Year One: Reflections on Turkey’s Second Founding and the Politics of Division

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When the Republic was proclaimed in France during the revolution, the National Convention adopted a calendar that started anew. Napoleon abolished it once he was crowned Emperor. Although this experiment with a republican calendar was short-lived, the gesture of resetting conventional time has nonetheless remained in the political imaginary, signifying a rupture with the past and the founding of the new. Of course, the calendar has not been reset in Turkey, and I doubt that this political gesture is still thinkable in today’s world. Nonetheless, I would venture that were the government in Turkey to adopt a new calendar, it would choose July 15, 2016 as its starting date.

The coup d'état that part of the military attempted to carry out that night can be interpreted as the effort of one of the main factions in Turkey’s “historic bloc,” a moderately Islamist, conservative, neoliberal, globalist, populist coalition in power under the leadership of Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP), or the Justice and Development Party, since 2002, to monopolize power by force of arms. The dissolution of that historic bloc had been in progress since 2011, with intensifying competition among its factions, which transmuted into what appears to be a war of mutual destruction. According to a highly popular narrative, the conspirators were mainly composed of the supporters and followers of the cleric Fethullah Gülen, who has been in voluntary exile in Pennsylvania for almost two decades. Although this is contested, the conspiracy also might have relied on the participation of other factions in the military, especially some anti-Erdogan and pro-Western cadres, who were not themselves Gülenist. That being said, Gülenist involvement in the coup is generally accepted, at least in Turkey’s public opinion. The Gülen movement has been declared a “terror organization” and relabeled FETÖ (for Fethullahçı Terör Örgütü, or Fethullah Gülen Terror Organization).

The coup attempt of July 15 failed, but its failure has not brought Turkey greater democracy. Instead, it has unleashed an assertive raison d’état that seeks to heal the deep fracture in the state apparatuses caused by the rivalry within the ruling bloc, rendering the maintenance and reproduction of the state itself the most important and legitimate goal of the state’s activities. It has provided the conditions for the victorious faction under Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s leadership to take charge of this raison d’état, assuming the role of a restorative force to re-establish control over the state apparatus and build a new ruling coalition in order to augment state power. The coup attempt has precipitated a state of emergency that has enabled Turkey’s present government to suspend the existing
constitution, to rule by way of executive decrees that take the power of legislation away from the parliament, to institute an elective autocracy through a dubious referendum, and finally to unleash a project of social and political re-engineering to create a new polity. July 15 has thus provided an immensely fertile conjuncture, which the ruling party has repurposed into an opportunity to re-engineer Turkey.

The AKP has found itself empowered because the dynamics that led to the failure of the July 15 coup have also lent the AKP strong popular support, a newfound legitimacy, and advantageous political instruments. The most important of these dynamics has been mass resistance against the coup attempt. Following a televised FaceTime call by President Erdoğan, those who took to the streets and surrounded the tanks to stop their advance not only played an important role in reversing the course of coup; they also forcefully expressed their strong political will against being reduced to passive objects to be governed and repressed, as has invariably been the case in prior military takeovers. The embodied barricade of the masses against the putschists has thus been an unprecedented occurrence in the history of the republic. If the coup has unleashed a *raison d’état* that seeks to heal the state, it has also unleashed a great popular energy that has sought to exercise political agency and counter the usurpation of its power.

As the title of the essay suggests, the reading presented here focuses on the first year after the failed coup of July 15 and interprets Turkey’s situation as a *rupture* from the past. This claim can be interpreted in different ways. Most obviously, the countrywide state of emergency, declared in response to the coup attempt and already extended several times, can be understood as a break with democracy. But this is a rather weak interpretation of the rupture thesis, because it is possible to see the declaration of a state of emergency as inherent in, rather than completely alien to, constitutional democracy. Indeed, Article 120 of the 1982 Constitution allows for the declaration of a state of emergency to take necessary measures against violent attempts at overthrowing the democratic order. Article 121 enables the temporal extension of the state of emergency with the approval of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey. Furthermore, historically, Turkey has been governed, at least in part, through a regional state of emergency that was in effect during the second half of the 1980s and 1990s as part of the struggle against the insurgency led by the PKK (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, or Kurdistan Workers’ Party) in the east and southeast. In fact, one of the AKP’s important achievements was to bring the regional state of emergency to an end in 2002.

A second way to interpret the rupture thesis is to analyze the current conjuncture through the lens of military-civilian relations. It is well known that Turkey’s democracy has been suspended or strained several times in the past: in 1960, 1971, 1980, 1997, and 2007, with the interventions of 1960 and 1980 involving actual military takeovers, those of 1971 and 1997 involving memoranda issued by the military that forced the resignation of civilian governments, and the e-memorandum of 2007 resulting in early elections. One must also mention several well-known coup attempts that failed or were prevented in the early stages (in 1957, 1962, 1963, 1969, and 1971). The events of July 15 also constituted an attempt to suspend Turkey’s democratic regime by way of a military takeover. Although the coup itself failed, the aftermath of the coup did not imply the restoration of democracy. Instead, from this perspective, the current moment could be seen as the exceptional interruption of democracy carried out by civilian forces. This, in fact, corresponds to the diagnosis of the main
opposition party. Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (CHP), or the Republican People’s Party, argues that the emergency regime declared shortly after the coup attempt, on July 20, corresponds to a “civilian coup.” In this thesis, which posits a kind of “auto-coup,” the emphasis is on President Erdoğan’s personal ambitions and his use of the state of emergency to assume extraordinary powers to rule the country while also disempowering parliament. The CHP and many observers close to it argue that it is for this reason that Erdoğan, even though he had been alerted to the possibility of the coup before it began, let it take place in a “controlled” manner in order to carry out the auto-coup in its wake. Some more skeptical observers subscribing to this line of interpretation consider the events of July 15 completely staged, planned, and executed in order for Erdoğan to collect power in his own hands.

Whatever accuracy these narratives might have—and it will be a long while before we will know for sure—the rupture thesis understood in terms of a binary opposition between democracy and coups is also inadequate. To call the current regime a “civilian coup” is to attempt to render a discursive and political equivalence between the current situation and a military takeover. While this equivalence may be used strategically to generate resistance on the basis of demands for democratization, it falls short of delineating the specifically novel qualities of the current government, which largely hinge on the special relationship between the masses that rallied to the streets and the ruling party. In addition, putting Erdoğan’s political ambitions at the center of the analysis fails to accord broader dynamics from above and from below the importance they deserve.

By contrast, the stronger sense of rupture that I have in mind takes us beyond both the democracy-state of exception and the military-civilian binaries. I contend that the current moment in Turkey is not adequately captured by either of these dualities. Instead, I propose to diagnose the current situation by taking note of the two forces unleashed by July 15: on the one hand, the force of the raison d’État that seeks to re-establish unity among state apparatuses and to enhance state power from above, and, on the other, the popular energies of participation from below. The latter are even more important than the former, and a strong interpretation of the rupture thesis must take as its foundation the novel irruption of the masses on the streets in an effort to directly reclaim the polity. With the interpretation of this political will as the expression of constituent power, the AKP has put Turkey on the course of a new founding. It will not come as a surprise if July 15—which has already been officially elevated into the lofty canon of national holidays alongside such days as the commemoration of the beginning of the national liberation struggle and its victorious ending, the first convention of the National Assembly and the proclamation of the Republic—is in the future chosen as the mythical point of Turkey’s new beginning, as the radical “event” that enabled its second founding.

Indeed, although it is not openly acknowledged or admitted, Turkey has entered the process of a new founding, rendering the current situation a (counter-)revolutionary one and the AKP government effectively a sovereign dictatorship. The extraordinary position of the current government vis-à-vis the 1982 Constitution and its extraneous relation to democracy cannot be fully appreciated by measuring it against the markers of liberal-democratic formations. It is true that the regime has shed some of its democratic credentials, such as accountability for elected officials and an independent judiciary; however, it formally retains other elements: the parliament, even if in hollowed out form; oppositional political parties, even if they are operating under great constraints;
and the possibility of future elections, even if there is no guarantee that they will take place without electoral fraud or at all.\textsuperscript{11} Certain policies of the government infringe on fundamental rights, and the prisons are filled much above capacity. And yet the government enjoys great legitimacy and popular support. Because the current situation is a contradictory amalgam of democratic and authoritarian elements, even if the decline can be tracked as a form of authoritarian backsliding, populist erosion, or gradual decay by corruption, the overall balance would not give us an accurate sense of the situation. Furthermore, there is a danger that such measures that track democratic decline domesticate the “deviations” from democracy by emphasizing continuity, also possibly leading us to expect existing legal and political mechanisms to reverse this course.\textsuperscript{12} For reasons that will become clear, I think that we must avoid a perspective that might implicitly rely on a normative developmentalism, according to which democracy will eventually prevail.

