

Fethullah Gülen: 'I call for an international investigation into the failed putsch in Turkey'

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On the night of July 15, Turkey went through the most catastrophic tragedy in its recent history as a result of the attempted military coup. The events of that night could be called a serious terror coup.

Turkish people from all walks of life who thought the era of military coups was over showed solidarity against the coup and on the side of democracy. While the coup attempt was in progress, I condemned it in the strongest terms.

Twenty minutes after the military coup attempt surfaced, before the real actors were known, President Erdogan hastily blamed me. It is troubling that an accusation was issued without waiting for the event's details and the perpetrators' motives to emerge. As someone who has suffered through four coups in the last 50 years, it is especially insulting to be associated with a coup attempt. I categorically reject such accusations.

I have been living a reclusive life in self-exile in a small town in the United States for the last 17 years. The assertion that I convinced the eighth largest army in the world - from 6,000 miles away – to act against its own government is not only baseless, it is false, and has not resonated throughout the world.

If there are any officers among the coup plotters who consider themselves as a sympathizer of Hizmet movement, in my opinion those people committed treason against the unity of their country by taking part in an event where their own citizens lost their lives. They also violated the values that I have cherished throughout my life, and caused hundreds of thousands of innocent people to suffer under the government's oppressive treatment.

If there are those who acted under the influence of an interventionist culture that persists among some of the military officers and have put these interventionist reflexes before Hizmet values, which I believe is unlikely, then an entire movement cannot be blamed for the wrongdoings of those individuals. I leave them to God's judgment.

No one is above the rule of law, myself included. I would like for those who are responsible for this coup attempt, regardless of their identities, to receive the punishment they deserve if found guilty in a fair trial. The Turkish judiciary has

been politicized and controlled by the government since 2014 and, consequently, the possibility of a fair trial is very small. For this reason, I have advocated several times for the establishment of an international commission to investigate the coup attempt and I have expressed my commitment to abide by the findings of such a commission.

Hizmet movement participants have not been involved in one single violent incident throughout its 50-year history. They haven't even taken to the streets to confront Turkish security forces while they have been suffering under the government's "witch hunt," to use Mr. Erdoğan's own words, for the last three years.

Despite being subjected to a smear campaign and suffering under state oppression for the last three years in the hands of a politically controlled law enforcement and the judiciary, Hizmet movement participants have complied with the law, opposed injustices through legitimate means and only defended their rights within the legal framework.

Turkey's legal and law enforcement agencies have been mobilized for the last three years to investigate and reveal an alleged "parallel state" that they claim that I run.

The administration called the 2013 public corruption probe an organized attempt by Hizmet sympathizers within the bureaucracy to bring down the government. Despite detaining 4,000 people, purging tens of thousands of government employees and unlawfully seizing hundreds of NGOs and private businesses, authorities were unable to find a single piece of credible evidence to prove their claims.

Turkey's prime minister called an opportunity to meet with me "heaven-sent" in May 2013; however, after the public corruption probe emerged in December 2013, he began using hate language such as "assassins" and "blood sucking vampires" when referring to Hizmet movement participants.

After the treasonous coup attempt of July 15, the attacks have become unbearable. Turkish government officials also began referring to me and people sympathetic to my views as a "virus" and "cancer cells that need to be wiped out." Hundreds of thousands of people that have supported institutions and organizations affiliated with the Hizmet movement have been dehumanized in one way or another.

Their private properties have been confiscated, bank accounts taken over and their passports cancelled, restricting their freedom of travel. Hundreds of thousands of families are living through a humanitarian tragedy due to this ongoing witch hunt. News reports show that nearly 90,000 individuals have been purged from their jobs and 21,000 teachers' teaching licenses have been revoked.

Is the Turkish government forcing these families to starve to death by preventing them from working and prohibiting them from leaving the country? What is the difference between this treatment and the pre-genocide practices throughout European history?

I've witnessed every single military coup in Turkey and, like many other Turkish citizens, have suffered during and after each one. I was imprisoned by the order of the junta administration after the March 12, 1971 coup. After the coup of September 12, 1980, a detention warrant was issued against me and I lived as a fugitive for six years.

Right after the February 28, 1997, post-modern military coup, a lawsuit asking for capital punishment was filed against me with the charge of "an unarmed terrorist organization consisting of one person."

During all of these oppressive, military-dominated administrations, three cases accusing me of "leading a terror organization" were opened and, in each case, I was cleared of the charges. I was targeted by the authoritarian military administrations back then, and now, I face the very same accusations projected in an even more unlawful manner by a civilian autocratic regime.

I had friendly relations with leaders from various political parties, such as Mr. Turgut Ozal, Mr. Suleyman Demirel and Mr. Bulent Ecevit, and genuinely supported their policies that I found to be beneficial to the larger community. They treated me with respect, especially when recognizing Hizmet activities that contribute to social peace and education.

Even though I distanced myself from the idea of political Islam, I praised the democratic reforms undertaken by Mr. Erdogan and AKP leaders during their first term in power.

