

August 1, 2016

The Turkish Coup, Part II

Last week, we began a three-part series on the attempted Turkish coup that started on Friday, July 15. In Part I, we examined Turkey's history to frame the historical conditions that affected the failed coup. As promised, this week's report will discuss the actual coup.

The Coup

Around 7:30 p.m. Eastern European Standard Time (EEST), there were reports that key bridges that cross the Bosphorus had been closed by soldiers. About 20 minutes later, military jets and helicopters were flying over Ankara and Istanbul. Gunshots were also reported in the capital. At 8:00 p.m., Prime Minister Binali Yildirim announced a coup was underway and called for calm. He indicated that a group within the military was behind the coup and noted that loyal security forces were being mobilized. At 8:25 p.m., the rebels issued a statement indicating that the military was taking over to "protect the democratic order." The same statement indicated that Turkey's existing foreign relations would be maintained.

The first inkling that the coup was not going smoothly came around 8:40 p.m., when CNN Turk announced that President Erdogan was "safe." At 8:50 p.m., the military's Chief of Staff was reported to be in the custody of the rebels. By around 9:00 p.m., the rebels in Ankara had entered the buildings of TRT, the state broadcaster. At 9:05, a Turkish state broadcaster read a statement on orders of the military. The

statement indicated that a new constitution was being prepared and accused the Erdogan government of "eroding democratic and secular rule of law."

In what was perhaps the most dramatic event of the coup and what signaled the onset of the countercoup, at 9:26 p.m., President Erdogan, speaking to a CNN Turk reporter via FaceTime, indicated that the coup would meet a "necessary response." He called on citizens to take to the streets. About 10 minutes later, the state broadcaster TRT went off the air but resumed service later in the evening from London.

At 10:03 p.m., the Justice Minister accused elements loyal to Fethullah Gulen of being behind the coup. This was the first official accusation against the cleric and his followers. Over the next hour, numerous reports of tank movements, military flights and explosions were reported. At 10:37 p.m., the Commander of the First Army indicated that he was still loyal to the regime and that the coup plotters were a small part of the military. Near 11:00 p.m., reports indicated that a helicopter being used by the rebels was shot down by a Turkish Air Force warplane. This action was the first clear indication that the military was starting to attack rebel forces. Over the next hour, President Obama called on all parties to "support the elected government." Gulen called reports that he had instigated the coup "highly irresponsible" and condemned the coup. There were numerous reports of explosions hitting the parliament building.

Shortly after midnight, Erdogan landed in Istanbul. At 12:45 a.m., the rebels finally entered the building of CNN Turk and

halted broadcasts. Fifteen minutes later, Erdogan addressed supporters at the Istanbul airport, urging them to stay on the streets. Near 1:00 a.m., mosques in Turkey began singing the “call to prayer” and telling followers to take to the streets. Around 3:45 a.m., first reports of rebels surrendering were noted. By 5:10 a.m., military headquarters were under the control of loyalist forces. Near 6:00 a.m., Turkey’s intelligence agency was attacked by military helicopters. This was the last significant military action by the rebels. By 9:00 a.m., the Acting Army Chief of Staff, First Army commander Umit Dunder, told the media that the coup was “90% under control.” Before noon, the coup was effectively over.

Questions and Conspiracies

In the aftermath of the coup, questions and conspiracies abounded. We will go through some of the more important ones and examine the issues.

Why did the coup fail? This question has numerous facets. Here are some of the mistakes that were made:

The plotters failed to capture President Erdogan. There are reports that Turkish intelligence had uncovered the plot a few hours before it was launched. The Turkish *Hurriyet Daily News* and al-Jazeera both claimed that a “senior military figure tipped off Erdogan” an hour before the coup went operational.¹ These reports noted that the president was moved to another hotel before rebels could capture him. The president rode by helicopter to the Dalaman Airport and, from there, boarded a private jet for Istanbul.² According to reports, rebel warplanes locked their radars on Erdogan’s

plane, but the pilot was able to convince the rebel pilots that it was a Turkish Airlines flight.³

There are unconfirmed reports that Russian intelligence tipped off their Turkish counterparts that the coup was brewing. This cannot be confirmed but there does appear to be solid evidence that Erdogan wasn’t captured because he was warned.

The rebels failed to control the media.

There are two parts to this failure. First, the coup plotters failed to realize that media in Turkey had changed. They quickly tried to shut down the state media facility, which would have made sense two decades ago (roughly when the last coup occurred), but failed to shut down independent outlets, such as CNN Turk.⁴ Second, the rebels failed to cut internet service, which allowed social media to continue.⁵ Twitter and Facebook continued to send out countercoup messages, including video of rebels being captured. It became completely impossible for the coup leaders to control the message.

Why did the coup go so badly? It appears the plotters realized their operational security had been compromised, leading them to initiate operations before being completely ready. EU officials noted that

³https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/18/military-coup-was-well-planned-and-very-nearly-succeeded-say-turkish-officials?CMP=share_btn_tw

⁴ It is quite ironic that Erdogan had been critical of private news agencies recently due to perceptions of negative reporting and his inability to control news flow. One of the key elements of the countercoup was the broadcast of CNN Turk’s FaceTime feed.

