

Cornerstones of July 15: Women Who Are More Powerful than Tanks

SARE AYDIN YILMAZ*

ABSTRACT *Public reaction to the coup attempt in Turkey on July 15, 2016, organized by members of a terrorist organization in the Turkish Army received a wide coverage in the Western media. This coverage however failed to reflect the pulse of the streets and the active presence of women from every segment of society in protests. This commentary argues that the ethnocentric and bi-ased coverage of the events by the Western media, their ignorance and negligence of the heroic struggle of women against the coup attempt is a result of feminist orientalism that portrays Eastern women as oppressed, submissive and incapable of taking their own decision and act upon it.*

Introduction

CNN International published a report entitled, “Turkey Coup Attempt: Reaction on the Streets of Istanbul” on July 18, 2016, shortly after the coup attempt in Turkey. It conveyed comments from an American who caught images from the Turkish street and stated, “Despite the older woman up front, there were no women marching with the men.” Based on this comment, the report further claimed that “the older woman was the only female in the group that was headed down İstiklal Caddesi (Independence Street) toward Taksim Square,” in Istanbul. Similarly, a number of accounts in the social me-

dia shared comments propagating the lack of women in protests against the coup makers while the coup was unfolding. Despite much evidence to the contrary, the reported “lack of women” has been used as the evidence for the alleged patriarchal character of the anti-coup mobilization against the secular state establishments of Turkey, such as the military. In parallel, Western media and social media accounts disseminated photos of violent male-dominated protests. To cite one example, Public Radio International claimed, “Images of protesters on the streets are mostly men... the fact that mostly conservatives are holding vigils at the squares might be a factor in women’s absence.”¹

* Women and Democracy Association (KADEM), Turkey

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Despite this early representation of the anti-coup protesters, reports proving the active participation of women in anti-coup protests started to find their place, especially in the Turkish media. For example, the *Daily Sabah* described women as heroic when it comes to defending their nations. In an article entitled, “The Women of Turkey’s Anti-Coup Protest,” one woman is quoted as saying, “I don’t care what others wear, and they don’t care about what I wear. This is not about lifestyle or politics. We were there for our country. It was a matter of life and death for Turkey.”² In another example, the *Hürriyet Daily News* published a report documenting leading women actors who actively participated in anti-coup mobilization.³ This paper aims to contribute to such reports in order to do justice to the many women who played a key role in suppressing the coup attempt against the elected government of Turkey. By doing so, the paper also focuses on civil society in

Turkey and its role during the mobilization of protests against the coup makers. In repelling the attempted coup in Turkey on July 15, the fact that the nation has reacted assertively by putting forward its willpower, has once again shown to the whole world how much the influence of civil society can grow, and its determination to protect democracy. This assertiveness no doubt marks an important milestone that clearly indicates the existence of a conscious civil society in Turkey against the terrorist organizations attempting to seize the government and deal a blow to the nation’s willpower. From this point of view, in this article, civil society, women and democracy will be emphasized.

The coups of the 60s and 80s, the March 12 Memorandum, the February 28 post-modern coup, and ultimately the April 27 e-memorandum, all of which constitute interventions in Turkey’s democratic civil government, also provide a litmus test of the strength of the nation’s willpower, and, until recently, have all been projections of the ill fate that has attempted to dominate the history of Turkey. What reversed this ill fate following the attempted coup of July 15, 2016, is the “civil defense” move, a massing of national will put forward by ordinary citizens gathering in the streets, and organizing against heavy weapons in order to protect their government and assembly, which were elected by democratic means. This willpower shown by Turkey in protecting democracy is significant evidence of a conscious reaction, specifically against this attempted



President Erdoğan visits Derya Ovacıklı, who lost one of her legs while she was trying to protect a young man from the bullets. In an interview she stated: "A leg is not important, we would sacrifice our lives for this homeland."

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coup, and against the coup tradition whose consequences Turkish civil society has been forced to bear for many years. The success of society's democratic fight against the attempted coup, Turkey has once again clearly shown that the willpower of the nation is a power above all. This awakening ensures that a more conscious and deliberate civil society can be developed and grow in solidarity in Turkey against terrorist organizations, and that this anti-coup understanding that protects democracy can find a place in the social base. This personal investment in democracy by citizens has an additional importance from the viewpoint of the protection of democracy and the democratic regime that was put forward in the EU adventure. There is an irrevocable acceptance of the superiority of the law and the value of democratic improvement at the social base, in spite of the

attempts of the junta to undermine or overthrow democracy and the rule of law.

