

## **“My duty as a Citizen”: A personal account of the coup attempt in Turkey**

*Mehmet Ümit Necef*

### **News**

On 15. July 2016 some officers of the Turkish army, allegedly followers of the so-called Fethullah Gülen Movement, staged a coup. The coup attempt was suppressed the next day. In the clashes 248 people died and 2,800 were wounded.

### **Summary**

The author, who was in Istanbul during the coup attempt, presents his own experiences and observations. He has been witness to the self-organisation of some citizens before President Erdogan called on the people to go out and fight against the putschists. This was the first time in Turkish history that civilians took to the streets to defend their votes and the politicians. It is argued that the coup attempt, in which military units opened fire on civilians, will in the long run have a secularising effect on the Turkish Sunnis.

### **Key Words**

Coup d’etat in Turkey, Erdogan, secularization

### **About the Author**

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### Account and Analysis:

I got caught up in the middle of the coup attempt on 15 July while on vacation in Istanbul last summer. After an evening with a friend in a bar in a Southern district of the city, Aksaray, I decided to go home before midnight so as not to risk missing one of the last buses to the Taksim Square. At the bus stop, which normally is full of people on Friday evenings, there was only one young man busy writing messages on his phone. After some time I asked him why the buses were not coming. He broke the news to me: "Didn't you hear, brother, that there is a coup going on in the country? All buses have been cancelled" and he showed me his phone: "Coup attempt. Army units in uprising".

Fortunately I found a *dolmus* instead, which took off immediately filled with people anxious to get home. There was a long line of vehicles on the Unkapani Bridge, which connects the Northern and Southern sides of the Golden Horn. The Northern end of the bridge was blocked by soldiers, and a couple of hundred people had gathered in front of the military vehicles. The crowd was growing and becoming more impatient. Suddenly people began to run away from the blockade, and I felt the nasty burning feeling of tear gas in my nose and eyes. Tear gas was thrown at ordinary people, whose sole aim was to get home. This indiscriminate aggressive attitude towards civilians, whose paths somehow crossed those of the coup plotters, got worse as the night unfolded, and brutality was a characteristic of the coup attempt generally.

Among the people in panic there was a young woman in bare feet who was fleeing the tear gas and screaming at the same time "I lost my son. He is back there". The tear gas clouds began to disperse, and she went back to look after her son. The putschists had apparently given no thought to the fact that they were disrupting the daily life of ordinary people, and that when you throw tear gas at a group of people, there may be children in the crowd.

### "My duty as a citizen"

I decided to try my luck at the new metro bridge nearby. At the beginning of the bridge, I met a middle-aged man who began to comment on the coup attempt after exchanging some introductory words with me. He was originally from the Central Anatolian town of Kayseri and was on his way to Taksim Square to join up with his friends to stand against the coup, which he said was his "duty as a citizen". He said that he had experienced four military interventions in his life, and that he didn't want to see another one succeed in toppling a government elected by the people. He was quite determined and poetic about his stance. He made comments such as: "I want to be able look in the eyes of my grandchildren without feeling shame. This time these bloody officers will not be able to steal the power from the people".

During this conversation he was constantly in contact with his friends on the phone discussing with them whether they should gather at the Taksim Square or at the Vatan Boulevard in Aksaray. Towards the end of the bridge, he got a call and turned to me and said, "There are enough people in Taksim trying to stop the military, but they need reinforcement at the Vatan Boulevard". He extended his hand, shook my hand firmly and said, "Let Allah protect you" and turned back and walked toward the Southern end of the bridge.

### **Supersonic booms**

It was a great relief to see that there were no soldiers or military vehicles at the Northern end of the metro bridge. The two hour walk in the heat of the summer night from the metro bridge to my lodgings near Taksim Square was tiring but undramatic. However, things changed once I had arrived back. Taksim is the central square in Istanbul, and its symbolic value is strong for the Turks. Any putschist would likely want control of the square. In the silence of the night without the hum of traffic, I could hear bomb explosions, machine gun fire, the loud chopping sound of helicopters and the roaring of military jets flying high over the city. The worst came later in the night in the form of the sonic booms of low flying F-16s, six times one after the other with about five minutes between each. They were most likely meant to terrorize the civil population and force them to stay at home. Immediately after the sonic booms one could hear the windows cracking and glass falling to the street.

### **"Is this my fight?"**

I admired the engagement and civil courage of the man from Kayseri and the people I saw on the television trying to stop the tanks and other military vehicles by standing or lying in front of them, but at no moment did the idea that I should join them occur to me. I was very frightened and did not want to get wounded, injured or possibly killed in the clashes. I was definitely against the coup d'état, but in my mind I also accused President Erdogan of polarizing society with his often fiery rhetoric and thus creating fertile soil for a coup. I kept on asking myself, "Is this my fight? Do I want to be a part of it?" and I could not answer with a definitive yes, that I would be motivated to go out and take part in the fight.

