

COUP IN THE NAME OF DEMOCRACY: MAY 27, 1960 AND THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF POLITICAL LEGITIMACY

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Abstract

This study examines, through a semiotic lens, how the May 27, 1960 military coup was represented in mainstream newspaper opinion columns and how political legitimacy was produced in the name of democracy. Nine columns published on May 27–28 (and on May 31 in *Hürriyet*) in *Hürriyet*, *Milliyet*, *Cumhuriyet*, and *Akşam* are analyzed using Roland Barthes's concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth. The analysis demonstrates that these texts construct the coup as an “extraordinary yet necessary” intervention and build a “myth of rescue” through signifiers such as “democracy,” “nation,” “freedom,” “law,” “youth,” and “Atatürk.” Within this discourse, the military is transformed into a neutral and constituent subject, while the Democrat Party government is coded as the agent of “deviation” or “degeneration.” Consequently, the coup is naturalized and legitimized through narratives of “punishment,” “purification,” and “new beginning.” Themes such as the “constituent assembly,” “normalization,” and “re-foundation” present the coup as a temporary “bridge,” thereby reinforcing consent, while binary oppositions (order/chaos, law/oppression, nation/government, youth/authority) are repeatedly circulated. The findings suggest that this discursive template provided a framework that could be reproduced in the legitimization of subsequent military interventions.

Keywords: 1960 Coup, Democracy, Newspaper Columns, Semiotic, Myth

Jel Codes: J18, J28, J38

1. Introduction

Military coups have marked critical turning points in Turkish political history, serving as moments when the boundaries of democracy were redrawn and political legitimacy was fundamentally contested. The May 27, 1960 coup — the first military intervention in the history of the Turkish Republic — not only set a precedent for subsequent interventions, including the memorandum of March 12, 1971, the coup of September 12, 1980, and the “postmodern coup” of February 28, 1997, but also established the discursive template through which military interventions would be legitimized for decades to come. What distinguishes the 1960 coup from a straightforward seizure of power is the ideological register in which it was articulated: the coup was presented not as a rupture of democracy, but as its restoration. This paradox — a military intervention justified in the name of the very democratic order that it suspended — raises a fundamental question about the role of language and representation in the construction of political legitimacy.

This study examines how that legitimacy was produced. Drawing on Roland Barthes’ semiotic framework of denotation, connotation, and myth, it analyzes ten opinion columns published in five major Turkish newspapers — *Hürriyet*, *Milliyet*, *Cumhuriyet*, *Akşam*, and *Tercüman* — in the immediate aftermath of the coup (May 27–31, 1960). The central research question is: Through which discursive mechanisms did mainstream newspaper columns construct the May 27 coup as a legitimate, even necessary, democratic intervention? The inclusion of *Tercüman*, a newspaper with a relatively pro-Democrat Party editorial orientation, is methodologically significant: it allows the analysis to demonstrate that the legitimization discourse was not confined to opposition or Kemalist-aligned outlets, but extended across the ideological spectrum of the mainstream press.

Existing scholarship on the media reflections of the 1960 coup has predominantly focused on the propaganda function of newspapers and their ideological alignments with political power (Şahin, 2023; Alacı and Babaoğlu, 2021; Yavuz, 2017; Çakır and Yayalar, 2017; Gülmez and Aşık, 2014; Acar, 2010). While these studies have illuminated the partisan dimensions of press coverage, they have not systematically examined how the relationship between coup and democracy was constructed at the level of the sign—that is, how specific words, figures, and narrative structures worked to naturalize military intervention as a democratic act. This study addresses that gap. By applying Barthes’ semiotic tools to a carefully selected corpus of opinion columns, it seeks to uncover the ideological architecture underlying the surface discourse of democratization and to demonstrate how this discursive template provided a reproducible framework for the legitimization of subsequent military interventions in Turkey.

2. The data sources of the research

Relevant columns about the coup and democracy, published in *Hürriyet*, *Milliyet*, *Cumhuriyet*, *Akşam*, and *Tercüman* newspapers, were accessed through the book titled *Ak Devrim*, issued by the coup administration, and through the newspaper archives of the Turkish National Library. The aforementioned newspapers are of great significance for understanding how the discussions on the coup and democracy were reflected in the public sphere, as they were the most influential and highest-circulation media outlets of the time (Acar, 2014). On 27 and 28 May 1960, the first days of the coup, *Akşam* published 8 columns on the coup and democracy (5 of which are included in the sample); *Milliyet* published 2 columns; and *Cumhuriyet* published 1 column. The first column concerning the coup and democracy in *Hürriyet* was published on 31 May 1960 and is included in the sample. The column published three days after the coup was included in the sample to demonstrate how the “coup-democracy” relationship was constructed across all four major mainstream newspapers. On the other hand, an editorial regarding the coup was published on May 29, 1960, in the newspaper *Tercüman* —known for its relative closeness to the Democrat Party—and was included in the sample.

Table 1. Newspaper columns and linguistic signs

Newspaper	Author	Columns	Linguistic Signs Used
Hürriyet	Tahsin Öztin	A Brand New Face, A Fresh Spirit (Yeni Çehre, Taptaze Bir Ruh)	Atatürk, revolution, freedom, nation
Milliyet	Çetin Altan	The Great Day (Büyük Gün)	Freedom, nation, human rights, legal order
Milliyet	Çetin Altan	Today I Feel Like Writing (Bugün Canım Yazı Yazmak İstiyor)	Nation, democratic principles, freedom
Cumhuriyet	Nadir Nadi	Turning Point (Dönüm Noktası)	Democracy, law, nation, constitution
Akşam	Müşerref Hekimoğlu	How Happy You Are, My Atatürk! (Ne Mutlu Sana Atam!)	Atatürk, nation, Turkish youth, democracy, freedom
Akşam	Vecihi Ünal	Unpleasant Friend... (Sevimsiz Dost...)	Democracy, freedom, nation
Akşam	Bedrettin Ülgen	May 27 (27 Mayıs)	Youth, freedom, democracy, nation, Turkish youth
Akşam	Ahmet Çitilci	We Are Following Atatürk's Path (Atatürk'ün İzindeyiz)	Freedom, human rights, Atatürk, army-nation
Akşam	Kuvvet Başarır	I Saw (Gördüm)	Democracy, freedom, nation, Atatürk, Turkish youth
Tercüman	Haldun Taner	The Miracle of May 27	Freedom, democracy, nation, Atatürk

