Twenty years since the military coup in Turkey

Justus Leicht
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Twenty years ago, on September 12, 1980, a right-wing military junta led by General Kenan Evran took state power in a predawn coup in Turkey, established martial law, abolished political parties and trade unions and abolished democratic rights. Coming after nearly a decade of social and political conflicts often bordering on civil war, the coup unleashed a wave of repression against working class and left-wing opponents of the Turkish regime whose consequences are still present today.

The international media have made little mention of this anniversary. This is not surprising, since at the time of the coup leading political and media spokesmen hailed the generals for saving Turkey and keeping it part of the "free world." The events of the last two decades, however, show that the "market economy reforms" demanded by Turkish and Western banks and corporations were from the start incompatible with the maintenance of democratic rights. The measures could only be implemented with naked terror.

Two years after the coup industrialist Rahmi Koc, a representative of Turkish big business, summed up its meaning: "The difference is this: before September 12, we were forced to do everything in a democratic system... That meant it was difficult and time-consuming to get anything done, and everything was looked at from a political angle. The difference under the military government is that there is no longer the difficulty of getting decisions passed by parliament."

The essence of these decisions was an onslaught on the Turkish working class. After the military takeover wages and salaries were frozen despite, an inflation rate of 130 percent. State-owned industries and services were privatised, the currency devalued and state expenditures for welfare, health and education drastically reduced. The military junta suspended workers' right to strike and bargain collectively for several years. These and other measures were demanded by the IMF, Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank to ensure the repayment of loans made to Turkey up to the mid-1980s.

Prior to September 12, the attempts to impose such conditions had been rebuffed by the resistance of Turkish workers. Hundreds of thousands had taken part in strikes and mass demonstrations against rising unemployment, staggering levels of inflation and IMF austerity programs.

After the coup Turgut Özal was appointed vice prime minister and minister responsible for economy and finance. Since the 1960s Özal held various high-ranking government posts where he closely collaborated with US and IMF economic experts. He was chairman of the metal industry employers federation in the 1970s. His infamous exhortation to business owners, "Get rich—no matter how!" neatly sums up official Turkish economic policy since that time. For the Turkish working class, on the other hand, it meant a halving of real wages and an increase in unemployment that, according to unofficial estimates, affects nearly a third of the employable population.

The military coup had the backing of US imperialism and the Western European powers. The same day the Turkish army tanks began to roll in working class neighbourhoods, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) conducted military maneuvers with 3,000 soldiers in the Turkish Thrace, only a few miles from Istanbul. Once in power junta leader Kenan Evran—who led Turkish NATO forces in the Korean War—immediately declared that the country would remain a loyal NATO member. NATO officials also sought to provide a political cover for the Turkish generals. One high-ranking official at NATO headquarters in Brussels was quoted by German news magazine *Der Spiegel* (Issue 38/1980) as saying, "Look, they're not going to hang anyone there".

The Carter administration in Washington and the CIA played a leading role in the coup. Following the 1979 toppling of pro-US dictatorships in Nicaragua and Iran, the State Department was determined to prevent a repeat in Turkey. J. Williams, the US State Department official responsible for Turkey, was in the American embassy in Ankara on September 12. He later remarked cynically that it seemed to be his "fate" to be where the action was at the right time—just as he had been in Greece when the military coup took place there. After the coup the *Washington Post*, *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* all ran favorable articles about Turkey's so-called moderate military.

In early March of the following year, West Germany sent a parliamentary delegation to Turkey including members of the then governing SPD (Social Democrats) such as Karsten Voigt, the party's foreign affairs spokesman. The delegation ignored the plight of the military's victims and declared that there was "no dictatorial regime" and "no systematic application of torture" going on. The German Foreign Ministry's report on April 30, 1981 echoed these lies and provided the basis for the rejection of most asylum applications by Turkish refugees.

According to estimates at that time, in the first six months after the coup, the regime put 123,000 political prisoners behind bars, carried out numerous death sentences, including 460 "executions" during "military operations," and tortured to death at least 50 people in its dungeons. In the far-off Kurdish provinces of south east Anatolia, where Bülent Ecevit (now the Social Democratic Prime Minister of Turkey) had already imposed martial law two years before, rapes, torture and executions were carried out, including sometimes in public, to intimidate political opponents. In those regions, the military banned the use of the Kurdish language and Kurdish names. Thousands of Kurdish villages—and sometimes even children—were re-named.

The West supported the uniformed executioners and torturers primarily for geo-strategic reasons, bound up with the Cold War. Positioned as a bridgehead to the Caucasus and Central Asia—at the south flank of the Soviet Union—and the Middle East, Turkey was one of NATO's most important bastions. Its significance increased even more when the Shah's pro-Western puppet regime was toppled in Iran by a popular uprising in February 1979, and when Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan that same year.

In late 1979, the US lifted a weapons embargo it imposed in 1974 following the Turkish occupation of northern Cyprus (the Turkish

government had reacted at the time by closing down American military bases in Turkey). In December 1979, the West German government concluded a military agreement with Ankara worth several hundred million marks. West Germany also intervened within the IMF to push through a multi-billion dollar loan, which Turkey eventually received in 1980.

