



• ANALYSIS

July 15, Ten Years On: A Comparison Between Kemalist and Gülenist Tutelage Models From the Perspective of Democratic Theory

Atilla Yayla

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SETA Yayınları

ISBN: 978-625-5703-66-8

Editorial Team: Ebrar Üzümcü, Sudib Sontoran, Gizem Akbaş,
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This analysis examines the common characteristics shared by Kemalist and Gülenist structures, despite their apparent ideological opposition, from the perspective of democratic theory and practice.

SUMMARY

The Gülenist coup attempt of July 15, 2016 occupies a distinct place in Türkiye's political history, both for the scale of violence employed and the direct targeting of state institutions, as well as for the fact that it was thwarted through broad-based popular resistance. The tenth anniversary of the coup attempt offers a valuable opportunity to move beyond the heat of contemporary political debate and reassess the event within the context of the country's long experience of bureaucratic tutelage. This analysis examines the shared characteristics of the Kemalist and Gülenist structures—outwardly opposed to one another—from the standpoint of democratic theory and practice. The comparison between the two structures proceeds along the axes of the leader cult, allegiance to absolute and centralized power, social engineering, distance from pluralism, the instrumentalization of democratic politics, contempt for elected politicians, organization within the state bureaucracy, and recourse to a coup as a last resort. The analysis does not claim that Kemalism and Gülenism constitute the same ideology; rather, it argues that different ideological sources and symbols can produce a similar style of tutelary politics. It is argued that, rather than dismantling the Kemalist model of bureaucratic tutelage, the Gülenist structure instead appropriated its methods of organizing within the state, building bureaucratic power, and shaping society from above, in pursuit of establishing a new order of tutelage. The analysis further considers the democratic lessons that ought to be drawn from July 15, within the framework of the rule of law, individual accountability, state impartiality, meritocracy, pluralism, and the primacy of civilian politics.

INTRODUCTION: RETHINKING JULY 15 ON ITS TENTH ANNIVERSARY

Ten years have now passed since the July 15, 2016 coup attempt, calling for a fresh assessment of this momentous political event. A tenth anniversary is more than a symbolically significant milestone. With sufficient time elapsed, it becomes possible to set aside the anger, fear, shock, and partisan polemics that surface in an event's immediate aftermath, and instead approach it from a broader historical and institutional vantage point. Likewise, the intervening decade has opened enough distance between the coup attempt and the present to allow for a more measured analysis of who carried out the assault, how they organized, and what they sought to achieve—as well as where July 15 fits within Türkiye's longer history of coups, and what its lasting consequences have been.

July 15 was not only significant because a small group of soldiers attempted to overthrow the country's elected government. After all, Türkiye had previously witnessed the removal of elected governments through military coups, memoranda, and pressure from the military, which resulted in democratic politics remaining being kept under bureaucratic tutelage. Still, July 15 was different from past interventions since residential areas, the Turkish Parliament, police headquarters, and anti-coup citizens were targeted with heavy weapons. Whereas the coup attempt constituted one of the bloodiest military interventions in the Republic's

history, the Turkish people played a defining role by taking to the streets and resisting the coup attempt.¹

On the night of July 15, the population became directly involved in thwarting a large-scale military coup. While citizens adopted a passive stance during past coups, waiting to see the outcome, 2016 was different because many citizens appeared before tanks, fighter jets, and armed units. This phenomenon makes July 15 a historic turning point – not only in terms of the intentions and conduct of the coup plotters but also in terms of how society related to democracy.

Huntington's 'democratization waves'² and the idea of democratic consolidation set forth by Linz and Stepan³ indicate that democracy is more than holding elections. Specifically, these authors stress that military and bureaucratic stakeholders must not restrict the space wherein elected governments operate. In this sense, the tenth anniversary of July 15 calls for a debate on the political culture and institutions that made coups possible in Türkiye – not just the acts of treason committed by an organization or the liability of coup plotters under the penal code. After all, coup attempt do not emerge overnight. The tendency to stage coups stems from a mindset that looks down on elected politicians, distrusts the population's political preferences, assigns the true ownership of the state to certain bureaucratic circles, and considers the top-down reshaping of society as legitimate. As such, the night of the coup is merely when years of secret mobilization, ideological training, personal bonds of loyalty, and illegitimate accumulation of power within the state apparatus become visible.

From this perspective, to properly understand July 15, one must analyze the Gülenist organization together with the older phenomenon of bureaucratic tutelage in Türkiye. Many observers have notably argued that the Gülenists wanted to bring down the Kemalist Republic, citing the group's involvement in the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer trials as proof. There is little doubt that Kemalists and Gülenists have had vast differences over religion, secularism, the interpretation of history, social base, and political symbols. Still, from the standpoint of



The tenth anniversary of the July 15 coup attempt calls for an assessment not only of the betrayal committed by a particular organization or the criminal liability of those who participated in the coup, but also of the political culture and institutional conditions that have enabled military interventions in Türkiye.

1 Atilla Yayla, "15 Temmuz Direnişi ve Türkiye Demokrasisi" ["The July 15 Resistance and Turkish Democracy"], *Liberal Düşünce*, no. 83 (2016): 5–13; Haluk Alkan, "15 Temmuz'u Anlamak: Parametreler ve Sonuçlar" ["Understanding July 15: Parameters and Consequences"], *Bilig*, no. 79 (2016): 253–72; Abdolvahap Akıncı, "Askeri Vesayetten FETÖ Vesayetine: 15 Temmuz Üzerine Değerlendirmeler" ["From Military Tutelage to FETÖ Tutelage: Assessments on July 15"], *Kahramanmaraş Sütçü İmam Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, no. 15 (2017): 1–24.

2 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 211–31.

3 Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-communist Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 3–15.

democratic theory and practices, one could notice significant similarities between the two movements.

This analysis does not argue that Kemalism and Gülenism are essentially the same ideology. Whereas Kemalism emerged as a secular, nationalist, and state-centered modernization ideology, Gülenism rested firmly on religious concepts, communal bonds, and global education networks. Moreover, the two movements have different historical roots, languages, and sources of legitimacy. Still, it is possible



The principal common features of Kemalist and Gülenist methods include the belief in a single infallible leader, reliance on centralized and absolute authority, suspicion toward pluralistic society, the instrumentalization of democratic politics, the use of the bureaucracy as an autonomous power base against elected governments, and a willingness to resort to coups when deemed necessary.

for contrasting ideologies to adopt the same (or similar) political methods. After all, what defines the relationship between a political organization and democracy is not only its symbols but also how it intends to seize and exercise political power.

According to Dahl's approach to pluralistic democracy, political competition and participation are indispensable.⁴ According to this criterion, there are several similarities between the Kemalist and Gülenist methods: the idea of a singular and infallible leader, faith in a central and absolute power, skepticism of pluralistic societies, considering democratic politics as a mere instrument, using the bureaucracy as an independent domain of power against elected governments, and resorting to coups as they deem necessary. Within this framework, it is possible to argue that the Kemalist and Gülenist tutelary models are similar in terms of political methodology and understanding of political power – not and ideological overlap.

Hence the decision to use “Gülenism” and “the Gülenist structure” in this analysis. While FETÖ as a concept plays a certain legal and political role in efforts to define the organization's violent activities and coup attempts, it would be insufficient to treat this entity as a terrorist organization in the classical sense.

After all, the Gülenist structure operated through operatives placed within the state apparatus, a secret hierarchy, education and financial networks, media organizations, and international contacts – not armed units operating outside the state's control. In this sense, terror was not *the* defining factor but one of several methods it employed to reach its goals. Moreover, the entity gradually transitioned from a seemingly religious community to a secretive and hierarchical organization seeking to seize control of the state apparatus.⁵

This conceptual preference does not mean that anyone who has ever contributed to educational or charitable activities by the Gülen movement (or any

⁴ Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971), 1-16.

