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Why Did People Become Human Shields Against The Coup?

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Abstract

Resistance of the people on streets in the night of July 15, against the coup staged by the officer members of FETÖ in Turkish army, was the primary factor that failed the attempt. The society in Turkey have seen many coups but it was the first time in the history that they stood against. There are several reasons why social segments distant to activism have acted different than before, who have taken the streets and turned their bodies to shields against tanks, guns and fighter jets. According to my analysis, these reasons may be summed up under five sections. Although I make this analysis shortly after the coup attempt and it needs to be supported by field studies, I think it frames a real-like picture regarding the question.

Keywords

15 July, military coup, President Erdogan, AK Party, democratic resistance, failed coup attempt

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Introduction

The reason history recorded the 15 July incident as a "failed coup attempt" was, without a doubt, because of the people on the streets who stopped the coup at the cost of their lives.

How did people who had never withstood a coup prior to July 15—the day putschists ruthlessly attacked groups they had not targeted before (Aslan 2016)—take to the streets and fight against the raving putschists by putting their lives at stake in a country where military coups are the longest established tradition?

What turned mild and modest Anatolians into human shields against gunfire and bombs from jets, copters, and tanks?

Which motivation and sociopolitical reason turned ordinary individuals into heroes of democracy?

People Had Much to Lose

The number of CHP (Republican People's Party) and HDP (People' Democratic Party) supporters who took to the streets to resist the coup was very small; the majority came from lower and middle income groups—largely AK Party (Justice and Development Party) voters, though some MHP (Nationalist Movement Party) voters participated[1] (KONDA 2016). Coups certainly are disastrous for all sections of society; however, conservative/religious segments of society who gained much following political reforms of the AK Party during its 14 years in power had too much to lose. Previously, these social segments had no considerable possession or gain to lose after any coup.

What is it that people had under AK Party rule that they would never have again if lost?

The primary thing that they would have lost if the coup attempt had been successful was their position at the center of the political system. These segments of society had been pushed to the periphery under the Kemalist regime, and they found an opportunity for political representation during the AK Party's 14 continuous years in power. They have gradually moved toward the center from the periphery and have even started to settle down; in fact, they are beginning to earn a measure of esteem and respect. Obstacles preventing

their children—and prior generations—from receiving an excellent and reputable education, career opportunities in public and private sectors, and international opportunities were removed. They These segments of society would have been exiled from the center and would have lost what they had waited worked for long and hardly had if the coup was had succeeded.

Secondly, if putschists had achieved a takeover of the country that night, conservative/religious people would have partially lost their economic status and advanced living standards. Their economic share of the country's general welfare was created through economic growth during the AK Party era. They had opportunities to possess property, accumulate wealth, and more comfortable living standards. Clearly, their living standards were relatively better than before. They would have lost their lower and middle-class economic status and increased prosperity if the coup attempt was successful. Under the rule of the Kemalist tutelage regime, the general economic situation in Turkey was bad, and wealth was limited to small oligarchies. For the first time, with Özal's free market reforms, the welfare of lower and middle income groups increased; during Erdoğan's tenure in power, the welfare increase for these groups has reached a significant level (Sabah 2016, TÜİK 2016a).

Thirdly, if the coup attempt had succeeded, those social segments would have lost the means that gave them a voice in the government—democracy. Some may think that people do not give much attention to democracy or fight to protect it. However, democracy generally makes ordinary people better off; it strengthens and empowers them. Elites in a society can find safe and secure places in every regime. Only in democracies do ordinary people have opportunities to prosper as well as rights and legal protection.

Prior to previous coups, the democratic system stipulated that only elections could be held in Turkey. However, that was a democracy dominated by a strict official ideology under military tutelage that interfered with freedom and controlled politics. During the 14-year democratization process by the AK Party, people started to recognize what real democracy meant and did not want to give up easily.

The society spotted what they could lose after a coup and did not give up—not only for things that they would have lost but also to protect their future.

Therefore, the people resisted the coup attempt at the expense of their lives. In conclusion, their motivation to resist was strong because the people recognized that there was much to lose, including the future of their society.

