

Measure permitting second term for Turkish president fails in parliament

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On April 4, following months of intrigue, a motion on the part of the government of Premier Bülent Ecevit to change the Turkish constitution to allow State President Süleyman Demirel a second term in office collapsed in the Turkish parliament.

Seventy-six-year-old Demirel has decades of experience in Turkish politics. His function as state president consisted in holding together and stabilising the divergent and competing wings of the ruling circles in the interest of all parties.

Demirel has been state president since 1993. His current term in office is due to expire in mid-May. Up for debate was a proposal whereby the single seven-year term was to be transformed into two terms of five years.

Five hundred and fifty deputies sit in the Turkish parliament. The governing coalition, controlling 351 seats, consists of the social democratic DSP (Democratic Left) of Ecevit, the fascist MHP (Nationalist Action Party, or Grey Wolves) of Devlet Bahçeli and the conservative ANAP (Motherland Party) of Mesut Yılmaz. A two-thirds majority of 367 votes was necessary to pass the measure. If the motion had won 330 votes, it would have been necessary to organise a referendum—something Ecevit wanted to avoid at all costs. In the event, just 303 parliamentarians voted in favour of the change.

The international media expressed regret and concern at the outcome. The *Washington Post* wrote: "Ecevit has long argued that the political feuding that would likely be sparked by Demirel's departure would endanger an IMF-backed economic recovery program and recently begun negotiations for full membership in the European Union..."

"Demirel, who served a record seven times as prime minister before being elevated to the presidency in 1993, is widely credited with having improving Turkey's relations with Europe, Israel and the United States. Above all, he has acted as a buffer between Turkey's interventionist armed forces and bickering politicians."

Ecevit did everything he could in an effort to force through the constitutional change. He linked the motion to another which would have allowed the deputies to increase their salaries as they saw fit. Contrary to the stipulation that the vote should be secret, Ecevit made his vote openly (as did Bahçeli and Yılmaz), and called upon other deputies to do the same—a complete breach of the law. Prior to the vote he also indicated that he would resign in the case of a defeat, but nevertheless stayed in office after the rebuff—"in the interest of stability". The vehemence with which Ecevit agitated in favour of Demirel led to concerned speculation

in the German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine* over the possible senility of the 75-year-old.

But why has the "Lex Demirel" now collapsed? After all, the motion originally bore the signatures of 400 deputies, which was the only reason the motion even came to a vote.

None of the media explanations went further than superficial explanations—that Ecevit had handled the affair badly and that Yılmaz, with his own ambitions for the presidency, resorted to intrigues behind the scenes. While these factors may have played a role, they were not decisive.

A significant number of deputies of the MHP and the ANAP, from the extreme right wing of the parties, voted against Demirel. It is anticipated that some ANAP members will soon switch to the MHP. According to reports in the Turkish press, the MHP deputies were put under enormous pressure from party leaders.

Demirel, a staunch nationalist, is nevertheless unpopular with the extreme right for his failure to immediately sign the death sentence for PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) leader Abdullah Öcalan, preferring to wait for the decision of a review procedure by the European Court for Human Rights. This decision, which was also supported by the head of the ruling coalition, unleashed hysterical protests on the part of the radical right and military circles. Speakers from organisations representing the relatives of soldiers who had died in the struggle against the PKK guerrillas defamed the government as a "servant of the EU". At one military funeral army officers in uniform screamed curses at government representatives. Three Turkish nationalists burned themselves to death.

Ecevit failed to win support for the constitutional change from the Islamic Virtue Party (FP), the largest party in the parliamentary opposition. He attempted to induce the FP, which is facing a political ban, by proposing a change in an article regarding the banning of political parties at the same time as the constitutional change. In addition the FP is seeking to have a law lifted which bans the Islamists' ideological leader, Necmettin Erbakan, from political activity. Erbakan, who was prime minister in 1997, was forced to resign in a "cold putsch" by the military. Demirel was state president at the time. The FP rapidly realised, however, that the practical legal significance of these proposed concessions was virtually worthless. To make matters worse, Erbakan was recently condemned by a court to a prison sentence for "separatism." In the end, there was not much of an incentive for the Islamists to support changing the constitution.

In addition, over the past weeks an open conflict has developed between the government and the military over how to deal with the Islamic spiritual leader Fetullah Gülen and his international empire of schools, media and businesses. Ecevit has praised Gülen for his “great services, despite what certain circles say”. For their part, some generals have described Gülen as a “great danger to the state”. For the first time books by Gülen have been banned.

