

After the Turkish earthquake: government amnesties for torturers and criminals

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According to official figures, some 20,000 people died and more than 600,000 became homeless in the earthquake that ripped through Turkey two weeks ago. Its aftermath has uncovered the deep gulf that exists between the ruling elite and ordinary working people. In the eyes the hundreds of thousands who are now mourning their lost families and friends, the ruling political and economic powers stand as a corrupt, profit-greedy horde, completely indifferent to the fate of the population. Those who had to listen to the gradually weakening cries of buried children for two days, without any rescue effort on the part of the government, are not likely to cringe in front of the authorities.

The government, composed of the social-democratic DSP, the conservative ANAP and the fascist MHP, reacted to this threat by closing ranks with those against whom the people's anger is primarily directed.

Broad layers of the population and most newspapers have attacked Osman Durmus, the Minister of Health from the fascist MHP, as an "ignorant racist", demanding he resign because of his chauvinist tirades against Turkey accepting international assistance, in particular from Greece and Armenia. His parliamentary colleagues, however, have cheered him on, and the social democratic Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit has offered him support.

Criminal building contractors, who enjoy good relations with the state and in political circles, are seen to be responsible for the devastating damage caused by the earthquake. According to an article in the newspaper *Radikal*, the parliamentary commission responsible for investigating this background is to be headed by Ersoy Özcan (MHP), one of whose own properties, a private hospital, collapsed, killing nine people.

With the massive outcry in the population and media ringing in their ears, the government rapidly pushed a series of laws through parliament, even as the country was counting its dead and clearing the rubble.

These include a decision enabling Turkish labour law to be set aside for the benefit of foreign companies and a drastic increase in the age of retirement. The latter had sparked

bitter protests by Turkish workers even before the earthquake disaster. The International Monetary Fund dictated the framework of these laws.

As a gesture of good will to the European Union, a "law of contrition" was passed, promising Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) members lighter punishment. However, it contains so many restrictions that it can hardly be taken up. It applies only to PKK members who have never borne arms, killed a soldier or held a leading position in the party, and agree to cooperate with the state, betray their comrades and provide details of the structure and strategy of the party. It is also limited to only six months.

At the same time the government pushed through an amnesty law that favours Mafia gangsters and fascist murderers and torturers. This law was passed in the face of widespread popular outrage. According to reports, 26,538 prisoners are to be released under the law and almost 32,000 will receive lesser punishments. Many legal proceedings are to be stopped.

The law was so provocative that President Suleyman Demirel refused to sign it on August 31 and referred it back to parliament, so that some cosmetic modifications could be made to supposedly bring it into line with "justice, the principles of equal treatment and the public conscience". Demirel cannot exercise a veto a second time, however.

Turkish newspapers have noted those who are to profit from the amnesty. Among them are many former high-ranking politicians, such as Mesut Yilmaz, Günes Taner, Meral Aksener, Sedat Bucak and Mehmet Agar, who were either implicated in corruption scandals, maintained relations with the rightwing Mafia, had connections with the death squads, or, like the former Prime Minister and today's ANAP boss Yilmaz, had links to dubious building contractors.

Despite Ecevit's assertions to the contrary, Turkish legal experts have pointed out that building contractors will fall under the scope of the amnesty law, including those who came under suspicion following the earthquake last year on the Mediterranean coast.

ANAP ensured that the law amnestying corrupt politicians was placed on the statute book, while the MHP has looked after the interests of Mafia godfathers and fascist murderers. According to an article in the conservative *Hürriyet* newspaper, the members of some 75 Mafia gangs will benefit from the amnesty.

Since the establishment of the MHP at the end of the 1960s, its activists have conducted a virtual civil war against the Turkish workers' and student movements, as well as against religious and national minorities. With the active or passive support of the security forces, they have been responsible for countless murders and massacres. Not a few are common criminals and Mafiosi. After the military seized power in 1980, some were locked up. But most of the fascists were soon released, and many MHP cadres were absorbed into the special "anti-terror" forces, the secret service and other "forces of order".

Naturally, these gangsters, controlled by nobody and afraid of nothing, used their powerful position mainly to enrich themselves through corruption and the drug trade. The close interlinking of the state, the Mafia and the fascists became more widely known following the so-called "Susurluk" scandal three years ago. All those involved will fall under the amnesty law. (After an auto accident at Susurluk on the Aegean, a high-ranking politician of the conservative True Path Party—the former government party under Tansu Ciller—emerged seriously injured from the wreck. Still inside was the corpse of a fascist killer who had ostensibly been on the run for nearly 20 years. A year later, the secretary to the parliamentary commission of inquiry charged with investigating this affair, judge Akman Akyurek, also met his end in a dubious auto accident.)

Besides common criminals, policemen accused or even condemned for torture will receive an amnesty. The Turkish human rights organisation TIHV has documented over 3,000 cases of torture since the early 1990s alone. This still does not count those victims who are too afraid or ashamed to report their cases, or who out of ignorance have not yet come forward. According to Amnesty International, over 400 people have been tortured to death since 1980. All their persecutors will now have nothing more to fear.

Things look quite different for their opponents. Well-known lawyers and human right activists such as Esber Yagmurdereli and Akin Birdal will remain in prison. Birdal is in detention because he called for a peaceful solution to the Kurdish conflict. Despite severe wounds as a result of a failed assassination attempt by right-wing terrorists, he was compelled to begin his sentence. His would-be assassins are to be amnestied.

More than half of the 60 imprisoned journalists will be set free. But only on condition that they do not write anything

critical of the government for the next three years. All "crimes" that have anything to do with opposition or criticism of the state are excluded from the amnesty. This largely applies to human rights activists, the Kurdish separatist PKK, Islamic and left-wing organisations.

There are differing motives behind the amnesty law. The official reason given is the need to empty overcrowded prisons and facilitate the control of these institutions. In recent years there have been bitter protests, especially by political prisoners, against the inhuman conditions in the gaols. According to human rights organisations, since 1994 alone two dozen prisoners have died from hunger strikes and the suppression of prison rebellions. Only recently, Maoist groups ended a kidnapping aimed at preventing the transfer of prisoners to solitary confinement.

Many in the media were of the opinion that the amnesty was seen by the MHP and ANAP as a means to protect their clientele from persecution.

The amnesty accompanies a brutal program of welfare cuts and privatisation. The conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine* newspaper in Germany recently wrote: "With the amnesty law, the Turkish parliament closes one of the most productive phases in its recent history... With the passing of these laws, the Ecevit government has survived its first baptism of fire... the government did not let itself be guided by populist considerations and even withstood a confrontation with the trade unions without lowering its sights."

The message is clear: everything considered to represent opposition to the existing order is to be mercilessly persecuted, while those guilty of corruption, torture and murder are let off scot-free. As the general secretary of the Turkish Human Rights Union IHD told the *Turkish Daily News*: "The government has forgiven all the crimes which were committed by its organs or gangs, legally or illegally."



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