

AKP government moves against Turkish army

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Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) government has dealt a blow to the army, which has been the central pillar of the Turkish state since its founding by Kemal Ataturk 90 years ago.

A Turkish court sentenced three former generals to 20 years in prison and two serving and one former general to 18 years for plotting a coup against the government in the so-called "Sledgehammer Coup" trial. It convicted a further 330 of the 365 suspects, all but one of who are serving or retired officers. Their sentences have yet to be announced. Thirty-four officers were acquitted.

The officers were accused of planning a campaign of violence in Turkey, including attacks on the Fatih and Beyazat mosques in Istanbul, and starting a war with Greece to destabilise the country and justify a military coup against the AKP government. They all denied the charges.

The verdict and sentences are widely viewed as unfair and unlawful. The prosecution's case was inconsistent and contradictory. Much of the evidence was flimsy, with some clearly fabricated. According to the defence lawyers, some evidence was not heard, important witnesses were not called, and defendants' rights were ignored. The court refused to allow legal experts to examine crucial evidence on hard discs and CDs.

Hundreds of other suspects, including military personnel, politicians and journalists face prosecution in a separate trial. Trials into a further two planned military coups, known as Ergenekon and KCK, involving hundreds of military personnel, including a former army chief of staff, are on-going.

There is no reason, however, to reject outright that sections of the military were contemplating or even planning action against the AKP or to accept their pose as defenders of progressive secularism and Turkish national interests.

The alleged coup attempts by the army took place in the run-up to the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, when Turkey's relations with the US deteriorated sharply. The US wanted to use Turkey as a launching pad for its invasion, which was opposed by the overwhelming majority of the Turkish people.

Erdogan, the army leadership, big business and much of the media wanted to allow Washington to use Turkish bases. In return, the Turkish military would be allowed to invade the predominantly Kurdish northern part of Iraq. In the event, parliament refused to sanction this, with a significant number of AKP legislators voting against their own government.

At the time, the US criticised the Turkish military for failing to force Washington's demands on the parliament. Then-Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz travelled to Turkey to deplore the fact that the army "did not play the strong leadership role on that issue that we would have expected."

Such comments were a barely veiled threat to endorse a military coup against the AKP government. Already, on three occasions—in 1960, 1971 and 1980—the Turkish army has taken power through a coup. In a "soft coup" in 1997, it forced the government of Necmettin Erbakan of the Islamist Welfare Party, the AKP's forerunner, to resign.

Reminded that the Turkish military had overthrown three elected governments, Wolfowitz added: "I think it's perfectly appropriate, especially in your system, for the military to say it was in Turkey's interest to support the United States in that effort ... My impression is that they did not say it with the kind of strength that would have made a difference."

The government and its supporters have sought to present the Sledgehammer trial and verdict as a victory for democracy against the military. But Erdogan's democratic pretensions are bogus. This is a conflict

between rival, reactionary sections of the bourgeoisie.

Erdogan heads an authoritarian, right-wing government which has carried out “free market” policies and cracked down ruthlessly on dissent. It has brutally suppressed Kurdish oppositionists, including making armed incursions into Iraq, killing at least 800 people in the last 14 months.

Turkey holds more journalists in prisons than any other country. More than 90 journalists have been held for most of the last year.

The AKP is using the Sledgehammer and Ergenekon trials to settle accounts with its secular nationalist political opponents and consolidate its power.

The military has its own business empire and is closely associated with the traditional layers of the Turkish bourgeoisie, while the AKP draws its support from the Anatolian bourgeoisie which developed outside the Kemalist elite.

The AKP won its first parliamentary election in 2002, following a devastating economic crisis in 2001. The power struggle continued, as the army tried to prevent the election of the AKP’s Abdullah Gul to the presidency and to ban the AKP. This forced Erdogan to appeal to broader layers of the population and present himself as a democrat. He made some concessions to the Kurdish minority, lifting the longstanding ban on the use of the Kurdish language.

Since then, the AKP has gradually gained the upper hand against the military, forcibly retiring many officers while becoming increasingly authoritarian itself.

Notwithstanding his differences with the Kemalists, Erdogan has adopted key elements of their foreign policy—proving a strong ally of Washington and seeking membership in the European Union. This has clearly secured the AKP support within the military and from the imperialist powers in North America and Europe.

With the economy having tripled in size since 2002 to become the 15th largest in the world, thanks in part to a significant expansion of exports to the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia, the AKP won the support of the Turkish bourgeoisie. It was re-elected in 2007 and 2011.

Erdogan initially pursued a “neo-Ottoman” foreign policy under the mantra of “zero problems with our neighbours.” It forged close political and economic ties with both Washington’s allies in the region—Israel, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States—and its opponents Syria, Iran and Russia, making Turkey an economic powerhouse in the region.

Erdogan had sought to exploit the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, trumpeting his AKP government as a model Islamist government. But they provoked a foreign policy shift that has further destabilised Turkey.

In Libya he initially rejected NATO’s war plans against Muammar Gaddafi, a close economic partner. However, he shifted towards full support for the US campaign for regime-change and recast Turkey in the process as the putative head of a pro-US alliance of Sunni Muslim states including Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

Turkey’s leading role in the US effort to unseat the Baathist regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria has misfired badly—triggering a resurgence of Turkey’s unresolved Kurdish conflict and necessitating the deployment of thousands of troops in Turkey’s Kurdish region. It has also led to huge popular opposition to Turkey’s position as a forward base for the Syrian rebels, particularly within the Alawite and Alevi populations.

Turkey’s relations with Iran, which is closely allied to Syria and an important trading partner, have deteriorated.

Ankara’s support for the rebels has also reignited sectarian tensions across Iraq, with its bombing of Kurdish regions and move to provide refuge for former Vice President Tareq Hashemi, who is accused of terrorism, leading to Iraq declaring Turkey a “hostile state”.

The Turkish economy is very unstable. Its growth has plummeted and there is a wide gulf between the industrialised west and the mainly agrarian and underdeveloped east, reflected in the ongoing Kurdish conflict. The trade gap, inflation and unemployment are all rising. It is under these increasing tense conditions that Erdogan is seeking to bring the military directly under the AKP’s control.



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