⁵ Ömer Çaha, “Cemaatten Terör Örgütüne: Gülen Hareketinin Anatomisi” [“From Community to Terrorist Organization: The Anatomy of the Gülen Movement”], *Liberal Düşünce*, no. 83 (2016): 91–113.

other religious community) must be considered a part of the coup plot. Indeed, academic analyses call for individual responsibility over collective scapegoating. Here, what really deserves attention is the organization's core, which was committed to a secret hierarchy, as well as its information and obedience regime, and attempts to seize political power by force.

THE IDEA OF COUPS AND BUREAUCRATIC TUTELAGE IN TÜRKİYE

Turkish politics has a long history of tutelage where elected politicians being restricted by the bureaucratic forces. During the single party era, political pluralism, free political competition, and the transfer of power through elections were not possible. The state and the Republican People's Party (CHP) were largely intertwined, as political power was exercised by the bureaucratic and ideological center. During this period, modernization was considered a top-down transformation backed by state power rather than a process that would enable social pluralism to emerge freely.⁶

The Kemalist political model maintained that society could not find the right path if left to its own devices. From this perspective, the political elite believed it to be their historic mission to modernize society, to educate it, and to consolidate it through national unity. Under this system, the various religious, cultural, ethnic, and ideological preferences were seen as elements that should be overcome or controlled – not natural components of a pluralistic society.

During the single-party era, the political arena was not a platform where different social groups could freely voice their demands and compete for political power. Instead, the political establishment was expected to perform its pre-determined duty of modernizing and nation-building. According to this view, the state was not an impartial body with rule of law, whose purpose was to serve the nation, but a founding and educating force intended to reshape society.

To be clear, Türkiye's post-1945 transition into multiparty politics did not completely dismantle this mindset. Although elections were held and political power changed hands, these developments did not lead all parts of the state apparatus to be controlled by democratically-elected governments. Specifically, the military bureaucracy, the judiciary, universities, and some media circles claimed to be the true protectors of the regime's fundamental principles, thus positioning themselves as equals or superiors of elected politicians.

As Cizre posits in her work on civil-military relations, a fundamental question for Türkiye's democratic governments has been the restrictions imposed by

⁶ William Hale, *Turkish Politics and the Military* (London: Routledge, 1994), 301–36; Ergun Özbudun, *Contemporary Turkish Politics: Challenges to Democratic Consolidation* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000), 105–30; Ahmet Insel and Ali Bayramoğlu, *Bir Zümre, Bir Parti: Türkiye'de Ordu* ["A Clique, A Party: The Military in Turkey"], (İstanbul: Birikim Yayınları, 2004), 17–36.



In Türkiye, coup mentality has not been confined to military circles; it has also gained legitimacy among segments of civilian society, including academics, journalists, and various professional groups.

the military tutelage on politics.⁷ In this sense, the 1960 coup and the resulting 1961 Constitution effectively institutionalized the influence of military and civilian bureaucrats over political decisionmaking processes. During this period, the National Security Council, the high courts, the ideological exploitation of academic autonomy, and the vast maneuvering space that the military bureaucracy enjoyed collectively limited the power of elected governments. To make matters worse, the 1982 Constitution further consolidated some elements of this tutelary architecture.

The bureaucratic tutelage system rested on the assumption that the people were incapable of making the right decisions all the time – and that elected politicians could place the regime’s fundamental values at risk. When faced with such seeming developments, military officers, judges, college administrators and elite bureaucrats believed themselves to be more capable and knowledgeable than elected politicians despite lacking democratic legitimacy. Accordingly, staging coups was not limited to military circles in Türkiye. Instead, it derived legitimacy from civilians, academics, journalists, and various professional groups.⁸

From the standpoint of the tutelary ideology, democratic politics did not reflect society’s true interests. By contrast, the political arena was a platform where the population’s ‘misguided’ preferences ought to be kept under control. The tutelage system maintained that, provided that elections could not be abolished altogether, it was necessary to limit what elected officials could do through bureaucratic institutions. Within this framework, a coup represented the last resort when all such lines were crossed.

This approach assigned superiority to the bureaucratic elites over political parties and voters. It saw elected politicians as temporary and the bureaucratic institutions as lasting. In this sense, the state’s fundamental direction had to remain the same, even if governments changed. The state’s “true owners” were expected to enforce the boundaries surrounding the political arena. This mindset inevitably led to a system of government where the democratic regime existed formally, yet elected officials could not actually exercise power.

The judiciary assumed an important role within the tutelage system. Instead of promoting human rights and the rule of law, the high courts acted as guardians of the official ideology. Specifically, the judiciary’s tutelary influence over the po-

7 Ümit Cizre, “Problems of Democratic Governance of Civil-Military Relations in Turkey and the European Union Enlargement Zone”, *European Journal of Political Research* 43, No 1 (2004): 107-125.

8 Yayla, “15 Temmuz Direnişi ve Türkiye Demokrasisi,” 6–9; Metin Heper, *The State Tradition in Turkey* (Beverly, North Humberstone: Eothen Press, 1985), 102–26; Gareth Jenkins, *Context and Circumstance: The Turkish Military and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 7–25.

litical arena was embodied by the closure cases targeting especially religious and Kurdish political movements, along with various bans and interventions.

Academia, too, was among the institutions reproducing the official ideology. During this period, universities, which were supposed to be centers of academic freedom and critical thought, demanded ideological loyalty and excluded alternative ways of thinking. Accordingly, the official ceremonies, curricula, academic appointments, and administrative structures of Turkish universities played an important role in passing down the Kemalist ideology to young generations.

Likewise, many media organizations contributed to manufacturing legitimacy for the tutelage system in the eyes of the people. How they reported the news before and after military interventions, together with their tendency to belittle elected politicians and to portray the military bureaucracy as the regime's savior, consolidated popular support for coup plotting. In this sense, coups were made possible not only by military units but also through civilian support networks portraying coups as legitimate and necessary.

This historical background helps explain why the Gülenist organization opted to infiltrate the state apparatus rather than form a political party. Specifically, the Gülenists correctly understood the distinction between governments (which supposedly exercised power) and bureaucratic (actual) power in Türkiye. Instead of seeking to win elections, they sought to infiltrate the judiciary, law enforcement, the military bureaucracy, intelligence services, educational institutions, and the media – which were less negatively affected by transfers of power. In this way, the movement believed that it could simply control key parts of the state instead of joining the democratic competition.⁹

THE MEANING AND LIMITS OF THE COMPARISON

Making a comparison between Kemalism and Gülenism does not require treating the two movements' ideas, members, and historical roles as identical. Kemalism acquired the character of an official ideology bound up with the founding of the Republic, and was transmitted to society over a long period through state institutions. Gülenism, by contrast, developed as a structure resting on covert organization and personal bonds of loyalty, operating under the guise of a religious community.¹⁰

Just as there may be individuals within the Kemalist tradition who embraced democratization, pluralism, and the rule of law, so too there may be people who

9 Buğra Kalkan, "Çoğulculuk Problemi ve FETÖ: Olsoncu Bir Analiz" ["The Problem of Pluralism and FETÖ: An Olsonian Analysis"], *Liberal Düşünce*, no. 83 (2016): 51–73; Akıncı, "Askeri Vesayetten FETÖ Vesayetine," 1–24.

10 Giovanni Sartori, *The Theory of Democracy Revisited* (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House Publishers, 1970), 1033–53; Juan J. Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes* (Boulder, Colorado and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000), 49–70.

took part in the Gülen movement's educational activities without being part of its covert structure, or who rejected the coup attempt outright. For this reason, it should be made explicit that the comparison is being drawn at the level of ideal types. The ideal types under examination here are the tutelary and authoritarian interpretation of Kemalism, on the one hand, and the closed, hierarchical, power-seeking organizational core of Gülenism, on the other.