Instead, considering how the state of emergency, declared constitutionally by the government, has exceeded its constitutional limits, we must diagnose Turkey’s current moment as an \textit{interregnum}: while a rupture has occurred, the new form of the polity that is being reshaped has not yet fully materialized. In light of the momentous expression of popular resistance against the coup, the AKP has in effect re-fashioned itself as a constituent government tasked with re-founding Turkey.\textsuperscript{13} As this self-interpretation has effected the transformation of the process of restoration into a process of remaking the polity, the AKP has also taken charge of the immense energy of political participation and strong political will unleashed by the coup in order to redirect it under its own control. Thus, the strong political will of the masses that enabled the rupture in the first place has been brought under the strict control of the current government and channeled into the direction of the AKP’s choosing.

To assess the direction and impact of the changes wrought in this transitional period, it is necessary to attend to how the government fashions itself as a revolutionary and constituent force and to decipher the political and social vision that forms the substance of the project of remaking Turkey. In what follows, I attempt to go beyond the insistent self-representation of the AKP as the sole bearer of the will of the nation, easily dismissed as propaganda, and offer a critical examination of the ruling party’s concrete practices in this period. These practices, I submit, consistently match the AKP’s self-understanding and its attempt to elucidate a revolutionary vision. However, this vision lacks coherence and fails to provide a compelling ideological framework that might act as the cement for the new regime. At the same time as the AKP enjoys strong support for being at the helm of the state, its vision for the future nevertheless fails to garner the consent of significant segments of society, falling short of a clear majoritarian mandate.

As a result, the project of a new republic in Turkey that is presented as the guarantee of its sovereignty, strength, and unity is currently precariously maintained by a reconfigured politics of division, for which the monopolization of power in the hands of President Erdoğan, his “charismatic” authority, is presented as the only remedy.\textsuperscript{14} Noting that this role is far from a consensual one, I will make the case that changing the course of this transition requires not a return to the status quo ante but the emergence of a popular front, organized from below on the basis of a radical democratic agenda. In the absence of any consolation that might come from a belief in inevitable historical progress toward greater democracy, the future of Turkey depends on the cultivation and popularization of a coherent alternative vision of egalitarian democracy, with a strong commitment
to social justice, libertarian secularism, constitutional citizenship, and popular reconciliation. It is my hope that this essay will contribute to the articulation of this need and make a strong case for a principled and unified opposition from below, one that can resist and confront the process of (counter-)revolutionary reconstitution.

**The Night of the Attempted Coup**

On the night of July 15, 2016, part of the Turkish military attempted a coup d'état. Almost ten thousand soldiers of different ranks were mobilized in this attempt, involving a partial blockade of the iconic bridges over the Bosphorus, the invasion of the Istanbul Atatürk, Sabiha Gökçen, and Ankara Esenboğa Airports, the blocking of some of the main roads in Istanbul, the takeover of High Command Headquarters, and the capture of the national TV channel TRT (Turkish Radio and Television) where the putchists had their declaration read to the nation, announcing martial law while noting that Turkey would continue its allegiance to NATO and the United Nations. The declaration was penned by the coup’s organizing council, which called itself “Peace at Home,” in an unmistakable if also ironic allusion to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s canonical motto: “Peace at home, peace in the world.”

As the coup unfolded further into the night, there were jets flying low over big cities, helicopters shooting on civilians, and tanks rolling on the streets. The Chief of General Staff was taken hostage. The putschists bombed or fired on strategic locations, such as the Police Headquarters, the Special Forces Headquarters, the Presidential Palace, and the National Intelligence Agency. Most symbolic of all was the bombing of parliament in the early hours of the morning, while some deputies who had been able to gather there remained defiantly in session, and, in a rare gesture of solidarity, even authored a joint statement, bearing the signature of all the political parties represented in parliament.

However, even in a political climate attuned to the strong influence of the military over politics and familiar with military interventions, indeed accustomed to their cyclical occurrence—every ten years—the 2016 coup attempt presented something of a puzzle, and for several reasons. First, the coup was highly unexpected in the existing conjuncture. The military’s influence over civilian politics had significantly waned especially after the 2007 attempt, in which the military had published a strong ultimatum on its website, was quickly neutralized by the decision to hold early elections, and was ultimately unsuccessful in preventing the election of the AKP deputy Abdullah Gül to the Presidency. The waning of the military’s influence has also been due to the controversial trials of top military commanders that started in 2007, over allegations of conspiracies to attempt coups in 2003 (the Sledgehammer Trial) and 2004 (the Ergenekon Trial, connected with a number of alleged coup attempts). Second, the coup’s timing was curious: instead of right before daybreak, as is the custom, the coup started on a Friday evening in the middle of the summer, with great civilian presence on the streets and even more people in front of their television screens. It is now speculated that the coup was moved back from the time for which it was originally planned on the suspicion that word of it had been leaked. Third, the coup appeared headless. The political leadership of the coup remains unidentified to this day, and the highest-ranking officers among the alleged conspirators currently on trial deny involvement. Fourth, the number of soldiers mobilized on the
streets was observably low, suggesting that this was not the work of a unitary corps acting with the full chain of command but only of a faction (or a coalition of factions) within it.

The takeover was ultimately stopped by thousands of military men who refused to participate in the coup, resisting orders to shoot civilians, clashing with the conspirators and their supporters, and surrendering to the crowds. Considering the might of the Turkish military, indeed, it is hard to imagine what other force could have stopped it, had it been coordinated to carry out the coup within a chain of command and as a unitary body. But another important deterrent to the coup was a fifth characteristic, perhaps the coup’s most striking feature: the masses that took to the streets in order to resist the military takeover. In the history of the republic, there is no occasion in which a coup attempt had faced popular resistance. Even in 1980, when there was a significant level of popular organization at the grassroots level by a plethora of right-wing and left-wing organizations, trade unions, neighborhood associations, occupational organizations, and so on, the coup was not opposed on the streets. There were only minor, localized, and easily contained skirmishes.

By contrast, the masses filled the streets in the late hours of July 15 and into July 16, after a televised FaceTime call by President Erdoğan, who asked them to come out to defend democracy. His call was repeated and disseminated by the instantaneous enlistment of local mosques to the cause. Imams hailed continuously from the minarets, with prayers and announcements, asking the people not to congregate for prayer but to heed to Erdoğan’s call and to “take to the streets in the name of Allah and Muhammad to protect democracy.” Soon, personal cell phones received text messages signed by Erdoğan asking the “children of the Turkish nation” to take to the streets in order to take charge against a “narrow cadre” that had usurped the weapons of the state and turned them against the nation. People heeded this clarion call swiftly and en masse.

Although the acts of resistance carried out that night—for instance, people lying in front of military vehicles to stop their advance—might have been physically crushed if the matter came down to a decisive confrontation, their symbolic power, which was strengthened even further by the mobilization of religious faith and patriotic fervor, must have been deeply confusing for the soldiers, especially the military school trainees and novice privates, who were trying to follow the orders that had cast them in a drama that they had no agency in authoring. It is clear that the unprecedented mass response, which was immediately shrouded in the aura of martyrdom for the nation, would have cast serious doubt on the “training drill” soldiers were allegedly sent to conduct or the “terror threat” they were asked to confront.