At home I followed developments mainly on CNN Türk. Towards dawn the noise of the bombs, machine guns and F-16s died out. It seemed as if the coup attempt was defeated. There was no need to follow the news anymore.

### Self-organization of the people against the coup

As the stories of those who resisted the coup attempt as soon as they had heard about it gained increasing publicity, it became clear that people both pro and anti-AKP had begun to organize resistance immediately after the coup was started at 10.00 pm. Erdogan showed himself live on screen for the first time at 12.26 am on CNN-Türk via a Face-Time interview and called on the people to take to the streets.<sup>1</sup> For example, my encounter with the man from Kayseri took place before President Erdogan had made his call. It has to be pointed out that CNN-Türk is a secular and AKP-critical channel, and its headquarters was among media outlets attacked by a pro-AKP mob ten months earlier. Moreover, the news anchor who came up with the idea to call Erdogan at his hotel in Marmaris and conduct a live interview with him was the prominent journalist Hande Firat. The picture showing her looking into the camera with a grave expression on her face and holding her phone up so viewers could see Erdogan talking has become one of the iconic images of the coup attempt. Firat's interview with Erdogan was one of the turning points of the event, one which sealed the fate of the coup plotters.

### First time in Turkish history

Probably the most important aspect of this incident is that masses took to the streets to protest against a military coup for the first time in Turkish history. The country experienced three direct coups in 1960, 1971 and 1980 and an indirect military intervention in politics in 1997. In none of these cases did the people come out to protest the coup in defense of the government. The majority was either scared or thought a military intervention was necessary. However, this time many citizens decided to fight back, and the main factor was possibly the AKP's local party organisations, which with the help of mobile phones and social media directed their members to the streets even before Erdogan emerged on CNN Türk's screen. That ordinary unarmed people prevented a military coup will probably have long term repercussions in Turkish politics, at least by significantly diminishing the military's political influence.

An investigation was carried out among participants in the Democracy Watch Meetings ten days after the coup attempt. It showed that the man from Kayseri was among the 27 percent who had taken to the streets before Erdogan's Face-Time call. 53 percent had gone to the streets after Erdogan's call and the remaining 16 percent after the coup attempt was suppressed.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Erez, Firat 2016: "Bulanık bir medya ve cadı avı" (Murky media and witch hunt). *Serbestiyet*, 26. November.

<sup>2</sup> KONDA 2016: "'Demokrasi nöbeti' katılımcılarının yüzde 84'ü AKP'li (84 pct. of the demonstrators are pro-AKP). Konda.org

### **Plurality on the Taksim Square**

For the following 20 days the AKP organized a Democracy Watch Meeting every evening, which lasted late into the night until three or four o'clock. Since I lived near Taksim Square, I had the chance to observe the demonstrations almost every evening. Two aspects about these demonstrations were noteworthy. During the first evening and night, from the huge loudspeakers placed on the square one could only hear a song about Erdogan, which praises him among other things as "the lion of an epos, which begins with a poem" and as "the strong voice of the nation". However, the music played by the organizers became more varied as the days passed, and one could also hear popular patriotic songs praising the motherland and even Atatürk. By this music choice, the organizers probably intended to attract and include people with different political tendencies, not only AKP followers.

Another remarkable aspect of the anti-coup demonstrations was the variety of the participants: many women of different ages, with and without headscarf, women with both "religiously proper" and more "Western" clothes as well as men of all ages with "Islamic" beards and clean shaven faces. In my eyes this reflected both the plurality of the grassroots of the AKP and the people opposing the coup attempt. I had even the chance to converse (and take selfies) with a number of Kurds. In fact, the above-mentioned survey showed that 12 percent of the participants at the Democracy Watches were Kurds.

### **"Allahu Akbar" and the secular intellectual**

Immediately after the coup, some secular and left-wing intellectuals questioned the genuineness of the coup and asked whether Erdogan himself was behind the coup. They claimed that the whole thing was merely Erdogan's "theater" to magnify his prestige and power. This claim was rejected by large segments of the Turkish intelligentsia as a far out conspiracy theory and it died out rather fast, at least among mainstream pundits. Many pointed out that one can justifiably criticize Erdogan for making use of the coup attempt to fortify his power, but this fact does not necessarily mean that he himself planned or instigated the coup.

