

Turkish parliament votes down US war plans

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In a surprise vote last Saturday, the Turkish parliament denied permission for the stationing of US troops on Turkish territory as part of the preparation for a war against Iraq. A draft law allowing 62,000 US troops to use Turkey as a base for invading Iraq failed to gather the necessary absolute majority. Those voting against the motion included members of the opposition social democratic Republican People's Party (CHP) as well as nearly a third of the deputies of the ruling Party of Justice and Development (AKP).

The decision unleashed a bitter reaction in Washington and a domestic crisis in Ankara itself.

The vote had been preceded by a week of wheeling and dealing. Through a combination of intimidation and bribery, Washington put pressure on the Turkish government to make Turkish bases available to American troops, although an overwhelming majority of the Turkish people oppose a war with Iraq.

On February 6, the parliament finally agreed to allow American specialists to check Turkish military bases and ports in preparation for the stationing of US troops. The vote permitting the actual stationing of troops was originally planned for February 18, but was then put off on a number of occasions. The American and international media treated the delaying tactics by the government as merely a manoeuvre aimed at forcing up the price for Turkish collaboration. But clearly the Turkish ruling class was deeply divided in the face of overwhelming domestic and international opposition to the US war plans on the part of broad social layers.

As Turkish deputies were discussing the war issue behind closed doors, 50,000 gathered for a peace demonstration at the central Sıhhiye square in Ankara. It was the biggest assembly in the Turkish capital in two decades. Demonstrators chanted: "We do not want to be soldiers for America", "The people will stop the war", and "Money for the people, not for war."

As the parliamentary vote was announced, jubilant crowds of thousands once more streamed spontaneously onto the streets, shouting, "We are all Iraqis. We will not kill, we will not die."

The demonstrations were an expression of a broad-based public sentiment. According to opinion polls, 94 percent of all Turks reject a war with neighbouring Iraq. One day after the vote, the Turkish newspaper *Hürriyet* recalled that US President Bush had promised democracy for the Middle East and commented: "Now democracy has begun in Turkey." The

vote showed that Turks "are not impressed by threats and ultimatums."

The antiwar demonstrations were mainly led by left-wing parties and trade union organisations, with Islamic organisations clearly in a minority. For its part the AKP, with its Islamic roots, plainly belongs to the conservative wing of the political spectrum. Many of the AKP deputies who voted against the draft law belong to the right-wing nationalist faction of the party.

Nevertheless, the AKP was responding to popular pressure. The party came to power four months ago after carrying out a populist campaign appealing to the widespread anger with the established political parties and winning support from poor, rural-based layers, from the inhabitants of the city slums and sections of small businessmen. According to newspaper reports, parliamentary deputies who returned to their constituencies after the vote of February 6, and later during the Islamic Festival of victims, were confronted with the full extent of popular opposition to an Iraq war.

The international antiwar demonstrations of February 15, three days before the original planned date for the second vote, also played a significant role in influencing the outcome. Since the middle of February there have been continual reports of the difficulties encountered by the AKP leadership to ensure the loyalty of its deputies regarding support for the US.

The latest vote is a bitter blow above all to the leader of the AKP, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. This coming weekend Erdogan faces a by-election in the eastern province of Siirt, which he needs to win to take a seat in parliament and officially assume the post of prime minister.

Together with acting prime minister, Abdullah Gül, Erdogan has been actively involved in driving up the price for Turkish involvement in a war which neither of them has disagreed with in principle.

To reward their efforts as mercenaries for the US they began by demanding \$10 billion in immediate aid and a further \$20 billion credit. The US objected and said it would only be prepared to pay when Turkey agreed to prior demands by the IMF for cuts in its national budget and a privatisation program. The IMF, strongly influenced by the US, has been holding back credits of \$1.6 billion since October 2002, demanding that such measures be taken. Eventually the Turkish leadership and the US agreed on a package consisting of \$6 billion in immediate

aid backed up by \$24 billion in credits.

The vote in parliament expressed a clear rejection of this horse trading—as it was publicly described. The newspaper *Milliyet* wrote that the vote had helped free Turkey from the image that it was a country which could be bought off if the price was right. Washington now had to acknowledge that the country was not a mere banana republic, the newspaper said.

