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1960 COUP D'ÉTAT: THE FIRST COUP IN TURKISH REPUBLIC

AKHAND SHARIF SURID*

* Researcher, Department of International Relations, Gazi University, Ankara, Turkey.

Email: nseries.surid@gmail.com

Abstract:

On May 27th the Republic of Turkey faced her first full-fledged Military takeover (Coup). As it is said, “A Coup is never just a Coup”. This review article provides a summary of the atmosphere before and after the coup of 1960 and a critical analysis of the democratic promises it brought. This Paper analyzes different terms used to identify the event such as revolution, insurrection, intervention, and coup. It also discusses the tradition of regular military intervention in the history of the Republic of Turkey. Since the transition to democracy and the multiparty system was not natural this paper also indicates the absence of democratic culture in Turkish history. After 27th May, Turkey was led to the new constitutional structure of 1961. As it is said, the 1924 Constitution that established the first Republic of Turkey was wiped out with a coup and the 1961 Constitution and the Second Republic was established (Dursun, 2005:187). Since then until recent times the military could not separate itself from the political life of Turkey. The following discussions enclose; the origin of the 1960 Coup, the Aftermath, the Conspiracies, the Civilian Military relationship, Traditional and Historical views, Kemalist Principles, Government citizen dialogs, and Socio-economic backwardness. This critical analysis went through different interesting and easily misunderstood concepts (such as Revolt, Revolution, Military takeover, etc.).

Key Words:

Kemalist Principles, 1960 Turkish Coup d'état, Democracy Dilemma, Traditional Militarism, NATO.

1. What is Coup d'état?

The term “Coup d'état”, originally means ‘blow of State’ in French. According to the popular definition: “A coup is a sudden and forcible seizure of government power through illegal and unconstitutional actions.” (Andrew, H, 2013). In general, Coup is the sudden overthrow of an existing government mostly occur in a violent way. The chief prerequisite for a coup is control of all or part of the armed forces, the police, and other military elements (Britanica, 2019).

The analysis is on the Republic of Turkey's first military coup, but before stamping the event as Revolt, Revolution or even as “A democracy act”, these conceptualizations need a pure ground to debate on. Revolt is generally used for failed coups, it is carried out by comparatively lower-ranking positions such as colonels. An uprising against the authority marking the disputes. Turkey's 1960 Coup was not certainly led by the high-ranked army generals and other military officers. Other than that it was mostly led by a group of low-ranking military officers. Which crystallized its way to revolt and thus the event can be discussed through multidimensional approaches. American political scientist Walter F Weiker in his book, “The Turkish Revolution 1960-1961: Aspects of Military Politics” mentioned that,

“The coup was carried out in an unhierarchical order. The high-ranking officers like Gürsel aimed to hand over the political rule to the civilians as soon as possible, whereas middle and low-ranking officers like Türkeş demanded a long period of time for the implementation of radical reforms. After the coup, several members of the Menderes government were charged with various crimes. The cabinet was appointed under the name of National Unity Committee.” (MBK) (Weiker, F, 1963, p. 129).

For a revolution, fundamental changes are obligatory and only if this mandatory requisite is fulfilled, coup d'état can be concluded as a revolution. A normal coup may bring some change in administrative structures but usually, some fundamental changes in society are missed. An ideal example would be the French Revolution; which cannot be considered as just a coup. After the 1960 Coup, the new constitution brought some enormous changes, e.g: separation of power policy was included, Labor Unions were permitted, National press, television, and Universities got their autonomy. Despite these many facts many who see secularism as the key to Turkish politics see the coup as a revolution. Many scholars from outside Turkey share the same views.

2. The 1960 Coup: “Democracy Dilemma”

Coup d'état is often seen as a democratic act, on the contrary coup can be offensive to democracy. As the Turkish military intervention in 1960 claimed to be the “savior of democracy” it somehow created a dilemma. Before applying the ‘scale of democracy’* the timeline of the multi-party period should be revisited. Turkey’s intelligent diplomacy and active neutrality saved her from entering into a new World War, but the aftermath of the war brought changes and pushed Turkey into a democratic regime. It is said that the victory of the democratic axis from World War II, the loss of Italy and Germany created pressure to be a democratic regime. To be a founder member of the United Nations and positioning Turkey in the new world order, in order to be a recipient of economic aid from the United States, and to take part in the new world order, Turkey conceded the international democratic system.

