*The failed coup and the rise of one man’s power*

In my short seminary work I had set a goal of examining and trying to summarize a situation of the failed military coup d’état in Turkey. This topic can hardly be thoroughly analysed in such a small article, especially when the situation develops every day and it is unsure what tomorrow might bring. On the following pages I will discuss the event, which purpose or planning is yet to be clear, and its following repressions on more than 50 000 citizens of Turkey. I will describe the development of the coup alone and at least evaluate contemporary situation that could change the modern way of Turkish politics. And in truth, situation, that already made its changes.

As we could see in other coups throughout the history, it is not unequivocally fought between democracy and the forces that try to destroy her. Even though we would like to call the pre-system in Turkey fully democratic, we can’t since there is still a lot of flaws in it. And with the coup’s failure, there remains a threat to the democracy (in the Turkish way of meaning), rooted in the events of the past.

**What happened**

On the 15th of July 2016, a military faction within Turkish army (Turkish Armed Forces), commonly referred to as *Peace at Home Council* (connection with Ataturk’s *“Peace at Home, Peace in the World”*), tried to take control over the key areas in Ankara, Istanbul, Malatya and Kars. Military jets and tanks were reported to be flying/driving over Ankara and in Istanbul’s airport.

The rebels, taking actions without orders from military commanders, kidnapped commanders Salih Colak and Abidin Ünal (Land and Air Forces) in the opening hours to make them sign the coup declaration. Meanwhile they bombed the police air and special forces headquarters in Golbasi (outskirt of Ankara), that caused death of more than 40 people. Another part of faction got control of the famous Taksim Square in Istanbul around midnight. This takeover might have more of a symbolic importance rather than strategic one. Local Monument of the Republic is a remembrance of establishment of the Republic of Turkey of 1923. Bosphorus and Muhmet’s bridges in Istanbul were barricaded and controlled. Curfew was set among residents.

Tijen Karas, an broadcaster in the Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (Ankara), under pressure read on air the Council’s statement about “the democratic and secular rule of law being eroded by current government”. Their goal was said to be a restoration of democratic principles that had been disrupted by current government and presidency of Recep T. Erdogan. According to the statement, foreign relationships and human rights and freedoms would have been preserved or extended on the earliest occasion.

Presidential office informed about Erdogan’s safety and his conviction of the coup attempt as an action against democracy. Early in the morning (around 1:00 a.m.), while FaceTiming with CNN Türk, president called supporters to march into streets to show their resistance against announced curfew. Ankara’s mayor Melih Gokcek has done the same. Prime minister Numan Kurtulmus confirmed that the ruling party AKP is still in charge of the state. Erdogan was out of town at that time, but as soon as he could, he moved to Istanbul. He gave a speech in television right away his arrival early in the morning and two hours later approached a crowd of his supporters that gathered during the night. His message was clear – he was going to deal with rebels and their alleged leader Fethullah Gulen, currently living in the U.S.

Throughout the night and the following morning, messages about gunfire, tanks passing by and pro-coup helicopters were reported in Ankara and Istanbul. Several bomb attacks on the strategic building of the Turkish parliament took place. Soldiers also attacked hotel at Marmaris, where the president enjoyed his holiday few hours back.

Early in the morning, around 5 and 6 a.m., rebelling soldiers started to surrender. As for Taksim Square or airport, government forces retook the control of those areas. The same happened on the Bosphorus Bridge, where citizens took the power into their hands and attacked the soldiers.

In the end, more than 260 people died, 161 of them civilians and police officers.[[1]](#footnote-1) The popularity of Erdogan grew, partly because of his political creed, but also because the nation, during those hard times, needed to stay united.[[2]](#footnote-2) The attempt of the coup was condemned by the society and alleged allies rejected (e.g. Germany and the U.S.). 2 745 judges were removed from duty, more than 2 800 military personnel were taken into custody and around 120 journalists were put in jail. Interesting is that they were not arrested because of their “anti-government” journalism, but for criminal and terrorist offenses. This journalist suppression isn’t new, but the scale and law enforcement connected with it surely is.[[3]](#footnote-3) The total amount of arrested has climbed since then and over 40 000 within them belong to the problematic group of Kurds. [[4]](#footnote-4)

