

HTR406

## Turkey's 1960 Military Coup d'Etat

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May 20, 2020

### Introduction

Since its foundation in 1923, the Republic of Turkey has witnessed multiple coups that were carried out by the staunchly secular military. With the first coup happening in 1960, and the next ones happening in 1971, 1980, and 1997 to cite a few, it seems that a coup is expected every ten years or so. Each coup took a characteristic form. The 1971 coup, for instance, was called a *coup by memorandum* or more famously as *post-modern coup*, while the coup of 2007 was dubbed *E-memorandum* as the General Staff simply released a statement on the Turkish Armed Forces website before the presidential elections of 2007 without directly intervening and seizing the power by force. Nevertheless, the military coup of 1960 remains the most important event that Turkish people till this day view under different lights.

### Background

In order to understand the reasons that led to the execution of the military coup of 1960, it is important to consider the historical context it took place in. Since the foundation of the Republic, Turkey has only known a single-party system under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, only to be succeeded by Ismet Inonu.

The Turkish economy stagnated during the 1950s. Even though Turkey was not directly involved in the World War, the global situation put a tremendous stress on Turkey's economy. People struggled to find food and could not provide shelter to themselves and their families. People were discontent with the current economic policies and wanted a new government that could take them out of this misery.

Things changed when Turkey introduced the multiparty system in 1946. At the time, the only party that opposed the Republican People's Party (RPP) was the Democratic Party (DP). Although it participated in the first free elections in 1946, it couldn't garner much support. Four years later however, the DP was well prepared to win the elections of 1950's against the longstanding RPP with its three decades of uninterrupted rule.

Celal Bayar, ex-member of the RPP that was unhappy with its policies, presided the new DP government, with Adnan Menderes as his Prime Minister.<sup>1</sup> The newly formed government was committed to economic growth. The DP aimed to achieve this progress mainly by reducing state interference and allowing for more liberal economic policies.

In the first few years, it seemed that the DP was successful at bringing change to the economic situation. Good harvest in 1950 and 1953 helped temporarily alleviate the problems, while the Korean War, which was the first war fought by Turkish forces on foreign soil, caused an economic boom and allowed Turkey, after nearly 30 years of neutrality towards international affairs, to join the United Nations and secure its role as a strong leader in the Middle East region.<sup>23</sup>

Unfortunately, this economic upheaval didn't last for long and problems started to appear in 1953. Poor harvest in the next few years wasn't enough to satisfy the demands of the population, which forced Turkey to import wheat once again from neighboring countries. This problem was aggravated with Turkey's lack of foreign exchange, which limited its power to purchase essential materials. Turkey was also facing on the highest inflation rates in its

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<sup>1</sup>(Dewdney and Yapp 2020) Turkey under the Democrats, 1950–60.

<sup>2</sup>(Dewdney and Yapp 2020) Turkey under the Democrats, 1950–60, The economy.

<sup>3</sup>(Lippe 2000) page 92.

history, which averaged 15% annually drowning Turkey even more into an economic depression. The Democratic Party tried to mitigate the effects of the inflation by controlling the prices through legislation with no success. Its continually rising public expenditure led to the prices soaring even more, making the DP less and less popular in the eyes of the people.<sup>4</sup>

The Democratic Party was now facing mounting criticism both from its members and outside environment. The RPP accused DP of trying to reverse the achievements of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, and particularly a principle that he stressed about: Secularism. In fact, under the DP's regime, conservative religious organization spread further in the country, religious schools were permitted to instruct, Arabic was reinstated for the prayer call.<sup>5</sup>

In spite of being able to justify their ascension to power through democratic elections, the democrats still felt insecure and perhaps inferior as long as Ismet Inonu was the leader of the RPP. Even though they had the political power by being a legitimate government, they were unsure about their hold over the state institutions, which remained loyal to the founding Party in general and Ismet Inonu in particular. To this end, the DP stressed on its dependence on the national will to legitimize the power it holds and the actions it takes.<sup>6</sup>