Sources: Archives of the National Library of Turkey

Immediately after the 1960 coup, the majority of newspapers adopted an approach supporting and legitimizing the coup. The archival research revealed that no newspapers published columns opposing the coup — at least not in the first seven days. In general, the newspapers adhered to a discourse that approved and legitimized the coup. The newspaper Tercüman, known for its closeness to the DP (Democrat Party), remained silent for the first three days before publishing, on May 27, an editorial supporting the coup. Similarly, the newspaper Havadis altered its editorial policy following the coup, abandoning its pro-DP publishing approach (Gülmez and Aşık, 2014, p. 72).¹

3. Methodology: Denotation, Connotation and Myth as Analytical Framework

This study employs Roland Barthes' semiotic framework as its primary analytical method to examine how the May 27, 1960 coup was represented in opinion columns. Semiotic analysis investigates how language functions as a system of meaning and how signs produce social meanings (Hodge and Kress, 1995; Guiraud, 1975). Within this context, the focus of the research is on linguistic signs -namely, the words used in the opinion columns- and seeks to uncover what these columns "communicate to society" regarding the concepts of coup and democracy. In this sense, semiotics examines the life of signs within the fabric of social life (Saussure, 1989). In this context, the columns are analyzed through three successive layers: denotation (the surface meaning of signs), connotation (their cultural and ideological implications), and myth (the process through which ideological meanings are naturalized).

¹ The fact that the column articles dated 27 May were published on the same day requires a methodological explanation. Given that the coup began in the early hours of the morning, Akşam, as an afternoon newspaper, was able to go to press early; by contrast, the issues of morning newspapers such as Milliyet and Cumhuriyet are considered to have been published through additional or late editions during the day. In this context, the fact that Çetin Altan was the only columnist to publish on 27 May is particularly noteworthy.

This framework allows for a systematic examination of how linguistic signs construct and legitimize the coup discourse.

Analyzing the May 27, 1960 coup in opinion columns offers significant intellectual opportunities when approached using semiotic methods. Semiotic analysis investigates how language functions as a system of meaning and how signs produce social meanings (Hodge and Kress, 1995; Guiraud, 1975). In this context, the research focuses on linguistic signs—namely, words. In other words, the study analyzes the words used in the opinion columns of newspapers and seeks to uncover what these columns “communicate to society” regarding the concepts of coup and democracy. In this sense, semiotics examines the life of signs within the fabric of social life (Saussure, 1989).

A sign is a binary structure composed of the signifier and the signified. According to Saussure, a sign is the basic unit of meaning. The signifier refers to the material aspect of the sign—an image or sound form that can be perceived through the senses; in other words, it is the phonetic aspect of the sign. The signified, on the other hand, is the conceptual content of the sign—the mental concept to which the sign refers (Hall, 1997, p. 38). For example, in the case of the sign “coup,” the signifier is the phonetic form represented by the letters “c-o-u-p,” whereas the signified is the concept of a “coup”. In this context, the sign “coup” symbolizes not merely a change in government, but also a concept imbued with specific historical, cultural, and ideological meanings. Roland Barthes’ semiotic analysis is particularly significant for understanding how a sign becomes loaded with ideological meanings.

Roland Barthes examines the meaning-making process of linguistic signs on two levels: denotation and connotation (Barthes, 1986, p. 89-91). Denotation refers to the first, surface-level meaning of a sign, while connotation encompasses the meanings carried by that sign within cultural and ideological contexts. In this framework, the denotative and connotative meanings of the 1960 coup are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Denotative and connotative layers of the 1960 Coup in newspaper columns

Denotative Meaning	Connotative Meaning
A coup is the replacement of political power through military intervention.	The coup is presented as an action taken in the name of democracy. The coup is understood as an effort to protect Atatürk’s reforms.
	The coup is depicted as a movement in which the Turkish military reclaims its role as the “founding assembly” and seeks to protect the sovereignty of the Turkish nation.
	Turkish youth are portrayed as a generation walking in Atatürk’s footsteps, charged with protecting revolutionary ideals.
	The coup is presented as a social movement in harmony with the will of the people, protecting the nation’s dignity.
	The army is emphasized as the natural representative of the Turkish nation and as the guardian of the state. The army’s intervention is linked to the defense of the homeland and the struggle for independence.
	May 27 is considered a movement for re-establishment and a continuation of the national struggle, aimed at preserving the foundations of the Republic.

Sources: Author

Connotations often carry ideological messages, and this ideological layer provides important clues about the intellectual and emotional responses the text seeks to elicit from the reader. A significant aspect of the opinion columns is the way the coup is narrated through themes such as “victim,” “hero,” and “victory.” This narrative structure evokes a range of ideologically charged emotional responses in the reader, thereby contributing to the

establishment of a new hegemony.

At the connotative level, the attempt to fix the meaning of the coup through the concept of democracy involves the “naturalization” of the coup. In this sense, the coup is transformed into a myth in Barthes’s conceptualization. According to Barthes, a myth is the process through which a sign is “naturalized” based on an ideological meaning within a cultural context (Barthes, 1991, p. 108). The myths in the opinion columns are conceptualized as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Myths of the coup in newspaper columns

Myths	Description
Army-nation identity	The army is presented as a structure that directly represents the will of the nation.
Preservation of Atatürk’s legacy	The coup is framed as an action aimed at preserving the values of the Republic and its reforms.
Saving democracy	The coup is presented not as an anti-democratic action, but rather as the reconstruction of democracy.

