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## **HUMAN RIGHTS, DEMOCRACY AND RULE OF LAW IN TURKEY: MAKING THE CASE** *BY THE DEMOCRACY & HUMAN RIGHTS WORKING GROUP\**

The July 15 coup attempt by elements of the Turkish military united Turks across the political spectrum in their opposition to a military takeover. Having experienced four military coups/interventions in the past five-plus decades, most Turks, even those highly critical of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's policies, opposed a non-democratic approach to addressing Turkey's challenges. In turning out into the streets in massive numbers in Ankara and Istanbul, among other cities, some Turks expressed their unstinting support for Erdogan while others simply resented the military for overstepping its bounds. Nearly 300 people were killed in the violence and another 1400 were injured; military forces supporting the coup attacked the parliament building, resulting in substantial damage.

This unity will prove short-lived, however, as Erdogan and Turkish authorities have used events of July 15 to declare a state of emergency and launch a massive crackdown against perceived opponents, exacerbating already deep political divisions. Authorities have suspended, detained or placed under investigation tens of thousands (estimates range from 60,000-80,000) military and security personnel, judges, prosecutors, university deans, teachers, civil servants and journalists. These moves have alarmed many inside Turkey and among Turkey's allies, including the United States. Despite Erdogan's rhetorical overtures in the immediate aftermath of the attempted coup to the political opposition to show solidarity in support of rule of law, the scale and speed of the arrests and dismissals suggest he was waiting for an opportunity to move against his opponents.

Turkey's entry into NATO in 1952 brought it into the community of Western nations, and it has been working toward European Union membership, as well, albeit on a very slow and halting pace. With a population of nearly 80 million, Turkey has the second largest military of NATO countries, and its geographic location – bordering Iran, Iraq, Syria and Russia, among other countries – makes it a key U.S. ally in the fight against terrorism.

However, in recent years, there have been serious concerns about Erdogan's efforts to consolidate power. Erdogan was elected 13 years ago as prime minister. He was elected president for the first time in 2014. Since initially drawing praise for loosening the military's grip over political life and easing the long-running conflict with the Kurds, in the last few years Erdogan has demonstrated increasingly authoritarian tendencies, reacting to criticism of his government by harassing

political opponents, imprisoning journalists, blocking websites, and even seizing media assets. Before the coup attempt, approximately 2,000 legal cases had been opened against journalists, comedians, political opponents, and ordinary Turks. As violence between the Turkish military and Kurdish militants has grown, and terror attacks by the Islamic State have increased, killing hundreds of people, the government crackdown on dissenters has also intensified. Turkey has become the leading jailer of journalists in the world.

Turkish society is deeply divided – between Turks and Kurds; religious and secular; rich and poor. Nearly three million refugees, mostly from Syria, have settled in Turkey, which has strained the economy and government resources. Tension with the minority Kurdish population – which has existed for decades -- was exacerbated by a series of attacks this year linked to the Islamic State and Kurdish separatists that killed hundreds of people and further damaged the economy. The military – which views itself as the protector of Turkey’s secular government system -- has staged coups on three occasions over the last 50 years, in 1960, 1971 and 1980 and intervened to remove a democratically elected government again in 1997. At this point, several things about the most recent coup attempt remain unclear: who organized and was behind it and what motivated the faction to move when it did. Turkish authorities accuse Fethullah Gulen, a onetime ally of Erdogan who lives in exile in Pennsylvania, of being behind the coup attempt. Supporters of the exiled preacher, referred to as Gulenists, are believed to be integrated within many state institutions, including the judiciary and the police. Gulen has denied the accusations, but Turkey is seeking his extradition from the United States, causing tensions in the bilateral relationship between Ankara and Washington. The Obama administration condemned the coup attempt against the democratically-elected government and has rejected allegations from some in Turkey that it knew about and even supported the military’s abortive action.

While it certainly should investigate and hold accountable those who were involved in the coup, the Erdogan government has launched a fierce response. President Erdogan is publicly supporting the reinstatement of the death penalty, which would effectively end Turkey’s bid for EU membership. Rather than providing an opening for discussion about Turkey’s internal divisions, the attempted coup is being used by Erdogan to justify a widening of his crackdown on opponents.

Erdogan enjoys significant popularity at home, especially among those who identify as nationalists or religious conservatives. But when he won the presidential election, he secured a bare majority, 52 percent of the vote with a historically low turnout; his Justice and Development Party (AKP) barely won last October’s parliamentary elections. These election results reflect the split in Turkish society and underscore the concerns many Turks have about the direction in which their country is headed. Recent polls indicate that democracy remains highly valued by the broader public, however, and that democracy, security, and prosperity are not viewed as being mutually exclusive.

For the United States, the challenge is how to engage Turkey on democracy and human rights issues, especially after the coup attempt, while maintaining an effective working relationship on national security matters. Accordingly, recommendations for the next U.S. administration working with Turkey on democracy and human rights include:

- Expressing support for democratic institutions, human rights, and rule of law as well as checks and balances to avoid excesses while urging all parties to resolve differences by avoiding extra-constitutional and illegal actions.
- Respecting the need to investigate those involved in the attempted coup, with the caution that these events should not become the pretext for persecuting and imprisoning non-violent political opponents and critics. The emphasis should be on due process and against political vendettas.
- Reminding Turkish authorities, the military and civil society of the important role model Turkey can be for other countries in the region, which can serve as a stabilizing factor in an otherwise turbulent part of the world.
- Continuing to speak publicly and privately at senior U.S. government levels about concerns with the decline of freedom of expression and association in Turkey, urging greater respect for media freedom and increased dialogue with the political opposition.
- Demonstrating that the United States can engage on multiple issues at a time by pressing on democracy/human rights concerns in Turkey and cooperation against ISIS, while also supporting Turkey in dealing with the challenges it faces. These include the need for a viable peace process with the Kurds, a strategy against terrorist attacks, assistance with its refugee crisis, and economic support. It should encourage and support resumption of efforts to resolve the Kurdish issue, which is not simply an internal Turkish matter.
- Encouraging the U.S. and Turkish militaries to engage at high levels, both to reinforce support for democratically-elected civilian leadership and assure Turkey that cooperation on NATO matters remains of major importance.
- Improving communication within the U.S. government between the national security and democracy and human rights communities so that there is a unified message and coordinated engagement with Turkey on these issues.
- Providing more support for local organizations working on democracy and human rights issues in Turkey, as it is at the grassroots level that democracy must take hold for it to be long-lasting and capable of resisting moves toward authoritarianism. The U.S. should increase its overall assistance for Turkish

civil society and outside NGOs working there in such areas as women's rights, youth empowerment, economic development, combatting corruption, and inclusion of minorities in the national discourse.

*\* The Democracy & Human Rights Working Group is a nonpartisan initiative bringing together academic and think tank experts and practitioners from NGOs and previous Democratic and Republican administrations, seeking to elevate the importance of democracy and human rights issues in U.S. foreign policy. It is convened by Arizona State University's McCain Institute for International Leadership. The views expressed here do not necessarily represent the positions of individual members of the group or of their organizations.*