The Resistance of Civil Society against Coups

When we look at the traditions of civil society in Turkey from the past to the present, we may talk about the existence of a civil society order, which had struggled to take a breath in the middle of social polarizations and ideology-based social problems. However, the fact that the resistance of civil society, which was the main element in repelling the attempted coup of July 15, was witnessed and reflected in the street, and the fact that this resistance contains within itself the main codes of a sustainable democracy, point to the culmination of a transition into a powerful and

50-year old Şerife Boz, with her friend 61-year old Sema Tutar, drives a truck, carrying people from their neighborhood to Taksim Square in Istanbul to stop the coup plotters on the night of July 15.

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efficient society and civil society order, which struggles to cure social problems. The most apparent example of this urge was the “Democracy and Martyrs Demonstration” held in Yenikapı, which entered into the records as the largest square demonstration in the history of the Republic of Turkey, together with the sagacity shown by the patriotic people of Turkey, who ensured that the coup was repelled by climbing on tanks, and who thereafter have kept a democracy watch all across Turkey. In the Yenikapı Demonstration held in Istanbul, more than 5 million people from various political parties came together and demonstrated a common stance against coups in Turkey, politically and on the common ground of civil society. With this demonstration, which brought together the whole of Turkey, in which supra-party unity, solidarity and brotherhood

messages were broadcasted, the mandate given by all segments of society against the attempted coup was unanimous support for democracy. The society fulfilled its conscientious responsibility and protected its determined structure for democracy and liberty by gathering to commemorate the martyrs who gave their lives for the sake of the homeland.

The fact that civil society, which is defined as “a value-creating institution, a communication network, which plays a role in the creation of important values such as social solidarity, social trust, social responsibility, social stability, and finding solutions to social problems,”⁴ and the society interlocked with each other in Turkey against the coup without any discrimination, and the fact that they banded together for the protection of the fundamental rights and

freedoms, shows that a new civil society understanding is growing. This has once again proved to us that the former civil society tradition, which had been polarized and which was struggling to take a breath with only ideological capital, is now obliged to fade away in this new world order and give space to a new civil society tradition which respects differences but unites against external threats.

Women Who Are More Powerful than Tanks

It is completely contrary to human rights and fundamental rights and freedoms for a terror organization to bombard the civilian community in such a way as to cause deaths by using the ammunition of the state, or to bombard the parliament, paying no attention to the willpower of the nation, or to force an announcement to be read by seizing a country's media institutions/organizations, or to demoralize the whole community psychologically. Concerning the protection of this basic right to live and the right to democracy, it is impossible to ignore the role of women in repelling the attempted coup, women from all different segments of Turkish society who came together against this interference with democracy, and who went out in the streets saying openheartedly, "we are here too."

In contrast to the reality of women's participation, the campaigns conducted in the international media, instead of acknowledging the community that protected democracy

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against the coup, have attempted to depict a completely opposite perception of the operation. According to this pro-coup understanding, the anti-democratic attempt of the FETÖ member pro-junta soldiers was argued to be legitimate and well-intentioned, and should be legalized. In this regard, the world media has been subject to serious disinformation, along the lines that Turkey is increasingly becoming conservative in a way that threatens democratic existence of the republic, and that the salvation of democracy and that the secular order can only be restored and ensured by a military coup. Along these same lines, the regrettable failure of the coup means that the domination of Islamist tendencies over the state will increase, and secular life and democracy will be endangered. The actual reality is that people from each party and social base poured onto the streets in order to defend democracy and protect the national will against the attempted coup of July 15, hastening to meet the call of the President of the Turkish Republic, urging them to gather in the streets against

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the attempted coup. The international media has largely ignored this reality, and has aired broadcasts and disseminated publications aimed at justifying the pro-coup terrorist organization. With this disinformation, instead of taking the pulse of the street in a realistic way, a defamation campaign has been carried out by using a marginalizing language against conservative women. It has been emphasized that women who were on the streets were mostly in headscarves and that this marginalized environment can be a great danger for women. Women from every segment, every social class of society, who went out into the streets to fight against the coup, were purposefully ignored.

