



• ANALYSIS

July 15, Ten Years Later: Leadership, Democratic Resilience, and Institutional Capacity

Hamit Emrah Beriş

**JULY 15,
TEN YEARS LATER:
Leadership,
Democratic Resilience,
and Institutional Capacity**

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This analysis examines why the coup attempt carried out by the Fetullah Terrorist Organization (FETÖ), which had infiltrated the Turkish Armed Forces, ultimately failed. It argues that the failure of the coup can be explained through three mutually reinforcing factors: political leadership, democratic resilience, and the institutional capacity of the state.

SUMMARY

The decade that has passed since the July 15, 2016 coup attempt provides enough distance to reflect, from a broader perspective, on what happened that night and the reconstruction process that followed. This essay analyzes, with an eye on three complementary factors — leadership, democratic resilience, and the Turkish polity’s institutional capacity — why the coup attempt, carried out by the FETÖ contingent within the Turkish Armed Forces, failed after being set in motion.

This analysis examines, first, the concept of leadership — embodied by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan — through the lens of Weber’s theory of charismatic authority and bureaucracy; second, the anti-coup resistance mounted by Turkish society, political actors, and state institutions, understood through the concept of democratic resilience; and finally, the uninterrupted delivery of public services, understood through the concepts of infrastructural power and state capacity.

As a result of President Erdoğan’s struggle against tutelage, which spanned his entire political career and left its mark on public memory and political culture, the coup plotters failed to receive support from Turkish society on July 15 — unlike in the military coups and interventions of May 27, March 12, September 12, and February 28. President Erdoğan’s call for mass mobilization, combined with society-wide resistance and the uninterrupted functioning of state institutions — the security forces foremost among them — together prevented the plot from succeeding.

INTRODUCTION

A decade has passed since the July 15, 2016 coup attempt. During this period, countless books, articles, reports, and news stories have been published regarding that fateful night, its lead-up, and its aftermath. One could argue that a decade is enough time to produce an in-depth analysis of the coup attempt's impact on Turkish society and politics, and to situate it within the bigger picture. However, it is first worth recalling the factors behind the coup attempt and how the events of July 15, 2016 unfolded.

On the evening of July 15, 2016, residents of Ankara and Istanbul, among other urban centers, noticed an unusually high level of activity on the streets. While the intercontinental bridge in Istanbul, then known as the Bosphorus Bridge, was cordoned off, fighter jets began to fly at a low altitude above Ankara's downtown area. Over the following hours, tanks and other military vehicles were spotted across Turkish cities. In some places, military units appeared in central neighborhoods, stopping traffic on certain roads. Around the same time, the first news of an unfolding coup attempt broke. Especially in major cities, citizens took to the streets, signaling that they would not keep silent in the face of a coup. When President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan appeared on CNN Türk via FaceTime to urge the Turkish people to resist the coup attempt, citizens across the country flocked to the streets, challenging the coup plotters. In response, the FETÖ militants in uniform escalated the violence, launching armed attacks against civilians as well as the security forces — including police officers stationed at the Special Operations Headquarters in Gölbaşı, Ankara. With fighter jets dropping

bombs and coup plotters opening fire on citizens with heavy weapons, the assault reached a scale comparable only to war. According to subsequent assessments, FETÖ-affiliated coup plotters killed 251 Turkish citizens.¹

It quickly became clear that a group of FETÖ militants who had infiltrated the Turkish Armed Forces was responsible for the coup attempt. The judiciary took swift action to launch an investigation into the assault. As early as the morning of July 16, the security forces began detaining coup plotters, conclusively foiling the plot. The absence of any interruption in public services and the functioning of official institutions was particularly noteworthy. At the recommendation of the National Security Council on July 20, 2016, the Council of Ministers, chaired by the President, declared a three-month nationwide state of emergency.² The state of emergency was extended seven times, ending on July 8, 2018.

A series of decrees issued under the state of emergency stripped FETÖ of its operational capacity, while also largely dismantling the tutelage mechanisms that had enabled coups throughout the Republic's history. Indeed, FETÖ had been recruiting militants through its educational institutions since the 1970s, and infiltrating the state apparatus since the 1980s by securing the admission of Gülenist cadets to military academies. As such, the organization secured the loyalty of its members at an early age through its network of schools, later influencing their college and professional preferences. Moreover, the Gülenists effectively seized control of their recruits by selecting jobs and even spouses for them, ensuring that they would serve the organization's interests. All of this took place under a veil of secrecy: leadership figures compartmentalized information, giving militants organized into cells only limited knowledge of the broader network — a precaution against infiltration.

