Turkey: Reform limits some military powers

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With the signature of Turkish state president Ahmet Necdet Sezer to the so-called "seventh reform package" the moderate Islamic government of Recep Tayip Erdogan has been able to register a minor victory in its power struggle with the Turkish military.

The reform sets considerable limits to the powers of the National Security Council (MGK) through which the military in recent history has had the last say in all important political decisions. However, the new rules are far removed from normal democratic convention. Basic democratic principles demand the strict subordination of the military to the elected government, but even after this reform the military in Turkey will remain an independent political factor. The institutionalised influence of the military has been restricted but not abolished.

The reform primarily serves the interests of Turkish big business, which is demanding the expansion and opening up of markets, and is no longer prepared to tolerate the role played in Turkey's foreign policy by a bureaucratic and sclerotic military caste. Should a danger emerge inside the country itself—in the form of rebellious workers or dissatisfied minorities—then there can be no doubt that the Turkish bourgeoisie would turn to the army for help.

The latest law change will soon come into force with the signature of the state president. It is the last of seven "packages of reforms" with which Turkey is seeking to fulfil the political requirements for membership in the European Union (EU). It is also the most politically controversial.

The key element is a reform of the MGK and its general secretariat. In constitutional terms, the MGK will return to the approximate status it had at the time of its foundation in 1962, two years after the military putsch against the government of Prime Minister Adnan Menderes, who was subsequently executed by the army. The army again carried out putsches in 1971 and 1980, and then in 1982 wrote into the constitution an expanded role for the MGK, which the current reform seeks to reverse.

Up until 1982, the MGK's role had officially been limited to consulting the government on issues of security. Afterwards, the general secretariat, which was chaired by a general, developed into a sort of unofficial government operating above the elected government. It announced its "recommendations" to the prime minister on how to carry out national security policies, stipulated the agenda for the MGK and supervised the implementation of its decisions. All government ministers, as well as public and private institutions, were accountable to the MGK, and "recommendations" made by the MGK were top priority for the government.

Now the general secretariat can only take action on the initiative of the prime minister. It is to coordinate the work of the MGK and only fulfill tasks that have been stipulated by the MGK and the judiciary. Above all, implementation of the MGK's decisions is to be supervised by the deputy prime minister. In future, the post of general secretary can also be occupied by a civilian, although his taking up of the post must be agreed to by the army chief of staff. In addition, the MGK is to convene only every second month instead of monthly, as it does now.

Further proposed changes to the law include proposals that the budget for the army, which up to now was mainly determined by the army itself, be decided upon by parliament in a non-public sitting and then checked by the national audit office. The minimum penalty for "slandering" the state and army is to be lowered from the current sentence of 12 months in prison to 6 months, and simple "criticism" will be non-punishable. Civilians can no longer be tried before a military tribunal in times of peace. Another significant change to the law permits private teaching courses in the Kurdish language.

Leading military figures have protested the changes, but have finally accepted them with clenched teeth.

On the day before the parliamentary vote on the package, the army head of staff, Hilmi Özkök, paid a surprise visit to Prime Minister Erdogan, in order, as the press reported, to "communicate the concerns" of the army. Then, several days after the vote, Erdogan took part in a meeting of the Supreme Military Council (YAS). According to reports (probably passed on personally by generals to the newspaper *Cumhurriyet*),the meeting included vigorous attacks on Erdogan and even threats of a new putsch.

A leading army commander, Cetin Dogan, was quoted as saying, "Forces, which will not allow any change to the secular form of the state, will act in unison...if necessary the army and the nation will act to achieve results hand in hand." Dogan is alleged to have warned Erdogan that the government can still profit from the reforms because "of the love of the Turkish people for the EU, but one day they will pay the price."

Up until now, however, such threats have had little effect. Apparently, the government has pushed ahead undeterred with its reforms. One reason is that influential sections of the Turkish business community, which regularly supported the army in previous putsches, now expressly support the attempts by the government to acquire membership in the EU.