That said, these differences should not obscure the shared political method. That one movement employs a secular language while the other employs a religious one—or that one constituted the state's official ideology while the other was a covert network infiltrating the state—does not mean the two could not develop similar attitudes toward pluralism and democracy. From the standpoint of democratic theory, the fundamental question is not which symbols an ideology uses, but how it seeks to obtain and exercise power.

Both structures regarded their own understanding of history, sources of knowledge, and political goals as superior to those of others. Both rested on the notion that a particular leader or elite group understood society's true interests better than ordinary people. This notion, in turn, produced a distrust of the population's political preferences and a purely instrumental view of democratic politics.

Kalkan's Olsonian analysis¹¹ helps explain closed organizations' capacity to generate in-group benefits and loyalty. Başdemir, meanwhile, notes that a monopoly over esoteric knowledge weakens independent judgment.¹² In this context, the common ground between the two structures can be examined under the headings of the leader cult, the conception of centralized power, opposition to pluralism, social engineering, distrust of democratic politics, bureaucratic organization, and recourse to coups. The Gülenist structure's closed group configuration provided its members with selective benefits while producing a sharp division between in-group solidarity and the pluralistic society outside it. In esoteric groups, the monopolization of knowledge by a leader and a narrow hierarchy weakens members' independent judgment and facilitates unquestioning obedience.

THE LEADER CULT AND THE NOTION OF INFALLIBLE AUTHORITY

One of the most visible similarities between the Kemalist and Gülenist structures is that both generate an extraordinary authority and cult of personality centered on a single leader. The leader cult rests on attributing all political and social

¹¹ Kalkan, "Çoğulculuk Problemi ve FETÖ," 51–73.

¹² Hasan Y. Başdemir, "Ezoterik Grupların Epistemolojisi" ["The Epistemology of Esoteric Groups"], *Liberal Düşünce*, no. 83 (2016): 75–90.

achievements to a single individual, treating the leader's views as truths that transcend history, and regarding criticism as a moral or political offense.

In the Kemalist cult of personality, Mustafa Kemal is presented not merely as the founding leader of the Republic in the narrow sense, but as the ultimate authority on nearly every question concerning Türkiye's political, moral, and cultural life. Although the saying "the truest guide in life is science" is frequently repeated, one can observe that, rather than the open-ended and critical character of scientific inquiry, statements attributed to the leader are instead treated as immutable truths. Decisions by the leader that ought to be assessed within their historical context are instead turned into absolute principles binding subsequent generations as well.¹³

The cult of personality is not confined to the realm of ideas alone. The houses the leader lived in, the objects he used, his clothing, his daily habits, and his personal memorabilia can acquire a political sanctity. The reproduction of this cult through the education system, ceremonies, official speeches, and symbols can make it difficult for individuals to voice differing assessments of the leader.

The Kemalist cult of personality has been disseminated throughout the whole of society by way of formal education. Across the educational process, from primary school through university, the narration of historical events and political principles centered on a particular leader has made it difficult for new generations to develop a critical and pluralistic understanding of history. Treating the leader's ideas as immutable truths valid in every era, rather than discussing them within their historical circumstances, also runs counter to the spirit of scientific thought.

In the Gülenist structure, the leader cult was constructed in a more closed, religious, and mystical idiom. Fethullah Gülen was presented not merely as a religious scholar or community leader, but as a figure with access—through dreams, spiritual signs, and special channels of knowledge—to truths beyond the reach of ordinary people. The leader's words acquired a de facto monopoly of interpretation over religious texts and general moral principles.

Within this structure, obedience ceased to be an organizational choice and became a religious and moral obligation. When a member experienced a conflict between the instructions of the leader and his hierarchical superiors, on the one hand, and his own conscience or the explicit provisions of the law, on the other, organizational loyalty could prevail. The fact that state officials owed allegiance to

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One of the most visible similarities between the Kemalist and Gülenist structures is their construction of an extraordinary cult of leadership centered on a single individual.

¹³ Murat Belge, *Militarist Modernleşme: Almanya, Japonya ve Türkiye* ["Militarist Modernization: Germany, Japan, and Turkey"] (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2012).

the leader of a covert organization rather than to elected constitutional authority was one of the fundamental conditions that made July 15 possible.¹⁴

In both cults of personality, the leader is cleansed of the errors and weaknesses common to ordinary people. It is never accepted that the leader has erred; any apparent error is instead explained away by historical circumstances, the inadequacy of those around him, or followers' failure to properly understand the leader. This makes the doctrine difficult to falsify. Success is attributed to the leader; failure, to those who carried out his instructions, or to enemies.

In Dahl's theory of democracy, opposition and competition are the institutional counterpart of the premise that those who govern are fallible.¹⁵ Democratic politics is incompatible with the notion of an infallible leader. Democracy rests on the assumption that all people—governed and governing alike—can err. The rationale behind elections, the separation of powers, freedom of expression, and the existence of an opposition is that no single person holds an absolute monopoly on knowledge and morality on society's behalf. As the leader cult grows stronger, criticism, legal oversight, and the peaceful transfer of power all become more difficult.

The cult of personality does not merely exalt the leader; it also weakens followers' individual sense of responsibility. Members may claim, rather than assuming moral responsibility for their own decisions, that they were simply carrying out the leader's instructions. Yet within a democratic and lawful order, no one can escape responsibility for a crime they have committed by citing loyalty to a leader as justification.

ABSOLUTE POWER, SOCIAL ENGINEERING, AND OPPOSITION TO PLURALISM

Hayek's critique of the limits of central rational knowledge lays bare the epistemic problem inherent in social engineering.¹⁶ Another point shared by the Kemalist and Gülenist styles of tutelage is the belief that strong, centralized power, concentrated in the hands of the right people, is necessary for the social good. According to this view, society is not capable of establishing order on its own through voluntary relationships, diverse ways of life, and competing ideas. Order must instead be established and safeguarded by a knowledgeable and morally superior elite.

This view rejects the idea of spontaneous order. It does not accept that society can develop as a result of the free activity of different individuals and groups. It

14 Atilla Yayla, "15 Temmuz ve Sadakat Çatışması" ["July 15 and the Conflict of Loyalty"], *Kriter* 8, no. 81 (2023).

15 Dahl, *Polyarchy*, 1–16.

16 Friedrich A. Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty: A New Statement of the Liberal Principles of Justice and Political Economy* (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), 35–54.

holds, instead, that social order must be designed by a central intelligence, implemented, and, where necessary, preserved through the use of force. Such an approach disregards both the limits of human knowledge and the complexity of society.

Kemalist social engineering aimed to reduce social differences in the name of modernization and national unity. The education system, language policies, dress regulations, religion–state relations, and the official historical narrative were all deployed with the aim of producing a new and homogeneous type of citizen. Within this framework, differing religious interpretations, ethnic identities, local cultures, and alternative readings of history were, more often than not, met with suspicion.

Pluralism is not simply the presence of different people within the same society. It is the acceptance, as normal and legitimate, that people differ from one another in religion, language, ethnic identity, ideology, way of life, occupation, interests, and moral outlook. A pluralistic society does not seek to eliminate these differences, but to allow them to coexist within a framework of freedom and law.¹⁷

The Kemalist tutelary approach frequently treated plurality as a threat to national unity and modernization. The state's production, through the education system, of a single correct understanding of citizenship and history narrowed the space available for the expression of differing ideas. That criticisms of the official ideology were met not with counterarguments, but with accusations that the critic harbored hostility toward the Republic, secularism, or Atatürk, is one manifestation of this problem of pluralism.

