The Urge to Purge: Forecasting Erdogan's Political Survival Following the Failed Coup

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Abstract

Drawing upon earlier research on the post failed coup survival of political leaders, we offer an ex ante in sample estimate of the likely political survival of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan following the fail coup of 2016. Depending on the assumption made about when he entered office, we conclude that his tenure is likely to endure until 2026, a result that was reached *before* his recent call for a snap election and its implications. We conclude with a brief discussion of the policy implications of President Erdogan's likely length of tenure.

Keywords

Turkey, failed coup, Erdogan, political survival

Most leaders who survive an attempted coup d'état punish those who participated in the attempt. In what follows, we use the results of previous research of the effects of purging on the survival of political leaders who survive an attempted coup d'état to estimate the likely future tenure of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan who survived in office following an attempted coup in 2016. After discussing the purges following the attempt, we use the results from our previous research to generate an in sample ex ante estimate of Erdogan's likely survival in office. We conclude with a discussion of the consistency of Erdogan's recent announcement of an early election and our forecast. We also suggest some policy implications for his possible lengthy term in office.

The Failed Coup

Early on the morning of July 15, 2016, elements of the Turkish military unsuccessfully attempted to overthrow the government of President Erdogan. Following the failed coup attempt, President Erdogan declared a state of emergency and systematically proceeded to purge the regime of those whose loyalty was thought to be suspect. After the immediate arrest of over 3,000 military personnel alleged to have been involved in the coup attempt, Erdogan dismissed 2,745 judges and 100,000 public workers, police officers, and teachers, some of whom were also detained. Over 130 media outlets were shut down, 117 journalists were arrested, and in some cases indicted for terrorism. More

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than a year after the failed coup the purging of public officials continued, with the most recent round taking place in late December 2017 and involving more than 2,500 individuals, including, according to the Associated Press (December 24, 2017), "637 military personnel, 360 gendarmerie force members, and 150 academics or other university personnel." Turkish military analyst Metin Gurcan (2016) estimates that the officer corps has been reduced by approximately 8% with the number of generals falling by 37%.[1] Because Turkey had ended capital punishment in 2004 as part of its effort to join the European Union, no executions have been reported. Although President Erdogan initially proposed reinstating capital punishment for crimes against the state, this has not been implemented and there are no signs it will be.

The immediate effect of the purges on Turkey's economy sharply reduced the exchange rate of the lira that was accompanied by a precipitous drop in the Ankara stock exchange. In addition, international rating agencies undertook reevaluations of the creditworthiness of Turkey's bonds with the suggestion that they were considering downgrading Turkey's debt (Dolan & Butler, 2017; Yackley, 2016). Immediately following the coup attempt Standard & Poor's Global Ratings reduced Turkey's credit rating two notches below investment grade. Moody's Investor Services followed suit 2 months later, dropping Turkey's sovereign credit rating to noninvestment grade, citing worries about the rule of law. In early 2018, Fitch downgraded Turkey's sovereign credit below investment grade and also closed their Turkish offices, suggesting a lack of confidence in Istanbul as a European financial center.

With all the collateral damage to the economy, it might be thought that President Erdogan's political future could be in question. However, the elimination of so many of his real, suspected, and possibly imagined opponents may have allowed him to strengthen his political position just as others have done after failed coups, a subject we explored in a recent paper (Easton & Siverson, 2018).

The purges following the failed coup in Turkey offer an opportunity to use the results reported below to estimate the extent to which the purge may have extended Erdogan's time in office. We do this by including the relevant data on his precoup tenure, his age at the time of the failed coup, and the nature of the purge in our sample of leaders who purge following failed coup attempts.

Purges and Political Survival

Following a failed coup, leaders purge for at least four reasons. First, they eliminate individuals who have revealed themselves to be disloyal. While this reduces concern about active coup plotters, current purges cannot guarantee the future passivity of others who may have designs on forcing the leader out (Sudduth, 2017). Second, since we presume leaders wish to stay in office they also purge to deter future coup attempts, indeed, purging those thought to be most likely to be involved in future coup attempts is an obvious strategic advantage at such a period in time. Third, since purging reduces the size of the winning coalition, it means that the allocation of private goods to supporters can be increased, thus enhancing their loyalty (Bueno de Mesquita, Smith, Siverson, & Morrow, 2003). Finally, while leaders may have the foregoing incentives to purge following a failed coup, there is also a window of opportunity where purges are more acceptable to domestic audiences, since those who failed to overthrow the ruler identified themselves and their opposition to the regime. Hence to the extent that a purge is focused on them, it is likely seen as appropriate punishment rather than arbitrary repression.

