The Role that the Media Played in the Failure of the July 15 Coup Attempt

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ABSTRACT *On the night of the July 15th coup attempt in Turkey both social and conventional media played important roles. Rather than inspiring and directing people, the Turkish media was used as a tool for communicating, motivating and disseminating reliable information throughout the world. This commentary aims to identify the media and military relations that characterized the July 15 case by examining the experience of the media outlets, the use of the media outlets they appealed to, as well as presenting an analysis of the media's prevalent role in the history of Turkish coups.*

July 15 made history as the night of new beginnings in Turkey. Without any doubt, the most significant one amongst those beginnings was that for the first time ever in Turkish history the people displayed a comprehensive resistance against the coup attempt. Equally as impressive, however, was the reconstruction of media-military relations in one single night, the roots of which can be traced back over the last decade to the empowerment of civil politics against the tutelage of bureaucratic and military power in Turkish politics. Historically, the Turkish media has played an important role in coup attempts, always being used to further the aims of the coup plotters.

In this regard, from the moment that the coup was publically declared, 'press freedom' faced a unique test: either the press would stand against the government and legitimize the coup, as had usually been the case in Turkish political history or it would take a risk and stand by democracy. On the night of July 15, almost every media outlet broadcasted messages against the coup attempt. The media's support for democracy and for the people of Turkey, and its resistance to the coup, became an important reason as to why the coup failed.

To understand why the media was so crucial that night, it is necessary to remember how it was guided by

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Coup plotters stormed the offices of TRT and forced Tijen Karaş to read the coup statement on air. This shows the moment, soon after the building was liberated, when she shared the experience with the public alongside Süleyman Soylu (Minister of Labor and Social Security) and Şenol Göka (General Director of TRT).

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the army and the deep state to mobilize and manipulate the base during previous coups in Turkish political history. Still, even though the media is one of the main factors that needs to be discussed in order to offer a complete analysis of that night, it is important to ask ourselves whether it was a main actor or simply a tool used by the 'actors'? This article discusses the role and importance of the media in the making of a failed military coup.

The Military and Mass Media in Turkey: A Brief History

Among countless coup attempts that took place in Turkey, four were successful. In 1960, 1971, 1980 and 1997, the Turkish Armed Forces arbitrarily interfered in civilian politics to remove elected governments from power through the use or threat of violence. Each time, military commanders considered the media a crucial ally capable of discrediting elected leaders in order to pave the way for military intervention and, upon their removal from power, legitimizing the actions of coup plotters.

The first successful *coup d'état* in modern Turkish history took place on May 27, 1960, when a group of soldiers led by 37 low-ranking military officers arrested their superiors, stormed government buildings and seized control of the public radio to announce that they were in charge. Over the following months, a show trial took place to discredit the Democratic Party (DP) leadership, including Prime Minister Adnan Menderes, who, along with two cabinet ministers, was executed in September 1961. President Celal Bayar, a hero of the War of Independence who was likewise removed from his position, was

offered clemency, although the coup effectively ended his political career.

The 1960 coup marked the beginning of a long-term cooperation between the military and mass media to discredit the guardianship regime's political rivals and legitimize the actions of coup plotters. Having informed the public via state radio that the government had been overthrown, the junta was praised by national newspapers, which hailed the military officers as saviors of the Republic.

Over the following decades, the relationship between the press and military leaders became much closer as the Armed Forces discovered how media campaigns could be used to further their interests. Many reporters, columnists and editors, in turn, turned their backs on journalistic standards and backtracked from their commitment to democratic values in order to collaborate with coup plotters and self-proclaimed guardians of the Republic. In 1971 and 1980, the mainstream media's support for military intervention in civilian politics made it possible for the generals to create an echo chamber that eventually marginalized all critical voices. Meanwhile, the state broadcaster TRT's monopoly over the media scape at the time made it easier for the guardianship regime to guide the public in the direction of their choice. Consequently, journalists emerged as the military's closest allies during the Cold War.

The mainstream media's cooperation with the Armed Forces, how-

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ever, continued after the collapse of the Soviet Union. As a matter of fact, journalists played a more active role in 1997, when the generals issued an ultimatum to the coalition government led by the Welfare Party's Necmettin Erbakan at a meeting of the National Security Council. What distinguished the February 27 process, dubbed the 'postmodern coup,' from other interventions by the military into civilian politics, was the military's decision to rely on the media and non-governmental organizations to throw knockout punches instead of resorting to hard power. At the time, newspapers such as *Hürriyet*, whose editorial board had backed the 1960 coup, pioneered a media campaign designed to turn public opinion against the elected government through fabricated stories and the use of provocative images.