During the period when it did not yet control the state in its entirety, the Gülenist structure lacked the means to directly homogenize the whole of society. Instead, it built an intensive internal regime of education and surveillance that controlled its own members across nearly every domain of their lives. Houses, dormitories, schools, private tutoring centers, discussion groups (“sohbet” circles), and professional networks could determine not only a member's education and career, but also his friendships, marriage, choice of reading material, and political attitudes.¹⁸

In this respect, Gülenist internal organization was able to produce a more intensive form of total control than the state's broad but not always effective official indoctrination. No room was allowed within the group for independent

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The Gülenist internal organizational structure was capable of producing a more intensive system of total control than the state's extensive, though not always effective, official indoctrination. Within the organization, there was no room for independent thought, criticism of the leader, or questioning of organizational directives.

¹⁷ Robert A. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 220–31; Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 24–30.

¹⁸ Kalkan, “Çoğulculuk Problemi ve FETÖ,” 51–73; Başdemir, “Ezoterik Grupların Epistemolojisi,” 75–90.

thought, criticism of the leader, or questioning the organization's orders. A person who asked questions, harbored doubts, or sought to act independently could be accused of spiritual weakness, arrogance, or betrayal of the cause.

The relationship between ends and means also became problematic within the Gülenist structure's moral framework. The belief that one was serving a great and sacred cause made it easier to legitimize conduct that would, under ordinary circumstances, be considered contrary to law and morality. The theft of public examination questions, the fabrication of evidence, the surveillance of individuals' private lives, and the use of judicial and law-enforcement authority for organizational ends could all be regarded as temporary evils permissible in the service of a greater good.

This outlook rests on the notion that small injustices may be committed in pursuit of a greater justice. Yet the rule of law holds to the principle that a good end does not legitimize bad means. An order established through the violation of human rights and law cannot be a just order, however lofty the aims invoked in its defense.

The gunning-down, on the night of July 15, of the people who resisted the coup is the most extreme example of this moral rupture. That soldiers who regarded themselves as members of a pious religious community could bring themselves to kill civilian citizens of their own society and fellow believers in their own faith shows how organizational loyalty can override general moral principles.

Opposition to pluralism manifested differently in the two structures. Whereas Kemalist tutelage sought to integrate society in line with the official ideology, the Gülenist structure first bound its own members into a rigid regime of obedience, and only then sought to seize state power in order to impose this organizational mindset upon society as a whole.

THE INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF DEMOCRATIC POLITICS AND CONTEMPT FOR POLITICIANS

Schumpeter's competitive theory of democracy¹⁹ regards the acquisition of power through open electoral competition as democracy's distinguishing feature. Rather than attributing any intrinsic value to democratic politics in its own right, the Kemalist and Gülenist conceptions of tutelage tend to view it as a mere instrument that can be used to reach a goal or to adapt to prevailing circumstances. Democratic politics is a process in which differing interests and values are openly organized, parties compete for voter support, and power changes hands through

19. Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1942), 269–83.

elections. This process rests on the premise that no single group can ever claim to represent the whole of society absolutely.

The tutelary outlook, by contrast, views the people's political preferences as unreliable. The voter may vote for the wrong party, may act in accordance with religious or economic self-interest, or may fail to grasp the regime's true interests. In that case, the elected politician, too, is regarded not as the representative of society's genuine interest, but as the product of the uneducated majority's transient preference.

The Kemalist single-party era's refusal to permit free and fair political competition is the clearest example of this approach. Even after the transition to multiparty life, elected governments' authority continued to be constrained by the military and civilian bureaucracy. The interventions of 1960, 1971, 1980, and February 28, 1997 all rested on the notion that the people's political preferences could be corrected by bureaucratic elites.²⁰

In tutelary Kemalist circles, the politician has often been portrayed as a self-interested, ignorant, populist, and untrustworthy figure. The soldier, the senior judge, the bureaucrat, or the university professor, by contrast, has been presented as an elite figure looking after society's long-term interests. This hierarchy inverts democratic legitimacy: the politician, who derives authority from the people, is placed below; the bureaucrat, who has never stood for election, is placed above.

The Gülenists, for their part, never founded a political party outright, nor did they organize themselves as an open and accountable political movement. Instead, they built relationships with various parties, supported different political actors at different times, and sought to expand their cadres within state institutions independently of election results. This choice reflects not merely tactical secrecy, but a genuine distrust of democratic politics.

Founding a political party, publishing a platform, fielding candidates, and taking part in elections all open a movement to public scrutiny. The voter comes to know the movement's aims, its rivals can criticize it, and it is kept from power when it loses an election. The Gülenist structure, by concealing both its aims and its own members, evaded democratic oversight altogether.

Anyone who seeks power in politics must follow open, legitimate, and accountable paths. State power cannot be divided up in the corridors of a covert organization. Those who dislike a given politician must face the voter in order to take his place. Seizing power through bureaucratic cadres, by contrast, renders



The fundamental democratic lesson of July 15 is that no bureaucratic or sectarian organization can legitimately claim a concealed authority over the openly expressed political will of the people.

20 Özbudun, *Contemporary Turkish Politics*, 21–76; Hale, *Turkish Politics and the Military*, 80–119.

democratic politics dysfunctional and turns the state into an arena of covert power struggles.²¹

The fundamental democratic lesson of July 15 is that no bureaucratic or communal group can claim a covert right over the people's open political preference. A movement that cannot come to power through elections, and that instead attempts to seize control of the machinery of state through armed force or bureaucratic power, constitutes an outright rejection of political legitimacy.

FROM KEMALIST TUTELAGE TO THE GÜLENIST BID FOR TUTELAGE

Akinci's assessment draws attention to the rise of a new organizational locus of tutelage precisely as the old military tutelage was in decline.²² The rise of the Gülenist structure is closely bound up with the fact that Kemalist bureaucratic tutelage long served as the true center of state power in Türkiye. The structure recognized that elected governments were transient, while cadres within the military bureaucracy, the judiciary, law enforcement, universities, and the intelligence services were more enduring.

For this reason, Gülenist investment in human resources was directed above all at bureaucratic institutions. Educational institutions and private tutoring centers did not merely carry out teaching activities; they also served as a mechanism for identifying, guiding, and preparing talented students for state office. Public examinations, career-advancement processes, and internal institutional appointments became strategic domains for the organization.

The Gülenist structure's long-term strategy rested on patience, secrecy, and the building of cadres. Members were taught to conceal their identities and organizational ties, and a mode of conduct was cultivated that allowed them to adapt to different political and ideological milieus. In this way, the structure built up cadres that appeared, in various domains of the state and society, to be independent of one another, while in fact remaining bound to the same hierarchy.

The organized cadres that emerged within law enforcement and the judiciary used their powers of investigation and prosecution not solely on the public's behalf, but also to eliminate the organization's rivals and expand its footprint within the state. The Ergenekon and Balyoz (Sledgehammer) trials, given the genuine existence of military tutelage and the phenomenon of coups in Türkiye, initially raised hopes of democratization. However, the expansion of these cases through fabricated or contested evidence, the targeting of individuals with no

21 Yayla, "15 Temmuz Direnişi ve Türkiye Demokrasisi," 45–47.

22 Akinci, "Askeri Vesayetten FETÖ Vesayetine," 1–24.

connection to any crime, and the transformation of judicial processes into instruments of political purge turned what had been legitimate opposition to tutelage into part of the construction of a new tutelage.²³

Two distinct phenomena must be separated here. Military tutelage, coup plots, and attempts to restrict democratic politics were real in Türkiye. It was therefore legitimate and necessary to investigate these matters and prosecute criminal conduct. But the existence of a genuine problem does not justify the unlawful methods of Gülenist police officers, prosecutors, and judges. The rule of law rests on the principle that legitimate ends can only be pursued through lawful means.

The Gülenist structure turned the instruments of the rule of law into weapons of organizational warfare. Police investigations, wiretaps, secret witnesses, media campaigns, and judicial rulings were deployed in coordinated fashion. Law ceased to be an impartial order protecting individual rights, and was instead turned into a weapon for neutralizing the organization's rivals.