How effective are purges in extending the tenure in office of those leaders who survive a coup attempt? In our research cited above, we use event history modeling to analyze the extent to which purging extends a leader's term in office following a failed coup d'état until a leader experiences either a second failed coup attempt or a successful coup, removing them from office entirely.[2] Using an ordinal scale of purging that ranges from no purges, to exile, then imprisonment and, at the highest level, execution, our results derived from a parametric Weibull model were consistent with a
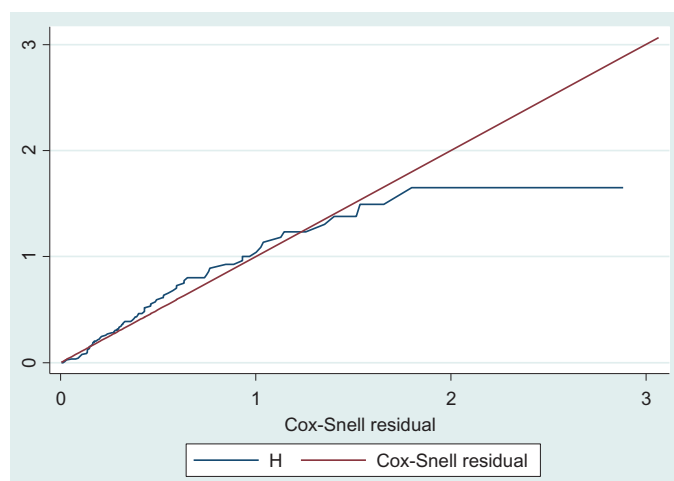
Figure 1. Cox-Snell residuals.

pattern in which the more severely a leader purges the failed plotters, the longer the leaders stays in office or postpones another coup attempt. However, this pattern holds only for autocratic states. Leaders in democratic states who purge, even up to the level of executions, gain no advantage. The results of our analysis for autocratic states are shown in Table 1.[3]

Most results reported in this type of scholarly research tend to be abstract, but in the case of this research, the results offer an opportunity to make a forecast about the effects of a purge that took place and that was instigated by a leader who is still in office. We hence have the opportunity to use the variables in our model to estimate the effect of the purge in Turkey that followed the failed coup in order to estimate the length of time President Erdogan will likely have extended his time in office.

Estimating Erdogan's Political Survival

To use our results to estimate Erdogan's political survival, we need to evaluate the quality of the results. In the context of event history models, the overall fit of our model is best assessed using the Cox-Snell residuals, where we plot an empirical estimate of the cumulative hazard function against the residuals. Figure 1 presents this plot and shows two outliers, but otherwise the model's estimated values do a reasonable job of matching the observed values. At the upper tail of the cumulative hazard rate, the line lies below the 45°, however, where variability due to the estimate's uncertainty is the greatest, a common pattern in such models (Box-Steffensmeier & Jones, 2004, pp. 122–124). Larger, more systematic deviation away from the reference line would suggest important covariates have been omitted or the functional form of some of the variables is wrong. In addition to the Weibull results in Figure 1, we plotted the residuals from exponential, loglogistic, and lognormal models. Only the exponential distribution appears to have residuals that systematical deviate from the reference line, and only at the tail end of the distribution.

Using the results for the nondemocrats reported in Table 1, we compute the estimated mean survival time of leaders who purge at various levels. The nature of the purge in Turkey was to remove people from office and put many in prison, which qualifies as a Level 2 in our coding rubric. The results for this estimate by level of purge are given in Table 2. For those leaders who purge at this level find that the mean postcoup survival time is 8.8 years. If we assume that Erdogan's term in power

Table 1. Weibull Model of Postcoup Leadership Tenure.

Explanatory Variable	Second Coup Attempt or Success (Hazard Ratio and Standard Error)
Purge	
Purge = 1	0.603 (.287)
Purge = 2	0.442[†] (.191)
Purge = 3	0.295** (.135)
Age	0.998 (.017)
Precoup tenure	1.000 (.000)
Constant	0.013** (.012)
Shape parameter	−0.386** (.078)
Log likelihood	−186.34
Number of observations	128

[†]<0.1.
**<.01.

Table 2. Mean Survival Times in Years (Weibull).

Covariate Values	Mean Survival Time	90% Confidence Interval
Overall	9.10	[1.90, 16.29]
Purge = 0	2.60	[−0.07, 5.26]
Purge = 1	5.53	[0.80, 10.26]
Purge < 2	4.41	[0.47, 8.36]
Purge = 2	8.82	[2.71, 14.93]
Purge = 3	15.71	[2.38, 29.04]
Purge > 1	11.36	[2.59, 20.12]
Erdogan	10.25	[2.26, 18.23]

Note. Assumes Erdogan time as prime minister counts toward his tenure and that he has remained in office at least until December 31, 2017.

