

# Why We'll Never Get a Full Accounting of Turkey's Failed Coup

Louis Fishman Jul 17, 2016 11:20 PM

*It was a wild, confusing night of gunfire, unscheduled calls to prayer and sonic booms in Istanbul. But with an nontransparent government, a media that's state controlled or under pressure, and wide-scale purges, Erdogan's narrative will be hard to challenge.*



On Friday night just after 10pm my cellphone started buzzing and the deluge of WhatsApp messages started. "Go home immediately!" After that: "Turkey is in the midst of a coup d'état!"

Rumors had already started taking off on Twitter that the Bosphorus Bridge connecting Istanbul's European and Asian sides had been blocked and that tanks had taken to the streets. Some of the reports seemed exaggerated: A coup was underway? Others reported that it was extreme measures taken to secure the city in the wake of fears of another possible terror attack. That same day there had already been a number of false alarms in a country already on edge after the ISIS attack on Istanbul's Ataturk airport just weeks before, which left almost 50 people dead.

It took no time at all for the Twitter rumors to spread like wildfire. Reports were emerging from Ankara that jet fighters were racing through the sky nonstop. Something was happening, but a coup? Was this really possible?

About two hours later, it seemed Turkey had been brought back to 1980, when the army briefly overran the state television channel TRT, which has functioned in the last few years as a mouthpiece for the Turkish government. This time, after a brief hiatus, the TV anchor came back on air to read the official coup statement, announcing that the “Turkish Armed Forces have completely taken over the administration of the country to reinstate constitutional order, human rights and freedoms, the rule of law and general security that have been damaged.”

This confirmation propelled residents of my Istanbul neighborhood out to get water and food, and for many others to line up at ATMs to withdraw money. For many in Turkey, this behavior was already hardwired as a coup survival instinct. Either citizens remembered first hand from the coups of 1960, 1971, 1980 (and the “post-modern coup” of 1997 that played out differently), or — for the younger generation who hadn't themselves lived through a similar scenario — they remembered the lessons of stories endlessly retold by their parents' generation and, in any case, were receiving enough advice through SMSs and social media to know what to do.

While chatter was emerging of how the country could be ruled by a “Peace Council,” and who was behind the attempted overthrow of the government, Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan ( love him or hate him) quickly pulled the carpet from out under their feet, not disappointing his supporters for a second. Having left his vacation on Turkey's southern coast he appeared on no less than ten television channels live via FaceTime. Back in the coup of 1980, Turkey only had one television station; channels have multiplied since then, including several 24-hour news channels and other that wear their support for Erdogan on their sleeve.

On air, Erdogan confirmed the coup attempt, and reiterated PM Binali Yildirim's words that the coup plotters would pay a heavy price. More importantly, Erdogan called on Turkish citizens to take to the streets, fill the squares, and make their way to the airport, where the army had rolled out its tanks. Within hours Erdogan himself landed there, once the masses had indeed forced the army to pull out: He was back in control. Erdogan supporters also heeded his call to take back the streets and challenged the army's presence in different parts of the city.

From the moment the unrest started, Erdogan, Yildirim and other government ministers reassured their constituency, and the opposition, that they were in control, providing no room for any discussion of a possibility of a coup. At the same time, the coup plotters seemed unorganized and ill-prepared, unable to sustain control of state television. The coup participants' somewhat embarrassing takeover of the Dogan Media's building, which brought CNN Turk's live television broadcast to a halt, led to their arrest shortly after.

Through the night in Istanbul we heard continuous gunfire mixed together with mosques that blared unscheduled prayers over their loudspeakers, anti-coup

demonstrators shouting, and massive sonic booms, which many mistook for explosions.

However, if Istanbul was bad, Ankara was much worse: The live TV streams showed the parliament being bombed by a helicopter and fighter jets. Civilians protesting the army's presence were at times being shot at with live ammunition; in one sequence we could see a helicopter shooting at a crowd from the sky.

I finally crashed out at 5:30 am, as sonic booms shook the house. I woke up a few hours later to the news that the soldiers controlling the Bosphorus Bridge had surrendered, and only vestigial clashes remained in Ankara.

The coup had failed, and it did so radically. However, it came at a high cost for Turkey. Its citizens have been left in a literal state of shock. Not only were anti-coup protesters (defending the state's democratically-elected government) shot by some soldiers, but some of the protesters lynched soldiers, leaving dead on both sides. For many Turkish citizens this is what they feared most: Turkish citizens fighting each other on the streets of its cities.

Only 12 hours after the last coup plotter fired on the building from an F-16, Turkey's Parliament was the scene of a moment of hope. In a rare moment of unity, all the political parties joined together in solidarity against the attempted coup, all calling for democracy. Despite the fact that the general public played a major role in challenging the coup, suggesting the diminishing likelihood of such an upheaval in the future, the polarization in the Turkish state has only grown stronger.

Turkey's government can certainly claim a major victory. Its supporters own the city squares where there were scenes of intense celebration. However the coup is also an object lesson for how unstable the country has become. Turkey has seen an immense amount of civil strife this year; the hundreds who died in this week's failed coup attempt will be added to a very long list of people who have died in recent terrorist attack and political violence.

In a country where there is no accountability or transparency, where most of the domestic press is in the hands of the government, while other media outlets are under immense pressures to minimize the extent and critical tone of their reporting, it is highly unlikely that we will ever get the real picture of what happened before, during and after the coup-that-wasn't.

It's great news the coup did not succeed. What's more worrying is that the events, though shocking, fail to engender much surprise: During the last three years the country has been in constant crisis and following the attempted coup, and subsequent purge, it seems ripe for even more internal strife.