Nonetheless, the confusion and chaos lasted until after daybreak, with soaring jets, road blockades, and armed clashes, especially as various paramilitary groups emerged on the streets. Violence, though limited, involved the beating and lynching of soldiers. Those in the High Command who had managed to escape the conspiracy denounced the attempt and began regaining control over the troops. Government forces bombed the Akinci Jet Fighter Base used as headquarters by the conspirators, and the commanders whom they had taken hostage were eventually rescued. Erdoğan and his family avoided a special forces team allegedly tasked with assassinating him. The alleged participants in the coup were beaten up and detained, the chain of command was reestablished, and the military finally receded back into its barracks. Ultimately, nearly 250 resisters and some thirty soldiers lost their lives, and over two thousand were wounded.
But this was not all. As the political tensions caused by this mysterious armed intervention lingered, and rumors that another coup attempt could soon follow circulated, the masses held onto the streets. For weeks after the failed July 15 coup attempt, people spontaneously held vigils. They also attended demonstrations and organized rallies called “democracy watches.” This participation was facilitated by the public transportation made free by municipal governments, a policy that also lasted for several weeks. The crowning rally, organized by the AKP, was held on August 7, with two million people fervently waving Turkish flags in Yenikapi, a district of Istanbul reserved for mass demonstrations, and millions more watching the televised rally from home. Even the Chief of General Staff addressed the crowds. To this spectacle, which already stood in stark contrast to the spontaneous gatherings on the streets, the AKP had invited two opposition parties: Milliyeçi Hareket Partisi (MHP), or the Nationalist Action Party, and Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (CHP), or the Republican People’s Party. The goal was to stage a display of national unity and political consensus, celebrating the democratic victory of the people against the armed attempt to take power. Only the pro-Kurdish HDP (Peoples’ Democratic Party) was excluded, showing that the boundaries of the political sphere would be drawn on the basis of the exclusion of Kurdish political representation.

While this exclusion might be considered the predictable outcome of the breakdown of the peace process in 2015, it also indicated the kind of politics of division that the AKP would foster. Furthermore, not only had the AKP taken upon itself the exclusive leadership of the popular will; it had also relegated the crowds to the role of flag-waving and spectating. As the AKP asserted its power to delimit the new boundaries of the political sphere, it based its claims on popular support, but both the MHP and the CHP, representing a large part of the political spectrum, lent support and legitimated this effort.

The Yenikapi consensus signaled a new era. In its self-representation, this era was one in which democracy had scored a great victory over military dictatorship, finally exorcising the specter haunting Turkish politics since the time of its transition to a multi-party regime after World War II. More importantly, the moment stood in stark contrast to most of republican history, in which the military’s overbearing role in Turkish politics had been met with a general sense of acceptance as an inevitable reality in a turbulent political geography. Indeed, it had even been welcomed in many quarters, in keeping with the widespread expectation that the military should be the “guardian” of national sovereignty and the founding principles of the republic against its challengers, even if this protection might mean the suspension of democratic rule. The mass denunciation of an armed takeover on July 15 revealed that, whatever legitimacy the military might have once had in intervening in politics, the popular sentiment that granted that legitimacy was no longer there. The people did not want to leave the stage of politics and be swept away by the usurpation of their voice and power. But this revelation was immediately recruited into an idealized official narrative, which not merely acknowledged July 15 as a crucial moment of democratic awakening, but enabled the AKP to take charge of this popular energy in order to contain and constrain it and control its direction.17

**Forces Unleashed**

The coup failed, but it brought into view how state apparatuses had been divided and pitted against
each other due to the competition between the two factions of the historic bloc. While this rivalry appeared to be a conflict between the military and the civilian wings of the state (as the discourse of combating the coup might imply), it was in fact a function of the AKP’s struggle, in alliance with Gülenists, against Kemalist vestiges in the state. This alliance was forged to overcome one of the traditional fault lines in Turkish politics: the divide between the state and government. Turkey’s “dual state,” in which certain parts of the state apparatus were constitutionally set up to be beyond the control of elected governments and would in turn act as checks on their power, involved such institutions as the National Security Council, the Supreme Court, and the Presidency, institutions that served as secular strongholds and guardians of the regime alongside the military. The AKP’s electoral success allowed it to wear down the dual state structure, while this erosion in turn contributed to its electoral success, insofar as the party recast this erosion as a democratic victory against authoritarian strongholds of the Kemalist establishment, while also enhancing its power by conquering these institutional strongholds. The controversial trials of top military commanders as well as the 2010 referendum that led to a decrease in the autonomy of the judiciary were measures that worked in this direction. As the previously unaccountable parts of the state apparatus came under increasing pressure, the government’s power also increased exponentially, because eliminating the vestiges of the dual state meant not only greater civilian control, but also the elimination of the checks and balances put in place to curb an electoral system designed to accentuate majoritarian gains.

The AKP’s alliance with Gülenists in this process is well documented. Initially, the Gülen movement provided the AKP with a strong social and economic network that shared a similarly Islamist and reformist outlook. It offered the AKP a qualified pool of human resources who could occupy bureaucratic posts, compensating for the newly founded AKP’s lack of qualified and educated cadres. Gülenists resorted to tactics including the leaking of questions on examinations for entry to military schools, police academies, and public employee positions; participation in unauthorized intelligence gathering about the private lives of politicians and bureaucrats; and coordinated disinformation campaigns in the press. These tactics seem to have allowed members of the organization to be placed in strategic state posts, with supporters occupying many of the highest echelons of the civilian and military bureaucracy (and many other ordinary posts). According to the report of the Parliamentary Investigation Commission, this “infiltration” into the “capillaries of the state” was a strategy articulated early on and diligently pursued. The new gains in the state apparatus were parceled out among the coalition of forces that the AKP mobilized. As a result, state apparatuses now became divided in a different way that cut across the old state-government binary (the “dual state”) and instead pitted state institutions against one another, making them sites of competition.

By the time the AKP and the Gülenists had a falling out, the latter had become strong enough to command a vast network of preparatory schools, middle schools, universities, cultural foundations, charities, newspapers, television channels, lucrative business enterprises in many industries, and financial institutions. This network was transnational, especially (but not only) in education, with many charter schools in the United States and private schools across Central Asia, the Balkans, Eastern Europe, and Africa, encompassing nearly one hundred countries. Gülenist
business enterprises operated across borders and supplemented the educational outposts that were set up in different locations. The Gülen movement was also seen as a faithful disseminator of the Turkish language, through schools that educated students around the world not only in locally tailored, rigorous, and competitive curricula, but also as friends of Turkey and Turkish culture. The foreign children reciting poems in the Turkish Olympics, which expanded to include participants from 135 countries, prompted many state officials to shed proud tears, unable to hide either their nostalgia for Ottoman influence or their desire for grandeur and cultural hegemony around the world.

With Erdoğan's decision to close down preparatory schools—a major source of income and recruitment alike for Gülenists—countered by the leaking of tapes alleging corruption and bribery going all the way up to Erdoğan's family, the rivalry between the AKP and the Gülenists became public and acrimonious. The AKP's condemnation of Gülenist influence on state institutions and its insistence that the Gülenists had become a “parallel state organization” that must be fought and eradicated soon followed. Indeed, the re-branding of the Gülenists as the “parallel state” by the AKP revealed not only the size and strength of Gülenist cadres in the state apparatus, but also that the common fight against the “dual state” of the past had become a struggle that pitted former allies against one another, according to another fracture that now traversed every institution of the military and civilian bureaucracy.

With the definitive dissolution of the ruling bloc in favor of Erdoğan's uncontested leadership, July 15 offered the government the opportunity to launch an aggressive campaign of *raison d'état*. It brought forth the conditions for the AKP to gather immense power in its hands with the aim of reestablishing control over the state and eradicating the conflict among different state apparatuses. July 15 allowed the AKP to augment its power not only by designating the survival and maintenance of the state as the state's own most important objective, but also by discrediting the Gülenist faction contending for power and bringing about their criminalization as a “terror organization.”