This insecurity surfaced in the many attempts of the DP to use military forces to prevent Inonu from entering cities all across Turkey and address citizens. But due to their respect for the old Chief, most soldiers did not obey the orders and left Inonu free to travel.<sup>7</sup>

Feeling that it is losing its grip over the country, the government responded to criticism with redoubled repression. in an attempt to weaken RPP, DP through the National Assembly in which it is majoritary, passed a law that would allow for the confiscation of most of the RP's property and assets on December 9 1953.<sup>8</sup> This fueled even stronger opposition attacks, which accused the DP of unconstitutional actions. The DP, fearing reprisal and a revolution,

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<sup>4</sup>(Dewdney and Yapp 2020) Turkey under the Democrats, 1950–60, The economy.

<sup>5</sup>(Dewdney and Yapp 2020) Turkey under the Democrats, 1950–60, Political repression.

<sup>6</sup>(Eryilmaz 2014) page 2.

<sup>7</sup>(Eryilmaz 2014) page 56.

<sup>8</sup>(Eryilmaz 2014) page 6.

whirled in a spiral of increasing repression to increasing protests and discontent.<sup>9</sup>

Another important aspect to consider is the attitude DP had towards the military institution. During this period, the cost of living soared and the military was neglected, suffocating officers and soldiers alike to the point of humiliation. In Ankara, cheap basement flats were called “Staff-Officer flats”, and officers “lemonaders” because they couldn’t afford the more expensive drinks. People were disappointed at the DP for not sticking to its promised programme that was intended to improve the situation of the military. The DP did not understand the importance of the military in Turkish society and thought it was more priority to spend money on roads, cement factories and other projects to enhance the country’s development<sup>[12]</sup>

The year 1959 was marked with increased paranoia, political instability, and censorship. Newspapers were banned, journalists taken to prison in unprecedented numbers. Perhaps the biggest event that sparked the coup was the Kayseri event in April 1960. Government officials stopped the train taking Ismet Inonu to Kayseri and asked him to return to Ankara. After waiting for three hours, he was allowed to go. The government started to accuse the RPP of instigating the military for a coup. Adnan Menderes himself claimed to have documents to prove this. This provoked the military officers and caused indignation throughout the military and academic institutions.<sup>10</sup>

## Coup d’Etat

In light of the economic and political downward spiral that Turkey was caught in, and in the attitude the DP had towards the military, discontent in the armed forces took a political form. People like Colonel Alparslan Türkeş had a different vision for Turkey than the ones deemed acceptable by the ruling élite.<sup>11</sup> He was a member of the junta and orchestrated the plot.

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<sup>9</sup>(Dewdney and Yapp 2020) Turkey under the Democrats, 1950–60, Political repression.

<sup>10</sup>(Eryilmaz 2014) page 54.

<sup>11</sup>(Feroz 2002) page 125-126.

On May 26, 1960, the armed forces took control by arresting the Turkish President Celal Bayar, his prime minister Adnan Menderes as well as a few other leading political party officers. The following morning, on May 27 1960, the following speech was broadcasted at 7 a.m. broadcast over Ankara Radio:

Honorable fellow countrymen! Owing to the crisis into which our democracy has fallen, in view of the recent sad incidents, and in order to avert fratricide, the Turkish Armed Forces have taken over the administration of the country. Our armed forces have taken this initiative for the purpose of extricating the parties from the irreconcilable situation into which they have fallen . . . (and will hold) just and free elections as soon as possible under the supervision and arbitration of an above-party administration.

The military took over the power and declared Marshal Law. The coup was to last only 18 months. At the beginning, the roadmap of the junta was not clear. Some officers intended that the government should be chosen by free elections after removing the corrupted politicians, another group was in favor of passing the power back to Ismet Inonu. The highest ranking officers were in neither group. They decided that constitutional changes needed to be made first.<sup>12</sup>

To that end, a new military committee, called National Unity Committee, was formed and presided by Cemal Gursel. The task of the NUC was to draft a new constitution that would limit the power of the government to prevent the same abuse from happening again in the future. The NUC promised to return the country to civilian life as quickly as possible. One of Atatürk's efforts and principles was to keep the military and politics separate, which is the reason why the military was against staying in power for too long. The deputies and leading members of the Democratic Party were put on trial for the violation of the constitution of 1924.