But throughout my life, I have stood against military coups and intervention in domestic politics. When I declared 20 years ago that "there is no turning back from democracy and secularism of the state," I was accused and insulted by the same political Islamists who are close to the current administration. I still stand behind my words. More than 70 books based on my articles and sermons spanning 40 years are publicly available. Not only is there not a single expression that legitimizes the idea of a coup in these works, but, on the contrary, they discuss universal human values that are the foundation of democracy.

Emancipating Turkey from the vicious cycle of authoritarianism is possible only through the adoption of a democratic culture and a merit-based administration. Neither a military coup nor a civilian autocracy is a solution.

Unfortunately, in a country where independent media outlets are shut down or taken under government custody, a significant portion of Turkish citizens were made to believe - through relentless pro-government propaganda - that I am the actor behind the July 15 coup. However, world opinion, which is shaped by objective information, clearly sees that what is going on is a power grab by the administration under the guise of a witch-hunt.

Of course, what matters is not majority opinion but the truths that will emerge through the process of a fair trial. Tens of thousands of people, including myself, who have been the target of such gross accusations, would like to clear our names through a fair judicial process. We do not want to live with this suspicion that was cast on us. Unfortunately, the government has exerted political control over the judiciary since 2014, thereby destroying the opportunity for Hizmet sympathizers to clear their names of these accusations.

I openly call on the Turkish government to allow for an international commission to investigate the coup attempt, and promise my full cooperation in this matter. If the commission finds one-tenth of the accusations against me to be justified, I am ready to return to Turkey and receive the harshest punishment.

Participants in the Hizmet movement have been overseen by hundreds of governments, intelligence agencies, researchers or independent civil society organizations for 25 years and have never been found to be involved in illegal activity. For this reason, many countries do not take seriously the accusations of the Turkish government.

The most important characteristic of the Hizmet movement is to not to seek political power, but instead to seek long-term solutions for the problems threatening the future of their societies. At a time when Muslim-majority societies are featured in the news for terror, bloodshed and underdevelopment, Hizmet participants have been focusing on raising educated generations who are open to dialogue and actively contributing to their societies.

Since I have always believed that the biggest problems facing these societies are ignorance, intolerance-driven conflicts and poverty, I have always encouraged those who would listen to build schools instead of mosques or Quran tutoring centers.

Hizmet participants are active in education, health care and humanitarian aid not only in Turkey, but also in more than 160 countries around the world. The most significant characteristic of these activities is that they serve people of all religions and ethnic backgrounds - not just Muslims.

Hizmet movement participants opened schools for girls in the most difficult areas of Pakistan and continued to provide education in the Central African Republic during the country's civil war. While Boko Haram took young girls hostage in Nigeria, Hizmet participants opened schools that educated girls and women. In France and the French-speaking world, I have encouraged people who share my ideas and values to fight against groups that embrace radical Islamic ideologies and to support the authorities in this struggle. In these countries, I strived for Muslims to be recognized as free and contributing members of society, and have urged them to become part of the solution rather than be associated with the problems.

Despite receiving threats, I categorically condemned numerous times terrorist groups such as Al Qaida and ISIS who taint the bright face of Islam. However, the Turkish government is trying to convince governments around the world to act against schools that have been opened by individuals who did not take part in the July 15 coup attempt, and who have always categorically rejected violence. My appeal to governments around the world is that they ignore the Turkish government's claims and reject its irrational demands.

Indeed, the Turkish government's political decision to designate the Hizmet movement as a terrorist organization resulted in the closure of institutions such as schools, hospitals and relief organizations. Those who have been jailed are teachers, entrepreneurs, doctors, academics and journalists. The government did not produce any evidence to show that the hundreds of thousands targeted in the government's witch hunt supported the coup or that they were associated with any violence.

It is impossible to justify actions such as burning down a cultural center in Paris, detaining or holding hostage family members of wanted individuals, denying detained journalists access to medical care, shutting down 35 hospitals and the humanitarian relief organization Kimse Yok Mu, or forcing 1,500 university deans to resign as part of a post-coup investigation.

It appears that, by presenting the recent purges as efforts that target only Hizmet participants, the Turkish government is in fact removing anyone from the bureaucracy who is not loyal to the ruling party, while also intimidating civil society organizations. It is dreadful to see human rights violations occurring in Turkey,

including the torture detailed in recent reports by Amnesty International. This is truly a human tragedy.

The fact that the July 15 coup attempt - which was an anti-democratic intervention against an elected government - was foiled with Turkish citizens' support is historically significant. However, the coup's failure does not mean a victory for democracy. Neither the domination by a minority nor the domination of a majority that results in the oppression of a minority nor the rule of an elected autocrat is a true democracy.

One cannot speak of democracy in the absence of the rule of law, separation of powers and essential human rights and freedoms, especially the freedom of expression. True victory for democracy in Turkey is only possible by reviving these core values.

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