People’s Republican Party put an end to the single-party period and founded The Democratic Party (DP) in 1946, led by Adnan Menderes an Aegean farmer and Celal Bayar.

DP was elected and welcomed by the majority of the population. Many claims that most of the supporter was conservative peasants and rich businessmen with a good alliance with the government. After 1954, the Democratic Party was criticized for its undemocratic movements. In English and French-presses of that time, Democratic Party (Menderes government) was well known for its authoritarian, anti-democratic practices and for its religious policies.

On May 27th the military carried out a coup, immediately throw out the government and the prime minister and president were accused of treason. Later on, Menderes was executed by the junta. Daily Sabah, Turkish newspaper published the following feature about the unjustness process of trails held by the military junta. According to Walter F Weiker (an American specialist in Turkish politics and history),

“On 27 May 1960, one of the main justifications of the military to carry out the coup was the argument that the Menderes government had lost his democratic legitimacy.” (Weiker, F, 1963).

Daily Sabah, Turkish newspaper published the following feature about the unjustness process of trails held by the military junta:

“The arrested DP members were detained awaiting trial for a year. Meanwhile, newspapers published articles against Menderes and provoked inappropriate insults and claims in the public. DP members were treated badly in prison and court. Their right to defend themselves was limited. According to certain accounts, Menderes tried to commit suicide as he could no

longer endure the torture in prison. The court ruled for the death penalty for 15 defendants.” (Ekinci, E, 2016).

As it is mentioned before this coup brought the most democratic constitution of Turkish history, freed the national press and broadcasts. Universities gained autonomy. But it can also be seen as a legacy of the single-party era where newspapers, broadcastings, and universities were not completely free either. In Turkish political history, the 1960 coup is considered a triumph. Unlike 1971 and 1980 coup this coup has played a significant role in creating a new military status in both society and politics.

Generally in coup d'état a legitimacy is constructed by quickly scheduling an election soon after the group throws out the current government. But after some time, every military loses its legitimacy. Quite the reverse, in 1960 the military (via National union committee/ MBK) governed Turkey for one and half year. The basis for gaining legitimacy was the increasing authoritarianism of the DP government. During this long period of time, the committee brought the most democratic constitution of that time. By doing this the military secured their position against potential legal action towards them in the future. The military constituted the rights to practice executive and legislative powers under the 1961 constitution. As Feroz Ahmad quoted,

“...Nevertheless, contrary to such democratic steps, the 1961 constitution also created a new institution called the “National Security Council” (NSC), which paved the way for the military’s influence over the decision-making process in both the domestic and international realms.” (Feruz, A. 2003).

As, Republic of Turkey was founded by military elites and they had an active role in the modernization of Turkey. Since then Turkish Army has been function as a principal factor of the modernization process. This modernization process mainly includes democracy, yet engaging in such undemocratic ways to fulfill its duty of protecting the state (B. BURAK, 2011). Thus and so the promised democracy brought by TAF (Turkish Armed Force) created a democracy dilemma in Turkish Politics.

3. A Coup is Not Just a Coup: (Political, Traditional militarism, Structural, and Socio-economic analysis)

3.1 Political analysis: Democrats are the new Republicans

“All power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely.” – British proverb.

The elections of the early 1950s had granted Democrat party a substantial place in the national assembly. Democrat party's over-reliance on the power let the party suppress the oppositions. Feruz Ahmed describes the situation,

“The overwhelming electoral victories in 1950, and again in 1954, also helped the Democrats justify their attitude towards the opposition. They saw themselves as the representatives of the ‘national will’ to which they alone held themselves accountable. If they alienated the people then the people would let them know at the next election just as they had so convincingly informed the opposition. Though the Democrats professed to believe in democracy, their understanding of it was rather crude. They failed to shed the anti-democratic mentality of the mono-party period which brooked no opposition from any quarter, including from within the party itself.” (Feruz, A. 1993).

