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“Social Media: Do they enhance or erode Democracy?”

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Social Media: Do they enhance or erode Democracy?

Social media is defined as “websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking.”¹ Democracy, on the other hand, is harder to define. It literally means “rule by the people,” originating from the Greek words *demos* (people) and *kratos* (rule)². It is political system in which the whole population participates, either directly or through elected representatives – as Abraham Lincoln famously put it: “government of the people, by the people, for the people”³. Today, however, democracy has acquired a somewhat broader sense, often including free and fair elections, active participation, human rights and freedoms, and a rule of law in its definition⁴. The purpose of this essay is to consider the impact of social media on democracy. This is determined through detailed examination of a specific case study – the coup d’état attempt in Turkey in 2016 and its aftermath, in which social media played a significant role.

On the night of Friday, 15 July 2016, a faction of the military attempted an overthrow against Turkish state institutions and the President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Tanks rolled onto the streets of Istanbul and Ankara, guns fired in the air, and large crowds marched the streets in chaos. At 11:25pm, the military claimed through the seized state television that “the political administration that has lost all legitimacy has been forced to withdraw”⁵. One hour later, the democratically elected President addressed the nation via the social media application FaceTime urging all people to “go to the streets and give them their answer.”⁶ He also tweeted: “I call our

¹ Oxford Dictionary. "Social Media." N.p., n.d. Web. 25 Mar. 2017.

² Dahl, Robert A. "Democracy." Encyclopaedia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., 22 June 2010. Web. 31 Mar. 2017.

³ "The Gettysburg Address by Abraham Lincoln." The Gettysburg Address by Abraham Lincoln. N.p., n.d. Web. 31 Mar. 2017.

⁴ Diamond, L., Lecture at Hilla University for Humanistic Studies January 21, 2004: "What is Democracy". Diamond, L. and Morlino, L., *The quality of democracy* (2016). In Diamond, L., *In Search of Democracy*. London: Routledge.

⁵ Narayan, Chandrika. "Turkey coup attempt: How a night of death and mayhem unfolded." CNN. Cable News Network, 17 July 2016. Web. 31 Mar. 2017.

⁶ Narayan, Chandrika. "Turkey coup attempt: How a night of death and mayhem unfolded." CNN. Cable News Network, 17 July 2016. Web. 31 Mar. 2017.

nation to the airports and the squares to take ownership of our democracy and our national will.”⁷ Soon enough, supporters of Erdoğan flooded public spaces to oppose the coup, standing against tanks and armed vehicles, shouting “Allahu ekber” and the Shahada, the Islamic creed of faith⁸. By 2:51am, the Turkish National Intelligence unit announced the end of the attempted overthrow. At the break of dawn, Recep Erdoğan claimed that the government was back in control, stating that “fifty percent of the people elected the President and that President is on duty.”⁹

The development of these events strongly suggests that social media, specifically FaceTime, played a role of paramount importance to the failure of the coup, among other reasons. Although rebels took control of traditional media and proclaimed their success on the state television, they underestimated the power of social networking in controlling the narrative of the overthrow. Erdoğan, a fierce critic of social media in the past, managed to take advantage of this fundamental mistake, and this proved to be the doom of the attempt to take control of the state. His address to the nation on FaceTime affirmed the presidential authority and eroded the seeming control of the rebels. This was further amplified by services such as Twitter, WhatsApp, and Facebook Live which broadcasted photos and live videos from various locations of the popular protests against the coup. Kieran Healy of University of Duke argues that the abilities of such applications to provide common knowledge, i.e. “having people be able to see what is happening” is “a crucial prerequisite for successful collective action in situations like this.”¹⁰ This view is supported by the chair of President Obama’s Global Development Council, Mohamed A. El-Erian, who believes that “the flow of information” in the social networks

⁷ Abutaleb, Yasmeen. "Coup bid in Turkey carried live on social media despite blockages." Reuters. Thomson Reuters, 15 July 2016. Web. 25 Mar. 2017.

⁸ Luttwak, Edward. "Why Turkey's Coup d'État Failed." Foreign Policy. N.p., 16 July 2016. Web. 25 Mar. 2017.

⁹ Narayan, Chandrika. "Turkey coup attempt: How a night of death and mayhem unfolded." CNN. Cable News Network, 17 July 2016. Web. 25 Mar. 2017.