In a way, the measures implemented in the aftermath of July 15 disrupted the organization's "supply chain" for recruits. In addition to shutting down FETÖ-affiliated educational institutions, the Turkish authorities took drastic measures against some public schools, starting with military high schools, where the Gülenists had long exerted significant influence. Within the framework of vetting policies, all public employees with links to the organization were ter-



Perhaps contrary even to the expectations of the coup plotters themselves, the July 15 coup attempt failed because of the coordinated and determined response of the political leadership, society, and state institutions, which acted collectively and in close cooperation.

¹ Numerous books, reports, analyses, and the like have been published on the events of the night of July 15. Some of these include Burhanettin Duran and Fahrettin Altun, *The Nation's Victory: July 15* (Ankara: SETA Publications, 2017); Hüseyin Aydın, *A Century-Long Night: The July 15 Coup Attempt in Light of Documents and Evidence* (İstanbul: Turkuvaz Kitap, 2021); Atilla Yayla, *Glorious Resistance: July 15* (Ankara: Liberte Publications, 2016); Ahmet Çiğdem, *The Ethical Moment of the Miracle: Reflections on Religion, Society, and the Planetary Subject After July 15* (Ankara: Felix Kitap, 2019).

² Cem Duran Uzun, "The Declaration of the State of Emergency After the July 15 Coup Attempt and Its Consequences," *SETA Perspektif*, no. 138 (July 2016).

minated.³ Later, FETÖ members were brought to justice through coup-related trials and other legal proceedings nationwide. In Ankara, a group of individuals directly or otherwise involved in the coup attempt were based at its headquarters, the Akıncı (now Mürted) Air Base. Other FETÖ members also appeared before courts in various cities due to their links to the organization.⁴

Over the last decade, the significance of FETÖ as a national security threat has arguably diminished, although this threat has not fully disappeared. Following the death of Fetullah Gülen, the organization's ringleader, the bonds between FETÖ members have ostensibly weakened, its financial power has diminished, and, most importantly, its ability to recruit new members has been severely limited. Still, it is no secret that FETÖ built up considerable financial resources and organizational manpower over the years. Finally, it appears that FETÖ's long-standing contacts with various intelligence services remain intact.

Aside from its FETÖ-related aspects, this essay concentrates on the theoretical lessons of the past decade and the broader implications of this process. It focuses on the coup attempt's foiling and the subsequent restoration efforts. In this context, this analysis rests on three core dimensions: (1) leadership — embodied by President Erdoğan and the single most important factor in the resistance to the coup plotters; (2) the resilience of Turkish democracy, shaped by past experiences with military tutelage and by subsequent efforts to dismantle that system; and (3) the strength of institutional capacity, which made the resistance possible and prevented any interruption in public services.

The July 15 coup attempt attested to the importance of leadership in a democracy. For a long time, the prevalent view was that institutions, operating in line with pre-determined norms, ensured the functioning of democratic systems. According to this view, the leader's role in a modern democracy was effectively limited to ensuring harmony among state institutions. In this context, some scholars argued that politics in a modern democracy was not centered around leaders. Instead, they posited that the leader was merely one stakeholder among many within the system — a sort of *primus inter pares*, to be seen alongside other elites, or simply “more equal” than the rest.⁵ At the very least, the leader was considered a kind of manager who oversaw the implementation of party or government policy without exercising significant personal initiative. By contrast, Max Weber argued that leadership plays a significant role in democracy, just as it does in every other form of government throughout history.⁶

3 Serdar Güleler, “Lustration Policies Around the World and the State's Purge of FETÖ,” *SETA Perspektif*, no. 142 (September 2016).

4 Cem Duran Uzun, Mert Hüseyin Akgün, and Hasan Yücel, *The July 15 Coup Attempt and FETÖ in the Indictments* (Istanbul: SETA Publications, 2017).

5 Nannerl O. Keohane, “Leadership, Equality & Democracy,” *Daedalus* 145, no. 3 (2016): 9.

6 Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 268.

