

Turkey: Power struggle between government and army

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The tensions between the elected Turkish government headed by Recep Tayyip Erdogan of the moderate Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the leadership of the Turkish army have now developed into an open power struggle. The generals are being spurred on by the US to act against the elected government.

The AKP, which gained an overwhelming majority in the Turkish parliament in elections last November, had already openly been snubbed on April 23, the day of “national sovereignty.” The state president, Ahmet Necdet Sezer, and the complete leadership of the army boycotted the traditional reception. The reason they gave was that Bülent Arinc of the AKP, the president of the Turkish parliament, was bringing his wife who would be wearing a headscarf at the event. The wearing of a headscarf at a state ceremony is regarded as a political symbol of Islamic fundamentalism.

One week later, a meeting of the National Security Council, which is dominated by the military, passed a resolution calling for “the highest possible awareness to protect the secular state.” The situation recalled the notorious one on February 28, 1997, when the military presented former prime minister Necmettin Erbakan with a similar ultimatum. A few months later, Erbakan was brought down in a “bloodless coup d’état.”

Only a few weeks after these incidents, US deputy secretary of defence Paul Wolfowitz came to Ankara, where he openly incited the army to act against the country’s elected representatives and demanded an apology from the Turkish parliament. On March 1, the parliament had decided that no American troops taking part in the Iraq war were to be stationed in Turkey. Wolfowitz declared: “For one reason or another they have not played the leading role on this issue that we would have expected of them.” He then went one step further: “In my opinion, it is especially appropriate with regard to their system when the military says it is in Turkish interests to support the US in its efforts.” The Turkish military has carried out a total of four putsches against the government over the last 40 years.

Under such extreme pressure, the AKP has continuously stressed that it is collaborating with the army in “complete harmony,” while at the same time attempting to restrict the powerful position held by the generals, which is laid down in the constitution established by the military regime in 1982. In this conflict, the AKP is counting on the European Union (EU), with which Turkey is currently negotiating membership. The government also knows it is backed by the majority of Turkish employers and especially the employers’ federation TÜSIAD. The EU has declared that a limitation of the “inappropriately large power” of the army is a prerequisite for negotiations over membership.

Similar to the former regime of Suharto in Indonesia, the Turkish military has implanted itself into Turkish society in the manner of an enormous parasite. The Security Institution for Members of the Military and the Foundation for the Strengthening of the Turkish Security Forces (TSKGV) are both declared to be “beneficial to the public” and are exempted from taxation. In reality, however, both have become large

concerns with many branches, holding shares in many European and American companies including Goodyear, Mobil, Shell, Renault and Turkish Telecom. The army itself decides how high its budget should be while the minister of defence merely puts his initials to the army decision. Regarding most other important political spheres, the army has a formal right to participate in decisions, which in practice amounts to a right of veto.

The established media also support the government. The liberal newspaper *Radikal*, which is neither radical nor pro-Islamic, called on the AKP to carry on with reforms and disregard pressure coming from the military. *Radikal*, which belongs to the influential media company Dogan, recently also published a sensational interview, which was unambiguously directed against the military. A Kurd, who was quoted as being non-political, described how he was thrown into jail without reason following the military putsch in 1980. He then described the sadistic torture he had witnessed of his fellow prisoners.

He reported that most of those tortured, who had at first been non-political, later joined the Kurdish national guerrilla movement PKK (Kurdish Workers Party) after their release. The fact that this interview appeared in a respectable bourgeois newspaper amounts to an admission that the army’s brutality was at least partially responsible for the civil war in the Kurdish regions. During the last 15 years, about 35,000 people have been killed in this war. The article shows how intense the conflicts within the Turkish establishment itself have become.

Now a number of new laws and constitutional changes intend to limit the power of the army. The “6th EU-harmonisation package” has already been passed. And not only that, it was not presented to the National Security Council to be checked beforehand.

Although limited, it allows for the introduction of the Kurdish language in the media and states that in future no representatives of the military are to be sent into the media supervisory authority (RTÜK). The notorious eighth paragraph, which calls for “propaganda against national unity” to be punished with up to three years imprisonment, is to be abolished. The military leadership immediately registered a sharp protest. At the end of May, the chief of the general staff, Hilmi Özkök, pointedly refused to rule out the possibility of another military putsch similar to that of 1997. In the meantime, state president Sezer has used his right of veto against the abolition of paragraph 8, but he can be outvoted by a renewed vote in parliament. The reason given by Sezer was similar to that of the generals. He claimed that the existence of the Turkish state itself was in danger.

Another reform package to limit the power of the army even further is imminent. It includes a reform of the National Security Council, the military’s centre of political power. In future, the president and representatives of the government will have representation on the body, while the military will only be represented by the chief of the general staff and not, as before, by the heads of all the armed services. Furthermore, the secretary of the council is to be a civilian. The defence budget is to be put under the control of the government and the so-called State Security

Courts are to be dismantled. It is not surprising that on June 26, during the last meeting of the National Security Council, the government and the generals could reach no agreement.

Parallel to the rapprochement with the EU, the AKP government is also attempting to improve its relations with the US. It was for this reason that the undersecretary of state for foreign affairs, Ugur Ziyal, travelled to Washington in the middle of June. There he supported the threats made by the US against Iran. A few days later, Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül announced that all Turkish ports and airports would be available for “humanitarian relief actions.” According to Gül, this could also include foreign troops.

