

On Turkey's Classical Revolution of July 15

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Abstract

The British, American and French revolutions are called as classical revolutions. They carry three main components of revolutions: a period of time in which political changes occur expeditiously; an intensive competition and/or fight between different groups to monopolize political power; and relatively extensive public/popular participation during almost every phase of the ongoing political transformation process. The same goes for what the Turkish people committed on July 15. It is a big event that has the three components of revolutions. Turkey is now among the nations that have a saga to support freedom and democracy.

Keywords

Revolution, political change, violence and revolution, coup, political system, democracy

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On July 15, 2016, Turkey went through an unprecedented event. Some soldiers, who were associated with the so-called Gülen cult, attempted to carry out a military coup against the Erdoğan administration. In a country so familiar with military coups, it would not have been a surprise if they had succeeded in overthrowing the government and had captured political authority. However, what many inside and outside Turkey would have expected to happen did not come true. No matter how perfectly planned, the coup attempt failed due to a combined set of factors with which I will deal later on in some detail.

It is very important to name these sorts of historical events, as they eventually become among the cornerstones of the political systems and political cultures of the countries in which they take place. The same applies to the July 15, 2016, event in Turkey. How is the most important event of Turkish political history to be known? Commentators have frequently used terms like “glorious resistance” and “great revolution.” In my opinion, the event rightly deserves both names. However, in this article, I will argue that it is more appropriate to call the July 15 event a revolution.

Definition or Elements of Revolution

Roger Scruton points out that “political scientists are deeply divided concerning both the meaning of the term ‘revolution’ and explanation of the phenomena denoted by it” (Scruton 1996: 479). However, this does not mean that political scientists agree on nothing about the elements and content of revolution. First of all, revolution means big change (Davies 1991: 229). In many cases, the words “revolution” and “change” are used identically or interchangeably. Change happens everywhere and at every time, even in most conservative circles and regimes, but revolutionary change is vast and happens very fast. It is because of this that the term “revolution” “suggests profound change over a short period of time, rather than evolution through stages or incremental adjustments to existing social, political and cultural arrangements” (Axford et. al. 1997: 151). This depiction of revolution makes us understand that revolution is quite the opposite of evolution, and it refers to total and wholesale change not piece-by-piece or incremental change. However, there is a matter here for more discussion—whether or not revolution includes social and cultural changes and whether the term must be reserved for political changes.

Revolutions can be defined as periods in which fast and comprehensive changes in political systems take place. Thus, a revolutionary period can

be defined by three characteristics: 1) a period of time in which political changes occur expeditiously, 2) an intensive competition and/or fight between different groups to monopolize political power, and 3) relatively extensive public/popular participation during almost every phase of the ongoing political transformation process. In a real revolution, all of these factors come together and function effectively. If the event lacks any of these characteristics, it cannot rightly be named a revolution. This is why we ought to be hesitant in calling every military coup a revolution, as some commentators do (Yayla 2015: 369-70).

However, one point needs more clarification. The term “revolution” connotes, especially when used in a romantic sense and context, radical changes that completely sweep away previous institutions, rules, and social and political entities. This approach is misleading. Revolution might mean significant change, but on no account does it lead to full change in everything. The idea that it can be possible to change everything at once and forever is an unrealistic, false approach, refuted by human nature. In the case of the three classical revolutions, including the French one, it is possible to detect continuity in social and political life. There is nothing surprising in this, as life depends upon repetition and continuity. So revolution does not mean change of everything in the sense of recreating social life from top to bottom.

One more issue discussed in the literature on revolutions is whether or not revolution includes or should include violence. Until as late as the 1990s, many political scientists saw widespread and intensive violence as one of the main components of revolution. However, this understanding started changing with the non-violence of the so-called “velvet revolutions” of Central and Eastern Europe in which some countries got rid of horrible Communist regimes. As Axford and his friends say, “revolutions are usually bloody, and violence is their stock-in trade, but there have been exceptions to this rule, some of them quite recent” (Axford et. al. 1997: 155).