According to Weber, all political systems, including democratic regimes, needed someone to play the leadership role. In modern states, the bureaucracy tends to cling to all forms of power. Weber notes that a modern state needs a bureaucracy to perform its fundamental tasks. Accordingly, the bureaucracy develops a rational organizational model through division of labor, specialization, continuity, hierarchy, and predictability. The bureaucracy grows as the state's area of responsibility grows. Yet Weber also warns that bureaucracy may pose a threat to democracy: thanks to their specialized knowledge, experience, and long-standing familiarity with the organizational structure, bureaucrats may seek to position themselves above the politicians. Moreover, bureaucrats tend to view themselves as the permanent core of the system, and politicians as merely temporary occupants of it. Therefore, there arguably tends to be tension between politicians and bureaucrats — which is where the leader steps in.⁷

According to Weber, the political leader constitutes the most important force to monitor the bureaucracy and to prevent it from positioning itself above politics.⁸ Together with his notion of charismatic authority, this approach suggests that a leader is needed to keep the bureaucracy in check and to engage directly with the people in order to make democracy function. Leaders become particularly important during periods of crisis. After all, the decision-making and implementation processes during ordinary periods tend to be well-established, which means that institutions and officials operate within their respective mandates. In other words, the situation tends to be predictable for those who govern and those who are governed. By contrast, leadership skills come into play amid extraordinary developments and crises, when the leader is expected to present a vision and a roadmap for overcoming the challenge at hand. Even more important, however, is the leader's ability to persuade the people that this is the right path, and that it must be pursued regardless of the circumstances.

It is no secret that President Erdoğan is a charismatic leader. It is also widely accepted that his ability to remain in power for many consecutive terms was due to his personal charisma more than the identity of his political party. What makes Erdoğan a charismatic leader in the Weberian sense, however, has been his ability to survive countless crises. Having been politically active since his youth, the Turkish president has notably held leadership positions at nearly every level



Owing to the impact that President Erdoğan's persistent struggle against military tutelage had produced on collective memory and political culture throughout his years in office, the coup plotters failed to secure broad societal support on July 15, unlike the military coups and interventions of May 27, March 12, September 12, and February 28.

7 Max Weber, *Sociological Writings*, ed. Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, trans. Taha Parla (14th ed., Istanbul: Deniz Yayınları, 2014), 347.

8 Henri Mendras and Etienne Jean, *The Founders of Sociology: Tocqueville, Marx, Durkheim, and Weber*, trans. Zuhul Karagöz (Istanbul: Albaraka Yayınları), 198.



President Erdoğan's charismatic leadership—an increasingly rare phenomenon in contemporary politics—was arguably one of the most significant factors contributing to the failure of the coup attempt.

of party organization. In terms of party hierarchy, this trend reached its peak with his emergence as the founding chairman of the AK Party in 2001. Erdoğan's career in public administration, which began with his election as Istanbul's mayor in 1994, culminated in his rise to the Office of Prime Minister in 2003, and to the Office of the President in 2014. It is important to note that democratic elections facilitated this progress. Nonetheless, his ability to remain in power for such a long time has been due to his strong leadership skills under extraordinary

circumstances and during crises. The 2007 e-memorandum, the 2008 closure case against the AK Party, the 2013 Gezi Park protests, and the subsequent judicial coup attempt of December 2013 immediately come to mind.

During all of the above-mentioned crises, Erdoğan's conduct occasionally differed from that of the rest of his party's senior figures. For example, the Turkish prime minister clearly stated that the Gezi Park protests were an illegitimate attempt to topple his government – as opposed to a benign act of environmentalism or advocacy. During the judicial coup attempt of December 2013, he warned that FETÖ-affiliated members of law enforcement and the judiciary were engaged in an extralegal act against the elected government, and he refused to bow to the pressure. In this sense, Erdoğan made the decisive calls that ended each of these crises, and then persuaded both his party and Turkish society at large to follow his lead.

During these periods, President Erdoğan took initiative and persuaded the people that his response was the best option and the way out of the crisis. Indeed, politics is the art of persuasion. Politicians are considered successful to the extent that they can persuade society that their platform is the best option and most closely aligned with the common good. Crucially, moments of crisis offer the clearest measure of that success. After all, crises and other extraordinary situations constitute uncharted territory for individuals, systems, and institutions. Therefore, most people may find it difficult to know how to act, or may react unpredictably. The true role of leadership and its influence over society becomes clear in such moments. A true leader successfully guides the people – however unusual the situation at hand. Yet to offer such guidance, the politician must swiftly chart his preferred course of action. Still, this need for speed must not result in inconsistency or hesitation. After all, the politician's self-confidence constitutes the most powerful tool to persuade the population. Arguably, Erdoğan's strong ability to guide the people during moments of crisis has repeatedly kept those crises from deepening or growing more complex.