¹⁰ "Facetiming the coup." Vox. Vox, 16 July 2016. Web. 25 Mar. 2017.

“encouraged, empowered and mobilized Turks to confront the rebels and their tanks.”¹¹

Therefore, it is clear that social media was one of the most significant factors in the failure of the coup.

With this, the importance of social media in the unfolding of the events of July 2016 in Turkey has been established. The question that follows is whether social media in the hands of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan enhanced or eroded democracy in the case of the Turkish coup d'état attempt. In order to assess the impact of social networks in this instance, this essay explores the main actors in the coup attempt's commitment to democracy. Although the Turkish military is often perceived as a guardian of democratic principles, this hardly appears to be true in this case. President Erdoğan, on the other hand, is a popular, democratically-elected President, which corresponds to the principles “rule by the people”. However, this argument also holds little validity due to the use of undemocratic methods by Erdoğan such as human rights abuse and corruption. Thus, it appears that the commitment to democracy of the different actors provides insufficient grounds to determine whether social media in the hands of the Turkish president enhanced or eroded democracy in the case of the coup attempt. For this reason, the essay examines the consequences of the coup – the 2016 purges – in order to fully assess the impact of social media in the long-term. It concludes that, due to the widespread breach of human rights under the Erdoğan administration before and after the unsuccessful coup, more specifically in the light of the unjust purges, social media as used by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan during the 2016 overthrow attempt eroded, rather than enhanced, democracy.

There is a scope to suggest that Erdoğan's use of social media during the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey eroded democracy because the military has been a democratic force in Turkey. Historically, the Turkish military has been perceived as “the guarantor of Turkey's constitution”,

¹¹ "How Social Media Helped Defeat the Turkish Coup." Bloomberg.com. Bloomberg, 18 July 2016. Web. 25 Mar. 2017.

which acts as a check to other institutions¹². Michael Rubin, a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), outlines four instances in which the military staged coups in order to protect the democratic principles in the republic in the last sixty years. In these instances, the armed forces resisted Islamist governments which attempted to increase their power (in 1960 and 1997) and political turmoil and violence (in 1971 and 1980)¹³. This role of the Turkish military originates in the Kemalist ideology which advocates the support of Kemal Ataturk's reforms including, most notably, multiparty democracy and secularism. Even though the plotters of the 2016 coup attempt cited "erosion of secularism" and "elimination of democratic rule" as causes of the unrest¹⁴, there is little evidence that Kemalism was the motivator¹⁵. Instead, the staged overthrow appeared rather disorganized with a lack of clear vision, demands, and objectives. This suggests that the role of the military has changed from previous decades. This is evident through the strong position of Erdoğan's government and his rising personal popularity compared to previous administrations¹⁶. Furthermore, neither the public nor the elite expressed any support for the attempted coup. Instead, the people supported the current government on the eve of the overthrow. Similarly, the political elite condemned the plot, including all three opposition parties and critics of Recep Erdoğan¹⁷. Therefore, the Turkish military did not act as a guardian of the constitutional and democratic principles of the country in the 2016 coup attempt. In this sense, social media, as used during the events of the overthrow, enhanced democracy by enabling state institutions to regain control through the will of the people.

¹² Rubin, Michael. "Why the coup in Turkey could mean hope." *New York Post*. N.p., 15 July 2016. Web. 25 Mar. 2017.

¹³ Rubin, Michael. "Why the coup in Turkey could mean hope." *New York Post*. N.p., 15 July 2016. Web. 25 Mar. 2017.

¹⁴ Kinney, Drew Holland. "Civilian Actors in the Turkish Military Drama of July 2016". *Eastern Mediterranean Policy Note*. No. 10. 19 Sept 2016.

¹⁵ Filkins, Dexter. "Turkey's Thirty-Year Coup." *The New Yorker*. *The New Yorker*, 22 Nov. 2016. Web. 25 Mar. 2017.

¹⁶ Kingsley, Patrick, and Ghaith Abdul-Ahad. "Military coup attempted in Turkey against Erdoğan government." *The Guardian*. *Guardian News and Media*, 15 July 2016. Web. 26 Mar. 2017.

¹⁷ Gul Tuysuz and Elliott C. McLaughlin. "Failed coup in Turkey: What you need to know." *CNN*. *Cable News Network*, 18 July 2016. Web. 26 Mar. 2017.