Cases of Heroic Resistance of Turkish Women against the Coup

CNN presenter Hande Firat is one of the women who played a significant role in the attempts to defeat the coup by connecting on *FaceTime* through her phone to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan so that the president could call the people on the street to stand against the coup. Turkey will not

forget 50-year old Şerife Boz and 61-year old Sema Tutar,⁵ who have turned into icons of the coup protest; these women drove trucks, bringing together everyone in their neighborhood, and went together to the coup protests. In one, now famous picture, which reflects the social reality of Turkey, they are sitting side by side: the woman driving the truck is a very conservative, veiled woman, and the woman sitting beside her is a traditional secular looking woman. This image is an emblem of the fact that the line separating these women from each other, of ideology and/or life style, was removed by the coup. The image of conservatively veiled Şerife Boz and her unveiled female friend driving a truck full of people to stop the coup plotters has become one of the symbols of the public resistance against the July 15 attack on Turkish democracy. This powerful image, although totally ignored by western media, was used in both the Turkish media and social media and by civil society organizations while calling on the streets to protest against the coup plotters during the democracy watches throughout Turkey. Hence, these women did not need the approval of a man while going out to the street of their own free will.

The self-sacrificing women of Turkey, who came out of their houses and into the streets to stand up for democracy, rights and freedoms, no doubt played a great role in winning the fight. Everyone who can take the pulse on the street can easily see the determined stance of devout Muslim women who are still struggling with being pacified

and painted in a different picture by the west with some feminist orientalist expressions that portray them as oppressed, submissive and incapable of taking their own decisions and act on them. Yet this attitude, this fighting spirit is not new. It is not possible for the west to understand this spirit, while displaying ignorance and ethnocentrism. The heroism shown in the War of Independence by Martyr Şerife Bacı, for instance, who carried the ammunition loaded onto tumbrils to Kastamonu under cold winter conditions, and who wrapped her own jersey around the cannon balls in order to ensure that they wouldn't get wet, and Halime Çavuş, who left her home and went to carry ammunition notwithstanding the objections of her mother and father, and the spirit in our modern-day hero women, who left their homes and families to pour onto the streets and were martyred fighting against the coup of July 15, all carry the same spirit. Women, who are the integrative and dynamic power of society, have again shown the same attitude and same resistance against this attempted coup. Their stories, simple yet powerful, demonstrate the strength of the women of Turkey and their willpower in safeguarding their country and democracy at any cost.

Following the reports about the coup-attempt on television, Safiye Bayat, a 34-year old, mother of two children, arrived at the Bosphorus Bridge alone, around midnight, after walking for about 45 minutes. This fearless woman wanted to talk to the commander. One of the coup plotters stopped her by saying, "You may

be hurt," yet she continued to walk through the soldiers, saying that soldiers cannot do something to frighten a woman. Bayat tried to explain with courage and faith to the soldiers that what they were doing was wrong. One of the coup plotters tried to push her away with his rifle, but she said "I am not afraid, are you trying to scare me with that?" This woman, who stood alone against the coup plotters and their tanks, went near one of the soldiers who fired his gun up in the air. Later, while she was reporting the heinous events of that night, she said: "I didn't know how I could go to the bridge as a woman but when it comes to my country, my blood flows differently." She continued, "If a man had gone over there, they might have killed him; luckily I was there." Safiye Bayat was wounded with a bullet fired by the coup plotters when she turned to help an injured protestor. She was taken to the hospital where she was given platinum implants on her legs afterwards. Safiye Bayat's name is going down in Turkish history as a fearless woman standing alone against the tanks. Her heroism inspired the anti-coup activities of many civil society organizations. Women and Democracy Associations (KADEM) organized several programs during the democracy watches to commemorate the heroism of the women who were on the street to stop the 15th July coup with slogan, "Women Stronger Than Tanks."

