Why Coups Fail

The Outcome in Turkey Was No Surprise

By July 17, 2016

A supporter of Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan is silhouetted against a Turkish flag during a demonstration outside parliament building in Ankara, Turkey, July 16, 2016.

Osman Orsal / Reuters

As tanks rolled through Ankara over the weekend, it looked like Turkey was about to become the first and only NATO member since the end of the Cold War to suffer a textbook coup d'état. Then, after merely a few hours, the plot began to falter. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan resisted his overthrow with a defiant address (albeit one delivered secondhand via television cameras

broadcasting Erdogan's smartphone transmission to a shocked nation). Then word began to leak that the commander of Turkey's military was not even part of the coup but was instead being held hostage by rogue elements within the army. Soon, a much larger part of the military began to fight back against the plot.

In the span of a few hours, the doomed plot was transformed from one that was poised to overthrow one of the most strategically important governments in the world into one that looked like amateur hour, or to borrow U.S. President Barack Obama's now infamous phrase, the "junior varsity team" of coup plotters.

But when you zoom out from Turkey and look at the wider world of coups, the Turkish plan looks extremely familiar. And in a comparative context, the would-be putsch's doomed outcome was eminently predictable because of a few telltale signs that signal early on whether a coup is likely to succeed or to fail.

A Turkish army honor guard marches after a funeral service for the victims of the thwarted coup, in Ankara, Turkey, July 17, 2016.

Baz Ratner / Reuters

Coups have become markedly less common since the end of the Cold War, declining from an average of nearly 13 plots around the world per year in the 1970s to fewer than 4 per year today. Moreover, the proportion of successful coups has fallen, having roughly a fifty-fifty chance of success in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, to less than a one-in-four chance since the end of the Cold War. Those changes are driven by a combination of factors, from new international norms against coups and foreign aid conditionality to rising incomes and better civil-military relations.

But even as the frequency of coups has changed, the reasons they succeed or fail have remained roughly the same. Successful coups usually follow one of two

pathways. Either the military establishment uniformly agrees from the outset that a military takeover should proceed, or a smaller group of audacious coup plotters within the military finds a way to create a bandwagon effect, wherein rank-and-file soldiers and the military brass rally around the plot. Only then can a smaller element within the military ensure the regime's downfall.

Thailand's 2014 coup was a textbook example of the first pathway. The military establishment agreed that it was time for Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra to go, and so the coup succeeded almost immediately. The unified officer corps met virtually no resistance as they took the reins in Bangkok. Unlike this weekend's events in Turkey, Thailand's transition to military rule was swift and certain.

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Conversely, African coups often follow the second pathway. In Madagascar's 2009 coup, a mid-level mutiny among rank-and-file soldiers grew into a full-blown military takeover when subsequent public protests grew so large that the military brass turned against the regime. Or, perhaps more infamously, the 1980 coup d'état in Liberia by the warlord Samuel Doe—a lowly master sergeant at the time—illustrates how relatively junior officers can take power if others rally around them. Doe and his entourage killed President William Tolbert and brutally executed many of Tolbert's allies, which spelled a quick end of the regime.

The failed Turkish plot is much more like the Thailand coup than the Madagascar or Liberia takeovers. Turkey's military is professional and institutionalized, so a lone wolf plot would have almost certainly been doomed. It takes far less force to topple a regime in weak, non-institutionalized governments such as Madagascar's or Liberia's than it does to achieve the same in Turkey or Thailand.

But what ultimately did doom the Turkish plot was a familiar culprit in failed coups: division within the military leadership. Rather than rally to the side of the coup plotters, much of the Turkish military remained loyal to the regime. And plots that bring out major divides within the military are simultaneously more likely to fail and more likely to descend into violence due to the highly dangerous prospect of military infighting.

