

Turkish municipal elections dominated by economic, political crisis

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As municipal elections scheduled for March 29 in Turkey approach, tensions within the bourgeoisie are being brought into sharp relief in the context of the current global economic crisis and internecine warfare between two factions of the ruling elite, the Islamists and Kemalists.

The Islamist ruling party—AKP (Justice and Development Party)—is drawing support from a widespread and financially strong network of Islamist media groups and has managed to take many important positions in the state apparatus, including the police, some sections of the judiciary, and the majority of universities.

The AKP has managed to rebuff the attacks engineered by the Kemalist establishment, including the military. The party has dealt a blow to its opponents through ongoing judicial actions and investigations into the activities of the so-called Ergenekon group—a cabal of ultra-nationalist military officers, intelligence agents and policemen who are accused of plotting assassinations and other measures to destabilize the country and prepare the groundwork for a coup.

A successive wave of detentions and arrests since 2007 and disclosure of the intrigues by the Turkish military and their civilian supporters through the Internet, has left these forces demoralised.

The AKP has established a sophisticated system of surveillance, which has been collecting data for at least four years. There are indications the Islamist camp is also using many of the psychological warfare tactics the Turkish state once reserved for left-wing opponents and periodically against Islamists, including misreporting and lies planted in the media.

In another action aimed at weakening the Kemalist establishment, the government's tax authorities recently handed down a massive fine for tax fraud against the Dogan Media Group, demanding the sum of TL826

million (€368 million or US\$500 million).

As a bourgeois party, the AKP has never contemplated mobilising the working masses against the anti-democratic efforts to remove it from government. On the contrary, it fears a movement from below—which would threaten the wealth and property of Turkey's elite—far more than the danger of another military dictatorship.

This fact underscores the basic truth that the mobilisation of the working class on the basis of a genuinely international socialist program is the only way to secure genuine democracy in Turkey.

As the representative of a wing of the Turkish bourgeoisie—known for its Islamist sympathies—the AKP wants to replace the Kemalist "secular" establishment and establish its own "state within a state".

After the period of relatively rapid economic growth, based on foreign capital inflows from 2003 to 2006, Turkish capitalism has increasingly been plunged into crisis. The global financial and economic crisis, which hit Turkey in October 2008, has undermined industrial growth and unemployment is soaring.

Under these conditions the low level of political discussion between the different bourgeois parties is truly astounding. As a country with a belated industrial development, bourgeois democratic forms in Turkey have long been underdeveloped in comparison with more economically developed capitalist states. The current absence of any serious political debate however, is unprecedented and reflects the fact that none of the official parties have any answer to the ongoing and deepening political and economic crisis.

Initially the AKP was expected to win more votes than it did in the national elections in July 22, 2007 when it garnered 46.58 percent. A few months ago Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and other top leaders of the party were talking about winning more than 50-55 percent of the upcoming vote. At the time, results of public opinion

polls were more or less in line with these "targets".

As the economic crisis has taken hold, however, electoral support for the AKP has started to diminish and the percentage of undecided voters has increased considerably. The AKP has responded by spending significant sums on social programs in order to win votes from millions living in poverty. At the same time, sections of the media backing the Islamist party, have presented the AKP as a saviour of the poor.

More than any other factor however, remaining support for the AKP is the result of the discrediting of all the official opposition parties, above all the Kemalist-nationalist CHP (Republican Peoples Party).

While the AKP has been expending the country's meagre resources to secure its political fortunes, after the elections it plans to make working people bear the brunt of the economic crisis, either through a cut in the credit rating of the country or a new austerity deal with the IMF. On March 18, Erdogan hinted at this, telling an interviewer on TGRT, "It appears that after elections, we will sit together [with the IMF] and finish this business."

Due to an increase in government spending and a decline in tax revenues, the budget deficit rose to 7.4 billion TL (\$4.35 billion) in February 2009, a massive 824 percent jump compared to the same month of 2008. Turkish capitalism is deeply in debt and foreign exchange reserves of the Central Bank are relatively weak. Such a deficit is not sustainable and can only bring about a reduction in the credit worthiness of the country and further capital flight with disastrous consequences for the economy and the working population in particular.

The AKP is the only political party presently able to win substantial votes in all parts of the country. In those cities with a predominantly Kurdish population, only the Kurdish nationalist DTP (Democratic Society Party) has significant support and is a serious rival. In these regions the DTP and the AKP together have roughly 90 percent of the vote.

In most of the rest of the country, the AKP's main rival is the Kemalist CHP. However, neither the CHP nor any other bourgeois parties, including the fascist MHP (National Movement Party), the moribund "centre-right" party the ANAP (Motherland Party) and the DP (Democratic Party) are expected to win any substantial support.

With no other alternative to the DTP in the Kurdish dominated cities, the Turkish military and an important section of its civilian supporters are reluctantly backing the AKP. In the second half of last year, opinion polls

taken in the region showed the AKP slightly ahead of the DTP. This alarmed the DTP leadership, which sees the local elections as a matter of life and death. In particular the loss of Diyarbakir, the key Kurdish city in the region, would be a major blow to the Kurdish nationalist movement.

An unprincipled electoral alliance of "lefts" consisting of a variety of petty-bourgeois radicals and nationalists, including the DTP, Stalinists, left-liberals, and pseudo-Trotskyists, has rapidly collapsed. The 13-year old ODP (Freedom and Solidarity Party)—the last and biggest project attempting to unify the "left"—has suffered a series of serious splits and is on the verge of dissolution.

In the absence of any principled political opposition, the Islamist movement was able to acquire strength in the early 1990s, taking hold of the municipal governments of most big cities in the local elections of 1994 and coming to power through a coalition government in 1996.

This movement represented the interests of a faction of the bourgeoisie, mostly concentrated in provincial cities and towns, which had an inferior position relative to the bigger monopoly groups in industrial and financial centres such as Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, Kocaeli and Adana. Control of the municipalities of big cities led to growing opportunities for the Islamist-controlled companies. At the same time, the AKP has adopted a very friendly approach to the West and global finance capital.

Turkish society is facing profound instability. Given the extreme divisions within the bourgeoisie, the loss of credibility and influence on the part of the so-called secularist parties and collapse of the once mighty "centre-right" parties, there is growing danger that opposition to the AKP from within the ruling class will lead to another military coup.

The democratic rights and social needs of the masses in Turkey can only be secured if the working class breaks the grip of the bourgeois parties and advances a socialist and internationalist solution to the crisis. This means building a Turkish section of the International Committee of the Fourth International as the new revolutionary leadership of the working class.



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