

Topic of the week for discussion: 21st to 27th July 2016

Topic: Turmoil in Turkey

Turkey's is a classic case of a **coup-prone political system**. The military is a relatively autonomous and popular institution. It has in the past **toppled civilian governments four times**. There had always been **tension** between the ruling elite and the military establishment. But the relatively stable rule of the Justice and Development Party since 2002 and the popularity of its leader **Recep Tayyip Erdogan** had projected a picture of military coups having become a thing of the past. However the developments, which unfolded on July 15th and 16th, busted this myth. Even President Erdogan didn't foresee the attempt. Clashes have left at least **190 dead, and more than 1,150 injured**. His **success in taking back the reins of government** is good for both Turkey and the larger West Asian region. Turkey is important for regional security at a time when West Asia is in turmoil. However, the **failed coup** exposes the weakness of Mr. Erdogan's regime. The fact that it was not a minor revolt by a few soldiers, but it was an uprising **by thousands of troops**. It has raised serious questions about the coherence of the Turkish state.

Mr. Erdogan has contributed to the **weakening** of the state in many ways: **his disastrous foreign policy** that has worsened the security situation; **forced Islamisation** that has sharpened the contradiction between the Islamist and secular sections; and the **push to rewrite the Constitution** to award more powers to himself.

The coup-plotters may have sensed they would get support from **the anti-Erdogan masses** and the secular political class. Sections of the population have problems with Mr. Erdogan's politics. At Istanbul's Gezi Park, thousands braved his brutal police force in 2013. Despite the government crackdown on liberal academia, opposition, media and social networks, Turkey still has a thriving public sphere where anti-Erdoganism is a common theme for mobilizing people. But they don't want the soldiers to **"solve" their problem through force**. That is why thousands thronged the streets to defend the government they had elected. That is why even Mr. Erdogan's fiercest critics in the opposition denounced the coup. **The question now is how the fissures that have been exposed will impact Turkey**. It depends, in large measure, on the choices Mr. Erdogan makes. He could see the people's commitment to democracy and use the crisis as an opportunity to reconsider his dictatorial policies. Or he could use the military revolt as a pretext to purge more of his enemies and get what he always wanted, which is a more powerful executive presidency. His choice will guide the future of Turkey's democracy.

The nation's head of state, which is seen by some as an authoritarian - even dictatorial - figure, can count himself lucky this time. At least **four times in Turkey's history**, the military has deposed incumbent leaders and taken the reins.

Topic
Introduction

This is a brief timeline of the four coups that Turkey has already witnessed:

1960 - This is **Turkey's first coup**. In the **1920s and the 1930s, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk** introduced a **series of reforms to modernize Turkey** - including literacy programs, compulsory primary education, co-education, and the abolition of Islamic law. But now, Prime Minister Adnan Menderes and President Celal Bayar - both members of the Democratic Party – allow mosques to re-open, make it legal for calls to prayer to be made in Arabic instead of Turkish, and introduce serious restrictions on press freedom. In doing so, they undo some of the progress made during the Ataturk years. **On the May 27**, the army, led by General Kemal Gursel, stages a coup d'état, and **arrests Bayar and Menderes**, who are executed, and General Gursel takes over as both Prime Minister and President. He remains in power until 1961.

1971 - An economic downturn, coupled with **soaring inflation - 80%** - and the **Turkish lira's devaluation**, leads to general disaffection. There are demonstrations by workers' groups, and the army steps in once again. **On March 12**, in a memorandum to Prime Minister Suleyman Demirel, Chief of the General Staff Memduh Tagmac insinuates that Demirel has brought about anarchy. He asks that “strong and credible” government inspired by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's thinking to be constituted. Demirel steps down just hours later. Turkey is governed by a series of caretaker governments until Fahri Korutuk, **a naval officer, becomes president 1973**.

1980 - In the 70s, Turkey sees **11 Prime Ministers come and go**, and its economic woes persist. Opposing political factions take their fight to the streets, and there are thousands of assassinations. **On September 12**, after many delays, a group of generals - including General Kenan Evren - go through with their plan to take over, and announce the dissolution of the elected government and the enactment of martial law on public television. **General Evren becomes president**. He is succeeded in **1983 by Turgut Ozal**, whose efforts to entrust many public sector industries to the private sector is thought to have brought stability to the country's economy, curbing inflation and boosting employment.

1997 - **On February 28**, a coalition-government led by the Welfare Party - an Islamic party of which the current Turkish president Erdogan was a member - is obliged to accept the armed forces' "recommendations" - including a mandatory **eight-year education programme** to ensure that students don't attend religious schools, and **a ban on headscarves** at universities. Prime Minister **Necmettin Erbakan is removed from power**, and a year later, he is **slapped with a five-year ban** from politics. The Welfare Party is banned.

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<http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/turmoil-in-turkey/article8862659.ece>

<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/europe/A-brief-history-of-Turkeys-military-coups/articleshow/53242743.cms>

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/16/whats-happened-in-turkey-first-hours-of-the-coup>

<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/18/opinion/turkeys-coup-that-wasnt.html>