In March 1980, the US signed a new “defense and economic cooperation treaty” with Turkey. From that point on, American armed forces were allowed to resume the use of military bases in the country without any interference from the Turkish state. The most important of these bases was Incirlik Air Force Base in southern Turkey. In return, the Turkish military received weapons systems from the US worth $9 billion and a further $6.5 billion in financial support to purchase American military equipment, according to independent estimates.

The official Turkish and Western versions of these events essentially repeated—and continue to repeat —the claims that the junta had used to justify its seizure of power. According to these accounts, the coup was necessary in order to rehabilitate the bankrupt economy and put an end to “chaos and anarchy”—especially in the universities—which was something the parliament and government were incapable of doing.

It is certainly true that by the 1970s Turkey faced chronic economic, social and political instability. The nationalist policies formulated by the founder of the modern Turkish state, Kemal Atatürk, and pursued since the 1920s—of building up the country's economy isolated from the world market—had manifestly failed. At first, successive governments attempted in vain to solve this problem by relying on more and more foreign loans. But this only gave Western creditors more leverage to press for “economic restructuring” and undermine national economic policies. Moreover, these measures brought the working class—which experienced an explosive growth during the country's post-World-War II industrialization—into repeated clashes with the economic and political elite. Moreover, the recurrent economic crises radicalized large sections of the middle classes, including the peasantry, leading to the emergence of numerous radical groups, most of them Stalinist- or Maoist-oriented, alongside a militant trade union movement.

Faced with this situation, influential leaders of the military and MIT intelligence service, as well as conservative politicians such as Süleyman Demirel, unleashed a systematic terror campaign to weaken left-wing organizations and pave the way for a coup. As part of these preparations Demirel formed so-called “National Front” governments—which included the Islamist MSP (National Salvation Party) and the fascist MHP (Party of the Nationalist Movement)—from 1975 to 1977 and from 1979 to the day of the coup.

The MSP and its leader Necmettin Erbakan hardly concealed their goal of establishing an Islamic theocratic state. The MHP, in turn, declared in programmatic documents that democracy was “an invention of the Jews” and the “beginning of decline” because it created the “breeding ground for communist penetration”. Death squads organized by these parties murdered left-wing and trade union activists, liberal journalists and intellectuals. They also carried out massacres of Alawi and Kurdish minorities and of striking and demonstrating workers.

Demirel defended these murders as “patriotic deeds” and claimed there were no right-wing terrorist squads. At the same time extreme right-wing elements were brought into the state apparatus and millions of dollars were spent on building new mosques and Koran schools to bolster the influence of Islamic fundamentalist leaders. During Bülent Ecevit's term as prime minister in 1978, documents emerged revealing that the CIA had long worked with the MIT intelligence service and the Turkish army generals who led the fascist MHP to establish a “counter-guerrilla” force to annihilate left-wing opponents and intimidate the population. Later Ecevit—presumably acting under pressure from the military—denied the existence of these death squads.

In the nearly two years of Ecevit's government, right-wing terrorism escalated dramatically. More than 2,000 political murders were committed, with the great majority carried out by right-wing forces. Ecevit urgently instructed workers, many of whom had placed their hopes in him, not to physically resist the fascists. Instead, he complied with the demands of the army and imposed martial law in the country's two largest cities, Istanbul and Ankara, and in the Kurdish provinces. Needless to say, this aided the army's preparations for a coup, which according to information that emerged years later had been planned as early as 1977.

After Ecevit was replaced by Demirel in 1979 the terrorist attacks escalated. During Demirel's term, which lasted less than a year, 2,500 people became victims of politically motivated killings. Western observers pointed out that of the 5,000 killed from 1975 to 1980, two-thirds or more were victims of the fascists, as the Swiss newspaper *Neue Züricher Zeitung* reported in its August 5-6, 1981 issue.

In the face of the right-wing terror and preparations for a military coup the working class was politically disarmed by Ecevit, the leader of the Turkish nationalist CHP (Republican Popular Party), and his Social Democratic and Stalinist supporters in the trade unions. Moreover, the numerous groups that sprang up since the 1960s propagating the theories of Mao, Che Guevara or similar concepts were opposed to the independent political mobilization of the working class against the threat to democratic rights.

Just like Ecevit these movements were proponents of Turkish nationalism, although they added a left-wing veneer of anti-imperialism and opposition to the US superpower. These organizations advanced a Stalinist theory of the two-stage revolution, which placed “national liberation” as the most pressing task. This meant in practice subordinating the struggle of the working class to so-called anti-imperialist sections of Turkish capitalists and politicians. Chasing after the mirage of “progressive sectors of the national bourgeoisie”, some of these groups even advised workers and the oppressed to place their hopes in sections of the military.

This political perspective served to bolster the influence of Ecevit, the Social Democrats and trade union bureaucracy over the working class and pave the way for the September 12 coup.