The Gülenist structure also sought influence in universities, the media, and civil society. On the one hand, it built cadres within public universities; on the other, it founded foundation universities of its own, using academic titles and administrative posts as domains of organizational influence. The privileging of organizational loyalty over academic merit weakened the scientific standing of universities.

In addition to founding its own media organizations, it steered outlets it did not directly control through leaked information, the selective sharing of documents, and organized public-opinion campaigns. Gülenist media was employed as an organizational tool not only on the night of the coup itself, but throughout the political and psychological operation that preceded it.²⁴

The effort to penetrate civil-society organizations and diverse ideological milieus illustrates the flexibility of the Gülenist strategy. Depending on the setting, the structure could adopt a conservative, liberal, nationalist, social-democratic, or Kemalist idiom. Behind this shifting appearance lay not any genuine ideological pluralism, but rather an instrumental use of identity in the service of organizational goals.

The structure's intelligence activities were likewise a significant part of its organization within the state. Information obtained from the police, the military



The conflict between the Gülenist movement and the Kemalist tutelary establishment was not always a struggle between democracy and tutelage. Rather, it was largely a power struggle between the old tutelary order and an emerging new one.

23 Atilla Yayla, “Öncesi ve Sonrasıyla Türkiye’nin 15 Temmuz Vakası” [“Turkey’s July 15 Case, Before and After”], *Liberal Düşünce*, no. 87 (2017): 49–74; Devrim Özkan, “Bir Terör Aparatı Olarak Medya: ‘Dink Suikastı’ ve ‘15 Temmuz Darbe Girişimi’ Örneği” [“Media as an Apparatus of Terror: The Cases of the ‘Dink Assassination’ and the ‘July 15 Coup Attempt’”], *Liberal Düşünce*, no. 87 (2017): 75–87.

24 Özkan, “Bir Terör Aparatı Olarak Medya”, 75–87.

bureaucracy, and other public institutions was used to monitor the organization's rivals, place them under pressure, and, where necessary, discredit them. Covert surveillance and the exploitation of personal data for organizational ends show that state authority had been placed in the service of a private structure.

The decline of Kemalist tutelage was seen by the Gülenists not as an opportunity to build a democratic and pluralistic state order, but as an opportunity to seize bureaucratic space left vacant. In this sense, the Gülenist structure did not reject Kemalist tutelage outright; rather, it took over its organizational logic, its state-centered conception of power, and its distrust of elected politics.

The Gülenists' goal was not to eliminate bureaucratic tutelage, but to shift its center. Old Kemalist cadres would be replaced by Gülenist cadres, but bureaucratic domination over elected politics would continue. For this reason, the Gülenist movement's conflict with Kemalist tutelage was not always a conflict between democracy and tutelage. It was, to a large extent, a power struggle between the old tutelage and the new tutelage then under construction.²⁵

FROM DECEMBER 17–25 TO JULY 15: THE EVOLUTION OF THE COUP METHOD

The relationship between the Gülenist structure and the AK Party governments developed within a temporary alignment of goals against military tutelage. The elected government sought to reduce the military bureaucracy's influence over political power, while the Gülenists sought to expand their own strength within the state by eliminating the old tutelary cadres. These two aims, which appeared to point in the same direction, turned into conflict over time, since the parties' ultimate objectives differed.²⁶

The Gülenist structure's presence within the state refused to submit to the elected government's democratic oversight. Cadres within law enforcement and the judiciary acted according to their own internal hierarchy, producing something resembling a state within the state. The elected government's attempts to bring these cadres under control and to limit the organization's room for maneuver were among the principal causes of the open conflict that followed.

The summoning of MİT Undersecretary Hakan Fidan for questioning on February 7, 2012 can be assessed as an attempt by the organization to turn its judicial and law-enforcement power against a critical bureaucrat of the executive branch. This episode clearly demonstrated that the parallel hierarchy within state institutions was capable of acting independently of the elected government.

25 Akıncı, "Askeri Vesayetten FETÖ Vesayetine," 1–24; Yayla, "Öncesi ve Sonrasıyla Türkiye'nin 15 Temmuz Vakası," 49–74.

26 Ersel Aydın, "A Paradigmatic Shift for the Turkish Generals and an End to the Coup Era in Turkey," *The Middle East Journal* 63, no. 4 (2009): 581–96; Yayla, "Öncesi ve Sonrasıyla Türkiye'nin 15 Temmuz Vakası," 49–74.

The December 17–25, 2013 investigations, for their part, revealed that legal allegations could be deployed within a coordinated operation aimed at toppling or bringing under control the political leadership. The investigation of corruption allegations is a requirement of the rule of law; no government or politician is exempt from a corruption inquiry. But it is likewise incompatible with the rule of law for legal processes to be timed by a covert organizational hierarchy, conducted selectively, and used to produce a political outcome.²⁷

When the law ceases to be an independent and impartial institution constraining power, and is instead turned into a weapon of organizational power, the claim to be fighting corruption loses its credibility. A structure that does not observe legal procedure, that uses evidence selectively, and that directs investigations according to political objectives does not produce justice.

In this respect, the December 17–25 process can be seen as a bureaucratic form of intervention distinct from the classic military coup. That police officers and prosecutors were used in place of uniformed soldiers, and powers of detention and investigation in place of tanks, does not change the essential nature of the intervention. Its aim was to neutralize the elected government outside the ordinary course of democratic process, or to subordinate it to the organization's own will.²⁸

The failure of the December 17–25 operation, and the onset of the purge of Gülenist cadres within the state, pushed the organization toward its final and most violent instrument. Cadres that had been concealed within the Armed Forces for years attempted a direct military coup on July 15, 2016. In this way, the pursuit of bureaucratic tutelage passed from intervention in legal guise to open armed violence.

The Gülenists' organization within the military bureaucracy had long been conducted in secrecy. Organizational solidarity was employed in admissions to military academies, promotions, appointments, and purges, with the aim of pushing non-Gülenist personnel out of the system by various means. That they were largely able to evade the ideological and religious-affiliation screenings known to be carried out annually within military institutions shows just how sophisticated the structure's strategy of concealment had become.

July 15 is the continuation and final stage of the Gülenist structure's earlier methods. The organization sought to overthrow, by military force, the political pow-

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The bombing of the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye (TBMM) demonstrated that the coup attempt targeted not only the government but also the institution embodying popular sovereignty. The use of lethal force against civilians, police facilities, and crowds resisting the coup further revealed the terrorist character of the attempted putsch.

27 Yayla, “Öncesi ve Sonrasıyla Türkiye’nin 15 Temmuz Vakası,” 55–61; Çaha, “Cemaatten Terör Örgütüne: Gülen Hareketinin Anatomisi,” 105–10.

28 Akıncı, “Askeri Vesayetten FETÖ Vesayetine,” 14–20; Yayla, “Öncesi ve Sonrasıyla Türkiye’nin 15 Temmuz Vakası,” 55–61.

er it had been unable to obtain through elections or bring under control through legal and law-enforcement operations. In this respect, July 15 laid bare, in the clearest possible terms, the organization's true attitude toward democratic politics.

THE JULY 15 COUP ATTEMPT AND DEMOCRATIC RESISTANCE

In Alkan's analysis, July 15 is the assault of a covert organization embedded within the state, one that goes beyond the classic pattern of the military coup.²⁹ July 15 differs from previous coups not only in the organizational character of its perpetrator, but also in the methods employed and the social response it encountered. The plotters sought to seize control of communication channels, to arrest or kill elected officials, to neutralize law enforcement, and to instill fear in society.

The bombing of the Grand National Assembly showed that the coup targeted not only the government, but also the institution representing popular sovereignty itself. The opening of fire on civilian citizens, police stations, and the crowds resisting the coup made plain the terrorist dimension of the attempt. July 15 was a large-scale assault by a covert organization embedded within state institutions, one that surpassed the classic patterns of the military coup.³⁰

The plotters appear to have assumed that the entire armed forces would join them, and that the public would stay home, as it had during previous coups. In fact, a significant portion of military units did not join the coup, some commanders resisted the plotters' orders, and the police actively fought against the coup.

