

Turkey: A new military intervention in the making

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Two weeks ago the high command of the Turkish military, with the full support of President Ahmet Necdet Sezer, launched a new campaign against the moderate Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) government. The campaign takes place within the context of US war preparations against Iran and a general increase of anti-Islamic propaganda in all Western countries. Without offering the slightest support for the reactionary AKP government, one must recognize that this military intervention represents a genuine threat to the Turkish population.

On October 1 Sezer told parliament on the first day of the new legislative year, “The danger of Islamist reaction is one of the threats against our internal security. Those who cannot easily comprehend the Islamic reactionary threat in Turkey should analyze developments in Turkey over the past 20 years and see how social and personal life has evolved.” He added, “It can be seen that the reactionary threat has not changed its objective of altering the basic characteristics of the state.”

Sezer’s unspoken message to the leadership of the AKP was very clear: “When you broke with the leader of the Welfare Party, Necmettin Erbakan, and launched the AKP in 2001, you claimed you had changed and this new party would not be an Islamist party, but rather a mainstream party of the moderate-conservative right. We have been watching you closely since November 2002 and now we have no doubt that you have merely changed your tactics, while your main goal—i.e. transforming the secular republic into an Islamic republic—remains the same.”

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan immediately responded to Sezer’s comments during his recent visit to the United States, saying, “I see no threat of Islamic fundamentalism in Turkey.” In his speech at Georgetown University, Erdogan noted, “The Turkish armed forces must act according to legal boundaries set by the Constitution.”

However, just a day after Sezer’s speech, the chief of general staff, General Yasar Buyukanit, gave a speech at a ceremony marking the beginning of the new year at the military academy that was full of harsh criticisms and accusations aimed at the AKP government, as well as the national police, some intellectuals and other organisations. Buyukanit’s statements leave no doubt that Sezer’s speech was just a prelude, and that the Turkish military is once again thrusting itself actively into political life.

Even before Sezer spoke, all three commanders-in-chief of the armed forces signalled what was to come. They argued that without an independent army Turkey would drift towards radical Islamism.

The head of the land forces, General Ilker Basbug (who will take up the post of chief of general staff in two years) declared, “Protecting our republic’s principles has nothing to do with domestic politics. It is a duty given to the armed forces laid down by law. Those who

compare the Turkish armed forces with the armies of other countries are not aware of the facts of Turkish society and its history.”

Neither Sezer nor Buyukanit directly accused the government of being Islamist, but urged it to take severe and immediate measures against radical Islamism. Like Basbug, Buyukanit emphasized that ‘protecting the republic’ is an indispensable part of the military’s duty laid down by the Constitution. This was a direct response to Erdogan’s remarks. He added, “I am a soldier, and I am carrying out the duties given to me by law. As soldiers, we have nothing to do with politics. However, if some people are disturbed by our assessments on security and regime, then that is their concern.”

Buyukanit also indirectly attacked parliamentary speaker Bulent Arinc (AKP), who suggested that a redefinition of secularism is needed. Without mentioning Arinc’s name, the general said, “Aren’t there those who at every opportunity express the need to redefine secularism? Are they not in the most senior positions of the state? If you cannot answer ‘no’ to these questions, then there is a threat of Islamic fundamentalism in Turkey, and every measure must be taken against this threat.”

Mehmet Ali Birand, a well-known Turkish journalist, wrote in the *Turkish Daily News* on October 3, “Buyukanit’s stance on secularism was very clear: ‘The future of the regime is my responsibility.’”

Buyukanit and Sezer were joined in their criticism by the main opposition party, the Republican People’s Party (CHP). CHP leader Deniz Baykal addressed his parliamentary group and said what the generals and Sezer cannot say openly for the time being: “Recently a group that lacks any concept of secularism has come to power. There has not been the emergence of any group, which has intentionally and systematically opposed the essence of secularism, since the time of Celal Bayar and Adnan Menderes.” The reference to Menderes is particularly significant, as he and two of his former cabinet members were tried and executed following the military coup of May 27 1960.

According to the journalist Birand, “Buyukanit gave the impression with his speech that he wants to form a bloc against the AKP government. ... The blocs have been formed. On the one side are the Republican People’s Party (CHP), the TSK [Turkish Armed Forces] and President Ahmet Necdet Sezer. If both sides remain firm in their stance and show no sign of flexibility, I can say bad days await our country.”

Buyukanit replaced Hilmi Özkök as chief of general staff in August this year. While Özkök was considered a “democrat,” who accepted the elected government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the political reforms demanded by the European Union, Buyukanit has close connections with the most right-wing factions of the military, which regard the AKP with distrust and would rather forgo EU membership

than accept a diminished political role for the military.

In the course of his military career the 66-year-old Buyukanit occupied top positions within NATO and established excellent relations with the United States. Following his graduation from the Army Staff College in 1972 and serving as an instructor there for five years, he worked for military intelligence at the NATO headquarters in Belgium. During the first Gulf war, his American friends brought him into the NATO command in Naples, where he directed the intelligence service. In 1992 he went back to Turkey, taking up a leading position on the general staff. In 1996 he was put in charge of all military operations against the Kurdish PKK (Kurdish Workers Party).

