It is indeed a strange feeling when you think your country has just narrowly escaped a military coup to find itself in the midst of a counter coup by the very government the attempted coup tried to overthrow. But are things as simple as they seem? I would tend to suggest that the coup and counter coup argument is one of perspective. One could interpret the developments in Turkey as a victory of the people and the country’s legitimate government over the putschists. Full stop. The government’s legitimacy cannot be denied even if by western standards it has been backsliding for some time in terms of press freedoms or the impartiality of the judiciary. All political parties represented in Parliament came out strongly in their condemnation of the coup attempt, having themselves suffered historically by the many coups that have taken place in the country’s brief history. Of course, though values are universal, the state of democracy is itself a matter of serious debate in a number of EU member states these days.

What is at play though, which leads to multiple interpretations, is the future direction of the country. Will it continue being the top down secular, western leaning state that Ataturk created on the back of the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire or will it evolve into one where religion plays a role in shaping the identity of the country? In other words, one could argue, one religion – secularism – is being replaced by another – Islam.

After all, Ataturk himself is reported to have said sometime in 1926-27 that: “I have no religion, and at times I wish all religions at the bottom of the sea. He is a weak ruler who needs religion to uphold his government; it is as if he would catch his people in a trap. My people are going to learn the principles of democracy, the dictates of truth and the teachings of science. Superstition must go. Let them worship as they will; every man can follow his own conscience, provided it does not interfere with sane reason or bid him act against the liberty of his fellow-men.” Yet secularism has been a top down construct in Turkish society since its founding in 1923. One may ask why in a secular country like the United States, it is acceptable for the President to end all his speeches with “God Bless America” or for all the police officers at the press conference this last Sunday in Baton Rouge, Louisiana in the wake of the deadly assault on 6 law enforcement officials to ask for everyone’s prayers and God’s help to help the community heal.
And hence the confusion by some as to whether Turkey’s current government is legitimate and whether it is a democracy. As a wise secular Turkish friend of mine noted on Facebook: “Only because someone is dressed in Islamic clothing isn't evidence that he is antidemocratic; just as someone's western uniform doesn't make them a democrat. Just sayin’.”

The 50% and growing Turkish electorate that votes steadily for Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the AKP represented the disenfranchised that had no voice in the political system until Erdogan and the AKP broke through and won the elections in 2002, on the back of the success of Necmettin Erbakan’s Islamic Welfare Party. This electorate now feels empowered, justifiably so, as the AKP steady grasp on power has grown, it has become more enfranchised, in particular in terms of its expectations to profess and practice without fear of expressing openly its piety. After all, the AKP’s hold on power has seen a Turkish economic miracle evolve at an average growth rate of 4.9% per annum between 2002 and 2014. The challenge, of course, is not encroaching upon the rights of other citizens whose belief system might be different but just as legitimate.

The challenge for Turkey is that the change in majority has come about through the politics of polarization rather than consensus-building. One could ask whether this has not always been the case? -- “plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose.” Hence, the opportunity provided by the attempted coup to purge, to cleanse…real or imagined or potential enemies in the expectation that a modicum of internal stability is reached. This in turn implies an existential battle for the soul of Turkey including what sort of democracy will emerge from it.

Will the new Turkey roll back much of the acquis of the country’s Kemalist past such as the right of women to vote, a Roman alphabet, a European legal system and a Western style constitution “with divisions of powers giving the parliament predominant control”? Some changes may be in the offing, in particular with regard to switching to a Presidential system thereby restricting Parliament’s powers. According to a June 2016 Poll, support for a Presidential system had reached close to 60% (58.9% as opposed to 56.1% in February). The support is understandable given the traditional weakness of the political system which led to successive military coups – some successful, some not – since 1960. In the polarized Turkish political setting, the possibility that the country’s current President who is already constitutionally strengthened in that he is the country’s first directly elected President since August 2014, could become the first one with extended powers, contributed to the coup attempt. After all, the polarization has been part of Erdogan’s modus operandi. On the other hand, the AKP government has been a stable one with its majority unchallenged thereby weakening the argument that justified a coup as previous military interventions came as a consequence of extended political instability.

The coup attempt has therefore led the government and Erdogan to the conclusion that it needs to stamp out whatever opposition within the state institutions that may challenge it once and for all – be it in the shape of Fethullah Gulen supports or secular elites that are wary of Erdogan’s growing reach. Everything else, including the...
arguments that Gulen needs to be returned to Turkey to face charges of treason and terrorism is meant to rally the troops around the government’s cause.

Although, this continued mutation of Turkish politics thus finds the country currently in an accelerated process of transition as a consequence of the attempted coup, we should keep in perspective the fact that Erdogan has conducted himself as a rational actor throughout his tenure in office even after tinkering with other possible alternatives for his country. He might be expounding his own variant of Turkish exceptionalism in juxtaposition to the ancient regime’s strand, yet Turkey remains a key NATO member state and committed to the EU accession process in the knowledge that without these anchors, it would be yet another actor that imports insecurity rather than exporting security. Erdogan and the AKP have worked hard since 2002 to enhance Turkey’s soft power across the globe, to ensure that the country is a key regional energy hub, and that it is an indispensable component of the global economy. The government would thus be seriously damaging itself and the country if it does anything to damage these dynamics.

As we wait for the dust to settle over the next weeks or months, we should take stock of the remarkable turnaround where the military has lost the battle of perception as the sole defender of the interests of the Turkish nation having to share this privileged space with the thousands waving the Turkish flag having heeded the government’s call to fill the squares since the tide turned against the misguided or anachronistic coup of 15 July. While Turkey’s political and systemic mutations are bound to continue, they need not necessarily be a cause of concern.

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Significant Turkish Coup Attempt Sites in Ankara

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