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Turkey

“The gift of God” - coup d’État, dictatorship and Islamو-nationalist union

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A country known for the role of military interventions in its political culture, on the night of July 15, 2016 Turkey witnessed an attempted coup live on the television screens and social media. Deprived of popular and international support and with very limited forces, the coup was rapidly defeated. This “attempt is the gift of God” said Turkey’s President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the day after, thus indicating that it would provide the desired opportunity to carry out his own civilian coup, waging an unprecedented wave of repression against all opposition forces and consolidating his dictatorial regime.

A live coup d’État

News of the occupation of Istanbul’s bridges linking the two continents by military tanks and low altitude fighter plane flights in the capital made the public aware that an attempted coup was underway.

A communiqué on the armed forces website indicated that the general staff had taken power, then on the state television channel, occupied by soldiers, a military group calling itself “The Council of Peace in the Country” announced it had taken power so as to restore liberty and democracy and re-establish the secular republic and the values of Atatürk in the face of systematic attacks on the constitution by the government. It was thus indicated that this was a putsch from outside the chain of command, as was evident also from the news circulating that the army chief of staff had been taken hostage, as well as other high ranking officers.

Via a connexion by smart phone on the CNN Türk channel – which would also be occupied later – Erdogan called on the people to go onto the streets and protest against the coup. A call relayed through the night by the imams of the mosques. Violent conflicts occurred throughout the night, mainly in Ankara and Istanbul, between the soldiers (apparently numbering 5,000 out of a total of 675,000) and the police loyal to Erdogan supported by the defenders of the regime. Thousands of civilians went onto the streets to cries of “Allahu Akbar”, demanding the reintroduction of the death penalty and opposing the tanks, representing mainly the AKP’s activist base [\[1\]](#). The attempt was finally defeated by the morning, after around 340 deaths (about a hundred of them putschists, the others being civilians and police) and 2,800 wounded.

The Gülen confraternity: from alliance to war

Erdogan announced after the coup that it had been led by military followers of the confraternity of Fethullah Gülen, the former AKP ally who has become his sworn enemy. A wide scale operation was then launched in the army, the judiciary (including the arrests of senior judges), the police and other branches of the state apparatus. If the Gülenist cadre obviously orchestrated the coup attempt, other military groups opposed to the regime were apparently supposed to participate in it initially; otherwise an attempt with such limited forces would be hard to explain. This is argued by the critical journalist Ahmet Sik, who in 2011, during the AKP-Gülen coalition, had been incarcerated for a year because of his book (before its publication!) revealing Gülenist infiltration of the police apparatus. Sik believes the Gülenist soldiers were betrayed by their allies who abandoned them once the coup was underway, probably following negotiations with Erdogan. It is highly plausible that having been alerted some hours before, Erdogan would have negotiated with some of the putschists so as to isolate the Gülenists.

Since 2013 Erdogan has been at war with his old friend, now known as the “Fethullahist terrorist organisation/parallel state structure” (FETÄ–), a hyper-organised and hierarchical Islamic confraternity – with which all governments have flirted – which has been infiltrating the state apparatus for thirty years. It has recruited mainly among the pauperised youth of Anatolia, above all through its “houses of light” where these youths have been fed and prepared for university examinations and in particular for military school and police examinations (where the questions are usually distributed in advance thanks to previous infiltration).

Coming to power in 2002, the AKP, having no framework in the bureaucracy, had formed an alliance with the Gülen community to fight the secularist-republican hegemony in the state apparatus and to domesticate the army. The 2007-2010 trials against soldiers accused of being involved in putschist conspiracies (in the context of which people like the former army chief and the above-mentioned journalist Ahmet Sik were arrested, for example) rested virtually entirely on false evidence fabricated and installed by the Gülenist police. The high ranking officers responsible for the recent coup attempt are mainly those who had succeeded in obtaining higher grades after the elimination of republican soldiers during these trials. Nonetheless this coalition weakened because of the huge power of the confraternity in the bureaucracy, in particular after the attempted arrest of the head of information Hakan Fidan (Erdogan’s “box of secrets”), suspected of “supporting the PKK” by judges and police who were members of the confraternity – opposed to the talks – because of his role in the negotiations with the Kurdish leader Ä–calan. The vast anti-corruption operations launched in December 2013, based on telephone recordings, which affected four ministers, businessmen close to Erdogan, as well as his son, were guided by this confraternity. It was starting from this date that the break was consummated and Erdogan launched sweeping operations above all in the police and legal apparatus, but also against the financial resources and media of Gülen. These operations seemed to have put an end to the power of the Gülenists. But apparently not.

