

Hundreds of Turkish officers, officials sentenced in Ergenekon trial

Alex Lantier
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Amid rising tensions between the Turkish government and the army, Istanbul's 13th High Criminal Court handed down stiff prison terms to hundreds of top army officers, officials, and journalists on August 5. They were convicted of plotting coups against Islamist premier Recep Tayyip Erdogan, killings, and other paramilitary operations in the so-called Ergenekon network.

Two days before the Ergenekon ruling, Erdogan replaced all the force commanders of the Turkish armed forces, fuelling speculation that he feared a coup.

All but 21 of the 275 defendants in the Ergenekon trial were found guilty. Those sentenced to life include former General Staff commander General Ilker Basbug; Lieutenant General Veli Kucuk, accused of running death squads in Kurdish-majority south-eastern Turkey; and the former heads of the First Army and of the Gendarmerie. Dogu Perincek of the ex-Maoist Workers Party (IP), *Cumhuriyet* journalist Mustafa Balbay of the Kemalist Republican People's Party (CHP), and organized crime boss Sedat Peker were also convicted.

The ruling sets the stage for protracted legal battles and political conflict. It is expected that the defendants will appeal their convictions, from appeals courts up to the Constitutional Court and, if necessary, from there to the European Court of Human Rights.

Though calling for “restraint, patience, and calm,” the Turkish army made clear that it rejects the ruling and supports the defendants, declaring in a statement that it “deeply shares the sadness felt by our brothers-in-arms and their families.” Basbug reacted to his sentence by saying, “The people will have the last word.”

Officials of Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) hailed the Ergenekon verdict. Erdogan advisor Yalcin Akdogan declared it “a great historic

act,” and Deputy Prime Minister Bekir Bozdag said, “Turkey passed an important test in democracy and the rule of law.”

While the trial's selected revelations of deep-rooted state criminality will strengthen popular hostility to the army, it will not settle but rather embitter the battles raging inside Turkey's political elite. The ruling came amid escalating tensions inside Turkey over the US-backed July 3 army coup that toppled Egypt's Islamist president, Mohamed Mursi.

In response to mass protests against Mursi, Washington ultimately gave a green light to plans for a coup to oust Mursi, hoping to pre-empt the development of a revolutionary struggle by the working class. These protests also coincided with the emergence in June of mass protests against the Erdogan regime, centered on Istanbul's Taksim Square.

The Egyptian coup was a serious blow to the AKP government, which had sent advisors and hundreds of millions of dollars in subsidies to the Mursi regime. Moreover, Erdogan is clearly worried that—with his government weakened by opposition to his brutal repression of the Taksim Square protests—the Egyptian coup will embolden Turkish officers plotting a coup against him.

Citing Nebahat Tanriverdi of the Center for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies in Ankara, Ireland's *National* wrote: “Turkey was concerned that the removal of Mr. Mursi could develop into a broader crisis for the much-touted ‘Turkish model’ of religiously conservative parties governing successfully through democratic elections.”

As the Egyptian army carried out bloody crackdowns on pro-Mursi protesters, Erdogan repeatedly denounced the Egyptian coup. “In Egypt, democracy was massacred, national aspirations were massacred, and

now the nation is being massacred,” he said.

Erdogan even pointed to the hypocrisy of Washington and the European powers—Turkey’s key NATO allies—who refuse to admit that the Egyptian army carried out a coup. He said, “Countries that embrace and care about democracy should not behave with double standards towards events like the ones in Egypt and should say something is wrong when it is wrong.”

Erdogan’s statements have embarrassed Washington, and the Egyptian junta has repeatedly summoned the Turkish ambassador in Cairo to protest.

The conflicts erupting over the Ergenekon trial and the Egyptian coup reflect the deepening crisis of the Turkish regime, amid a continuing world economic downturn and spreading war in the Middle East.

Economic crises in Europe and escalating fighting in the Middle East amid the US-led war in Syria—which Erdogan has supported despite overwhelming popular opposition—have largely undermined Turkey’s export markets. Its economic growth has slowed from over 10 percent during the boom to 3 percent last year, largely propped up by state infrastructure spending. The diplomatic crisis with Egypt now threatens to cut it off from North African markets.

Amid rising anger over social inequality in Turkey, international media are now calling for drastic attacks on the Turkish working class. Pointing to Turkey’s “competitive weakness,” *Le Monde* wrote: “The country essentially offers low value added products at high costs, as wages are higher than in many European countries, such as Bulgaria or Romania.”

There are also bitter tensions in Turkey’s political establishment over Erdogan’s attempt to negotiate a peace deal with Kurdish separatist forces and then use them for war in Syria.

Amid these conditions, Erdogan and the AKP have allowed the Ergenekon trial to proceed within definite limits, using it as a political weapon against its opponents in the army and the Kemalist elite.

The AKP has benefited from broad popular opposition to the Turkish army’s record of coups—in 1960, 1971, 1980, and the 1997 “soft coup” against Necmettin Erbakan of the AKP’s forerunner, the Islamist Welfare Party. When the AKP resoundingly won snap elections called amid army coup threats in 2007, it dealt a major blow to the army and its allies in the CHP and pro-army sections of the petty-bourgeois

“left.”

This is, however, a risky and potentially explosive strategy, given the subject underlying the trial—the criminality of the Turkish army and intelligence, which are both key NATO allies—which threaten to discredit the entire ruling elite.

The trial has a massive scope: the 23 counts against the accused were drawn up in an indictment that was thousands of pages long, and the various stages of the trial have lasted five years. It constitutes a devastating admission of the role of so-called “deep state” operations, organized over decades as part of Turkey’s role in the Cold War, to murder opponents in the judiciary, the Kurdish population, and the political left.

There are widespread reports that the outcome of the trial is being politically manipulated in order to defend the state. Erdogan himself initially criticized the indictment of Basbug.

Citing discussions with Bulent Kenes, the editor of the pro-AKP *Zaman* newspaper, the *Christian Science Monitor* wrote: “Especially during the 1990s, prominent political dissidents and Kurdish activists with separatist sympathies were the victims of suspected ‘Deep State’ murders. Kenes acknowledged that because of the focus on the coup allegations, many of those crimes remain unsolved.”

Press accounts also criticized the release of Osman Yildirim—an Ergenekon suspect found guilty of involvement in several shootings, including the murder of Council of State judge Mustafa Yucel Ozbilgin—ostensibly in exchange for testifying against other suspects. Yildirim was initially sentenced to life in prison but was subsequently released, even though he threatened his judges with violence during the trial proceedings.



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