In this article, I am not interested in such issues as the reasons for revolution, the sequence of events in a revolutionary process, and setbacks of well-known revolutions (Skocpol 1979) and they require a larger article. What I want to do here is to concentrate on classical revolutions and then try to trace the footprints of classical revolutions in the July 15, 2016, revolution in Turkey.

Classical Revolutions

In political and historical studies, the English Glorious Revolution (1688), the American Revolution (1776), and the French Revolution (1789) are usually cited as examples of classical revolution. In the 20th century, there have been many periods of political unrest, rebellion, and change, which some call “revolutions,” and some do not.

In fact, the classical revolutions mentioned above had certain similarities and differences. They, no doubt, included violent conflict between rival political claimants, caused profound changes in their respective lands, and involved some kind of popular participation (Bauer 2004)

The English Revolution

In the English case, two claimants for political power appeared. King James II succeeded Charles II amid heated religious disagreements and conflicts. He claimed to rule the country by divine right and stated that his right to rule and his authority could not be objected to or challenged. Despite being Catholic, he could make neither the Catholics nor the Protestants happy. He also angered the English Parliament, which had been gaining strength against the throne in the previous decades. Finally, Parliament removed James II from the throne and replaced him with Mary and William of Orange in November 1688.

The agreement with the new holders of the throne constituted a significant step towards establishing the constitutional order of Britain. After the Revolution, the king became a symbolic figure. England moved towards a constitutional monarchy and the first parliamentary system. It was a peaceful transformation and became formally known as the “Glorious Revolution.” The revolution did not witness the deaths of thousands of people; however, in previous decades, England had experienced a civil war, which can be assumed helped to pave the way for sweeping political change. The Glorious Revolution, to a large extent, shaped the British political system, and Parliament, which represented the people, was the main player in the game.

The American Revolution

The American Revolution was, to a large extent, identical to a war of independence. The colonials objected to the authority of King George III

and the British Parliament, but on no account were they slaves in shackles. In March 1770, British soldiers panicked when civilians threw snowballs at them, and they opened fire. Five civilians died, but in a short period of time the event became known as the Boston Massacre throughout all the colonies—one of the smallest massacres in world history.

Local merchants decided to stop selling British tea and refused to unload the tea from the three ships anchored in Boston Harbor. On the night of December 16, 1773, 60 locals went to the harbor and threw the tea into the sea. The British Parliament was angered by this act and imposed a ban on the usage of Boston Harbor until the owners of the tea were fully compensated. Parliament also declared that Boston would be governed by British soldiers commanded by the British General Thomas Gage.

The Continental Congress gathered in 1774, and sent a petition to King George III and Parliament, asking for the harbor to be opened, the soldiers removed, and the taxes abolished. The petition did not solve the problem or bring peace. Skirmishes between colonials and British soldiers broke out, evolving into full-scale war. In the beginning, it seemed impossible that the colonials would win against Britain, a huge military world power that had recently won the Seven Years War. However, in 1778, things started to change. Britain's old foe, France, decided to side with the American colonies. Spain and the Netherlands then also entered the war. In 1781, George Washington captured the biggest British army unit at Yorktown, Virginia. The colonies gained independence and started to construct a new political system.

The colonials fought for their independence against an imperial power with which they shared many social and cultural values. According to one interpretation, they preferred to set up a republic instead of a kingdom because they had conducted their war of independence against the British kingdom. The colonies desired to achieve two important aims at the same time: to create a new common political entity and to keep their autonomy. The American founding fathers were also sensitive to achieving or, to put it better, protecting individual freedom. Thus, they created a federal system to please the colonies and implemented checks and balances in the sense of constitutional governance traditions to serve individual freedom.

The French Revolution

France was later than Britain, both in having a constitutional order and achieving an industrial revolution. It was poor and militarily weak. Out of hostility towards Britain, France helped the American colonies to defeat the British Empire. The French people followed the fight of the American colonies with great admiration. Ironically, they had to obey a king in their own country.

