

Turkey's failed coup has firmly tightened Erdoğan's grip on power

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What does the attempted coup in Turkey mean for the country's politics moving forward? [Dimitar Bechev](#) writes that on the one hand the failure of the coup illustrates the extent to which Turkey has become 'civilianised', with citizens less willing to accept the military interfering in politics. However, the net effect of the coup will be to greatly strengthen Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's grip on power.



Whatever its perpetrators had in mind, the failed coup attempt in Turkey highlights how far the country has travelled since the late 1990s. Politics has become 'civilianised'. A clear majority of Turkish citizens and elites, irrespective of their leanings and affiliations, believe the military should stay in the barracks.

The coup was, no doubt, welcomed by some hard-core secularists, but hardly any of them marched in its support. The Kemalist [People's Republican Party](#) (CHP) leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, denounced it in short order. It was not that long ago when his predecessor on the job, Deniz Baykal, was calling the army to intervene against the government's alleged efforts of undermining secularism. That was in the tense summer of 2007 when Kemalists were rallying en masse against the notion that a veiled woman, Abdullah Gül's wife Hayrunnisa, could become the nation's first lady. Now the CHP along with the three other parliamentary parties have signed a joint declaration to condemn the coup attempt.

What is more, years of debating the traumatic legacy of past military interventions, notably the one of 1980, have made the word "coup" (*darbe*) toxic. Erdoğan has fought back against the corruption inquiry started in December 2013 by magistrates close to exiled cleric Fethullah Gülen by labelling it a "judicial coup". When Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu was [forced to step down](#) earlier this year, the opposition described President Erdoğan's decision as a "palace coup".

In September 1980, a great many citizens acquiesced with the army's heavy-handed clampdown on civil liberties, which was justified on the basis that it was necessary to stop the country from descending into chaos amidst clashes between radical leftists and rightists. In February 1997, secular supporters cheered when a military memorandum resulted in the resignation of the coalition cabinet of Necmettin Erbakan ("the post-modern coup"). But in 2016 social demand for the military to act as political arbiter is limited – a fact which was already made visible by the [Gezi protests](#).

The coup may have been a last-ditch attempt to stop Erdoğan from becoming the sole ruler of Turkey. Predictably, it has had just the opposite effect, handing him even more power than what he had before. Tanks in the streets of Istanbul and Ankara corroborated Erdoğan's narrative of being the underdog victimised by murky forces conspiring against the national will (*millî irade*) exercised through the ballot box. Turkey's pious conservative majority, the story goes, has continuously fallen prey to the deep state led by the Kemalist elite ensconced in the military command, the upper layers of bureaucracy and the judiciary. The democratic process is there to bring Turkey back to its rightful master, the people, with Erdoğan at the helm.

But the likely origins and subsequent development of the "kamikaze coup" suggest that this narrative is flawed. In fact, the top brass, by and large, remained loyal to the civilian leadership. The notion that there is a deep state working against the AKP might have held true in the early years but now, after three full terms in office and several waves of purges in key institutions, it sounds much less convincing. The party has largely co-opted and merged with the state machine. The coup will advance the fusion even further. The mass arrests and dismissals of military

officers and magistrates strengthens Erdoğan's grip on power. Even if the Gülen movement is not behind the coup, contrary to government's claims, its influence is likely to wane to the point of extinction.

The mutiny may be a prelude or stepping stone to constitutional change, inaugurating a presidential system. Erdoğan will use the momentum to bring on board the [Nationalist Movement Party](#) (MHP), or individual MPs from its ranks, to reach the threshold of 330 needed for a popular plebiscite. But even if he fails yet again, what counts is his informal sway over the political system. Erdoğan's [electoral triumph](#) from last November and the appointment of loyalist Binali Yıldırım as a prime minister make the executive presidency a palpable reality, with or without a formal change of rules.

Absent a well-functioning system of checks and balances, is there anything that could contain Erdoğan's boundless ambition? Reconciliation with Israel and Russia indicates that if necessary he can be flexible and adapt to changing circumstances. The series of setbacks in the Middle East, the self-styled Islamic State terror attacks and the ongoing war with the PKK have all brought back the pragmatist in Erdoğan.

But at home he is "turning the screws" and making life for his opponents difficult. The unanimous condemnation of the coup will not presage a shift from polarisation to consensual politics. The only game changer could be an economic crisis of dramatic proportions that could destabilise the government, bring support for the AKP well below 40%, and trigger early elections. But, as of today, such a scenario appears unlikely. In the first quarter of 2016, the Turkish economy [expanded](#) by a remarkable 4.8% of GDP in comparison to the same period in the previous year. For a number of reasons, Turkey is underperforming and could grow much more robustly. Yet there is no crisis in sight.

The stars are all aligned for Erdoğan but, as the old cliché has it, with great power comes great responsibility.

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