

Political aftershocks in Turkey

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There is great anger among broad layers of the Turkish population over the actions (and inactions) of the state following the most devastating earthquake in the country's history. The government, president and army leadership have reacted to the widespread discontent with a mixture of scornful arrogance and nervousness. Suddenly, the deep gulf that separates the political establishment from the vast majority of the people has become visible.

The crisis of the existing social order is so great that a Turkish commentator compared it with the last days of the Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union. However, there are also forces who are dissatisfied with the status quo for opposite reasons from those motivating the mass of the population. They are seeking to direct the general outrage into very reactionary channels.

It is remarkable that right-wing papers, such as the conservative-nationalistic *Hürriyet* and *Sabah*, have put themselves at the head of a media campaign against the incompetence and corruption of the state. Likewise the international media has repeatedly criticised the incompetent and corrupt national authorities, as well as the unscrupulous building contractors in Turkey.

As a rule, it is only by reading between the lines that one can detect the malicious political tendencies—hiding their aims behind displays of shock and indignation—that lie behind the verbose and tearful reports. One should not forget that only recently the same media appealed to similar emotions to justify the devastation of another country—Yugoslavia—by NATO bombs and rockets. Political caution is in order.

Particularly in the Turkish press, two responses have predominated. First, commentators have counterposed the failings and ineffectiveness of the state to the “private initiative of the population”. Second, they have emphasised the “generous” and “rapid” assistance from the European Union countries, the United States and Japan, amongst others.

The daily *Milliyet* cited this as proof that the interests of Turkey lay “in the West”, with which Turkey should establish firm links. The paper quoted with approval the prominent Spanish newspaper *El País*, which said the EU

should use the crisis in Turkey to draw the country closer to it.

The Turkish government and media—which have long sought full membership in the EU—lavishly praised the “helpfulness” of the Western governments. But in the cold light of day, it becomes clear that the help they actually provided was minimal. One to two million German marks (US\$534,000 to US\$1.07 million) was the most that these countries initially promised; later they offered somewhat more.

A few years earlier Germany had supplied tanks and other military equipment worth hundreds of millions of dollars to the Turkish army, free of charge, to assist in the suppression of the masses in the majority Kurdish regions. Now it boasted of the “enormous” sum of 5 million German marks (US\$2.67 million) in promised aid.

The West is not interested in providing serious assistance for Turkey. What really concerns the international banks and corporations, as well as an influential part of Turkish capital, was shown in a recent editorial in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*: “Unmoved, this state has up to now pretended to be in control despite earthquakes and their consequences. It governs the furthest corners of the country centrally from Ankara. It does not feel able to trust its citizens, even when the situation requires rapid action. The well-known industrialist Rahmi Koc blew his top, saying that the private sector should not simply hand over money: ‘We want to have a say as well!’”

The British *Observer* was even clearer: “The background to what happened is the furious surge of economic growth into which Turkey was plunged in the 1980s, an attempt to escape from stagnation and backwardness by letting private enterprise rip.... Many people got rich quick, many corruptly. But Turkey had taken a great, stumbling stride towards ‘modernity’, towards the unprotected free market economy which the European Union enforces on nations hoping to join it.

“So is it Turkey's ‘new class’ of fast-buck entrepreneurs and contractors, with their sleazy political contacts, that are the guilty men? Things are not so simple. Strange as it sounds, these are also the people who carry within them the

potential to bring about real changes for the better after the catastrophe.... But in Turkey an ancient and discredited political clique still clings to power, even though Turkish society has changed dramatically in the last 20 years.

“It’s not hard to conclude that Turkey needs an old-fashioned, democratic, middle-class revolution, in which these new social forces would take the political power to which they are entitled.... And the earthquake of 1999 would be remembered as a beginning, not only as tragedy.”

The “democratic middle class” of which the *Observer* speaks proves on closer inspection to be selfish, ruthless and organically hostile to democracy, if by this one understands the control over society which the broad mass of the population should exercise.

The emergence of these layers in Turkey did indeed begin 20 years ago. At that time, the International Monetary Fund and the international banks required Turkey, whose economy lay in tatters, to open itself up to deregulation, i.e., to loosen national regulation so as to foster unrestrained profit-taking, to make the economy more accessible to international capital, and to substantially lower the standard of living of workers. This could be accomplished only by systematic fascist terror against the workers movement and the seizure of power by the military in 1980. Like other countries, Turkey proved that the more the great mass of the people is unfree, the more freely is the class of “free employers” able to operate.

However, a state in which a small minority can enrich itself without restraint—protected by the terror of fascist gangs and the repressive force of the military and the police, at the expense of an ever expanding majority that sinks into poverty—is a state in which corruption, nepotism and gangsterism rapidly spread.

This is the basis for the close intertwining of state power, the Mafia and right-wing radicalism in Turkey, which finds its highest expression in the fact that the political arm of the fascist-Mafia gangs—the MHP or “Grey Wolves”—sits in the government.

However, to a thin but powerful layer of nouveaux riche and social climbers, this type of entrenched ruling clique represents an annoying obstacle to the complete plundering of society and the total sell-off of Turkish resources to international banks and corporations. Hence the call for a “democratic revolution by the middle class”, as the *Observer* puts it.

There are sufficient examples of such “revolutions” in recent history—the most recent being Indonesia. A regime which for many decades served as a reliable pillar of imperialism—but whose parasitic relation to the national economy has, in the age of globalisation, become an obstacle to the freedom of movement of international financial

capital—is, in the name of democracy, to be replaced by another that is better suited to the present requirements of global capital. The social position of the masses, if changed, will be changed for the worse. In the new Moloch state the basic structures of rule are to remain intact, while the miserable remnants of social welfare are eliminated.

In Turkey the traditional establishment, based on the ideology of state founder Kemal Atatürk, is regarded as the most important guarantor of the existing social order. The more farsighted sections of Turkish and international capital regard as a serious danger the fact that it has suddenly become clear how hated the government of Social Democrats, Conservatives and fascists is in the eyes of the population. They are therefore open to a turn to the Turkish Islamists, who have won a considerable following in recent months with their oppositionist demagogic. The Islamists of the Virtue Party, for their part, signalled their support for the IMF “reform package” shortly before the earthquake, thereby presenting themselves as a party of state and a political force friendly to the needs of big business.

Thus the *Turkish Daily News*, in an August 20 editorial, called for a “government of national unity” and demanded an end to “discrimination against Muslim believers”. In place of the senseless conflict between secularists and Islamists, a “common effort” should be made to provide a solution to the problems of the country. On August 24 the newspaper received support from the British *Financial Times*.

The consequences of the earthquake have intensified the political crisis of Turkish capitalism. But a progressive and truly democratic way out of the crisis is possible only if the masses of working people construct a party which breaks with all wings of the Turkish bourgeoisie—whether Kemalist or Islamic—and sets as its goal the socialist reorganisation of society. Their allies will be found not among the Western powers, which only recently bombed Yugoslavia into ruins, but in the international working class.



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