

What is the path to genuine democracy in Turkey?

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At present the call for a "democratization" of political conditions can be heard throughout Turkey. Before the assembled cream of state and government representatives including the army—only the commander in chief was missing—the chief of the Supreme Court of Appeals, Sami Selcuk, recently called for the elaboration of a new constitution. The central theme was that Turkey could not enter the new century with a constitution whose legitimacy was virtually null. The largest employers' association, Tüsiad, has been making the same noises for a long time. Influential daily papers have joined the chorus.

This campaign began immediately after the terrible earthquake of August 17, which at a stroke and before the eyes of millions exposed the thoroughly rotten character of the Turkish state. The government, consumed by corruption and criminality, proved incapable of organising even the simplest rescue measures for the injured and those buried in the rubble. Minister of Health Osman Durmus, from the fascist MHP (Party of the Nationalist Movement), went so far as to oppose offers of assistance from abroad. He rejected blood supplies offered by Turkey's "racial enemies" Greece and Armenia, saying, "If the earthquake was sent by God, then God will decide who is to live."

The Turkish state maintains the second largest army in NATO. It can dispatch 10,000 soldiers across the country within 12 hours to pursue its war of extermination against the Kurds. After the earthquake it deployed approximately 50,000 soldiers, not to carry out rescue work, but to ensure law and order. To this very day those whose houses were destroyed must sleep in shabby, damp tents without proper floors, or even in the open air.

The earthquake ripped away the veil of "progress" with which Western institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the European Union had endowed Turkey over the past 10 years, since the end of the last period of direct military rule. The unbridgeable gulf between the regime and the vast majority of the population can no longer be covered over.

The return to fashion of the old, oriental pursuit of pleasure by Turkey's wealthy upper crust is no accident. Restaurants and hotels offer deep-pocketed tourists an opportunity to experience an "Ottoman" ambience, where, in thickly carpeted rooms laced with gold, one can indulge in choice (and not so choice) entertainment.

The legendary extravagance of the Sultans, combined with proverbial nepotism on the one hand, and bloody despotism on the other, corresponds to today's political conditions. Not only the building contractors, whose apartment blocks became mass graves, but the entire political establishment of Turkey stands exposed as a gang of rapacious criminals.

A regime that is rotten to the core testifies to the inability of the Turkish bourgeoisie to overcome poverty and backwardness. It is the final, sad product of Kemalism, the official state ideology. Its historical balance sheet reads mass poverty, desperate social inequality, the rise of the fascists and Islamists and indescribable misery for the Kurdish population.

None of the problems inherited by Turkey from the disintegrating Ottoman Empire has really been solved. The war against the Kurds in the

southeast of the country, which all objective observers describe as a scorched earth campaign, testifies to the brutal suppression of national minorities. The misery of the small farmers and rural poor attests to the continued existence of large landowners, feudal clan structures and conditions of dependency in the lesser developed regions, as do the high levels of migration from the countryside. The formal separation of religion and state exists only on paper. The influence of Islam grows thanks to state promotion. Enormous slum belts exist around all of Turkey's large cities. Unemployment and poverty menace the lives of the overwhelming majority of the population.

The entire history of Turkey proves that there is no escape from these conditions under capitalism. Turkey's problems cannot be attributed to a lack of effort to become a "modern capitalist state along the lines of the western European model". This, the usual explanation, really belongs to the realm of myth.

The opposite is the case. The present state of the regime is a result of the decades-long subordination of Turkey to imperialist rule, in particular, to the United States. The present condition of the country does not contradict the "Western world", but is rather the product of that world. The global supremacy of imperialism leaves no room for countries with a belated industrial evolution to undergo an organic democratic development.

In 1923, when independent Turkey was baptised, the class struggle on a world level had already brought about the Soviet Union. From the outset, state founder Mustafa Kemal, who later called himself Kemal Atatürk, was confronted with the fact that large sections of the working class and poor farmers who had carried out the Turkish war of liberation of 1919-22 against British and French imperialism had also enthusiastically welcomed the Russian Revolution of 1917. They expected that for Turkey as well the days of exploitation and suppression by big landowners, corrupt civil servants and imperialist great powers were past. Although diffuse, socialist and communist ideas were widespread.

This constellation of class forces defined the character of Kemalism. Due to the weak development of the Turkish bourgeoisie, since the time of the "Young Turks" at the beginning of the twentieth century the military had assumed the prominent political role in the fight for the formation of a capitalist nation. The Kemalists continued this tradition. At the same time they reacted to the mobilisation of the popular masses in the years 1919-1920 by courting the support of the young Soviet Union, swearing that their movement was revolutionary and by no means bourgeois. They even claimed that their aim was the construction of a nation "without class differences and privileges".

