

Turkey: Abdullah Gül sworn in as president

Justus Leicht**6 September 2007**

On August 28, the Turkish parliament confirmed former foreign minister Abdullah Gül as the country's 11th president. Gül, from the Islamist AKP (Justice and Development Party), received the votes of 339 of the 550 deputies, 63 more than necessary. He only succeeded in a third round of voting, when an absolute majority was sufficient, having failed to gain the required two-thirds majority in the first two rounds.

Sabahattin Cakmakoglu, the candidate of the fascist Nationalist Action Party (MHP), received the support of 70 deputies; Tayfun Icli of the Democratic Left Party (DSP) received 13 votes. The Republican People's Party (CHP), which is close to the military, boycotted the vote, while deputies from the Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP) abstained.

In the spring, the Kemalist political establishment prevented Gül's election. The military threatened a putsch if a politician with Islamist roots entered the presidential palace, and CHP deputies, at that time the largest parliamentary opposition group, boycotted the vote. In a dubious legal ruling, the constitutional court then declared Gül's election invalid.

The AKP answered by initiating early parliamentary elections, which the party then won in July with a clearly increased majority. The military and their civilian allies, who for months had conducted a loud nationalist campaign against Gül, suffered a serious defeat. The CHP, under Deniz Baykal, who had appointed themselves as the voice of the generals, was clearly punished by the voters.

Nevertheless, the military is still resisting accepting the new president, who constitutionally is also commander-in-chief. On the eve of the election the general chief of staff, Yasar Büyükanıt, warned on an official army web site that the armed forces were determined to defend the separation of state and religion, and made ominous suggestions about Kurdish separatists who threatened the unity of the state, as well as referring to "centres of evil" that were trying to destroy the secular character of Turkey with "malicious plans"—a clear warning to the AKP.

After the election, prominent military figures demonstrated that they still considered themselves the masters of Turkey and did not accept the authority of the new commander-in-chief. Breaking with tradition, they did not attend the president's inauguration. In a clear breach of protocol the following day, at a ceremony in a military academy, Büyükanıt demonstratively sat down before Gül had taken his place. At this first meeting other high-ranking generals refused to salute Gül, although he had sought to avoid a confrontation by not attending the ceremony with his wife who wears the traditional Islamic headscarf.

The recently graduated young officers greeted Büyükanıt instead of Gül, and in a threatening reference to the new president the commander of the military academy, lieutenant general Necati Özbahadir, told the press the Turkish armed forces "serve only those who are integrated with the principles and revolution of Atatürk and

who are loyal to the fundamental rules of the Republic."

The Turkish president primarily plays a representative function, but nevertheless possesses considerable powers and authority. He controls his own audit unit and has extensive authority over the appointment of senior civil servants, judges and state attorneys as well as university rectors. He can veto laws and send them back to parliament for renewed consideration, and if it accepts them a second time without amendment can refer them to the constitutional court.

Gül's predecessor, the nominally nonpartisan Ahmed Necdet Sezer, made extensive use of his presidential powers and practically played the role of an opposition party. He blocked numerous laws proposed by the AKP government and had refused to appoint hundreds of officials put forward by the government. In April and May, he supported the mass demonstrations against Gül and the AKP government. After the parliamentary elections in July he refused to appoint a new government, saying his successor should do this.

Gül's smooth transition to power after a months-long war of nerves with the military was welcomed by the international press as the beginning of a new era of political stability and economic prosperity. However, the reaction of the generals shows that this impression of political stability is deceptive.

The conflict between the generals and the AKP hides many more fundamental contradictions: a sharp social polarization in Turkey, which is also increasingly involved in the struggles for power in the Middle East, something that is becoming ever more violent as a result of the crisis of the American occupation of Iraq.

Since entering government five years ago, the AKP has gained the confidence of international capital by conscientiously fulfilling the economic demands of the International Monetary Fund and the European Union. It represents the interests of the so-called "Anatolian bourgeoisie", i.e., the conservative but ambitious entrepreneurs from the provinces, who have grown economically over the last 10 to 15 years by establishing large, financially powerful holdings. The Kemalist establishment, however, has kept these layers out of state offices and the levers of power.

This "Islamic capital" stands in competition with the established banks and companies that are closely linked to the state through corruption and nepotism and is determined to break their dominance. This objective is shared by the IMF, the World Bank and the EU, which regard the old monopolies and bureaucracy as an obstacle to the penetration of international finance capital.

The AKP first won the elections in 2002, after the Turkish economy largely collapsed in 2001. It gained influence in local government by exploiting the bankruptcy of the trade unions and social reformist parties and presenting itself as the representative of the impoverished masses. Government head Recep Tayip Erdogan first became popular as mayor of Istanbul in this way.

The period of the AKP government coincided—somewhat

coincidentally—with an extremely favourable international economic situation for Turkey. By 2002, the financial markets had recovered from the Asian crisis of 1997 and international capital was again beginning to flow into developing countries like Turkey.

