

Turkey: Political allies of military move to unseat moderate Islamist government

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Last week the leadership of the Republican People's Party's (CHP) publicly announced that its election strategy to unseat the ruling moderate Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) would be based on criticisms of government corruption and the practice of parliamentary immunity. According to the declaration, the CHP leadership and its temporary ally, the Democratic Left Party (DSP), will emphasise that the AKP has failed to deal with these two closely interlinked issues, although they promised the opposite to the Turkish electorate before the 2002 national elections.

Recently Cevdet Selvi, deputy leader of the CHP, gave an interview to the *Turkish Daily News* and maintained that Turkey's most important problem is corruption, and the fight against corruption should begin by stripping the immunity enjoyed by parliamentarians. Selvi said, "We are going to explain to our people during the election campaign that removing immunity will be the first thing we will be doing once we come to power. All our candidates gave the party a written statement that reads, 'Remove my immunity if I enter parliament.' This is the policy of CHP."

In addition to Selvi's remarks, someone from the top echelons of CHP told the TDN that, "Baykal and Sezer's [Zeki Sezer, leader of DSP, which recently decided to form an election bloc with CHP] first success is achieving a long-awaited unity on the left. They will build their strategy on that and we will attack the ruling AKP for their failure in tackling corruption and removing immunity." The two leaders launched their joint campaign on May 26 with a rally in Mersin, a large city on the Mediterranean coast of southern Turkey.

Articles 83 (parliamentary immunity) and 84 (loss of membership) of the constitution grant immunities to the members of parliament, thus they cannot be arrested, interrogated or taken to trial unless there is a decision by parliament to strip a lawmaker of this immunity. Before the 2002 elections, almost all political parties, including the AKP, promised to narrow the scope of immunity for parliamentarians. However, in the four and half years since the AKP became the ruling party with a comfortable majority in parliament it has not taken any initiative on this pledge.

Evidently, the AKP leadership drew the lessons from recent history realising that immunity might protect it from attacks targeting the party and enabled it to maintain an absolute majority in parliament. As Gurcan Kocan from Istanbul Technical University and Simon Wigley from Bilkent University correctly explained in 2005, "Given the shutdown of its predecessor

conservative parties, the Welfare Party (Refah Partisi, RP) in 1998 and the Virtue Party (Fazilet Partisi, FP) in 2001, and the four-month imprisonment of its leader Tayyip Erdogan in 1999 for an allegedly seditious speech, the AKP will argue that it has good reason to fear the consequences of narrowing the immunity, even if that appears to contradict its anti-corruption stance. From their point of view, curtailing immunity based on public concerns over corruption might only serve to play into the hands of the secular establishment." ("Democracy and the politics of parliamentary immunity in Turkey," *New Perspectives on Turkey*, no. 33 (2005): 121-43.)

The AKP government was elected in November 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 the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and implementing far-reaching austerity measures on behalf of big business. Despite this, the government still enjoys a measure of public support because of the discrediting of the official secular parties and its relative success in stabilizing the country's financial situation, after 30 years of uninterrupted high inflation. Recent 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 that is why Turkey's mainstream secular parties are launching an anti-corruption campaign to remove it.

Coming from these long-standing bourgeois parties charges of illicit government activity are hypocritical, to say the least. For decades both right- and "left-wing" versions of these parties ruled the country through coalition governments well known for pervasive corruption. Needless to say, the AKP government has not been totally free from corruption; however, its actions are no more egregious than its predecessors.

At first sight the focus on such narrow issues seems quite bizarre when the country has been virtually paralyzed by a months-long political crisis, with repeated talk of a possible military coup, including a letter threatening the AKP government issued by the military on April 27.

Contributing to this deepening crisis are significant problems and risks accumulating in the economy. The unemployment rate continues to be very high despite successive reports of high rates of economic growth—a direct product of speculative capital inflows. If significant international economic shocks take place Turkey could be plunged into an acute debt crisis, given its

unsustainable current account deficit, which surpassed 8 percent of the GDP last year. Such a financial crisis would immediately turn into an overall economic crisis as it did in February 2001.

