Turkey before the elections: Political instability, economic crisis and war

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22 August 2015

Speaking before the press on Friday, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced that there would be a new general election on November 1. He is following the proposal of the Turkish electoral commission put forward on Thursday.

The official deadline to form a government expires on Sunday. Following the parliamentary elections on June 7, Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) suffered a crushing defeat, losing its absolute majority. It has been unable to form a government.

According to the Turkish constitution, a transitional government composed of all parties represented in parliament now has to be formed. However, to what extent this can be implemented in practice remains to be seen. The Kemalist Republican People's Party (CHP) and the extreme right-wing Nationalist Action Party (MHP) refuse to join such a government. Only the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP) has agreed to do so.

A government involving a Kurdish political party would be a first in the history of Turkey. Since their election victory in June, the HDP has been a thorn in the side of Erdogan and the AKP, and the brutal actions of the Turkish military against the Kurdish provinces in the east and southeast of the country are aimed not least at weakening the HDP, to push them below the 10 percent hurdle and so stop them entering parliament.

At the moment, it does not appear that Erdogan's cynical strategy will pay off. On the contrary, the aggressive actions against the Kurds, the direct intervention into the Syrian civil war and the increasing repression of any domestic opposition is promoting the growth of resistance against the president and his plans to transform Turkey into a presidential republic with himself at the top.

Recent polls show that Erdogan and his Islamic-conservative AKP continue to lose support. According to a survey by the polling institute Gecisi, compared to its election results from July, the AKP has lost 3 points and is down to 39 percent. The HDP could gain a point and now stands at 14 percent.

With the upcoming elections, the situation in Turkey, which is already marked by political instability, a deep economic and social crisis and war, threatens to further worsen.

The headlines last week convey an image of a country that is increasingly in "disintegration" and stands before "the abyss" (*Tagesspiegel*) . Here is just a small selection of headlines in the German press: "Poison cocktail on the Bosphorus: Turkish lira crashes", "IS declares war on Turkey," "Where is the war against IS? US losing patience with Turkey", "Kurdish cities declare their 'self-government'" and "Attack in Istanbul: Six signs that the terror in Turkey has reached a new level".

Ever since Ankara officially joined the US-led war against the Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria at the end of July, the country has become ever more deeply embroiled in the Syrian and Iraqi conflict.

On Thursday, US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter demanded Turkey step up its participation in the war against the Islamic State (ISIS).

After Turkey had already opened its bases for American attacks, Carter demanded that the Turkish Air Force participate in the so-called "Air Tasking Order" (ATO) with its own fighter jets, i.e., that it join the air raids on ISIS. The Turkish contribution to the fight against the jihadists was "important, but not enough," the US Secretary of Defense declared.

In recent weeks, there have been growing tensions between Ankara and the imperialist powers. Erdogan had until recently supported Islamist forces in Syria and used the "war on IS" primarily as a cover in order to take action against the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) and its Syrian satellite PYD/YPG, which the United States works with in the fight against ISIS. The German Bundeswehr (armed forces) has armed and trained the Kurdish Peshmerga in northern Iraq, and so also indirectly supports the Syrian Kurds.

The Turkish army also began the war against the PKK in the east and south of the country in order to prevent it extending the de facto independent Kurdish regions in Syria and Iraq across Turkey's borders. Since the beginning of the offensive a month ago, 771 Kurdish rebels have been killed, according to the Turkish news agency Anatolia. Four hundred thirty rebels died in air raids on PKK positions in northern Iraq; 260 PKK fighters have been killed on Turkish soil.

Many foreign commentators have already drawn parallels with the 1980s and 1990s, when the Kurdish areas within Turkey stood under the infamous "OHAL administration", i.e., under military rule, in which 30,000 died in an effective civil war between the Turkish army and the PKK.

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In recent days, the Turkish army has set up more than 100 so-called “Special Security Zones” in the Kurdish provinces. After a call by the PKK, 12 Kurdish cities have declared their “self-government”, including the provincial capital Sirnak with its 60,000 inhabitants.

On Tuesday in the city of Silvan, with 90,000 inhabitants, PKK fighters were quickly surrounded by police and army units after they occupied four neighbourhoods. According to reports, at least one fighter from the YDGH, the youth wing of the PKK, was killed in the fighting.

The PKK responded in turn with attacks. On Wednesday, the Turkish media reported eight soldiers being killed in a PKK bomb attack in the province of Siirt. The Kurdish news agency Firat reported that many other soldiers were injured. The night before, four soldiers were also killed in clashes between security forces and PKK militants in the predominantly Kurdish province of Diyarbakir.

Erdogan and the AKP are responding to the worsening crisis and the pressure of the United States by intensifying their war policy.

On Thursday, the English language edition of Turkey’s daily *Hürriyet* reported that in a “Memorandum of Understanding” the US and Turkey had agreed to establish a militarily protected buffer zone in northern Syria.

The agreement means a massive escalation of the war in Syria and the bloody struggle of the imperialist powers and their regional proxies for the redivision of the resource-rich and strategically central region of the Middle East.

According to *Hürriyet*, the memorandum includes a two-stage plan. In a first “clearing phase”, ISIS would be fought in a 100-kilometer long and 50 kilometre-deep zone along the Turkish-Syrian border between the west of the Euphrates town of Dscharablus and Azaz in the north of Aleppo. In a second step, the area would then be handed over to the “moderate” rebel militia, the Free Syrian Army (FSA).

The “clearing” phase would consist of air strikes against ISIS by US and Turkish warplanes from the NATO base at Incirlik and support for “local fighters”. Then tent camps for Syrian refugees who are currently living in camps in Turkey would be built in the buffer zone. According to *Hürriyet*, the memorandum bears the signatures of both Erdogan and US President Barack Obama.

According to *Hürriyet*, the memorandum does not apply to Kurdish fighting units. The newspaper reports, however, that the US and Turkey had “verbally” agreed not to let the Syrian PYD units onto the western side of the Euphrates.

The “practical details” of the memorandum were further elaborated in a “plan of operations” of the Turkish and American military. According to this, at least 26 US fighter jets, four armed drones and a number of reconnaissance aircraft would be stationed at three other bases in the provinces of Batman, Diyarbakir and Malaty in addition to the base in Incirlik.

In addition, there are plans to install a missile defence system on these bases that go far beyond the capabilities of the recently withdrawn Patriot anti-aircraft missile system. In recent weeks, Germany, the Netherlands and the United States have announced they would withdraw their Patriot batteries from Turkey, which had been stationed there in 2013 as part of the offensive by the imperialist powers against the Assad regime in Syria.

Many foreign commentators had initially regarded the decision as an expression of rising tensions with Ankara. Now *Hürriyet* writes that the decision to end the operation of America’s Patriot missile deployment in Turkey is part of the deal between Washington and Ankara to open Turkish bases for US air attacks against ISIS.

In an interview with *Tagesspiegel*, Turkish Minister for European Union Affairs Volkan Bizkir said last weekend that the plans were also supported by the German government. There was an “agreement with the United States that their fighter jets would fly from Incirlik in attacks against the Daesh [ISIS] to liberate the security zone”. In addition, there is a “second agreement with the US and coalition forces, which includes Germany, to free this area.”

On Saturday, German Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) stressed that Germany would remain militarily engaged in the region even after the withdrawal of the Patriot missiles. The influential CDU foreign policy expert Roderich Kiesewetter brought the possible deployment of German Tornado jet fighters against ISIS into play at the weekend. There are those in CDU circles arguing that it cannot be ruled out that the anti-ISIS coalition will soon be asking the German armed forces for more support.

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