The left and the coup

It should also be noted that no secularist republican and/or left force, including those in the Kurdish movement, came onto the streets to resist the coup. It might seem strange that the left, which was the preferred target of previous military interventions, particularly in 1971 and 1980, did not mobilise to oppose this attempt. In the absence of detailed objective analysis on the question, we can offer some elements, based on personal observations, so as to highlight the state of play on the republican-reformist left and the far left. First, it seems that, taking account of the level of political-cultural polarisation in society, the dictatorial administration of the country by Erdogan, Islamicization, the cycle of suicide attacks, the atmosphere of civil war and so on, the feeling of “anything but Erdogan” contributed to the non-mobilisation of republican sectors but also that of left activists. All the more so since the communiqué of the putschists asserted republican values and respect for democracy and the Constitution. The coup protagonists had moreover thus probably relied on the emergence of civilian and military support in the course of events through a snowball effect. Which did not happen, the people detested Erdogan enough not to oppose the tanks but not enough to acclaim them.

On the other hand, the manipulations of the regime (like for example when, after the elections of June 7, 2015, Erdogan was ready to provoke chaos and a situation of civil war to win back nationalist votes) allowed a conspiracy theory (produced spontaneously) – according to which this was a “theatre”, a “super-production” set up to realise Erdogan’s dictatorial ambitions – which found a broad echo in the early hours. It is true that the regime now benefits to the maximum from this post-coup climate, but in the conditions where the government was consolidated at the elections of November 1, 2015 by obtaining nearly 50% of the vote, Erdogan had no legitimacy problem requiring such a stunt.

Finally, the mobilisation of Islamist and fascist activists and the police in defence of the regime did not encourage the radical left to go onto the streets alongside them, above all taking account of its limited activist forces, which

prevented it playing an independent role. The deployment of the putschist military forces was mainly in the west of the country, so the question was not posed directly in Kurdistan, but given the conditions of war between the Turkish state and the PKK, even if the Gülen confraternity (which possesses a vast organisation in the Kurdish region and which opposes the process of negotiation) has been a privileged rival of the Kurdish national movement, the latter would have been far from defending the regime.

Also, the resistance against the putsch was followed by Erdogan’s call to stay on the streets, with festive rallies, marked by a high participation of the popular classes representing the electoral base of the AKP and the far right, organised on downtown plazas throughout the country (including Taksim of course) in what was in a certain sense a “revenge for Gezi”. The Gezi revolt of 2013 represented a first youth and civilian resistance to the Erdogan regime and had destabilized it. The resistance of July 15, with its battles against the tanks, its martyrs, then its “occupations of the squares” (with the support of the local authorities and public transport), its songs and so on, thus constituted “the “Gezi of the AKP” and has allowed the pro-regime forces to boast of their moral superiority for having fought in the streets.

State of emergency and dictatorship

Erdogan and the National Security Council responded to the coup attempt by declaring a state of emergency. It was initially supposed to be limited to a period of three months. But as any clear thinker might have guessed, it was extended for a second period of three months. It seems Erdogan is not inclined to put an end to it, going by his comments of November 13, 2016: “Some say the state of emergency should be lifted. Why should that be done immediately? When we came to power we lifted the state of emergency [in the Kurdish region]. But at that time the state of emergency had practically halted life. Today this is not the case. Everyone goes to their work calmly”.

The state of emergency allows the government, among other things, to extend the period of detention to thirty days, to declare curfews, to forbid public rallies and above all to issue decrees with legislative force. Thanks to these decrees, which are controlled neither by Parliament nor by the Constitutional Court, Erdogan can lead the country as he pleases, without any hindrance. These measures presage fully the dictatorial regime which Erdogan intends to install through the presidential system.

Thus through massive purges, arrests, closure of media outlets and institutions, initially targeting the Gülenists but then extended to the Kurdish opposition and the radical left, Erdogan combines a fundament restructuring of the state apparatus with an attempt to annihilate any possibility of opposition.

In the context of the anti-terrorist operations targeting the Gülenists as well as the Kurdish movement and those suspected of supporting the latter, 50,000 persons have been detained and 35,000 arrested. Among the latter nearly 2,500 are judges and prosecutors, 6,500 soldiers and 7,000 police officers. The total number of persons excluded from the civil service (and forbidden from working there again) is 70,000 while 93,000 have been suspended. Nearly half of these were attached to the education ministry. 10,000 teachers who were members of the left trade union Egitim-Sen, mainly in Turkish Kurdistan, have been dismissed in one day. Thus the city of Diyarbakir lost a quarter of its teachers and Dersim half. In the public and private universities 3,600 teachers have been dismissed.