Several factors contributed to thwarting the coup. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's call for the public to resist, the refusal of government members to surrender, the political parties' stand against the coup, the resistance of the police, the fact that not all of the armed forces joined the plotters, the continued broadcasting of media outlets, and, most importantly, citizens taking to the streets, together ensured the attempt's failure.³¹

The people's resistance changed the fundamental behavioral pattern in Türkiye's history of coups. In previous coups, society had largely waited to see the outcome of the military intervention; no organized and effective civilian resis-

29 Alkan, "15 Temmuz'u Anlamak", 253-272.

30 "Fethullahçı Terör Örgütünün 15 Temmuz 2016 Tarihli Darbe Girişimi ile Faaliyetlerinin Tüm Yönleriyle Araştırılması Amacıyla Kurulan Meclis Araştırması Komisyonu Raporu ve Tutanakları" ["Report and Minutes of the Parliamentary Investigation Committee Established to Investigate All Aspects of the Fethullahist Terrorist Organization's July 15, 2016 Coup Attempt and Its Activities"], TBMM [Grand National Assembly of Turkey], (2017).

31 Yayla, "15 Temmuz Direnişi ve Türkiye Demokrasisi," 5-49; Nebi Miş, "Measuring Social Perception of the July 15 Coup Attempt," *Insight Turkey* 18, no. 3 (2016): 169-204.

tance had emerged. On July 15, by contrast, people of differing political views, ways of life, and social classes took a common stand against the coup.³²

This resistance became a historic experience that strengthened Türkiye's democratic political culture. Society demonstrated that a democratic regime can be protected not only by constitutional texts and state institutions, but, where necessary, by the active intervention of citizens themselves. The subsequent "democracy watches" have likewise been regarded as a continuation of this process of social learning.

Field research conducted in public squares shows that, among the principal motivations of those who took part in the resistance, were sentiments of democracy, national will, and support for the elected government. This finding suggests that the July 15 resistance should not be reduced to loyalty to a single party or leader alone.³³

Loyalty to President Erdoğan and the AK Party certainly played an important role in bringing some citizens out onto the streets. But the resistance as a whole cannot be explained by this factor alone. Had the coup succeeded, not only the government, but the whole of democratic politics would have been eliminated, and every political party would have come under the control of a military-organizational administration.

The opposition parties' clear stance against the coup is likewise significant. There is no contradiction between opposing the government within democratic politics and standing alongside the elected government at the moment of a coup. On the contrary, democratic opposition must insist that power can only change hands through elections. The rejection of the coup by different political parties on the night of July 15—if only for a short time—produced a shared commitment around democratic legitimacy.³⁴

That members of parliament from different parties refused to leave the Grand National Assembly despite the bombardment likewise carries great symbolic and political significance. Keeping the Assembly open demonstrated that constitutional legitimacy endured in the face of the plotters' attempt to eliminate the will of the people.

The role of the media, too, differed markedly from that of previous coups. Although the plotters attempted to seize control of certain broadcasters, television stations and digital communication tools continued broadcasting, and



The anniversaries of the July 15 coup attempt should not be reduced to ceremonies that merely reproduce narratives of heroism.

32 Yayla, "15 Temmuz Direnişi ve Türkiye Demokrasisi," 43–48; Miş, "Measuring Social Perception of the July 15 Coup Attempt," 169–204.

33 Miş, "Measuring Social Perception of the July 15 Coup Attempt," 169–204.

34 Atilla Yayla, "15 Temmuz ve Türkiye'nin Siyasal Kültürü: Siyasi Partiler Üzerinde Bir Değerlendirme" ["July 15 and Turkey's Political Culture: An Evaluation Focused on Political Parties"], *Liberal Düşünce*, no. 84 (2016): 57–66; Diamond, *Developing Democracy*, 10–15.

government representatives were able to reach the public. In this way, the media order of the past—in which coup declarations had once been broadcast unilaterally—gave way to a multi-centered communications environment far harder to control.³⁵

Whether this shared stance has since turned into a lasting democratic culture is a separate question. While the initial spirit of political unity following July 15 was significant, the possibility soon emerged that Türkiye would revert to its old patterns of polarization within a short time. One of the central questions that must be assessed on the tenth anniversary is the extent to which the anti-coup solidarity of that night has become institutionalized.

Opposing coups is not merely a matter of rejecting a particular coup or a particular organization. It requires opposing all military and bureaucratic interventions, whoever carries them out and against whatever government they are directed. Opposition to coups should not be a partisan stance, but a general and consistent democratic principle.

THE RULE OF LAW AND INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE COUP ATTEMPT

Gülener and Erciyas's study of purge practices shows that any process of elimination must be carried out within legal safeguards and in a manner that is proportionate.³⁶ Following July 15, it was inevitable that the state would purge the Gülenist structure from public institutions. It was not possible for the democratic state to continue while the network a covert organization had built within law enforcement, the judiciary, the military, education, and intelligence remained intact. But the legitimacy of the purge depends not only on the justice of its aim, but also on the lawfulness of the methods employed.

In a state governed by the rule of law, crime and responsibility are individual. Opening an account at a particular bank, attending a particular school, belonging to a particular union, or taking part in one of the lawful activities of the structure once known as the Gülen movement does not, on its own, prove membership in the coup organization. At the same time, involvement in more than one of these activities legitimately raises suspicion; participating in covert communication systems in particular, receiving organizational instructions, using public authority in the organization's favor, fabricating evidence, stealing examination questions,

35 Özkan, "Bir Terör Aparatı Olarak Medya," 75–87; Diamond, *Developing Democracy*, 219–33.

36 Serdar Gülener and Serencan Erciyas, "Dünyada Arındırma Uygulamaları ve Türkiye'de Devletin FETÖ'den Arındırılması" ["Lustration Practices Around the World and the Purge of FETÖ from the Turkish State"], SETA Analiz, no. 179 (December 2016).

or taking part in the coup itself can constitute definitive proof of individual responsibility.³⁷

Those who served within the organization's decision-making mechanisms cannot be assessed in the same legal and moral category as those whose relationship to the structure was limited to educational or charitable activity.³⁸ This distinction is necessary not only to prevent injustice to individuals, but also to demonstrate that the rule of law rests on a moral and political order fundamentally different from that of the coup plotters. The plotters treated individuals not as citizens possessing rights and responsibilities of their own, but as instruments of organizational goals. The democratic state must not reproduce this same collectivist logic in reverse.

Collective accusation risks the state adopting the very logic—one that erases individuality—found within the Gülenist structure's own internal reasoning. In combating a coup-plotting structure, the state must not adopt its methods. Transparent evidence, independent adjudication, the right to a defense, the presumption of innocence, and proportionality are indispensable principles of a democratic order.

The conditions of the state of emergency may have made certain rapid administrative measures necessary. Even so, emergency measures must be prevented from hardening into a permanent legal order. The erroneous decisions of the administration must be subject to review by independent courts, the rights of those unjustly removed from office must be restored, and people whose guilt has not been proven must not be kept under permanent suspicion.³⁹

By the same token, the investigation of the coup attempt should not be left to court rulings alone. It must be openly examined why state institutions failed for so long to detect or prevent the organization's infiltration of official posts, what weaknesses existed within military and civilian intelligence, how public examination questions could be stolen, and what mistaken judgments were made by political decision-makers.

The growth of the Gülenist structure within the state owed not only to the activities of the organization's own members, but also to political and bureaucratic negligence. Unless the conditions that allowed the structure to expand for so many years within education, the media, business, and public administration are critically assessed, there is no way to prevent similar structures from emerging in the future.



Commemoration
should be
accompanied by
critical reflection and
institutional learning.