It was not long before the regime was murdering the leaders of the Turkish Communist Party and other left-wing organisations, in particular those of the peasants. The Kemalists could not forego the use of religion as a means of preventing the political crystallisation of a working class movement. Thus in the war of liberation, they advanced the slogan of the "unity of the Ottoman Muslims" against the "infidels". This was directed not only against British and Greek invaders and Armenian separatists, but

also against the threat of social revolution to the property of both old and new exploiters.

In the years following his seizure of power, Mustafa Kemal gradually introduced a series of reforms. The Gregorian calendar and the Latin alphabet were introduced, and other, more symbolic measures were enacted, such as the mandatory wearing of hats instead of the Fez. A new civil and penal code, modelled after the more advanced European system, was introduced to create the necessary prerequisites for economic development along capitalist lines. The Caliphate was abolished, religious orders banned, and Islamic schools closed in favour of national educational facilities. Legislation created the framework for the leading role of the state in matters of economic development, and included regulations to impose limits on the influence of foreign capital.

In the name of the "unity of all Turks", left-wing organisations and even trade unions were banned during the entire period of Atatürk's reign. (He died in 1938). Characteristically, in 1926 he adopted the labour and penal code of Mussolini's fascist Italy.

Meanwhile, under the banner of Islam, feudal forces were amassing, particularly in the extremely backward Kurdish east, seeking to deal with the newly rich "upstarts". They gathered backward rural layers behind them, who often suffered more under their new masters than under the old. Even newly formed right-wing parties which supported the state, such as the Progressive Party and the Liberal Party, were considered potential poles of political opposition and banned.

The Kurds, who shortly before had been courted as brothers within a common Turkey, suffered intense discrimination. Several rebellions in Kurdish regions were suppressed during Atatürk's reign.

Faced with profound social contradictions, the Kemalist system of government could not tolerate the existence of any opposition parties. Any relaxation of power brought with it the danger that pent-up social discontent might split the regime. Democratic discussion of differences, even if confined to the ruling class, was not possible under these circumstances.

The bourgeoisie always needed someone whose unquestionable authority could be invoked to decide all questions. This was the source of the cult of the state and its founder Kemal Atatürk (the "Father of the Turks"), and for the dominant role of the army. Despite their different social foundations, the parallels between Kemalism and Stalinism can be clearly seen: the cult of the leader and the state, nationalism, oppression and corruption. It is no wonder that right up to his death, Atatürk remained an admirer of Stalin.

Turkey's founding father and his successor, İsmet İnönü, were able to balance between England, France, Germany, the US and the Soviet Union, and keep the country out of the Second World War. However, Turkey's industrial development, with a five-year plan along Soviet lines and with German finance, undermined the basis for this policy.

Industrialisation gradually created a small but militant working class, and a class of employers with their own social and political concerns. The impoverishment of the peasantry increased. The ruling class developed a strong need for credit, investment, and not least, political support from the West. In 1950 Turkish troops participated in the Korean War as part of the UN force and in 1952 the country was accepted as a member of NATO.

In the 1950s, the Menderes/Bayar government pursued a pro-American policy of economic liberalism, combined with the systematic strengthening of the army, the construction of a "counter-guerrilla" force, and the promotion of Islam. In 1960, the military carried out a coup in order to keep relations stable. At that time, however, conditions for a state-directed policy of economic construction still prevailed. The military justified their coup, naturally referring to Atatürk, by citing the necessity for economic development. They promised to improve the social conditions of the population. The rapid growth of the working class, however, heralded a new period of violent class struggles that marked the

1960s and 1970s.

Alparslan Türkeş, the founding leader of the fascist MHP, known as the "Grey Wolves", participated in the 1960 coup as a colonel. He had already established good relations with Nazi Germany in 1943. Right up to his death Türkeş boasted of having been sentenced for his efforts to bring Turkey into the war on the side of Nazi Germany against the Soviet Union.

Following the war, he was educated in the US and posted to the US Ministry of Defence as a representative of the Turkish armed forces. From the mid-1960s, the then-government head Süleyman Demirel called for a "struggle against Communist infidels". Beginning in 1968, the fascist Grey Wolves were systematically built up as a terrorist organisation aimed against left-wing workers and the student movement. Demirel defended the murders they carried out as "patriotic deeds".

