

# The July 15 Resistance by the Turkish People: Googling “How to Stop a Tank”

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- **Why is the July 15 Turkish Resistance against the coup attempt is a civil resistance case?**
  - **How did unarmed civilians become successful in the face of troops?**
  - **Why did the July 15 resistance receive broad-based participation?**
- **What are the factors that will shape the future of the July 15 resistance campaign?**

On July 15, 2016, certain members of the Turkish army attempted a coup d'état to bring down the government. On the night of July 15, the people resisted this intervention, filled the squares all across Turkey and united against tanks, warplanes, and troops. Following the night of the coup attempt, graphs of Google trends illustrated an amazing fact: the number of the people googling “how to stop a tank” carried the words to the trend list.<sup>1</sup> The subsequent events will live long in the memories as a glorious moment not just because of the fact that the coup attempt failed miserably, but also because by standing up to army tanks the Turkish civilians provided a remarkable example of a spontaneous civil resistance campaign against a military coup.

Civil resistance is an umbrella term for a number of concepts with distinctive connotations; the term has been used, among others, for satyagraha, nonviolent action, unarmed resistance, and people power. Civil resistance is a method of sociopolitical action for applying power in a conflict without use

<sup>1</sup> CNN Türk, “‘Tank Nasıl Durdurulur’ En Çok Aranan Kelimeler Arasına Girdi”, July 20, 2016.

of violent action. It is a civilian-based method used through social, psychological, economic, and political means. The term “resistance” reflects both the non-institutional and confrontational nature of civil resistance. It is non-institutional in the sense that the civil resistance methods deliberately or compulsorily operate outside the conventional political sphere. It is confrontational in the sense that, civil resistance campaigns aim to weaken the opponents’ ability to sustain a particular policy or even undermine the ruler’s legitimacy and power as a whole. In the Turkish nonviolent resistance campaign, it is possible to diagnose both the confrontational and non-institutional nature of civil resistance movements.

## WHAT EXACTLY HAPPENED ON JULY 15, 2016 IN TURKEY?

Late Friday, tanks rolled onto the streets of Ankara and Istanbul. Soldiers blocked the Bosphorus Bridge that connects the European and Asian sides of Istanbul. The Parliament, the Presidential Palace and some other government buildings including the police and intelligence headquarters were heavily attacked.

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Shortly before midnight, a faction of the military issued a statement, attempting to suspend the Constitution, impose martial law and enforce a nationwide curfew, claiming that the "political administration that has lost all legitimacy has been forced to withdraw." In the advancing hours, President Erdogan addressed the nation via FaceTime. Speaking to a CNN Turk anchor, he urged people to take to the streets to stand up to the junta. He said, "Go to the streets and give them their answer."<sup>2</sup> After the statement of the director of religious affairs calling people "to resist without resorting to violence," mosque loudspeakers urged people to resist. Thousands heeded the calls to take to the streets, to resist the coup plotters. People marched with Turkish flags; they stood on, climbed onto the tanks. After a while photographs and video footages of civilians taking control of the tanks, and soldiers abandoning them gained widespread media coverage. Although there were some marginal cases in which some soldiers were tormented by angry crowds, it is generally reported that people took hold of Turkish soldiers participating in the coup, and handed them over to police officers. It is observed that to a large extent as a result of the resistance campaign, the coup attempt failed. The atrocious coup attempt resulted in 246 civilian deaths, and 1,491 injuries. In spite of the violent attacks by soldiers towards those resisting the coup attempt, people never abandoned their nonviolent methods, and remained steadfast in the streets. How did unarmed civilians of all ages become successful in the face of troops?

### **HOW DID THE JULY 15 RESISTANCE SUCCEED?**

Firstly, the main logic behind any civil resistance campaign is that rulers derive their power from the people over whom they rule, and when an adequate number of the people withdraw their support for a considerable time, the rule disintegrates. Analyzing nonviolence merely as a technique, not a moral obligation, Sharp argues that "Without at least the passive

<sup>2</sup> Gül Tüysüz and Elliott C. McLaughlin, "Failed Coup in Turkey: What You Need to Know", July 18, 2016.

support of the general population and his/ her agents the most powerful dictator in the world becomes just another crackpot with dreams of world domination."<sup>3</sup> He identifies six sources of power: the legitimacy of rule in the eyes of the people ruled; human resources provided to the government; citizens' skills and knowledge to keep business and service systems operational; material resources; cultural and ideological beliefs to encourage obedience; and sanctioning the power of security officials imposed on the resisters in order to suppress them. A nonviolent strategy aims at withdrawing these power sources until the regime collapses.<sup>4</sup> The people taking to the streets disclosed the idea that they would never accept the legitimacy of a junta regime in Turkey. From the very first moment it was made apparent to those involved in the coup and to an international audience that there was no way to make a junta regime legitimate in the eyes of Turkish people.

Secondly, there are certain psychological consequences of the use of nonviolent methods in the face of violent repression. Gregg argued that when unarmed resisters do not strike back, the opponents lose credibility. The resisters' acceptance of pain without attacking back will bring disgrace on the opponents, which will give resisters the ability to generate public support. Hence it is possible to argue that the failure of the coup attempt came as a result of the steadfastness of the people to resist by nonviolent methods. In recent events, it was observed how nonviolent action provided moral and psychological superiority to the Turkish people and caused despair to the other side.

The psychological superiority of the people in the streets is remarkable. Interviews conducted with the people who are participating in the guard of democracy reveal their psychological and moral superiority. A 46-year-old cleaning lady, who attends the protests in the late evening after work, says that she does not

<sup>3</sup> Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action Vol 3*, Boston: P. Sargent Publisher, 1973.

