

Political tensions increase as Turkish presidential elections approach

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As presidential elections approach, Turkey's political tensions are continuing to intensify both domestically, between the Kemalist establishment and the moderate Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) government, as well as internationally, between the Turkish establishment and the Iraqi Kurds.

The Turkish military is decisively leading both campaigns with support from the "unarmed forces," a euphemism invented to describe supporters of the military within influential business and political circles. The principal protagonists of these forces are Deniz Baykal of Republican People's Party (CHP), the main opposition leader, and the outgoing president Ahmet Necdet Sezer. It also includes the Kemalist Thought Association (ADD) and the Association for Supporting Modern Life (CYDD), which are both by-products of the events of February 28, 1997, when the military intervened to oust a coalition government led by the Islamic-based Welfare Party.

The head of ADD, Sener Eruygur, is a former general. Democratic Left Party (DSP), and the Social Democrat People's Party (SHP) also supported a march organized by the "unarmed forces" late last year. CHP has long been acting as the civilian spokesman of the Turkish military. In short, all the social democratic or "left-wing Kemalist" parties, are included.

Less prominent members of this camp are 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) are also active together with Kemalist-Maoist Workers Party of Dogu Perincek. President Ahmet Necdet Sezer (who does not have a party affiliation) also sides frequently with the military against the government.

It appears that the strategy of the military is to heighten tensions domestically while capitalizing on the deteriorating Kurdish situation in the east to increase pressure on the elected AKP government before the general elections currently set for November. In addition, the first round of parliamentary voting in the presidential elections is scheduled for April 27.

The AKP government represents the moderate wing of political Islam in Turkey. It was elected on November 3, 2004, with 34 percent of the vote, a large enough margin to form a single party government. It lost some of its base after establishing close relationships with International Monetary Fund (IMF) and implementing far reaching austerity measures on behalf of the big business. Despite this, the government still enjoys a measure of public support partly due to its relative success in stabilizing the country's financial situation, after 30 years of uninterrupted high inflation. The latest polls show that the AKP enjoys the support of 25 to 30 percent of the electorate. This level of support makes it very difficult to topple an elected government via an outright military intervention and hence comes the critical role played by the "unarmed forces."

A common feature of these forces, armed or otherwise, is their determination to whip up a nationalist mood throughout the country. In so

doing they seek to exploit the international situation. The US aggression in Iraq has destabilized Turkey's neighbors and created an environment that the political establishment has used to spread chauvinist and nationalist sentiments. Similarly, the brushing aside of Turkey in the accession talks with the EU and the subsequent nationalist rhetoric from both sides—especially the use of Kurdish, Armenian and Cyprus questions by the EU as a means of pressure—played into the hands of the nationalists in Turkey.

There is growing social unrest in eastern Turkey within the predominantly Kurdish population. Social unrest in the region has intensified since the Semdinli events of November 9, 2005, when police intelligence officers (JIT) were caught in a provocative bombing campaign against the civilian population and General Yasar Buyukanit, the current chief of general staff, publicly praised one of the bombers.

Last month, during the Kurdish New Year (Newroz) celebrations there were many banners supporting the PKK (Kurdish Workers Party—the Kurdish nationalist guerilla organisation) and pictures of Abdullah Ocalan, the former PKK leader currently jailed by Turkey—despite the ban on such Kurdish symbols. Since ending its 15-year long military campaign towards the end of the 1990s and fruitless attempts to curry favor with Turkish establishment, the PKK has now increased its military and political activity inside Turkey. In response, there are reports that Turkish military has drawn up a 250,000-strong contingency force in the southeast region to combat the PKK near the Iraqi border. Buyukanit said on Thursday that an all out offensive has started against PKK. On April 8, Kurdish rebels killed nine members of Turkish security forces.

There is a growing threat that the Turkish army will invade northern Iraq in the coming days to clamp down on PKK forces in their Iraqi safe haven. As a result, tensions between Ankara, Washington and the Kurdish leaders in northern Iraq, namely Barzani and Talabani, have been growing over the last few months. Last month witnessed a harsh clash of words between Ankara and Kurdish leaders, particularly Barzani, the president of the Kurdish autonomous zone in northern Iraq.

