

Professor Bray

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Turkey's Struggle for Democracy

According to the National Atlantic Treaty Organization, a nation's armed forces are rooted in the concept of representative democracy, bound by law and justice, and tasked with promulgating a constitutional framework that defines the fundamental relationship between the state and military. Additional legal guarantees should ensure the political neutrality of the armed forces and protect said nation from two prospective circumstances: politicians with hazardous military ambitions and military officials with political ambitions. Yet, in July of 2016, the Peace at Home Council, a mutinous faction within the Turkish Armed Forces, attempted a coup d'état against the nation and its civilian institutions. Citing a recent erosion of secularism and democratic rule and an outright disregard for human rights, the Council sought to seize the Turkish government and oust President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Although ultimately unsuccessful, the 2016 coup d'état sparked debate both within Turkey and abroad, debate that reevaluated the role and standing of a state's armed forces and reexamined Turkey's complex history and its consequences on the nation's sensitive modern condition.

The attempted coup began late on July 15, when members of the Peace at Home Council hijacked military aircraft and stole tanks along with other armored vehicles. The mutinous troops used the stolen vehicles to block bridges and tunnels in Turkey's largest city, Istanbul, and take over government buildings, major airports, military bases, and the offices of several news outlets. They proclaimed themselves as bastions of democracy, circulating a press release that

read, "The Turkish Armed Forces, in accordance with the constitution, have seized management of the country to reinstate democracy, human rights, and freedom, and to ensure public order, which has deteriorated." In its statement, the Council alludes to Erdogan's recent power grabs: the Turkish president purged the armed forces and accused over 250 senior military officers, journalists, lawyers, and academics of conspiracy to overthrow his administration in a series of trials in 2012. He also accelerated the government takeover of newspapers, television stations, and media channels, forcibly repressed peaceful protests against increased government authoritarianism in 2013, spearheaded legislation in 2016 that gave the government increased powers over the appointment of judges within the Turkish judiciary, and introduced changes to Turkey's educational system that featured "compulsory religious instruction" and represented an attempt to instill Islamic values in the nation's youth (Faction).

In the early hours of the coup, President Erdogan remained unaccounted for; it was later reported that he had been vacationing in the coastal city of Marmaris and narrowly escaped before a special forces team arrived at his hotel to capture him. He first addressed the Turkish people in the early hours of July 16 via a FaceTime chat on a journalist's mobile phone, urging his supporters to defend their country and its institutions and to take to the streets to voice their opposition to the insurgents. Erdogan also forwarded a text message to every cellular phone in the country, reiterating his calls to convene at public squares and demonstrate the collective power of the populace:

Dear children of the Turkish nation. This action is a coup against the nation, commandeering armored vehicles and weapons in Ankara and Istanbul, behaving as if it were the 1970s. Honorable Turkish nation, claim democracy and peace: I am calling you

to the streets against this action of a narrow cadre that has fallen against the Turkish nation. Claim the state, claim the nation (Recep).

The president's efforts proved extremely successful: his appeals galvanized supporters to leave their homes to rally and push back against the coup. Government officials reported that tens of thousands of Turks had taken to the streets to protest the night's events and that Erdogan's administration began to gain ground as members of the Council perceived an outcry and lack of support among Turkish citizens. President Erdogan's direct contacts with the public are regarded as the coup's major turning point, in which he delivered to his people a strong and devoted leader and spurred "the first instance of civilians rallying to protest a coup in progress in the country's long history of military takeovers"(Yeginsu).



Despite the protests, violence carried on throughout the night, including the kidnapping of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Hulusi Akar, by his own security personnel, tense aerial fights, gunfire crackling throughout Istanbul and Ankara, explosions at Turkey's central parliament

building, one of which killing a Turkish lawmaker, and a helicopter occupied by members of the Council blown from the sky. Erdogan landed in Istanbul just after 3:30 a.m., the city where he began his career as a politician and is remembered by many as the mayor who brought running water to the region's poorest neighborhoods. He greeted supporters amid continued chaos in Turkey's largest cities, yet despite the roaring explosions and gunfire, the president's appearance signaled that the coup was nearing its end. Thousands of ordinary citizens, armed with "nothing more than kitchen utensils," along with loyal soldiers and law enforcement, had defeated the insurgents within a span of hours. Speaking to supporters just after sunrise on July 16, Erdogan proclaimed, "This government, brought to power by the people, is in charge. Turkey is proud of you. I am here, I am with you and I want you to know this." All in all, the toll of victory was high: 2,194 people had been injured, and an additional 265 were killed. The Turkish Armed Forces reported that over 8,000 soldiers, or roughly 1.5% of the military, as well as over 2,500 noncommissioned soldiers and military students, had been involved in the coup (Faction).