More importantly, however, July 15 created a conjuncture in which the AKP's task of restoration could be refashioned into one of remaking. It let the party entrench emergency rule to implement a wide range of extralegal measures that would have otherwise been met with great political opposition. Much hinged on the force of civilian resistance unleashed from below, complementing the force of *raison d'état* from above. The irruption of this force against the coup not only strengthened the AKP's claim to power; it also offered it a new and radical source of legitimacy that could be incorporated into the AKP's self-representation. For the AKP, the masses' readiness to sacrifice themselves by throwing themselves in front of tanks as human barricades meant not only the expression of a unified stance against military coups, not only a defense of democracy against its suspension, but also a validation of the undisputable leadership of President Erdoğan. Insofar as the masses responded to Erdoğan's call, personally threatened as he was by the assault of the conspirators, it seemed as if they were coming to his defense most of all. As a result, mass mobilization on the night of the coup attempt was swiftly interpreted as a new and energetic approval of Erdoğan's special place in Turkish politics as the first popularly elected president of the republic. Erdoğan, of course, already viewed himself as the true embodiment of the general will. But July 15 offered him a source of power much stronger than simply the fact of his election by fifty-two per cent of the popular vote: the sacrificial actions of the masses on the streets, masses who have come to stand in for
the whole nation.

At the same time as the presence of the masses was read as a confirmation of Erdoğan’s leadership of the nation, it was also taken as a marker of passionate popular support for and validation of the AKP’s government and its deeply transformative, even revolutionary, role in Turkey’s politics. Indeed, the people’s presence on the streets led to many invocations of and allusions to “constituent power” in the public sphere, endowing the AKP with a new type of legitimation: legitimation by the people, defined not as an abstract ideal but as an embodied force on the streets. Of course, one could argue that an appeal to the “people” is the bedrock of all democratic politics. Successive governments in Turkey, including military governments, have all appealed to an abstract idea of the “people” for legitimation. But they have always feared and frowned upon the presence of actual people on the streets, in assembly, in protest. This tendency was as valid for the center-right democratic governments as for republican elites.

Following the center-right tradition of the Democrats, the AKP had always held that true democracy happens in the ballot box and not on the streets. In this context, it is helpful to recall how Erdoğan vigilantly condemned the peaceful Gezi protestors in 2013 as riff-raff, looters, vandals, and marauders, showing little patience for their nonviolent methods of expressing discontent. Strikingly absent then was a reading of that social protest as the expression of national will or constituent power. In a similar spirit, when the AKP held rallies before elections, these were conceived of as orderly gatherings based on transporting supporters to designated areas, giving them party flags to wave, and having the party leaders talk at them while they cheered on. Hence, for the AKP, the role of the people in the legitimation of political rule had largely been based on the electoral support of this “silent majority,” which has empowered the AKP’s unimpeded government for fifteen years.

With the masses’ resistance against the coup attempt, the role of “people” at the source of this legitimation has shifted from being an abstraction to being an active presence. Consent has become indexed not merely to the electoral expression of popular will but to the enactment of popular will, through the embodied assembly of masses on the streets in the active defense of the state. Imagining July 15 as a revolutionary moment, akin to the storming of the Bastille or the fall of the Berlin Wall, the government assigned itself a historic role, the task of re-founding the polity. This task would be spearheaded by President Erdoğan, now openly at the helm of the party (without the veneer of presidential neutrality) and yet acting as the exclusive embodiment of the national will.

While mass resistance, wrapped in the invocations of a mythical constituent power, helped provide a novel form of legitimation that would let the government justify the restoration of the republic, it became clear that this restoration would not involve the widespread participation of the masses, as a discourse on constituent power might imply. A strange constituent power indeed, one that does not create its own institutions, insist on participation, jealously protect its rights of assembly, strike, and protest, or articulate even a demand for refounding. The rally at Yenikapi was precisely the containment of popular participation from below, through the transformation of the unregulated and unplanned resistance of the masses into cheering for the political representatives of the nation. Despite all the rhetoric, the active presence of the masses on the streets was thus limited to an “event” that enlisted them into the defense of democracy, the state, the AKP, and Erdoğan—in a chain of equivalence that progressively narrowed the field of politics. This process of containment
and rechanneling, which meant the progressive deactivation of popular participation, would become clearer in the draconian decrees that would soon be put into effect during the state of emergency. As the state’s restoration turned into its remaking, the embodied role of the masses would be reduced to their giving plebiscitary support from below whenever the leadership needed legitimation in its effort to escape the straightjacket imposed by the “first” republic.

**Emergency Rule**

The revolutionary self-understanding of the AKP, its appeal to the people’s embodied defense of the state, justified an aggressive campaign of sovereign restoration. The declaration of a countrywide state of emergency, endowing the existing government with extraordinary powers, enabled this campaign to be set into motion. It is an ironic reversal of history that the AKP, once proud of its role in eliminating the regional state of emergency rule, ultimately became the party to introduce and periodically extend the validity of a countrywide state of emergency. In fact, the AKP has adopted executive decrees as a way to govern more generally.24

Meanwhile, the project of restoration that involved addressing the conspiracy and overcoming the deep and rivalrous fracture within and among state apparatuses quickly changed into a form of top-down engineering, a restructuring of the state apparatus and remodeling of many features of the political, legal-constitutional, social, economic, and cultural domains. Executive decrees have become the efficacious political instruments for enacting the revolutionary rupture that the AKP now sees itself as tasked with bringing to fruition. These decrees have often exceeded the rights-based, temporal, and substantive limits set on emergency rule by the 1982 Constitution, limits pertaining strictly to the elimination of the causes of emergency.25 How?

First of all, these measures have authorized the infringement of fundamental rights.26 For example, pretrial detention was initially extended to a month (though later decreased to seven days, with the possibility of another seven-day extension) without access to a lawyer. New limitations on access to legal counsel have also been introduced; the number of lawyers who can appear in trials has been limited; the denaturalization of citizens living abroad and under investigation, who do not comply with the call to return to the country within three months, has become possible; and, while the death penalty has not yet been reinstated, the debate about its reinstatement has been reopened and encouraged by the government. As a result of the crackdown, more than 130,000 people have been detained, and over sixty thousand have been arrested.27 Turkey’s prison population has reached an all-time high, with nearly 230,000 prisoners (including convicts and detainees).28

Secondly, the executive decrees have also gone beyond constitutional limits in terms of stipulations that are applicable beyond the temporality of emergency rule. For example, the decrees have stipulated the permanent closure of private institutions, including healthcare providers, schools, private dormitories, hostels, foundations, associations, trade unions, and private universities owned by or associated with Gülenists. Similarly, in addition to the imposition of temporary publishing and broadcasting bans on various media, the decrees have led to the permanent closure of certain television and radio stations, newspapers, news agencies, journals, publishing houses, and distribution networks. All of the assets of the institutions closed down by the decrees have been irrevocably confiscated. Banks owned by Gülenists and their supporters have been put under the trusteeship of
Tasarruf Mevduatı Sigorta Fonu (TMSF), or the Savings Deposit Insurance Fund of Turkey, and the TMSF has been given the right to sell the private companies and corporations transferred to its trusteeship during the state of emergency. Civil servants sacked due to “terrorist connections” have been banned from future employment in any public institution. Finally, the decrees have also stipulated impunity for those who execute them, effectively eliminating the possibility of holding them accountable for violations. Most recently, this impunity has been extended to civilians partaking in the defense of the state, in a move that has pushed a wide field of actions, including acts of violence, outside of the law. Hence, emergency rule has allowed the AKP to usurp the power to make changes that are not temporary.

Finally, the executive decrees have undertaken a significant and substantive restructuring of the state apparatus, the political field, and many public institutions, with the stated goal of eliminating dangers to the republic in the form of conspirators and Gülenists. However, these decrees have dealt with a variety of fields that have little to do with that goal. Examples include the abolition of the election of university presidents (who will instead be directly appointed by the president of the republic); changes to attendance rules for university students; an increase in the retirement age for university professors; specifications regarding the use of snow tires; the regulation of aviation safety and of payments on home sales; the introduction of bans on a whole range of television programs that include matchmaking and marriage, involve the promotion of unapproved health products, or feature games, lotteries, and competitions on grounds that these programs involve misleading information and unfair gains. Furthermore, important economic measures introduced by the executive decrees—such as the establishment of a sovereign wealth fund and the transfer of public banks and assets to its control, along with the transfer of licensing rights for horse-racing, gaming, and lotteries to the fund for forty-nine years—clearly extend beyond the immediate goals of emergency rule. The aforementioned seizures of the assets of universities, private foundations, and associations owned by alleged Gülenists and the permission to liquidate companies and sell their assets placed under trusteeship have allowed for an immense transfer of wealth. Finally, the government has also used emergency rule to give tax breaks, provide debt collection benefits, enable the unilateral cancellation of contracts for firms doing business with municipalities placed under trusteeship, and suspend labor strikes. As such, emergency rule has become a way to facilitate capitalist accumulation by way of extra-economic coercion and state intervention, while also repressing organized opposition by labor.

