

Senior military officers arrested in Turkey

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The arrest of a number of senior officers has brought the long-festering conflict between the government and the military in Turkey to a new climax. The arrests take place against a background of growing social discontent and tensions with the United States and Israel.

On Monday, anti-terrorist units of the Turkish police arrested nearly 50 active and retired members of the military. They are accused of belonging to a right-wing underground organisation called Ergenekon and of having made coup plans against the Islamist AKP (Justice and Development Party) government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

So far, there has been no public comment from the government about the arrests, carried out by acting Chief of Staff Ilker Basbug. However, the Turkish media is openly discussing Basbug's dismissal, something unheard of in Turkey.

Among those arrested are senior military figures, including General Ibrahim Firtina, chief commander of the air force from 2003 to 2005; Özden Örnek, commander of the navy from 2003 to 2005; Ergin Saygun, former commander of the 1st Army (which is stationed in the city of Istanbul); and Cetin Dogan, another ex-commander of the 1st Army.

According to the *Hürriyet* newspaper, in 2007 Saygun was a member of the delegation accompanying Prime Minister Erdogan to Washington. He agreed with Washington on the need for greater intelligence cooperation against the Kurdish nationalist PKK in northern Iraq. Saygun was tasked with coordinating this collaboration.

Former Lieutenant General Engin Alan, who was also arrested, commanded the special forces of the Turkish army. He was head of the special teams that kidnapped PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in Kenya in 1999 and abducted him to Turkey, where he is serving a life sentence. Another of those detained, ex-general Süha Tanyeli, was head of Sarem, a think tank of the General Staff.

Other active and retired officers were also arrested. Their homes were searched, along with the Mehmetcik Foundation, which is related to the military. Including earlier arrests, and with the exception of Chief of Staff Hilmi

Ozkok, all of those arrested for alleged coup attempts were commanders in the Turkish army between 2003 and 2004.

At that time, there were several coup plans, which were prepared under pseudonyms such as "Fair-haired girl," "Moonlight," "Cage" and "Sledgehammer." The media reported about the latter scenario in January of this year. It consisted of planned provocations, including the killing of politicians and journalists, and a bomb attack on a mosque during Friday prayers, which were meant to undermine the Erdogan government and pave the way for a military coup.

It is worth noting that all the alleged coup plans were developed in the period just preceding the Iraq war, when Turkey's relations with the United States deteriorated sharply in a very short time. The invasion was opposed almost unanimously by the Turkish population, but the US still wanted to invade Iraq through Turkey.

Erdogan, the army leadership, big business and much of the media wanted to allow Washington to use Turkish bases. In return, the Turkish Army was to be permitted to invade the predominantly Kurdish northern Iraq. However, parliament refused to sanction this, with a significant proportion of AKP deputies voting against their own government.

The US administration took offence that Turkey was obstructing them on the "northern front" and instead collaborated with the Kurdish nationalists in northern Iraq. Then-US Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz openly attacked the Turkish military because it had not imposed the will of the United States against the elected representatives in parliament. It is quite conceivable that a part of the Turkish army understood this as tacit support for a coup.

The US, however, has been virtually silent on the action against the generals. Washington has said that it has no concerns about the arrests, but that everything should proceed lawfully and transparently. This is a sign of how much relations have improved with the AKP.

The current wave of arrests was preceded by sharp clashes between the government and judiciary. In January, the Constitutional Court unanimously overturned a judicial reform adopted by parliament in July 2009 that allowed members of the Turkish military to be tried in civilian

courts.

In February, Sanal Osman, attorney general of the northeastern city of Erzurum, had his colleague, İlhan Cihanger, from the neighbouring city of Erzincan arrested. Osman and three colleagues from the Supreme Judicial Council in Ankara were then suspended from duty, against the dissenting vote of the AKP justice minister. Osman is threatened with proceedings for abuse of office.

State Prosecutor Cihanger is alleged to have participated in plans to overthrow the Erdogan government along with those in the Ergenekon trial. In Kemalist circles, however, it is said that Cihanger had merely investigated Islamic sects for conducting illegal courses on the Koran. In response to these investigations, the influential Islamic organisation, Fethullah Gülen, is said to have sought the backing of the AKP government. This interpretation of events views the suspension of Osman as an attempt to hinder the investigation in the Ergenekon proceedings.

It has also been reported that Attorney General Abdurrahman Yalcinkaya, who dragged the AKP before the Constitutional Court two years ago, was preparing a new order banning the ruling party. In 2008, a move to ban the AKP nearly succeeded. Now, Yalcinkaya will investigate charges that the ruling party has put the judiciary “under pressure.” The AKP has responded to these reports with the announcement that it may call a snap election.

Whether the AKP will really call early elections is doubtful, however. The popularity of the Erdogan government has dropped considerably in recent months; many of its political projects have failed or are about to fail.

A visible expression of social discontent is the strike by workers of the former state tobacco company TEKEL against the consequences of privatisation, which has been ongoing since December 2009. The workforce is threatened with massive pay cuts and the loss of contractually agreed benefits.

On February 4, hundreds of thousands of workers throughout the country participated in a solidarity strike. The sympathy of working people for the protesters could not be broken by false government claims that the PKK and even the devil himself were influencing the strike—an attempt to implicate TEKEL workers in terrorism and foment religious backwardness and chauvinism against them.

The solidarity of working people shows that the right-wing, market-oriented policies of Erdogan have lost support. These policies aim to attract foreign capital through privatisation and deregulation, to supposedly create economic growth. This strategy has undermined by the economic crisis, especially in the export-oriented industries, which have suffered heavy losses.

The “democratic initiative” of the government, which

sought to appease the Kurdish conflict with a handful of concessions, has also not achieved its aims. Hardly a week goes by without new protests by Kurdish demonstrators. The AKP did nothing to prevent the banning of the legal Kurdish party DTP last year, even though its parliamentary majority meant the AKP could have amended the law governing political parties. Instead, it has come to terms with right-wing nationalist forces.

The same goes for reconciliation with Armenia, which has been strongly supported by the United States. Protocols signed in October, providing for the opening of the Turkish-Armenian border and the establishment of diplomatic relations, have so far not been ratified by either side. In Turkey, nationalists are demanding Armenia must first withdraw from Nagorno-Karabakh, which lies inside Azerbaijani territory.

Also in Armenia, there is a massive nationalist opposition against Turkey, which wants to make recognition of the genocide of 1915 by Ankara a condition for establishing relations.

Finally, the US is putting pressure on Turkey to take a tougher stance against Iran. Ankara has been trying without success to mediate the nuclear dispute with its neighbor. Washington, by contrast, is employing threats and sanctions against Tehran.

Relations between Turkey and Israel have been strained for months, and the recent visit to Turkey by Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak in January brought no significant changes.

While admirers of the AKP have celebrated the arrest of the officers as a “great moment” and “a part of the epic struggle between democrats and non-democrats” (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*), the arrests in fact indicate the extent of the crisis of the ruling elite. Pressure from workers and Kurds at home, combined with the aggressive expansion of the US war drive, are exacerbating tensions between the government and its police apparatus on the one side and the army and the judiciary on the other.



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