

After the Coup, the Counter-Coup

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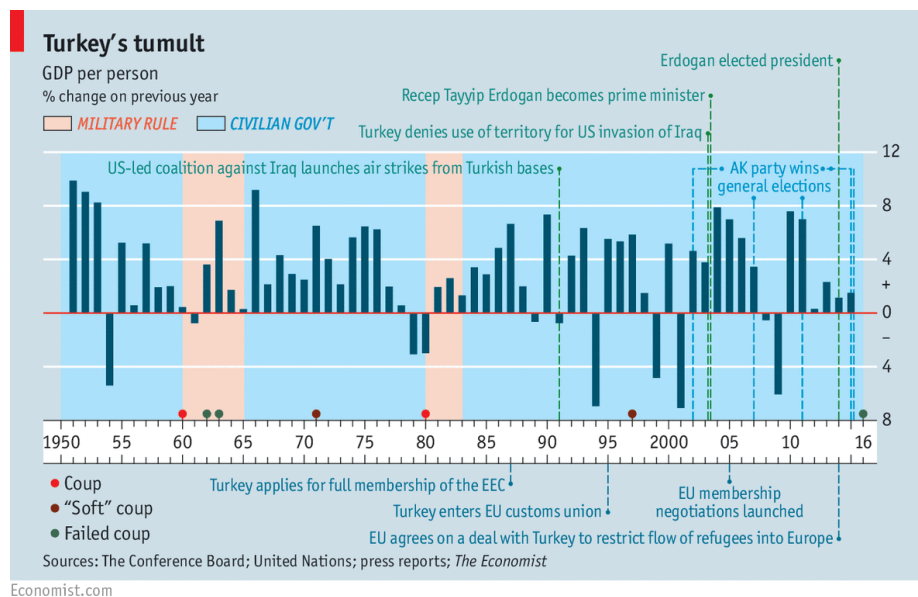
July 23, 2016

THE brutality of the soldiers' power-grab still horrifies many Turks. Each day brings fresh footage and stories of what took place during the long, bloody night between July 15th and 16th: one mobile-phone video shows a group of bystanders near the presidential palace in Ankara overwhelmed by the blast of an air strike; another captures a man diving to the ground between the tracks of a tank to avoid being crushed, rising to his feet, then falling again to save himself from another one; a third records soldiers shooting down unarmed protesters.

Stories are told of how the rebels kidnapped their commanders. The chief of general staff, General Hulusi Akar, was told by his aides to sign a declaration of martial law. When he refused, they tightened a belt around his neck, but he would not yield. He survived the ordeal.

This was hardly the first time that Turkish soldiers had tried to seize power. Forged in military revolt, modern Turkey has seen the generals topple four governments since the 1960s, sometimes ruling directly, sometimes indirectly (see chart). Even when civilians have been in charge, the army has lurked in the background as the self-appointed guardian of secularism against Islamists and other radicals. The latest putsch was the bloodiest yet: more than 230 people died, among them 145 civilians who had taken to the streets to confront the rebellious soldiers.

The government's backlash has been harsh, too. "This uprising is a gift from God to us because this will be a reason to cleanse our army," declared Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey's Islamist-tinted president, a few hours after he triumphantly returned to Istanbul to reclaim the country.



He proved as good as his word. On July 20th the government declared a state of emergency for at least three months. Roughly 6,000 servicemen have been arrested, among them about 100 generals and admirals. Nearly 8,000 policemen have been sacked; almost 3,000 judges and prosecutors have been suspended or detained. University academics, teachers and civil servants—including some 250 from the prime minister's office—have been pushed out.

Altogether more than 60,000 people have been purged for suspected links to Fethullah Gulen, a Muslim cleric exiled in America. His movement emphasises education; but his devotees are accused of infiltrating the government and fomenting the coup. Mr Gulen was for years an ally of Mr Erdogan, never more so than when Gulenist prosecutors were busy purging the military “deep state” on charges of fomenting a putsch. But when they started digging into corruption in Mr Erdogan's entourage, the Gulenists were treated as a “parallel state” to be extirpated. The defeat of the latest coup seems to have opened the way for Mr Erdogan's counter-coup.

Mehmet Simsek, the deputy prime minister, declares reassuringly: “Some of these measures might seem like a wholesale purge, but they are aimed at minimising the aftershocks after the earthquake.” Turkey's Western allies are pleading for restraint.

The identity of the plotters, and their motives, remain murky. They had impressive resources at their disposal: F-16 fighter-jets, aerial refuelling tankers, helicopter gunships and transporters, and tanks. Units took over parts of Istanbul and Ankara, but commandos missed capturing Mr Erdogan at an Aegean resort by less than an hour. The rebels bombed the police and intelligence-service headquarters in Ankara, but did not knock them out.

