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Erdoğan's Coup: Purging Domestic Critics, Gaining External Allies

By Prof. James Petras

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“President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan prepared a list of targets for arrest even before the coup (sic) was launched”, European Commission official on Turkey (quoted in FT, 7/19/2016).

The coup in Turkey was made to order. A group of military officers and police officials were set-up to seize power by senior intelligence operatives in the Erdoğan regime. They were allowed to drop a few bombs, seize bridges and buildings before they were encircled, rounded-up and arrested using a list of targets for arrest prepared even before the so-called coup. In the midst of this fake coup, the ‘vacationing’ Erdoğan flies into Istanbul unharmed, of course, because his vacation resort was bombed after he had left. He seizes the mass media, denounces the coup, rouses the Muslim masses and sets about on a mass purge of Turkish society, concentrating on the civil service, teachers and administrators, the military, the courts and judges. Indeed every institution capable of independent action or reputedly critical of Erdoğan is closed. After a week over 60,000 people had been purged.

Why did Erdoğan resort to a coup?

Why did Erdoğan purge Turkish society?

What policies will follow Erdoğan's power grab?

Prelude to the Coup

Over the past 5 years Erdoğan has suffered a series of political, economic and diplomatic failures and defeats, seriously undermining his dictatorial and territorial ambitions. His air force shot down a Russian military jet operating within Syrian territory. The images of Turkish jihadi mercenaries murdering a Russian pilot as he parachuted to safety, as well as a member of the Russian rescue party, caused the Russian government to halt the multi-billion-dollar Russian tourism industry in Turkey and cancel lucrative business deals. He broke relations with Israel, which undercut a lucrative gas and oil offshore contract. His support for ISIS and other violent Salafist mercenary groups operating in Iraq and Syria provoked a rupture with Syria and Iran. His subsequent effort to disavow Turkey's links with ISIS led to a series of horrific terror bombings by jihadi cells implanted in the country. Turkey's diplomatic position in Egypt deteriorated as Erdoğan sought to maintain his ties with the Muslim Brotherhood after it had been ousted from power by a US sponsored Egyptian military coup.

Domestically, Erdoğan alienated the secular Kemalist military and civilian political-economic elite via trumped up trials and media purges. Erdoğan's heavy-handed assault on liberal and leftist protestors over environmental issues increased Western concern. His brutal handling of the labor protests following the 2014 Soma coalmine disaster, when over 300 workers were killed, further isolated him.

Erdoğan's war on the Kurdish independence movements in Turkey, Iraq and especially in Syria, where they were allied with the US against the jihadi terrorist ISIS, added to domestic unrest and international isolation.

In order to consolidate his executive power, Erdoğan had first allied with the extensive Gulenist-Islamist networks in Turkey in order to undermine the Kemalists and then he turned around to purge his former allies .

Faced with enemies and adversaries at home and overseas, Erdoğan decided on a dual strategy of improving his ties abroad, especially his links with Russia and Israel while launching a total war on domestic critics.

Fabricated Coup and the Permanent Purge

Erdoğan's intelligence operatives within the military command encouraged or even provoked his critics in the General Staff, who were fed up with his bungling and disastrous policies, to mount a coup. They gave the rebellious military sufficient space and resources to provide a semblance of authority while retaining strategic control over the air force and key ground troops. They may have feigned sympathy to the launching of a premature uprising ...doomed to defeat. Once the heavily infiltrated rebel units moved, the entire Erdoğan operation struck. Hapless conscripts

thought they had been called out for military exercises, only to find themselves encircled, arrested and even lynched. The dissidents were isolated, their advances paralyzed, their leaders incapacitated. Erdoğan's loyalist within the Turkish Air Force flew the triumphant president into the 'liberated' Istanbul International airport to the cheers of his adoring civilian supporters.

Erdoğan immediately decreed a massive purge – in the name of the fatherland. A real coup had indeed taken place – Erdoğan's total power grab. The entire political, military, judicial and police system was stripped of personnel within hours. There were over 20,000 arrests, beatings and disappearances. There were calls to re-introduce the death penalty.

Erdoğan's power grab eliminated key US assets among the Gulenist and eliminated independent Supreme Court officials and secular republican officials. The president was free to rebuild an entire civil, governmental and military apparatus with his own loyalists. His control over the media and the educational institutions was total.

Rule Under Erdoğan

Erdoğan's pre-emptive coup, purge and power grab will result in a monolithic state which Erdoğan will shape into his long-sought version of an Islamist regime. The new regime announced a 'State of Emergency', which places all Turks under strict compliance with Erdoğan's policies.

Erdoğan's "New Order" will launch large-scale operations against the Kurds, with no respect for the Syrian or Iraqi national borders. Erdoğan will ensure compliance with Islamist decrees designed to enforce conformity. He will succeed in imposing a dictatorial 'Presidential' regime. And parliament, if necessary will be bypassed; his 'electoral' mandate will be ensured.

In the immediate aftermath, mass detentions will strengthen the state – and Erdoğan's generals, allied religious authorities and street thugs will call the shots.

Unleashing force and violence against his domestic enemies, however, may lead to internal disputes among the new predators over the spoils of victory. The economic elite may accept the New Order, but only if and when Erdoğan tones down his rhetorical attacks on the US and the EU.

Erdoğan has yet to develop a strategy on replacing the purged ('Gulenist') professionals within the civilian economy and public bureaucracy – especially the schools and judiciary. The impetuous reversals of his reckless policy of confrontation with Russia, Syria, Israel, Iran, Iraq and the Kurds are likely to generate new layers of discontent, especially among his current military commanders.

Erdoğan's New Order arises from the breakdown of civil society and long-term alliances. He may remain in power in Ankara but he will be viewed as more of a local political thug than a partner among the regional big powers.

Erdoğan's external allies will exploit his isolation and radical bombast to forge lucrative alliances. Israel will push for favorable gas and oil deals; Russia will insist that Erdoğan abandons his ISIS allies. The US will demand he cease attacks on the Kurds. The EU will use the ongoing purge and re-institution of the death penalty to finally declare Turkey unfit to join the European Union. Bankers and foreign investors will wait for Erdoğan to stop his rampage over the financial sector and 'get serious' about the economy.

Erdoğan's dream of lifetime rulership presiding over an Islamic Neo-Ottoman caliphate, buttressed by street mobs, praetorian guards and crony capitalists makes for an unstable and unruly Turkey. Erdoğan's military loyalists have their own rivalries and ambitions. Now that Erdoğan has established his 'military road to power', he has set a clear precedent for other 'Erdoğan's' to take the same route.

In the short-run Erdoğan needs to restart the economy, stabilize the political system and establish a semblance of international order.

Erdoğan cannot and probably will not prolong tensions with the US over the Gulen affair. Gulen will remain in Pennsylvania, in the CIA's 'regime change' pocket. Meanwhile, he has eliminated most of the Gulenist agents capable of working with the US as a fifth-column. The question is whether he now moves back to his role as a 'valued' NATO junior partner, or if he will launch an intensified war against the US's strategic Kurdish allies?

Erdoğan's ties with Russia are precarious. There is no reason for the Russians to trust him. He has fallen somewhere between the need for reconciliation with Russia and the desire to continue his proxy war against the government of Syria.

In the end Erdoğan may have secured power and undertaken a vast domestic purge of his enemies, but he has lost the regional war while bearing the consequences of millions of war refugees and a deeply entrenched jihadi terrorist threat within Turkey.