Although the AKP also incorporated former members of traditional right-wing parties, especially the ANAP (Motherland Party), into its structures, the vast majority of its leaders have a hard-line Islamist background. Most of them belonged to the banned Welfare and Virtue (FP) Party. After the AKP's election victory in 2002 the armed forces chiefs adopted a wait-and-see attitude towards the new government. Although tensions arose from time to time, the AKP leadership has been quite careful to avoid a clash with the military.

This was also its reaction to the most recent attacks. The AKP leadership kept calm and preferred not to react immediately. Erdogan told the Turkish daily *Hurriyet* that he is ready to discuss their concerns with the military. "I have always said we should avoid attitudes that strain the country," he said. But he also made a small countermove by saying, "We should resolve the problems through talks among ourselves and not [by speaking out] in front of the public."

Nevertheless the recent ultimatum-type speeches clearly demonstrate that unless the AKP government makes substantial concessions to the army (such as electing a secularist figure as president next year) this period of tolerance has come to an end.

Not accidentally this period was also the time during which Turkey had a realistic hope of becoming a full member of the European Union (EU). Among the main political demands of the EU were limitations of the political power of the military and a "peaceful solution of the Kurdish question"—i.e. integration of Kurdish nationalists into the political process. But while EU reforms have mainly brought more hardship for the Turkish masses, it has also become increasingly clear that the EU does not want Turkey as a member.

This has emboldened forces like Buyukanit, who has made no secret of the fact that he is unwilling to give up the power and privileges of the military for the sake of the EU. He angrily rejected criticisms by EU enlargement commissioners Hansjörg Kretschmer and his successor Ollie Rehn, who emphasized that the military has to be subordinated to civilian control.

In addition, the campaign of the Bush administration against "Islamic fascism and terrorism" shows that there are other options for Turkey than the EU.

It is significant that the United States named ex-general (and lobbyist for the arms industry) Joseph Ralston as coordinator for the struggle against the PKK in northern Iraq around the time when Buyukanit was inaugurated as new chief of staff. When the PKK reacted with a unilateral ceasefire, this was welcomed by the EU as a first step, but dismissed by the US. Ralston said that the military option against the PKK was on the table. Accordingly Buyukanit declared that the PKK had no other option than surrendering to Turkish justice. The army would fight on "until not a single armed terrorist was left." This statement was made after Prime Minister

Erdogan had said that if the PKK kept its word there would be no military operation without apparent reason.

At present the AKP enjoys a huge parliamentary majority—363 out of 550 seats. Thanks to the anti-democratic 10 percent threshold (a party must receive that percentage of the vote to be represented in parliament), 34.3 percent of the total vote was enough to win a landslide victory. So it will not be an easy matter for the army to force the AKP from power.

The weakness and instability of the Turkish bourgeoisie, however, has recurrently brought the military to the foreground. If this newly launched campaign inaugurates a military intervention into Turkish political life, than it will be the fifth occasion within 46 years. The Turkish army staged no less than three coups between 1960 and 1980. Although they all had their own peculiarities, the first three putsches were all direct interventions to oust existing governments.

In addition to these three classical coups, in June 1997 the army removed the Islamist Welfare Party-led coalition government with the threat of a military takeover. Without a direct military intervention President Suleyman Demirel then passed on the baton to Mesut Yilmaz of ANAP, who formed a minority government, in coalition with the Bulent Ecevit's DSP (Democratic Left Party) and with outside support from the CHP.

Some journalists called this military intervention a "post-modern coup." In order to avoid the word "coup" many preferred to call it the "February 28 process," after the military presented an ultimatum to the Erbakan led coalition government at the National Security Council on February 28, 1997.

The February 28 military intervention was a carefully planned operation and supported explicitly and implicitly by the bourgeois media (except the Islamist media), many of the political parties, business organisations, trade unions, women's groups, intellectuals etc. Even one army general overtly explained the importance of this mobilisation by calling their civilian props "unarmed forces."

This alliance of "unarmed forces" was directly led by big business organisations and spokesmen—namely the Turkish Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association (TUSIAD) and the Union of Chambers of Commerce (TTOBB). The Turkish Trade Union Confederation (Turk-Is), and the Revolutionary Trade Union Confederation (DISK) also took part—albeit from the sidelines.

It is impossible to predict which direction this recently launched military intervention will take in the near future. But three things are very clear. Firstly, this new military intervention will further undermine the weak and decrepit forces of Turkish bourgeois democracy by opening the road for the domination of political life by more right-wing and fascist forces. Secondly, the new regime will resort to increasingly repressive measures to suppress the demands of masses of working people called upon to foot the bill. And finally, only an independent socialist political movement of the working class and other layers of working and oppressed people, based on a truly internationalist programme, can stop these successive disasters and build a just and genuine democracy in Turkey.



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