

Five minutes with Dani Rodrik: “The West has made a serious mistake in failing to see the wide range of abuses that the Turkish regime has been engaged in”

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Around 300 officers in the Turkish military were jailed in 2010-2011 over an alleged coup to overthrow the Turkish government. The controversy over the arrests is still on-going, with all officers still in jail released earlier this month pending a retrial. In an interview with EUROPPE's editor Stuart Brown, Dani Rodrik discusses the case, the impact it has had on Turkish politics, and why it would be a mistake to interpret the removal of the military from politics in this way as a process of democratisation.



You have written and spoken a great deal about the criminal cases pursued against figures in the Turkish military in relation to the alleged ‘Sledgehammer’ plot to overthrow the Turkish government. For those who lack an understanding of these events, why were they so important for the country?

It was a rather remarkable experience where the military and the secular elites, who seemed to be so powerful in governing Turkey, effectively lost control in a short space of time. This happened between 2007 and 2011, roughly speaking. On the one hand, superficially this is a good thing because the military don't belong in politics, but on the other hand the manner in which this transition was accomplished through Kafkaesque trials based on bogus evidence has left a very unhappy legacy for the Turkish polity going forward.

The allegation was that the 300 or so officers who were put on trial had planned an elaborate coup in 2003. We now know that the planning documents which described this attempted coup were forged. There is no substance to the so called ‘Sledgehammer’ coup, which in fact never existed and is a figment of the imagination of the forgers who prepared this plan.

The political alliance that made this possible was an alliance between the Gülen movement and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government. They also received very important legitimising support from much of the intelligentsia as well, which mistakenly interpreted what was happening as a process of democratisation.

In terms of the overall purpose, there were several motivations. It was aimed at hitting the military and was also partly payback for the perceived persecution by the military of religious conservative groups in Turkey. It was a very successful method whereby the military and the secular establishment could be put on the defensive and effectively deprived of their power. What's unfortunate is that the demilitarisation of Turkish politics had to take place using such dirty tricks.

You've mentioned that this was interpreted by some figures, including those outside Turkey, as a process of democratisation. Is there any basis behind this interpretation?

The purpose of demilitarisation is to pave the way for democracy. If the manner in which demilitarisation occurs does not pave the way for democracy, and instead entrenches forces whose modus operandi is fundamentally undemocratic, then what you get is not democracy, but simply another kind of authoritarianism.

That's exactly what has happened in Turkey. The political groups which have been strengthened – the Gülen movement and the AKP – are currently operating under fundamentally undemocratic methods. Anyone can see that today Turkey is as far away from democracy as it has been in quite some time. It's therefore very difficult to talk

about democratic gains under the current context.

What has been the wider legacy of the trials, particularly in terms of the recent protest movements which have taken place in Turkey?

I think these political trials have entrenched a highly authoritarian style of governance. This is evident in the way that Erdoğan behaves and that's certainly an important legacy of the events. There is plenty of opposition to Erdoğan – and the Gezi movement and some of the events that happened after the Soma mining disaster are evidence of that.

Unfortunately, this grassroots opposition currently finds no counterpart in organised political movements or in the existing political parties. Until such an organised political movement emerges, which spans the traditional divides in Turkey and which is at once secular democratic and liberal, it is difficult to see how the current political dominance of the AKP can be overcome.

Another aspect of this whole situation is the question of why so many people outside Turkey, including Turkey's friends in Europe and the United States, misread what was going on so badly. I think the answer is that it's sometimes difficult to distinguish a shift in power from one dominant group to another from a process of democratisation. This is because this shift comes with a certain loosening of the old taboos and restrictions associated with the old dominant elites.

So early in the process it was understandable to some extent that what was essentially a power grab by the AKP and the Gülenists was viewed as democratisation. But I think that since 2011 the West has made a serious mistake in failing to see the wide range of abuses that the Turkish regime has been engaged in.

Dani Rodrik will be speaking on this topic at an [LSE European Institute event](#) on Wednesday 25 June at 6.30PM

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Note: This article gives the views of the interviewee, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. Feature image credit: Andrzej Barabasz (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

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About the interviewee

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