The deputy president of the Turkish employers organisation (TSIAD), Mustapha Koc, made this point clear at a conference organised by the Deutsche Bank on May 30 this year: "The AKP Party [Erdogan's Party of Justice and Development] did not come to power for ideological reasons. More important than ideology in causing their rise to power were a succession of economic crises in the 1990s. Then there was the debilitating corruption of a tired political system and the unresponsiveness of the established order to the aspirations of a young, dynamic and fast modernising society.... Much to its credit, the AKP government took the EU project with utmost seriousness.... A succession of reform packages showed AKP's commitment to the EU project."

Koc was confident that Turkey under the AKP would be able to rapidly make the changes necessary for EU membership. He explained why his organisation, which counts among its members 300 of Turkey's biggest companies, was so emphatically in favor of the EU: "Almost 60 percent of Turkish export revenues come from EU countries. The regional distribution of imports reveals a similar picture. EU countries represent the largest Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Turkey. In 2002, the EU share amounted to 65 percent of the total foreign direct investment. Most foreign firms operating in Turkey come from EU countries."

An additional text featured on the web site of the federation makes clear why the employers are in favor of such "democratic reforms." They are directly bound up with the liberalisation of the economy—the privatisation of state-owned companies, the dismantling of the public sector and the opening up of the country to international capital.

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A paper dealing with the implementation of the "Lisbon Strategy," which stipulates the economic criteria for Turkey's admission to the EU, states: "Turkey's integration, both into the global economy and the EU, requires an effective public administration reform that defines the new role of the state."

Priority must be given to predetermining the economic tasks of the state regarding the private sector and, in this respect, redefining its relationship to society and relationship between the state and the individual. This redefinition should be achieved by means of a three-fold strategy: privatisations, abolition of state monopolies, and rule of law.

The paper demands: "With regard to the first axis, the services provided by the state, other than clearly defined core services, should be transferred to the private sector through privatisations." Other sectors, which up until now were state-owned, should be made available to market competition. This can only successfully occur, however, when a strengthened judiciary can introduce transparent procedures and guarantee that contracts will be adhered to.

In addition, the organisation demands the decentralisation of government-owned businesses and increased powers for local authorities; reduced tax and social insurance payments for employers and businessmen; increased deregulation of the job market; and a "a tight fiscal policy and expenditure cuts in the public sector in light of downsizing the public sector and improving the fiscal balances."

The paper makes clear that in the final analysis the political reforms share the same aim as the economic ones: business and society as a whole are to be liberated from the interference and control of the state, the army and corrupt politicians. However, this will not take place in order to benefit ordinary workers or the poor, but instead to further the interests of big business at home and abroad—at the expense of the working class. This explains why the latest reforms were supported by established media outlets and newspapers such as *Hürriyet* and *Milliyet*, which themselves are close to the army, as well as many of the papers of the influential Dogan media group, which in 1997 had carried out a vicious witch-hunt against the Welfare Party government led by Necmettin Erbakan prior to the party being forced out of power by the military.

The AKP was founded largely as a successor organisation to the Welfare Party. Erdogan, however, represents a different social layer from those who backed Erbakan.

Erbakan mainly represented traditional Islamist forces and a section of the conservative older generation. Correspondingly, his fate was sealed after he promised a 50 percent wage increase for state officials and a 130 percent increase in pensions (annual inflation in Turkey currently runs at between 100 and 150 percent), while covering up a corruption scandal involving his coalition partner, Tansu Ciller, and intensifying foreign political relations with Iran and Libya.

For his part, Erdogan represents a layer of social climbers from conservative areas of rural Anatolia who began their careers under the military regime of the 1980s, which had as economics minister Turgut Özal, the man who later rose to the posts of prime minister and state president.

Özal and the military made a series of concessions to the Islamists, which they regarded as a necessary counterbalance to a radicalisation of the working class. They introduced obligatory religious teaching, gave religious schools the same status as normal ones by awarding university entry to pupils of the former, and praised the values of Islam as an "antidote to communism." At the same time, they propagated the slogan "Enrich yourselves, by any and all means."

The Shiite layers that emerged from this development have now finished their studies and gone on to acquire wealth and run large-scale business (organised in the employers' organisation MÜSIAD). They broke with the old guard of the Islamic movement, following the overthrow of Erbakan and the banning of the Welfare Party, and are now ready for their share of the fleshpots. This was the social process behind the foundation of the AKP. The followers of Erbakan organised themselves at that time in the "Happiness Party" (SP).

