

Uncovering Western Efforts for Cultural Hegemony over Turkey's July 15 Coup Attempt

Burak Başkan

Phd Candidate in Politics, The University of Sheffield

Abstract

The discourse on the Islamic Reformation has become a hot topic within the agenda of the Western media and intellectual circles in recent years. The concept, however, has been instrumentalised in order to construct an alternative interpretation of Islam which serves Western national interests in Muslim majority lands and seeks to create a 'radical Islamist – reformist Muslim' dichotomy. The construction of such an alternative interpretation aims at demonising legitimate governments and individuals with the label of 'radical Islamist' and gaining the consent of Muslim masses in favour of so-called reformist Muslims. The main purpose of this paper is to uncover Western efforts for cultural hegemony by directing attention on how Western media and political circles took a specific stance towards the July 15 coup attempt in Turkey carried out by the Fethullah Gulen Terrorist Organisation (FETO). For this goal, examples selected from the Western media are analysed by means of the discourse analysis method.

Key Words: Islamic Reformation, Cultural Hegemony, FETO, Coup Attempt

Türkiye'nin 15 Temmuz'unda Batı'nın Kültürel Hegemonya Girişimini Açığa Çıkarmak

Öz

İslam'da reform, Batı medyasının ve Batılı entelektüel çevrelerin son yıllarda en çok üzerinde durduğu konuların başında gelmektedir. İslam'da reform söyleminin ne şekilde kullanıldığına bakıldığında ise, kavramın Müslümanların çoğunluğu oluşturduğu ülkelerde sözde bir 'radikal İslamcı – reformist Müslüman' ikiliği yaratmak ve bu ikilik üzerinden Batı çıkarlarıyla hiçbir durumda ters düşmeyecek alternatif bir İslam yorumu inşa etmek için araçsallaştırıldığı görülecektir. Bu çeşit bir alternatif İslam yorumu ile bir taraftan Müslüman ülkelerin meşru hükümetleri ve seçilmiş siyasileri 'radikal İslamcı' etiketiyle şeytanlaştırılmakta, diğer taraftan ise Müslüman kitleler ile sözde 'reformist Müslümanlar' arasında bir rıza ilişkisi kurulmaya çalışılmaktadır. Bu çalışmanın amacı, Fethullahçı Terör Örgütü (FETÖ) tarafından gerçekleştirilen 15 Temmuz 2016 tarihli darbe girişiminin Batı medyası ve siyasi çevrelerinde ne şekilde karşılık bulduğu üzerinden Batı'nın kültürel hegemonya girişimini mercek altına almaktır. Bu amaçla, Batı medyasında yer alan darbe girişimi ile alakalı söylemlerden örnekler söylem analizi metodu ile incelenecektir.

How the Western media and political circles approach cases in Muslim majority countries has always been a debated and problematic issue. When cases such as Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories and Egypt's *coup d'état* in 2013 are considered, it can be seen that only national interests, rather than democracy and human rights, are the main determinants in their relations with Muslim majority countries. Beyond being biased, the Western approach can be accepted as deliberate and conscious.

We have been witnessing the same problematic approach to the case of Turkey over the merciless coup attempt carried out by the Fethullah Gulen Terrorist Organisation (FETO) on 15 July 2016. Western political circles and media took a scandalous stance just as they had done during the coup in Egypt. Many well-known figures in the West entered into competition with each other to explicitly support and justify this brutal attempt by giving ideological aid to coup plotters.

There was another common attitude of the West towards the cases of Egypt and Turkey: using the '*reformist Muslims – radical Islamists*' dichotomy and presenting the two coup plotters, tyrant Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and terrorist leader Fethullah Gulen, as the '*reformist faces of Islam*'. Hence, Western discourse about '*Islamic reformation*' is more than just an intellectual discussion.

In this paper, we endeavour to uncover the '*reformist Muslims – radical Islamists*' dichotomy embedded within the Western discourse on Turkey's July 15 by placing it alongside the wider Western discourse about the '*Islamic reformation*'. On this point, we make use of the theory of '*cultural hegemony*', which is a significant tool for comprehending the hegemonic face of discourses. We benefit from the discourse analysis (DA) method which is a significant tool for social scientists in comprehending how language is used to produce and constitute the social reality within written texts.¹

What is Cultural Hegemony?

