



A Brief History of Coups in Modern Turkey (1960 – 2007)

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THE 1960 COUP

The Pre-Coup Political Climate

Adnan Menderes' Democrat Party (DP) was a populist, center-right party that espoused moderately Islamic and free market values. Under Menderes, the party had grown increasingly authoritarian, openly religious, and willing to engage with the USSR – none of which pleased a military that saw itself as the vanguard of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's legacy.

The Coup

On May 27, 1960, a radio broadcast went out announcing that a military takeover had taken place overnight. The officers had spent years planning the coup. They deliberately sought out a figurehead to buttress their legitimacy, and in May, General Cemal Gursel – popular among the rank-and-file – agreed to participate. Once the coup had occurred, Gursel was appointed head of state, prime minister, minister of defense, and head of the newly-created National Unity Committee (NUC), which was made up of about 40 officers.

The Post-Coup Political Climate

While the armed forces claimed the coup was nonpartisan, the takeover's national reception indicated otherwise. It was received with jubilation in Ankara and Istanbul, particularly among the intellectual and student classes, but it was much less well-received in the rest of the country.

The NUC moved quickly to establish its hold. On August 31, the ruling DP was suspended and later dissolved. Prime Minister Menderes and two other high-ranking DP officials were tried and executed in September 1961. The NUC also issued a decision in August 1960 that forced 235 of 260 generals and 5,000 colonels and majors to retire. In October, 147 university professors and lecturers were fired. Nationwide, rectors of Turkish universities resigned in protest; the government later reversed the academic sackings in March 1962. During these purges, the NUC itself struggled with infighting. A power struggle within the committee resulted in the November 1960 expulsion of a hardline, conservative, nationalist faction led by Alparslan Türkeş.

As the junta sought to restore civilian rule, a small group of law professors was tasked with aiding the NUC in drawing up a provisional constitution. Eventually, a larger group (which included politicians from non-DP political parties) was brought in to consult on its drafting. Under the new, proposed constitution, a senate and an independent constitutional court were established. A National Security Council (NSC) was also set up, to be composed of military figures. The new document offered Turkish citizens more opportunity and scope for political activity and expression.

In January 1961, the ban on political activity was lifted. On July 9 of that year, a referendum was held on the newly written constitution; it passed with a meager – given the massive government propaganda campaign in its favor – 61.7% of the vote. The October parliamentary elections sent another signal to the armed forces when parties composed of erstwhile DP elements received 48.6% of the vote.

U.S.-Turkey Relations Following the Coup

After being assured of the putschists' amity for the U.S. and their commitment to NATO, Washington officially recognized the junta on May 30. While the U.S. had enjoyed a relatively fruitful relationship with the Menderes regime, there were a few reasons for their quiescence in the face of the military takeover. For one, Menderes had helped foster an increasingly toxic and repressive domestic political atmosphere in the last years of his government. To make matters worse, his regime had become prone to economic mismanagement, including with U.S. aid packages. Finally, Menderes' flirtation with the USSR during the height of the Cold War frustrated U.S. leadership.

THE 1971 COUP: A "COUP BY MEMORANDUM"

The Pre-Coup Political Climate

Socio-economic woes and deep polarization among civil society intensified throughout the 1960's, resulting in a rash of street violence. Some leftist groups born out of the burgeoning industrial proletariat and student classes began resorting to violent demonstrations and political assassinations. By the late 1960's, right wing groups increasingly relied on violent tactics as well, spearheaded by Turkey's Grey Wolves, a right-wing paramilitary organization. Defections from Prime Minister Suleyman Demirel's ruling Justice Party (JP) sapped its ability to pass legislation, and coupled with the JP's overall ineffectiveness at curbing street violence, the military decided to intervene.

The Coup

On March 12, 1971, a memorandum was handed to Demirel by Chief of the General Staff Memduh Tagmac. It demanded the formation of a stronger government that could end the current state of "anarchy" and do so by embracing the "Kemalist spirit." Disobeying the request would result in the armed forces' exercising of "its constitutional duty" – the seizing of power. [1] Prime Minister Demirel promptly resigned.

