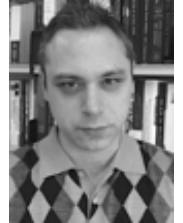


The Gezi Park protests illustrate the fall of the military as a political actor in Turkey

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A series of protests took place in Turkey this summer following a dispute over the redevelopment of the Taksim Gezi Park in Istanbul. [Burak Kadercan](#) writes that one largely overlooked aspect to the protests was the absence of Turkey's military, which has traditionally played a strong role in Turkish politics. Tracing the rise and fall of the military as a political actor in the country, he argues that direct military intervention in politics is now no longer an option. Nevertheless, Turkey's political situation is so fluid that the possibility of a military resurgence cannot be ruled out long-term.



The summer of 2013 was a remarkable episode in the ever-unpredictable story of democratisation in the Middle East, especially in the context of civil-military relations. Not surprisingly, the Egyptian case has attracted much of the attention. As hundreds of thousands of protesters took to the streets to criticise Mohammed Morsi's Freedom and Justice Party for its increasingly autocratic and "Islamic" posture, the Egyptian military under General Sisi toppled the government, suspending the constitution. The subsequent protests by the supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood were crushed violently by security forces, fuelling a series of tragic events that claimed the lives of many. For lack of a better word, the future of Egyptian democracy looks bleak. And the armed forces will most likely play a very important role in that future.

On the other hand, what did *not* happen in Turkey when hundreds of thousands of protesters took to the streets in June has attracted little attention. The military, the pivotal actor in Turkish politics since 1960 with four coups under its belt, was not there. Not at all. While counterfactual reasoning – with its emphasis on "what if" questions – is a tricky business in the presence of too many variables, it can still provide an insight into the extent of the military's now-lost political prowess. What would have happened if the Gezi Park protests broke out in 2009, when the army was still considered a potent political force? Suggesting that Turkey in 2009 would have looked like Egypt in 2013 would be a stretch, for Turkey is not Egypt. Yet, it is difficult to make the case that everything would have been the same. The question then becomes, what happened to the military?

The short answer is that as its political might grew, the army's mode of involvement in politics became too sophisticated and too bureaucratised for its own sake, eventually rendering it too "cumbersome" a political actor to keep up with the Justice and Development Party's (JDP) "agile" and pragmatic modus operandi. As tensions between the army and the JDP were boiling by the end of the last decade, the latter was able to catch the former off-guard and effectively pacify it by pushing forward cases such as *Ergenekon* and *Balyoz* (where numerous members of the military were charged with crimes that ranged from conspiring against the elected government to outright terrorism). At the same time, the JDP galvanised public support behind Prime Minister Erdoğan, who himself had been a victim of the military's overbearing political might in the past.



Credit: Michael Fleshman

Rough play: how the armed forces “quit” politics

Make no mistake. Few would complain about army’s exit from politics. However, considering the ‘rough play’ between the army and the JDP that eventually led to the arrests of dozens of generals, countless officers, and even academics and journalists, few would defend the process of transformation for its fairness or smoothness. The trials that dismantled the political prowess of the military are usually defended as a means to an end (further democratisation), but rarely for their own sake.



Ilker Basbug (Public Domain)

There are many reasons for this ‘bad taste’ that the trials left in the public consciousness. For one, there remain doubts about the reliability of some of the evidence provided by the prosecutors, one of the most notorious being digital Microsoft Word files allegedly produced in 2003, but somehow written by a font Microsoft only introduced in 2007. The fact that the former Chief of Staff, Ilker Basbug, was condemned as the leader of a “terrorist organisation” and sentenced to life most certainly feels ‘wrong’ for many Turkish citizens. The rather blanket treatment of the suspects as well as the excessively long duration of the trials also raise questions about the scope and depth of the collateral damage that the process might have created.

In sum, the process through which the army quit the political sphere was neither voluntary nor graceful. The ousting of the military from politics did not follow from a series of negotiations or a gradual democratisation effort where the armed forces were phased out of politics smoothly. It was, in the end, a counter-coup of sorts. The puzzle, then, runs even

deeper than it may first appear: how could the JDP defeat the military in a game – the game of rough power politics – which the latter had excelled in since 1960?

Getting the story right: from colonel coups to “sophisticated intervention”

Turkish political discourse has long been dominated by the myth of “the” army, which is conceived of as an immutable and static actor that intervened in politics via institutionalised and sophisticated means since the coup of 1960. For any informed student of Turkish political history, this is anachronistic at best. The army’s means of intervention in politics as well as its decision mechanisms over such intervention have evolved tremendously over time. It is in fact in this very institutional evolution where we can find the key to unlock the mystery surrounding the rise and fall of the Turkish army as a political actor.

As with many issues in Turkish politics, the story of the army’s institutional evolution is complex, but it can be summarised in five stages. The first stage was between 1923 and 1960, where the army had some latent power, but neither the opportunity nor the motivation to intervene in politics. It is at this stage that the military internalised its reason of being as the protector of the secular republic.

