

Military Coups, Turkey and Flimsy Democracy

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"A minority within the armed forces has unfortunately been unable to stomach Turkey's unity." -President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Jul 15, 2016

Any aspect of instability in the state of Turkey is going to be greeted with trepidation by those partners who bank on its security role between East and West. The European Union, that rattled club of members who fear the next onslaught against its institutional credibility, have been bolstering Ankara in the hope to keep refugees at bay. There are security exchanges, and promises (always promises) of sweeter deals regarding the movement of Turkish citizens.

A cynic versed in the darker side of such instability would also suggest that a Turkey too stable and hungry for external releases of meddlesome power is hardly in a good way either. The Erdoğan regime has been prone to lashing out with acts of concerted violence, be it against Kurdish rebels or selected anti-Assad forces in Syria. For its role in backing the Western coalition against the Islamic State, albeit erratically, Turkish citizens have also paid a high price.

Such posturing has to have the imprimatur of the military. And they don't always like it. In its short history, the Republic of Turkey has seen military interference in the political process, a constitutional door that opens in times of crisis. While military matters may not be best vested with military men, the suggestion has often been that politics is sometimes best left to the military. The result is that the cat is left guarding the cream.

Several civilian heads have rolled because of that contrivance. In 1960, Adnan Menderes got his marching orders. As Time Magazine noted, "The Turkish army has long scrupulously observed the admonition of the late great Kemal Atatürk that the army should stay out of partisan politics. But it also remembered that Atatürk charged it with guarding the constitution."

The style of Menderes is worth recounting, offering an assortment of parallels to the current Turkish leadership. Like President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, he courted the rural populations and was rewarded. Like Erdoğan, he supped from the cup of autocracy, irritating cosmopolitan intellectuals and worrying the military in the wings, ever keen to safeguard Kemalist ideals.

Press censorship became one of Menderes' favourite weapons, while journalists were jailed on flimsy grounds. Despite an ailing economy and a taste for state funds, he managed to win at the ballot box. That outcome was insufficient to curry favour with the suspicious military men, who stepped in on May 27, 1960 to arrest the leader along with hundreds of Democrat Party leaders. For the next 11 months, the Republic was subjected to a trial with a foregone conclusion: a death sentence that Menderes attempted, and failed, to avert.

Hailed as a saving move for democracy, backers of General Cemal Gürsel were sufficiently conned into thinking that a man named President, Premier and Defence Minister would be its saving grace. The National Unity Committee, as it was termed, got busy not merely casting the DP into political and legislative oblivion, but purging the military's own ranks. As a result, 5000 officers were dismissed or forcibly retired; lands from wealthy landowners in eastern Anatolia confiscated and 147 university teachers left without jobs.

Other coups followed. The "coup by memorandum" in 1971, delivered via radio by a newscaster, revealed how the government had again erred, pushing "our country into anarchy, fratricide and social and economic unrest." In 1980, the story repeated itself, with the military sages assuming control over chaos.

On Friday, that internal instability manifested itself when Turkish personnel blocked bridges over the Bosphorus strait in Istanbul. Low flying jets and helicopters were to be seen flying over Ankara. Tanks were also witnessed at the main airport.

Where was Erdoğan? Rumours were spun that he was on his way to Germany, seeking asylum. Such a suggestion supposedly stemmed from US military sources via NBC News. Having been denied landing rights at Istanbul's airport, the presidential jet veered to Germany, where NBC suggested he had been refused a request for asylum.

Erdoğan did not waste time finding a presumptive architect in the business, conveying his message via iPhone. Using Facetime, he addressed the Turkish population with his usual non-conciliatory flavour, vowing to eliminate any vestige of opposition. "This country can't be managed from Pennsylvania," he remarked, pointedly referring to the US-based imam Fethullah Gülen.

On finally making his way back to Atatürk Airport, the president addressed the crowd with various promises of zealous retribution. "This attempted uprising will get its answer from the law and they will be given an answer in the judicial system. They should know that in this country the law will be maintained." Curiously enough, the sort of language previously used by the Generals when the Kemalist sword starts to rust.

The coup will be a perfect opportunity for Erdoğan to cleanse the now cluttered stables. Its failure will permit him a moment of self-satisfied reflection while speaking about that fragile, if not fictional beast called national unity. The generals will continue to wonder, and wait. "Everyone," lamented the architect of the 1980 coup, General Kenan Evren, "speaks of national unity, but unfortunately everyone fails to bring it about." [1]

Note

[1] <http://time.com/vault/issue/1980-09-22/page/1/>

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