The Post-Coup Political Climate

The armed forces high command installed Nihat Erim, a more conservative member of the CHP, as prime minister. A technocratic cabinet was subsequently assembled, and a more progressive, statist economic reform package was put forward. While many on the left hoped that the coup would resemble its liberalizing 1960 iteration, they were ultimately disappointed. The high command viewed communism as the most pressing of Turkey's threats, and as a result, it was the left that was primarily targeted in the ensuing crackdown. Martial law was imposed in provinces that contained major urban areas, and the military carried out mass campaigns of arrests, primarily of leftists and progressives.

U.S.-Turkey Relations Following the Coup

The years preceding the coup had been marked by high levels of anti-American sentiment, which had culminated in the kidnapping of four American airmen by leftists on March 4, 1971. Moreover, a politically wounded Demirel was unable to acquiesce to American pressure that the growing of poppies be outlawed – western Anatolia had become a major source for an American opium and heroin epidemic. Given these developments, in addition to the general lack of stability in the country, the U.S. put up little fuss once the takeover occurred. Cold War considerations came first, and a stable, right-leaning Turkey was better for American interests.

THE 1980 COUP

The Pre-Coup Political Climate

By the late 1970's, political violence was again a massive problem. Fascist organizations like the Grey Wolves and leftist student groups battled for control of streets, campuses, and neighborhoods. A 1977 Istanbul shooting that left 39 dead, the

establishment of the PKK, a 1978 massacre of Alevites in Kahramanmaraş, and several high profile political assassinations contributed to the sense of national crisis. The violence took place in a broader context of calamity; this period was marked by parliamentary paralysis, a growing Islamic fundamentalist movement, and economic dysfunction.

The Coup

On September 12, 1980, at 4:30 in the morning, a communique was released by the armed forces. It stated that they had taken political power, that parliament had been dissolved, and that parliamentary immunity had been lifted. All political parties were suspended and their leaders arrested. Martial law was imposed throughout the country. Power was concentrated in the hands of the NSC, and the coup's leader, General Kenan Evren, was appointed head of state on September 14.

The Post-Coup Political Climate

A cabinet of apolitical figures was appointed by the NSC and was headed by retired admiral Bulent Ulusu. The NSC and provincial commanders exercised wide powers at the national and local levels. News outlets were closed, and two rounds of academic purges left hundreds without jobs. Most of the previously arrested political leaders were released in October 1980, but they – and all other politicians active before 1980 – were banned from politics for ten years.

This was the most violent and repressive of Turkey's coups. By the end of 1980, 30,000 people had been arrested; within a year of the coup's beginning, 122,600 arrests had been carried out. Again, the bulk of arrests were of Turkish citizens with perceived left-leaning ideological beliefs. Most cases were tried before military courts; torture was widespread; tens of thousands were sentenced to lengthy jail terms; and 20 defendants were ultimately executed. Amidst this fierce crackdown, political violence ground to a halt.

Much like in 1960, a consultative body was assembled to draw up a new constitution. Unlike in 1960, the new constitution curtailed personal liberties. The NSC was given increased powers, and a temporary article was included that elevated Evren to the presidency. The constitution was put to a national referendum in which voting was compulsory. The referendum passed with an overwhelming majority (criticism of the document was decreed illegal in the run-up to the vote).

A few months after the referendum's 1982 passage, the formation of political parties was allowed. Because of the previously mentioned ban on career politicians' involvement and the military's rejection of applications from clear successors to historically powerful parties, a new party landscape took shape. Turgut Ozal's Motherland Party won the subsequent 1983 parliamentary elections by building a coalition of nationalists, religious fundamentalists, and middle-class Anatolians.

U.S.-Turkey Relations Following the Coup

Like in 1971, Cold War considerations colored Washington's reaction. The American response was largely muted; they were content to overlook human rights abuses by the military regime if it meant Turkey's continued cooperation on security issues and anti-communist efforts.