Nebahat Topaloğlu, another female hero heard at home that there was a coup attempt in progress; following President Erdoğan's call, she told her-

Safiye Bayat, a 34-year old mother of two, having walked for 45 minutes to reach the Bosphorus Bridge, stands alone in front of the tanks to confront the coup plotters
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self: “Today is the day to go outside and defend the country; if we do not go outside today, it will be too late tomorrow.” Topaloğlu marched to Saraçhane along with other citizens and stood against the coup plotters. She was wounded by one of the coup plotters who opened fire on her. This strong fighting spirit and determination of resistance drew the women of Turkey to the streets to stop the coup attempt, regardless of their age and ability. Fikriye Temel, a 75-year old woman, stood against the tanks with her stick on her hand and fought to protect democracy. This mother of four children who lives in Ankara rushed into the street during the coup attempt and hurried to the Presidential Complex to do what she could; the photo of this elderly woman with her stick went viral on social media and became a symbol of the courage and determination of Turkish women in defending their country and democracy against the coup. Temel

recalls, “I was never afraid; that stick felt like a machine-gun in my hands. If it happens all over again, I would do the same.” These words reflect the fearless spirit and heroism of Turkish women, and they are not mere words: many women lost their lives on that night while defending democracy.

Türkan Tekin, a 53-year old housewife from Malatya, saw the reports on TV about FETO’s coup attempt; she left her home and took to the streets to defend the nation’s will after President Erdoğan called people to stand against the plotters. Türkan Tekin, together with her husband Ramazan Tekin and their children arrived at Esenler Atışalanı Police Station. After hearing the news that the tanks of coup plotters were going towards Atatürk Airport, the family decided to join other citizens marching there. Türkan Tekin was critically injured after being run over by a tank. She was taken to the hospital by other pro-

testors but unfortunately she could not be saved. Tekin's 20-year old son Berkay, 18-year old daughter Buket and 11-year old daughter Sümeyye stated that they are honored to have had such a fearless and heroic mother. Special Operation Commissary Demet Sezen, who left her 3-year old son at home, went for duty to stand against the coup plotters and was martyred. There are many others, just like our women, who in 1947, when it was asserted that the *mukhtar* (village or neighborhood headman) elections were illegal and attempted to be renewed, replied that "the voting box is our honesty" and protected the voting box with their sticks and canes. All the hero women of Turkey, have given the necessary response against the coup, for democracy, freedom and justice. In addition to the women who fought on the battlefronts, the history of Turkey is full of heroic women who were active behind the front – who gave logistical support in today's terms – who fought against all kinds of threats to their democracy and state, and who have shown the most distinguished example of national unity and solidarity in this fight for liberty and democracy.

As we commemorate these heroic women, it becomes increasingly ridiculous to see that the orientalist approaches and expressions in the perception operations carried out by the western media aimed at conservative women are being maintained and repeated snidely; these perspectives are at the same time ominous examples, showing the double-dealer attitude of the west, which asserts that it protects

Neither the perception operations, nor any power, including terrorist organizations that wrap themselves under a religious cover, can harm the heroic women who protected democracy, their state, and nation against pro-junta and similar terrorist organizations, who are strong and determined to fight for democracy and liberty

basic rights and freedoms. At this point, what we have to see is that the coup FETO attempted to carry out on the night of July 15 was aimed not only at the President and voters of a party, but at people from every segment and base living in the Turkish Republic. The aforementioned "Democracy and Martyrs Demonstration" held in Yenikapı, in which millions of people from every segment of society banded together against the attempted coup and against the disinformation of the western media, is one of the best indicators of this.

Women from very different social and political backgrounds who took it to the streets during the post-coup democracy watches and streets protests also reinforce this argument. Young and old women, veiled and secular looking women, women with

children, girls, were marching on the streets throughout Turkey shoulder to shoulder, uniting on the streets for their common interest. This is a clear indication that ideological and political differences are insignificant when the future and security of the country that women will leave to their children are at question.

Talking about the passivity of conservative religionists women from past to present, and complaining about their obedience, their public appearance and publicity was brought into question. These women were accused of being used in public sphere as a political tool of political Islam. This approach defined them as passive players who were exploited in public sphere through their appearance, i.e. their headscarves. Today, nobody can plausibly make the same arguments about the “passive” stance of these women, who participated in a democracy watch against a terrorist organization which attempted a coup under a religious cover, and who demonstrated their attitude toward patriotism and democracy by confronting soldiers, waving sticks at rifles, and climbing onto tanks. Today, the conservative religionists woman, who is integrated into Turkey’s economic life, who can easily be adapted to the political and social arena, and who confronts us as a conscious and even combatant individual with regard to representation and taking part in decision making, is a woman who doesn’t leave the Islamic references, but maintains her existence having a voice in the public sphere.⁶ The bold resistance of these wom-