The high point in this campaign was a press conference by Chief of General Staff Buyukanit on Thursday attended by all military force commanders in uniform. He accused the EU of "inventing" minorities in Turkey, but made no direct criticism of the US. Buyukanit instead declared that a cross-border operation to northern Iraq was necessary and that the Turkish military was ready to move, but he emphasized that the go-ahead was a political decision. This provoked defiant responses from Iraqi Kurdish leaders, as well as conciliatory noises from Washington.

Kemal Kerkuki, vice-president of Kurdish autonomous zone in northern Iraq, remarked that "a military operation on Kurdish regional soils would constitute a declaration of war directly against Iraq." He said that there was no basis for claims by Turkey that the PKK is receiving military and economic aid from the northern Iraqi government.

This comes on top of Barzani's remarks in an interview made at the end of February but broadcast only recently in which he said that if Turkey

interferes with Kurdish plans to attach the oil-rich Iraqi city of Kirkuk to the Kurdish autonomous zone, Iraq's Kurds would retaliate by intervening in southeast Turkey, where the PKK mainly operates.

After Barzani's remarks Ankara sent an official ultimatum to the Iraqi government. Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdullah Gul said they will do "whatever is necessary" unless Baghdad responds "as expected." Spokesman for the ministry said that the ultimatum asks for border security and the capture of members of the PKK and their return to Turkey.

After this Washington immediately stepped in. Having acknowledged that the PKK must be dealt with, US State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said this should not be done unilaterally by Turkey. Washington has also criticized Barzani for not being helpful in dampening down the crisis. Assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs Dan Fried went further and accused Barzani of being "unwise."

In the past, Washington has issued harsher reactions against Turkish threats to undertake military intervention in northern Iraq. This time, however, they have clearly taken into account the fragile domestic political situation in Turkey due to the imminent presidential elections and the general elections later this year.

Should the AKP government follow Buyukanit proposal and order a cross-border operation, it would lead to a break between the AKP and the US. If not, the AKP could be attacked for capitulating to Kurdish "separatism."

The crisis between Iraqi Kurds and Turkey could hardly come at a better time for the military. The military had exerted enormous pressure on the AKP government with regard to the election of the new president of Turkey. AKP leader and current prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has long indicated his ambitions for the presidential seat. Now, the military is putting pressure on the AKP government to allow a cross-border military operation, thus pushing the AKP into a political mine field just before the presidential election.

The president is elected by the parliament for a seven-year term in office and holds some important powers such as appointing rectors of universities, the members of the Higher Education Council, the members and the chairman of the state Supervisory Council, the members of the Constitutional Court and one-fourth of the members of the Council of State. He also appoints the Chief Public Prosecutor and the Deputy Chief Public Prosecutor of the Higher Court of Appeals, the members of the Military High Court of Appeals, the members of the Supreme Military Administrative Court and the members of the Supreme Council of Judges and Public Prosecutors. These are the strongholds of the Kemalist establishment and in a space of seven years with an Islamist President, Islamists could seize them all one by one.

For his part, CHP leader Baykal chose to attack Erdogan personally, accusing him of referring to then PKK leader Ocalan as "Mr. Ocalan" on January 15, 2000, long before he became prime minister. The acronym "Mr" in Turkey is exclusively reserved for respected members of the society. Erdogan, on his part, managed to brush away this flimsy attack. Even though the claim went to court based on Article 215 of Turkish Penal Code for the "crime" of "praising a crime and the criminal," Erdogan was soon acquitted of all charges.

Other attempts are desperately being made. In particular, the idea of reinterpreting the constitution came to fore. It is being argued that two thirds of the parliamentary majority is required to "open" the session to elect the president. AKP currently holds 354 parliamentary seats and the presidential candidate cannot vote. By this logic, AKP would be short of 14 seats to elect the president outright. AKP argues that in 1989 during the election of 8th President Turgut Ozal, the session was opened with a majority below two thirds. Against this, CHP asserts that "a bad example cannot be the rule."

