

Turkey seeks increased presidential powers amid rising social tension

Jean Shaoul**2 June 2016**

Fierce clashes broke out between armed police and a few hundred demonstrators commemorating the third anniversary of the May 31 Gezi protests this week.

Beginning Monday, hundreds of armed police, as well as riot control vehicles and water cannon, were deployed to Taksim Square to bar people from entering the square. Police fired tear gas and detained more than a dozen activists. In a separate incident, police detained 16 activists at the offices of the city's architects' chamber near the Yildiz Palace.

The heavy-handed response to a small demonstration testifies to the extraordinarily tense social relations in Turkey. Since 2013, the authorities, particularly President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who was prime minister at the time, have used every opportunity to demonise the Gezi protests—and any other protest movement—as an attempted coup orchestrated by Turkey's domestic and foreign enemies, with Washington's backing.

Thus far, Erdogan's government has focused repressive measures on supporters of the opposition Gulenist movement founded by US exile Fethullah Gulen, a former ally of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP).

While Gulen is a convenient scapegoat, the AKP government's increasing repression is fundamentally driven by fear of working class opposition to the deeply unpopular domestic and foreign policies implemented by Ankara in response to the 2008 global financial crisis.

Erdogan is seeking to side-line his political rivals, most recently the former president and co-founder of the AKP Abdullah Gul, and his former foreign minister and handpicked prime minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, whom he has replaced with the loyalist Binali Yildirim.

Erdogan is developing closer relations with the

military, which he long viewed as a threat to his rule. Since 2007, the Erdogan government has tried hundreds of current and former military officials on charges of attempting to overthrow the government, when military leaders threatened to intervene if Turkey's secular character was diluted by the Islamist AKP.

Last month, Erdogan invited Turkey's top general to his daughter's wedding, evoking a storm of criticism in the opposition press and on social media. In April, a court overturned the convictions of 275 people in the 2008 case, including those of top generals.

The government is to introduce a constitutional amendment to parliament to allow Erdogan to become a "party affiliated" president, enabling him to resume his leadership of the AKP, which he was obliged to give up on assuming the presidency, a largely ceremonial position, in August 2014. This will enable him to more directly control the AKP and the government. It forms one of a series of changes that Erdogan is determined to force through in order to create a more dictatorial presidential system. Other constitutional amendments are to be introduced that will consolidate his position as an executive president.

This follows the passage of a sweeping anti-terrorism law that enables people who merely express opinions to be investigated or tried on the grounds of aiding terrorism. Erdogan is using the anti-terrorism law to eliminate opposition politicians and journalists, targeting those critical of the army's brutal crackdown on the Kurds, and operations aimed at toppling the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad.

Anti-terror statutes are also being employed for repression against ethnic Kurds, aimed at preventing the establishment of an autonomous Syrian Kurdish entity on Turkey's borders, an objective which Ankara

has pursued through backing Islamist forces such as ISIS and the al-Qaeda-linked al-Nusra.

Erdogan's aggressive Syrian policy has already brought Ankara to the brink of war with Russia, after the Turkish military provocatively downed a Russian fighter jet for allegedly straying into Turkish airspace. Moscow has retaliated by cutting its commercial links with Ankara, leading to a dramatic fall in investment, trade and tourism that has reverberated throughout the economy and accelerated the decline of the Turkish lira. So bad is the situation on Turkey's south coast that Antalya has placed large colour brochures in the travel sections of foreign newspapers to bring tourists to its shores.

Last month, the Turkish parliament agreed to the AKP's demand to lift the immunity of a quarter of its deputies, predominantly members of the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP), ostensibly for aiding and abetting the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). The government is waging war at a far greater level of intensity than that of the 1990s war. It has locked down towns, devastated cities, including much of the historic old city of Diyarbakir, capital of the largely Kurdish province, which contains UNESCO world heritage sites, displaced more than 350,000 civilians and killed more than 1,000 people. The entire region, already the poorest in Turkey, home to waves of refugees from Syria and prey to ISIS bombings, faces an economic disaster.

HDP legislators can now be brought before the courts and lose their mandate if convicted. In this way, Erdogan could establish the two-thirds parliamentary majority he requires to legitimise the presidential dictatorship, which is already functioning in practice, constitutionally.

The Turkish press has been brought to heel with the AKP-led drive for dictatorship. The only news media widely available are those that toe the government line. To step outside the boundaries of what the government deems acceptable means imprisonment.

Erdogan, who served a jail term in 1999 for reciting, while mayor of Istanbul, a nationalist and Islamist poem that was deemed guilty of "inciting violence and religious or racial hatred," is now imposing similar treatment on those who dare to criticise him.

The Turkish authorities have jailed two leading journalists, Can Dündar and Erdem Gül of the

Cumhuriyet newspaper, for "disclosing state secrets" and aiding "an armed terrorist group", after they showed pictures of the security forces handing over weapons to ISIS and other Islamist groups. They have raided the weekly news magazine *Nokta*, opened a case against *Hurriyet*'s editor-in-chief Sedat Ergin for insulting the president, and appointed state-trustees to run the Koza ?pek Media Group, *Zaman* newspaper and Cihan News Agency. Numerous foreign journalists have been deported, usually on the grounds of aiding the PKK.

At the end of 2015, more than 100 journalists remained either imprisoned or on trial, mostly for "national security" offences, making Turkey the fifth worst jailer of journalists globally in 2015.

Around 2,000 journalists and ordinary citizens have been prosecuted for insulting Erdogan since he became president, the latest being Merve Buyuksarac, a former Miss Turkey, who was given a year-long suspended sentence for reposting a satirical poem insulting the president on social media. Bar?? ?nce, former editor of the leftist daily *Birgiün*, which faces another 40 similar investigations, was given a 21-month prison term for "insulting" the president.



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