en on the streets against the coup attempt demonstrates the bias and inaccuracy of the orientalist perception of the west toward the reality of Turkey’s women. The stories of these women provide clear and undeniable proof of their determination and will to be present at every platform, to be part of public life; as such, their stories are helping to shatter traditional depictions of the East as a man-dominated society where women are unable to act on their will. The story of Safiye Bayat standing alone against the tanks on the Bosphorus Bridge and asking soldiers how they could drive their tanks over civilians in a democratic country is an outward expression of the level of democratic consciousness among Turkish women.

This strong resistance by Turkish women, and their role in defeating the coup attempt may have been ignored or overlooked by the western media. However, this omission will not break their forceful spirit nor their iron will. Their stories will be told for generations, and their heroism will provide inspiration and hope for many people. The whole world will continue to remember and recall the fight for the homeland given by these women, who struggle to protect their own stance and identity, and their stance in the streets before the tanks, more powerful than tanks.

Conclusion

The attempted coup, which was instigated in Turkey on the night of July 15 by the Fetullahist Terrorist Orga-

nization, was prevented as a consequence of the fight given by the nation by pouring onto the streets with women, men, elders and youngsters from every grade and every segment of society, notwithstanding all the perception operations. The resistance of the community in protecting Turkey's existing democracy once again demonstrates to the international powers that they will not be able to break the unity and solidarity of the nation. The fact that the international media reported with perception operations groundless, snide and unacknowledged news aimed at Turkey's democratically-elected government and its citizens, using an anti-democratic, polarizing language, and ignoring the unity and solidarity of the Turkish community, has clearly shown that the western media has a long distance to cover for democracy.

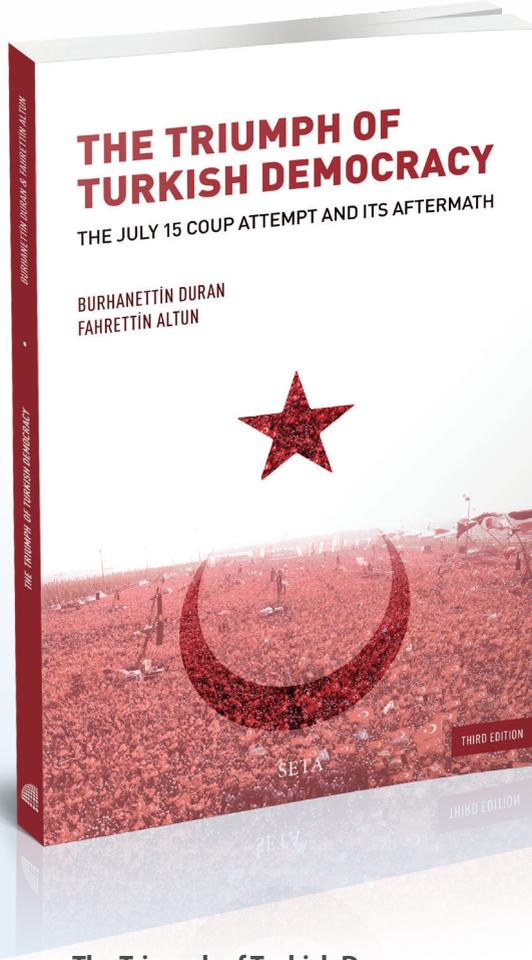
Communities that, in this century, still believe that democracy can be brought about by means of a coup are required to review this approach in themselves, which ignores the democratic environment in Turkey. The big picture that Turkey gave after the coup shows us that: Neither the perception operations, nor any power, including terrorist organizations that wrap themselves under a religious

cover, can harm the heroic women who protected democracy, their state, and nation against pro-junta and similar terrorist organizations, who are strong and determined to fight for democracy and liberty. ■

Endnotes

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SETA BOOKS



**The Triumph of Turkish Democracy:
The July 15 Coup Attempt And Its Aftermath**

August 2016 | Fahrettin Altun, Burhanettin Duran

The aim of this book is to overcome the prejudice and the misunderstanding against Turkey by analysing the events that took place on that night and the developments that followed.