Sources: Author

Table 3 summarizes attempts to mythologize and naturalize the coup, along with the signs used in this process.

4. Analysis of Research Data

The study sample was constructed according to several criteria. First, opinion columns that directly addressed the relationship between the coup and democracy and were published in four major mainstream newspapers on the first days of the coup (May 27-28, 1960) were selected. Second, in order to avoid the ideological bias that would arise from focusing solely on opposition or CHP-aligned newspapers, the May 29, 1960, column from *Tercüman* — a newspaper known for its relatively pro-DP editorial line — was also included in the sample. This choice carries analytical value by demonstrating that the legitimization discourse was not confined to the opposition press but extended across newspapers of differing ideological orientations. Finally, the linguistic signs identified in the columns are analyzed through Barthes’ (1986; 1991) concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth. In this approach, each sign is first examined at the level of its surface meaning (denotation), then in terms of its cultural and ideological connotations, and finally in terms of how these meanings are naturalized and elevated to the level of myth.

4.1. The Coup as Re-foundation: The Constituent Assembly and Atatürk’s Legacy

The signs used in opinion columns concerning the 1960 coup portray the coup as a democratic “movement, revolution, or reform”. At the connotative level, the cultural-ideological layer of this “revolution or reform” is linked to the Atatürk sign through the signs “Constituent Assembly”, “Revolution”, and “Turkish Youth”. In his column titled “The Great Day”, Çetin Altan addresses the reader as follows: “Free from all kinds of lies, repression, and petty games, democratic principles to be set by the Constituent Assembly will soon lead to free elections” (Altan, 27 May, 1960). Altan establishes a relationship among the “constituent assembly”, “democratic principles”, and “free elections”. Here, the emphasis is placed on the construction of “democratic principles” by going from “the assembly to the elections”, rather than “from the elections to the assembly”.

The Constituent Assembly, which was established in Ankara on April 23, 1920, following the occupation of Istanbul on March 16, 1920, symbolizes the founding of the Republic and the national struggle. In writings on the 1960 coup, the Constituent Assembly is linked to that historical context, and the coup is argued to represent a ‘movement of reconstitution’. Accordingly, the 1960 coup is framed as having a mission similar to the establishment of the Republic in 1923. In this context, in his column titled “We Are Following Atatürk’s Path”, Ahmet Çitilci

establishes a connection between the national struggle, the foundation of the Republic, and the coup: “Yesterday, the Glorious Turkish Army, which fought from front to front for our independence, with women, girls, and men, has today fulfilled an honorable mission for our freedoms and human rights” (Çitilci, 28, May, 1960).

In the opinion columns, the discourse surrounding the coup codes the “Constituent Assembly” as a ‘second founding will’ that re-establishes it. A synchronization can be observed between the Constituent Assembly of 1923, which was composed of military figures (army), and the 1960 military coup (army). For example, Müşerref Hekimoğlu hears Mustafa Kemal’s voice in the voice of the officer reading the coup declaration: “In the voice of the glorious officer speaking on the radio right now, you are also present, my Father” (Hekimoğlu, 28 May, 1960). Thus, at the connotative level, the Constituent Assembly is identified with Mustafa Kemal, and its role is framed as preserving Mustafa Kemal’s revolutions and reforms.

In her column titled “How Happy You Are, My Atatürk”, Müşerref Hekimoğlu addresses the coup through the signs of “Atam” and “Turkish youth”:

Since your death, we have endured many trials in your absence. It cannot be said that all these trials ended honorably, but we have concluded this final trial with a success worthy of you, Father. This nation, this youth, this army came together to walk in your footsteps, placing love for and service to the country above all other affections. Once again, they confirmed that they would make any sacrifice for the sake of freedom and independence. Thus, they immediately achieved the goal of the Turkish revolutions (28 May 1960).

First, the word “Atam” is not only a personal name but also a figure symbolizing the ideological and cultural leadership of the Turkish nation. “Walking in Atatürk’s footsteps” means following the path he set; throughout the text, this sign serves as sacred reference. In his column titled “Today, I Feel Like Writing,” Çetin Altan continues this discourse as follows:

The action taken by our Armed Forces, guided by the spiritual directive of the Great Father echoing through the years, will be recorded in our history as the strongest guarantee of our democracy, and it will always serve as an unforgettable lesson to those who seek to exploit freedoms for their own selfish purposes (Altan, 28, May, 1960).

Altan emphasizes that the coup was an “action” taken to preserve Mustafa Kemal’s legacy.² Mustafa Kemal’s legacy refers to the “first cause” that created and gave birth to the nation and the country, and the reforms inherited from this cause (Bora, 2018, p. 121). Connotatively, the term “spiritual directive” in the text denotes the continuity of Mustafa Kemal’s intellectual and ideological legacy, symbolized by the “revolutions”.

This discourse of reconstitution—the coup as a “second founding”—reaches its most explicit articulation in Haldun Taner’s column “The Miracle of May 27” (Tercüman, May 29, 1960). Taner frames the coup not merely as a political rupture but as an epochal rebirth of the nation itself, invoking the metaphor of emergence from a “dark winter” into spring and identifying the coup directly as “an intellectuals’ revolution” (aydınlar ihtilali).

Today is May 29, 1960. The second day of the happy era marked our decision to break free from the yoke of the tyrants who sought to turn us into a herd and to rebuild our destiny on the principles of the West’s most advanced democracy, namely tolerance and freedom of thought. This spring morning, like trees freshly watered at the root, all of the Turkish Nation -men and women, young and old, educated and uneducated, military and civilian, partisan and non-partisan- rise up with a brand new strength and vitality, with a love of homeland unseen since the time of Atatürk (Taner, May 29, 1960).