THE 1997 COUP: "THE POSTMODERN COUP" (Known as the February 28 Coup)

The Pre-Coup Political Climate

Necmettin Erbakan's Welfare Party, a conservative, Islamic political party, took power in 1996. They ruled in coalition with Tansu Ciller's True Path Party. While the accession to power by an openly Islamic party was greeted with consternation by elites, years of political deadlock meant much of the public was more open to different solutions than in years past. To head off some of these concerns, the Welfare Party (WP) moved cautiously once in power – abandoning some of their more strident policies – and they increased their vote share in the 1996 by-elections.

The Coup

While the armed forces initially tolerated the status quo, in early 1997, the military confronted the cabinet with a list of demands. These demands were intended to stymie a perceived growth in Islamic influence across the state's economic, educational, and bureaucratic systems. Under tremendous pressure, the cabinet accepted the "recommendations," yet declined to implement the demands. The situation escalated as WP members and generals insulted each other publicly. The generals began a campaign to drum up opposition against "the fundamentalist threat," and as pressure mounted, Ciller's True Path Party began hemorrhaging members. [2] On June 19, Erbakan resigned.

The Post-Coup Political Climate

A coalition government headed by Mesut Yilmaz was charged with implementing the demands, and both Erbakan and the WP were banned from politics shortly thereafter. Current President Recep Tayyip Erdogan was a member of the WP, and his Justice and Development Party (known by its Turkish initials, AKP) – which was more measured on Islamic values and more pro-capitalist than the WP – later swept to victory in the 2002 national elections.

U.S.-Turkey Relations Following the Coup

The Clinton administration denounced the military's meddling more forcefully than had previous administrations. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright declared that changes in Turkey's government should occur "within a democratic context and with no extra-constitutional approach." [3] Nevertheless, she had a few months prior expressed concern with Turkey's "drift" away from secularism, and there was ultimately little concrete blowback from the U.S. government. [4]

THE 2007 COUP ATTEMPT: THE "E-MEMORANDUM"

The Pre-Coup Attempt Political Climate

As President Ahmet Necdet Sezer's term reached its conclusion, the AKP nominated Abdullah Gul as their candidate for the presidency. By this time, the AKP had established itself as the most politically powerful party in Turkey. With the party controlling a majority of parliamentary seats, Gul's elevation to the presidency looked likely.

The Coup

On April 27, 2007, the Turkish Armed Forces released an online statement that demanded "secularism not just in words but in deeds" and threatened "action... whenever it is necessary." [5] The statement was supposedly motivated by the fact that Gul's wife wore a headscarf, a particularly sensitive detail due the presidency's historic reputation as the trustee of secularism in Turkey. While the email was reminiscent of the 1997 coup, then-Prime Minister Erdogan did not back down. After an initial parliamentary vote failed for procedural reasons, a snap election was called. In July, the AKP won 47% of the vote, and later, with the help of the far-right Nationalist Movement Party, Gul was successfully elected President. The military ultimately took no action despite its earlier statement.

The Post-Coup Attempt Political Climate

To some extent, anti-military sentiment in the wake of the April 'e-memorandum' was what drove the AKP's electoral success in the July general election. The military's inaction and Gul's eventual victory bolstered the AKP's confidence and allowed them to undermine the armed forces' reputation as Turkey's most powerful institution.

U.S.-Turkey Relations Following the Coup Attempt

The U.S. was critical of the military's actions in this instance. Several State Department officials warned the Turkish military against intervention. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice also publicly agreed with the EU's call for the military to refrain from political involvement. Following Gul's victory, President Bush called him to congratulate him on his win.

Sources

[1] Zurcher, E. (2003). *Turkey: A modern history*. London: I.B. Tauris, p. 258.

[2] Zurcher (2003), p. 301.

[3] Couturier, K. (1997, June 19). Turkish Premier quits under army pressure. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1997/06/19/turkish-premier-quits-under-army-pressure/97318adf-9c58-45c6-8a31-d3aeaa9f8502/?utm_term=.982a208d86d1

[4] Albright says U.S. not happy about Turkey's Islamic drift. (1997, February 12.) *CNN*. Retrieved from <http://edition.cnn.com/WORLD/9702/12/turkey/>

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