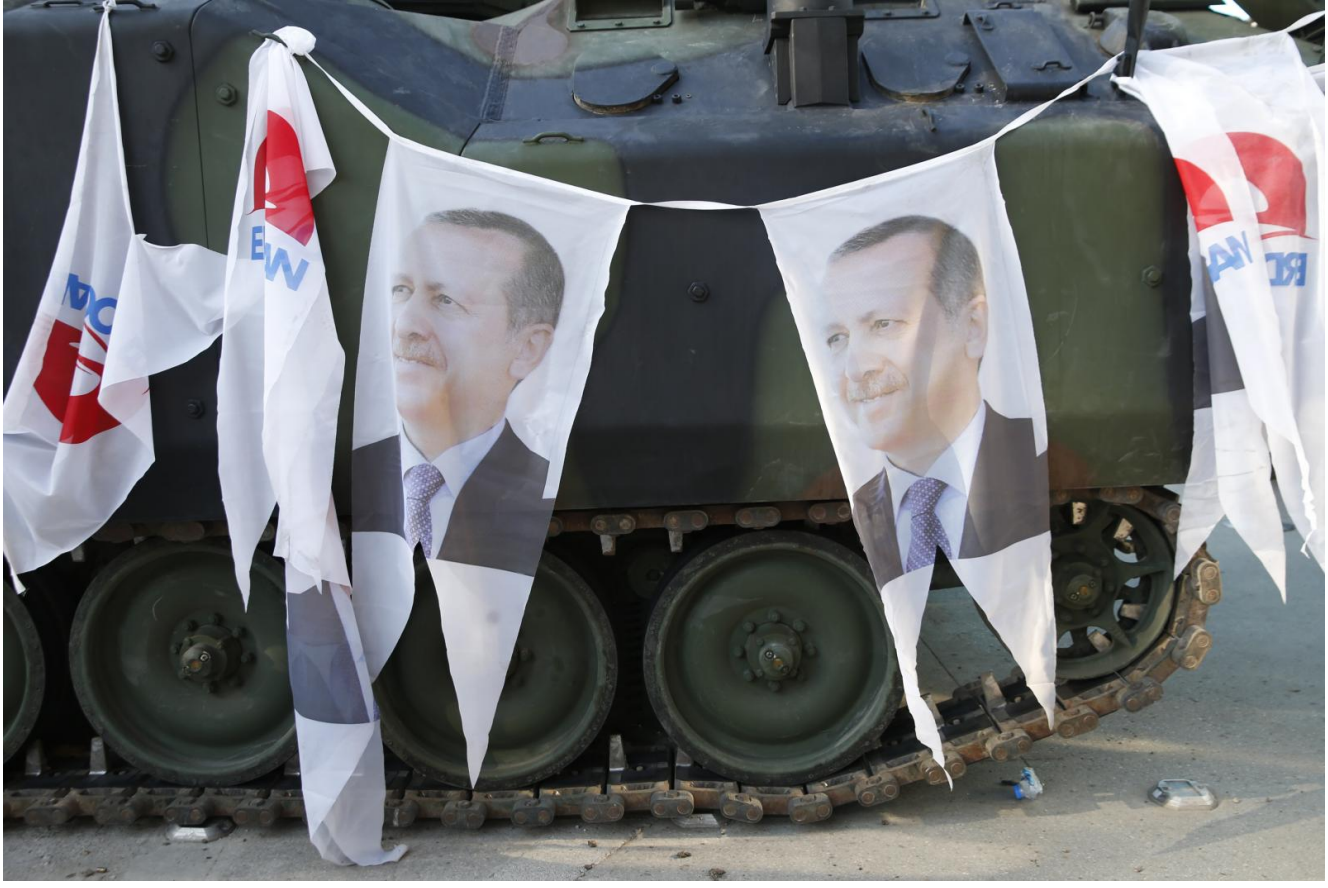
> **The key to a successful coup plot is to create an aura of inevitability.**

In that regard, the Turkish coup plotters miscalculated badly. This miscalculation might seem surprising or amateurish, but that isn't necessarily the case. After all, it's hardly possible for coup plotters to take an opinion poll and see how the rank-and-file soldiers or their commanding officers feel about a possible putsch. Coup plots—which rely on secrecy and surprise—are almost always hatched with highly imperfect information and are therefore prone to misreading the prospects for success, as the dismal success rates show.