Political Awareness of the People is High

The people of Turkey have a strong political consciousness, though they have been distant regarding activism. One can argue that their increased political awareness through various factors was a determinant in their resistance to the July 15 coup attempt.

The *first factor* in raising people's awareness was their personal experience with military coups throughout Turkey's history, which provides clues about the background, actual targets of coups, preparations for and implementation of coup attempts, and their results. Turgut Özal's era and the period after it led Turkey to a more open and free society in which the release of information about actual events in the country was possible (i.e., it became easier to find out what was behind the events). Each day brought information about plots to create fraudulent circumstances for coups, agendas hidden from the public, the cost of coups, and winners and losers.

Additionally, proceedings of the Ergenekon and Balyoz (Sledgehammer) cases alerted people to threats. It was discovered recently that the Fethullah Terrorist Organization (FETÖ) had members in media and the army, police force, and judiciary who manipulated and made fraudulent claims in lawsuits opposing military coup attempts; consequently, they misled the public. People realized that the army had become political to the extent that it completely forgot its primary function of securing and defending the country. Thus, elected politicians were its archenemies, and its political situation escalated because of its structure.

In this scenario, the army had already started to decay, though the fact was hidden behind an ideological heroism. The Ergenekon and Balyoz cases served also to remove fear and frustration of civilians and politicians toward the military, and they began to feel more self-confident. Lawsuits caused military officers to lose their discursive hegemony and psychological superiority over politicians.

The *second factor* affecting people's political awareness has been sadness and regret from doing nothing or not resisting during previous coups. Feelings

of embarrassment and regret from the generation who did not do anything to resist a previous coup attempt and who, subsequently, watched quietly in tears as Prime Minister Menderes (whom they had elected) was sentenced for execution, extended to succeeding generations. That regret turned into social remorse after Özal's suspicious death. I think that this remorse created a reactionary effect that made people jump into the streets on the night of July 15. The accumulated remorse must have motivated people to stand against the attempted coup.

A poor, middle-aged woman wearing a head scarf and who participated in Democracy Watch meetings that began after a coup attempt said, "My father cried for Menderes, I cried for Özal, but my children will not cry for Erdoğan" (YouTube 2016).

Third, after judicial operations of December 17–25, the real face of the Cemaat (Hizmet Movement) become apparent—long before the July 15 coup attempt. Until then, to conservative/religious sections, Cemaat was a relatively credible organization and a strong ally of the AK Party, supporting its fight against military tutelage and assisting with the implementation of successful educational activities.

After the 2011 elections, Cemaat had been mobilized to capture power of the state by replacing tutelage actors it discharged, turning the government into a symbolic actor and leaving it with an unessential role. Cemaat intended to use state power and determine key policies. The breakdown of the relationship between Cemaat and Erdoğan, who resisted the former's mobilization to capture state power, was revealed to the public for the first time when Hakan Fidan, the head of the National Intelligence Organization (MIT), was called to testify on February 17, 2012. Leaks from a congressional meeting of Erdoğan's plan to ban mixed student housing, the positions of Cemaat during the Gezi Park protests, and the fate of private teaching institutions exposed Cemaat's true colors. However, after the December 17–25 operations, it came out that Cemaat intended to establish within the state the Parallel State Organization, which was conducting dirty, unlawful, illegal, and unethical activities.

The picture that became more clear after December 25 showed Cemaat as a structure that was not following the interests of the country but only the

interests of the organization, a fact that was hidden from the public and even from many of its followers. Those connected with Cemaat would do anything to achieve their purposes, including using any kind of illegal and unethical means.

Thus, understanding the real face of Cemaat and what it could do helped create a political awareness that empowered people with strength for July 15. The perception that this organization could slaughter anyone without blinking an eye, vandalize the entire country, and take the chance of starting a civil war probably reinforced resistance toward the coup that could cost people their lives.

The *last factor* for increased political awareness is that the people of Turkey, especially the AK party voters, followed the Egyptian military coup three years earlier very closely and understood the process and ensuing developments well. The conservative/religious segments identified or associated themselves with like-minded people in Egypt. They also associated Erdoğan with Morsi and the fate of Egypt with that of Turkey because they had carefully observed the Egyptian coup.

