

Germany: Guantánamo detainee Murat Kurnaz and the politics of the SPD

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6 February 2007

Following two terms in office by the government led by Gerhard Schröder, broad layers of voters in Germany know that the politics of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) are anything but social. Under the SPD and the Greens, the most comprehensive welfare cuts and the biggest redistribution of wealth took place since the establishment of the Federal Republic after World War Two. Now, following the return of 24-year-old Murat Kurnaz from his Guantánamo detention, it is also clear that the politics of the SPD are anything but democratic.

Murnat Kurnaz, who grew up in the German city of Bremen, was detained and abused for four years at the US detention camp in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. His treatment and the handling of his case by leading SPD politicians reveal a frightening disdain for democratic principles. For the SPD, such constitutionally protected rights as the presumption of innocence, habeas corpus and prohibitions against physical and mental abuse are meaningless.

In this regard, their attitude differs only by degree, but not in principle, from that of the Bush administration, which in the name of the “war against terrorism” has kidnapped, abducted, abused, tortured and “disappeared” suspects all over the world.

It has now been clearly established that up to its last days in office, the SPD-Green Party government used every trick at its disposal to prevent the release of Kurnaz from Guantánamo and his return to Germany—this despite the fact that he was being kept under conditions amounting to torture and that his innocence was well known. There was no evidence to incriminate him, and an American court had attested to his innocence. German officials who had interviewed him in Guantánamo in 2002 were also convinced of his innocence.

But this was not enough. Following Kurnaz’s release and return to his family in Germany, the secret service monitored him for months. Responsibility for this now lies with Germany’s current grand coalition government of the SPD and Christian Democrats (CDU), and specifically Interior Minister Wolfgang Schäuble (CDU).

The SPD has refused to acknowledge any wrongdoing on its part or change its attitude towards Kurnaz. Old accusations against him are now being rehashed in order to exonerate the present foreign minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD), who as chief of staff in the chancellery of Gerhard Schröder bears personal responsibility for the unrelenting treatment Kurnaz faced. Last week, when Kurnaz gave evidence before a parliamentary committee of inquiry, SPD deputies confronted him with long-since disproved accusations of having contact with Al Qaeda and the Taliban. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* described the argumentation employed by leading SPD figures as an “infamous line of defence.”

Foreign Minister Steinmeier denies any fault, claiming that “given the then available information,” the decision not to let Kurnaz re-enter Germany was correct. He said also that “he would not take a different decision today.”

Former chancellor Schröder has spoken out as well in support of Steinmeier, telling one paper, “In the situation at that time he acted correctly and in conformity with the line for which I was responsible.” “I also would not have taken any other decision against the background of the events at that time,” he said.

Schröder’s interior minister Otto Schily (SPD) remained equally unrepentant. His ministry had developed the line that Germany bore no responsibility for Kurnaz because he possesses Turkish nationality,

although he has spent his entire life in Germany. Former foreign minister Joschka Fischer (Green Party), whose ministry was also involved in the Kurnaz case, is remaining silent.

The case of Kurnaz reveals a cruel bureaucratic callousness, recalling the worst periods of German history, combined with a disdain for elementary legal principles.

When the SPD-Green Party government sought to justify the first-ever postwar international deployment of German forces in Yugoslavia or Afghanistan, it repeatedly invoked human rights, international law and Germany's "historic" responsibility following the Nazis' extermination of the Jews. But when the human rights of a young worker were being clearly flouted, it has hidden behind bureaucratic excuses and refused to defend him.

Such contempt for basic democratic rights on the part of the SPD must be taken as a warning.

In contrast to the US or France, Germany has minimal bourgeois-democratic traditions. When the bourgeoisie emerged as the dominant class, Germany's conservative and liberal parties established themselves behind the Prussian state of Kaiser Wilhelm. Only the social democrats fought consistently for democracy. At that time, however, the SPD was a Marxist party and understood that the struggle for democratic rights was a component of the fight for a socialist society.

The first quasi-democratic German constitution—the Weimar constitution of 1919—was not the result of a victorious bourgeois revolution but of a suppressed proletarian revolution. The SPD had allied itself with the paramilitary *Freikorps* (the forerunner to Hitler's Brownshirts) in order to drown Germany's 1918 November Revolution in blood. The military and significant sections of the bourgeoisie rejected the Weimar constitution. The SPD defended it—but predominantly against opposition from the working class. Starting in 1930, the SPD supported a semi-dictatorial regime that governed by means of emergency decrees, thus helping to open the road to power for Hitler.

After the fall of the Nazi regime in 1945, the SPD presented itself as the defender of the "Basic Law" (as Germany's postwar constitution is called) and the fundamental rights guaranteed therein. This was also directed predominantly against criticism from the left.

In 1972, Willy Brandt, the first postwar social democratic chancellor, issued the so-called "decree against radicals," which branded socialists as "enemies of the constitution," who then faced disqualification from public service jobs such as teaching.

Today, the SPD unscrupulously ignores fundamental constitutional rights. The only party in Germany that was been established in the fight for democracy and social equality violates the most elementary democratic principles. This means that in the camp of official politics there is no longer any constituency prepared to defend democratic rights.

The sharp polarisation of society, the increasing gulf between the rich and poor, is incompatible with democracy. The treatment of Murat Kurnaz shows what threatens workers and young people who rebel against iniquity and social inequality. Today, the defence of democracy and democratic rights, like the defence of social gains, requires the building of an independent political movement of the working class that fights for a socialist society.



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