In every aspect of daily life, we can witness the relations of domination. An individual can dominate other individuals, a class can dominate other classes, and a state can dominate the states in the rest of the world. From this inescapable fact, a significant question needs to be emphasised: how is domination maintained in the long term?

As a response to this question, the Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci came up with the idea that gaining the consent of the dominated is

¹ Bryman, A., *Social Research Methods*, 4th Edition, Oxford University Press, New York 2012, p.528-540.

a vital requisite in addition to direct coercion². To achieve this, the dominant class needs to produce and distribute its own values to the subordinate classes by means of various civil society institutions such as schools, the media and religious institutions. As a result, the values of the dominant class are perceived as natural and universal, and are interiorised by the subordinate classes; and gaining their consent then becomes much easier.³ This class-based explanation also applies to the domination relations between states. The core idea in the theory of cultural hegemony is shaping the values, beliefs and perceptions of the dominated and by this means ensuring their consent for rule by the dominant.

Considering the need to gain the consent of the dominated, how can the Muslim world be dominated by the West in the long term? The answer is clear: by constructing an alternative interpretation of Islam that would guarantee the consent of Muslims for Western cultural domination. The construction of an alternative interpretation of Islam is referred to as the 'Islamic reformation'.

The Discourse of Islamic Reformation

Reforming Islam and finding a 'Muslim Martin Luther' are often-heard ideas which have been deliberately kept on the agenda of the Western media and intellectual circles in recent years. In 2002, the American journalist and author Thomas L. Friedman fired the signal flare with his article headed 'An Islamic Reformation' in the *New York Times* in which he insisted on the need for a Muslim Martin Luther to bring about the reformation of Islam.⁴

Ironically, well-known Islamophobic atheists such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and Ayaan Hirsi Ali pay more attention to the issue of reforming Islam than Muslims do. For instance, the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science, an atheist organisation, carries numerous articles about the issue of Islamic Reformation on its website. In a similar vein, the well-known atheist author Ayaan Hirsi Ali published her book 'Heretic: Why Islam Needs a Reformation Now' in 2015 and it was excitedly embraced by the Western media and Islamophobic circles. In the book, she explicitly advised Muslims to give up all the fundamental principles of Islam which is tantamount to telling Muslims to apostatise from Islam.⁵

2 Gramsci, A., *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, in Q. Hoare & G. N. Smith (eds.) and (trans.), Lawrence and Wishart, London 1971, p. 80.

3 Giroux, H. A., *Ideology, Culture & the Process of Schooling*, The Falmer Press, London 1981, p. 94.

4 Friedman, T. L. (2002) 'An Islamic Reformation', *The New York Times*, 4 December 2002. Available at: <<http://www.nytimes.com/2002/12/04/opinion/an-islamic-reformation.html>> [Accessed: 01.07.2017].

5 Hirsi Ali, A., *Heretic: Why Islam Needs a Reformation Now*, Harper Collins, New York 2015.

When the literature regarding the issue of Islamic reformation is reviewed, it can be seen that the discourse on Islamic reformation refers to a kind of ‘Protestant Islam model’ which abandons Islam’s arguments on social and economic fields, reduces Muslimness to a mere cultural element, accepts the cultural supremacy of the West, and silences any criticisms from the Islamic world against the regional interests of the West in Muslim lands. We have witnessed how this scenario became successful in Egypt following the 2013 *coup d’état* there. The July 15 coup attempt was a failed opportunity by the West to implement the same scenario for Turkey. Needless to say, willing Muslim stooges were required for the propagation of this concept to the Muslim world. In publications about the topic of the Islamic Reformation, two names came to the forefront: tyrant Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and terrorist leader Fethullah Gulen.