NATO backed the Turkish military, the fascists and the death squads within the framework of the so-called "Gladio" programme. In 1953, John Foster Dulles had declared that Turkey was the most important link in the "northern tier" against the Soviet Union, and served as a NATO bridgehead into the Middle East. To this end, the "democratic" North Atlantic alliance required forces in Turkey that were capable of and prepared to undertake ruthless and aggressive measures against any "communist threat", either at home or abroad. The US and NATO supported the Turkish state and military apparatus with billions of dollars. They also backed the military coups of 1971 and 1980.

In the 1970s the social and political crisis escalated. In 1974, on a wave of hopes and illusions, many workers voted Bülent Ecevit into government. Ecevit, who presently occupies the office of prime minister, is generally described as a social democrat. However, his party, the CHP (Republican Peoples Party), has no roots in the workers movement. It was formerly the state party of Atatürk. In 1972, as its newly elected chairman, Ecevit adorned the party with a left image.

Faced with militant workers' struggles, Ecevit resorted to social demagoguery in the tradition of Kemalism. He promised more social justice, a fight against speculators, public control of the mining industry, the promotion of co-operative farming and workers' representation in industry. Moreover, he sharply attacked the terrorism of the Islamists and the fascist death squads against the workers movement.

On this basis, he won enormous support in the 1973 elections. Once in government, he avoided any measures that might encourage the further development of a left-wing movement in the working class. Instead, he built a coalition government with the Islamic MSP (National Salvation Party) of Necmettin Erbakan.

Following a putsch in Cyprus instigated by the Greek military junta, he dispatched Turkish troops to the island, where they occupied the north. In the tradition of Kemalism, he utilised religious backwardness and encouraged nationalism to contain the social tensions gripping Turkey.

Nevertheless Ecevit's government continued to lose popular support. Finally, Süleyman Demirel replaced Ecevit as prime minister, heading up the National Front government of the MSP and MHP. This marked the onset of the period when the relation between the fascists, the Mafia and the state became symbiotic. Islam not only grew stronger, but also began to find a party political expression.

At the end of the 1970s Turkey was hit by a deep economic and political crisis that culminated in the September 1980 coup, which was organised by the US. In the following years, the military regime and the head of government, Turgut Özal, replaced the traditional Kemalist economic policy, which had been based on the construction of national industry by means of import substitution, with a ruthless policy of opening up Turkey to foreign capital.

The security forces, the right-wing Mafia and the economy melted into one. The government promoted Islamism and Turkish chauvinism, while its economic policies raised up a layer of highly unscrupulous and corrupt

employers. The privatisation of the former state sector of the economy led to the rise of a layer of petty capitalists in the east of the country, who in 1990 organised themselves in the Muslim Employers Association (MÜSIAD). Some of these employers, who as a rule support the Islamic party, have since become exceedingly wealthy. A living legend is Fethullah Gülen, who has established a network of Islamic schools abroad, and has even founded his own university in Turkmenistan.

During this period, in the mid-1980s, the war against the PKK (Kurdish Workers Party) began, conducted in the name of “fighting terrorism”, but in reality aimed at the entire Kurdish population.

Turkey's integration into the process of globalisation and the “liberalisation” of the economy according to the prescriptions of the International Monetary Fund have raised social and regional contradictions within the country to a breaking point. At the same time, these processes have fostered unbridled corruption throughout the entire state apparatus. Kemalism gradually reached its present deplorable condition. It is becoming clear that the regime can no longer be maintained on the old foundations. Its reaction is to cling even more closely to the US. During the first Gulf War, the Turkish government slavishly supported America, despite widespread protests by those opposed to the war.

The break-up of the Soviet Union in 1989-91 changed Turkey's geopolitical situation and brought new exigencies. Turkey has great strategic significance for the imperialist powers, perhaps greater now than during the Cold War period. Regions in direct proximity to Turkey include globally significant raw materials and spheres of influence: the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Persian Gulf and Central Asia. Turkey is indispensable for the US as well as the EU in the struggle over a new division of the world.

But how is the stability of the capitalist ruling class in Turkey to be maintained? That is the real question behind the ongoing “democratisation” debate. As is customary for the initiatives of the Turkish bourgeoisie, the way for the discussion was cleared by the imperialist powers.

On August 5, just two weeks before the catastrophic earthquake, US Assistant Secretary of State Harold Koh stated in the American embassy in Ankara that progress in democratic and human rights questions was unavoidable if Turkey was to maintain her role as “a bulwark of stability in a region critical to US strategic interests”.