Since President Erdoğan's government was democratically elected, his use of social media during the events in July 2016 appears to enhance democracy as it restored the order established by the people's vote. In the 2015 November general election, Erdoğan's party, AKP, received 49.50 per cent of the popular vote¹⁸. Even more strikingly, the people also showed their overwhelming support in the last presidential elections of 2014 where Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was elected a President with 51.79 per cent of the votes¹⁹. The statistics from the last elections clearly indicate the will of the majority, which implies that the current government does represent the rule of the people to a large extent. What is more, various prominent advocates of democracy expressed support for the institutions in Turkey during the coup attempt. For instance, the Secretary General of the Council of Europe labeled "any attempt to overthrow the democratically elected leaders" as unacceptable²⁰. Barack Obama and the US government also expressed their commitment to the Turkish "democratically elected civilian government"²¹. This suggests that the coup was a challenge to the democratically elected institutions, and its overcoming through the use of social media enhanced democracy.

However, the argument that the restoration of Erdoğan's government is democratic only holds superficial validity. In fact, Erdoğan's administration rules under rather undemocratic principles which have little regard for human rights and freedoms, transparency and secularism. According to Edward Luttwak, "Erdoğan has been doing everything possible to dismantle Turkey's fragile democracy," citing instances of violence against journalists, crackdown on free speech and exercise of unconstitutional executive power as evidence²². In order to illustrate this, Turkey has

¹⁸ "Turkish general election, November 2015." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, 30 Mar. 2017. Web. 27 Mar. 2017.

¹⁹ "Turkish presidential election, 2014." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, 28 Mar. 2017. Web. 26 Mar. 2017.

²⁰ Jagland, Thorbjørn. "Turkey: Any attempt to overthrow the democratically elected leaders in a member state of the Council of Europe is unacceptable." Twitter. Twitter, 15 July 2016. Web. 26 Mar. 2017.

²¹ "Turkish government post-coup purge widens." News. N.p., 19 July 2016. Web. 26 Mar. 2017.

²² Luttwak, Edward. "Why Turkey's Coup d'État Failed." Foreign Policy. N.p., 16 July 2016. Web. 25 Mar. 2017.

the highest rate of convicted reporters per capita²³. Such claims are substantiated by various reports on democracy and corruption. For example, Human Rights Watch reports in early 2016 that “the environment for human rights in Turkey deteriorated”²⁴. Transparency International, on the other hand, ranks Turkey 75th out of 176 countries for highest corruption perception index in 2016²⁵. What is more, Erdoğan’s explicit and exclusive support for Islamism resulted in oppression of women and minorities in the country. Michael Rubin argues in favor of that, claiming that Erdoğan “dropped any pretense of governing for all Turks”²⁶. This is exemplified by the skyrocketing rates of murders of women which increased by 1.400 per cent between 2003 and 2010²⁷. This points to a situation where the strong support for Erdoğan by half of the population has turned into tyranny of the majority evident by the continuous human rights abuse and the dismantling of the rule of law in favor of religion. Thus, the victory of Erdoğan over the rebels did not necessarily mean a triumph for democracy in Turkey. Although the rebels did not represent a democratic force as argued above, neither does Erdoğan or his government. Therefore, the use of social media during the 2016 coup d’état attempt did not enhance democracy by restoring the elected institutions; instead, it eroded democracy in the Republic of Turkey by handing the political system back to its corrupt leaders.

Finally, the consequences of the Turkish coup attempt of 2016, rather than the characteristics of the main actors and their role in the political system, provide the most compelling evidence that the use of social media significantly eroded democracy in Turkey. In response to the overthrow attempt, Erdoğan launched a series of purges. As of August 2016, the unprecedented mass arrests included 10,012 soldiers detained, 21,000 private school teachers and 2,745 members of

²³ Rubin, Michael. "Erdogan Has Nobody to Blame for the Coup but Himself." *Foreign Policy*. N.p., 18 July 2016. Web. 26 Mar. 2017.

²⁴ "Turkey." *Human Rights Watch*. N.p., 27 Jan. 2016. Web. 26 Mar. 2017.

²⁵ E.V., Transparency International. "Corruption Perceptions Index 2016." *Www.transparency.org*. N.p., n.d. Web. 26 Mar. 2017.