The semiotic chain is revealing: “spring” displaces “dark winter” (the DP era), “Atatürk’s time” provides the temporal ideal, and the reconstituted nation — defined not as the electorate but as an organic, feeling body — is

2 In his column titled “The Great Day,” Çetin Altan expresses the relationship between Atatürk and the revolutions as follows: “The hour of true freedom has struck. Based on Atatürk’s revolutions, the foundations of an order befitting the honor of Turkishness are being laid in a democratic country” (Milliyet, May 27, 1960). Similarly, H. Bahattin Ülgen, in his column titled “May 27,” states: “The youth, who have pledged to follow the path laid out by Atatürk and remain committed to his revolutions, have now added May 27 as a new holiday alongside the May 19 Commemoration Day” (Akşam, May 28, 1960).

the subject of this new founding. Taner's claim that "perhaps this hopeful atmosphere comes from the fact that this revolution is an intellectuals' revolution" (aydınlar ihtilâli) further encodes the coup as an act asserting cultural superiority, carried out by the Kemalist intelligentsia against a government coded as culturally retrograde.

4.2. The Army-Nation Identity Myth in Opinion Columns

In Turkish political history, the concept of the "military-nation" identity stands out as one of the most frequently referenced myths.³ According to this myth, the most defining characteristic of Turks throughout history has been their capability as skilled soldiers and their identification with the military itself (Altınay and Bora, 2008, p. 142). This form of identification is also a key element in the discourse surrounding military coups, especially as reflected in opinion columns. In such writings, the military is portrayed as an institution "above all other institutions", representing the identity, values, and sovereignty of the Turkish nation. What grants the military this "above institutions" status is its historical role in fighting alongside the people to establish the Republic, as well as its mission to guard the Republic and its reforms (Cizre, 2008, p. 156-157). Tahsin Öztin draws attention to this mission in his column titled "New Face, A Fresh Spirit".

Few have understood what can be achieved with the Turkish army as well as I have," the late Atatürk would always say with pride. Once again, the world has seen that he was right. The honorable army, guardian of the homeland, peace, and our revolutions, has added yet another golden page to Turkish history. The world applauded the Turkish nation, represented by General Cemal Gürsel, on 28 May 1960.

Mustafa Kemal personally assigned this mission to the military.⁴ According to Taha Parla, after 1923, Mustafa Kemal positioned the military as follows: "Our heroic army is the sole guardian of the state's independence, as well as the life of the nation and the homeland." Not only of state independence (and national defense), but also of the nation's and the homeland's very existence. And it is the only one" (Parla, 1991, p. 174). In addition to leading the Turkish nation's struggle for independence, Mustafa Kemal entrusted the military with the responsibility for protecting the values of the Republic and of modern Turkey. In this context, the military is seen as the protector of the nation's future, a guarantor against both internal and external threats, and the guardian of the Republic's reforms and social structure. At the connotative level, Tahsin Öztin interprets the military's intervention in governance (via a coup d'état) as fulfilling its historical responsibility to safeguard internal values. H. Bahattin Ülgen shares this perspective with Öztin, writing: "The Turkish nation now faces yet another success of the Turkish Army, the very force that secured its independence and carried out its revolutions" (28 May, 1960).

The statement in Tahsin Öztin's column — "The world is applauding the Turkish Nation in the person of General Cemal Gürsel" — strongly reflects the idea that the Turkish military and the nation constitute an inseparable whole, a notion often referred to as the "military-nation identity." In this context, the strength of the Turkish nation is symbolically embodied in the military's victory, represented by General Cemal Gürsel. During the 1960 military coup, Gürsel assumed leadership, and, for Öztin, the military emerged as the natural representative of the Turkish nation's struggle for independence and sovereignty. Similarly, Çetin Altan, in his column titled "The Great Day," draws attention to the military's role as the nation's natural representative: "The Turkish Nation has taken control of its destiny in the person of its Armed Forces".

Connotatively, Çetin Altan, through his use of the term "mukadderat" (destiny/fate), suggests that the Turkish nation's future, fate, and destiny are embodied in the military. This implies a strong emphasis on the legitimacy of the coup and the organic bond between the military and the nation. Through this framing, a discourse is constructed

3 In almost every period of Turkish political history, the soldier-nation myth has been prominently emphasized by academics, writers, and the press alike. One of the clearest articulations of this myth comes from the historian Halil İnalcık, who asserts that "the Turkish nation has preserved its identity as a nation-army from the beginning of history to the present day." (İnalcık, 1964, p. 56).

4 In a speech delivered in Konya on November 22, 1931, Mustafa Kemal drew attention to the following points: "From now on, in the pursuit of the Turkish nation's noble ideal, its heroic soldier sons will always lead the way... When I speak of the army, I am referring to the enlightened sons of the Turkish nation, who are the true owners of this country" (Parla, 1991, p. 169-170).

that presents the military intervention as in harmony with the will of the people.

According to Renan Acar, however, the discourse of “national will” produced in newspaper columns concerning the coup did not reflect the sentiments on the street:

The chaos created before May 27 and the enthusiasm generated afterward largely remained confined to newspaper front pages and did not directly translate into public sentiment. Contrary to press claims, the coup did not have widespread popular support. The events and demonstrations during the May 27 process were largely confined to Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir and to the student population. Even after the coup, outside these three provinces, not only the local population but also the military units involved in the operation lacked knowledge about the reasons behind this military action (Acar, 2010, p. 233).