In an article headed ‘*The Muslim Martin Luther*’⁶ in *Foreign Affairs*, Victor Gaetan presented the terrorist organisation leader Gulen as the unique actor who can be the Martin Luther of the Islamic world and reform Islam from within. In the article, which was full of disinformation, he described Gulen and his followers as “*a genuinely modern school of Islam that reconciles the religion with liberal democracy, scientific rationalism, ecumenism, and free enterprise*”. Such an interpretation was an attempt to create a ‘Western/non-Western’ dichotomy; to associate FETO with Western values; and by this means, to present the terrorist organisation as the representative of so-called acceptable Western version of Islam.

In a similar vein, James Zumwalt proposed the tyrant Sisi as a candidate for being the new Muslim Martin Luther in the Islamic world in an article under the heading ‘*Outside View: Islamic Martin Luther Issues His Proclamation*’⁷. Not surprisingly, Sisi was welcomed by the Spanish King Felipe VI as “*the top hero in the Muslim world who struggles with the radical Islamists*” on his visit to Spain after the Egyptian coup.⁸ Sisi’s speech at Al Azhar University in January 2015 revealed how he acknowledged the mission attributed to him by the Western political heads. During that speech, Sisi, the man responsible for the massacre of thousands of Egyptians during the resistance to the Egyptian

6 Gaetan, V., ‘The Muslim Martin Luther’, *Foreign Affairs*, 20 February 2014. Available at: <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2014-02-20/muslim-martin-luther>> [Accessed: 09.12.2016].

7 Zumwalt, J., ‘Outside View: Islamic ‘Martin ‘Luther’ issues his proclamation’, *United Press International*, 28 January 2014. Available at: <<http://www.upi.com/Outside-View-Islamic-Martin-Luther-issues-his-proclamation/38161390885380/>> [Accessed: 10.12.2016].

8 Al Jazeera, *Kral Sisi’yi Kahraman İlan Etti [King Declared Sisi as a Hero]*, 1 May 2015. Available at: <<http://www.aljazeera.com.tr/haber/kral-sisiyi-kahraman-ilan-etti>> [Accessed: 10.12.2016].

coup, ironically called for religious scholars to lead an Islamic reformation against violence and extremism in the Islamic world.⁹

Hegemonic Discourse in the Attitude towards July 15

The emergence of a so-called 'Muslim Martin Luther' also necessitated the existence of an 'other', a villain with completely negative characteristics. While locating the so-called 'reformists' on one side of the spectrum, the West has located the so-called 'radical Islamists' on the other. It can be seen at first glance that the Western discourse regarding the July 15 coup attempt in Turkey has been completely shaped by the 'reformist Muslims - radical Islamists' dichotomy.

On the night of the coup attempt, the American author Ralph Peters stated on *Fox News* that "*If the coup succeeds, Islamists lose and we win*".¹⁰ Based on the 'we /Islamists' dichotomy, he associated the coup plotters with Western values and labelled the victims of the coup attempt as Islamists. The main discourse in his statement was that a coup regime could represent Western values better than the rule of Islamists.

Following the coup attempt, political analyst Graham Fuller posted an article entitled '*The Gulen Movement Is Not a Cult — It's One of the Most Encouraging Faces of Islam Today*'¹¹ on the *Huffington Post* website. In that article, he used the 'moderate Gulen - authoritarian Erdogan' dichotomy. The word 'cult' has a negative connotation which underlines the deviance of a religious group and is used as the antonym of 'moderate' and 'mainstream'. Therefore, by rejecting the fact of FETO being a cult, he was endeavouring to show the terrorist organisation as a moderate and mainstream religious group. Moreover, he whitewashed Gulen with the adjectives "*moderate, tolerant, non-violent, open to dialogue*"¹² and described Gulen's position as "*mainstream modernizing Islam*".¹³ Accepting Gulen's stance as mainstream automatically makes the stance of Erdogan marginal and unacceptable. The intention of Fuller with such a discourse can be seen as marginalising Erdogan's interpretation of Islam and by this means justifying any undemocratic intervention against Turkey's elected

9 Ford, D., 'Egypt's President calls for a religious revolution', *CNN*, 6 January 2015. Available at: <<http://edition.cnn.com/2015/01/06/africa/egypt-president-speech/index.html>> [Accessed: 10.12.2016].