France was a country of three classes. The first class consisted of the Roman Catholic priests (the Church) who did not have to pay taxes as Catholicism was the official religion of France. This class had other privileges too. The second class, which included almost 30,000 people, lived in large manors, farms inherited from their ancestors. They had a high social and official status, serving as generals, ambassadors, and ministers, and very few of them paid taxes. The third class was the largest, numbering almost 26 million. It included lawyers, merchants, doctors, farmers, etc. They were the people who paid taxes, even for basic needs. They also paid taxes to the church.

The French people were poor, and in the seasons of bad harvest they went hungry. The state was also broke. King Louis XVI wanted to impose taxes on the aristocracy, but was not successful. Social unrest seemed inevitable. As the American Declaration of Independence was translated into French and published, millions of French people read it and learned about freedom and equality.

King Louis XVI pressed for taxes. The aristocracy declared that they would agree to be taxed, provided that the representatives of the three classes came together and united on the necessity of the taxes. The king accepted, and the representatives of the three classes assembled. However, the representatives of the third class (named the public or the people) were discriminated against and made to understand that they were not as important as the other classes. The voting method in the Assembly also caused discontent among the representatives of the third class. As the third class included a huge majority of the French people, its representatives changed the name of the Assembly to the “National Assembly” and convinced some of the priests and aristocrats to act together with them. Other aristocrats rushed to ask the king to stop the new Assembly from functioning, fearing that it would take

decisions that would harm their interests. The king accepted and locked the meeting hall.

The new Assembly insisted on gathering and decided to write a new constitution. The king ordered the National Assembly to dissolve, but his order was rejected. He then decided to use force and called upon his special guard unit of soldiers from Switzerland. Hearing that the king's guardians were coming to suppress them, Parisians declared that they would resist. They attacked the Bastille prison on July 14, 1789, to find an arsenal with which to free prisoners whom they considered political victims of the regime. The Bastille only housed seven prisoners, and the prison was protected by almost ten soldiers commanded by a liberal-minded moderate official. The mob captured the Bastille not after a fierce fight but a feast for its leaders offered by the commander. After the feast, the leaders of the mob killed their host and chopped off his head. However, later on, as the history of the French Revolution was being rewritten, a story about the Bastille was produced that was comparable to that of the Boston Massacre. Bastille Day was first celebrated by the Third Republic in 1880, almost a century after the Revolution took place. The violence of the Revolution grew in extent, costing the lives of thousands, among whom were not only aristocrats but also ordinary people.

After the French Revolution, France adopted a republican political structure. The newly emerged republic was based on the idea of equality for all citizens. It produced the French Declaration of Human and Citizen Rights. The French revolutionaries also took a position not only against the dynasty but also the religious establishment (the Church) and even religion itself, and created the French concept of *laïcité*. More than two centuries after the French Revolution, the French people are still divided into two large groups: those who are for the Revolution and those who are against it.

Thus, the French Revolution marked a break in French political history. Although it is debatable how successful it was in reaching its declared aims, the French Revolution created a completely new political structure instead of restoring what the French people called the *ancien régime*.

There have been different approaches to explaining the French Revolution, which some have praised and some have damned, not only in France but

worldwide. In other words, the French Revolution has been the most influential among all the classical revolutions. It shaped to a large extent the thought and political systems thereafter. As Raymond Plant indicated, “the French Revolution still exercised an enormous influence on left wing and right wing thinkers (Plant 2004: 380-409).

Not all writers praise the French Revolution and its impact on humanity. Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn, a European-American thinker, calls the French Revolution a “heinous iniquity” and says that it is historically “the mother of the most of the ideological evils besetting civilization not only of the West but of the entire World (Kuehnelt- Leddihn 1990: 57)

Turkish Political System up to July 15, 2016

Turkey lived through and witnessed an unprecedented event, not only in Turkish history but probably in the history of the world on July 15, 2016. The Turkish people defeated an attempted coup by the military without the use of weapons. In order to fully grasp what happened and why it is unique and so important, we need to point out the main characteristics of the Turkish political system before July 15, 2016.

