

The Bush administration, Turkey and democracy

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Only last week, US President George W. Bush solemnly proclaimed that his administration's impending assault on Iraq was driven by a "vision" of democracy and liberation for the entire Middle East. Iraq's conquest, he declared, would "serve as a dramatic and inspiring example of freedom for other nations in the region."

Just three days later, the cynicism behind that statement was graphically demonstrated when the Turkish parliament shocked and angered the White House by failing to pass a resolution permitting 62,000 US troops to use Turkey as a base for the coming invasion of its neighbor to the south. The March 1 parliamentary vote came despite intense US pressure, including the lure of a \$30 billion financial package to bail out the Turkish economy.

The vote was all the more significant because Turkey is the only country in the region, apart from Israel, that is portrayed by the Western powers as having a democratic system of government. During last month's conflict with France, Belgium and Germany over authorizing NATO military aid for Turkey, Bush touted Turkey as the only democracy in the Islamic Middle East.

The narrow margin in the parliament against allowing US forces to stage an assault from Turkish soil (the measure actually won a plurality, but failed because the combination of "no" votes and abstentions brought the "yes" total to less than 50 percent of those voting) was a pale reflection of the overwhelming hostility of the Turkish people to a US-led war against Iraq. Opinion polls show 94 percent opposition to the war, with opposition increasing in recent weeks, in part because of the Bush administration's arrogant and bullying tactics.

The rejection of the resolution, resulting from the defection of a large number of delegates of the ruling Party of Justice and Development (AKP), was celebrated by jubilant crowds of ordinary people on the streets of Ankara and across Turkey. It was, at least in a limited sense, a victory for democracy over the dictates of the US government and its servants in the Turkish political, business and military establishment. One MP, Ahmet Faruk Unsall,

commented: "We did something that not even the British parliament, the cradle of democracy, was able to do. We voted with the public, against a war."

The outraged response in Washington revealed the deep contempt of American ruling circles for democracy, whether it be in Turkey, elsewhere in the oil-rich region, or within the United States itself. Backed by the American media, the Bush administration immediately embarked on an intensive diplomatic and economic offensive to insist that the vote be reversed.

While in public US officials issued assurances that the vote would not damage relations with Turkey, behind the scenes the pressure has been ferocious. US Secretary of State Colin Powell personally telephoned Prime Minister Abdullah Gul last Sunday to demand that a new vote be pushed through the legislature. In a statement issued afterwards, Gul said the two men had agreed "to keep open the channels of communication."

The *New York Times*—which claims like Bush to champion democratic values—noted without comment: "Turkey's leaders have been under intense American pressure to ask the Parliament to reconsider the measure.... The American diplomats here have been busy pressing their case, meeting privately with members of the majority party, including legislators who voted against the measure."

For its part, the *Wall Street Journal* expressed seething hostility to the Turkish vote, no doubt mirroring the language being used behind closed doors in Washington. A March 4 editorial entitled "The Inscrutable Turks" decried the fact that "democracies are messy" and lambasted Turkish politicians for bowing to "short-sighted domestic politics."

"Unless reversed in a later vote, the decision will damage US-Turkish relations for years to come," the editorial threatened, before outlining its own version of democracy. "Turkish opinion polls show large opposition to an Iraq war. But then the role of political leaders is supposed to be to shape public opinion, not follow it, especially when the benefits of assisting the US are so obvious."

The editorial complained that the Turkish military had “failed to speak up at a crucial moment apparently in order to embarrass the new Islamic-leaning government.” Here the *Journal*, which closely tracks the thinking within the top echelons of the Bush administration, was explicitly denouncing the military for not inserting itself into the political controversy to push for the reversal of a democratic vote in parliament—implicitly backing its “opinion” with the threat of a military coup. So much for the principle of the subordination of the military to civilian authority!

This criticism clearly struck home. The next day, March 5, the Turkish military chief, General Hizmi Ozkok, went on national television to declare that Turkey had no choice but to open its borders to US combat troops, in order to guarantee Washington’s support in the postwar carve-up of the region.

The Turkish military, with whom the White House and the Pentagon maintain the closest ties, has carried out no less than four coups, each backed by Washington, since 1960. In the name of combating socialism or, most recently, Islamic fundamentalism, the Turkish generals seized power or otherwise deposed elected governments in 1960, 1971, 1980 and 1997. In the most recent “silent coup” six years ago, the military forced the resignation of Prime Minister Tansu Ciller, whose government included numerous members of the current AKP administration.

Ozkok’s thinly veiled threat of another military putsch was not lost on the AKP leadership. Only hours before General Ozkok’s remarks, a senior party official said Turkey’s leaders were determined to take the resolution back to the parliament and push harder to guarantee its success.

However, facing an angry public, government leaders remain nervous about the outcome. The official said the government probably would not act until after a by-election Sunday in which party leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan hopes to win a seat, enabling him to become prime minister.

In general elections last November, Turkish voters threw out nine in ten members of parliament and all the previous ruling parties, replacing them with the newly-formed AKP. Erdogan’s party won office by promising to improve the lot of the impoverished and appealing to the broad sentiment against war with Iraq. “We do not want blood, tears and death,” Erdogan declared just after the elections.

But for several months—starting long before the issue was put to parliament—the military has been collaborating with the Pentagon, preparing for Turkey to become the northern front in the assault on Iraq and mapping out routes to shuttle soldiers and equipment into the region. Barely a week went by without a trip to the Turkish capital by a high-ranking US official or general, including General Richard Myers,

chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Part of the arrangement between the US and Turkish military was a cynical agreement that at least 52,000 Turkish troops would occupy a slice of northern Iraq to prevent the emergence of an independent Kurdish state or autonomous zone. The Turkish leadership, both military and civilian, is particularly anxious to dominate the Kurdish regions of Kirkuk and Mosul, which possess large reserves of oil.

Such is the “democratic” vision of the Bush administration for Iraq, Turkey and the Middle East: the maintenance of repressive, military-backed regimes that will put down social and political unrest and secure control over the oilfields. Under the banner of “liberation,” the long-suffering people of the region, including the Kurds, Turks and Iraqis, are seen as pawns in the division of the spoils of war.

The Turkish parliamentary vote cast an illustrative light as well on the state of democracy within the US. As a number of commentators pointed out, the extended debates that occurred in and around the Turkish parliament were far more serious and substantive than the pro-forma, cursory discussion in the US Congress that preceded last October’s passage of a sweeping resolution granting Bush the power to declare preemptive war.

One measure of democracy is meant to be the existence of a political opposition. But the official opposition, the Democratic Party, provided the Republicans with ample votes to pass Bush’s resolution, shutting down a one-man filibuster attempt by Democratic Senator Robert Byrd.

The Turkish vote has exposed still another Washington myth: that Iraq represents an imminent threat to its neighbors. The problem with this claim is the fact that the overwhelming majority of the people in the region, and most governments, oppose the US war drive, and do not feel under threat from Baghdad. For a large majority of the people, the far greater threat emanates from Washington.



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