Other than the oppositions, the Menderes government suppressed the Press, the Universities who raised voice against the DP government. Turkish Military was under the suppression too. As Republicans still had potency over the military and DP government was afraid of a potential military coup.

Democrat Party did democratic practices too. As they, improved commerce and industry and gave importance to public works and mitigated the obstacles put on people who were religiously active. (E. EKINCI, 2016). They abolished the banning of Azan (prayer call). Democratic Party clearly had a conservative side.

For the rest, democratic practices were narrowed down. They introduced “University Law” which prohibited active or passive participation of university professors in political activities. National Party (Millet Partisi) which was founded in 1948 by ex-politicians of DP was banned in 1953. (Wikipedia, 2002)

At the end of their government, the Democratic Party shook the state establishment by adopting total oppressive policies. Moreover, the Democrat Party had challenged the secular character of Turkey and undermined some of the fundamental principles of Kemalism (republicanism, nationalism, populism, statism, secularism, and revolution). The 1957 election was also accused to be shifted earlier for Democrat Party's own interest. This too created a legitimacy ground for 1960 coup and these are some of the reasons Republicans and Western literature see the 1960 coup as a revolution.

3.2 Structural analysis: North Atlantic Treaty Organization

Many Turkish political analysts see the stress between the alliance of United States and Turkey like: Baghdad Pact (CENTO), NATO as one the principal cause of the coup. Issues

such as; Opium production and Economic aid increased the stress between relationship between United States and Turkey. Especially when it comes to opium smuggled into United States, It proposed several offers to completely ban opium production in Turkey. This request was forwarded to DP government at the CENTO meeting in Washington in 1959 and DP responded negatively. Turkey and U.S had an agreement of security cooperation (Turkish-American Agreement of Security Cooperation, 5th March, 1959) which allowed U.S. to react on any attack conducted directly or indirectly on Turkey. After the coup, a group of officers from the Turkish Armed Forces took and Prime Minister Adnan Menderes, Foreign Minister Fatin Rüştü Zorlu and Finance Minister Hasan Polatkan were executed. Unlike, United States European Union was very distressed from this event. EU disconnected Turkey temporarily from the negotiation process of EEC. While U.S continued a very tight grip with the military regime and kept on with the nuclear-tipped Jupiter missiles talk which was deployed in June 1, 1961. Surprisingly, during this process Turkey was governed by National Union Committee.

The military elites saw a decline in their traditional central roles during the DP government, which they enjoyed in the Republican People's Party government rule. Before 27 May 1960, attempts of the military officers were witnessed to intervene in politics. The incident of “Nine Military Officers” can be a good instance (Burak, B, 2011).

In her analysis of the 1960s coup, Begum B. has mentioned, “Apart from political reasons, the structure of the military played a key role in the emergence of the 1960 coup d’état. As known, in 1952, Turkey became a part of the NATO, and this membership made the military personnel become more aware of the economic and technological backwardness of the army. Briefly, it can be said that those years were times of change: the military staff had become much more aware of the armies of other NATO members and as noted above, this paved the way for making them realize how backward they were both in technological and financial terms. On the other hand, there was a significant transformation of Turkish society as domestic migration to cities was witnessed. Also, the victory of the DP rule and then its tendencies towards a more authoritarian line played a central role in destabilizing the country” (Begum, B., 2012).

3.3 Traditional militarism: “Every Turk is a born soldier”

Turkish literature is full of stories about “Gazis” and Martyrs. The society has an undeniable commitment to the military since the birth of the Turkish nation. In the last centuries of the Ottoman era where the empire was inferior to the West mainly in terms of military warfare.