The normalization of emergency rule, or the recourse to executive decrees as a routinized technique of government, means that the executive has practically eliminated the role of parliament as an arena of public and unfettered discussion. This has been done by short-circuiting the necessity of parliamentary debate for the approval of such decrees, as originally stipulated by the 1982 Constitution. At the same time as these emergency decrees eschew parliamentary debate, moreover, they also avoid judicial review. Since the Supreme Court has judged itself unauthorized to rule on the content of the emergency decrees, any possible judicial limit on the exercise of power has been effectively eliminated. The AKP’s revolutionary self-fashioning has thus meant the practical elimination of the separation of powers.

When we turn to the restructuring that is being carried out by way of executive decrees, we
see that the most visible target of emergency rule has been the state apparatus itself. These decrees have entailed extensive purges that have become important tools for clearing ground in order to reshape the architecture of the state in ways that will further the government’s revolutionary program. In a feverish campaign of self-cleansing, the government has resorted to purging the conspirators of the coup as well as their alleged supporters and affiliates working inside the state bureaucracy in droves. We are told that, through these purges, the state has been trying to restore the “health” of its ruling apparatus by getting rid of its “cancerous cells.” Like an autoimmune disease that the body is trying to eradicate, but in which it ends up fighting and consuming itself, the restructuring has brought about a situation in which each institution of the state is at war with itself, trying to “eliminate” those parts that have now revealed themselves to be “internal enemies.”

These biological metaphors should not be taken lightly as rhetorical flourishes at a time of impassioned discourse and the orchestrated mobilization of affect. Erdoğan has used such metaphors time and again. They both help people to imagine his purges as moves beneficial to the nation and figure the state’s new founding in the organicist image of a unitary “body politic” (of which he is the head) whose health he is trying hard to restore.

Numbers reveal how wide the net has been cast. To date, some 150,000 people have been dismissed from public posts, as lists of names have been published in the official newspaper, decree after decree. No part of the repressive state apparatus has been spared. Purges have taken place across the whole ensemble of the army, navy, air force, gendarmerie, coast guard, police, and special forces. The number of generals and admirals who have been sacked and made to retire is 130, representing forty per cent of the High Command. War academies and military schools have been shut down, military hospitals have been transferred over to the Ministry of Health, and a new National Defense University has been set up. The Supreme Military Council responsible for appointments and promotions within the armed forces has been changed by the inclusion of a higher number of civilian members and thus brought under the purview of the Ministry of National Defense, which has also been given the right to initiate disciplinary proceedings concerning military personnel. Overall, these changes have sought to decrease the autonomy of the military and bring it further under governmental control.

At the same time, the weeding out has proceeded in each of the Ministries of Health, National Education, Defense, the Interior, Justice, and Foreign Affairs; it has included the Directorate of Religious Affairs, the National Intelligence Agency, and the Higher Education Council, as well as the staff of the Prime Ministry and Presidency. Two fields have become especially significant battlegrounds: the judiciary, with the purge of over four thousand judges and prosecutors and the reappointment and relocation of thousands of others; and education, both at the university level and in secondary schools, with the firing of thousands of teachers, researchers, and professors at an unprecedented scale. Nearly six thousand academic staff members have lost their jobs at universities. Instead of temporary suspensions subject to due process, these have been dismissals without a trial. Affected individuals are banned permanently from public service without revocation, and they face the confiscation of their passports, evictions from public housing, and the denial of social security benefits.

In practice, purges have come to include not only the “members” and supporters of the
Gülen Movement but of all “terrorist organizations” threatening the state. Legally, an executive decree published on April 29, 2017 has amended the executive decree of August 17, 2016, which was limited to sacking Gülenists, by including “other terror organizations” within the purview of emergency rule. This has been interpreted as endowing the terminations of employees, for example those with leftist or pro-Kurdish sympathies, entirely unrelated to Gülenists, with a retroactive legal basis. Moreover, these purges have not been limited to targeting those with demonstrable ties of “membership” to terrorist organizations, but have included those who are allegedly in relations or communication with “members of terrorist organizations,” and those who benefit from the actions of terrorist organizations, even though they may themselves not be members or even aware of the benefits. Such an ever-expanding definition of “terrorism” has enabled the government to include in these purges those who are unrelated to the coup attempt but known to be opposed to the government. It has also allowed the government to rationalize lengthy detentions pending trial. The extension of the purges beyond the military and civilian bureaucracy into public institutions such as universities has led to the exodus of many intellectuals from the country and the silencing of many dissidents in the public sphere, if not always through actual termination of employment, then through the threat of persecution. The effects of censorship and self-censorship are felt most acutely in the public sphere, with many media outlets closed down and over 170 journalists currently in prison. The extension of purges into the domain of civil society has meant the detention of many prominent public figures, including community leaders, trade unionists, intellectuals, journalists, and social media users.

In addition to vague criteria such as being in communication with or benefiting from the actions of (members of) a “terrorist organization,” identity markers have been used to implicate individuals in involvement with “terror organizations.” These markers have sometimes taken the place of concrete evidence of participation in the attempt to violently overthrow the constitutional order. Indeed, criteria for being identified as a Gülenist include such markers as which schools individuals have studied at and which schools they sent their children to, which newspaper they read, which bank they chose to deposit their savings in, and so on. These criteria are problematic not only because they retroactively criminalize institutions that had once been actively supported by and affiliated with the government, but also because in their application they have allowed for considerable arbitrariness, hardly reassuring worries about the rightfulness of who gets purged. The most solid evidence was considered to be the presence of a special encryption system installed on individual cell phones to ensure secure communications among members of FETÖ, but this, too, has been put into question with the discovery that accessing some commercial websites has led to the automatic installation of the encryption system on individual phones. These criteria, it should be noted, are supported by the testimonies of secret informants. As people are actively encouraged to come forward to inform on their colleagues, a top-down purge is being supplemented by a horizontal network of fear and mutual suspicion that rekindles popular support for the government’s post-coup measures by facilitating indirect participation in the purges. Needless to say, the voluntary and eager participation of ordinary citizens in informing on each other is itself the best evidence of the nature of the new regime: in the process of its constitution, the path to personal security passes through establishing loyalty to the ruling party and gaining the approval of the leader. What better sign of fidelity than the eagerness to
inform on others?

It should also be noted that these purges have become convenient tools with which to overhaul and restructure the state’s apparatuses in keeping with the downsizing demands of a neoliberal agenda. To be sure, the most important goal in this restructuring is the elimination of unwanted political factions in the state apparatuses, to achieve a homogeneity that would allow greater governmental control over the bureaucracy, facilitating the enactment of its future agenda. At the same time, however, the purges also clearly help to enact the neoliberal shrinking of the state, where the bureaucratic apparatus is a heavy weight on the public budget, which is already quite strained. In this process, not all of these posts will be filled; in fact, the purge will be the occasion for a smaller state, with public functions farmed out to private companies close to the government and ready to do the government’s bidding. Furthermore, the convenient suspension of bureaucratic procedures and meritocratic criteria in the hires that are made to fill remaining posts imply that the redistribution of posts among different constituencies will also likely follow criteria of loyalty and expediency.

Rule by executive decree not only involves the redesigning of the architecture of the state; it also goes hand in hand with the refashioning of the political sphere. The parliament has become a space in which critique is considered betrayal and opposition to the ruling party is swiftly criminalized, deemed either direct participation in “terrorism” or a form of indirect support for “terrorists.” The new amendments for parliamentary procedure, proposed by the AKP and supported by the MHP, in order to eliminate so-called obstructionism and increase the speed of legislation necessary for the legal consolidation of the new regime, entail the dramatic shortening of time for debate. These amendments also legalize censorship by imposing restrictions on what is sayable from the pulpit in the supreme institution of the republic. They also enable the retrospective redaction and editing of the parliamentary record by a simple written request, eliminating the oral presentation of the error and the correction to the rest of the parliament.