<sup>4</sup> Sharon Erickson Nepstad, Nonviolent Civil Resistance and Social Movements, *Sociology Compass*, Vol 7 (7, 2013): 590-598 p. 592.

believe that there will be another coup attempt in the future. "They attempted such a thing because they did not predict that people would resist with such strength. Now they know what we can do. They will never dare to attempt a coup again."<sup>5</sup> A 61-year-old man standing in the streets of Eskişehir since Friday night said, with pride in his eyes, that there will never be a coup from now on because the Turkish people did not give in and the ones with undemocratic aspirations would not attempt to do such a thing again.

Thirdly, they feel united and stronger when they are in the streets according to them. It can be argued that this sense of solidarity and the participation in such a mass movement against an undemocratic attempt will have important consequences for Turkish democratic culture. Jacques Semelin argues that the goal of the unarmed resistance against Nazi occupation was not defeating them but, "to preserve the collective identity of the attacked societies; that is to say their fundamental values... When a society feels less and less submissive, it becomes more and more uncontrollable. Then, even if the occupier keeps its power, it loses its authority."<sup>6</sup> It is apparent that the resistance movement has a strong role in the failure of the coup attempt. In addition to this, it is possible to argue that the resistance movement will result in a "less submissive, and more uncontrollable" society, which will be a factor that should be considered by anyone with undemocratic plans. In other words, it can be argued that the July 15 civil resistance movement prepared the grounds for a more democratic Turkey in the future.

Fourthly, civil resistance comes to fruition by two mechanisms. It either affects the decisions of domestic actors, or rallies international support around its cause and achieves its goal through the pressure of the international community on the government. I will argue that in the Turkish case the first aforementioned mechanism led to success. The coverage of the coup attempt and the resistance of the people in Turkey

in the international media reflected a "wait and see" strategy in the public opinion of the world. Instead of the undemocratic nature of the attempt the measures applied to maintain the public order were scrutinized in the international media. Therefore it is possible to argue that the failure of the coup attempt owes almost nothing to the international public or actors' pressure, and rather owes everything to the civil movement's ability to change the behavior of the perpetrators. Civil resistance movements operate through four main mechanisms of change. The behavior of the adversaries (the coup makers in our case) can be changed due to acts of conversion, accommodation, coercion, or disintegration. Coercion mechanisms work when resisters acquire the ability to impose their will as opposed to the will of their adversaries. The Turkish people filling the streets and forcing soldiers to abandon their tanks implemented the strategy of coercion. So, the success of the campaign turns out to be a product of internal mechanisms rather than external pressures exerted on the coup makers.

Fifthly, in general, nonviolent campaigns are more likely to attract higher levels of participation than violent campaigns. It is shown that major nonviolent campaigns are successful 53 percent of the time, compared with 26 percent for violent resistance campaigns. The main reason behind this success is that the implementation of nonviolent methods enhances the movement's legitimacy, which encourages more broad-based participation in the resistance. The mobilization of people is an important factor leading to success of a civil resistance campaign. Widespread participation increases the likelihood of success.<sup>7</sup> On July 15, 2016, the high level of participation was affected by two major factors. Firstly, the anti-coup sentiment was widely shared in Turkish society, and the action concerned was non-military or nonviolent in character, which increased the participation rates.

<sup>5</sup> Interview conducted, 20 July, Eskişehir.

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Semelin, *Unarmed against Hitler: Civilian Resistance in Europe, 1939-1943*, (Praeger Publishers, 1993), p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Chenoweth, Erica, and Maria J. Stephan. "The Primacy of Participation in Non-violent Resistance." *In Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Non-Violent Campaign*, by Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, 30-62. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011, p. 30.

Lastly, the movement was an example of an elite directed defensive resistance. The statement of President Erdogan, calling people to stand up to the junta constituted a turning point in the course of events. Although a number of people took to the streets before the statement, the bulk of the resisters were mobilized following the statement. Besides, the calls to prayer from mosques also urged people into the streets, having a considerable impact in motivating people towards action. In the light of these evaluations, it is possible to argue that the movement has emerged as a result of an elite-directed mobilization, whereby elites harness popular discontent. The logic behind a defensive resistance may be summarized as follows: “we protect those in danger, and preserve certain values endangered by an illegitimate power.” The resisters in Turkey pronounced that they will stand up to the coup, and filled the squares to “protect the nation, homeland, democracy, freedom.” The protection of shared values that unite society is stated as the motivation behind the resistance, by the resisters themselves. Accordingly there is no doubt that the civil resistance campaign of July 15 has a defensive nature.

## THE FUTURE OF THE RESISTANCE CAMPAIGN

There is copious evidence from historical examples that civil resistance can be an effective technique of social action. The resistance of the Turkish People against the coup attempt on July 15 constitutes a remarkable example of how nonviolent civil resistance succeeds. The steadfastness of the resisters to remain nonviolent played and will play an important role in the future of the July 15 resistance movement. It is the nonviolent and civilian nature of the resistance which undermined all the legitimacy claims of the coup plotters. That’s why the people who will stand guard against any coup attempts in the future should continue to apply nonviolent methods. The calls urging people to stand against the coup saved Turkish democracy from a deadly attack. The coup plotters and the ones who committed crimes in the course of the events shall be entitled to a fair trial in order to maintain people’s respect for the people for the rule of the law. Lastly, the exciting success story of the July 15 civil resistance campaign should be communicated in the international media more broadly. The lessons that the Turkish experience has taught us have the potential to inspire resistance movements against coup d’états all across the world.