What is to be expected in future from the new Islamic bourgeoisie, known as the "Anatolian tigers," was amply demonstrated by the recent marriage of Prime Minister Erdokan's 22-year-old son Bilal. The prime minister, whose election victory was to a large extent a result of his populist appeals to the rural and city poor, celebrated the marriage of his son, a student of economics at the elite Harvard University in the US, with oriental splendour.

The bride, a 16-year-old girl, had been systematically selected for the marriage. Ten-thousand guests were invited to the ceremony held in the Istanbul Lütfi-Kirdar congress centre. Most of the female guests wore, as did the bride, a headscarf or face-covering veil. The wedding itself was carried out by the mayor of Istanbul, Ali Müfit Gürtuna, who two years before had performed the same ceremony for the son of the former German chancellor Helmut Kohl. Amongst the witnesses at this latest wedding were Silvio Berlusconi—the Italian prime minister and EU council president—and Albanian prime minister Fatos Nano.

Four-thousand police were mobilised to protect the wedding and went into action against demonstrators, who carried out a protest near the congress centre against Turkish government support for the American war against Iraq. Whole streets in the centre of Istanbul were closed off for the wedding. As a memento, wedding guests received a silver bowl filled with sweets. For their part, the guests donated generously, and sacks were necessary to transport away the many presents, including 100 kg of gold.

As the German *taz* newspaper noted: "Amidst applause, tears, headscarves, kilos of gold and a plane ticket for America, this was the manner in which the Islamist elite undertook a new stage in its passage to modernity."

These Shiite layers have not the least interest in any serious confrontation with either the US or the Turkish military. Quite the opposite—one reason for the smooth passing of the recent laws was the fact that Erdogan made concessions on central points to the generals.

At a sitting of the Supreme Military Council, the generals decided to sack 18 high-ranking officers for alleged Islamist subversion. Erdogan criticised the purge but eventually accepted it. In addition, he agreed that up until next year the general secretary of the MGK will be filled by a general rather than a civilian.

Erdogan also announced that he would call a special sitting of parliament for the beginning of September to decide upon the dispatch of 10,000 Turkish troops to Iraq to support the American occupation. According to opinion polls, such a move, while vehemently demanded by the army, is rejected by nearly two thirds of the population and by sections of the AKP itself.

Just a week ago, the deputy general chief of staff, Yasar Büyükanit, expressly told journalists that the position of the army was that Turkey had to send troops, regardless of whether such an action was covered by United Nations mandate and despite the risk to the soldiers themselves. Naturally, he hurriedly assured the press, the military realised how unpopular such a decision would be. He emphasised, however, that final agreement rested with the government—this after making patently clear what way parliament should decide.

There are good reasons for Erdogan to avoid any direct conflict with the military. After all, he could soon be dependent on their support. There are a series of unresolved problems that sets his government on a collision course with the Turkish people as a whole. Much of the programme of privatisation demanded by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund still must be carried out. It is doubtful that the workers affected will simply accept the redundancies that such measures inevitably require.

There is also the prospect of renewed conflict with the country's Kurdish minority, with reforms that exist on paper still waiting to be

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carried out. At every opportunity, bureaucratic hurdles are imposed in order to prevent the implementation of Kurdish teaching and access to the media. According to a report by the human rights group IHD, such practices as torture and state-executed murders have risen in the first half of this year compared to the year before.

The leadership of the Kurdish Worker's Party (PKK/KADEK) has not only rejected the partial amnesty that was passed for repentant "terrorists". So far, the amnesty has only been taken up by people already imprisoned whose links to the PKK itself are questionable. Although the law was directed at militants still active for the organisation, there has been barely any response from such layers. In addition, the PKK/KADEK has threatened to renew its "war" against Turkey in September.

With regard to the dispatch of troops to Iraq, the government only stands to lose. Should parliament agree to send troops without a UN mandate to defend the American occupation against Iraqi resistance, then the AKP will find itself discredited in the eyes of the people and a large portion of its own supporters. Should parliament vote against, as it did once before, then the AKP's relationship with the US and its own generals will be ruined.

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