Among the thousands of institutions, foundations and establishments closed are a thousand schools, 35 medical centres and hospitals. Fifteen private universities and 19 trade unions have also been closed. All their capital, financial resources and property have been confiscated by the state. Erdogan has granted himself the right to name university rectors directly, without previous internal elections, so as to break the few places of cultural opposition which have until now escaped him. This process of direct nomination began last year with pro-Erdogan

administrators having been named as the heads of enterprises confiscated from Gülen. With the state of emergency this measure was extended to the municipalities. The mayors of more than thirty municipalities accused of logistically supporting FETÄ– or the PKK have been replaced by pro-regime administrators. Most of these town halls were led by the Party of the Democratic Regions, sister party of the HDP in the Kurdish region [2].

The repression has also hit the media and thus the freedom of press and expression. More than a hundred media outlets (television channels, newspapers, press agencies, radio stations, magazines, publishing houses, internet sites) have also been banned as well as Kurdish language television channels. The intellectuals who responded to the repression of the pro-Kurdish daily *Ozgur Gundem* last year by each taking on the post of editor in chief for a day have been threatened with life imprisonment, accused of supporting the PKK. Other journalists and intellectuals have been incarcerated for transmitting “subliminal messages” supporting the idea of a coup. Ten directors, journalists and cartoonists for the main centre left opposition newspaper *Cumhuriyet* have been arrested, suspected “of having committed crimes in the name of the PKK and the Fethullahist terrorist organisation without being a member of these organisations”. The newspaper had attracted Erdogan’s ire for having reported on the delivery of arms to the jihadists in Syria by the Turkish intelligence services. More than 140 journalists have now been imprisoned.

In the context of this unprecedented wave of repression, while Erdogan has made cabinet changes, he has avoided any crackdown on AKP deputies who have had links with the Gülen confraternity, so as to keep his large parliamentary majority. Given the level of the alliance between the AKP and the confraternity, the praise conferred on Gülen from the summit of the state and its organic intellectuals and the support for its educational work, the whole party as well as its leaders could be accused of having links with FETÄ–, if having opened a bank account with Gülen’s Bank Asya is now enough to be dismissed. Hence a sort of “date limit” (which corresponds to the anti-corruption operations of December 2015) for links with the confraternity has been formulated. Erdogan has said of his years of coalition with Gülen: “We were wrong, may God forgive us”. But that is only valid for the political and economic elites, not for the tens of thousands of ordinary people persecuted under the mere suspicion of having had contact with the confraternity (or its schools, universities, banks or student residences) once considered so legitimate by the regime.

National unity and Islamo-fascist coalition

Immediately following the coup attempt, the four parties represented in Parliament – the AKP, the far right MHP, the centre-left secularist CHP and the pro-Kurdish left reformist HDP – denounced it and celebrated the civilian resistance with a common declaration [3]. Conscious of the insecurity of his government, Erdogan, parallel to the wave of anti-Gülenist repression, lowered the tensions with his political opponents in the CHP and the MHP in a context of “national unity”, while excluding the HDP which is still considered as terrorist. Thus the resistance led mainly by the AKP rank and file and the Islamist-fascist far right against the tanks was subject to a discursive reconstruction, being compared to the battle of the Dardanelles (when Ottoman troops fought British and French soldiers in the First World War), as a combat where “there were neither Turks, nor Kurds, nor Alevi, nor Sunni, but the whole nation facing those who wished to destroy us”. And this with slightly “anti-imperialist” connotations given that Gülen has sought refuge since 1999 in the USA – the idea that the US was behind the coup is broadly shared by the government and repeated incessantly. The extradition of Gülen has been demanded by the Turkish state and has taken on a major importance.

