

Turkey on the brink

BY BUNN NAGARA



For the president: Erdogan supporters waving Turkish flags as they gather at Taksim square during a rally in Istanbul following the failed military coup attempt of July 15. — AFP

While Erdogan gives the impression of heroically defeating a coup attempt, the underlying political differences have become harder to resolve and remain a growing problem.

WHEN some tanks rumbled on the streets and air force jets screeched across the skies on behalf of Turkish rebel units nine days ago, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government seemed caught by surprise.

As in most coups and attempted coups, the government that had become the target of rebels was not supposed to know about it until it happened. Erdogan himself was conveniently away in the holiday resort of Marmaris.

Yet, by the time Erdogan had rushed back to Ankara, he and his officials were in no doubt about what happened.

It was all a plot by only a small group of junior military officers, they said. Somehow, these few officers could mobilise armoured units and fighter aircraft in an operation that would jeopardise their careers and lives.

Soon after that, it was said to be a plot hatched by Erdogan's exiled 75-year-old critic Fethullah Gulen living in Pennsylvania, US. Government officials then demanded that the US extradite Gulen, whom they had been meaning to get for years.

In Erdogan's flight back to Ankara, his business jet was said to be pursued by two air force jets. But somehow they did not intercept or threaten his aircraft.

Then, almost an hour after widespread news reports of Erdogan having landed in Ankara, helicopter units allegedly operated by rebels attacked his hotel in Marmaris in an attempt to eliminate him.

After some shots at the national intelligence headquarters and an explosion or two in front of parliament that did not harm anyone, it was suddenly over. Government forces had regained control.

In those few hours of uncertainty, more than 160 people had been killed and some 1,500 others injured. But observers noted that no government leaders had been taken hostage, harmed or

arrested, the coup plotters did not issue a list of demands and pro-government media continued to broadcast live throughout.

And the attempt at a coup failed, remaining only an attempt. Cynical Turks said the army knows how to stage a successful coup if that was what it actually wanted.

After turning the tide only hours later in Ankara, Erdogan mobilised crowds to his side on the streets.

One full week later, street crowds would still gather in his favour to denounce the coup plotters.

Critics gave the authorities full marks for the theatrical nature of the “production”.

If the purpose had been to stage a coup, it failed miserably. But it succeeded very well in discrediting the army and giving Erdogan the justification for a nationwide crackdown against all his critics and opponents.

Erdogan and other officials accused Gulen of masterminding the coup. Others along with some Turkish media accused the US government of it. Gulen said Erdogan himself could have been behind it.

A survey by London-based Streetbees found that a third of Turks polled believed Erdogan himself had planned the “coup”.

Despite speeches demanding Gulen’s extradition, no formal request was made of the US. After pledging to provide proof of Gulen’s involvement, none had been presented.

But soon after vowing not to take revenge on opponents, the government wasted no time in going on the offensive. Opposition parties which denounced the coup attempt earlier soon turned on Erdogan.

Apart from detaining thousands of troops including several generals in a putsch originally said to be the work of only a few junior officers, the same fate befell the police who had helped in arresting rebel troops.

Thousands more judges were arrested or sacked, together with more than 43,000 educationists, from schoolteachers to university professors, including all of the country’s academic deans.

Within days, lists of 60,000 people had been ready and acted upon in Erdogan’s witch-hunt. Little doubt exists about their being ready before the July 15 putsch.

Just as clearly, calls for pro-Erdogan rallies had been coordinated with mosques in their calls to prayer across the country. This boosted his Islamist image and distinguished it from the secular stand of the military.

Turkey is located in the midst of a high-stakes game of global geopolitics.

It is a Nato member country straddling Europe and Asia, with the largest military force on the continent and host to 90 nuclear bombs at Incirlik Air Base.

Power supply to Incirlik was switched off even days after the coup attempt had been defeated. Various questions have since arisen about Turkey’s reliability as a Nato member.

A military coup could be destabilising in the short term, Erdogan’s alienation of dissidents and neighbouring countries could be risky in the medium term, and his creeping Islamisation may be just as unsettling over the long term.

Officially, Erdogan is aiding in the battle against the Islamic State (IS) in neighbouring Syria. But his government is known to assist IS and al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra by allowing their shipments across Turkish territory, such as by keeping the border with Syria open.

Erdogan is also battling to destabilise Syria's Assad government. On this front, assistance to militant groups attacking Assad's forces is consistent in purpose.

Even as Erdogan appears to smoothen the ruffles within Turkey, the knots multiply internationally. If reports of his unreliable character and devious personality are true, Turkey's role within Nato would become questionable.

His autocratic style lends further concern within the alliance. As recent days have begun to show, it means a dogmatic form of governance without independent or opposition inputs.

Yet, even this may not be so alarming if strongman rule keeps extremists and militants at bay. But the Erdogan credo happens to be an Islamisation project that actively helps the operations of militants.

While working the crowds following the failed coup attempt, Erdogan allowed open calls for the return of the death penalty to bear on government policy.

He continues to flirt with this prospect in full knowledge that it would work against Turkey's hopes of joining the EU. That is apparently being balanced against the hopes of putting critics like Gulen away "for good".

Ultimately, it does not matter whether the pathetic attempt at a coup had been staged, and if so by whom.

That episode only gives an appearance of a government winning a battle against its opponents at the cost of it losing the war. The real divisions within Turkey are not so easily resolved by a security sweep that only sweeps political differences under the carpet.

For some four decades, Turkey's political intrigues have given the world the notion of a "deep state", an elusive political force that is as invisible as it is unaccountable and effective in shaping Turkish society.

Virtually every political quarter or interest group feels alienated from and averse to this deep state. But ultimately, like all political realities elsewhere, the will of the people will have to be served.

In this, Turkey's independent voices, parliamentary opposition and civil society groups will have their day. With or without autocratic rule, or the involvement of external forces, the global campaign against extremism and militancy will impact on Turkish society.

With Erdogan's political style it may take longer. Those who prolong it would only be giving him the proverbial "longer rope".

But it is almost an immutable reality in physics that the longer the rope, the bigger the jerk at the end, in the end.

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