began with election as president (August 28, 2014) and assume that he has remained in office at least till December 31, 2017, we find that his estimated survival time following the failed coup is below the mean of leaders who purge at Level 2 (8.6 years), or roughly to 2026. If we assume that his term in power instead started earlier when he became prime minister (March 14, 2003), then his predicted survival time rises to 10.25 years,[4] which is above the mean (8.8 years) of leaders in his cohort. It is important to note these predictions need to be viewed in contrast with Erdogan's predicted survival if he were *not* to have purged coup plotters. Under that condition, his tenure is predicted to last around 3.7 years following a failed coup attempt, but the standard error around this estimate is large enough that it should be considered no different from zero.[5]

The conclusion that emerged in our original research was that leaders who purge severely after a failed coup have an enhanced chance of remaining in office over those who either do not or pursue relatively benign acts. Purging, of course, is not the only thing they can do. As we noted above, one consequence of a purge is reducing the size of the winning coalition and hence increasing the rewards of loyalists. In this context, it is relevant to note that a large number of new generals have been appointed to take the place of those purged (Gall, 2017). Similarly, new judges and other officials have replaced those purged; often those given new positions are without training, such as judges replaced by "ordinary people" (Kingsley, 2017). The combination of the purge, the prior restructuring of the Turkish Constitution and the rewards given to loyalists indicate the prospect of a long tenure for President Erdogan.

The Call for an Early Election

As the result of a 2017 referendum, Turkey's constitution was amended to give the president broad new powers. On April 18, 2018, Erdogan used his new powers to call for a snap election 18 months ahead of the normally scheduled time. As a consequence, after serving his first term (2014–2019), Erdogan has essentially reset the electoral calendar so he can run for another two terms (2019–2024 and 2024–2029). The end of the second prospective term is close to our estimate of 10.25 for his survival in office. It should be remembered that our estimate was the result of an ex ante analysis of data and not an ex post reading of the media.

That said, for our forecast to be accurate, Erdogan will need to be elected and reelected, both, obviously, future events with unknown outcomes. What might interfere with his serving out those terms? First, President Erdogan is at present 65 years of age. In 2029, he will turn 76 and perhaps illness or fatigue might lead him to leave early.[6] It is also true that since 1950 Turkey has experienced several successful and failed coups, and although the most recent attempt failed, it is not necessarily the case that a military that has shown itself to be less than totally reliable in the past will remain reliable in the future. Finally, it is worth recalling the Erdogan first entered his tenure in national leadership in 2003 as prime minister. If his tenure were to continue on to 2029, it would mark 26 years in office, which is a very long, but not unprecedented, time for any leader to hold power, albeit in two different offices.

Policy Implications

Leaders come and leaders go, but some, probably including President Erdogan, stay longer than others. What are the policy implications of our forecast that he is likely to remain in office for a considerable period? Three stand out. First, as long as, he stays in office Turkish foreign policy is likely to be relatively stable. To be sure, most states have relatively stable foreign policies, but a leader who faces relatively little opposition is likely to reinforce this pattern. It would hence behoove other state leaders to anticipate this and to plan accordingly. Second, and tempering somewhat the previous point, it is the unavoidable fact that Turkey is, depending upon one's perspective, either on the edge of the volatile Middle East or at the center of a crossroad between Russia and the Middle East. Either way, it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that Turkish foreign policy is likely to be buffeted between these forces. That said, it will be to Turkey's advantage to have stable leadership, particularly if that leadership can take a long view and avoid erratic, response-driven policies. Third, if electoral authoritarianism is mismanaged, modern autocrats may not be as stable as past research suggests. Authoritarian leaders who hold rigged elections are not uncommon, but how leaders treat elections can often provide valuable information about the length of their tenure. Whether Erdogan allows real competition to emerge during the next election or throttles, all political dissent will in part determine the stability of Turkey's political landscape.

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Notes

1. Gurcan reports that the number of generals has fallen from 325 to 206 across army, navy, and air force—the number of officers has fallen from 32,451 to 29,949.
2. An excellent exposition of event history analysis (sometimes also referred to as survival or duration analysis) may be found in Box-Steffensmeier and Jones (2004).
3. Using the POLITY2 measure of Marshall, Gurr, and Jaggers (2017), we coded as democracy all states with a combined recorded autocracy and democracy score of 6 or greater. All other states with a reported score on the scale were recorded as authoritarian.
4. The lower 90% prediction bound is 2.26 years, and the upper prediction bound is 18.23 years.
5. This predicted value is accompanied by a 90% confidence interval of plus or minus 4.5 years.
6. A recent paper by Bueno de Mesquita and Smith (2018) shows that in autocratic political systems, the anticipation of an incumbent leader's death significantly increases the probability of the leader's overthrow. The reasoning for this, as developed in an earlier paper (Bueno de Mesquita & Smith, 2017), is that as the leader's likely death becomes apparent, members of the supporting coalition will anticipate that the private goods they have enjoyed will end and act so as to preserve them.

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