10 Fox News, Lt. Col. Peters on #Turkey: "*If the coup succeeds, Islamists lose and we win.*" #OreillyFactor [Twitter], 16 July 2016. Available at: <<https://twitter.com/FoxNews/status/754112160423215104>> [Accessed: 10.07.2017].

11 Fuller, G. (2016) '*The Gulen Movement Is Not a Cult — It's One of the Most Encouraging Faces of Islam Today*', *Huffington Post*, 2016. Available at: <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/graham-e-fuller/gulen-movement-not-cult_b_11116858.html> [Accessed: 12.12.2016].

12 *Ibid.*

13 *Ibid.*

president and legitimate government on the pretext of stopping extremist Islamism. Moreover, Fuller scandalously introduced Gulen's terrorist organisation as the guardians of democracy against Erdogan's so-called abuses of authority. In other words, he presented the perpetrator as victim and the victim as perpetrator.

In a similar vein, the BBC published an article on July 21 with the heading '*Turkey coup: What is Gulen movement and what does it want?*'¹⁴ in which the BBC carried out Gulen's public relations campaign for him by presenting a terrorist leader as an imam who "*promotes a tolerant Islam which emphasises altruism, modesty, hard work and education*".¹⁵ Such a presentation can be seen as an effort to associate Gulen with Western values and to influence Western readers' stance in favour of the so-called Western side. Furthermore, the description of the 'Fethullah Gulen Movement' was aimed at depicting FETO as a legal movement, since the word 'movement' had a positive connotation which falsely reflected the terrorist organisation as acting within the boundaries of legality and legitimacy.

Michael Rubin, a well-known supporter of FETO, accused Erdogan of causing the coup in his column on *Foreign Policy* headed '*Erdogan has nobody to blame for the coup but himself*'.¹⁶ Similarly, in an article with the heading '*Turkey was already undergoing a slow-motion coup – by Erdogan, not the army*'¹⁷ published in *The Guardian*, Andrew Finkel turned a blind eye to the brutality of the coup plotters and falsified the reality by claiming that the situation before the coup attempt was worse than a possible coup regime. In order to justify the bloody coup, both authors attempted to highlight the discourse that the overthrow of the President and the government was inevitable.

Zack Beauchamp, from *Vox Media*, also located President Erdogan in a radical Islamist position by stating that "*Erdogan is clearly a threat to Turkish democracy and secularism*".¹⁸ Ironically, the author directly supported the *coup d'état* which unarguably presented a real threat to the will people and to democratic values. Rather than being astonished by the coup attempt, Beauchamp preferred to be astonished by the quietness of the military by

14 BBC, *Turkey coup: What is Gulen movement and what does it want?*, 15 July 2016. Available at: <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-36855846>> [Accessed: 09.12.2016].

15 *Ibid.*

16 Rubin, M., 'Erdogan has nobody to blame for the coup but himself', *Foreign Policy*, 15 July 2016. Available at: <<http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/07/15/erdogan-has-nobody-to-blame-for-the-coup-but-himself/>> [Accessed: 15.01.2017].

17 Finkel, A., 'Turkey was already undergoing a slow-motion coup – by Erdoğan, not the army', *The Guardian*, 16 July 2016. Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jul/16/turkey-coup-army-erdogan>> [Accessed: 04.12.2016].

18 Beauchamp, Z., 'Turkey's coup, explained in under 500 words', *Vox*, 15 July 2016. Available at: <<https://www.vox.com/2016/7/15/12204172/turkey-coup-erdogan-military>> [Accessed: 04.12.2016].

stating that “*The military had been shockingly quiet about these developments in recent years*”.¹⁹

Beauchamp ended his column in a scandalous manner with the following sentences: “*If that happens (if the coup fails), the coup leaders may have doubly failed. They will have failed to seize control of Turkey’s government and failed to defend Kemalism from its greatest enemy in a generation*”.²⁰ It is clear that the prominent feeling of the author in those sentences was the desire for the success of the coup plotters. The statement of “*greatest enemy*” in the last sentence was intended to provoke a secular/devout divide in the country, creating a threat perception for the secular segments of the society and ensuring seculars’ support for the coup plotters on the pretext of defending Kemalism.

