military attempted to overthrow the government, Erdoğan seized control of the national narrative, using it to consolidate his authoritarian vision, yet projecting it onto the public as a model of democracy. The image of his face on a phone held up to a television camera got people to go out into the streets to resist the putschists. From that moment, the coup was all but over. However, Erdoğan didn't stop when the coup ended. He exploited the coup to justify a massive purge of civil society in the name of protecting the institution he was set on destroying. The state of emergency that followed lasted two years, and in that time, both a constitutional referendum and an election were held under circumstances that were anything but free and fair. He consolidated power within the presidency, which he continues to occupy today. The narrative that the July 15 coup created—and Erdoğan exploited—is the key tool he needed to transform the Turkish political system in his own image.

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