

Turkish elections take place amid anti-Kurdish repression

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On Sunday April 18, elections will take place for the Turkish parliament. On the same day, mayoral elections will be held throughout the country. An almost permanent crisis of the political system in Turkey meant that it was questionable whether the poll would go ahead at all--and it is unlikely that the elections will provide a solution.

The last time Turkey's voters cast their ballots was in December 1995. Some 70 years since the formation of the secular republic and the abolition of the Caliphate, it was the Islamist Welfare Party (RP) under Necmettin Erbakan that emerged as the strongest party in parliament. After a short-lived coalition of the "lay" centre-right parties, Erbakan held the prime ministership for a year. Following massive threats from the army, a "cold coup" in mid-1997 forced him to resign in favour of Mesut Yilmaz of the conservative Motherland Party (ANAP). However, Yilmaz did not fare much better. In November last year, he was toppled as a result of his dubious involvement with the business world and Mafia-like right wing groups. Leading Mafia gangsters began to reveal the close connections between these gangs and the state.

Only after nearly three months of tough battling was the social democrat Bulent Ecevit able to form a minority government in January 1999. The military, concerned at the possibility of an even greater Islamist victory, have indicated that they believe the April 18 elections should be postponed, a belief they share with President Suleiman Demirel. To the same end, a series of deputies from different parties organised a parliamentary revolt. The key figures were thought to be right wing deputies with close contacts with the military and business. They utilised the fears of other deputies that they would not be given a "safe" place on the ballot paper, and thus might lose their positions and privileges.

By mid-March, as the popularity of Ecevit increased following the abduction of Abdullah Ocalan, leader of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), and mounting war threats made against Greece, the Army chiefs made dark warnings about "chaos" if the elections were postponed. The parliamentary "revolt" collapsed.

This prelude to the elections reveals how unstable political relations are in Turkey, reflecting the deep underlying divisions in Turkish society. Three years ago, Turkey entered a customs

union with the European Union that has rapidly proved to be a loss-maker. The shock wave of the financial crisis in Asia, Russia and Brazil was an additional blow. This was worsened by a series of corruption scandals. These not only hindered the reflation of the economy, but also made the gulf more visible between a clique of politicians, businessmen and gangsters and the mass of ordinary working people who increasingly suffer unemployment and poverty.

The growing alienation of the population from the political and economic establishment has enabled the ultra-right wing *cety* (Mafia gangs) and the military to dominate official politics. The established parties are little more than vehicles for corrupt and unprincipled careerists. While the words of Kemal Attaturk, founder of modern Turkey, "He is lucky, who is a Turk" that can be found chiselled in stone throughout the land, they must sound mockingly in the ears of most ordinary people today. Turkish nationalism takes on ever more hysterical forms. This will change little after the elections.

Ecevit, who entered office in January and is favoured by the press as a future president, has promised to fulfil all of the demands of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and to collaborate even more closely with lending agency. This means a further series of privatisations and social cuts, especially the "reform" of the loss-making state pension scheme.

All this makes it clear why, even after the abduction of the PKK leader Ocalan, the furious campaign against "separatist terrorism" has not died down but grown. While individual liberal voices inside Turkey itself and various European governments cautiously proposed that the Turkish state should now display some magnanimity following its "victory", and at least make some minimal concessions to the Kurds, the government has done the opposite.

Ocalan, for 15 years has been presented in Turkey as the embodiment of everything evil, was paraded in handcuffs before the Turkish flag like a trophy in order to humiliate and provoke the Kurds. Thousands of people, mostly supporters of the pro-Kurd "Democratic Peoples Party" (HADEP) and the human rights organisation IHD were arrested and a pogrom atmosphere encouraged.

HADEP currently faces prohibition proceedings and the majority of its leadership is already in jail. On April 13 masses

of police and soldiers were mobilised in Diyarbakir, the largest city in the Kurdish-populated southeastern region, to disperse a HADEP election rally. Some 4,000 people were arrested and detained at a sports arena in the city's center, including five HADEP candidates for parliament.