However, in newspaper columns, the military is portrayed as the institutionalized and official embodiment of the nation. At the connotative level, the military is framed as a natural force that protects the national will, and, in a sense, as the very expression of that will itself. According to H. Bahattin Ülgen: “Yesterday, the entire nation, united with its army as one body and one heart, gave an example that it will never forget and will pass down through generations”. For Ülgen, the coup constitutes a national movement. When the coup is presented as a national movement, the symbolic reference to a “holiday” (bayram) is employed.⁵ Consequently, every action and intervention by the military is transformed into an event received with celebratory joy by the “nation,” thereby constructing a narrative in which military interventions are not only legitimate but also occasions of collective national pride.

Haldun Taner’s column in *Tercüman* captures this celebratory logic particularly vividly, portraying the shared joy between citizens and soldiers as the spontaneous expression of national unity:

That morning, the flags extending from every window resembled a long-held breath finally released from the lungs. The people threw their arms around every soldier they encountered, pressing tear-moistened lips to those dark cheeks -kissing, on that May 27 morning, the Ankara military cadets who had set out, heads in hand, to claim on behalf of the nation the right to live as human beings (Taner, May 29, 1960).

At the connotative level, Taner’s image of flags and embraces performs the mythological fusion of the army and the nation: the people do not merely accept the coup; they celebrate it as an act of collective self-liberation. The soldier is not an agent of power but the embodied expression of the nation’s own will. This image directly corroborates the “military-nation identity” myth discussed above and illustrates how affect—gratitude, joy, tears—functions as the vehicle through which ideological naturalization operates.

The military is represented not only as the guardian of the Turkish nation’s destiny (mukadderat) but also as a fundamental, existential force embodying its dignity (haysiyet). In his column titled “Today I Feel Like Writing,” Çetin Altan states: “Thanks to the Turkish Armed Forces, who gave us the chance to experience these days and who, with a single breath, swept away the dust that had settled on a nation’s dignity.” Accordingly, Nadir Nadi declares that “Since yesterday, the Turkish nation has reached a new turning point in its history.” At the connotative level, a dual discursive field is established—one that flows “from the Turkish nation to the military” and “from the military

5 In many opinion columns of the period, the word “holiday” (bayram) is used as a symbolic expression of the enthusiasm shared between the coup and the so-called “national movement”:

“The voice addressing Turkish youth roared from the depths of our being; we overcame those most unfavorable conditions and reached the joy of a national holiday.” (Hekimoğlu, *ibid.*).

“We have every reason -from earth to sky- to rejoice and celebrate.” (Hekimoğlu, *Vazifeye Devam*)

“To the May 19th Holiday, May 27th has now been added as a new day of celebration.” (H. Bahattin Ülgen, *ibid.*).

“I saw my nation crying with joy for its trust in the army.” (Kuvvet Başarı, ‘I Saw’).

“... Atatürk’s spirit, in all its grandeur and majesty, once again swept across the country like a flood; his noble and sacred image began to flutter in the skies of the homeland, in the midst of a holiday-like atmosphere.” (A. N. Kırmacı, ‘Today’).

“This noble movement, directed against an unjust form of governance born of the personal desire for domination by a small elite, was met with the joy of a holiday.” (İrfan Derman, ‘They Did Not Die in Vain’).

to the Turkish nation.” Within this framework, the military, by defending the “dignity of the Turkish nation,” is in fact seen as safeguarding its own dignity. Thus, the boundaries between the nation and the army are blurred, reinforcing a mutually reflective identity.

The foundations of the military-nation identification found in newspaper columns are connotatively rooted in the Turkish History Thesis developed during the 1930s. This ideological basis can be traced in many columns, particularly those by Tahsin Öztin. According to Öztin:

Forgetting history — not knowing the Turkish Nation — was a grave mistake. Before them lay countless examples. This was a nation unparalleled in history, capable of shaking off whatever burden it bore whenever it wished. The Turkish homeland was not an estate, nor was the Turkish Nation a servant. This nation knew how to bring down those who saw the land as an estate and themselves as servants—through the identity it revived in the person of its army.

In the Turkish History Thesis, the Turkish people’s longstanding tradition of fighting for independence, defending the homeland, and establishing powerful states throughout history holds a central place (İnan et al, 1930). At the connotative level, the term “gaflet” (neglect) in Tahsin Öztin’s writing signifies more than just a failure to know history; it implies a dangerous forgetting of the very foundations of the Turkish nation’s struggle for freedom, independence, and sovereignty. The expression “capable of shaking off whatever burden it bore on its shoulders whenever it wished” highlights the Turkish nation’s inherent ability to overcome hardships and to fight for independence. In this context, Öztin’s column symbolizes the Turkish nation’s historical strength, its resilience in the face of adversity, and its capacity for self-renewal. His writing reinforces the notion that the Turkish people possess an innate, enduring capacity to confront and overcome obstacles in the name of national sovereignty.

According to the Turkish History Thesis, the Turkish nation is constantly in a process of rebirth (İnan et al, 1930, p. 1-3). In this context, the term “silkme” (shaking off) signifies the Turkish nation’s capacity to renew itself after past difficulties, rising each time with renewed strength. The statement “through the identity it revived in the person of its army, it knew how to bring them down” symbolizes that the military, as the natural representative of the nation, serves as a bulwark against those who threaten the nation’s sovereignty. At the connotative level, the military occupies the position of a “natural representative”, which embodies the Turkish nation’s intrinsic strength and historical responsibility. According to Tanıl Bora, “Atatürkist/Kemalist writers, particularly during coup periods, placed the military in the position of ‘the essence of the nation’ and ‘the master and owner of the country’” (Bora, 2018, p. 172). At the connotative level, the military is the natural representative of the Turkish nation through a kind of ‘natural right’ inherited from Mustafa Kemal.