A second subject of greater importance was whether a secular or a left-leaning person would participate in demonstrations where thousands shouted "Ya Allah! In the name of God! God is the greatest!", which is a popular slogan used during demonstrations by Islamists of different shades. Murat Belge, one of Turkey's most prominent and respected socialist intellectuals, formulated this dilemma in a question: "What place do I have among people who took to the streets with the slogan "Ya Allah! In the name of

God! God is the greatest!"<sup>3</sup> Belge, together with many left-wing intellectuals conceded that they were against the coup attempt, which they believed the Gülenists were behind, and that it had to be opposed. They also admitted that it was very important and positive that thousands took to the streets and fought against armed putschists, and that so many people did so was an important milestone in Turkish history. Even Erdogan had to watch out now, now that the people saw that masses in the streets can have some political clout. However, the argument continued, since democratic and secular slogans were not to be heard very much in these so-called Democracy Watches, it would not be proper to take part in them.

On the other hand, a number of other secular left-wing intellectuals<sup>4</sup> argued that people all over the world mobilize their own religious and cultural arsenal of beliefs, symbols and slogans in times of crisis, and that it is expected and very natural that citizens of Turkey, the Muslims that they are, mobilize Islamic elements from their cultural tool kit. "What do you expect in a Muslim country?" asked historian Cemil Kocak, "Did you really imagine that people would chant Christmas psalms, but not recite the Islamic Creed, while they are walking towards possible death?". Thus, it was positive that people took to the streets at all to defend their votes and politicians, the slogans they shouted notwithstanding.

### **The survival of the nation**

The pro-Erdogan media was quick to present the coup not as an internal fight among Muslims but as an American onslaught against the nation and Islam, thus a case of survival. In this universe of conspiracies, the putschists were merely the henchmen of the "West". As the prominent liberal intellectual Etyen Mahcupyan puts it, the nation is actually going through "a period of delirium in which self-deceit has become a national occupation, ignorance is being sanctified and comprehension is handed over to ideological rituals".<sup>5</sup>

It is becoming ever clearer that President Erdogan is misusing the coup attempt to strengthen his power base by having politicians, journalists, academics and intellectuals who oppose his policies arrested and critical media outlets closed. Thus, the people of Turkey are missing this exceptional opportunity to unite and establish a real democratic

<sup>3</sup> Belge, Murat 2016: Sokaklar, meydanlar (The streets and the squares) *t24*, 23. August.

<sup>4</sup> Bertay, Halil 2016: Murat neden sokağa çıkamamış? (Why did not Murat take to the streets?) *Serbestiyet*, 28. August; Koçak, Cemil 2016: "Halk sokağa çıkınca vatandaş darbe yapamadı" (When the people took to the streets, the citizens could not stage a coup"), *Yeni Şafak*, 30 July. Başer, Ertuğrul 2016: "Bir fatiha: arkadaşım Ahmet Aşık'ın ruhuna mektup" (A letter to my friend Ahmet Asik's soul). *Serbestiyet*, 30 July.

<sup>5</sup> Mahcupyan, Etyen 2016: "Inandığımızı gerçek sanarak" (Imagining our beliefs to be the reality). *Karar*, 27. November.

system. This would naturally include purging the putschists and their supporters in the civil and military bureaucracy, but the government is laying off or arresting many other people, who have nothing to do either with the Gülenist putsch or with the PKK, but who potentially can be a threat to its power.

### **Secularising effect in the long-run**

However, in the long run the putsch will most probably have a secularizing effect on the pious Sunnis, the largest section of Turkish society, since this was a dramatic showdown between two similar groups within the pious Sunni Turks: the Gülen Movement and the AKP. Whenever the pious Sunni Turks get involved in a political conflict with another group, at least in the last one hundred years, the other side has almost always been either the secularists, the Alevi minority, the Kurds or non-Muslims, and this circumstance has often blocked self-criticism within the Sunni Turkish community. This is the first time in modern Turkish history where both sides are near copies of each other. Many family members have landed on opposite sides of the conflict. By all appearances, this circumstance will probably in the long run have a cathartic effect on the minds of the Sunnis.

There is another circumstance which may possibly have a secularizing effect: all the secularist politicians and the secularist media opposed the coup attempt from the start. From now on, it will be more difficult for Erdogan and other AKP politicians to accuse the secular opposition of being anti-islamic, unpatriotic or disrespectful of the political choices of the majority. For the time being he can get away with authoritarian policies by presenting the purges of oppositional persons and the media, including the Kurdish politicians, as necessary measures for the "survival of the nation" and for defending it against the lackeys of the West. In passing, it has to be pointed out that the PKK's ongoing armed struggle in the mountains and terrorist attacks in the cities serve his interests well.

In the absence of any noteworthy popular protest against Erdogan, Turkey's best bet at the moment seems to be that supporters of the AKP, such as the courageous man from Kayseri, take to the streets again, this time to protest against their own party. Hopefully, 248 persons did not die and 2800 people did not get wounded in the evening and night of Friday, 15 July merely to facilitate Erdogan's path to becoming the authoritarian leader he aspires to be.