

Opinion

Turkey's Purge of Political Opponents Will Come Back to Haunt It

Despite a show of almost unprecedented unity at a recent rally – and newfound Turkish nationalism following July's bloody coup attempt – the purges hark back to a bleak pattern in Turkey's past.



Louis Fishman | Aug 09, 2016



Millions gather at Yenikapi during a rally against the failed military coup of July 15 in Istanbul, Turkey, August 7, 2016. Turkey's Presidential Press Service via AFP

- Erdogan stages mass rally in show of strength after failed coup
- The failed putsch in Turkey put the last nail in Ataturk's coffin
- Amnesty International reports 'credible evidence' Turkey torturing post-coup detainees

Will July 15, 2016 go down in history as the day Turkey tried to wipe the slate clean?

Just three weeks after Turkey was shaken by a bloody coup attempt, the nation on Sunday came together in a mass show of unity. According to Turkish sources, at least 3 million people joined

together in Istanbul's Yenikapi district to celebrate the nation's democracy and to remember the more than 250 people killed by the ruthless putschists.

The massive rally will go down in history not merely due to the sheer numbers of citizens from different backgrounds who attended, but due to the fact that it managed to bring together warring parties, the ruling AKP government and its staunch adversary, the secular CHP, in addition to the smaller nationalist MHP. Seeing the CHPs Kemal Kilicdaroglu speaking at the same rally as the nation's president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, for many, was an unbelievable moment.

This newfound unity has emerged as all parties in the parliament, including the mostly Kurdish leftist party, the HDP, which was not invited to the government rally, have come to a consensus that the U.S.-based, self-exiled religious leader Fetullah Gulen—who ordered his secret followers in the army to overthrow the democratically elected government—was behind the coup.



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan thanks millions of his supporters at the 'Democracy and Martyrs' Rally' in Istanbul on August 7, 2016. Kayhan Ozer, AP

This newfound unity, which is currently riding a wave of Turkish nationalism, also has many people asking if the days of extreme political and social polarization in the country might be a thing of the past, and whether this marks the dawn of a new day in Turkey. Certainly, the new hope we are seeing is a welcome change and a major step in the right direction. Unfortunately, at the same time, the mass purges that followed the failed coup attempt do not seem to be forging a new future for Turkey, but rather hark back to its much bleaker past.

Since July 15, and since the subsequent three-month-long state of emergency was declared, the Turkish government has set out to eradicate Gulen followers from all civil and military sectors. Almost 15,000 have been detained, and the number of sacked workers is staggering: around 50,000. In addition, hundreds of university deans have been forced to resign and thousands of schools have been closed, along with universities affiliated with the Gulen movement. In

addition, newspapers and radios have been shut down, and dozens of journalists have been arrested. If all this was not enough, reports have emerged of widespread torture of detainees.

There is no doubt that the government is responsible for protecting itself and its citizens from illegal organizations out to undermine it, which justifies some of the state's measures, but at the same time the net is being thrown wide and infringing on the rights of many individual citizens who had nothing whatsoever to do with the coup.

The current purge follows a dangerous pattern that is well known in Turkey. From the first days of the Turkish Republic to the coups of 1960, 1971 and 1980, Turkey has found itself in vicious circle of purges and paybacks. One of the most recent followed the 1997 “post-modern” coup d’etat, which set out to cleanse the country of political Islam in the parliament and its influence within the ranks of the military and bureaucracy. As a result, politicians such as Erdogan, then Istanbul’s mayor, found themselves behind bars, together with Gulenists, who were also locked up or lost their employment. It was around this time, in 1999, that Gulen left Turkey in self-exile.



Protesters hold a plane model with an attached toy depicting Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen during a massive anti-coup rally in Istanbul, Turkey, August 7, 2016. | Umit Bektas, Reuters

The AKP, which came to power in 2002, was founded as a direct response to the 1997 purge; it cemented a coalition of religious politicians, including Gulenists, and liberal ones, who challenged the military’s role in Turkish society. However, despite the overwhelming power of the AKP over the state’s institutions, the ruling party continued the tradition of “paybacks,” targeting those who they deemed responsible for the purge against them in 1997—the same ones believed to be responsible for crimes of the deep state—that become known as the Ergenekon trials.

These trials led to the arrests of hundreds of high-ranking military personnel and civilians, including journalists, who were accused of plotting to overthrow the AKP government. In 2013, 275 suspects, including the former Chief of Staff, Ilker Basbug, were sentenced to long jail terms

(many for life), in trials that lacked transparency and were built on fabricated evidence. In fact, even if there was a kernel of truth to some of the claims against those arrested, that truth was lost very quickly among the obvious injustices.

This leads us to today, and the current purge against the Gulenists, which is an acceleration of a slow-burn purge that began over two years ago after a falling out between Gulenists and Erdogan's AKP. In 2014, a group of Gulenists occupying key positions in the judiciary challenged the government head on with the December 17, 2014 indictments of AKP members for massive corruption, leading all the way to Erdogan's family; for him, this was nothing short of a staged coup. Following this, Erdogan distanced himself from the Ergenekon trials, claiming that the Gulenists had duped him into believing that the convicts were indeed guilty of their crimes. Within a year, after a new trial, most of the convicted members of Ergenekon had been freed through the well-known revolving door of Turkish prisons (gaining Erdogan hefty political leverage among some of those released).

Using the Ergenekon trials as a vantage point, it is much easier to understand today's purges. In fact, it is no surprise which journalists have been arrested: those affiliated with the Gulen movement, or others who used Gulen media outlets to voice their staunch opposition to Erdogan. It is also unsurprising that many people who often staunchly oppose Erdogan's rule remain silent in the face of the current purges, under the pretext: When our colleagues were being arrested during the Ergenekon trials, where were those writing for Gulen's media outlets who justified the arrests of innocent journalists? The same holds true for academics. Where much noise has been made over leftist academics imprisoned recently for signing a pro-peace petition, a relative silence reigns over the arrest of academics for Gulenist affiliations.

Unfortunately, just as with the Ergenekon trials, the recent foiled coup attempt also seems to lack a clear narrative. It is unlikely that Gulenists in the army acted alone, however, in the name of unity, and to "get" the Gulenists once and for all, it seems that all the major political parties, government and opposition alike, are glossing over this.

Like past purges, it is unlikely that the rule of law will be upheld, and it is safe to say that many innocent people have already become victims of Turkey's vicious historical circle. As with the Ergenekon trials, it will be almost impossible to keep track of those detained, arrested or put on trial. What we are seeing is a high-octane settling of accounts with the Gulen movement that has managed to anathematize more opponents than it can handle.

Turkey's payback-purge pattern, especially in its current and extreme form, will not solve the country's greater problems; it will not bring justice to those killed fighting for democracy, and it certainly does not bode well for Turkey over the long run. Rather, it only shows Turkey regressing to past behaviors—and just as previous mass purges have only come back to haunt the country, so will these.

If Turkey wants to take the high road and show that July 15 is indeed a new beginning for the country, it can do so only by making sure everyone who is responsible for this heinous crime is convicted to the fullest extent, and that innocent people, regardless of their affiliation with the Gulen movement, be afforded legal recourse and self-dignity. This also pertains to those liberals who opted to use Gulen media outlets to attack the government, and who, like those mentioned above, have nothing to do with the disgusting July 15 attack staged against Turkey.