Another problematic point in Beauchamp’s column regarding its coverage of events during the coup attempt was its conscious and deliberate selectivity which was in conformity with the ‘radical rulers – secular military’ dichotomy. The title of the article was ‘*Turkey’s coup, explained in under 500 words*’.²¹ Such a title gave the message that the writer had summarised every single point that readers needed to learn about the coup attempt in Turkey. However, Beauchamp constructed an alternative reality to the actual one by totally ignoring the Turkish people’s legendary resistance against putschists and by seeking to whitewash the brutality of putschists who had killed more than 200 people without mercy, bombed the Turkish Grand National Assembly and invaded public buildings.

The American author Ben Shapiro defined the supposed overthrow of Erdogan as “*a boon to the world and the population*”. Michael Rubin repeated the same disgraceful view in an article with the heading ‘*The coup in Turkey could mean hope*’²² in the *New York Post*. According to such a discourse, Erdogan and the AK Party represented the bad, negative, and undesired side; whereas Gulen was representing the good, positive and the desired side. Both authors endeavoured to legitimise an attempted bloody regime shift by exaggerating the negative elements in the situation before the coup attempt and by promoting a coup regime which would contravene fundamental rights and freedoms.

Reuters News Agency reported the 8 August Yenikapı Democracy and Martyrs’ Rally as “*a show of strength by Erdogan, who has been angered by Euro-*

19 *Ibid.*

20 *Ibid.*

21 *Ibid.*

22 Rubin, M., ‘Why the Coup in Turkey Could Mean Hope’, *New York Post*, 15 July 2016. Available at: <<http://nypost.com/2016/07/15/why-the-coup-in-turkey-could-mean-hope/>> [Accessed: 05.12.2016].

pean criticism of his combative response to the coup²³". Such an interpretation completely turned a blind eye to the unity and solidarity shown by the three major political parties (the AK Party, CHP and MHP) during the rally, since accepting such unity would have caused the 'reformist Muslims – radical Islamists' dichotomy to collapse.

Consequently, when the dominant discourse within the Western attitude towards July 15 is carefully considered, a '*reformist Muslim – radical Islamist*' dichotomy can easily be detected. On the one hand, the legitimate and elected President and the legal government of Turkey were demonised with accusations of radicalism and presented as if they share the same ideological stance and methods with inhumane terrorist organisations such as ISIS and Boko Haram. On the other hand, the perpetrators of the coup attempt were presented as the peaceful, progressive and reformist face of the Islamic world. This formulation of discourse reveals which political goals the concept of the Islamic reformation serves.

Conclusion

The concept of the Islamic reformation is more than just an object of intellectual discussion. It is a tool for constructing an alternative interpretation of Islam which does not disturb the Western political interests on Muslim lands, for marketing the stooges of such an alternative interpretation under the name of the peaceful and progressive face of Islam, and for demonising any legal and legitimate actors who might threaten the Western cultural hegemony. It is an instrument for the West to gain the consent of the Muslim world, and by this means to guarantee Western cultural hegemony, with the help of so-called Muslim Martin Luthers.

Egypt was devastated as a consequence of the brutal *coup d'état* led by the cruel Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who was also recognised as the candidate put forward by the West as the Muslim Martin Luther. Thousands of Egyptians were killed in the squares, all the politicians in opposition have been imprisoned, and civil society has been silenced. The West did not hesitate to give material and ideological support to the tyrannical coup regime of el-Sisi.

On the night of July 15, Turkey was on the verge of long-term devastation by another so-called Muslim Martin Luther, Fethullah Gulen. Hundreds were unmercifully killed, the hearts of Turkish cities were bombed. The discourse

23 Pamuk, H. and Tattersall, N., 'Turkey's Erdogan stages mass rally in show of strength after coup attempt', *Reuters*, 7 August 2016. Available at: <<http://uk.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-idUKKCN1010CZ>> [Accessed: 05.12.2016].

of the West on the July 15 coup attempt revealed that if the coup attempt had been successful, the brutality of the putschists would have been forgotten and the coup regime would have been embraced by the West under the pretext of supporting the reformist face of Islam.