⁵ http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/07/19/facetime-is-a-cyberweapon-and-other-lessons-about-digital-age-coups/?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=New%20Campaign&utm_term=Flashtags Note the Tweet from Erdogan calling for all to go to the city streets. It came out before the coup was actually in motion.

¹<http://www.timesofisrael.com/erdogan-said-to-be-target-of-assassination-attempt-during-failed-coup/>

² <http://www.latimes.com/world/europe/la-fg-turkey-coup-president-20160717-snap-story.html>

Turkish security officials seemed to have lists of plotters arranged almost during the coup.⁶ This has led some commentators to suggest that this coup was staged. However, a more likely explanation is that the coup had been penetrated and so the plotters moved prematurely.

The military was not united with the rebels. What the rebels were able to accomplish should not be taken lightly. Even with the problem of being forced to act prior to the most opportune time, the plotters managed to acquire aircraft, including refueling tankers. They were able to secure the Bosphorus bridges. Had Erdogan not been alerted to the coup, his capture would likely have occurred which would have dramatically increased the odds of success. Still, this coup was attempted with a minority of the military and those who were not participating were clearly not willing to stand aside and allow their compatriots to take power. Thus, a substantial force that could oppose the coup plotters remained available to the government and the loyalists were able to neutralize the threat.

The political opposition did not support the coup. President Erdogan is a polarizing figure. He is attempting to change the presidential office from a mostly ceremonial post to one with centralized power. He has wooed Kurdish political parties before elections, only to turn on them and brand them as terrorists. His Islamic positions have raised concerns among the secular parties that he intends to roll back Ataturk's founding principles. Despite the growing worries about Erdogan's increasingly

⁶ http://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-eu-hahn-idUSKCN0ZY0EA?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=New%20Campaign&utm_term=%2AMideast%20Brief

autocratic behavior, the leading political parties were united in opposing the coup. This suggests that the political class in Turkey have reached the point where they want to end the military's interference in politics, which is an important development. Because the opposition didn't support the coup, the rebels lost a potential source of support.

The public took to the streets at great risk to physically confront rebel soldiers. This factor may have been the biggest surprise. Rebel soldiers have military class weapons and are trained to use them. Civilians tend to be outgunned. And yet, following the call from Erdogan and Muslim clerics, the public, at great risk, took to the streets. They physically began to rout the rebels. In some cases, it appears that enlisted soldiers were not actually aware they were participating in a coup. Many claimed their officers told them they were conducting military exercises. It is highly unusual, but not unprecedented, for civilians to confront the military.⁷ To a great extent, the massive public turnout against the coup was probably key to its failure as it showed the rebels did not have the support of the people.

Was this coup staged? We have mentioned a couple of factors that have led some analysts to postulate that either Erdogan sprung a "false flag" operation or that, once aware of the coup, he let it continue so he could engineer the crackdown to eliminate political enemies. There are some facts that could support the thesis that either the coup was staged or anticipated. The information that arrest lists were already available raises concerns, although it appears that the coup

⁷ We did see Russians turn out to protect the Duma during the attempted coup against Mikhail Gorbachev. Chinese citizens confronted tanks during the Tiananmen Square protests, which, ultimately, did not change the political situation in China.

was being uncovered by Turkish intelligence which likely led to its early launch. The fact that Erdogan's aircraft wasn't shot down raises questions. Selling a corporate jet as a commercial airliner is a stretch; on the other hand, the last problem a coup plotter wants is a distraction like downing a civilian aircraft. Finally, is it reasonable to wager that civilians would be willing to risk their lives to stop a coup? In other words, if Erdogan simply allowed the coup to occur, the improvised FaceTime call to CNN Turk (who may or may not have been broadcasting) and the assumption that civilians would be willing to die for your government seems like a rather foolhardy plan. Thus, our conclusion is that Erdogan may have been warned of a potential coup but probably didn't expect it so soon and narrowly escaped.

Who was behind it? The Erdogan government has put the blame squarely on Fethullah Gulen, who vehemently denies any role. We tend to think that Gulen is probably telling the truth. We doubt he directed the coup. However, we would not be at all surprised to learn that many of his followers were among the rebel leaders.

Erdogan has been cracking down on followers of Gulen who have infiltrated ever higher levels of government. Although coups traditionally come from the Kemalists and some participation from the secular camp would also not be a surprise, the fact that Erdogan has studiously avoided blaming this group suggests that either (a) Erdogan's intelligence points to Gulenists as the primary leaders, (b) he no longer fears the secular parties and thus doesn't care if they participated, or (c) he has lots of enemies and is simply planning to purge the ones that are the greatest future risk to his drive for power. Next week, we will further analyze the likelihood that Fethullah Gulen was directly involved in the coup.

What's next?

Next week we will conclude this series with a look at the post-coup purge, the likely path forward for Turkey and the impact of the coup on the Turkish economy and geopolitics.

Bill O'Grady
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