Faced with the level of violence of the repression the CHP criticised the authoritarian measures taken in the context of the state of emergency, rapidly placing itself outside the “national union”, but the MHP, the historic party of Turkish fascism, is fully involved. Their criticisms of the AKP concerning its policy of negotiation with Ä–calan have fallen off with the resumption of the war. However the fact that Erdogan wages a pitiless war against the Kurdish urban militias, destroying entire towns, has deprived the MHP of its main argument (it shares the same

conservative-religious-nationalist base as the AKP). Thus during the November 2015 elections it lost nearly 30% of its vote in relation to those of June 2015 (before the war) falling from 16.2% to 12%, whilst its number of seats fell from 80 to 41, putting it in fourth position in parliament behind the HDP, something which is unacceptable for the historic party of Turkish nationalism. A strong opposition has emerged inside the party, led mainly by Meral Aksener, a former interior minister from the conservative right (1996) who subsequently joined the MHP. The opinion polls show that if Aksener led the MHP it would get more than 20%, reducing the AKP vote. The coup attempt came right in the middle of the MHP’s internal crisis. Its leader, Devlet Bahçeli, gave his support to Erdogan and denounced the opposition, accusing it of being guided by Gülen so as to exclude Aksener as well as other rivals. Today the support of the MHP – who in return obtained the promise to restore the death penalty – allows the AKP to get parliamentary approval of the proposal of a referendum on the project of constitutional modification to install a presidential regime custom made for Erdogan, destroying what remains of the separation of powers.

The Kurdish question

After the coup the repression of the Kurdish civilian movement has crossed a decisive stage. First the co-mayors of Diyarbakir, the most important Kurdish city, Gultan Kisanak and Firat Anli, as well as the former Democratic Party of the Regions deputy Ayla Akat Ata were arrested under the accusation of being members of the PKK. More than 20 mayors of Kurdish municipalities have been dismissed and replaced by new administrators identifying directly with the “Duce” of Ankara. The HDP co-chair Selahattin Demirtaş had correctly said that in designating as terrorists all those who did not see Erdogan as “their sultan”, the Turkish state took on henceforth the form of a “Hitlerian fascist state”, and was himself arrested with other leaders and deputies of the party, including its co-chair Figen Yuksekdag.

The conditions of these arrest had been prepared by the lifting of parliamentary immunity in May 2016, with the contribution of the CHP – its chair, Kilicdaroglu, fearing that his party would be stigmatised as sympathetic to the PKK, had said that this measure was contrary to the Constitution, but that the CHP would nonetheless vote for it, because if this measure was not directly accepted by the parliament and subject to a referendum, the polarisation in the country would reach an extreme level. The lifting of immunity affected all deputies who had been arraigned before parliament, but it was obvious that it targeted the HDP.

In the context of the parliamentary elections of June 7, 2015 which took on a plebiscitary character for Erdogan – like any election from now on – the campaign led by Demirtaş and the HDP around the motto “we will stop you being president” had provoked his ire. Realising that the process of negotiation had lost him nationalist votes, Erdogan had already decided in March 2015 to suspend the talks with Aċalan to adopt an anti-Kurd policy. Unhappy with the result in the June elections when the HDP obtained 13.1% and the AKP fell from 50% to 40.8% and could not thus form the government alone, Erdogan argued for new elections while the AKP affected to be searching for a coalition partner. However the weakening of the HDP was for the AKP the condition sine qua non of winning the next elections. It was thus that, in a strongly suspect fashion, the suicide bombing carried out by Islamic State in Suruc (where 32 young students who were going to Kobanê to contribute to the reconstruction of the town were killed) and the immediate reprisals of the PKK causing the death of two police officers – which the PLL first claimed then repudiated, saying it was the work of “local units” – provided the opportunity to resume the war against the Kurds and criminalise the HDP, and help the AKP to regain the initiative for the elections [4].

After nearly 16 months of blockade, curfew, massacres, forced displacement of population and destruction of towns, the civil resistance in Turkish Kurdistan seems weakened, to say the least. The extremely limited number of mobilisations in relation to what might be expected – moreover severely repressed – after the imprisonment of the HDP leaders attests to it. The “trenches” policy of erecting barricades and digging trenches in the neighbourhoods of Kurdish towns to declare autonomy – inspired by the experience of Syrian Kurdistan, although that took place after the withdrawal of the Syrian army – ended in a veritable bloodbath. These attempts at self-administration led by the

youth militia of the YDG-H (Movement of Revolutionary Patriotic Youth) and approved by the PKK (although the local populations were more reserved in their support), in a situation of an extremely unequal relationship of forces, without the militias having the ability to flee to the mountains, certainly showed the courage of the plebeian Kurdish youth, but constituted a dramatic defeat for the Kurdish movement. “We did not expect such a violent reaction from the state” said the strategists who have led the PKK for more than 35 years.