Yet one of the most important aspects of the reconfiguration of the political sphere has been the exclusion of pro-Kurdish representation from the political sphere, as affirmed in the Yenikapi consensus. This tendency was already present prior to the coup attempt, in the aftermath of the June elections, with escalating violence during the hung parliament and leading up to the repeat elections of November 2015. But the tendency was solidified when the decision was made in parliament to lift parliamentarian immunity for crimes committed until May 2016, allowing for the trial and lengthy pretrial detention of members of parliament. This decision was inexplicably supported by the largest opposition party, the CHP, and it must be considered a historic mistake in judgment and the product of a clear lack of political foresight. It is possible, though no less alarming, that the CHP believed that this measure would target only the HDP. Whatever the reasons, the first year after the failed coup has painfully shown that the CHP deputies are next in line, even though HDP deputies have borne the brunt of this move. (Ninety-three percent of HDP deputies are now stripped of immunity.) The AKP has stripped 154 members of parliament of immunity to date, effectively eliminating their presence in the parliament and muting their voice in the public sphere. To date, nine HDP deputies have been placed in prison, including the co-chairs of the party, who are on trial for charges that could lead to hundreds of years of imprisonment. Furthermore, one of the
CHP’s deputies is now also in prison serving a twenty-five-year sentence on charges of espionage, for allegedly leaking footage documenting the involvement of the National Intelligence Agency in the covert shipment of weapons to Islamist rebels in Syria. The protest march initiated by the CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu in response to his arrest was met with insinuations that the next wave might indeed include other CHP deputies, including Kılıçdaroğlu himself (as when the prime minister argued that the CHP is walking with “terrorists” and when the president openly warned that Kılıçdaroğlu would soon “not be able to walk the streets”). This is a clear demonstration that the AKP is keen to monopolize the political sphere by eliminating all of its rivals. Even the founding party of the “first” republic is not secure in the process of its refounding.33

But the most devastating consequence of the lifting of immunities, exacerbated by emergency rule, has been the effective erasure of the HDP from the speedily shrinking sphere of politics. The silencing of Kurdish politics and the prevalence of the military option appear as two of the most significant continuities with the ancien régime, and indeed they mark a return to nationalism defined on ethnic and exclusionary terms after a short-lived peace process in which reconciliation seemed possible, within reach, and highly supported by Turks and Kurds. The peace process, crowned by the 2013 Newroz celebrations in Diyarbakır, now appears as a fleeting exception to the dominant approach of the republic in dealing with the Kurdish question throughout its history.34 With the failure of the peace process in 2015, the influence of the Rojava experience,35 the declaration of self-government in Kurdish cities, the emergence of urban militias in the form of “defense units,” and the initiation of urban guerilla trench warfare by the PKK, the security operations in southeastern provinces have led to the devastation of many neighborhoods and the displacement of about half a million people.36 Compounded by the imprisonment of democratically elected mayors and the appointment of trustees to municipalities, the erasure of Kurdish political representation has not only reversed the achievements of the peace process in public discourse, but it has also reinforced the growing alienation of Kurdish constituencies from the orbit of democratic politics.

But all of these changes pale next to the constitutional amendments enacted through the dubious legality of a referendum held on April 15, 2017.37 Carried out under the most asymmetrical circumstances—with President Erdoğan publicly declaring the “no” voters “terrorists,” severe intimidation of and lack of public access for the “no” campaign, and disproportionate mobilization of state resources, including access to public television airtime, for the “yes” campaign—this referendum asked for the approval of a constitutional amendment package whose contents were barely known to the public. Leaving aside the fact that this referendum on the nature of Turkey’s new regime was conducted without serious and free public discussion, the referendum itself was also compromised, when the Supreme Electoral Council announced that it would approve ballots without an official stamp, which would have been the guarantee of their authenticity. With up to 2.5 million ballots suspect, the referendum was “won” by a slim margin by the “yes” campaign, effectively legalizing the restructuring of the political system into a strong presidentialism.38

Touted as “executive presidency,” this new constitutional form is in effect an elective autocracy. It transforms the parliament into a rubber-stamping institution and effectively places the sovereignty of the people, until now exercised through elected representatives in parliament, in the hands of an elected presidency, which used to be the ceremonial and symbolic office of the head of state. In
fact, the first measure legalized by the referendum, which went into effect immediately after it, was that the president could now obtain membership in a political party, shedding the appearance of neutrality of office. With the elections of 2019, the new regime will continue to vest the president with extraordinary powers to govern with an unelected and therefore unaccountable cabinet. The office of the prime ministry will be eliminated, along with the council of ministers. The president-elect will hold the office of commander-in-chief and will have the power to deploy troops, to declare a state of emergency, to rule by decrees, and to ratify international agreements, all without parliamentary approval. Although the budget ostensibly remains under parliamentary control, this is not a real restraint on the presidency, because in the case of disapproval by parliament, the president can rely on the previous year’s budget. The president also consolidates control over the judiciary through a reduction of the members on the Council of Judges and Prosecutors, tasked with regulating the appointment and promotion of judges and prosecutors. The president will also be given the right to appoint half of its membership. Thus, with these measures, the referendum approved a political form without any systemic checks and balances other than the enlightened despotism of the next elected president. In fact, the referendum recognized the de facto situation of emergency rule put into place after the failed coup. While the AKP governed the post-coup process of restoration in the form of a sovereign dictatorship with elements far exceeding that restoration, the referendum offered the possibility of legalizing the second founding with elements of a new constitutional form.

As these changes make clear, the first republic, with its many ebbs and flows, seems to have suffered a silent death as it has been transformed into an elective autocracy. The myth of the great democratic victory of the people has been expediently mobilized by the AKP, which has changed the process of restoration into a process of new founding. The popular energy that enacted the refusal to be pushed out of the political stage by the coup on July 15 has been reduced to a mere source of legitimation for the AKP and brought under its strict direction. Thus the first casualty of this process of transformation, conducted in the name of the masses, has been the real constituent power of the masses themselves.

The Politics of Division

The result of the contested referendum, in which the “yes” campaign only barely scraped by with a majority, has forcefully revealed that, despite all the advantages that the campaign had in skewing the vote in its favor and the strong rhetoric of national unity, citizens of Turkey are deeply divided about the country’s future. In spite of the homogeneous construction of the “people,” of whose unified political will the AKP considered itself to be the main representative, the popular will distilled from the referendum was not unitary. This meant that even if the mass resistance on July 15 might have corresponded to a constituent desire for a new founding, the direction of this founding imposed by the AKP’s leadership was far from embracing and articulating the hopes and desires of a significant majority. Instead, the almost symmetrical division of the “yes” and “no” camps, regardless of whether electoral fraud played a role in determining the final outcome, suggests the need to understand the crisis of hegemony brought forth by July 15 and to develop a more nuanced analysis of the oppositional tendencies that represent the possibility of contestation among different political
imaginaries for Turkey’s future.

For a long decade, the AKP had been successful due to its ability to spearhead a historic bloc on the basis of an ideology that can be identified as a moderate version of political Islamism, itself a response to the crisis of hegemony in Kemalism as the official ideology of the republican regime. One of the AKP’s main strategies had been to politicize the desire for growth, stability, prosperity, and security into a political antagonism between those who felt neglected, scorned, or mistreated by the ruling elites of the republican regime and those who appeared to be the beneficiaries of that regime. The AKP also built on and actively cultivated cultural divisions, especially the cleavage between religious and secular life-styles, through which it could fortify a large coalition that cut across different classes and social strata and unify this coalition around issues of religious and cultural identity, family values, and other forms of social conservatism. The party thus built on experiences of exclusion and on the grounds of traditionalism, economic disadvantage, provincial neglect, and victimization by the authoritarian secularism of the state. Its populism brought together the provincial middle classes and the urban poor. It also benefited from a growing economy that kept unemployment low and significantly increased average income.

With July 15, the crisis of this ideological hegemony has become forcefully apparent. Ideologically indistinguishable from the AKP, the Gülenists were transformed from former allies into “terrorists.” This transformation has shattered the ideological framework of political Islamism from within, further straining a hegemony already under strain due to the failure of the peace process with the Kurds, the bankruptcy of neo-Ottomanism as a foreign policy orientation, international isolation, corruption scandals, a weakening currency, and the looming economic crisis in Turkey. While it is not surprising that the Gülenists would be elevated to the status of the internal arch-enemy, given the concrete threat of an armed takeover they posed, it has also been difficult to find a compelling explanation for how their vision for the nation differed from the political Islamism of the AKP. Other than by pointing to a ceaseless drive for power, or what the Parliamentary Investigation Commission has called “power poisoning,” the official narrative’s construction of the enemy fails to offer a convincing account of the transformation of an alliance into a bitter life-and-death struggle.