When the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) came to power in 2002, there was a possibility that a coup against the civilian government

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could happen at any time. In a way, the founding leaders of the AK Party had been traumatized by the challenges they had experienced since the February 28 postmodern coup. It was this trauma that helped them make a decisive effort to institutionally restructure civil-military relations. Although the AK Party changed the institutional structure to prevent the military's meddling in politics, it was challenging for the government to change the media's *modus operandi* when it came to legitimizing coups. To be clear, the relationship between the media and military leaders has never really been completely transformed. Nonetheless, it is important to note that advocates of military interventions in civilian politics have been marginalized, as the vast majority of Kemalist intellectuals and journalists, traditional allies of coup plotters, started paying lip service to the illegitimacy of all coups which has itself indeed been a milestone in Turkish political history.

In this regard, the tipping point was the response of the people and the government to a memorandum is-

sued by the Armed Forces, dubbed the e-memorandum since it appeared on the military's official website ahead of the 2007 presidential election. Citing concerns over secularism, the generals, emboldened by Kemalist political parties, the mainstream media and non-governmental organizations, attempted to strong arm the AK Party government into replacing then Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül with another presidential candidate.[1] In addition to launching a coordinated campaign to discredit the elected government, major media outlets openly used a pro-military language in an effort to promote and legitimize a military intervention in the event that all other options failed. During this period of time, certain publications also played a central role in organizing massive pro-coup demonstrations.[2]

In this regard, the government's resistance to the military's demands and the support of ordinary citizens for civilian leadership marked a milestone in the transformation of civil-military relations in Turkey. Then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's strong leadership at the time against any undemocratic attempt like military coups, among other things, proved instrumental in mobilizing opponents of another military power grab. Having promoted a national conversation on civil-military relations since 2002, the AK Party had made the case that no *coup d'état* was legitimate, no junta was a viable alternative to the elected government and that the only way governments rise to and fall from power is through

elections. In 2007, one of the government's main accomplishments was to utilize the emerging new media to by-pass the mainstream media, which traditionally supported the military, to reach their audience directly. Moreover, Turkey's changing political climate, which had become more and more liberal since the 1990s, made the civilian leadership's message more attractive to voters.

Following the 2007 confrontation between the elected government and the establishment, even Kemalist hardliners in the journalist community slowly turned their back on 'the coup option' and instead adapted to the changing circumstances – partly due to their desire to maintain good relations with the West, which sided with the civilian leadership against the military. Having revised its position on civil-military relations, the mainstream media reacted to the July 15 coup attempt in an unprecedented manner by openly opposing the power grab.

There is no doubt that the change in the media in this perspective is not only the result of the AK Party's democratization policies towards civil-military relations. Since the 1990s, parallel to the rise of the private media sector, the media in Turkey has started to change by diversifying not only in brand but also in perspective. The number of media outlets rose dramatically especially in the early 2000s. In this regard, it is not possible to understand the change in media-military relations in Turkey without understanding the change in media economics. Additionally, technological developments in this regard made it easy for ordinary citizens to reach a large number of alternative voices via the web or social media.

Resisting the Coup: The Role of Conventional and Social Media

The role that the media played during the Arab Spring revolutions has been the subject of numerous articles and studies. According to some authors, it was new media, as opposed to conventional media, that expanded the social base of revolutionary political movements in Algeria, Egypt, Syria and Tunisia.[3] In fact, a number of revolutionary movements in recent years have been called "Twitter Revolutions" to pay homage to social media's central role in the resistance against authoritarian regimes. Regardless of where one stands on the concept, it is important to acknowledge that new platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and the blogosphere made it possible to facilitate the free flow of information in places where the mainstream media was censored.