One interesting anecdote about this military coup was the fact that it was initiated not

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<sup>12</sup>(Eryilmaz 2014) page 15, page 28-29.

by the top echelon of the military like most coup d'états in the world but by the *lower rank* of officers. In fact most of the officers were under the age of 40 years old.

## **A new constitution**

Immediately after the coup, the NUC started working on the new constitution. They appointed a committee of five law professors to create the first draft. The constitution took its final form in May and was approved by 61 percent of the voters at referendum in July<sup>13</sup>

The new constitution introduced a bicameral system through a two-chamber parliament made up of the Republican Senate and the Turkish Grand National Assembly. Because the DP was able to pass almost any law through the National Assembly as it held the vast majority (90%) of the seats, the Senate would act as a dampener that would limit their control and have stricter supervision over the drafted acts. Another two institutions were the Constitutional court and the State Planning Organization. The first institutions' job was to supervise the actions of the government and be on the watch for any abuse that is unconstitutional and threatens the foundation of Republic of Turkey. The latter was introduced in order to bring about a systematic approach to investments and a solid long-term economic planning that can withstand political instability better.<sup>14</sup>

Another interesting point about the new constitution is that it focused on protecting social rights and freedoms of citizens. It put individual rights and liberties at the heart by not only enumerating basic rights but describing their components in details<sup>15</sup>

## **Purge and Yassiada Trials**

Two months after the coup, the Democratic Party was abolished. Many leading political members were brought to trial for charges of unconstitutional rule and corruption. They were taken to a small island in the Bosphorus called Yassiada. The trials lasted almost a year.

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<sup>13</sup>(Feroz 2002) page 183.

<sup>14</sup>(Dewdney and Yapp 2020) The military coup of 1961, The constitution of 1961.

<sup>15</sup>(Eryilmaz 2014) page 27.

Out of 601 tried Democrats, 464 were found guilty.<sup>16</sup> Three former ministers, Fatin Rüştü Zorlu, Hasan Polatkan, and prime minister Adnan Menderes, were sentenced to death for high treason. They were taken to İmralı Island, further southwest of İmralı, near the southern shoreline of Marmara sea, to be executed in 1961.<sup>17</sup>

The actions taken by the NUC did not stop at the Democratic Party and its members. A country-wide purge was launched, which resulted in over 5000 officers dismissed or retired, including 235 of the 260 generals, 147 university teachers dismissed, and 55 wealthy landowners banished from Turkey, with their lands confiscated.<sup>18</sup>

After the 1960 coup “Yassıada” name was remembered negatively, which led the island to be renamed as “Democracy and Freedom Island” on November 7, 2013<sup>19</sup>

## **Back to civilian life**

After the constitution was drafted, the referendum of July 9, 1961 took place for the first time in Turkish Republic history. Out of 10,322,169 votes, 6,348,191 (61.7%) of them accepted the new constitution. While the number is above 50% percent, it leaves to wonder why 40% voted against it. This percentage can be interpreted as lukewarm support. People were skeptic of the new constitution and the military regime behind it. They feared a return to the single-party system due to the Republic Party’s majority in the House of Representatives when the constitution was prepared.<sup>20</sup>

Once the new constitution was ratified, the army, as promised, withdrew from direct political involvement. The NUC however retained some influence through its members in the Republican Senate.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>(Dewdney and Yapp 2020) The military coup of 1961, The National Unity Committee.

<sup>17</sup>(“Yassıada” 2020).

<sup>18</sup>(Dewdney and Yapp 2020) The military coup of 1961, The National Unity Committee.

<sup>19</sup>(“Yassıada” 2020).

<sup>20</sup>(Eryilmaz 2014) page 23, .

<sup>21</sup>(Dewdney and Yapp 2020) The military coup of 1961, The constitution of 1961.

