Weimar Turkey?

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What can be said about recent events in Turkey?

Real or staged coup

First, it is exceedingly difficult to understand what has transpired. There is no shortage of speculation on the causes and consequences of the events of 15 and 16 July. Some argue that the coup was "staged", mainly in the sense of being designed by or at the behest of Recep Erdoğan and his close affiliates. Turkey has considerable experience with strategy-of-tension campaigns, including false flag operations, and it is not beyond reason to think that the coup—a suspiciously ill-conceived and poorly executed affair—could have been planned as a means to consolidate and further augment Erdoğan's power. Others contend that the intervention was quite "real", in the sense that factions within the armed forces took independent action to supplant the state apparatuses over which Erdoğan's forces wield considerable control. Clumsily designed and brutally implemented though it clearly was, the intervention was, they insist, an authentic attempt to overthrow Turkey's new order, whether in the name of some kind of neo-Kemalism (as the coup plotters' public statement suggested), Fethullah Gülen's rival Islamist movement (as Erdoğan and his allies have since claimed), or for some other cause.

We do not know if either of these accounts holds water, or if some strange combination of the two is closer to the truth. If the past is any indication, it is likely that we will never know, at least not fully and convincingly. And at the end of the day, the reality is that having to choose between a "real" coup and a "staged" coup is essentially indistinguishable from having to choose between dogshit and horseshit.

Turkey's long authoritarian history

Second, whoever is ultimately responsible for what is occurring in Turkey, one thing can be said with certainty: Turkey has a lamentably long tradition of elite authoritarianism, and the events of recent days—however exactly one understands them—fall squarely within it. At times, this tradition has manifested itself in direct armed intervention on the part of military vanguards, actually or ostensibly of "secular" and "nationalist" persuasion. At other times, it has found expression in what may be termed the "democratic tyranny" of political administrations dedicated to ensuring the entrenchment of plutocratic capitalism, no matter what the cost. Obvious differences aside, both military and "civilian" forces have drawn on the same bundle of techniques: war, cronyism, mass propaganda, systemic curtailment of civil liberties, collaboration with industrial and financial capital, repression of non-Turkish and non-Muslim groups, manipulation or direct control of the media, and, above all, the use or (constant) threat of coercive force.

It is not difficult to draw parallels between this failed coup and the "successful" coups of 1960, 1971, 1980, and 1997 (not to mention a variety of foiled conspiracies). Nor is it difficult to trace structural connections between Erdoğan's regime and a number of previous administrations, notwithstanding significant differences in material basis and ideological orientation. And the point can be made even more comprehensively, for, when all is said and done, the roots of Turkish authoritarianism stretch back to the Ottoman period. Think, for instance, of the 1908-9 Young Turk Revolution—the result of tensions between two competing conceptions of authoritarian rule, that of a pan-Islamist paranoiac despot (Abdülhamid II) and that of a motley assemblage of "state-building" positivists (the Young Turks). Authoritarian

through and through, the two employed the same methods: reliance upon Islamist and ultra-nationalist discourse, cooptation and violent persecution of minorities, and strategic deployment of security organizations of a fundamentally criminal nature, to name but a few.

Most of this would be taken up in the republican era: Mustafa Kemal and his cohort operated with much the same understanding of the state and its key institutions as a modernizing avant garde, regularly stressing the importance of "defending the nation" at all costs—and regardless of the means deemed necessary to do so. And "defending the nation" is, of course, the prism through which supporters of Erdoğan, supporters of the attempted coup, and nearly everyone else now seek to channel their arguments (or simply their rage). The rhetoric of coercion-as-political-necessity, once unleashed, offers a veneer of legitimacy to all actors, regardless of their specific interests and ambitions. Bottom line? Whatever it may have been, this coup failed; but both it and the reaction it has engendered are in keeping with Turkey's tradition of authoritarianism.

Seizure of power

Third, these events will almost certainly bolster Erdoğan's power. Indeed, it is possible that they may give rise to full-fledged dictatorial rule, with Erdoğan arrogating to himself the full authority of "democracy" and "popular will". The crackdown, which is unfolding at an astonishing pace, began only hours after the suppression of the coup initiative: among other things, nearly three thousand judges were suspended, roughly nine thousand police officers were sacked, some twenty independent news websites were shut down, and the Council of Higher Education (Yükseköğretim Kurulu)—an organization that was established after the 1980 military coup and the massive purge of educational institutions that occurred in its wake—was ordered to "cleanse" universities.

For some time prior to 15 July, there had been rumours of an imminent round-up of Gülenists in the military and other state institutions. This at a time when Erdoğan has pressed hard to transform Turkey's parliamentary constitutional order into a fully presidential system. Many now wonder whether this coup failed because it was hurried, with the plotters becoming aware that they were surveilled and rushing to take action before it was too late. Regardless of whether that was actually the case, it is more than likely that Erdoğan will now have an easier time pushing through his "reforms". If the bombarded Grand National Assembly reminds many of the Reichstag after the 1933 fire, it does so for good reason.

What ought to be done?

First, it is clearly not sufficient to proclaim, as many Turkish citizens do today, that the country has become "unrecognizable", that it has "lost its moorings", or that one finds oneself "estranged from" one's "new surroundings". Such responses are both delusional and deeply irresponsible. The current configuration of power in Turkey is a direct product of a deep-seated legacy of authoritarian politics, both military and "civilian". Far from marking a rupture with the past, recent events can only be understood against the background of this tradition. Decades of Islamist mobilization and rampant neoliberalization—processes which, as Cihan Tuğal has shown, are conjoined tightly—have combined with the brutal war against Kurds, intervention in the Syrian Civil War, and the influx of millions of refugees to produce conditions in which such authoritarianism has been strengthened and reinvigorated, rather than going by the wayside as part of Erdoğan's once-lauded move toward "free market democracy". The Turkish left cannot afford the narcissism of what Hegel called the "beautiful soul", withdrawing into fatalistic resignation or placing its hopes in some sort of romantic fantasy. Unless it is to abandon Turkey altogether, it must develop a concrete and genuinely coordinated programme of action.

Second, no programme of action of this kind can justifiably assume "purely legal" form, at least not if it is to have a reasonable chance of realizing serious, sustained social change. It is time once and for all to put to bed hard-and-fast distinctions between "law" and "politics". Law is politics by other means, just as politics is law by other means. Law formalizes, ratio-

nalizes, and legitimates politics. It is itself a form of politics. Politics, for its part, is incapable of being pursued compellingly without the force of law. In this regard, politics is to a significant degree a mode of legal power. In the present context, what this necessitates is a struggle waged both within and outside of conventional legal forms. Above all, it means that resistance to coups, counter-coups, and related authoritarian practices in Turkey (and elsewhere) cannot be couched in strictly, or even predominantly, human rights terms. Taking human rights into battle against the Turkish state machine is like trying to eat a five-pound T-bone steak with a spork. It is decidedly not a winning strategy, both because of the weakness of human rights norms and their dialectical relationship with neoliberal capitalism and because of Turkey's long-standing record of violating civic-political as well as socio-economic entitlements, domestically no less than internationally. The battle must be fought on the level of sovereignty itself. And that can never be a "purely legal" matter.

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