

As the Turkish military provocatively shells northern Iraq

Social tensions at the forefront in run-up to Turkish parliamentary elections

Sinan Ikinici, Justus Leicht
21 July 2007

On Sunday, July 22, Turkey will vote for a new parliament. The fact that these elections are taking place in July and not, as scheduled, in November is a reflection of the profound divisions in Turkish society. The Turkish army has sought to directly intervene and increase tensions in the run-up to the election by deliberately shelling Kurdish-occupied positions in northern Iraq on Wednesday. While the Iraqi government condemned the shelling, the Turkish government led by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has so far refused to criticise the military provocation.

The snap elections were called after the parliamentary opposition boycotted the election of a new Turkish president from the ranks of the ruling, moderate Islamist AKP (Party for Justice and development) led by Erdogan. The opposition was supported by a thinly disguised threat by the Turkish military to stage a coup, should the AKP win the presidency. This initiative by the military and right-wing conservative forces received support from the country's constitutional court, which, in a blatantly political judgement, declared the presidential vote invalid due to the boycott by the minority opposition faction in the Turkish parliament.

According to most polls, the AKP is expected to win the elections with an absolute majority. Two other parties—the Kemalist CHP (Republican People's Party) of Deniz Baykal, sometimes misleadingly labelled “social democratic,” and the fascistic MHP (Nationalist Movement Party) led by Devlet Bahçeli—are likely to obtain more than the 10 percent of the vote necessary in accordance with Turkish electoral law to enter parliament. A number of “independent” deputies are also expected to enter parliament in southeastern Turkey from the Kurdish Nationalist DTP (Democratic Society Party), even though the outgoing parliament has made elections more difficult for them by a last-minute constitutional change. The DTP has concentrated on putting up independents because of Turkey's high threshold of 10 percent qualification for entry to parliament.

The AKP government is expected to win significant support from working people and the poor. The chauvinist Maoist sect led by Dogu Perincek, the Workers Party (IP), as well as Kemalist forces, claims these layers are voting for the AKP because they support its pro-US stance. This argument is nonsensical, as the overwhelming majority of the Turkish population people oppose US policies. According to this year's annual global poll by the Pew Research Centre, favourable views of the US have fallen to single digits in Turkey, which, the research institute says, has become the “most anti-US country” in the world.

Others argue that this support is based on low levels of education and the persistence of conservative Islamic beliefs. There is undoubtedly a core of support for the AKP based on a strong network of Islamic brotherhoods (*tarikats*), which has been growing recently for several reasons. For decades, these organisations have been supported by conservative and right-wing parties, associations and politicians, and following the 1980 military coup, by the army itself—with the aim of diverting growing social tensions and discontent, especially in eastern Anatolia, into reactionary religious and chauvinist channels.

Turkish peasants have suffered through the modernisation of agriculture while big landlords have profited. In the 1980s, when the failed Kemalist projects of national development were replaced by “market reforms,” the state Islamic brotherhoods were used to combat popular opposition, as well as Kurdish nationalist tendencies. The political bankruptcy of Turkey's once-influential Stalinist organisations allowed religious tendencies to exploit social grievances on the basis of appeals to “morals” and “justice.” Some of these Islamist forces eventually became quite rich and influential in the course of this process. But this only partially accounts for the support for the AKP.

Some commentators attribute the relative popularity of the AKP to the “charisma” of Recep Tayyip Erdogan. While Erdogan is a capable demagogue and wily bourgeois politician, this explains nothing by itself.

One major factor, which the AKP has been able to exploit in its election campaign, is the economic growth over recent years (an uninterrupted growth for the last 21 quarters). Broad masses of the population have not forgotten the 2001 financial crisis that led to massive job losses and widespread impoverishment. Their response at the last parliamentary elections was to punish the coalition parties, and the AKP was able to emerge as Turkey's new ruling party.

Polls at that time revealed that the majority of the population were mainly worried about the economy—i.e., the issues of unemployment, poverty etc.—and today these remain pressing problems.

There was also broad opposition to the austerity demands by the International Monetary Fund. The right-wing populist “Young Party” (GP, Genc Parti) led by the “Turkish Berlusconi,” Cem Uzan, sought to exploit this anger with a mixture of nationalism, social demagoguery and rhetoric against the IMF and the European Union. On this basis, the GP was able to receive more than 7 percent of the vote.

Many AKP voters share this hostility to the IMF. While Prime Minister Erdogan has said little publicly about the IMF, the AKP's

grassroots activists employ radical anti-IMF rhetoric to take advantage of this widespread sentiment. In fact, the country's recent economic expansion has chiefly been based on IMF loans, speculative inflows, the growth of debt and current account deficits and, above all, the increased exploitation of the working class.