However, it has become apparent that all attempts to curry favour with the military are of little use. On June 30, the *Turkish Daily News* reported that the Bush administration had sent a note directly to the Turkish general staff. In this note, the US government “praised the contribution made by the Turkish military during the Iraq war” and “pointed out the significance of the Turkish armed forces.” At the same time, economic pressure was put on the AKP to translate the “structural reforms” demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) into action and attack the working population.

At the end of June, referring to “sources in the Bush administration,” the television news channel NTV-MSNBC reported that the AKP government was “deviating from the demands made in the IMF programme.” According to these sources, “the populist policies of the AKP” were also a reason for US concern, and resemble “a violation of the strict fiscal demands made by the IMF programme.”

On July 4, Turkish-American relations reached a new low. In a surprise attack, American troops rushed into Suleymania, a town in northern Iraq. There they occupied an office of the Turkish army, taking 11 Turkish officers and all domestic personnel prisoner and then wrecking the office equipment. Those arrested were accused of planning the assassination of a high Kurdish representative in Kirkuk, a town about 100 kilometres away. The Turkish government rejected the accusations, calling them absurd and demanded the immediate release of the prisoners as well as an apology by the US. As a countermeasure, it closed the border crossing point in Harbur where US-troops in northern Iraq are being supplied with fuel and other equipment.

In its conflict with the AKP government, the military has the support of the trade union bureaucracy of Türk Is (trade union umbrella organisation) and of parts of the Turkish “left.” Türk Is called on workers to regard themselves as “unarmed troops.”

In this context, one must recall that on February 28, 1997, Türk Is went along with the military and supported the intervention by the army that led to the removal of the government headed by the Islamic Refah (Party of Prosperity). Now the trade union leadership is going one step further and is offering its support in advance—before the military has even made an appeal to the “unarmed troops.” Shamelessly they discuss openly whether a “transitional regime” or even a military putsch is necessary in Turkey.

Türk Is has demonstrated its loyalty to the military in the cheapest manner. For years it has evaded the questions of privatisation and wages, but during the demonstrations against the new labour law on May 17, it utilised these questions to gain more influence among workers. This is seen as necessary to mobilise them to support the military. By making appeals to nationalist sentiments among the workers—with such slogans as “save the nation”—Türk Is is attempting to align them alongside the pro-American wing of the bourgeoisie against the government. Yildirim Koc, a mentor of Türk Is, provocatively demanded that all parties remove their flags and banners during the demonstrations. “We do not want to see any banners and flags except the Turkish national flag,” he shouted.

Türk Is is not the only organisation with such a position. The nationalist-Stalinist “left” declared in its weekly paper *Aydinlik* that the workers and Turkish armed forces stand together. The reputed left-wing Kemalite

newspaper *Cumhuriyet* also supports the army.

For its part, the AKP government is not capable of making an appeal to the broader masses to resist the pressure put on them by the military. It is busy with the implementation of a neo-liberal programme consisting of the opening up of the Turkish market for international capital, as demanded by both the IMF and the EU.

The state-owned refinery company Tupras, the monopoly holding company for tobacco and spirits Tekel, and the petrochemical group Petkim Petrokimya Holding SA are to be privatised, as well as 19 of the 33 power supply networks. A general law now provides foreign investors with the same fundamental rights and freedoms as Turkish investors. It also lifts restrictions regarding the acquisition of land by foreign investors and companies. The government plans no pay increases in the public sector and wants to cut 100,000 jobs.

This programme is extremely unpopular. The government is as fearful of a popular mobilisation as it is of the military. The population could raise social questions and a movement could develop that could easily go out of control.

This is the background to Erdogan’s about-turn concerning Cyprus, although this is an important issue regarding Turkey’s application for EU membership.

Initially, Erdogan’s government had signalled that it supported UN plans aimed at creating a unified state, including autonomy for both the Greek and Turkish halves, as well as limiting the military presence on the island. The overwhelming majority of the Turkish-Cypriot population, which showed its support for a reunification of the island in mass demonstrations, supports this plan. On the other side, these plans are being rejected by the military and the right-wing nationalist followers of Rauf Denktasch, who, with the aid of the Turkish army, has controlled the north of Cyprus for over 30 years. In the meantime, Erdogan’s government has begun to back Denktasch and has pointed out the role the army plays as a “guarantor of power.”

Confronted with a putative danger for the establishment, Erdogan is using traditional methods of repression in Turkey itself. The government is also actively pursuing the persecution of the nationalist Young Party (GP) led by Cem Uzan, which, according to opinion polls, is the biggest rival of the AKP. The persecution of the GP makes a mockery of all talk about democratisation.

Uzan is a multimillionaire who, because of his shady business methods and ruthless use of his Star media group for political means, is often described as the “Turkish Berlusconi.” He is attempting to exploit the social crisis for his own purposes. He has blamed the IMF and the EU for the devastating social conditions in Turkey and, among other promises, has pledged tax reductions, the distribution of land to the poor and the building of hundreds of new universities. As a result, the government took away two of his power companies and a bank, and threatened to expropriate his family. Erdogan has accused him of slander and Uzan’s TV stations were taken off the air for one month.



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