Within five years, some \$114 billion in foreign capital flowed into the land adjoining the Bosphorus. The economy registered substantial growth, strengthening the AKP government's position. It undercut—to a very limited extent—the influence of the military and liberalized dealings with religious minorities and the Kurds. But here, also, the practical effects remained rather limited, which did not prevent the Kemalist establishment from bitterly fighting every concession, however small, as a national betrayal.

Something similar happened in foreign policy. In its relations with the Iraqi Kurds, the AKP relied predominantly on diplomatic pressure and put a brake on the military, which was pushing for a large-scale invasion of northern Iraq. Military confrontation would have led to a conflict with the US, strengthening the extreme right and the military at home. To diminish the influence of these forces the AKP government sought rapprochement with the European Union.

But the economic upturn proved anything but harmonious. The current account deficit exploded, reaching 8 percent of GDP by the end of 2006, and making the country extremely sensitive to international business fluctuations. Above all, this growth took place at the expense of the working class, which is now demanding its share.

“Turkey is experiencing the biggest strike wave since the 1990s,” a pro-AKP newspaper recently announced under the headline “Strike wave threatens the economy.” Workers at Turkish Airlines, in the textile industry and the merchant marine are presently fighting for higher wages.

The AKP is firmly opposed to meeting any of the workers’ demands. On this question, the “Anatolian bourgeoisie” agrees with the Kemalist establishment and the military, despite their other differences. The key positions of Erdogan’s new government team have been filled by proven representatives of international capital, who have been confirmed by Güл in one of his first official duties.

On the one hand, Erdogan has kept on far more ministers than had generally been expected: 16 of 25 ministers were members of his former cabinet, with 11 continuing in the same departments.

Kemal Unakitan remains as finance minister, and has already announced further business tax cuts. He has been one of the opposition’s most important targets, since preliminary investigations for tax evasion were launched against him, which have been suspended due to his parliamentary immunity.

The new foreign minister is the 40-year-old former economics minister Ali Babacan, who is keeping his role as chief negotiator over Turkey’s EU accession. Western observers regard his appointment as foreign minister as a signal to the European Union.

Babacan studied business administration in the US. After completing a Fulbright scholarship he remained in America working as a financial advisor and only returned to Ankara in the mid-1990s in order to take over his family’s textile business. At the same time, Babacan began his political career in the city administration of the Turkish capital. He was one of the joint founders of the AKP and, at 35, was the youngest member of the cabinet. In the post of economics minister, he imposed the dictates of the IMF with iron determination against the general population.

The new economics minister is Mehmet Simsek, about whom *Financial Times Deutschland* wrote enthusiastically: “During the past two years, Simsek has worked for the US investment bank Merrill

Lynch as chief analyst for the economies of the Middle East. Simsek began his career as an advisor to the American embassy in Ankara. After posts with the major Swiss bank UBS and the Istanbul investment firm Bender, which was acquired by Deutsche Bank, he moved on to work as an analyst for Merrill Lynch in London.... His possible appointment as economics minister is viewed positively in the international financial world. ‘Simsek worked for many years for a foreign bank, therefore he knows exactly what foreign investors require. He would be a good ambassador for the Turkish economy abroad,’ said Kerim Acanal, a broker with Lehman Brothers in London.”

The new industry minister is a former president of the Ankara chamber of commerce, Zafer Caglayan. The incoming culture and tourism minister is also a man of the old elite: Ertugrul Günay, who only joined the AKP in May. Günay’s political origins are actually in the Kemalist CHP, where he rose to become secretary-general before he was expelled from the party.

Turkey faces turbulent times. While the old elite and the “Anatolian bourgeoisie” are fighting for power and influence, the AKP government is planning to launch harsh attacks against the working class in order to retain the confidence of international capital. In this, all the parliamentary groupings of the Turkish bourgeoisie are united.

For this reason, the readiness of the AKP to oppose the generals’ claims to power will be extremely limited. Already Erdogan has demonstrated he is more willing to compromise with the military than risk a mobilization and radicalization of broader layers of the Turkish population. This is the chief reason why political “liberalisation” has always been stunted and impotent.

The police, feared for their brutality and corruption, were granted new authority and powers shortly before the elections and will continue to be strengthened. This is something Abdullah Güл expressly supported in his inaugural speech, in which he referred only very generally to freedom and individual rights. Although he did make particular mention of the freedom of religion, and made reference to the founder of the Turkish state, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, he also expressed his opposition to “terrorism” and praised the army.

The crisis of the American occupation in Iraq has also unleashed a new struggle between the regional powers for supremacy in the Middle East, in which the Turkish bourgeoisie—both “Kemalist” and “Anatolian”—have no intention of taking second place to Iran and Saudi Arabia. This new scramble for power and influence can only strengthen the military and further undermine democratic rights.



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