²⁶ Rubin, Michael. "Erdogan Has Nobody to Blame for the Coup but Himself." *Foreign Policy*. N.p., 18 July 2016. Web. 26 Mar. 2017.

²⁷ Girit, Selin. "Loud calls to action follow murder of young Turkish woman." *BBC News*. BBC, 20 Feb. 2015. Web. 26 Mar. 2017.

the judiciary suspended, 21,700 Ministry of Education officials fired, 1,500 university deans forced to resign, and more than 100 media outlets shut down²⁸. Many of the arrests and detentions involved abuse of human rights. For instance, a significant number of the convictions were conducted without clear charges and evidence of their alleged link to the attempted coup in July²⁹. This implies that the President of Turkey exploited the situation to eliminate his opposition, rather than punish the plotters. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan himself claimed that “this uprising is a gift from God,” potentially indicating his true intentions³⁰. The New York Times editorial board expressed concern over this matter, suggesting that the President is “more vengeful and obsessed with control than ever.”³¹ The controversial purges undoubtedly caused enormous turmoil and unrest in Turkish society. Furthermore, they were widely criticized and condemned by the international elite. For example, the Foreign Minister of France, Jean-Marc Ayrault described the current situation in Turkey as “political system which turns away from democracy”³². The crackdown on Turkish society not only represented a subversion of democracy in itself due to the further deterioration of the rule of law and human rights abuse, but also affirmed the power of Erdoğan and laid the foundations for the establishment of a dictatorial, rather than democratic, rule in the Republic of Turkey. The elimination of AKP’s opposition through the purges secured the President’s position both in politics with the growing exercise of presidential power, and in popular support with the imposition of state-controlled media and education. Therefore, the aftermath of the 2016 coup attempt was tragic, rather than triumphant, for democracy and its future in Turkey. This suggests that social media in the hands of Erdoğan during the attempted overthrow was a tool for subversion of democracy.

²⁸ Josh Keller, Iaryna Mykhyalshyn and Safak Timur. "The Scale of Turkey's Purge Is Nearly Unprecedented." The New York Times. The New York Times, 02 Aug. 2016. Web. 26 Mar. 2017.

²⁹ US State Gov. "Turkey 2016 Human Rights Report." N.p., n.d. Web. 27 Mar. 2017.

³⁰ Dolan, David, and Gulsen Solaker. "Turkey rounds up plot suspects after thwarting coup against Erdogan." Reuters. Thomson Reuters, 16 July 2016. Web. 27 Mar. 2017.

³¹ Board, The Editorial. "The Counter-Coup in Turkey." The New York Times. The New York Times, 16 July 2016. Web. 27 Mar. 2017.

³² "US and EU leaders warn Turkey's Erdogan over post-coup crackdown." Financial Times. Financial Times, n.d. Web. 27 Mar. 2017.

In conclusion, social media was a powerful tool during the 2016 coup d'état attempt which decided the victors of the brief confrontation. Although it appears initially that social networks safeguarded democracy as it returned political power and authority in the hands of the democratically elected leader of Turkey, this argument lacks credibility upon closer examination. This is evident by the undemocratic practices employed by President Erdoğan's government such as disregard for human rights and the rule of law. Nonetheless, the most convincing argument for the negative impact of social media in the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey is the aftermath which proved disastrous for democracy in the republic. Although there is no direct correlation between social media and the consequent crackdown of Turkish society, the use of the social networking service FaceTime during the coup enabled President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to achieve his political objectives later, which ultimately resulted in subversion of democracy in the country. It should be noted, however, that the conclusions reached by this essay are largely dependent on the definition of democracy. Throughout the work, I have used the broader definition of democracy which includes elections, participation, human rights, and a rule of law among its key characteristics for assessment of the impact of social media. If, on the other hand, democracy is taken to mean merely "rule by the people", even if this implies tyranny of the majority, then the conclusion of the essay would be quite the opposite. Notwithstanding, I strongly believe that democracy today requires more commitment than it did in the past, and such commitment is exhibited in the four principles which are part of the broader definition above. Furthermore, in the ever-changing twenty first century the definition of democracy has to be adjusted to some extent to amplify its meaning to current understandings such as the increasing demand for liberty, equality, and pursuit of happiness by the global society. Therefore, social media eroded democracy in the case study of the coup d'état attempt in Turkey in 2016 and its aftermath.

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