The fact is that during its period of government, the AKP turned into a loyal disciple of the IMF and its austerity programme. The government rushed through the massive and swift privatisation of public assets, passed a labour law based on the employer's needs for a "flexible" work force, and launched major attacks on working people in the field of social security. At the same time, the agricultural policies of the AKP have prompted angry protests by farmers.

Erdogan often claims that foreign capital "trusts" Turkey. Though prospects for full Turkish membership in the European Union have faded—in particular since Sarkozy's election as French president—and the US still relies on its Kurdish nationalist allies in Iraq, both the EU and the US are still keen to see Turkey implement the "reforms" demanded by the EU.

The AKP government has so far resisted pressure from the armed forces, as well its nationalist civilian supporters—the so-called "unarmed forces"—for a parliamentary vote on a cross-border military operation into neighboring Iraq. The AKP is well aware of the fact that such a move could jeopardise its electoral fortunes as well as "investor confidence."

In the event of any international crisis, the fast-paced, yet fragile, economic growth in Turkey will end as it did in 1994, 1999 and 2001. Nevertheless, the government has emphasised the temporary economic recovery, and its propaganda has been taken up by much of the Turkish media, as well as the trade unions.

The reality is that this growth is not creating enough new jobs and has only stabilised the level of unemployment at 10 percent (this is the official rate for unemployment; the real rate is presumed to be higher). Some economists refer to this as jobless growth, and poverty still is prevalent. It is mainly bourgeois and upper middle-class layers who have benefited from the very fast economic growth. Nevertheless, many AKP voters still regard the present situation as preferable to the many economic crises and rampant inflation of the past.

The Islamist AKP is also able to rely on its own nationwide system of social support networks. While the central government carries out the dictates of the banks, which require painful cuts to the country's welfare provision, AKP activists intervene at a grassroots level to offer some relief by providing charitable contributions to those who are worst hit. This is a typical feature of Islamists in different parts of the world. Privatisation, market reforms, the weakening of a public school system, etc., create more and more space for such Islamist social support work.

It is possible to talk about a second or alternative economy based on such activities funded by Turkish capitalism. The exploitation of workers in this "alternative economy" of small, medium and, on occasion, large Islamic businesses is at least as intense as elsewhere. Religious ideas promoted by Tarikats (brotherhoods) are used to justify this. They serve to mobilise those poorer layers ignored by the state and promote right-wing, backward ideology.

In fact, the AKP does not represent the interests of the urban and rural poor and workers, but of reactionary layers of the so-called "Anatolian bourgeoisie" or "green capital," which rose to economic power in the 1980s under the military regime. The main slogan of the AKP was for a "Turkish-Islamic synthesis" directed against the left and working class. These layers are more envious of than hostile to

the traditional big banks and corporations allied with the corrupt bureaucracy and army of the Kemalist state. Their real hostility is reserved for the working class and poor peasantry. This is why they support the "market reforms" of the EU and IMF. Their assent to political prominence is entirely a product of the utter bankruptcy of the Kemalist establishment and the various Stalinists and trade union organisations, which have thoroughly discredited themselves with their nationalist, opportunistic policies.

Under the banner of "Kemalism" and secularism, the establishment parties have brought nothing to the masses of working people but poverty and corruption. They have discredited themselves for decades. And while they are attacking the AKP in nationalistic terms for "selling out" the country, the last governing coalition prior to the AKP—the "left-wing-Kemalist" DSP, "liberal" ANAP and fascistic MHP—also dutifully did the bidding of the IMF.

Today, the political perspective of these organisations is directed at inciting the most backward and reactionary sentiments in their campaign warning of an Islamist takeover. The leader of the neo-fascist MHP attends every public election meeting with a rope promising to re-introduce the death penalty and hang the leader of the banned PKK (Kurdish Workers' Party), Abdullah Ocalan. Not only the MHP but also the CHP is so right-wing and chauvinist that significant layers of Kurds and religious minorities such as the Jews and Armenians prefer to support the "Islamist" AKP rather than the nominally "left-wing" CHP.

The AKP does not present any progressive alternative. Erdogan's response to the MHP campaign is to ask why Bahceli did not hang Ocalan when his party was in power; and with regard to law and order, the AKP has carefully avoided any mobilisation against the right-wing nationalists and military. Having previously accused the secular establishment of firing a "bullet at democracy" by blocking the selection of Erdogan's candidate as president, the prime minister has now adopted a more conciliatory tone towards the military during campaigning. During its period in power, the AKP has massively strengthened the powers of the police and now is sporting Turkish national flags during the election campaign to make clear they are the better Turkish patriots.

It remains to be seen how the Turkish military will respond to a victory for the AKP, but what is already clear is that a further term in power by the Islamists will only serve to deepen social divisions in Turkey. None of the organisations standing in the current elections defends the interests of the working class and the poor peasantry. The political crisis calls for the urgent construction of a genuine socialist alternative—the Turkish section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



To contact the WWSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wwsws.org/contact