The claim that social media or mass media were the driving force behind the Arab Spring revolutions or the Turkish people's resistance to the July 15 coup attempt, however, would be an oversimplification. Although the media did play an important role in mobilizing the masses and generating a higher level of awareness, the active use of Facebook and Twitter by protestors to communicate must not lead observers to overlook the significance

of the extent to which the idea of democracy was institutionalized, the ultimate goal of participants and the actual motivation of the movement. In this sense, The Guardian's Maeve Shearlaw certainly provides a more nuanced picture when she says, "Despite Western media's love affair with the idea, the uprisings didn't happen *because* of social media. Instead, the platforms provided opportunities for organisation and protest that traditional methods couldn't."[4]

Cyber activism, or "the act of using the Internet to advance a political cause that is difficult to advance offline," opened a new chapter in politics and media. The horizontal connectivity that was established between people and citizen journalism aroused interest during the Arab Spring revolutions. Over a short time, social media attained such power and influence that many conventional media outlets started covering stories due to their popularity online.[5] To be clear, the assumption that social media, supposedly an anarchist network, remains independent and uncensored could be misleading.[6] Nonetheless, online news remains attractive because it is disseminated through a platform that encourages, and is built on, popular participation. Social media enables ordinary people to share their own opinions, photos and videos with other people freely and quickly.

In Turkey, where social media remains widely popular, 46 million people, or 58 percent of the population, are active internet users. There are 71 million cell phone lines and the average person spends almost twice as much time on social media than watching television –4 hours and 14 minutes versus two hours and 35 minutes, respectively.[7]

As such, many people in Turkey became aware of the coup attempt on the night of July 15 through social media and the Internet. The timeline of the July 15 coup can be boiled down to a number of key events.[8] At around 9:30

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p.m., people started asking each other via WhatsApp, a popular messaging app, whether something was wrong. In the following hours, citizen journalists started sharing what they saw or heard on the streets. Meanwhile, Ankara-based social media users posted images and footage of F-16s flying low over residential areas, while İstanbulites spread the word that soldiers in Beylerbeyi, a residential district on the Asian coast, were stopping cars and blocking bridges with tanks. Before pro-coup soldiers stormed the public broadcaster TRT to force an anchorwoman to read their statement, a video purporting to show a military commander had begun circulating on social media: "Go back home! The military has seized power!"

It took only a few minutes for social media chatter to be picked up by mainstream news outlets in Turkey and around the world. On an other-wise slow-news night, TV stations broke the news of an unusual movement of troops in İstanbul and Ankara and informed the public that there was "possibly a coup underway." It was the individuals, who responded to the news by taking to the streets in an effort to resist that pioneered the effort that eventually thwarted the coup attempt.

At 10:20 p.m., Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım appeared on national television to acknowledge that there was a coup attempt underway and pledge to "not allow it to succeed." Echoing the Prime Minister's remarks, a commander of the Second Army stated that the coup attempt was illegal and noted that the coup plotters had broken the chain of command. In other words, the Turkish people, and perhaps more importantly soldiers, bureaucrats and politicians received word early on that the Turkish military was opposed to the power grab. In this regard, the media played an important role in the resistance by helping the authorities communicate their message to the public.

A few minutes past midnight, pro-coup soldiers stormed TRT, the public broadcaster, to hold an anchorwoman at gunpoint and force her to read a written statement on air. In addition to announcing that the government had been removed from power, the putschists ordered all TV channels to distribute the statement – an order these channels, eventually disobeyed. This was a trick out of the junta play-book, seizing official media was a classic move intended to strike fear in

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the hearts of ordinary citizens. In the past, the tactic had worked primarily because there were a limited number of media outlets. This time was different. Although the incident confirmed that a *coup d'état* was indeed underway, it also strengthened the people's resolve to resist the plotters.

Minutes later, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan addressed the nation via FaceTime, a video chat app, and called on the people to take to the streets and defy the coup plotters. "There is no power higher than the power of the people," he said. "Let them do what they will at public squares and airports. I will join the nation there."[9] It became clear later on that the president had held a press conference outside his hotel in Marmaris earlier, only to find out that there was a technical problem with the satellite connection. When it became clear that his message had not been broadcast, Erdoğan opted to appear on national media via FaceTime. In retrospect, Erdoğan's address to the

nation proved to be a driving force behind the peaceful resistance. Many participants in the nationwide protest stated that they left their homes after the iconic FaceTime call and that they were encouraged by his personal appeal to them. The live interview also helped the authorities get in front of rumors that Erdoğan had either escaped or been assassinated.

In essence, there were two fundamental contributions made by both the conventional and the social media during the coup attempt. First, politicians, military personnel and bureaucrats who opposed the coup plotters were able to communicate their messages to the general population – thereby encouraging activists and forcing plotters to reconsider. Secondly, social media, in particular, made it easier for activists to share updates and coordinate their actions. In many cases, reports on social media about attacks against civilians, government buildings and TV channels were met by an influx of protestors to affected areas in an attempt to help fellow activists. Furthermore, chat groups on messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Telegram were used by protestors to convince their friends and colleagues to take to the streets and defy the junta-imposed curfew. In addition to ordinary citizens, members of the security forces, including soldiers and police officers, as well as bureaucrats and politicians used WhatsApp to communicate securely.