4.3. The Discursive Construction of the Democrat Party as Illegitimate

The rise to power of the Democratic Party (DP) in the 1950s marked significant changes in the political climate of Turkey. The DP gained widespread popular support and initially emphasized its commitment to democracy. However, as it consolidated its power, democratic values and principles began to be replaced by an authoritarian approach (Eroğul, 2019, p. 178-186; Demirel, 2021, p. 286-300). Over time, the DP regime transformed into a regime in which freedoms were restricted, the press was censored, and the opposition was silenced. Cem Eroğul explains the repressive measures of the DP after the 1954 elections by four key actions. First, by an amendment to the electoral law, an individual who had been rejected as a candidate by a political party could not run again during that electoral period. Second, civil servants were required to resign six months before the elections to become candidates. Third, after the 1954 elections, political parties were prohibited from using mixed lists. These first three changes were aimed at suppressing the opposition. The fourth measure was the closure of radio broadcasts belonging to opposition parties. After 1954, opposition journalists (such as Hüseyin Cahit Yalçın, Cemal Sağlam, and Nihat Erim) were sentenced to fines and imprisonment (Eroğul, 2019: 145-155). In this context, according to newspaper columns, the DP regime is identified as one in which personal interests were prioritized, freedoms ,

including press freedom, were restricted, and the opposition was silenced.⁶

The critique of the Democratic Party in newspaper columns is structured as follows:

- “The army gave the best lesson to ambitious politicians and those who chase personal interests.” (Müşerref Hekimoğlu)
- “The Turkish nation, whose rights were sought to be taken away, regained its freedom with such dignity and maturity that it is not something every nation can achieve, beyond hatred and passion.” (Ahmet Çitilci)
- “With this history, the youth will begin to see the true face of democracy, which had so far only been a word and a longing, and will attain it.” (H. Bahattin Ülgen)
- “Negligence and power blurred their vision. They became unable to see the truth.” (Tahsin Öztin)
- “In countries where freedom of thought, speech, and especially the press is either non-existent or severely restricted, democracy is like a pine sapling that is desired to be grown in a pot.” (Vecihi Ünal)
- “They violated the Constitution, curtailed freedoms, and established illegal commissions.” (Çetin Altan, May 28, 1960)
- “I saw Ankara residents crying for the young people who had fainted from blows with truncheons due to innocent demonstrations in the streets.” (Kuvvet Başarır)

Müşerref Hekimoğlu brings the critique of the Democratic Party (DP) into the columns through the signs of “personal interests,” Ahmet Çitilci through “freedom and human rights,” H. Bahattin Ülgen through “the true face of democracy,” Tahsin Öztin through “negligence,” Vecihi Ünal through “freedom of thought, speech, and the press,” Çetin Altan through “illegality,” and Kuvvet Başarır through “violence.” All of these are signs that render the DP illegitimate and legitimize the coup.⁷ Particularly, Nadir Nadi, in his column titled “Turning Point”, brings the DP’s authoritarian practices into the discourse through the concept of “the degradation of democracy”:

Citizens who love their country have closely witnessed how the multi-party democratic system, which we thought we had achieved ten years ago, has gradually degenerated. They attempted to warn the concerned parties to prevent this situation. After the events in the Grand National Assembly, the degeneration of our young democracy took on a horrifying shape, and the possibility of bloody strife pitting citizens against each other ominously appeared on the horizon.

Nadir Nadi’s concept of “degeneration” critiques the idea that, at the outset of democracy, the political system was based on the pure will of the nation, but over time, this structure was corrupted and transformed into an authoritarian form of government. In particular, terms such as “bloody strife” and “horror” in his writing imply increased societal conflict and potential violence. In this context, Nadi describes the coup as “a fortunate stroke that foretells a bright future for us, as the first move made by our nation’s beloved, heroic army was successfully accomplished without the shedding of citizens’ blood.” This perspective carries significant ideological weight regarding the coup’s legitimacy and the reshaping of the social order; it is grounded in the narrative that authoritarian interventions in reconstructing democracy and societal order are in harmony with the nation’s free will.

At a connotative level, the sign “degeneration” rests on the assumption that democracy has a lineage. This assumption assigns a lineage to democracy through a multi-party political system. However, the transition to a multi-party political system in Turkey was initiated by the 1946 elections. Nadir Nadi, on the other hand, marks the establishment of the “multi-party democratic governance system” in the 1950 elections, that is, the rise of the Democratic Party (DP) to power. At the connotative level, the “degeneration” sign here also includes the elimination of the Kemalist political elites who were part of the governing mechanism during the one-party period. Mete Kaan

⁶ However, the Democrat Party sought to legitimize the repressive regime it had established during its rule through the discourse of ‘national will’ (Türk, 2018, p. 31-39).

⁷ “The legitimacy and grandeur of this movement emerge monumentally, in inverse proportion to the illegitimacy and insignificance of those who were overthrown.” (Çetin Altan, “Today I Feel Like Writing”).

Kaynar also explains the primary cause of the 1960 coup as the removal of the CHP elites from the governing mechanism (Kaynar, 2010, p. 27-29). At the connotative level, the second context of degeneration is the deepening polarization and ideological divisions within society. For the Kemalist writers of the period, with the rise of the DP to power, the understanding of the state and society that had been shaped under the one-party rule undergoes a transformation (Azak, 2010, p. 76-81). Consequently, this transformation leads to the questioning of the old order in the political, cultural, and ideological foundations of the state. According to this, the DP, upon coming to power, criticizes the secular, Turkist, and modernization-based Kemalist ideology of the early years of the Republic and begins to build its own conservative, religion-based ideology (Eroğul, 2019, p. 120-121; Koca, 2016, p. 307-311). Therefore, according to the columns, the rise of the DP to power intensified conflicts between the old and new political forces and heightened ideological rivalry, creating tension within the social structure. This tension led to the ideological division of the nation and the state. At this point, “degeneration” refers not only to political collapse but also to the erosion of the social bonds built through the revolutions and to the loss of cultural and ideological unity.