Egypt, like many other Middle Eastern countries, was ruled by a dictatorship that was Western-oriented, with secularist policies and military support. Eventually, the dictatorship that became unbearable was demolished via the Arab Spring. However, after the first elections there, a coup took place; it was, so to speak, the abortion of the democracy of Egypt before it was born. People of Turkey have recognized from the example of Egypt that the international system and the West are not ready or have not intended to let any Muslim society build a democracy. They testified with astonishment that instead of supporting Muslims' efforts to establish democracies, they preferred to support putschists. They have noticed that the USA and the EU, the hegemonic powers of the international system, tend to take the easy way out with actions that fit their own interests; therefore, they prefer that countries in Muslim regions are easily dominated and controlled by Western-oriented dictatorships.

The example of Egypt showed people in Turkey how easy it was to destroy a democracy blatantly in front of the whole world. The combination of the Egyptian experience with the Gezi Park protests and December 17–25 judicial operations contributed to the emerging consciousness that the

elected government, leader, and democracy were under a great threat in Turkey. Conservative/religious segments were already partly alert because of the discourse that was constituted and insistently emphasized by Erdoğan for almost three years. On July 15, just after learning that there was a coup attempt, most people must have thought about the fate of Egypt.

They Have an Indomitable Political Leader

The society had experienced four successful and three unsuccessful open military interventions during the history of the republic prior to July 15, and the people did not show any direct or physical resistance to any of them. One of the most important reasons for their inaction was that no politician had displayed a strong stance against the military. Prime ministers, opposition leaders, and MPs did not stand up to the soldiers in any way. The famous quote of Süleyman Demirel's, "I would take my hat and leave,"[2] was a symbol of the dominant attitude of politicians toward coups. In conclusion, prior to July 15, there was no political leadership for people to stand behind or that would support their resistance by backing them up with tanks. It is another matter of discussion that under certain circumstances to what extent and costs the politicians could resist to a coup and if this resistance would succeed or not. If the prime minister, opposition leaders, or MPs gave up at the first instance, for whom would you jump into the streets and stand in front of the tanks?

One of the most important triggers for people taking to the streets on the night of July 15 was the announcement by President Erdoğan that he would resist the coup; subsequently, he invited people to join the resistance. After realizing this was a coup attempt, Erdoğan, instead of giving up and yielding, took the risk of resisting, using his cell phone with the call to the people,[3] which was televised, to stand with him (CNNTürk 2016). It is a well-known fact, even among his opponents, that Erdoğan has a strong and unusual connection with his voters, who trust his leadership. It is undeniable that this connection was very effective in driving people into the streets. For a moment, imagine that Erdoğan had never made that announcement and suppose that he asked for silence and—to prevent spilling blood—yielded to the putschists by accepting their provisions. In this scenario, would the people have poured into the streets and risked their lives to prevent the plot? If the dominant response is no, then it is necessary to admit the crucial role of political leadership in the resistance of the people.

People are Self-Confident

The self-confidence of conservative/religious segments of society has increased significantly since 2000. It explains the courage of people to stand against the army like a cult, believing that they could stop the coup by their own efforts. More importantly, self-confidence of the people caused them to perceive that they were proprietors of the state, which includes the army and other institutions. Therefore, they must have determined that they were protecting their own property when they used their bodies as shields to protect the state.

There are various reasons for people's self-confidence. Erdoğan's leadership is certainly the primary reason. He has been very influential over conservative/religious segments, boosting their confidence in domestic and international political realms. When Erdoğan started to take a stance against elites of the country with a snub and a challenging and provoking tone, he shook privileged sociocultural groups and pressures of the old regime. Those who were humiliated and trivialized by elites of the old regime began to rid themselves of their frustration by identifying with Erdoğan. They expected to be acknowledged and recognized by secular segments, and their learned "despair" disappeared. They started to feel that they were first-class citizens who had important rights in the state and country.