Koh supported Supreme Court of Appeals Judge Selcuk's call for a new constitution, and made a point of meeting with prominent Kurdish political figures and human rights activists in jail. Prompting his actions was the fear that the sclerotic military-backed regime would be unable to steer Turkey through the stormy waters of foreign and domestic politics into which she is sailing.

Speaking with unsurpassable cynicism, Koh declared that having demonstrated to NATO, through her support for the wars in the Persian Gulf and Kosovo, that Turkey was prepared to defend human rights abroad, Turkey must now take the same path in its domestic politics.

According to Stephen Kinzer, the Istanbul bureau chief of the *New York Times*, “As long as Turkey is afflicted by political paralysis, caught up in civil conflict and subjected to persistent criticism for its attitude toward freedom of speech, she cannot play this role as fully as the United States would like.”

In an article in the latest issue of *Private View*, published by the main employers' organisation Tüsiad, Kinzer wrote that Turkey was a member of NATO, and the latter would possibly have to carry out new wars in Turkey's immediate vicinity. “The West has an interest in assuring that Turkey is strong enough to play her role in those wars, possibly as a frontline state”, he continued. “But neither the United States nor Europe can do all they want to arm Turkey while Turkey remains as she is. Only when Turkey is recognised as a truly democratic state will her friends be

able to accept her as a full partner.” The world had changed since the fall of the Berlin wall, he added, but Turkey had not.

By the term “democratisation” these circles understand the maintenance of their own interests. To this end they hope to bring about a reconciliation of all those social and political forces which are united by common class interests against the working population. Their obvious goal is the inclusion and taming of the Kurdish nationalists as well as the Islamists.

Kinzer appealed to the army to leap over its own shadow. He quoted “one American official who deals with policy toward Turkey on a daily basis” as saying: “What we would really like is for the army to embrace Kurdish nationalists, embrace fundamentalists, and tell them: ‘Listen, we're all Turks. We all have to live here together. Let's work out a basis for coexistence, a formula that we can all live with.’” Such an outcome, however, is considered next to impossible.

The earthquake has brought out into the open that which close observers have long realised: the old Kemalist regime has lost all credibility and is unable to contain social antagonisms. New mechanisms have to be found in domestic and foreign politics in order to maintain capitalist rule. That is why the American foreign minister and the Turkish establishment—the same people who have carried through oppression and torture for decades—have suddenly discovered “democracy”.

In a comprehensive paper drawn up in 1997, entitled “Perspectives on Democratisation in Turkey”, the employers' body Tüsiad stated in a similar vein: “Located as it is in a sensitive part of the Middle East and the Islamic world, Turkey is faced with these two burning problems: making an effort to reconcile secularism and Islam, on one hand, and the nation state and the different ethnic identities, on the other hand.”

Sections of influential US policy makers are clearly intent on re-evaluating the role of Islam. One such individual is Edward P. Djerejian from the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy at Rice University. Djerejian previously served as US ambassador to Syria and Israel, and assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern Affairs.

He has written: “A coherent policy framework toward Islam has become a compelling need as foreign policy challenges erupt involving an ‘arc of crisis’ extending from the Balkans, the Caucasus, North Africa, the Middle East, and Central and South Asia... Underscoring the importance to the interests of the United States ... is the critical geographical factor that in the arc of crisis are located vast oil and natural gas reserves... The arc is home to approximately three-quarters of the world's oil and gas reserves... Indeed, we recently fought a war in the Persian Gulf to reverse aggression and protect precisely such interests.”

He then argues it is necessary to differentiate between the Islamic movements in terms of what they say and what they do, and not merely judge them all by the same yardstick. One must, as a matter of urgency, he advises, work more closely with the moderates: “Indeed, several countries can serve as a positive force for moderate Islam beyond their borders. They should be considered as potential bridges of mainstream Islam to the Muslim world in the Middle East and Central Asia. Examples include Turkey with its secularist model of Islamic society and potential outreach to the Turkish-speaking countries of Central Asia.”

Other papers contain similar comments. The same writer enthusiastically quoted the Saudi Arabian interior minister, Prince Naif Bin Abdul Azziz: “Islam is a religion of peace, love and security.”

Undoubtedly opinions within Turkish and international political circles differ over whether the legitimacy of the present Islamic movement under Necmettin Erbakan should be strengthened, or if the process of Islamisation should continue to be exclusively managed by the military. Erbakan, as prime minister in 1996-97, certainly demonstrated his loyalty and usefulness to the West.