The Sultans were convinced they could meet the western challenge through reforms especially the military reform. The last centuries of the Ottoman Empire the military went through extensive modernization which was based on secular and European sources whilst the Ottoman rulers held tight to the “Old” religious doctrine and traditional absolute monarchy. Over the years it created a gap between the new military and traditional system which continued until the emergence of the secular republic. Then when the Ottoman Empire collapsed the western secular educated officers remained standing. They took control and won the War of Independence, established a secular Republic under the leadership of Mustafa Kamal Atatürk. The TAF, traditionally, has been the only connection between the Ottoman Empire and the modern Turkish Republic. Any other institutions such as Bureaucracy, Education institutions for civilians, not even the press, but the Turkish Army survived.

Since the Westernization worked through the armed force and saved the country from destruction. They thought westernization might also work for society, diplomacy, and politics. While many historians argue the 1960 coup for ideological conflict. As Celal Bayar (Prime minister, DP) said,

“There were no ideological differences and that both parties were committed to the program of developing a modern and prosperous Turkey” (Omer, E, 2014).

It would be ignorant to skip the solid background of secularization and the “Gap” which was created during the last centuries of Ottomans and it was reopened during the Menderes Era. These are the key reasons for the 1960 coup.

3.4 Socio-Economic Analysis

The early years of DP government were flourishing despite its dependency on foreign aid, Turkey became the major crop exporter in Europe after the Second World War. It boosted the economy in the agricultural sectors. Democrat party thrived in the early 1950s. To quote the situation earlier in 1950s Omer E. stated in his work,

“During its first years in power, the DP delivered the services and improvements, which had been pledged before the 1950 election by the party. The new government took steps to liberalize the economy, mechanize agriculture, and subsidize the peasants. While subsidizing the peasants with money borrowed from foreign governments, especially the United States.” (Omer, E, 2014).

However, the worsening of the Turkish economy was another important reason for the formation of this coup. The economic crisis increased dramatically after 1954, difficulties in

supplying basic necessities and the devaluation of the Turkish Lira, as a result, the rise of the dollar against Turkish lira was from 2.8 to 9 at that moment.

Besides economic reasons, the anti-democratic initiatives of the ruling Democratic Party, such as the ‘Investigative Commission’ or the ‘Homeland Front’, have increased discontent both within the opposition, the university, and the military. The oppressions Democratic Party created, to silence the opposition based on its political power brought its own end.

4. Other Reasons

Rumors spread around 1959 Adnan Menderes being excited about the possibility of infiltration of communism into the Middle East and joining the anti-imperialist line with Egypt. Feroz Ahmad quoted the real situation, “President Eisenhower had lost all hope in the Menderes government and refused to bail him out (with economic aid). Menderes returned to Ankara empty-handed and disheartened. At that point, Menderes, hitherto a totally unrepentant Cold Warrior, decided to visit the Soviet Union the following July. This decision was all the more remarkable because, during the course of his US tour, he had constantly warned his American audiences not to be deceived by Soviet overtures for detente for such an enemy, he warned, was not to be trusted.” (Omer, E, 2014).

As we know during the cold war this kind of attitude was not tolerated. Thus many find a connection between the U.S.A and 1960 coup.

5. Conclusion & Evaluation

“Even the lowest form of a democratic regime is better than the highest form of the military regime” – old Turkish proverb.

Surprisingly after overthrowing the DP government, the Military regime was in administration for one and half year through the MBK (National Union Committee). It established a temporary constitutional order that changed many provisions of the 1924 constitution. According to this constitution, MBK has the rights over the Turkish Grand National Assembly. The committee shall exercise its legislative power in personal and executive power by ministers of its own choosing. MBK has the authority to supervise the ministers and to dismiss them at will. Which constituted a greater grip on the Republic of Turkey. It had its impacts on the 1970s and 1980s Coups and the postmodern coups of Turkey.

Certainly, at the end of the DP party, there was civil and military unrest but that does not justify a coup and the 1960 coup, aimed not just to be the “saviors” it created a “*shadow*

government” through the constitution. Later on, the military intervene the politics and secure themselves against any legal allegations. Neither the DP was totally against the Kemalist principles besides of its own conservative side. Other than just an ideological conflict this coup has multi-dimensional reasons and outcome. In this case, more than one dialectic approach is the best way to study the 1960 coup.

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