The nationalism that has been deliberately whipped up since 2005 is

now expected to play a decisive role in the decisions of the AKP. It has already produced an atmosphere of intimidation by dragging writers, translators, activists and other intellectuals into the courts, not to mention open political opponents of the state. The stage has now been set for a confrontation with AKP if Erdogan insists on himself or another Islamist taking the summit of the state power in Turkey.

A similar episode occurred in 1997. After an ultimatum to weaken the religious training schools the military put pressure on the Islamist-led government to implement eight years of uninterrupted compulsory primary education. On May 1997 hundreds of thousands Islamists attended a huge demonstration in Istanbul as a display of power, and in the wake of this demonstration Dogu Ergil of *Turkish Daily News* wrote, "as the latest Sultanahmet demonstration proves, they can rally together and bring one million people onto the streets with a snap of the fingers." However this counter attack by Islamist forces backfired when the military and the "secularist" front used it as further proof of an immediate reactionary threat.

It appears that AKP would like to avoid such a confrontation. This time, however, the Kemalist establishment organized a demonstration against the Islamist government. Saturday's "Republic Rally" organized by ADD and supported by CHP, DSP, IP, trade union federation Turk-Is, but also right-wing extremist MHP (Nationalist Movement Party, "Grey wolves"), managed to bring "hundreds of thousands" to the streets according to the organizers, mainly from middle-class and well educated layers. Some estimates put numbers at 100,000 to 200,000.

This was a large demonstration by any measure but it came after two years of sustained campaigning against the government. Last Friday, president Sezer himself tacitly supported the campaign by declaring before military commanders, "Since the foundation of the Republic Turkey's political regime has never been under this much threat ... For the first time in history the fundamental values of the Republic has been questioned and both domestic and foreign forces seek Turkey to conform to the model of conservative Islam."

In a thinly veiled warning against an AKP president, Sezer said, "The President represents the Republic's principles and constitution. In other words, these principles and constitution defines the red lines of the Turkish Republic's regime." Buyukanit at his press conference on Thursday said almost the same, "We hope that someone who truly respects the principles of the republic [becomes president], not someone who pretends to do so."

After the demonstration, Erdogan did not appear unduly impressed and remarked calmly that he was "happy to see a peaceful demonstration like this in a democratic Turkey." In the Islamist media there were no signs of panic.

In the face of growing pressure, Erdogan made a minor concession in November 2006 by saying, "I have no bet to become the president." However he ruled out the possibility of appointing someone outside of the parliament, "Selecting an external candidate for presidency is an example of helplessness. We will not be in such a helpless situation."

Since then AKP has tried to keep a low profile and avoid any clash with the military. The party announced it would not select its presidential candidate until April 25—the day before the deadline—in order to limit controversy.

The Kemalist establishment argues that if elected as president, the Islamists will usurp the regime and change the character of the state. There is a grain of truth in this; however, history shows that the interventionist methods currently promoted by the Kemalists have consistently strengthened the Islamic parties. After the 1980 military coup, Turgut Ozal came to power—a man with close links to political Islamist circles. After the February 28, 1997, military intervention, the Islamists swept to power with the AKP in the elections of 2002.

The root cause of the rise of the Islamic parties is the betrayal of

Stalinism and collapse of bourgeois nationalism in Turkey and internationally, which has created a huge political vacuum that is being exploited by the reactionary religious and ethnic nationalist political tendencies. In the parliamentary elections of 2002, more than ninety percent of all parliamentarians were voted out of office at a time when parliament was dominated by the Kemalist clique.

The Kemalists represent the corrupt state bureaucracy, army and the traditional big banks and corporations, while the Islamists represent newer bourgeois layers who are no less ruthless, but keen to break up the established structures in order make their own enrichment easier. There is nothing progressive in either camp. The campaign of nationalism and repression by the Kemalists under the battle cry of secularism is in the final analysis directed against the democratic rights of the working class.



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