For better understanding, it is important to know what the Gulen movement (sometimes called a Hizmet) is and why it was labelled as the main leader of the coup. Hizmet is a globally active Muslim community-movement, named by Fethullah Golan. He is considered as one of the most influential Muslims, mainly because of his theory of tolerant Islam and social changes. He is the head of many educational and social organizations. He represents some kind of opposition to the Edrogan’s governance, but shares the same view of the position Islam should have in a state. For many analytics, Gulan had no need to embrace such an action. The movement had never acted as terroristic or violent (even though Ankara claims Gulen is connected with un-democratic assaults, for which he was put on the Turkey’s terrorist list)[[5]](#footnote-5). But the followers of this social movement were immediately arrested and accused of helping the coup. It almost looked as a witch hunt. An arrest warrant was issued for Fethullah Golan along with Turkey’s demand to the USA to hand him over to Turkey, where he would face an interrogation and a trial.[[6]](#footnote-6)

It is not the first time that Erdogan put the blame on him. Their quarrel could be dated back to 2013, when the former friendship and collaboration started to fall apart. Gulen, who has been living in Pensylvania since 1999, criticized Erdogan’s intervention of protests in Gezi Park. Later that year, during the famous and wide corruption affair that led many AKP’s members to resign[[7]](#footnote-7), Erdogan pointed at Gulen and called him the initiator of it. Prosecution of members of affiliated institutions followed.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Problem is, with the re-usage of torture, information that would be collected by police and other investigators don’t necessarily have to be true.

**State of emergency and emergency decrees**

One of the basic freedoms, freedom of speech and press, have been widely disrupted. More than 3 000 citizens were facing charges of insulting the president. According to the official Twitter’s Transparency Report, several social networks were restricted by government, making users delete offending posts and pictures. Around 150 news platforms were shut down.

President Erdogan declared state of emergency, by which he is able to bypass parliament and release decrees that have the same weight as law. State of emergency can last 6 months, during which should the president ensure safety and prepare parliament and departments for normal rule. But in the wake of the terrorist attack on New Year’s Eve the state of emergency has been extended by the vote of parliament.

**The aftermath**

Almost no revolution happens without sacrifices. Unfortunately, those victims are often among civilians. The number of affected during the coup is high, but the amount of victims of the subsequent hunt is much higher.

The hunt for coup plotters and participants became right after. Main prosecutions were made against Gülan movement, as president Recep Tayyip Erdogan labelled cleric Fethullah Gulen as an initiator and main mind of the coup. Any institution connected to the cleric was closed by the first presidential decree issued since the failed coup. It concerned 35 medical institutions, 15 universities, 1 043 private schools, 1 229 foundations and 19 unions. Apart from that, the decree also extended detention period from 4 to 30 days.  
The prosecution impacted judges, soldiers, officers, civil servants and others as well. The smallest suspicion about a connection to the Gulen movement was enough for government to imprisonment or suspension. President’s goal was to eliminate any movement’s supporters from state and public services.[[9]](#footnote-9)

As spotted and claimed by Human Rights Watch in document “A Blank Check: Turkey’s Post-Coup Suspension of Safeguards Against Torture”, many people were tortured or at least dealt with badly by Turkish police. That was enabled by many after-coup decrees, which had removed or eliminated safeguards in the approach of police officials towards held citizens, especially in the case of using torture during interrogation. The document concerns cases of sexual abuse, sleep deprivation, rape threats, beating and others. Turkish officials seem to not approach this knowledge in the near future, as they have postponed United Nations special rapporteur on torture’s visit.

The importance of people’s protection and given rights is enshrined in international law. Its violation is not allowed even during the war times, so the state of emergency is no exception. Even though allegations of torture were publicly known, the officials marked them as biased report against government or Gülen’s propaganda.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Recent development in suppression of human rights (meaning the right to get a lawyer and if one cannot afford it, the government appoints one) is very disturbing and retrograde, considering the improvement of police detention in recent years (Turkey had major problem with torture tactics in the past).[[11]](#footnote-11)

Could Mr. Erdogan plot this event to gain more power? The whole attempt of a coup seems surprisingly very badly prepared and it was only a matter of hours when it will fail. And president’s quick response, with many people imprisoned during the first day after the attempt, is a little bit suspicious. I am not in the position of accusing anyone or making some conclusions, but we should take those inconsistencies into account.

Situation in Turkey is unpredictable. It provides many questions. Which way will the country take in the future? It has been 6 months since the coup and we can clearly see how the political system is turning into authoritarian regime with power in president’s hands. He managed to, in a relatively short period of time, remove even the smallest threat amongst politicians, militants, journalists, teachers and other professions through presidential decrees. Some have been accusing Erdogan of using the failed coup to gain power, some even blame the president of standing behind it.

Where lays the truth? We shall never know, all we can do is speculate and hope that anything that happened and will happen, was/will be for the best of the country in today’s measure. That people’s right and freedom will prevail. From my point of view, that’s what matters the most.

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11. ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)