Çetin Altan structures the relationship between degeneration and Mustafa Kemal as follows: “It had even become a crime to publish Atatürk’s Address to the Youth during the serialization of Nutuk.” “They did not want any mention of Atatürk” (28 May, 1960). Altan argues that Atatürk’s legacy should be embraced, while emphasizing that a new understanding of power has emerged that rejects this legacy. According to this account, the DP government is destroying the achievements of the revolutions and of the Republic. The critique of Çetin Altan above, along with Nadir Nadi’s concept of “degeneration” also refers to the transformation of social identity. Therefore, the process leading to the 27 May 1960 coup resulted in changes in societal values and collective memory, such as the revolutions of Mustafa Kemal. In this context, degeneration signifies the erosion of the foundations of a social structure.

4.4. Fixing the Meaning: The Coup as Democratic Necessity

The term “fixation” in the title refers to the process of making the meaning of the coup permanent by associating it with certain signs in the social and ideological context. It is not possible to fix the meaning at the level of linguistics. As Jacques Derrida emphasized, a single interpretation tied to the existence of a single entity is nothing more than a foundational myth of meaning. This arises from the infinite potential for meaning that the sign carries: the absence of a transcendental signifier infinitely expands the field and play of interpretation. In this context, attempting to fix meaning is based on the assumption that meaning is not fixed (Derrida, 1997, p. 242). Therefore, to establish hegemony, those who seize power attempt to fix meaning. This is because they can establish their hegemony by fixing their ideological discourses within certain networks of meaning (ideological apparatuses) (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001). The coup plotters attempt to establish hegemony by fixing the meaning of the coup within democratic discourse through columns.

In columns, the fixation of the coup’s meaning within democracy functions at three connotative levels. First, the portrayal of the coup as part of, or as a defender of, democracy indicates the initiation of a new “construction of meaning.” However, this construction of meaning begins with framing the coup as an event. In the early days of the coup, when its political and social consequences were uncertain, columns framed it as a “democracy holiday.” Here, considering the coup as an event is a key factor in determining its meaning within a democracy. This is because an event is external to its purpose and carries an element of unpredictability. According to Çetin Altan, the coup “opens new horizons for our nation in a free and human-rights-respecting way... The hour of true freedom has struck” (27 May, 1960). In this statement, the “hour” signifies both a moment and historical inevitability. However, while the coup is seen as an event, the democratization process is constructed as a future phenomenon. Ahmet Çitilci emphasizes that “freedom and human rights, with all their institutions, will remain permanently established with the legal and freedom principles to be created”, underlining that the coup is not a temporary event, but rather

the beginning of a permanent democratic transformation. Vecihi Ünal locates the beginning of this transformation in the coup communiqué and in the idealism it embodies: “As seen, the idealism that gives life to the communiqué is based on the essential principles of democratic governance and the rule of law” (28 May, 1960). In this context, columns attempt to reframe the coup not as a single event but as a process of democratization characterized by historical continuity.

Columns include a series of discursive interventions intended to transform democracy into a phenomenon. The authoritarianism of the Democratic Party, the legacy of the Kemalist modernization ideology, and the idea that military intervention plays a foundational role constitute the core components of this discourse.⁸ However, a contradiction arises. If democracy is accepted as a phenomenon, how can it be legitimized through military intervention? Columns address this contradiction by constructing a mythology that presents the coup as intrinsic to democracy, even as an assertion of its historical and political necessity. Çetin Altan’s statement, “The hour of true freedom has struck,” illustrates how this mythology is reinforced by the temporal signifier: Democracy does not emerge as a natural historical progression resulting from maturation, but rather suddenly, through military intervention. When evaluated within Barthes’ concept of ‘myth,’ this perspective clarifies how May 27 is interpreted as a historical rupture (Barthes, 1991). While the coup is presented as a spontaneous, natural event that established democracy, it is actually transformed into an ideologically constructed historical narrative. Therefore, although the coup is immediately associated with democratization as an event, democratization becomes a phenomenon that manifests through military interventions.

The second context in which the meaning of the coup is fixed within democracy emerges from the use, in columns, of the signs “nation” and “democracy” instead of “people”. The concept of “nation,” produced on the basis of the Turkish History Thesis, symbolizes not only a political unity but also a national identity and a sense of belonging. Signs such as “patriot” and “citizen,” which appear in columns (especially Nadir Nadi’s column), are associated with the nation’s deep love and attachment. Therefore, the coup is presented as a national awakening and as a means of protecting the state’s survival; in this framing, democracy is redefined as national solidarity and social unity. In this framework, the coup triggers a new process of constructing the meaning of democracy; this meaning emerges by equating the coup with democracy and presenting military intervention as a necessary step in safeguarding both democracy and national unity. Columns present the coup as a historical moment or turning point in which society’s democratic consciousness will coalesce, while disregarding the interruption of the ‘democratic process.’

The third context in which the coup is associated with democracy in the columns is to prevent any debate regarding the legitimacy of the coup. The concept of democracy is used by columnists, not in the sense of a political regime functioning through specific rules and institutions, but rather in the context of “the liberation of the nation” and “the construction of democratic values.” Therefore, the coup is framed as a starting point that enables the re-establishment of “the will of the nation.” One of the clearest examples of this is found in H. Bahattin Ülgen’s statement: “With this date, the youth will begin to see the true face of the democracy that has remained a mere word until now and longed for, and they will attain it.” In this instance, the coup is represented not only as a moment marking the end of authoritarianism, but also as the beginning of the construction of a genuine democratic order. Thus, the coup is positioned as “the true source of democracy.” However, this discourse contains an important contradiction in associating the coup with democracy. If the essence of a democratic order is based on elections and the will of the people, the overthrow of a government elected by the people through military intervention would interrupt the democratic process. Yet, in the columns, this contradiction is rendered invisible and even reversed. In this narrative, the coup is presented not as an interruption of the democratic process but as a movement that restores its “true spirit”.