Face time with Erdogan

Crucially, an air strike on the Turksat satellite broadcast station in Ankara failed to put it out of service. This meant that, even though the coup-makers took over the state broadcaster, private television networks continued to operate freely. The turning-point came when Mr Erdogan, hitherto a critic of internet activism, called a television station with his phone's video app to urge followers to take to the streets.

As crowds surrounded pockets of rebel soldiers, the coup began to collapse. One Turkish ex-officer said it was madness to stage a coup at ten in the evening when the streets were still crowded. “Coups have to be carried out when everyone is asleep, so they wake up and it's all over.”

So badly was the coup botched, and so well has it played into Mr Erdogan's hands, that many of his opponents now think it was choreographed by the government all along. A more likely explanation is that it was a desperate, almost suicidal attempt to preclude an expected wave of arrests and demotions in the army this summer. Officials in Ankara acknowledge they had a list of officers suspected of plotting the coup but failed to nip it in the bud. “The network had been mapped as part of an investigation that, to be frank, did not consider an actual coup very likely,” says one.



Turks' sacrifice in defence of their institutions—not just supporters of the ruling Justice and Development (AK) party but also of the opposition—offered Mr Erdogan a perfect opportunity to heal a country beset by growing terrorist violence and political divisions over his autocratic manner. The entire parliamentary opposition and what was left of the free media, which Mr Erdogan despises, denounced the plotters. “There was some level of dialogue, a level of solidarity we have not seen in years, something that could have been built on,” says Nigar Goksel of the International Crisis Group, a think-tank. Instead Mr Erdogan has squandered the opportunity, preferring to expunge his enemies, real or imagined, and extend his power.

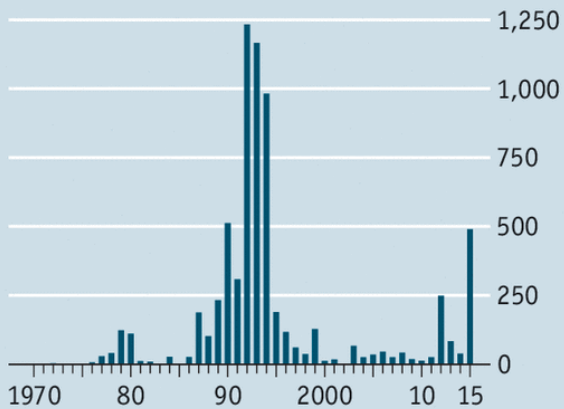
Every night, crowds of distinctly Islamic flavour gather in town squares to hold vigils and deter any other would-be putschists. In the southern city of Gaziantep, where during the coup the governor blockaded the local army base with lorries and other vehicles, loudspeakers broadcast music reflecting the lurches of Turkey's modern history: the drumbeat of Ottoman-era Janissaries, the national anthem of the ardently secular Kemalists and Islamic mantras set to techno beats. “Yallah. Bismillah. Allahu akbar,” intones the crowd. Many give the four-finger salute first used by Islamists in Egypt after the army overthrew their elected president.

Crowds hold up effigies of Mr Gulen. One banner in Taksim Square in Istanbul called him “Satan's dog”, proclaiming: “We will hang you and your dogs with your own leashes.” Mr Erdogan says he may indeed reinstate the death penalty. He has resurrected a project to build a mosque in Istanbul's Taksim Square and convert a nearby park into a replica of an Ottoman barracks—a plan that sparked mass protests, violently suppressed, in 2013.

The longer Mr Erdogan whips up his alliance of Islamists and nationalists the greater the danger of ethnic and sectarian violence—including against secularists, liberals, Alevites

The blood flows again

Terrorist fatalities in Turkey



Sources: Global Terrorism Database
University of Maryland; *The Economist*

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and Kurds. In the south-eastern city of Diyarbakir, a Kurdish stronghold, activists are bracing for a round-up. “I’m waiting for the knock on the door,” says one Kurdish journalist after AK activists blacklisted her on social media.

Another concern is that Turkey’s security forces are being dangerously hollowed out by the purges at a time when they are confronted by the twin menaces of Kurdish and jihadist attacks. “We would not have such losses to the officer corps if we had fought a conventional war for eight years,” says Haldun Solmazturk, a former brigadier-general.

As with previous challenges to his rule, the coup attempt has left Mr Erdogan stronger, or at least more autocratic. For years, he suspected an unholy alliance of foreign and domestic foes of conspiring to topple him. Now that he has survived a real coup, Mr Erdogan may give free rein to his authoritarian instincts and seek new executive powers.

How far will he go? Some are not sticking around to find out. The day after the coup attempt, a newly wed couple swept incongruously into a restaurant near Taksim Square, alarmed and elated in equal measure. They had decided to go ahead with their wedding despite the previous night’s gunfire, explosions and roar of fighter jets. But they were fed up: in a few days they would be leaving for Germany. They were not expecting to come back.