## Criticism

The 1960's coup d'état is not without opposing views. Some people view the 1960 as a necessity that was carried out by the military in order to prevent the Islamization efforts of the country by Celal Bayar and his prime minister Adnan Menderes and protect the Kemalist principle of secularism, while others believe there is more to it than what is told.

One particular theory for why the coup d'état happened has to do with the situation of the Western world, specifically of the invisible struggle of power that was happening between the Western capitalist block, namely the United States, and the Eastern communist bloc, namely the former Soviet Union.

The conservative approach of the DP party seemed to have been encouraged by the United States. The probably reasoning for this was the fact that Islam could be an effective weapon to contain the spread of communism in the region, given that Islam's principles conflict with many of the communist ideas. In that regards, the US was either passively or actively encouraging the practices of DP.

The Soviet Union had for a long time and on multiple instances attempted to seize control of the Straits. It considers the strait of utmost importance as it connects the Black Sea to the Mediterranean, and would allow for strategic military and trade opportunities. During the 1940s, after the World War II, Turkey was pressured to allow the free flow of Russian ships through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits. Territorial integrity and sovereignty was crucial for Turkey, therefore it did not submit. This led to tense relations in the region, where the Soviet would threaten Turkey with military intervention by making a show of naval force. Since the British assistance ended in 1947, some other power had to intervene to help contain the Soviet threat. At the same time, an American foreign policy called the Truman Doctrine was announced on March 12, 1947, whose goal is to contain the geopolitical expansion of the Soviets during the Cold War. It became clear to the United States how strategically important Turkey was in this mission. To this end, the U.S. sent a \$100 million economic and



military aid package that would empower Turkey to remain in chief control of the straits.<sup>22</sup>

Although the economy seemed to be coming back on track during the beginning of the DP's term, the poor harvest combined with diminishing aid from the US pushed the DP to look for other ways to patch up the deficit. It seems that the Democratic Party was considering to ask the Soviet Union for credit. This credit wouldn't of course be given without a list of requirements from the Soviet Union and the US wouldn't be happy about Soviet Union expanding their sphere of influence to Turkey and neighboring countries.

Despite US's encouragement of the DP in the first phase, seeing as how DP is now turning to the soviets for help, it decided that DP was becoming a threat and needed to be dealt with in some way or another. In fact, it was no surprise that Colonel Alparslan Türkeş would be the one orchestrating the coup plot. He was member of the junta and had been among the first 16 officers trained by the US in 1948 to form a stay-behind counter-guerilla, codenamed Operation Gladio, whose existence in Turkey was revealed by survivors of the Ziverbey incident in 1971 and officially on 26 September 1973 by the then-prime minister Bulent Ecevit.<sup>23</sup>

The sole fact that Alparslan had this connection with the United States gives this coup d'état a whole new dimension.

The constitution is also not without criticism. Many points introduced that seemed to be good at the time caused a few headaches down the road. Among the critiques was the fact that the fundamental rights and freedoms, as they were stated in the new constitution, could be improperly exploited. The bicameral structure of the Parliament complicated the method of enactment and slowed down the introduction of new legislations or executives actions, sometimes to the point of making governing and taking urgent decisions impossible, as was the case during the violent civil unrest between the left and right wings in Turkey during the 1970s. Another point was that universities considered themselves totally independent

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<sup>22</sup>(“Truman Doctrine” 2020).

<sup>23</sup>(“Counter-Guerrilla” 2020)

from the state as was arranged for by the new constitution, giving them breeding ground for propaganda in the years to come. These critiques brought about new amendments in the Constitutions for a total of seven amendments between 1969 and 1974.

## **Conclusion**

The 1960's coup is an event in the modern history of the Republic Turkey that won't be forgotten any time soon. It lies at the transition from 30 years of single-party rule to a multi-party system that Turkey experiences for the first time. It asserts the military's influential role in the path followed by Turkey and the ways it protects the Kemalist principles of both Republicanism and Secularism. It also insists on the crucial role that Turkey plays as geopolitical power in the Middle East region as it tries to reconcile the Western and Eastern's conflicting interests and guarantees its territorial integrity.

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