Professor sentenced for criticising Turkish founder

Sinan Ikinci
31 January 2008

On January 28, Atilla Yayla, a professor of political science at Gazi University and the president of the Association for Liberal Thinking in Ankara, was sentenced to 15 months in jail for allegedly insulting Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Republic of Turkey. The charge arose from a speech made by Yayla in Izmir more than a year ago.

The court suspended the jail term against Professor Yayla. However, if he commits the same offence within the two-year probation period the sentence will be carried out.

On November 18, 2006, Yayla spoke on a panel in Izmir organised by the local branch of the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) and criticised the era of one-party rule from 1925 to 1945, which was chiefly led by Atatürk until his death in 1938. Yayla said that despite the official propaganda, the single-party era was not as progressive as claimed and was in some respects backward.

According to daily papers, Yayla told the court, “In that speech, I did not speak about Atatürk or his legacy. I talked about Kemalism. I said, ‘The republic is said to have saved us from the medieval ages; this is controversial.’ And as for the controversial nature of this argument, I said, ‘They [the Europeans] will ask us why there are pictures and statues of Atatürk everywhere.’ ”

In his indictment, the prosecutor claimed that Yayla insulted Atatürk’s legacy explicitly by referring to him as “this man.” According to the indictment, there were eight separate complaints about the professor.

Soon after these provocations, Gazi University fired professor Yayla over the controversy, but he was later reinstated.

Politically, Professor Yayla is a liberal, known for his deep hostility towards socialism. He regularly contributes articles to Islamist daily papers published in Turkey. Nevertheless, he has come under attack by extreme nationalist forces, particularly within the military and other sections of the state, which want to crush any expression of political dissent that might lead to a further weakening of their political and economic power.

Legal counsels representing Yayla told the press they will lodge an immediate appeal. In an interview, Yayla told the BBC he was prepared to take his case to the European Court of Human Rights, if necessary.

In an article published in the *International Herald Tribune* on December 6, 2006, Yayla explained how the campaign against him came into being. “There were only 37 participants in the panel, including a local journalist [working for *Yeni Asir*, an Izmir-based daily]. She asked whether she had misheard my statement that Kemalism was somehow backward. I replied that she had not misunderstood me, and said we needed to discuss these issues calmly and without animosity.”

The following day, *Yeni Asir* printed a report on its front page, which condemned Yayla as a traitor who “swore at and insulted Atatürk.” The piece was accompanied by a news report carrying the headline, “Wicked Words.” The paper also condemned the leaders of AKP’s Izmir branch for maintaining silence in the face of these “insults.”

In response, local AKP leaders immediately disassociated themselves from Yayla, saying they were very uncomfortable about his comments concerning Atatürk and his era. This was purely hypocritical because it is no secret that Islamists—both “moderate” and “hardliner”—hold a deep dislike of Atatürk. However, at a time when there was an ongoing campaign against them spearheaded by the Turkish military, the AKP leadership adopted this shameful

© World Socialist Web Site

opportunistic manoeuvre.

Once again, the Maoist Kemalist Workers Party played a pernicious and disgusting role. Fax messages poured into Gazi University accusing Yayla of treason and demanding that he be sacked immediately. This provocation was organised by a so-called "left-wing" Kemalist youth organisation named Youth Association of Turkey (TGB) that, behind the scenes, is controlled by the Workers Party.

On November 27, the general secretary of the TGB, Osman Yilmaz, filed an appeal to the Higher Education Board (YÖK) demanding the dismissal of Yayla from public duty and the academic profession. Before submitting the petition, Yilmaz and some of the TGB leaders held a press conference where he accused Yayla of taking up "the campaign of lies and slander of US and EU authorities against Atatürk and the Republic of Turkey."

Yilmaz maintained that making offensive statements about Atatürk doesn't fall under freedom of expression. "Nobody can hide behind freedom of expression to promote hostility against Atatürk."

The persecution of Professor Yayla clearly shows that the campaign led by the Turkish military against the Islamist government is continuing, although it suffered a huge blow with the landslide victory of the AKP at the July 22 national elections last year.

Last October, the AKP government gave the military generals a green light to conduct cross-border operations in northern Iraq against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), thereby strengthening the hand of the military domestically. This was a clear sign that the hopes voiced in liberal circles—including Professor Yayla—that the AKP would diminish the influence of the generals and introduce greater democracy, were a mere illusion.

Moreover, since the AKP came to power in 2002, soon after the devastating financial crisis of February 2001, GDP growth has averaged 6.6 percent. This was mainly due to large capital inflows driven by the low global interest rates, combined with Turkey's very high returns—i.e., arbitrage returns deriving from the difference between domestic real interest rate and annual depreciation in the foreign currency.

The period of the AKP government coincided—somewhat accidentally—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.

At a time when the world capitalist system has entered a period of intense economic and political turmoil, Turkish capitalism is very vulnerable. In addition to soaring inflation, the country is burdened by permanently widening current account and foreign trade deficits.

Certainly, the military will see this new economic period as an opportunity to re-accelerate its campaign against the AKP while the working class and other layers of people pay the price, and plunge even further into poverty and debt.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site