Neither the CHP nor any other bourgeois party has any means to prevent such a scenario, let alone resolve the intense social problems that confront masses of working people. Whatever the form of the government that will take shape after the July 22, 2007 national elections—whether it is led by a right-wing or nominally “left-wing” bourgeois party—it is guaranteed to pursue the same anti-working class austerity measures as those demanded by the IMF, the World Bank and the European Union.

The CHP’s anti-corruption campaign highlights the crisis of all of the bourgeois parties in Turkey, which, like their counterparts throughout the rest of the world, are unable to maintain a mass base of popular support, particularly as they carry out the demands of the global financial market for the dismantling of existing social reforms. Under these conditions the CHP has increasingly rested on sections of the military and functioned as its mouthpiece, particularly since top generals signalled their plans for a new military intervention last August.

The CHP’s campaign is an organic part of the ongoing fifth military episode—after the military coups in 1960, 1971 and 1980 and the ouster of the Erbakan government in 1997. It is a calculated move to intensify the attack of the “secularist” camp—led by the military—against the AKP, which, in the face of the reactionary policies of the secular bourgeois parties still enjoys a large measure of popular support.

A few months ago the leader of the fascist National Movement Party (MHP), Devlet Bahçeli, explicitly warned that if Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan insisted on becoming the next president, a “regime crisis” could evolve and the country could end up in “interim governance.” He went even further and threatened the AKP by saying that the next parliament would carry out a “treason” inquiry against Erdoğan to remove him. He has repeated these threats several times over the last few weeks. It is unlikely that Bahçeli initiated these threats alone. There are strong historical links between the fascist MHP and top military generals.

More evidence that such a strategy is taking shape to destabilize the AKP was provided by the retired diplomat, *Radikal* columnist and new MHP candidate Gunduz Aktan. Aktan recently wrote, “The AKP should stop the election of the president without having consensus. If they want a solution for the party’s problem with the regime they should select parliamentary candidates accordingly. The AKP should declare that they recognize the Turkish identity as the supra-identity. If it is laic as they claim, the party should prove by word and action that they adopt all the elements in the 24th article of the Constitution. Otherwise, it will lose. Besides election and military coup, there are other ways to lose, not objected to by the West...”

Aktan’s comments leave no room for doubt. What he wrote perfectly matches with rumours about preparations for a court case to close down the AKP for good, if the military finds this essential. Another option is taking the leaders of the AKP to court for existing or new cases. These two tactics are not mutually exclusive and could be used against the AKP simultaneously.

On the very same day the CHP declared that corruption and

immunity will be its major campaign themes, Anatolia news agency reported that a prosecutor has launched a probe into claims of corruption during the presidential election process in parliament, which have been put forward by the CHP.

Just before and after the first round of voting for the new president in parliament, Baykal and Motherland Party (ANAVATAN) leader Erkan Mumcu claimed that their deputies were offered money in return for attending the parliamentary session. Moreover Baykal said earlier that a businessman and a very close friend of Erdoğan offered money to some of the CHP deputies-i.e., tried to bribe them.

There are pending lawsuits against many of the AKP leaders, including Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül, which have been postponed until the end of the parliamentary term. Removing immunity would certainly open the way for eliminating the leaders of the AKP through court cases.

During the last couple of days there was a debate over swimsuit advertisement bans in Istanbul. According to the news reports, swimsuit manufacturers have prepared billboard advertisements for the approaching summer season, which were turned down by the Istanbul municipality controlled by the AKP. The media reacted fiercely, with *Vatan* asking, “Will this become a land of the mullahs, like Iran?”

A spokesman for the municipal government denied the ban was for religious reasons, claiming the AKP was concerned with protecting the “aesthetics” of the city and preventing distractions that could cause traffic accidents. “Istanbul, after all, is a historical city,” Ahmet Faruk Yanardag told Reuters, adding, “We have to make sure these photos are placed in appropriate places for advertising purposes,” he said.

Several papers also mentioned that all these accusations have already been included in a dossier the public prosecutor’s office has submitted to the country’s highest court as evidence against the AKP. The German magazine *Der Spiegel* wrote, “There are rumours in Ankara, *Sabah* writes, that the investigation could even lead to proceedings to ban the AKP—a dream for their opponents, perhaps, but not likely ever to happen.”

Der Spiegel misses the point. The strategy of the military and its civilian supporters is clear: remove the immunity protection, take the leaders of the AKP to court and close down the party if necessary.



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