The July 15, 2016 coup attempt was arguably the most severe crisis during the AK Party years. It made clear that the coup plotters were keenly aware of Erdoğan's

charisma and his influence over Turkish society. In this regard, their immediate goal was to prevent the leader, who was on vacation in Marmaris at the time, from addressing the nation. Ironically, Erdoğan tilted the balance in his favor as soon as he spoke to the people via FaceTime. Here, one important point deserves emphasis: Erdoğan — who appeared in a suit, as confident and calm as ever — influenced not only his own supporters but the entire population during this crisis.

The Turkish president's call to uphold democracy and his uncompromising commitment to resisting the coup attempt were closely linked to his leadership skills. Indeed, his decision to land at Istanbul Atatürk Airport, disregarding security concerns, not only encouraged the people but effectively crushed the coup plotters' morale.

One of the most important skills of any leader is the ability to mobilize the masses. A charismatic leader must possess the ability to mobilize the population toward the outcome he or she seeks, especially under extraordinary circumstances. In this sense, Erdoğan urging the people to take to the streets was no less important than the people answering his call. A different outcome would have led to the conclusion that the leader had run out of charisma — or, at the very least, that his charisma had weakened. However, Erdoğan took a considerable political risk in urging the people to take to the streets, persuading the masses that there was no other way to defend democracy and the national will.

As discussed in greater detail below, the people answering President Erdoğan's call was closely linked to his continued emphasis on fighting the tutelage regime. After all, the Turkish leader had long sought to raise awareness among the people about the importance of dismantling tutelage, which had constrained him in various ways over the years. The same goes for FETÖ. Several years before the July 15 coup attempt, Erdoğan repeatedly warned the country about FETÖ operatives infiltrating the state apparatus to seize power through antidemocratic means. Indeed, the Turkish leader openly stated that FETÖ was a terrorist organization that had infiltrated the state and received support from foreign intelligence services.⁹ That millions of people took to the streets — first as an uncalculated reflex, then in response to Erdoğan's statement — reflected their faith in his leadership. As such, Erdoğan's charismatic leadership, which remains largely unparalleled today, was arguably the most significant factor in thwarting the coup attempt.

THE RESILIENCE OF DEMOCRACY

Turkish democracy faced a serious test on July 15, 2016. It had encountered similar challenges in the past — notably in 1960, 1971, 1980, and 1997 — and

⁹ Hamit Emrah Beriş, "The Fight Against FETÖ," in *AK Parti's 15 Years: Politics*, ed. Nebi Miş and Ali Aslan (Istanbul: SETA Publications, 2018), 379–408.



Having himself been prosecuted during the February 28 process, sentenced to imprisonment, and subsequently subjected to a political ban, Erdoğan placed the struggle against military coups and the tutelary structures that emerged in their aftermath at the center of his political agenda.

arguably failed to resist each time. In previous instances, the Turkish people's response to military coups and interventions was quite limited, enabling coup plotters to reach their goals with relative ease. The tradition of coups in Türkiye arguably originated in the events of May 27, 1960, when a contingent within the Turkish Armed Forces toppled the elected government of the Democratic Party (DP). Failure to bring coup plotters to justice — from May 27 to September 12 to February 28 — gave rise to the perception that the military bureaucracy had the right to meddle in democratic politics as it deemed necessary.¹⁰ Moreover, the country underwent relatively soft transitions back to democracy following military coups, which resulted in impunity for coup plotters — thus standing in the way of a genuine normalization process.

Since the earliest days of his tenure, President Erdoğan was determined to combat all forms of tutelage.¹¹ Having served a prison sentence during the February 28, 1997 process and been banned from politics, the Turkish leader centered his platform around confronting military coups and dismantling the tutelage system that was born out of them. Erdoğan consistently argued that the tutelage mechanisms born of past coups constituted the greatest obstacle to the free exercise of the national will. In doing so, he instilled in the national consciousness the idea that resisting coup attempts was every citizen's duty, and that the nation as a whole was bound to defend its will. To be clear, this approach was not limited to statements. Over time, Turkish governments identified pro-tutelage regulations, which were adopted under junta regimes, and abolished them. The events that unfolded on the night of July 15, 2016 established that President Erdoğan's past efforts had rendered Turkish democracy more resilient.