Military interventionism and expansionist policy

The main concern for both the Turkish government and the PKK is Rojava, the autonomous region now known as the “Democratic Federal System of Northern Syria and Rojava” led by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the PKK’s sister party in Syria. For the regime it is about preventing the consolidation of this autonomy at any price and preventing the two parts of Rojava (Djazira and Kobané in the east and Afrin in the west) from joining up to form a Kurdish corridor along the Turkish-Syrian border. If the overthrow of Assad was the main objective of Turkey’s intervention in Syria and in its support for the jihadists, the Kurdish question also has enormous weight here. But this adventurist stance – as well as its more authoritarian turn internally – has increasingly isolated the Turkish state at the international level. During 2016, Ankara attempted to break this isolation, on the one hand by trying to profit from the “migrant crisis” in relation to the EU by offering itself as a rampart against the migratory flows, and on the other by renewing diplomatic relations with Russia and Israel. The ousting of Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu – the initiator of the foreign policy seeking to make Turkey the hegemonic pole and also the main advocate of military interventionism in Syria – gave a free hand to Erdogan to revise his alliances in the Syrian conflict. Also, after the attempted coup, this rapprochement with Putin and even a warming of relations with Damascus – including the acceptance of the idea of a transitional period with Assad – took on the form of an opposition to the western powers presumed to have supported the putsch as well as the PKK.

The regime thus tries to play a game with multiple facets, like everyone else in the region. On the one hand it tries to convince the US that it is a better ally than the Democratic Forces of Syria (FDS) led by the YPG (Units of Popular Protection), the armed wing of the PYD in the fight against Islamic State, while positing the alternative of its rapprochement with Putin. Ankara also benefits from the campaign against Islamic State (which Erdogan openly preferred to the Kurds as his neighbours on the border, before this became too encumbering, especially with the suicide attacks) to stop the FDS and force them back beyond the Euphrates. Meanwhile the operation led by Islamist fighters – under the name of Free Syrian Army! – with the support of Turkish military planes is called, very maliciously, “Euphrates Shield”. The right for Ankara to overfly Syrian territory under the silence of Moscow and the moderate protests of Damascus has been paid for by the silence of the Turkish regime over the destruction of Aleppo. As for the battle to liberate the city of Mosul from IS, Turkey’s desire to participate was rejected by Baghdad, which had already opposed the Turkish military base in Bashika which Ankara refuses to quit. Seeking an image as the protector of Sunnis, Erdogan argues that the liberation of Mosul by Shiite militias alone will lead to a massacre of Sunnis, while to the Turkish public he defends the thesis that Turkey has historic rights to Mosul. But all these alliances and rivalries can change very quickly, taking account of the tactical pragmatism in the region, the irrational character of Erdogan and the election of Trump, whose international policy for now is only words.

By consolidating his hegemony afterwards and thanks to the attempted coup, there is henceforth a relationship of identification, rather than representation, between Erdogan the “Reis” (leader) and the “Millet” (nation, Turkish and Sunni, of course). It seems for now to be very difficult to open any breach in this hegemony. Apart from the coup, from the Gezi revolt to the electoral success of the HDP, via the revealing of the high level of corruption in the government and in Erdogan’s entourage, any opposition to his authority is likened to an offensive seeking to undermine the development of the Turkish state, to betrayal of the country, supported of course by foreign powers.

“The gift of God” - coup d’État, dictatorship and Islamo-nationalist union

A sinister horizon for the peoples of Turkey for whom democracy, justice, liberty and secularism constitute values which are not only desirable, but indispensable, categorical. It is time for a resistance without illusions for our rights and our liberties, for a struggle to drive back the Islamist and nationalist tide, and a struggle to say that we are here, we still exist and that we will not capitulate.

[1] The Party of Justice and Development (AKP) is a conservative and Islamist party founded by Erdogan which obtained 49.5% of the vote and 317 (out of 550) seats in parliament at the last elections

[2] The Democratic Party of the Peoples (HDP) is a coalition of associations and parties of the Turkish left and the Kurdish political movement. At the parliamentary elections of June 2015 it won 12.96% of the vote and 80 seats, but in November 2015 it won only 59 seats (10.76% of the vote)

[3] The Party of Nationalist Action (MHP) is the historic party of Turkish fascism. In November 2015 it won 11.9% of the vote and 40 seats in parliament. The Republican Party of the People (CHP), founded by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in 1923, is a party of the secularist centre-left. In November 2015 it won 25.32% of the vote and 134 seats in parliament

[4] Since the police and information services have done everything to destroy evidence and proposals that parliament investigate the bombing and the reprisal killings have been rejected by the AKP and MHP, speculation about who ordered them remains rife