The Turkish plotters were likely aware that their hopes lay

with creating a bandwagon effect. And that is precisely why the coup attempt followed a familiar strategic script. The first rule of coup plotting is to strike when the regime is likely to respond slowly to a lightning-quick attack. As with so many coup attempts, the one in Turkey began while Erdoğan was away from the capital (on holiday, in this case). This was almost certainly deliberate. In 2014, a coup was attempted in Gambia as the president was abroad. Tunisia's toppled former dictator, Ben Ali, came to power in a coup when the sitting president, Habib Bourguiba, fell ill.

Once the president's regime can more easily be caught off guard, the next key to a successful coup plot is to create an aura of inevitability. Participation on the losing side during a coup plot is dangerous. People who defend the regime are terribly vulnerable if it is eventually toppled. Likewise, failed coup plotters and their accomplices usually face jail, beatings, exile, torture, or death. And that is why the early stages of the coup attempt in Turkey involved a shocking display of force, with jets flying low over the city and tanks rumbling through normally peaceful streets. The plotters wanted to convey that Erdoğan was a sinking ship and that it was time to abandon him and join the new power in the country instead.



An armored vehicle with portraits of Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan is parked outside the parliament building in Ankara, Turkey, July 16, 2016.

Baz Ratner / Reuters

But it usually doesn't take much to undermine that all-important aura of inevitability. Erdoğan quickly addressed the nation, calling for resistance. People responded and took to the streets, tipping the momentum back to the regime. And when it became clear that the military commander was being held against his will, there was just enough doubt to stop others from rallying to the coup plotters' side.

Inevitability is thus the critical factor, and it can change in a matter of seconds. In 1997, for example, a Zambian coup plot unfolded in which mid-level officers hoped to create the perception of certainty by kidnapping the army commander at gunpoint and forcing him to announce the putsch on the radio. Late at night they noisily broke into

his house. Alarmed by the intrusion, the army commander fled through the backyard and began climbing his compound wall in an effort to escape. One of the plotters grabbed the general's pant leg and tugged, but he managed to slip over the wall. Rather than being taken at gunpoint to the radio station, he alerted the government to the plot. In the meantime, the dejected mid-level officers discovered to their delight that the affluent commander had imported Namibian beer in his refrigerator, so they salvaged a very bad night with a bit of drinking. The coup plot was quashed just hours later. Had they been a few seconds quicker, it is possible that Zambia would have had a completely different political trajectory.

Observers saw the same thing Friday night in Turkey, albeit in a decidedly less comical fashion. The plotters would have had no clue about what precisely to expect. Even the best laid coup plans often go awry. And when they do, the plotters are forced to make enormously consequential split-second decisions with little information and in much chaos.

Thus, even though the Turkish plotters followed a now-familiar script (down to the lofty but empty rhetoric about restoring democracy, human rights, and constitutional order), they were also doomed to failure by the most difficult barrier to a successful coup: division in the military ranks. When those divisions were exposed, the plotters seemed less likely to win. And in a matter of

moments, like Cinderella at the stroke of midnight, they were transformed from an inescapable force into a group of cocky but severely misguided upstart soldiers.

Unfortunately, the long history of coups also teaches a clear lesson about what is likely to come next. One of the most ironclad of laws in politics is that governments that face coup attempts almost always become more authoritarian in response to them. Erdoğan is likely to be an eager paragon of this unfortunate reaction, using the failed plot as a pretext to accelerate his relentless despotic practice of jailing journalists, silencing dissent, and ruling with a hardening fist.

In the last 65 years, there have been more than 500 coups and coup attempts around the world. They follow clear patterns. If history is any guide, then, the future of democracy in Turkey will be bleak.