Democratic resilience refers to the ability of a democracy to defend its core institutions, norms, and processes against internal and external threats, and to neutralize such threats.¹² In this sense, a strong democracy is capable of defending itself against coups and other antidemocratic acts.¹³ It is easier for a democracy to function under ordinary conditions than during moments of crisis. What really matters, however, is the existence of a political culture capable of defending

10 Nebi Miş, "From May 27 to July 15: The Problem of Reckoning with Coups and Coup-Plotters," in *Turkey After July 15*, ed. Burhanettin Duran and Cem Duran Uzun (Ankara: SETA Publications, 2022), 117–136.

11 For further detail on this subject, see Hamit Emrah Beriş, "The AK Party's Toughest Test: The Struggle Against Coups and Tutelage," in *Turkey After July 15*, ed. Burhanettin Duran and Cem Duran Uzun (Ankara: SETA Publications, 2022), 89–115.

12 Kevin Walz, Lion Merten, Matthias Rosenthal, Jana Niedringhaus, and Johannes Helgest, "From Latest Buzzword to Conceptual Framework: Unraveling the Complexities of Democratic Resilience," *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft* 19, no. 1 (2025): 100.

13 Wolfgang Merkel, "What is Democratic Resilience?," *Democratization* 33, no. 3 (2026): 472.

democracy in the face of a crisis. Accordingly, democratic resilience arguably consists of four distinct parameters.

Primarily, the branches of government — the legislature, the executive, and the judiciary — must be able to perform their respective functions. In the face of such problems, each branch's response plays a different role in defending the system. Secondly, all political stakeholders, including political parties and politicians, must clearly demonstrate their willingness to uphold democracy and to preserve the system. Thirdly, civil society must actively side with democracy in moments of crisis. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, is how society responds to extraordinary situations when democracy faces a serious threat.¹⁴

The bottom line is that any antidemocratic assault has very little chance of success without the support of the people. Therefore, even coup plotters tend to claim that their actions serve the population's interests — or even that they were motivated by a popular demand. Likewise, all regimes strive to derive legitimacy from the people. As such, how society reacts in moments of crisis largely determines whether any attempt to subvert the democratic process will succeed.¹⁵

On the night of July 15, as the coup attempt unfolded, all stakeholders made a clear commitment to defending Turkish democracy. The Turkish Parliament remained in session even as the building came under bombardment, with parliamentarians still inside. İsmail Kahraman, then serving as Speaker of the Parliament, opened the General Assembly and handed the floor to representatives from various political parties, enabling them to speak up against the plot. During this session, all speakers stated that they refused to surrender the power vested in them by the Turkish people. At the same time, the executive branch continued to operate without interruption. The security forces, in particular, assumed an important responsibility by actively pushing back against the coup plotters. Likewise, there was no interruption in transportation or communications despite attempts by the coup plotters to undermine the relevant networks. The judiciary, too, participated in the defense by immediately launching investigations into the assault and issuing arrest warrants for the perpetrators. Civil society, too, stood with the country's elected government, declaring its opposition to the coup attempt. Still, the popular reaction was more significant than any other factor: as soon as the coup attempt began to unfold, hundreds of thousands of citizens in Istanbul, Ankara, and other cities took to the streets as an act of resistance. Following President Erdoğan's address to the nation, the number of protestors multiplied. During the confrontation, the coup plotters used violence against the security forces and the civilian population alike. Nonetheless, the citizens resist-

¹⁴ Merkel, "What is Democratic Resilience?," 476–81.

¹⁵ Marianne Dahl and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, "Clouds with Silver Linings: How Mobilization Shapes the Impact of Coups on Democratization," *European Journal of International Relations* 29, no. 4 (2023): 1018–19.

ing the plot refused to retreat despite suffering casualties. Turkish democracy thus passed a challenging test.

The decision by the Turkish people to take to the streets on July 15 was also linked to the legacy of past coups etched in the nation's collective memory.¹⁶ In particular, the execution of Prime Minister Adnan Menderes, along with cabinet ministers Fatih Rüşti Zorlu and Hasan Polatkan, in the aftermath of the May 27, 1960 coup had effectively traumatized the political right.¹⁷ Although almost every-



From the perspective of democratic governance, the most significant aspect of July 15 was the emergence of a comprehensive and collective resistance to the coup attempt. This broad-based mobilization is particularly significant as an indication of the level of democratic maturity that Turkish society had attained.

one deemed the executions unjust, citizens failed to speak up at the time, which left them with a lasting sense of regret. By contrast, the September 12, 1980 coup impacted a much larger part of Turkish society.¹⁸ During this period, countless people were put on trial, tortured, imprisoned, and executed. As such, many more people experienced the traumatic impact of September 12, whether directly or indirectly. Furthermore, the junta adhered to a policy of executing “one from the right and one from the left” – which enabled the associated grievances to be viewed as above politics. Although the 1982 Constitution was adopted with 92 percent of the vote — seemingly attesting to popular support for the 1980 coup — the stories that surfaced over time transformed prevailing public perception. Finally, the February 28 process was far more recent and the memory of the resulting grievances was still quite vivid. What the victims had to endure was also known to a broader group of people.