Following the attempted takeover, President Erdogan sought to quickly reassert control and authority, his administration's reaction dubbed "swift and severe" by Bloomberg News. On July 17, over 6,000 people were detained due to links to the coup, a number that would grow to up to 36,000 by the end of the month. On July 19, over 15,000 education ministry personnel were placed on suspension, 1,500 university leaders forcibly resigned, and 21,000 teachers were disbarred from academia. Later that day, over 200 people were fired from the prime minister's office, and another 500 were fired from the religious affairs office. By July 22, over 53,000 people had been removed from their jobs: roughly 29,000 academics, 13,500 government employees, 7,000 defense and law enforcement personnel, including 100 generals, and 3,000 judges. As of July 2017, more than 100,000 people had been fired or suspended and 50,000

arrested by an administration that, according to *The New York Times*, had "become more vengeful and obsessed with control than ever, exploiting the crisis not just to punish mutinous soldiers but to further quash whatever dissent [there is] in Turkey." Erdogan's purges did not stop at those with clear links to the coup; he expanded the witch hunt in November 2016 to well-respected papers and radio stations and doubled down on his already apparent suppression of the press, detaining the top editors and writers of *Cumhuriyet*, Turkey's oldest daily newspaper. He also sought out political rivals, including leaders of the People's Democratic Party, a leftist group that at the time controlled the third largest number of seats in parliament. Turkey researcher Andrew Gardner refers to the government's actions as a "crackdown of exceptional proportions"(Faction).

Beyond the arrests and firings by Turkish officials, President Erdogan declared a three-month-long state of emergency in the nation on July 20, just four days after the attempted coup. Throughout the state of emergency, the government was able to greatly expand its powers: Erdogan and his cabinet could pass new laws without parliamentary approval, implement early curfews, and curb public demonstrations. During the three months following the emergency's declaration, the government increased the length of time a suspect could be held without formal charges, made it more difficult for those fired or suspended to get their jobs back, and suspended its following of the European Convention on Human Rights. "Right now, law is suspended," said Sercan Aran, deputy head of the Ankara Bar Association's human rights commission. Aran's statement cited reports of suspect mistreatment, in which detainees were reportedly being held unlawfully, had not had their charges properly explained, were deprived of food and water, and had been physically abused. The coup, as a whole, left the nation of Turkey in a state of disarray, one that allowed President Erdogan to continue his power grabs (Faction).

While an extraordinary event in and of itself, the 2016 Turkish coup "is perhaps not quite as surprising and extraordinary as many have suggested," says University of Manchester researcher Tim Jacoby. By considering how the event fits into the broader spectrum of Turkish history, its origins and influences become clearer and more predictable. Turkey was established as a sovereign nation only 95 years ago as the Republic of Turkey, in which military leader and revolutionary Kemal Ataturk overthrew centuries of Ottoman imperialism and with it the majority of Turkish political, economic, and social traditions. Ataturk sought to modernize and secularize what had previously been a zealous Islamic state and one of the largest and longest-lasting empires in world history. He gave women the right to vote, substituted the Arab alphabet with its Roman counterpart, and adopted many important features of modern democracy, including a Western-style legal system and constitution. The Constitution of 1921, which was later amended in October of 1923, derived its sovereignty from the nation and the people rather than an absolute ruler and took necessary steps to place executive power and legislative responsibility in the hands of the National Assembly, a parliamentary body consisting of elected representatives. Turkey ultimately joined the United Nations in 1945 and the National Atlantic Treaty Organization in 1952, joining the ranks of the world's most progressive and democratic nations. Turkey's identity is thus centered on a secular, democratic nation rising from the ashes of Islamic fundamentalism and autocratic rule.



