

## **TURKEY AND ITS PEOPLE IN POST-COUP ATTEMPT REALITIES**

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**July 26, 2016**

**Ottawa**

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First, permit me to state my admiration for Turkey and its people. With its now 80 million population, Turkey has long been admired internationally for its vibrant economy in a Muslim-majority democracy. Under its founder Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, Turks created a strong nation and showed a way to independence in harmony with neighbours. The rule of law, NATO membership, almost universal literacy and a state without any official religion became keystones of modern Turkey.

Like many, I was impressed by Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his then moderate Justice and Development (AK) Party in their early years as the national government. The AK represented the devout portion of the population, but he began his prime ministership in the best Ataturk tradition. Erdogan was elected mayor of Istanbul (1994-98), prime minister (2003- 2014) and finally president in 2014. His early successes included winding down a 30-year conflict with Turkey's 15-million-strong Kurdish minority, which had cost 40,000 lives, and accepting 700,000 refugees from the killing fields and cities of Assad's Syria.

Erdogan has since undermined Turkey's democratic institutions and basic rights of its citizens. In late 2013, for example, when a corruption scandal broke involving the cabinet, no-one was charged. Numerous judges, prosecutors and police were quickly reassigned. By the end of 2014, as Turkey's newly-elected president, he had imposed more than 20 blackouts on important news issues. As of March last year, 22 journalists were in jail and more than 61 had been found guilty of defamation against him.

In the June 2015 national election, which focused on combatting corruption, the Kurdish People's Democracy Party (HDP) won 12 percent of Turks' votes and cost Erdogan's AK its parliamentary majority. Opposition parties attempted to form a coalition government, but failed, allowing Erdogan to call a snap election. On November 1, 2015 he won an absolute majority from voters upset with Turkish Kurds and the PKK, allowing him to change the constitution to establish a presidency without checks or balances.

In August, 2015, I felt compelled to write that Erdogan's "cynical manoeuvres were weakening the fight against ISIS". By then, according to a UN report, in Iraq alone the ISIS conflict has killed almost 15,000 civilians and wounded 30,000 others during a 16-month period. More than 2.8 million people remained displaced within the country, including 1.3 million children. Some ISIS acts appeared to amount to war crimes, crimes against humanity, and possibly genocide. On March 17 this year, for the second time in American history, secretary of state John Kerry officially designated that Christians, as well as Yazidis and Shi'a Muslims, are suffering genocide at the hands of ISIS.

Erdogan's government appears to have assisted ISIS in various ways, including providing a logistical, economic and political base in Turkey. An estimated 25,000 foreign combatants joined ISIS in Iraq and Syria through Turkey. ISIS was in 2015 enriched by \$1-4 million daily because most of the oil it received

was smuggled through Turkey. The respected *Guardian* newspaper (UK) reported that ISIS computers seized by US commandos in Syria contain irrefutable evidence of collusion with the Turkish government.

Tragically, by assisting the inhuman ISIS to replace al-Qaida as the Sunni jihadists in Syria, Erdogan has upped the local ISIS uprising into a full-scale war between Sunnis and Shiites. Obama and NATO went along with his wishes, agreeing that the coalition would henceforth support only Turkey and withdraw much-needed support from the effective and courageous Kurds.

Graham Fuller, the American author of numerous books on the Muslim world, wrote on July 20th: "... if Erdogan had retired from politics in 2011 with all the party's accomplishments he would certainly go down in history as the greatest prime minister in the history of democratic Turkey. But, as with so many leaders, after a decade in power corruption sets in, leaders lose their touch, grow isolated, even power-hungry. Erdogan is now in the process of destroying virtually everything his party created in the first decade of governance. His sweeping purges and the pall of fear and uncertainty is destroying Turkey itself."

### **Attempted Coup and Aftermath**

The full details about the attempted coup might never be fully known and no-one should purport to give a definitive account today. There does appear to be general agreement that a group of mid-ranking Turkish soldiers attempted a coup on Friday, July 15, seizing control of the Parliament in Ankara and Istanbul's bridges, airports and some police stations. The public and police courageously soon overpowered the attempt to overthrow Turkish democracy.

In the days afterwards, 3,000 soldiers and 2800 judges-of all people-were arrested. Today, the situation has escalated and is deeply disconcerting. Dozens of the officials who appoint judges and prosecutors were arrested, along with dozens of appeal court justices. Erdogan's government then announced it would close 600 private schools, after firing more than 20,000 public sector teachers, and is planning to revoke the licenses of 21,000 other private school teachers. It has also detained 9,000 military personnel, including more than 100 generals. All in all, more than seventy thousand people are reported to have been arrested. Detainees are being refused food, rape is occurring in prisons, prisoners are kept bound and denied access to their lawyers and families. Davud Hanci, a Canadian of origin in Turkey, went On July 23, the *Calgary Herald* reported that there to visit his ailing father and remains detained.

### **Trudeau Government Response**

The Trudeau government correctly expressed concern over Erdogan's imposition of a three-month state of emergency and reports that it might reintroduce the death penalty. Justin Trudeau said last Wednesday, "We are preoccupied at the same time that democratic institutions and the constitution of Turkey be respected, and that the rule of law continues...We need to make sure that all those who will be arrested related to his coup will have the opportunity to defend themselves in a robust and legitimate trial. And those are preoccupations that we've communicated to the Turks..."

At a joint news conference in Washington, Foreign Minister Stephane Dion and Secretary of State John Kerry both addressed claims from Erdogan that Fethullah Gulen in exile in the U.S. masterminded the coup attempt: "About the Gulen movement ... we have received requests before the coup and after from the government of Turkey about the movement that is existing in Canada, and we have asked for evidence because otherwise the Canadian justice system cannot address an issue on the basis of allegations," Dion explained. I understand that Mr. Gulen would be pleased to have an international inquiry, including participants from Canada, look into the causes of the attempted coup. He will gladly accept the conclusions.

The Canadian Association of University Teachers sent a letter to the Turkish embassy in Ottawa, calling for an end to a crackdown on educators, and the reinstatement of all those fired. "The sheer number of

arrests and suspensions in recent days is nothing short of alarming, and suggests that purges are now being used to censor anyone, including academics, who is critical of the government," wrote David Robinson, the association's executive director.

### **Conclusion**

*The Economist* magazine in its lead editorial, "Erdogan's revenge" (Jul 23-29), praises Turks for coming out onto the streets to denounce the assault on democracy: "The second, more alarming conclusion is that Mr Erdogan is fast destroying the very democracy that the people defended with their lives...The failed putsch may well become the third shock to Europe's post-1989 order. Russia's annexation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine in 2014 destroyed the idea that Europe's borders were fixed and that the cold war was over. The Brexit referendum last month shattered the notion of ineluctable integration in the European Union. Now the coup attempt in Turkey, and the reaction to it, raise troubling questions about the reversibility of democracy within the Western world—which Turkey, though on its fringe, once seemed destined to join."

It is difficult for now to be optimistic about Turkey. The state of emergency jeopardizes democracy by granting additional power to a presidency, which already lacks checks and balances. We Canadians, Americans, Europeans and all other friends of Turkey across the world must urge its immediate return to the rule of law.