During the February 28 process, as in other coups, the tutelary establishment swiftly achieved its goals without significant popular backlash. Still, such episodes had clearly left a lasting wound on society. It is important to point out that, in the early hours, it was still unclear whether FETÖ was responsible for the assault – even though many had the right intuition. In this sense, the people who took to the streets opposed this assault on Turkish democracy regardless of who was behind it and the costs they would have to bear. It is worth recalling that the population had received no advance warning from the media or politicians regarding an imminent coup attempt. In this sense, the people were not prepared even psychologically – let alone strategically. As such, the resistance against this unexpected development occurred swiftly and autonomously without any plans in place. It was possibly the spontaneous nature of this mass reaction that crushed the morale of the coup plotters.

¹⁶ On the concept of collective memory, see Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

¹⁷ Hamit Emrah Beriş, *The First Blow to National Will and Democracy: May 27, 1960* (Ankara: Grand National Assembly of Turkey Publications, 2022).

¹⁸ Hamit Emrah Beriş, *A Dark Stain on Democracy: September 12, 1980* (Ankara: Grand National Assembly of Turkey Publications, 2022).

What stopped the July 15, 2016 coup attempt in its tracks was the determination of Turkish society, political stakeholders, and public institutions to defend democratic legitimacy with all their might. This picture also demonstrated that Türkiye possesses a high level of democratic resilience. Indeed, FETÖ became completely isolated during the coup attempt, abandoned by the very social groups from which the coup plotters may have hoped to receive open or tacit support. In the end, the attempted coup was devoid of any popular base. This collective resistance mattered more than anything else — not only for democracy’s survival, but as clear evidence of Turkish democracy’s maturity.

THE STATE’S INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY

State capacity refers to a state’s ability to exercise authority over society through law, to ensure and preserve public order, to deliver public services regularly, and to address popular needs continuously.¹⁹ According to Francis Fukuyama, what matters most is the state’s capacity to implement decisions made by its various institutions, since this is what allows it to exercise strong and lasting authority. In this sense, the state must have both the necessary financial resources and a specialized workforce in positions of implementation.²⁰

Michael Mann distinguishes between despotic power — a state’s ability to impose decisions on society without negotiation — and infrastructural power, its capacity to implement those decisions through society’s cooperation. Reliance on despotic means, this analysis argues, comes at the cost of democratic legitimacy. In this sense, a modern state is expected to be able to apply its decisions to the entire population, to influence civil society, and to have uninterrupted access to any part of its territory. Mann describes such qualities of the state as “infrastructural power.” Infrastructural power refers to the uninterrupted and regular delivery of public services, including security, transportation, communications, healthcare, and education, across its territory. For this purpose, states establish professionalized bureaucratic mechanisms, using them to perform key tasks such as collecting taxes and registering the population. Any disruption or pause in such functions tends to create problems as the state seeks to perform its fundamental tasks.²¹

The role of capacity becomes pronounced during moments of crisis and under extraordinary circumstances. In other words, the population does not ordinarily experience any major problems in receiving public services. When forced to step out of their routine, however, public institutions may be unable to react as

19 Francis Fukuyama, “What is Governance?,” CGD Working Paper No. 314 (Washington: Center for Global Development, 2013), 4–18, 7.

20 Fukuyama, “What is Governance?,” 17.

21 Michael Mann, “The Autonomous Power of the State: Its Origins, Mechanisms and Results,” *European Journal of Sociology* 25, no. 2 (1984): 185–213.

quickly to pressing problems as they would ordinarily do. As such, extraordinary developments may disrupt the delivery of public services or effectively undermine the bureaucracy. For example, in the face of a coup attempt, some bureaucrats may be reluctant to take an active role, thus avoiding confrontation with the coup plotters or simply failing to perform their duties, even if they do not openly side with the plotters.²² This would amount to indirect support.