Because the establishment of political Islamism as the ruling ideology of the new republic no longer seems possible, as its hegemony is internally undermined by the AKP’s former ideological ally’s transformation into an internal enemy, the AKP has sought to supplement this ideological configuration with an eclectic mix of nationalism and anti-Westernism, including some flirtation with Eurasianism, to resolve the crisis of hegemony. If the first decade of AKP rule can be characterized by the Islamicization of national identity, the new tendency seems to be its reversal: the nationalization of Islamist identity. In the emergent historic bloc, the ultranationalist MHP has become the willing auxiliary of the AKP, alongside different religious sects that have stepped into the void left by the Gülenists. In the emergent ideological configuration, the previously marginal Vatan Partisi (VP), or Patria Party, has stepped up to offer further direction. According to the contemporary political imaginary, the Gülenists operate side by side with a whole range of other terrorist organizations, traditionally highlighted by Kemalism as threats to the nation, as internal enemies.

Terrorist organizations such as the PKK, ISIS/ISID/DAES, or the Islamic State, Devrimci Halk Kurtuluş Partisi-Cephesi (DHKP-C), or the Revolutionary People’s Liberation Party-Front,
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and FETÖ now all appear as secretly coordinated players in a massive conspiracy against the Turkish nation, threatening the sovereignty, unity, and success of the Turkish state. Bringing together the Kurdish threat, the threat of Islamic fundamentalism, and the specter of popular revolution highlighted by the Gezi uprising with the Gülenist conspiracy, and claiming that their collusion is also backed by foreign powers interested in weakening Turkey, the AKP has moved to cultivate a politics of division that puts constantly proliferating danger at the center of politics, pitting the nation against what are considered to be existential threats. Against these multiple and grave dangers, exacerbated by the regional turbulence that is now further complicated by Turkey’s military operation in northern Syria, the AKP argues that only a more powerful state can guard the country and only the monopolization of power can strengthen the state. In the absence of a satisfactory solution to the crisis of political Islamism other than this politics of division, which tries to unite broad sections of the population against its enemies, much seems to rely on the charismatic authority of Erdoğan: to elicit the loyalty of his party’s rank and file, the obedience of the state bureaucracy, and the broad support of the masses in order to combat multiple and ruthless enemies attacking Turkey simultaneously. The split referendum casts doubt on the sustainability of this solution.

The unreliable strength of Erdoğan’s charisma is not the only force to consider in assessing the deep divisions among social forces in Turkey. Indeed, in order to change the course of the current interregnum, we need to take note of the heterogeneous oppositional tendencies and especially the popular dynamics from below. Consider, first, the role of opposition by political parties and their constrained capacity to halt the second founding. While the HDP is struggling in parliament to launch a sustained critique of the government, it is now largely paralyzed by the imprisonment of its leadership cadres and many rank-and-file members. Even though the CHP appears to be in a privileged position to lead oppositional efforts, it also seems to be in a bizarre paralysis. Despite the CHP’s tainted political record and major political blunders (such as its support for the lifting of immunities, its inexplicable choice of candidate in the last presidential election, or its neutralization of social protest after the constitutional referendum, and so forth), it seemed to be taking a different turn with the Justice March organized in the summer of 2017, after CHP deputy Enis Berberoğlu’s arrest and sentencing for twenty-five years on charges of espionage. In a well-publicized campaign, Kılıçdaroğlu walked from Ankara to Istanbul with a growing crowd of participants, ending the march at the gates of the prison where Berberoğlu is being held, and organized a massive rally the next day. Predictably, the government quickly responded by associating this new mode of opposition with anarchy, disobedience, and support for “terrorism.” This stance, itself the best evidence of the government’s new politics of division, found immediate echoes on the ground, when local residents dumped manure in one of the camping sites of the participants in the march en route to Istanbul.

This march seemed to signal a shift of strategy, indicating that the party was finally seeking to embrace opposition from below in place of its longstanding strategy to activate the already-defunct checks and balances of the old constitution, such as the Constitutional Court, in order to counteract the AKP’s exceptional measures. Despite the potential of this shift to contribute to a counter-momentum that could erode the legitimacy of the government from the street up, as evidenced by the strong attendance at the CHP’s rally and its positive resonances in the public sphere, it has so far been short-lived. The HDP’s Justice and Conscience Watches were attempts to further the
momentum of the Justice March and build an alliance between the two constituencies, but this alliance has not materialized, either.

Finally, Meral Akşener’s newly founded Iyi Parti, or Good Party, is a center-right initiative that broke from the ultranationalist MHP, against the AKP-MHP consolidation of a “national front.” While there is no strong indication regarding how the party will fare, it is likely to gather together more conservative forces that are disillusioned with the MHP and alienated from the AKP, and those who have fallen out of favor with Erdoğan. It might ally itself with the Islamist Saadet Partisi (SP), or the Felicity Party, and also compete with the CHP’s more nationalist constituencies in the process. Nonetheless, its opposition from the right presents an important obstacle to the AKP’s consolidation of ideological hegemony. Akşener will present a challenge to Erdoğan’s leadership in presidential elections scheduled for 2019. Indeed, it is rumored that Erdoğan might consider early parliamentary elections in order to spare the AKP the competition of Akşener’s new party.

While all of these political parties advocate the lifting of the state of emergency, the restoration of the constitution, and the redress of the excesses of the transitional regime, their ability to counter the AKP seems limited, although collectively they represent at least half of the electorate. Because of the contentious nature of the current transitional regime, the strategy of advocating the return to the status quo ante, as if there were ever a “golden age” from which the AKP had moved away, appears less than satisfactory and in any case ineffective. The future of Turkey depends on the cultivation of a grassroots alternative: the emergence of a united popular front that takes as its foundation the popular participation that seized the stage on July 15 and the irruption of the masses’ constituent energy. This front should work to redirect that energy from below, to counter its plebiscitary enlistment from above and to halt the consolidation of the autocratic regime. The moment of mass mobilization on July 15 has its precedent in the mass protests that spread throughout Turkey in the June 2013 protests that developed in opposition to the cutting of trees in Istanbul’s Gezi Park to make way for a shopping mall, styled after an Ottoman army barracks whose compound also included a signature mosque. Indeed, a more potent symbol for AKP’s politics could hardly have been found. The curious marriage of political Islamism with neoliberalism, blended with a nostalgic appeal to the glorious imperial past, could not have been more powerfully encapsulated than by this contentious project to be built in the most central public park in the former imperial capital. In it, one could easily observe the AKP’s economic program of privatization, the destruction of the urban commons, and the transformation of the citizen into a consumer with a pious and traditionalist identity that defined itself in antagonistic relation to the first republic. The Gezi protests brought into the open the significant force of accumulated grievances and worries concerning the authoritarian tendencies of the AKP government, long before the emergency regime put in place after the failed coup of 2016, revealing a “crisis of representation.”42 The Gezi protests also signaled the emergence of new modalities of resistance on the left, based on the absence of hierarchy, mass participation, and nonviolent protest.43 Although the riot police forcefully repressed the protests, the latter created an important legacy that must be drawn on in order to cultivate a popular front that can resist and confront the process of state reconstitution from below.

Finally, though more marginal, it is important to note the struggles of workers connected to
metal industries as well as the growing politicization of the regulation of subcontractors, who make up a significant portion of the workforce in the country. Similarly, the struggle of academics who signed the declaration stating “We will not be a party to this crime” (or the “Peace Petition”) and lost their jobs, along with those who were barred from public service under emergency decrees contribute to other important social dynamics. The hunger strike of two leftist academics, Nuriye Gülmen and Semih Özakça, who were terminated with an executive decree on grounds that they were affiliated with “terror organizations,” has been an important attempt to seek redress and mobilize the masses on the basis of grievances. These academics, imprisoned several months into their hunger strike on charges of inciting rebellion when their protest had garnered significant public attention, continued to starve themselves outside prison even after they had been released, until the State of Emergency Commission reviewed and rejected their petition to be returned to their posts.  