The smaller "Democratic Mass Party" (DKP) that is also pro-Kurd, but is more conservative, has also been banned. This has all contributed to radicalising Kurdish nationalism. Hatip Dicle, a former leader and parliamentary deputy of the "Democratic Party" (DEP), declared from prison that he was now a "PKK militant". Inside the country's jails, many political prisoners have started "death fasts" (hunger strikes). The PKK and several Maoist organisations have carried out attacks against the military, some by suicide squads. Organisations bearing names such as "Apo's [Ocalan's] falcons of revenge" and "The Forces of Kurdish Nationalist Revenge" have conducted attacks on civilians.

A firebombing of a department store killed 13 people, mainly shop workers. A declaration states that "for every burned out Kurdish village, a Turkish district will be set ablaze". This attack was followed by a massive wave of repression. The PKK has distanced itself from the attack, although the organisation stated on February 18 that, from now on, "every act of violence was legitimate and justified". This expressly applied to "all organisations, institutions or persons who are hostile to our people", regardless whether they are "civilian or military". However, Osman Ocalan, "Apo's" brother, declared on March 13 that "civilians would not be attacked".

The strategy of the PKK throughout the 1990s, a combination of military pressure and offers of negotiations aimed at moving a "democratic wing" inside the Turkish establishment to make concessions, has clearly failed. The increasingly brutal Turkish chauvinism resulting from the intensification of social antagonisms is driving many poor Kurdish youth deeper into nationalist hatred, desperation and bitterness. This development could accelerate within a few months or even weeks, as the trial of Ocalan for "high treason" opens on April 30 in a military court. In the words of Prime Minister Ecevit, it will not take long for this trial to be held "under the rule of law".

If "Apo" is found guilty, which is highly probable, he is expected to face the death penalty. The execution of such a sentence has to be confirmed by parliament. However, under the present lynch-mob atmosphere, which deputies would dare to plead for mercy to be shown to a leader held to be "responsible for the deaths of children and 30,000 others"?

A turn to acts of terrorism by Kurdish youth, in reaction to such an execution, is predictable. The spectre of a "Kurdish Hamas", whether this arises out of the PKK or a split-off, is very real. This would itself also provide grist for the mill of the most right-wing elements in the Turkish state.

Along with hysterical Turkish chauvinism, the cult-like state worship of Kemal Attaturk and constant invocation of Kemalism are accompanied by a furious campaign against

Islamism. Prohibition proceedings are also running against the Islamist Virtue Party (the successor to Erbakan's banned RP), and various organisations under its influence. Some of its prominent members face the courts; the Islamist mayor of Istanbul, Erdogan, has already started a ten-month sentence.

The Chief Prosecutor for the State Security Court has demanded the death sentence for four former RP deputies. He has announced he will be seeking the same penalty for Erbakan, his party associate and former Minister of Justice Sevket Kazan as well as other present deputies from the Virtue Party. The chairman of the banned "Association of Muslim Businessmen" (MUSAID) has also been charged.

The grounds for the present state clampdown on the Islamists lies in the 1980 military coup, which was carried out in the name of Kemalism and of "saving the nation". This strangled all political life in Turkey and, while officially upholding secularism, systematically promoted Islam. This course was successful due, above all, to the bankruptcy of the Turkish left: the Stalinists, social democrats and the trade unions. For this reason, political discontent today is expressed in very confused and distorted forms, such as support for reactionary Islamic tendencies. The *Turkey Update* website notes that, "The parties appear to have abandoned all ideologies and, with the exception of the Virtue Party which remains a vocal opposition force, have almost merged into one indistinct political entity, overshadowed by the army." (April 7, 1999)

Although it is probable that Ecevit will emerge as the victor following the elections, even if nothing else is at all certain, this will in no way resolve the social and political crisis gripping Turkey. More likely, social divisions will increase, the conflict with the Kurds will intensify, and the strength of the Islamic tendencies will grow. The state will react, as usual, with more repression. What is urgent is the construction of a new party that will unite working people and the oppressed, both Turks and Kurds, through a socialist programme.

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