Notwithstanding his populist rhetoric against the US and the EU, he kept to the many agreements with both partners. He allowed the US to continue

using the airforce base at Incirlik to bomb Iraq. Then, following the illegalisation of his Welfare Party in 1998, he appealed for help from the European Court of the same EU which he had previously condemned.

The recent IMF-sponsored constitutional changes passed by the Turkish parliament shortly before the earthquake were only pushed through with the assistance of the Virtue Party (successor to the Welfare Party). In exchange the Virtue Party was assured that Erbakan would be allowed to return to politics.

The Turkish Islamists, who had won electoral support among the urban poor with their demagogic rhetoric at the start of the 1990s, today base themselves more explicitly on a growing entrepreneurial layer which, in the name of Islam, conducts flourishing trade not only with neighbouring countries but also with the West, particularly the EU.

A nation that serves as the geo-strategic base for the imperialist re-division of the region (including the acquisition of the former Soviet republics) cannot be genuinely democratic, if one understands by democracy political rights for the mass of the population. A move toward greater public recognition of Islamic and Kurdish forces would not lessen the military's role in society. On the contrary, a strategy based on foreign policy conquests requires a strong army. The ability to strike effectively abroad requires the crushing of all domestic dissent—perhaps no longer in the name of Atatürk, but rather, as once in Chile, in the name of “democracy”.

A reconciliation in this sense between Kemalism, Islam and Kurdish nationalism is conceivable. If they squabble among themselves, they are nevertheless united by a common interest in maintaining a capitalist Turkey. A reconciliation between the ruling circles and the people is, by contrast, utterly impossible.

In this respect, it is instructive to consider the terrible conditions of the Russian people and the pillage of Russia by criminal elements. The road to this disaster was paved at the start of the 1990s by “democratisation”. The greatest vigilance is called for when the old establishment, in concert with Western diplomats, begin talking about “democratisation”.

The same parliament now called upon to draw up and ratify a new constitution recently passed the Amnesty Law, which was designed to free torturers and Mafia elements while their victims remain locked up. It also sanctioned the law raising the pension age, along with all the IMF measures of recent years. It felt no shame in using the situation after the earthquake to push through cutbacks which had met with strong opposition shortly before.

Genuine democracy can only emerge through a progressive resolution of social antagonisms and the replacement of Turkey's belligerent foreign policy by a union of the peoples of neighbouring countries. The only social force capable of carrying through such a change is that force which has no stake in the exploitation of the region in the interests of capital. The working class is the only such force.

Indeed, the earthquake brought forward precisely this frightening (for the ruling classes) spectre. The various regimes of the region drew together after the catastrophe not simply out of love for one's fellow man. Within the cauldron of war and intrigues in the Near East, the earthquake revealed the potential of another social force erupting, one that could, if politically conscious of its historic interests, make a bid for power.

The unresolved tasks of democratic development can only be fulfilled by socialist measures. The following are fundamental initial measures:

Without a just and equal distribution of wealth, there can be no equality of rights. To this end the real structures of rule in Turkey must be exposed. The representatives of the ruling class are incapable of doing this. After all, the Susurluk scandal of three years ago, exposing the entangled web of government, parliament and Mafia, has not been properly investigated to this day.

Commissions established by the people themselves must take this task out of the hands of the corrupt and incompetent parliament. An

independent inquiry into the links between the government, the parliament and the Mafiosi is necessary. Assets attained by criminal means should be confiscated and used to finance immediate emergency measures for needy slum dwellers.

A further first step would be the seizure of the assets of construction companies and the use of their wealth for emergency measures for the still unattended victims of the earthquake.

From within the ruling circles one hears the call for a new constitution. The employers' federation (Tüsiad) has even elaborately re-formulated the relevant articles. But everyone knows that a few cosmetic changes on paper will alter none of the real structures. No matter what the existing parliament might decide, so long as the nation's wealth remains in the hands of a tiny minority, corruption, nepotism and militarism will continue.

A new constitution must be drawn up by the working people themselves. This would augur the beginning of genuine rule by the people, who would finally be able to take on the pressing problems which remain: the resolution of the land question through the abolition of the big estates; equal rights for all national minorities; the disbanding of the existing army; the creation of free, comprehensive state education and healthcare; above all, the replacement of an aggressive foreign policy with one that appeals for a united struggle of the working classes of the neighbouring countries.



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