However, neither of these dynamics alone is sufficient to counter Erdoğan. Nor is it the case that these movements and struggles will easily congeal into a single, united front. They lack coherence, at times displaying irreconcilable positions. Such a front should not aspire to homogeneity, as if to mirror the AKP from below, but should instead organize around a coherent ideological vision and patiently build a counter-hegemonic bloc. While this bloc can take as its starting point the split referendum, it cannot afford to limit itself to the fifty per cent. Instead, and in response to the AKP’s new politics of division built on the multiplication of the figure of the “internal enemy,” popular forces should be re-activated around a radical democratic agenda.

It is time for oppositional forces to be bold and offer an alternative vision. In my view, this vision should embrace egalitarian democracy, with a strong commitment to social justice, libertarian secularism, the embrace of a pluri-heritage, multilingual, multicultural citizenship, and reconciliation with the atrocities and injustices of the past. This vision must address the disenchantment with the increasingly narrow and elitist forms of representative democracy that have enabled the monopolization of power and made possible the AKP’s redirection of popular desire, transforming Turkey’s break with the past into a project of top-down reengineering that involves the institutionalization of elective autocracy. Only a substantive counter-vision and the real emergence of constituent energies can counter the myth of constituent power that is currently enlisted in the service of the second founding. July 15 has shown that the best means to counter the monopolization of the political sphere is the masses’ willingness to make themselves heard. Until then, it seems, we will remain trapped in Year One of the new regime’s fictitious revolutionary calendar.

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Notes

1 The term comes from Gramsci, indicating a coalition of social forces that partake in and help reproduce the hegemony of the dominant class. See Gramsci, Selections, 60-1, 105, 168.
2 Unfortunately, I do not have the space to discuss the different class components of this historic bloc and the policies of their mobilization. See Yankaya, Yeni Islami Burjuwazi and Tugal, Fall of the Turkish Model. For the theoretical background, see the analysis of fascism in Italy and Germany in Poulantzas, Fascism and Dictatorship.
3 Gülen and his followers are inspired by Said-i Nursi, a revivalist theologian who preached a rationalized Islam, with a heavily modernizing outlook and long-standing interest in educational reform. The Kemalist state considered Nursi a threat to secularism and exiled him from his hometown, but it could not contain the spread of his views and the growth in his following, which has come to be known as the Nur Movement. Far from monolithic, the Nur movement had split on various occasions. Gülen emerged as the leader of one of its strongest branches, actively organizing since the late 1960s. Gülen’s views were disseminated by his preaching, cassette recordings of his preaching, regularly held conversations with followers, youth training camps, dormitories, after-school programs, and university exam prep courses, thus growing over time. The followers of Gülen, known also as the “Community” [Cemaat] or the “Service” Movement [Hizmet], view Gülen as a messiah. For a study of the Gülen movement, see Turam, Between Islam and the State and M. Yavuz and Esposito, eds., Turkish Islam.
4 For a critical analysis of raison d’état, see Foucault, Security, Territory, Population.
5 For the distinction between state power and state apparatus, see Althusser, “Ideology.”
6 However, according to Agamben, the state of exception enables an assumption of extraordinary powers that invariably collapses the separation between the executive and the legislative branches, thereby delineating “a threshold of indeterminacy between democracy and absolutism.” Thus, modern democracies bear the tendencies of absolutism within them. Agamben, State of Exception, 3, 18.
7 For CHP’s diagnosis, see T24, “Kılıçdaroğlu.”
8 Arslan, “Kılıçdaroğlu.”
9 Schmitt, Dictatorship, 112-30.
10 Similarly, it is difficult to measure it vis-à-vis the markers of the republican tradition. This is because in the classical republican tradition, in which there is a role for the institution of dictatorship in extraordinary situations, there are strict temporal limits and specific goals imposed upon the office of the dictator. Such thinkers as Machiavelli and Rousseau have warned that going beyond such constraints can easily transform dictatorship into tyranny. It is closer in this sense to the French revolutionary republicanism, in which dictatorship assumes constituent powers. For a brief overview of dictatorship, see Bobbio, Democracy and Dictatorship, 158-66.
11 Another way to address this regime change is through the concept of “competitive authoritarianism,” which also emphasizes the dramatic nature of the transformation. For a discussion of this approach and why this conceptualization is better than commonly used alternatives such as illiberal or majoritarian democracy, see Esen and Gümüşçü, “Rising Competitive Authoritarianism.”
13 For an interpretation of mass resistance on July 15 as Turkey’s first popular revolution, see Bilici, “Darbe ve Türkiye’nin.”
15 For the official narrative, see Cumbhurbakanligi Genel Sekreterligi, 15 Temmuz; for a pro-Gülenist narrative, see Stockholm Center for Freedom, July 15.
16 This violence reproduced a militaristic masculinity. See Açiksöz, “He Is a Lynched Soldier Now.”
17 Türkmen and Küçük, “Gezi’den demokrasi.”
18 Fraenkel, Dual State.
19 For an incisive analysis of the constitutional reform process both prior to and during AKP rule and the failure of the process to create a new constitution, see Arato, Post Sovereign Constitution, 223-65.
While the trials were initially hailed as the AKP’s effort to roll back the influence of the military to assert democratic control, they have been politically highly charged and controversial because the conspiracy allegations were largely prosecuted on manufactured evidence and with great procedural irregularities, and interpreted as the instrumentalization of the courts to eliminate the secular strongholds of the regime. See Gürsoy, “The Changing Role of the Military”; and Aydını, “Turkey under the AKP.” For the irregularities in these trials, see Dogan and Rodríguez, *Yargı, Cemaat*. For a critical analysis of the Ergenekon trial as the production of the “deep state,” see Ertür, “The Conspiracy Archive,” 177-94.

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See the statistics kept by Turkey Purge: https://turkeypurge.com/.

For the increase in the prison population over time, see the website for Turkey’s General Directorate of Prisons and Detention Houses: http://www.cte.adalet.gov.tr/.

Derrida, “Autoimmunity.”

See https://turkeypurge.com/.

After a year, as a result of many grievances, and as many as twelve thousand applications at the European Court of Human Rights, the government has set up a State of Emergency Commission to review some of these decisions. However, we have yet to see how effectively this commission will be in redressing the legal infractions caused by the executive decrees. Furthermore, various of the executive decrees have included ad hoc and limited measures to redress some of the earlier errors, as a result of which a few hundred civil servants have been restored to their posts. In addition, a few foundations, some associations, and a limited number of newspapers have been allowed to re-open.

For an analysis of violence during the period between the two elections, see Bargu, “Another Necropolitics.”

Demirkent, “Yeni Bir Devlet.”

For succinct accounts of the peace process, see Özpek, *The Peace Process*, and Basaran, *Frontline Turkey*. See also Hakyemez, “Turkey’s Failed Peace Process.”

For theoretical analyses of the Rojava experience, see Küçük and Özselçuk, “The Rojava Experience”; and Üstündağ, “Self-Defense.”

For a tally of recent curfews and casualties, see Türkiye İnsan Hakları Vakfı, “Curfews.” See also Peoples’ Democratic Party, “Urgent Call.”

See European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission), *Turkey*. For an analysis of the amendments included in the referendum, see Tombus, “Fall of Turkish Democracy.”

For an analysis of irregularities in the referendum, see Klimek, et al., “Election Forensic Analysis.”

For the process of AKP’s constitution of hegemony, see Tuğal, *Passive Revolution*, 42-56.

This foreign policy orientation was interpreted as a means for achieving hegemony in former Ottoman territories. Most often associated with Ahmet Davutoğlu, it has also been criticized as a form of pan-Islamism. See Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik*. For the critique, see Özkirimli, “Turkey’s Imperial Fantasy.”

For an analysis of how the AKP initially reconfigured nationalist identity on religious grounds, see Koyuncu, “Benim Milletim…”

Yardımcı-Geyikci, “Gezi Park Protests.”


For an analysis of hunger strikes in Turkey’s prisons, see Bargu, *Starve and Immolate*.

### Bibliography