Parliamentary speaker Bülent Arinc, who belongs to the antiwar faction in the AKP, commented on the vote as follows: “For months we have had Big Brother on our backs. Parliament has done the right thing. Everyone should be proud of themselves.”

While the price for the stationing of American troops was being haggled over to the last minute, Washington and Ankara had achieved broad agreement on another issue: At the beginning of last week the Turkish Defence Ministry announced that the US had agreed to the deployment of 52,000 Turkish troops in northern Iraq under independent Turkish command.

The aim of the Turkish troops was to prevent the emergence of an independent Kurdish state or a region of broad Kurdish autonomy in northern Iraq. In this regard Turkey repeated its calls for influence over the regions of Kirkuk and Mosul, which possess large reserves of oil.

According to reports, Washington had agreed to permit Turkish troops to disarm Kurdish militias active in northern Iraq. This news caused consternation on the part of the two leading Kurdish parties in the region—the KDP of Massud Barzani and the PUK led by Jalal Talabani. In an appeal to the White House, both men expressed their complete opposition “to the presence of Turkish troops in Iraqi Kurdistan, irrespective of the reason given.”

Barzani and Talabani had offered their services to the US as partners in Iraq against Saddam Hussein and thereby sought to improve their own prospects in the region. Now they are faced with the danger of being misused by the US and ending up as small change in a deal with Turkey. This would not be the first time in the history of the Kurdish national movement that it had thrown itself at the feet of a Great Power only to be later betrayed.

The Turkish government had united the two issues—the stationing of American troops in the country and the dispatch of Turkish troops to Iraq—in a single parliamentary bill. In so doing they argued that Turkish interests in northern Iraq could only be guaranteed by a “yes” vote in parliament. The government also postponed the vote due last Thursday for final deliberation on Saturday in order to assure the backing of the Turkish military and state president, who met on Friday in the National Security Council. Despite these precautions, however, the government leadership was not able to secure a majority in parliament.

It was already clear some days before the latest vote that the AKP was deeply divided over the issue. It is said to have

required more than six hours to obtain cabinet agreement to the parliamentary bill. Despite this, Deputy Prime Minister Ertugrul Yalcinbayir later openly called upon parliament to reject the draft law. Parliamentary deputy Göksal Küçükali from Istanbul argued in similar fashion and was promptly confronted with disciplinary action instigated by the AKP leadership.

In the debate Saturday, which was held in secret session, government representatives threatened deputies for hours with the consequences of rejecting the bill. The details of the debate are not known apart from the fact that it was tempestuous—one deputy fainted and another suffered a heart attack.

The no vote by the Turkish parliament is a severe blow to US war plans. American ships laden with war materials have been cruising the Turkish coast waiting for permission to land. Now they are forced to turn back.

A northern front against Iraq opened up from Turkish territory would have made a war much easier and reduced the chances of substantial American losses. It would have tied up large numbers of Iraqi troops, making it easier for US troops to advance from the south from Kuwait to capture the strategically important city of Basra, before continuing on to Baghdad.

The alternative is for American troops to land in northern Iraq from the air, but due to the great distances involved such an option would cost the military more time and is bound up with many more risks.

Nevertheless it is expected that Turkish rejection will not hold up American war plans. Representatives of the White House have made clear that President Bush will not be deterred should he be unable to undertake a two-pronged attack on Iraq. According to a US government official quoted in the *New York Times*: “There’s a Plan B ... It’s messier. It’s more complicated. But it’s not likely to slow the president.”

In Washington hopes still remain that the Turkish government will agree in a further vote on the issue. The White House anticipates that the economic consequences of the failed aid package for the unstable Turkish economy, together with the prospect of being unable to take part in any re-division of Iraq, will shift a section of the deputies.

Turkish and European commentators, however, said it was improbable that Erdogan would risk a second vote. Should he lose such a vote, his authority will be irreparably damaged. Should he win, then he will stand in glaring opposition to the Turkish people whose antiwar sentiments have only been strengthened by recent events.



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