Apart from a few symbolic gestures, repressive measures against the Kurds have also increased over the last period. Thousands of Turkish soldiers and combat helicopters have once again advanced into northern Iraq in pursuit of PKK guerrillas. Meetings of the legal Kurdish-nationalist HADEP (Democratic Peoples Party) have been banned. Dozens of its functionaries and members have been arrested, some of them merely for speaking Kurdish during the Kurdish new year festival Newroz. The most well-known human rights activist in Turkey, Akin Birdal, was sent to prison again despite the fact that he is still recovering from wounds resulting from a assassination attempt by extreme right-wingers. He was arrested for speaking out in favour of a peaceful solution to the Kurdish question.

When such developments are taken together it is possible to understand the concerns of the Turkish and international bourgeoisie over the defeat of Demirel as a “pillar of stability”. For some time now Turkey has been of great strategic significance for the United States and the European Union and, if anything, its significance has grown since the end of the Cold War. In order to suppress the class struggle the ruling circles in Turkey, with help from abroad, have systematically encouraged fascist forces. Islamism has played a supplementary role: neutralising the dissatisfaction of the most desperate via religious means.

Now it is emerging that those forces brought forward in order to suppress the working class—the military, the fascists and the Islamists—are themselves becoming difficult to keep under control or bring together in a common cause.

The political fate of Demirel is symbolic. As prime minister he handed over power to a military junta in 1971. He was rewarded by being nominated head of government on a number of occasions in the 70s, and governed in so-called “nationalist fronts” together with the Grey Wolves and the Islamists of Erbakan. In conflicts verging on civil war, fascists and religious fanatics, supported by the state and government, murdered thousands of left-wing workers, peasants and students. It was Demirel and Ecevit, who formed a coalition with Erbakan himself, who enabled the growth to prominence of Islamic fundamentalism. In 1980 they returned power once again to the military.

The military dictatorship pursued a long, continuing offensive against the working class and a neo-liberal economic policy, represented above all by Turgut Özal. Following Özal's death in 1993, Demirel took over the post of state president. He reacted to the strikes and mass demonstrations on the part of workers with a combination of repression as well as bringing social-democratic and trade union bureaucrats into the government. In the Kurdish south-east of Turkey, Demirel gave the army, fascist death squads and Mafia gangs a free hand to “eradicate separatism”. Thousands of Kurdish civilians were abducted, tortured and murdered—frequently on the open streets. At the same time the

army pursued a scorched earth policy and wiped out numerous Kurdish villages.

With his policy of encouraging militarism and all manner of right-wing tendencies Demirel had not just worked in the interest of the Turkish bourgeoisie. During the Cold War, Turkey was a military advance post for NATO against the Soviet Union. Following the collapse of the latter, Turkey increasingly became a bastion in the struggle for raw materials and supply lines in the Balkans, Caucasus, Central Asia and the Middle East. In particular, the US has systematically supplied the Turkish military with arms in order to use the country as a powerful mercenary force in the region.

In an extensive study, American scientists established that in the first six years of the Clinton administration alone, the US delivered weapons worth nearly \$5 billion to Turkey. Their report stated: “U.S. sales to Turkey during the Clinton era have been more than four times as large as the *entire* value of U.S. arms transfers to Turkey during the 34 years from 1950 to 1983.... The Turkish government is in the midst of what the military industry journal *Defense News* has described as ‘its biggest weapons buying spree in recent memory’ expected to be worth more than \$31 billion during the next eight years and up to \$150 billion by the year 2030” (*Arming Repression: U.S. Arms Sales to Turkey During the Clinton Administration*, by Tamar Gabelnick, William D. Hartung and Jennifer Washburn with research assistance by Michelle Ciarrocca; A Joint Report of the World Policy Institute and the Federation of American Scientists, October 1999).

In a speech to the American-Turkish council at the beginning of April, US Defense Secretary William Cohen announced that Turkey would, together with other countries, take part in the development of a new fighter plane. The project envisages the construction of 3,000 new military jets at a cost of \$200 billion.

Justifying the project, Cohen declared: “Turkey is located at a crossroads, an important one from the front line of history.... What we need to do is build and strengthen the partnerships with those countries like Turkey, who are regionally strategic to the security of the entire Middle East area.”

At present it appears that following its aggressive actions in the Caucasus Russia has once again won the upper hand, at least in the former Soviet Republics. It is improbable, however, that this state of affairs will last long. There is too much at stake, and this is why Turkey is being prepared. The feverish military build-up in the country, while the population sinks deeper and deeper into poverty, will lead inevitably to new conflicts and instability—as the Demirel crisis demonstrates. Concerns over this instability are the only reason for the regular exhortations of Turkey by the EU and the US for its “legal reforms” and “democracy”—all in all leaving a nasty taste of hypocrisy in the mouth.



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