The [coup of 1960](#) that eventually led to the execution of Prime Minister Adnan Menderes and two of his ministers marked the coming of the second stage. The rationale for intervention was the increasingly autocratic and “Islamic” policies and discourses pushed forward by the Menderes administration. However, the coup of 1960 was a far cry from how it is usually presented in present-day political discourse: it was not a collective and top-down effort on the part of the armed forces. It was truly a “colonels’ coup,” launched by mid-ranking officers not only against the government, but also in open defiance of the chain of command. The coup literally smashed the bottle where the military genie used to live. The early 1960s witnessed two more – failed – attempts at a colonel coup. More

importantly, the army, while willing to go back to the barracks, proved unwilling to let go of its newfound pivotal position in politics.

The third stage came with [the coup of 1971](#). This time, the decision to intervene came from the chain of command and the mode of intervention was much less violent and dramatic, not to mention better-organised, than it had been in 1960. In the face of political instability, the members of the General Staff simply handed a memorandum to the Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel, who eventually stepped down. The top-down nature of the decision to intervene and the means of doing so reflected the increasing institutionalisation and bureaucratisation of army's involvement in politics. However, the process was not entirely complete by 1971, as there were serious disagreements among the members of the General Staff, especially between the Air Force Commander and the Chief of Staff, who had different ideas about the scope of the intervention as well as the position to be taken afterwards.



Adnan Menderes (Public Domain)

“Who calls the shots” was no longer a question in the fourth chapter of our story. When the military intervened again in 1980, this time with full force, in the face of domestic instability and a low-intensity civil war between the radical left and ultranationalist right that was bleeding the country white, the decision for intervention came directly from the Chief of Staff Kenan Evren (also the President between 1980 and 1989). It was also expressed through a unified voice, suggesting that “to intervene or not to intervene” as well as “how to intervene” was now an inextricable component of the decisions that have to go through the chain of command.

Intervening in politics, one can argue, was becoming one of the “regular” institutionalised and bureaucratised functions of the army. Acting as a unitary political actor, the army during Evren's reign (which can also be identified as the fourth episode of our story) was instrumental in the substantial political and social engineering efforts that followed the coup. The army went back to the barracks once again, but only after further ossifying and institutionalising its presence in the political sphere.

The fifth episode of the institutional evolution of the military is highlighted by the “post-modern” coup of 1997. The rationale for intervention reflected concerns of 1960 much more so than 1971 and 1980: having been convinced that Erdoğan's once-mentor and predecessor Necmettin Erbakan, who was the Prime Minister of a coalition-government at the time, had been trying to offset the country's secular ways, the army passed a “memo” to the government, “strongly” advising Erbakan to resign (of course, a display of tanks was involved). As sophisticated, nuanced, and bloodless as this mode of intervention was, it left a scar on Turkish democracy, triggering a series of slow-motion reactions from the masses that eventually empowered Erdoğan, who had spent four months in prison for reciting a poem that was deemed “provocative” by the military, and his JDP at the expense of the more established political parties.

In this fifth and final episode, the army's involvement in politics became substantially sophisticated and bureaucratised, which rendered the military not only a formidable force to be reckoned with, but also a “slow” and predictable political actor. When JDP placed its bets on Ergenekon and Balyoz (to be sure, if the trials had backfired, they might have triggered another coup), not everyone was sold on the idea that the Turkish army was willing to blow up mosques and carry out strategic political assassinations just to create the kind of political instability that would “invite” military intervention. Nevertheless, few also doubted the notion that the army might have devised contingency plans based on the possibility that the JDP might – someday – slide into less secular and more autocratic territory.

Regardless, the JDP acted swiftly and decisively by putting its weight behind the Ergenekon and Balyoz trials while also galvanising public support for its cause. The military was too unprepared, isolated, and outpaced to match JDP's manoeuvres. Put simply, what made the army the most formidable force in politics eventually made it “slow,” exposing it to a “counter-coup” from a politically agile actor.

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Credit: Gobierno de Chile (CC-



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Road ahead: back to the future, or a brand new day?

The commanders of the 1997 coup proudly declared they initiated a process that would last for a thousand years. Delivering such bombastic statements while holding unmatched power is one of the constants of the Turkish political discourse. Yet another constant is that the political discourse itself adjusts quite rapidly and effortlessly. Considered as inextricably tied to the fate of Turkish democracy only a few years ago, ‘what will the military say?’ is no longer an interesting or relevant question in everyday politics.

The JDP made sure to decisively dismantle the very institutional and bureaucratic mechanisms that the army had developed over decades in order to stay involved in politics. This is good news for Turkish democracy. Yet, the ‘rough’ dismantling of the military’s top-down and institutionalised involvement also created a residual risk, especially in the context of the long-running tensions within Turkish society that

revealed themselves during the Gezi Park protests.

Just as a 1990s-style military intervention has become practically impossible, a 1960-style colonels’ coup is more likely now than it was a decade ago, for the decision to intervene in politics is, once again, utterly decentralised. Such an outcome is highly unlikely, yet not impossible. The Turkish political landscape is a shifting terrain that more often than not compels the informed commentator to retreat to a well-known phrase: never say never.

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