In accordance with this unique national identity, Turkey's judiciary, along with its military, the Turkish Armed Forces, have for nearly a century viewed themselves as protectors and guardians of the state. They have thus positioned themselves against leaders and political parties that promote Islam as a state-sponsored religion or simply put forth platforms that expand its role in public life. The military itself, according to Jacoby, possesses "age-old interventionist tendencies" and continues to serve as a somewhat check on the state rather than as a "unitary, undifferentiated organ." For, even the coalition led by Kemal Ataturk was founded not in restaurants, media outlets, or workplaces, but in the Military Medical School. This revolutionary Committee of Union and Progress, referred to often as the Young Turks, developed as a secret military society consisting of students, civil servants, and army officers. The Young Turks were responsible for toppling the Ottoman Empire and ushering in an era of constitutional government for the first time in the region's history; the nation's military is rooted in combatting autocratic rule and championing a democratic and secular form of government (Jacoby).

Despite Turkey's establishment as a sovereign nation, it proved difficult to prevent highly conservative Muslim leaders and political parties from gaining traction among the populace, as Islam had dominated every major strand of Turkish life for nearly 1,000 years. The secularism of the Republic of Turkey was enjoyed by a ruling elite well-versed in Western life and culture, yet resentment grew among the masses; the nation was secularized and modernized at the official level, but Islamic teachings remained embedded in the lower classes. As Western-educated Turks flourished under Ataturk's policies, much of the population suffered from economic ills and crushing inflation and felt culturally abandoned. Recognizing these conditions within Turkey, political leaders were quick to appeal to much of the population's attachment to Islam. In 1950, the socially conservative Democratic Party, led by President Celal Bayar and Prime Minister Adnan Menderes, was elected. Bayar had promised to relax restrictions on Islam in public life, and following his election, made religious education compulsory for secondary school students, allowed thousands of previously closed mosques to reopen, and appointed Arabic as the official language of prayer over Turkish. As Bayar presided over the Turkish people throughout the 1950s, the nation entered a period of economic distress, and the Democratic Party became increasingly authoritarian in response to Kemalist opposition, cracking down on independent media outlets and ultimately imposing martial law in 1960. The military, on May 27, toppled Bayar's administration and arrested the president, his prime minister, and several cabinet officials. General Cemal Gursel assumed power with the intent to restore Ataturk's Turkish vision and reestablish the nation's commitment to democracy (Pearson).

Military coups similar to that of 1960 later materialized in 1971, 1980, and 1997, and the Turkish Armed Forces during the period banned several major political parties. In 1971, the Turkish economy had stagnated, and Prime Minister Suleyman Demirel had driven the nation

into chaos; the period was characterized by social unrest, violence, and an aggressive Islamic movement that openly opposed Ataturk and the principles of secular democracy. The military, in an effort to "restore order," handed the prime minister a memorandum demanding his resignation and the "formation of a strong and credible government inspired by Ataturk's views" (Timeline).

The coup of 1980 was similar to that of 1971, in which the nation was plagued by economic stagnation, inflation, and social unrest. Unlike the events of 1971, however, the military was forced to impose martial law and dissolve the government; the military's actions did manage to bring stability to Turkey, and through economic policies promoting greater privatization of industry, inflation and unemployment declined. It was also following the 1980 coup that a new constitution was drafted and implemented in 1982. The last successful Turkish coup took shape following the 1995 Turkish general election, in which the Islamist Welfare Party rose to power. In response, the military issued a series of compulsory recommendations to the incoming administration in 1997, similar to the memorandum of 1971, including a headscarf ban at Turkish universities and a required eight-year education program designed to prevent students from enrolling at religious schools. Although the events of 1997 remain the military's most recent successful intervention effort, it has continued to involve itself with Turkish politics; it openly opposed the 2007 election of Abdullah Gul, issuing an ineffective memorandum, and, as discussed, attempted a coup against the increasingly authoritarian Recep Tayyip Erdogan in 2016 (Timeline).

Since its founding in 1923, Turkey has maintained one of the most successful forms of democracy in the Middle East. Committed to its identity as a free and secular nation among staunch Islamic strongholds and monarchial regimes, Turkey has persisted through fierce challenges and obstacles, including ultra-conservative leaders and political parties and

authoritarian figureheads mired by corruption and power. Perhaps its most redeeming feature is its historically interventionist and politicized military, which has taken up the responsibility of safeguarding Kemalism and thwarting threats to the country at large. The Turkish Armed Forces dispel the National Atlantic Treaty Organization's notion that the military and the state are one in the same and for just under a century have capably and predictably maintained Turkey's national identity along with its most revered institutions. The 2016 coup is thus an extension of the country's broader history, in which the military failed to overthrow an increasingly zealous and authoritarian regime. How Erdogan and his administration continue to preside over the nation and coexist with the Turkish Armed Forces will surely be watched in the coming years by the global community.

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