8 In this context, Çetin Altan continues his column by stating: “The foundations of an order befitting the honor of Turkishness are being laid in a democratic country, based on Atatürk’s revolutions.”

4.5. Turkish Youth as a Semiotic Figure: The Guardian Generation Myth

In the opinion columns, “revolutions” or “reforms” are presented as a ‘sacred principle’ that must be defended, applied, and fought for. In the editorials, this principle allegedly evokes Mustafa Kemal’s “Address to the Youth” and the “Bursa Speech”. In his Bursa Speech, Mustafa Kemal addresses the youth as follows:

Turkish Youth is the custodian and guardian of the revolutions and the Republic. They have been more convinced of their necessity and correctness than anyone else. They have embraced the system of government and the revolutions. If they hear even the slightest tremor or the greatest action that may weaken them, they will not say, ‘This country has its police, gendarmerie, army, and judiciary.’ They will protect their creation using whatever they have — hands, stones, sticks, and weapons.⁹

In his column titled “I Saw”, Kuvvet Başarır narrates the coup in a way that evokes the Bursa Speech:

I observed university students visiting our office to receive news from their brothers in Istanbul. I saw law students protesting the events in Istanbul, fully aware of what might happen to them. I saw young people starting a demonstration with banners written in blood, with a flag torn in half, and resisting with sticks, guns, bottles, coal, and stones (Başarır, 28 May, 1960).

The semiotic synchronization between Mustafa Kemal’s Bursa Nutku (Bursa Speech) and Kuvvet Başarır’s column articulates the ideological role of Turkish youth and their commitment to the reforms through symbolic language. At the connotative level, Mustafa Kemal, Kuvvet Başarır, and other columnists refer to youth as symbolic of the army. In one of his speeches, Mustafa Kemal states, “When I speak of the officers of our esteemed army and the enlightened sons of the Turkish nation, I am also referring to the Turkish youth who are mentally, morally, and intellectually prepared to join in national heroism alongside them” (Parla, 1991, p. 170).

An ideological continuity and discursive alliance between the youth addressed by Mustafa Kemal and those portrayed by Başarır: Both assign the youth responsibility for defending, protecting, and upholding a historical and societal legacy. Connotatively, Başarır presents Turkish youth not only as a generation but also as a symbolic figure. In this way, youth, along with grand ideals such as revolution and reform, transforms into “living signs” that must be preserved.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how the May 27, 1960 military coup was discursively constructed as a legitimate democratic intervention in mainstream Turkish newspaper opinion columns. By applying Roland Barthes’ semiotic framework of denotation, connotation, and myth to a corpus of ten columns drawn from five newspapers (Hürriyet, Milliyet, Cumhuriyet, Akşam, and Tercüman), the analysis yields four principal findings that together illuminate the ideological architecture of coup legitimization.

First, the columns portray the coup as a movement of refoundation, establishing a semiotic continuity between the 1923 Constituent Assembly and the 1960 military intervention. By invoking symbols such as “Constituent Assembly”, “revolution”, and “Atatürk’s legacy”, the coup is positioned not as a rupture of the republican order but as its renewal — a second founding that restores the original ideals of the Republic. Second, the army-nation identity myth functions as the central legitimizing mechanism through which military intervention is naturalized. Drawing on the Turkish History Thesis and the Kemalist conception of the military as the guardian of the nation, the columns position the army as the organic and indispensable representative of the Turkish nation’s will—thereby rendering the coup an expression of popular sovereignty rather than its suspension. Third, the Democratic Party government is systematically coded as the agent of democratic degeneration through descriptors such as “corruption”, “negligence”, and “illegality.” This delegitimization of the incumbent power serves as a prerequisite for legitimizing

the coup: the greater the degeneration attributed to the DP, the more inevitable the military intervention appears. Fourth, the meaning of the coup is fixed within democratic discourse through three connotative mechanisms: the framing of the intervention as a historical event rather than a political act, the substitution of “people” with the ideologically loaded concept of “nation”, and the systematic suppression of any legitimacy debate through the equation of the coup with the “true spirit” of democracy.

Taken together, these four discursive operations reveal a coherent semiotic strategy through which military intervention is naturalized as democratic necessity. The inclusion of *Tercüman* in the sample is particularly significant in this regard: that even a newspaper with pro-DP sympathies reproduced the legitimizing discourse within days of the coup demonstrates that this discursive realignment was not simply a matter of partisan alignment, but rather reflected a broader structural pressure on media institutions to conform to the new political reality.

The findings of this study carry implications that extend beyond the 1960 coup. As the analysis demonstrates, the discursive template established in May 1960 — the fusion of military intervention with the signifiers of democracy, nation, and Atatürk’s legacy — provided a reproducible framework that was mobilized, with varying degrees of adaptation, in the legitimization of subsequent military interventions in Turkey, including the memorandum of March 12, 1971; the coup of September 12, 1980; and the February 28, 1997 process. The persistence of this template across decades suggests that what was at stake in 1960 was not merely the legitimization of a single coup, but rather the discursive institutionalization of military intervention as a structurally available political option within Turkish political culture.

This study has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. The analysis is confined to mainstream Istanbul-based newspapers, and the provincial press remains outside its scope. Furthermore, only opinion columns have been examined; news reports, editorials, photographs, and headlines — all of which constitute significant sites of meaning production — fall outside the corpus. Finally, the study focuses on the immediate aftermath of the coup (May 27–31, 1960), and thus does not address the longer-term discursive evolution of coup legitimization in the weeks and months that followed. Future research could address these limitations by conducting a comparative semiotic analysis of press discourse across the major military interventions of 1960, 1971, and 1980, thereby mapping the transformation and reproduction of the legitimization template over time.

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