37 Ronald Dworkin, *Law's Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 93–101; Yayla, “Öncesi ve Sonrasıyla Türkiye'nin 15 Temmuz Vakası,” 70–74.

38 Yayla, “Öncesi ve Sonrasıyla Türkiye'nin 15 Temmuz Vakası,” 70–74.

39 Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, 10–15; Diamond, *Developing Democracy*, 111–17.

The parliamentary commission of inquiry established within the Grand National Assembly worked to investigate the activities of FETÖ/PDY and every dimension of the July 15 coup attempt. Even so, the fact that debate continues, even in the tenth year, over certain institutional and political dimensions of the event shows that investigation and transparency cannot be considered a completed task.

The anniversaries of the coup attempt should not become mere ceremonies in which a narrative of heroism is repeated. Commemoration must proceed together with critical thought and institutional learning. The state must strengthen the principles of merit, transparency, accountability, and the clear legal grounding of official duties, in order to prevent illegitimate organizations from forming within its own ranks.

THE MEANING OF JULY 15 FOR THE DEMOCRATIC REGIME, TEN YEARS ON

Linz and Stepan's approach to democratic consolidation holds that no unelected power should possess a veto over elected office.⁴⁰ What is called for on the tenth anniversary of July 15 is not merely to remember the night of the coup. The real task is to correctly diagnose the political culture and institutional weaknesses that made the coup attempt possible, and to prevent their recurrence. This requires, above all, that the primacy of civilian politics be embraced as a clear and unquestionable principle. Anyone who wishes to exercise state power must take part in open politics, declare a program, seek the voters' support, and accept the results of elections. No military, judicial, religious, or bureaucratic group holds a covert right of sovereignty over elected bodies.

The primacy of civilian politics does not mean that elected governments possess unlimited authority. Elected governments must be constrained by the constitution, the law, human rights, freedom of expression, and an independent judiciary. But these constraints cannot be made a pretext for military or bureaucratic groups lacking democratic legitimacy to intervene in politics. Legal oversight and bureaucratic tutelage must be kept distinct from one another: the former is an indispensable condition of a democratic regime, the latter a denial of popular sovereignty.

It is likewise of vital importance that state institutions not be allowed to become the property of any ideology, religious community, or closed professional group. The bureaucracy must operate on the basis of loyalty to the state and the law. A state official may hold personal religious or political views, but may not

40 Linz ve Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, 3-15.

exercise public authority in accordance with the instructions of a covert organization. The loyalty of the civil servant must be directed toward the constitutional order and the law—not toward particular persons or groups.

At the same time, loyalty to the state does not mean personal loyalty to the party in government. A democratic bureaucracy implements the lawful policies of elected governments, but does not enter into the private service of a party organization or any individual leader. In combating the danger posed by the Gülenist structure, surrendering state cadres to some other network of political, ideological, or communal loyalty would only allow the same problem to reemerge in a different guise.

Merit, moreover, should not be understood merely as technical competence or examination success. Adherence to the law, professional ethics, a sense of duty, the impartiality of public service, and openness to oversight are likewise components of merit. A person who performs well on examinations but harbors loyalty to a covert organization cannot be considered meritorious for public office. By the same token, a bureaucracy built of individuals appointed for their personal loyalty to political power, rather than professional competence, cannot be expected to constitute a meritocratic institution.⁴¹

Ensuring that entry into and advancement within public office rest on open, fair, and accountable criteria will make it more difficult for closed networks to form within the state. Conducting interviews and appointments on the basis of political or communal connections not only produces injustice, but weakens the institutional capacity of the state itself. The Gülenist structure's past exploitation of public examinations and appointment processes showed just how severe the consequences of departing from merit can be.

Another issue brought to light by July 15 is the incompatibility of cults of personality with a democratic society. A leader's political achievements can be recognized; the great services of historic figures can be acknowledged. But no leader is infallible, beyond history, or beyond criticism. A cult of personality can place not only leaders currently in power, but also historical founders and religious figures, beyond the reach of law and criticism alike.

Democratic culture requires loyalty to principles and institutions, not to persons. A society's future cannot be entrusted to the wisdom or goodness of a single leader. Good institutions limit the harm that bad or inadequate leaders can do; they ensure that power is subject to oversight and can change hands peacefully.



On the tenth anniversary of July 15, the essential task is not merely to remember the night of the coup attempt. Rather, it is to identify the political culture and institutional weaknesses that made the coup possible and to prevent the re-emergence of similar conditions.

41 Güler and Erciyas, "Dünyada Arındırma Uygulamaları ve Türkiye'de Devletin FETÖ'den Arındırılması," 7–28; Kalkan, "Çoğulculuk Problemi ve FETÖ," 51–73.

When trust in institutions is replaced by trust in persons, the democratic regime becomes fragile.

It is likewise essential to understand that pluralism is not a weakness, but a natural condition of a democratic society. The presence within society of differing religions, sects, ideologies, ethnic identities, and ways of life is not a disorder to be eliminated by some central will. Peace is achieved not by making all people alike, but by allowing differences to coexist under equal rights.



The separation of powers, an independent judiciary, a free media, and a strong civil society are essential not only for constraining governments but also for ensuring that clandestine organizations within the state remain visible, accountable, and subject to democratic oversight.

The state's task is not to shape society around a single correct conception of life, but to establish a legal order within which different individuals and groups can live without violating the rights of others. The shared error of the Kemalist and Gülenist projects of social engineering was their attempt to impose a particular model of the human person and of society upon everyone. In one case, the model that prevailed was the modern, proper citizen; in the other, the obedient and devoted member of the community. Both models remove the individual from ownership of his own life.

Freedom of expression and open debate are the principal means of preventing closed and tutelary structures from developing. Closed organizations gain strength precisely in spaces removed from criticism and outside oversight. The activities of state institutions, religious communities, political parties, and civil-society organizations alike must remain open to public criticism. A culture that treats criticism as treason or enmity, by contrast, serves only to conceal wrongdoing for long periods of time.⁴²

Thanks to its internal structure's closure to criticism, the Gülenist organization weakened its own members' capacity for questioning. In the same way, rendering the official ideology beyond criticism likewise prevented society from freely debating its political and historical questions. An open society is one in which no person, institution, or ideology is placed beyond the reach of criticism. That an idea is true or powerful requires that it be defended in free debate—not shielded from criticism by force of law.

Opposition to coups must also become a general democratic principle, free of partisanship. People must oppose not only a coup directed against the government they themselves support, but interventions against every elected government. The notion that “coups are bad, but this government deserved one” is a rejection of the democratic principle itself. Opposing a coup is not a matter of supporting the government in power; it is a matter of insisting that political power can only change hands through elections.

⁴² Dahl, *Polyarchy*, 1–16; Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies: The Spell of Plato* (Vol. 1) (London: Routledge, 1945), 124–28.

This same consistency must apply to the assessment of past coups as well. Regarding the 1960 coup, the 1971 memorandum, the 1980 coup, or the February 28 intervention as legitimate while opposing only July 15 does not constitute genuine opposition to coups. The democratic principle requires the rejection of every military and bureaucratic intervention. Changing one's stance according to the identity of a coup's victims turns democracy from a principle into a partisan instrument.

July 15 demonstrated that the people need not remain passive in the face of a coup. This experience will lead future potential plotters to reckon with the possibility of societal resistance.⁴³ The shared memory that the people are capable of thwarting a coup is a form of deterrent capital for the democratic regime. Even so, democratic resistance is not confined to the night of a coup alone. Democracy, in everyday life, likewise requires safeguarding the rule of law, freedom of expression, free elections, the separation of powers, and the rights of the opposition.

A society that opposes coups while remaining indifferent to the erosion of democratic institutions cannot complete its anti-coup culture. Defending the people's right to choose does not mean regarding every action of the elected government as correct. On the contrary, democratic citizenship makes it possible both to defend the elected government against coup plotters and to criticize that same elected government within the framework of law and freedom.