The Turkish Republic was founded on October 29, 1923, after a war of independence as a relatively plural and democratic political entity. Then, in 1925, it was turned into a single-party dictatorship that lasted until 1945. After the end of World War II, Turkey had to choose between the democratic West and the totalitarian Soviet bloc. Due to several domestic and international factors, the political leadership of the time decided to unite with the West and started the process of transfer from a closed political system into a democratic one. On May 14, 1950, Turkey had its first democratic elections, which the opposition Democrat Party (DP) won, replacing the CHP.

However, the CHP and its allies in the bureaucracy and society were discontented with the new regime. As early as 1952, only two years after the DP took office, army officers began to make plans to overthrow the democratic government. They finally staged a military coup on May 27, 1960, the first coup in the history of the Turkish Republic. After a show trial, the army executed Prime Minister Adnan Menderes, and had a new constitution prepared that allocated to the army a special and

undemocratic position and, overall, established what we call a “bureaucratic tutelage system.” In the new political structure, the democratically elected government was given limited scope, and the remaining state authority was reserved for the bureaucracy, with the army at the center.

All democratically elected governments showed discontent with the bureaucratic tutelage system and made small attempts to change its denominators. The biggest effort in this respect occurred after the AK Party came to power in November 2002. During the AK Party era, the bureaucratic tutelage system has been pushed back step by step. In his fight against bureaucratic state power, then-Prime Minister (now President) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan needed allies in the bureaucracy as he, despite having political power, lacked bureaucratic cadres. Within the state structure, the main bureaucratic groups were the Kemalists and the Gülenists. As they came from similar religious and cultural backgrounds, Erdoğan allied with the Gülenists against the Kemalist cadres. However, the Gülenists were a deep-rooted, clandestine group with their own ambitions and plans. The aim of the Gülenists was to seize power within the bureaucracy so that, no matter which political party was in office, they would have the real power.

Erdoğan sensed the Gülenist make-up in the bureaucracy in 2010 and started preparations to take steps to curb the Gülenist bureaucracy. This was the beginning of a still-ongoing fight between the two powers: democratically elected, legitimate, and transparent government on one side, and a hidden, bureaucratic, totalitarian power on the other.

The Gülenist movement made several attempts to bring Erdoğan's governments down. It tried to arrest the head of the National Intelligence Agency and, through him, reach Erdoğan in February 2012. The attempt failed. The Gülenist gang then tried to benefit from the Gezi Revolts in June 2013. Gülen's men in the police and judiciary made an important effort to oust Erdoğan on December 17–25, 2013. This attempt also failed.

The Coup Attempt of the Gülenist Army

Everyone in Turkey was aware that the Gülenists had infiltrated the army, but no one knew with certainty how large their infiltration was (Özçelik 2016). This became clear on the night of July 15, 2016. The army officers who were GTO (Gülenist Terrorist Organization) members attempted a

violent military coup. It was the bloodiest coup attempt in the history of the Republic. More than 200 people were killed, and thousands more were wounded. The people resisted the Gülenist army officers and defeated the coup.

Many domestic and foreign observers of Turkish politics had expected such an attempt by the Gülenists. But why did it come on July 15, 2016? One might consider two reasons: 1) the judiciary was about to arrest many Gülenist officers who had participated in plots against non-Gülenist army officers; 2) the government was about to have almost 2,000 Gülenist officers retired at the High Military Commission meeting in early August 2016. The Gülenists understood that they would lose an important part of their manpower in the army. This forced them to begin the coup as soon as possible. As the National Intelligence Agency learned of the attempted coup, the coup plotters changed their timing and began to implement their plan at 21:00 on July 15, instead of 03:00 on July 16, 2016.

One point needs to be specifically mentioned here. The Gülenists had been able to present themselves to the outside world—though, of course, not to the vast majority of the Turkish people—as a peaceful movement of moderate Islam that defended secularism and fought radical Islam. They also managed to portray Erdoğan as a radical Islamist and Turkey as a country run by Islamists. To do this, they used totalitarian disinformation tactics. In fact, it is Gülen and his men who are radical. Gülen wishes to create a political system that resembles that of Iran. His ultimate aim is world domination.