One can conclude, then, that the true power of a state and its various institutions is measured by its ability to respond swiftly and effectively to extraordinary developments and crises. As demonstrated in the aftermath of the 2023 earthquakes, Turkish institutions have shown a strong capacity to respond to crises swiftly and effectively. Furthermore, Turkish society, too, has proved capable of taking swift action and standing in solidarity under extraordinary circumstances. Still, until the July 15 coup attempt, it remained unclear how the underlying duality between FETÖ-infiltrated elements and the loyalist majority within the state apparatus would ultimately play out.

To be clear, the Turkish state's institutional capacity proved quite strong in the wake of the July 15 coup attempt. Shortly after the assault began, public prosecutors in Ankara and Istanbul opened investigations and ordered law enforcement agencies to detain a large number of suspects. Public prosecutors and law enforcement officials in other cities, too, acted swiftly. In the end, law enforcement agencies implemented the judiciary's arrest warrants without delay. It was also striking that there was no disruption in public services, including security. As soon as the coup plot became public, law enforcement officials were called to duty. Throughout the night, citizens were able to follow events through both traditional and social media.

Although the coup plotters attempted to cut communications by storming the TURKSAT headquarters in Gölbaşı, Ankara, the TURKSAT staff stopped them by risking their own lives. Consequently, two members of the TURKSAT team were killed in an attack by the coup plotters.²³ For a brief moment, the TRT headquarters, too, was controlled by the coup plotters, who forced an anchorwoman to read their statement on live television. Ultimately, however, the coup plotters were removed from the TRT building with the help of ordinary citizens, thus preventing a media blackout or any attempt to conceal the facts. Likewise, the authorities took necessary precautions to prevent any problems within the security establishment or the judicial bureaucracy.

On July 16, 2016, the Official Gazette featured a decree whereby Gen. Ümit Dündar, Commander of the First Army, was appointed as acting Chief of the

22 David Delfs Erbo Andersen, Carl Henrik Knutsen, and Svend-Erik Skaaning, "Dimensions of State Capacity and Modes of Democratic Breakdown," *Political Studies* 74, no. 2 (2026): 815–40, 823.

23 "Türksat'ta Görevli 2 Personel Şehit Oldu" ["Two Türksat Personnel Killed in the Line of Duty"], Anadolu Agency, July 25, 2016.

General Staff. This move prevented any vacancy in this office, as Gen. Hulusi Akar remained in the hands of the coup plotters. Later the same day, the Supreme Board of Judges and Prosecutors (HSYK) suspended 2,745 judges and prosecutors, who were suspected of being FETÖ members, and warrants were issued for their detention.²⁴ Accordingly, the authorities prevented any attempt by FETÖ operatives to undermine efforts to resist the plot.

In the immediate aftermath of July 15, the Turkish government issued a series of decrees designed to prevent any future assaults by the coup plotters and to ensure the uninterrupted delivery of public services. Decree No. 667, dated 23 July 2016, ordered the closure of numerous schools, dormitories, foundations, associations, universities, trade unions, and confederations linked to FETÖ, an organization deemed to pose a clear threat to national security.²⁵ The same decree also established the legal framework for dismissing FETÖ-affiliated public officials. Meanwhile, all public institutions were instructed to identify their FETÖ-affiliated employees and to report their names to the Office of the Prime Minister for termination. Once the legal mechanism was in place through this series of decrees, all FETÖ-affiliated public officials were permanently dismissed from their posts. Importantly, there was no disruption in the delivery of public services despite the dismissal of 125,678 public employees.²⁶ In particular, the Turkish National Police and the Turkish Armed Forces swiftly hired new personnel, based on merit, to prevent any security gap. Likewise, the judiciary underwent a major overhaul as the relevant services continued to be delivered without interruption – despite the dismissal of almost a quarter of all 18,000 judges and prosecutors in the country. Gradually, the judiciary hired new personnel to bridge the gap.

Public institutions also demonstrated strong coordination during the coup attempt. All institutions, starting with the Presidency, the Prime Ministry, and the security establishment, convened around an impromptu crisis desk. There, they determined how to respond to the coup plotters and established which precautions had to be taken, while developing a communication strategy to ensure accurate messaging to the population. As part of these efforts, the governors of all 81 provinces were contacted and asked to take necessary precautions and to offer moral support to the popular resistance. Likewise, commanders of various military units who opposed the assault appeared on live television to denounce

24 “2 Bin 745 Hakim ve Savcı Hakkında Gözaltı Kararı” [“Detention Orders Issued for 2,745 Judges and Prosecutors”], Anadolu Agency, July 16, 2016.