Reference List

- Al Jazeera, *Kral Sisi'yi Kahraman İlan Etti [King Declared Sisi as a Hero]*, 1 May 2015. Available at: <<http://www.aljazeera.com.tr/haber/kral-sisiyi-kahraman-ilan-etti>> [Accessed: 10.12.2016].
- BBC, *Turkey coup: What is Gulen movement and what does it want?*, 15 July 2016. Available at: <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-36855846>> [Accessed: 01.07.2017].
- Beauchamp, Z., 'Turkey's coup, explained in under 500 words', *Vox*, 15 July 2016. Available at: <<https://www.vox.com/2016/7/15/12204172/turkey-coup-erdogan-military>> [Accessed: 04.12.2016].
- Bryman, A., *Social Research Methods*, 4th Edition, Oxford University Press, New York 2012, p.528-540.
- Finkel, A., 'Turkey was already undergoing a slow-motion coup – by Erdoğan, not the army', *The Guardian*, 16 July 2016. Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jul/16/turkey-coup-army-erdogan>> [Accessed: 04.12.2016].
- Ford, D., 'Egypt's President calls for a religious revolution', *CNN*, 6 January 2015. Available at: <<http://edition.cnn.com/2015/01/06/africa/egypt-president-speech/index.html>> [Accessed: 10.12.2016].
- Fox News, Lt. Col. Peters on #Turkey: "If the coup succeeds, Islamists lose and we win." #OreillyFactor [Twitter], 16 July 2016. Available at: <<https://twitter.com/FoxNews/status/754112160423215104>> [Accessed: 10.07.2017].
- Friedman, T. L. (2002) 'An Islamic Reformation', *The New York Times*, 4 December 2002. Available at: <<http://www.nytimes.com/2002/12/04/opinion/an-islamic-reformation.html>> [Accessed: 01.07.2017].
- Fuller, G. (2016) 'The Gulen Movement Is Not a Cult — It's One of the Most Encouraging Faces of Islam Today', *Huffington Post*, 2016. Available at: <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/graham-e-fuller/gulen-movement-not-cult_b_11116858.html> [Accessed: 12.12.2016].
- Gaetan, V., 'The Muslim Martin Luther', *Foreign Affairs*, 20 February 2014. Available at: <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2014-02-20/muslim-martin-luther>> [Accessed: 09.12.2016].
- Gramsci, A., *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, in Q. Hoare & G. N. Smith (eds.) and (trans.), Lawrence and Wishart, London 1971, p. 80.
- Giroux, H. A., *Ideology, Culture @ the Process of Schooling*, The Falmer Press, London 1981, p. 94.
- Hirsi Ali, A., *Heretic: Why Islam Needs a Reformation Now*, Harper Collins, New York 2015.
- Pamuk, H. and Tattersall, N., 'Turkey's Erdogan stages mass rally in show of strength after coup attempt', *Reuters*, 7 August 2016. Available at: <<http://uk.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-idUKKCN10I0CZ>> [Accessed: 05.12.2016].
- Rubin, M., 'Why the Coup in Turkey Could Mean Hope', *New York Post*, 15 July 2016. Available

at: <<http://nypost.com/2016/07/15/why-the-coup-in-turkey-could-mean-hope/>> [Accessed: 05.12.2016].

Rubin, M., 'Erdogan has nobody to blame for the coup but himself', *Foreign Policy*, 15 July 2016. Available at: <<http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/07/15/erdogan-has-nobody-to-blame-for-the-coup-but-himself/>> [Accessed: 15.01.2017].

Zumwalt, J., 'Outside View: Islamic 'Martin 'Luther' issues his proclamation', *United Press International*, 28 January 2014. Available at: <<http://www.upi.com/Outside-View-Islamic-Martin-Luther-issues-his-proclamation/38161390885380/>> [Accessed: 10.12.2016].