The coup attempt failed. Several factors contributed to its failure. President Erdoğan and Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım declared that they would resist, even at the cost of their own lives. Erdoğan called on the people to defend democracy in the streets. Millions of people from every walk of life and political bent poured into the streets unarmed and challenged the soldiers. Public prosecutors issued a warrant to the police forces to arrest soldiers who were trying to overthrow the government. Turkish media, for the first time in the history of the Turkish republic, stood united against the coup attempt. The police bravely fought against the soldiers taking part in the coup, and army officers who opposed the coup attempt and were loyal to the constitutional order resisted the Gülenist officers actively or passively.

Sweeping Changes in Political Structure and Culture

The Gülenists tried to renew and accelerate the Kemalist bureaucratic tutelage system. That the coup attempt failed, or to put it better, that Turkish politics and the people defeated it, will have consequences for Turkish politics and the political system. Turkish politics will push the bureaucratic tutelage system back even further. It is certain that Turkey will be more democratic afterwards. After the failed coup attempt, Turkey began to reconstruct the state structure. Of special importance in this respect are the reforms in the army. For decades, the army in general and army generals in particular enjoyed a fairly autonomous position with regard to the democratic government. Generals saw themselves as on a par with high-level politicians, and even thought of themselves as superior to the prime ministers.

Now all of this is changing. Military schools at the level of high schools have been, rightly, closed down as they had been completely infiltrated by the Gülenists. Commanders of the army, navy, and air forces will be under the command of the Minister of National Defense, something that has been talked about for decades but has never come to pass. The National Intelligence Agency will be restructured.

More importantly, there is a spirit of reconciliation in the country. Turkish politics is excessively divided, but all main political parties united to oppose the coup. Political leaders now use softer language towards each other. People from all political parties participated in demonstrations against the coup. These developments all give us hope for the future of Turkish democracy.

July 15 Revolution of the Turks

It is not an exaggeration to call the Turkish people's defeat of the coup attempt a revolution. It has the main characteristics of the classical revolutions. It caused or paved the way for sweeping political change. The Gülenists competed illegitimately for political power and lost the fight. Millions of people joined the resistance against the coup attempt. Now we can say that Turkey is among the countries that have a saga to support its struggle to reach a consolidated democratic system. Thus, Turkey's July 15 resistance against the Gülenist coup attempt is no less a revolution than the English, American, and French Revolutions.

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15 Temmuz Türkiye Klasik Devrimi Üzerine

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Öz

İngiliz, Amerikan ve Fransız devrimleri klasik devrimler olarak adlandırılırlar. Devrimlerin üç temel ögesini barındırırlar: politik değişikliklerin süratle meydana geldiği zaman dilimi; politik gücü tekelleştirmek için farklı gruplar arasındaki yoğun rekabet ve/veya çatışma; ve devam etmekte olan politik dönüşümün hemen hemen her safhasında nispeten geniş çaplı bir halk katılımı. Aynen 15 Temmuz'da Türk Milleti'nin yaptığı gibi. 15 Temmuz devrimlerin üç ögesini taşıyan oldukça önemli bir olaydır. Türkiye şuanda özgürlük ve demokrasiyi savunan destanlara sahip milletler arasındadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Devrim, politik değişiklik, şiddet ve devrim, darbe, politik sistem, demokrasi

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Классическая Революция Турции в 15 Июля

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Аннотация

Британские, американские и французские революции называются классическими революциями. Они включают три основные элементы революций: время которое произошли политические изменения; интенсивная конкуренция и/или конфликты между различными группами, чтобы монополизировать политическую власть; и почти сравнительно широкое участие общественности на каждом этапе текущей политической трансформации. Также как и поступил народ Турции в 15 Июля. 15 Июль - является очень важным событием носящий три элемента революции. Турция в настоящее время входит в число стран которые защитят свободу и демократию.

Ключевые слова

Революция, политические изменения, насилие и революция, переворот, политическая система, демократия

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