Gaining self-confidence through the statements and attitudes of Erdoğan has extended internationally as well. Especially, in the second term of the AK Party, Erdoğan began acting like the leader of a country in the highest league with the sympathy that came from international public opinion and a strong economy. With attitudes and statements that indicated his intentions to build a relationship as an equal among powerful actors of the world and demolish the image and habits of an underdeveloped country, he proceeded to turn passive, obscure, and obedient Turkey into an active and honorable partner with a striking effect. The very first challenges that come to mind are "one minute," "the world is bigger than five," temporary membership in the United Nations Security Council, his relationship style with powerful state leaders, and the attempt to act independently with Brazil.

Eventually, in front of his interlocutors internally and externally, Erdoğan caused a significant increase in self-confidence among conservative/religious

people because of his own confident and conservative/religious status. As early as the Gezi Park protests in 2013, secular republican people were expressing that they had begun to feel proud to carry a Turkish passport with them.

In my opinion, the second main factor for the rise in people's confidence has been the combination of rapidly improving economic indicators and high expectations that the economy is getting better. Turkey has shown great performance in terms of economic development, becoming prosperous under the AK Party. The country hit bottom with an economic growth rate of -7 during the 2001 economic crisis, raising the GDP per capita from about 3,000 USD to 10,000 USD; further, the GNP increased from approximately 200 billion USD to 800 billion USD (TÜİK 2016b). In addition, rapid and striking recoveries in highway, railway, and water transportation, and developments in communication and IT technologies reflected the welfare, comfort, and luxury that ordinary people were beginning to enjoy.

Especially, economic development and prosperity that reached ordinary people instilled the hope that Turkey could become like the Western European countries they had emulated. The belief in their country and the expectation of advancement turned into trust and pride in their country and its future, eventually evolving into confidence.

Thinking of What They Could Go Through

If the coup plot had succeeded, President Erdoğan, followed by the AK Party's general staff, MPs, AK Party members, and supporting intellectuals, journalists, businessmen, and other politicians who stood against the coup would have faced serious danger. There are many just reasons to think that symbolic figures like Erdoğan would have been murdered immediately on the night of the coup and that many others would have been executed later. It is not difficult to imagine that many would have been arrested, prisoned, tortured, fired, and expropriated. Thus, people's intuitions regarding the disasters coming after the coup fueled their strength.

People must have foreseen that in the case of a successful coup, the damage would not be limited to politicians but profoundly to all social segments. Conservative/religious segments were already consolidated around Erdoğan and e had an intimate relationship with him since the Gezi Park protests.

They could not distance themselves from Erdoğan even if they wanted to; those people who had strong ties with Erdoğan would have posed a serious risk to putschists who needed to be taken under control, even forcibly.

Considering the profile of putschists, one can easily understand the danger facing AK Party supporters. The fight between Cemaat and Erdoğan and the government started on February 7, 2012; it became violent with leaks of Erdoğan's talk regarding student housing, the Gezi Park protests, and the decision to close private teaching institutions. It reached a peak during the period of December 17–25. Gülenists acted as if they were engaged in a fight to survive after December, when Cemaat was found out to be an illegal, secret organization. They tried to use everyone and every means—and enormous energy—in that fight. However, they ultimately failed, and an enormous organization constructed very carefully over 40 years was exposed. Their space narrowed and they were cornered.

We witnessed many times, even via social media, FETÖ members nurturing hate and promising revenge against Erdoğan and those who opposed them. If they had succeeded via an immense final attack, namely the coup attempt that turned into a kamikaze mission, further proving that Cemaat was a terrorist organization, they would go further to slaughter and torture. Remembering that they opened fire on civilians, ran over them with tanks, and bombed their houses (Anadolu Ajansı 2016), it is easy to imagine what they would have done if the coup attempt had succeeded.