25 “Olağanüstü Hal Kapsamında Alınan Tedbirlere İlişkin Kanun Hükmünde Kararname” [“Decree Law on Measures Taken Under the State of Emergency”], Resmi Gazete [Official Gazette], July 23, 2016, accessed June 29, 2026, <https://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/eskiler/2016/07/20160723-8.htm>.

26 İsmet Karakaş, “OHAL Komisyonu Çalışmalarını Tamamladı” [“State of Emergency Commission Completes Its Work”], Anadolu Agency, January 23, 2023.

the plotters. This way, it was made abundantly clear that the coup attempt had unfolded outside the military chain of command.

Undoubtedly, there are lessons to be learned from the coup attempt vis-à-vis state capacity. First of all, the assault revealed that no single stakeholder had complete knowledge of the true extent of FETÖ's infiltration, which had been building within the state apparatus for many years. Still, the authorities identified various shortcomings in the aftermath of the coup attempt and adopted new regulations governing admission to public service and promotions.

On the night of July 15, President Erdoğan and the rest of Türkiye's senior officials remained in office, ensuring the continuity of the Turkish state's constitutional authority without fueling speculation. In this way, the principle of preserving authority — a key indicator of state capacity — was upheld. Moreover, the authorities did not permit any weakening of the state's security capacity. For example, there was no looting, no violence against civilians, and no rise in theft. In the end, the coup plotters were merely a minority within the Armed Forces. The rest of Türkiye's security forces were opposed to the plot. Likewise, all other public institutions joined the resistance.

Ultimately, nearly every part of the state apparatus — which reflects the state's institutional capacity — opposed the coup attempt, just as politicians and society did, and each pushed back against the plotters within the bounds of its own mandate.

After all, President Erdoğan distinguished himself in Turkish political life as the leader most unequivocally opposed to coups. Since the AK Party's rise to power, he actively worked to undo the legacy of coups in Türkiye, highlighting the need for a new constitution. At the same time, his government made urgently needed changes to promote democratization and political freedoms until a new constitution could be drafted. In this regard, Erdoğan's anti-coup and anti-tutelage stance became deeply etched into the national consciousness.

HAMİT EMRAH BERİŞ

Prof. Dr. Hamit Emrah Beriř was born in Ankara in 1977. He graduated from the Department of Public Administration at Gazi University's Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences in 1998. He completed his master's degree in political science at the same university and his doctorate at Ankara University. He was appointed associate professor in 2010 and full professor in 2016. He held positions ranging from research assistant to professor at Gazi University and subsequently at Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli University's Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences. Alongside his university post, he served as Deputy Undersecretary of the Undersecretariat of Public Order and Security from 2014 to 2018, and as Deputy Head of the Police Academy and Dean of the Faculty of Internal Security from 2018 to 2023. In 2023, he was appointed Chair of the Higher Education Supervisory Board, and in 2024 he was appointed Rector of Çukurova University, a position he currently holds. He has published fourteen books and numerous articles.

July 15, Ten Years Later: Leadership, Democratic Resilience, and Institutional Capacity

Hamit Emrah Beris

LThe decade that has passed since the July 15, 2016 coup attempt provides enough distance to reflect, from a broader perspective, on what happened that night and the reconstruction process that followed. This essay analyzes, with an eye on three complementary factors — leadership, democratic resilience, and the Turkish polity's institutional capacity — why the coup attempt, carried out by the FETÖ contingent within the Turkish Armed Forces, failed after being set in motion.

This analysis examines, first, the concept of leadership — embodied by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan — through the lens of Weber's theory of charismatic authority and bureaucracy; second, the anti-coup resistance mounted by Turkish society, political actors, and state institutions, understood through the concept of democratic resilience; and finally, the uninterrupted delivery of public services, understood through the concepts of infrastructural power and state capacity.

As a result of President Erdoğan's struggle against tutelage, which spanned his entire political career and left its mark on public memory and political culture, the coup plotters failed to receive support from Turkish society on July 15 — unlike in the military coups and interventions of May 27, March 12, September 12, and February 28. President Erdoğan's call for mass mobilization, combined with society-wide resistance and the uninterrupted functioning of state institutions — the security forces foremost among them — together prevented the plot from succeeding.



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