It is likewise important that the relationship between religious communities and the state rest on legal and transparent foundations. That religious communities operate within civil society, and carry out educational and charitable work, is part of the freedom of religion and association. But no community holds the right to establish a covert hierarchy within public institutions, to place its members in office by unlawful means, or to seize control of the state.⁴⁴

The state's stance toward religious communities should be neither prohibitive nor exceptional, but neutral and grounded in law. Treating all communities as enemies violates religious freedom; making any one community a privileged partner undermines the state's neutrality. The solution lies not in political relationships that vary from group to group, but in general and equal legal rules applicable to all.

The Gülenist structure's infiltration of the state should likewise not be made a pretext for demanding more centralized and unchecked power. On the contrary, state institutions must be made transparent, rule-bound, and mutually accountable. Unchecked power—whatever ideology or group holds it—remains open to abuse. A strong state is not an unlimited state. A strong state is one that

43 Atilla Yayla, "15 Temmuz'dan Darbe Karşısı Dersler" ["Anti-Coup Lessons from July 15"], *Kriter*, no. 92 (2024).

44 Diamond, *Developing Democracy*, 24–30; Kalkan, "Çöğulculuk Problemi ve FETÖ," 51–73.

acts within the law, effectively carries out its duties, and protects the rights of its citizens.⁴⁵

Concentrating all of the state's powers in a single center may, rather than preventing covert structures, instead lay the groundwork for new monopolies of power to emerge. The separation of powers, an independent judiciary, a free press, and a strong civil society are necessary not only to constrain governments, but also to make closed organizations within the state visible and subject to oversight.

The meaning of the tenth anniversary lies in treating July 15 not merely as a coup attempt now consigned to the past, but as a democratic warning for the future. The tutelary mindset does not disappear entirely with the elimination of any one particular organization. Any way of thinking that distrusts the people's preferences, holds politics in contempt, and treats the state as the property of a particular elite carries within it the potential for a new form of tutelage.

CONCLUSION

The historical and institutional dimensions of the coup attempt have been the subject of various studies.⁴⁶ The tenth anniversary of the July 15, 2016 coup attempt matters not only for Türkiye to remember a great assault it once suffered, but also to assess the continuities of tutelary politics. The coup was not a sudden and isolated military mutiny; it was the final move of a structure that had organized itself within state institutions over many years, had directed its members' constitutional loyalty toward a covert hierarchy instead, and regarded democratic politics as a mere instrument.

There are significant differences between Kemalism and Gülenism in terms of ideological origin, religion, secularism, history, and social base. Yet when examined from the standpoint of democratic theory, strong similarities emerge between the tutelary interpretations of the two structures. The leader cult, belief in absolute power, the desire to shape society from above, distance from pluralism, contempt for elected politicians, the use of the bureaucracy as an independent domain of power, and recourse to a coup as a last resort are foremost among these similarities.

This similarity does not mean that Kemalism and Gülenism are identical in every respect. The comparison drawn here concerns the two movements' tutelary attitudes toward democracy, pluralism, and the legitimate exercise of power. A secular or a religious guise does not, on its own, change the essential nature of an authoritarian and tutelary political method.

45 Cizre, "Problems of Democratic Governance of Civil-Military Relations in Turkey and the European Union Enlargement Zone," 107–25; Metin Heper and Aylin Güney, "The Military and the Consolidation of Democracy: The Recent Turkish Experience," *Armed Forces & Society* 26, no. 4 (2000): 635–57.

46 Alkan, "15 Temmuz'u Anlamak," 253–72; Yayla, "Öncesi ve Sonrasıyla Türkiye'nin 15 Temmuz Vakası," 49–74.

As Kemalist bureaucratic tutelage was being dismantled, the Gülenist structure did not work to establish a democratic and impartial state; instead, it sought to fill the vacated spaces of power with its own cadres, aiming to build a new and more closed order of tutelage. The unlawful practices seen in the Ergenekon and Balyoz (Sledgehammer) cases, the organization within law enforcement and the judiciary, the December 17–25 intervention, and finally the July 15 coup attempt itself can all be read as different stages of this same pursuit.

The thwarting of the July 15 coup attempt is one of the most important social achievements of Turkish democracy. The shared resistance of the people, elected officials, political parties, the police, the media, and the soldiers who refused to join the coup demonstrated that coups are not an inescapable fate. For the first time, Turkish democracy repelled a large-scale military coup through the direct participation of the people.

Yet the fact that the coup was thwarted does not mean the tutelary mindset has disappeared entirely. Coup-making is not merely the name of a particular organization; it is a way of thinking that distrusts the people's preferences, holds elected politics in contempt, and treats the state as the property of a particular elite. This mindset can reemerge under secular or religious, nationalist or universalist, military or civilian guises alike.

What must be done on the tenth anniversary of July 15 should not consist merely of remembering the heroism of that night. It is necessary to honestly examine the state structure, political culture, problems of merit, covert networks of loyalty, and gaps in institutional oversight that made the coup attempt possible in the first place. For societies that fail to learn from the mistakes of the past may find themselves facing the same dangers in new forms.⁴⁷

Abandoning the rule of law in the fight against a coup weakens the very democratic legitimacy won by defeating the plotters. The individual nature of crime and punishment, the right to a fair trial, the presumption of innocence, and the principle of proportionality must be safeguarded with the utmost care. A democratic state grows stronger not by resembling its enemies, but by surpassing them in law and in morality.

The most meaningful response to give to July 15, ten years on, will not be merely to punish the perpetrators of the past, but to strengthen the democratic institutions capable of preventing new tutelary organizations from arising. The foundation of these democratic institutions must be the state's impartiality toward ideological and communal structures, merit in public office, transparency, the rule of law, individual responsibility, freedom of expression, and the primacy of civilian politics.

⁴⁷ Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, 3–15; Andreas Schedler, "What is Democratic Consolidation?," *Journal of Democracy* 9, no. 2 (1998): 91–107.

The memory of July 15 requires embracing democratic politics not as a mere instrument, but as the indispensable method of peaceful coexistence. No person, ideology, community, or bureaucratic institution has the right to establish sovereignty over the people in the people's own name. The most lasting guarantee against coups is not tanks stronger than other tanks, but free citizens who believe in democracy, know their rights, possess the capacity for critical thought, and resolutely stand by their right to vote.

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July 15, Ten Years On: A Comparison Between Kemalist and Gülenist Tutelage Models From the Perspective of Democratic Theory

Atilla Yayla

L The Gülenist coup attempt of July 15, 2016 occupies a distinct place in Türkiye's political history, both for the scale of violence employed and the direct targeting of state institutions, as well as for the fact that it was thwarted through broad-based popular resistance. The tenth anniversary of the coup attempt offers a valuable opportunity to move beyond the heat of contemporary political debate and reassess the event within the context of the country's long experience of bureaucratic tutelage. This analysis examines the shared characteristics of the Kemalist and Gülenist structures—outwardly opposed to one another—from the standpoint of democratic theory and practice. The comparison between the two structures proceeds along the axes of the leader cult, allegiance to absolute and centralized power, social engineering, distance from pluralism, the instrumentalization of democratic politics, contempt for elected politicians, organization within the state bureaucracy, and recourse to a coup as a last resort. The analysis does not claim that Kemalism and Gülenism constitute the same ideology; rather, it argues that different ideological sources and symbols can produce a similar style of tutelary politics. It is argued that, rather than dismantling the Kemalist model of bureaucratic tutelage, the Gülenist structure instead appropriated its methods of organizing within the state, building bureaucratic power, and shaping society from above, in pursuit of establishing a new order of tutelage. The analysis further considers the democratic lessons that ought to be drawn from July 15, within the framework of the rule of law, individual accountability, state impartiality, meritocracy, pluralism, and the primacy of civilian politics.



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