Twitter was one of the most applied social media platforms of the night. The hashtags that were the most

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan speaks during an interview for Al Jazeera news channel in Ankara on July 20, 2016. This was the first interview President Erdoğan gave to an international channel after the coup attempt.

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widely used during the coup night were #NoCoupInTurkey, #Turkey-Coup, #TurkeyCoupAttempt. More than 7 million content were posted under these 2 titles in a short period of time. The tweets that were posted on July 16 increased 223 percent, and from July 15 to 17 there were 34,818,329 tweets posted. These tweets reached an audience of 15 billion people.[10] The uncensored visuals from the anti-coup protests, such as videos and photos, were perhaps the strongest and most positive motivators that drove the people that night. In particular, the messages regarding unity raised the number of people who went out onto the streets. In this regard, social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and Periscope were the most widely used applications. When compared to the use of social media, mainstream media like television, radio and newspapers lagged behind.

Before jumping to conclusions about the significance of messaging apps, it is important to recall that the same apps were used by pro-coup soldiers to discuss operational details, receive instructions from- and share information with others.[11] To be clear, the use of encrypted messaging apps among the coup plotters goes back to 2014, when the terrorist organization led by Pennsylvania-based retired *imam* Fetullah Gülen started using ByLock, another app that requires an eight-digit password to sign up, to avoid scrutiny and communicate securely. From the beginning of the coup attempt, the putschists organized each step through instructions given in a WhatsApp group they had founded. In their conversations, the plotters discussed how to interrupt all communication and issued orders to cut off all lines of communication in the country as soon as possible to prevent the protestors from co-

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ordinating their actions. When they tried, but ultimately failed, to slow the speed of social media in order to hinder the resistance, the pro-coup soldiers moved to seize control of conventional media outlets.

After the coup attempt failed, millions of ordinary people continued to gather on the streets for 'democracy watch' events every night for almost a month. The events were often covered by conventional media outlets, which produced and aired documentaries about the failed coup as well as the experiences of those who helped thwart the attempt. Citizen journalists continued to document their experiences with amateur videos and photos taken with their phones. They often published their own photos on Facebook and Twitter and invited their friends to join them. As a result, like-minded individuals came together through social media while cyber activists launched blogs to tell the world what happened and share videos, photos and news articles online. This shows that the media had a significant role both on the night of the attempted coup and in its aftermath.

Conclusion

Media was an important instrument in the resistance against the July 15 coup attempt. New media provided many opportunities for resistance when conventional media was blocked. One thing is certain and that is that the position of conventional media during this time was crucial. The democratic position of the media deeply relates the democratic experience of Turkey under the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) as being against any type of undemocratic intervention into Turkish politics.

Regarding the importance of media, we might say that although the media in the July 15 case was not the main actor it was an important tool of resistance against the coup. As such, it is a good example that can be used to illustrate the role of new media in a global world. While manipulations and fabricated news were met with a poor response on July 15, it is still worth considering the opposite scenario. Despite social media's positive role on the night of July 15, the lack of limits on what you post, for example, can carry its own risks. In this sense, it is crucial to specify the legal infrastructure in a more comprehensive manner.

The power of social media also highlighted a new reality. The necessity of new policies in a new world to guide new media was clearly seen that night. On the night of July 15, audiences all around the world, with access to various social media platforms, reacted to the actions of the

coup plotters in Turkey. While the international media's reporting on the coup in its aftermath was biased, it was ordinary global citizens who accurately reported on the events of that night. This shows us political actors, political parties or even the coup plotters no longer only address local audiences but they also address global audiences. They are no longer pursued by their own voters, but also by a wider mass.

That night, Turkish media stood on the right side of history as a supporter of democracy and civilian politics. It played an important role as an instrument that led to the failure of the coup attempt. It also defied its traditional role in Turkish coup history as an instrument used to support coup plotters. Media theorist Marshall McLuhan once famously said "the medium is the message" and the understanding of the media has completely changed. This time, in the case of Turkey, the message influenced the media in the way the story was covered and in the narrative the media applied. It was not the media itself that helped the coup fail but rather the use of the media by the Turkish people for the first time in Turkish history. ●

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