On the other hand, the magnitude of the disaster would be the same for the abovementioned groups if the coup had succeeded and Kemalists had cooperated with Cemaat or Kemalist officers had eliminated the Gülenists and assumed dominance at the helm of the coup. Although they do not define every action as "permissible," Kemalists also have a grudge against the AK Party and their supporters because of the breakdown of the Kemalist regime. The old regime's elites could not accept being overthrown from their privileged positions because they would be underrated. This cumulative desire for revenge exploded in Gezi Park, but they did not wreak complete vengeance. On the contrary, the despair after Gezi Park stiffened after defeats in local and presidential elections. When the military coup, which had been encouraged by radical Kemalists for such a long time, materialized, it was predictable that some groups would behave as revanchists.

Finally, it is obvious that a successful military coup would have been destructive for AK Party supporters and conservative/religious people. Therefore, these groups had legitimate and strong motives to resist the coup attempt at the expense of their lives.

Conclusion

Unlike previous coups, conservative/religious people had strong motives for resisting the July 15 coup directly and actively. This time, democracy was crucial to them—even to the point of death. They saw the reality based on the political awareness they had gained; they correctly analyzed political events. They made accurate judgments about the situation and predicted the cost of the coup; additionally, they took a stance on the right side of the conflict. These people, with self-confidence and sound leadership, successfully defeated the furious putschists. July 15 will be recalled as "an extraordinary victory of ordinary people" in world history.

Endnotes

1 According to the KONDA's study, on the night of the coup, 83% of those who took to the streets before the President's call and 90% of those who joined the effort after his call were AK Party voters. Since the night of the coup, 79.5 % of those who participated in Democracy Watch were either AK Party members or voters, KONDA July 26, 2016 *Demokrasi Nöbeti Araştırması,* http://konda.com.tr/demokrasinobeti, Accessed 17.08.2016.

2 Statement attributed to him at the March 12 coup

3 Hande Fırat from CNNTürk connected to President Erdoğan with a FaceTime application on her cell phone around 00:25 on the night of the coup, projecting Erdoğan's facial image and call to a wide audience. See the video record of the broadcast at http://www.cnnturk.com/video/turkiye/cumhurbaskani-Erdoğan-aciklama-yapti. Accessed August 20, 2016.

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Halk Darbeye Karşı Niye Canlı Kalkan Oldu?

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Öz

15 Temmuz gecesi ordu içindeki FETÖ'cü subaylar tarafından girişilen darbe girişiminin başarısız olmasında birinci faktör halkın sokaklara çıkarak darbeye direnmesidir. Pek çok darbe görmüş bu toplum, tarihinde ilk defa sokaklara çıkarak askerin karşısına dikildi. Aktivizmden uzak toplum kesimlerini, bu seferki darbe girişimi karşısında, öncekilerden farklı davranarak canları pahasına sokağa çıkaran ve tanka, tüfeğe, savaş uçağına karşı kendi bedenlerini bir kalkana dönüştürmeye iten çeşitli sebepler olmalıdır. Bu konuda yaptığımız analizin sonucuna göre bu sebepler beş başlık altında toplanabilir. Bu beş başlıklı analizin, darbe girişiminden görece kısa bir süre sonra yapılmış olması ve saha çalışmalarıyla desteklenmesi gereğine rağmen soruya ilişkin gerçeğe oldukça yakın bir resim verdiği düşünülmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler

15 Temmuz, askerî darbe, Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan, AK Parti, demokrasi direnişi, başarısız darbe girişimi

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Почему люди стали живым щитом против переворота?

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Аннотация

Сопротивление людей на улицах в ночь на 15 июля, против переворота, который был поставлен офицером членов Фето в Турецкой армии, был основным фактором неудачного переворота. Люди видели много переворотов, но они первый раз в истории, выходя на улицу стояли против армии. Есть различные причины, которые заставляли людей действовать иначе, чем раньше, которые заставляли их превратит свои тела на щиты чтобы быть против танка, боевых самолетов и оружии. Эти причины могут быть сгруппированы по пяти категориям в соответствии с результатами нашего анализа по данным вопросам. Эти пятиглавные анализы были сделаны после короткий период переворота, и несмотря на необходимость поддержи работ по данной области, считается что эти анализы показали реальную картину в отношении вопроса.

Ключевые слова

15 Июль, военный переворот, Президент Эрдоган, ПСР, сопротивление демократии, неудачная попытка государственного переворота

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