

Turkish army intervenes ever more openly in political life

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The Turkish army is intervening ever more openly into political life as the country's July 22 parliamentary election approaches.

The army leadership is resorting to increasingly overt measures in its campaign against the moderate Islamic AKP (Party for Justice and Development), led by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. It is encouraging chauvinist sentiments against the Kurdish minority and has appealed to the fascist elements involved in the Grey Wolves movement, which has links to the extreme right MHP (Party of Nationalist Movement).

The military has sought to create an atmosphere of intimidation by portraying the AKP government as traitors who are capitulating to Kurdish "separatism and terrorism." This motive is also behind the high command's saber rattling and threats to intervene against the Kurds in northern Iraq.

If the military is unable to prevent an election victory for the AKP in the July 22 elections then a military putsch cannot be ruled out.

The struggle for power between the AKP with its large parliamentary majority and the army and its civilian supporters escalated in the course of presidential elections at the end of April.

The parliamentary opposition, which is allied to the military, had boycotted the election and then, following the selection of foreign affairs minister Abdullah Gül as president, called upon the constitutional court to rule the election invalid. In a parallel development, the army attacked the government and virtually threatened a putsch, should Gül, as the AKP candidate, be nominated. In a legally farcical judgment the constitutional court then annulled the vote and prevented the election of Gül, who had a clear field in the third and final round of voting.

Following the failure to nominate a president, Prime Minister Erdogan called parliamentary elections for July 22. According to opinion polls, the AKP is well placed to retain its majority of seats. The struggle for power over the office for president between the army and its "unarmed armed

forces" (i.e., the Kemalist parties and federations, associations and trade unions which also have links to the military) and the AKP has been postponed but not resolved.

On Tuesday, the opposition accepted Erdogan's offer to seek a compromise candidate, evidently made by Erdogan as part of an attempt to reach an accommodation with the military. Whether this will lead to a resolution of the dispute is unclear, however. No names have yet been proposed by the government, and the question of who will be nominated for President has been postponed until after the parliamentary elections.

The so-called "unarmed armed forces" embody the Kemalist establishment, which has dominated key levers of power in Turkey for decades—including control of the security, legal and administrative machinery. On the other side stands the AKP, which represents the interests of the "Anatolian bourgeoisie," and has the support of poorer layers in the big cities and less-developed rural regions.

The Kemalists have organized a series of nationalistic mass demonstrations, involving up to hundreds of thousands of participants, using the slogan, the "defense of secularism," to mobilize better educated middle class layers in the major cities.

In its campaign, the Kemalists have largely failed to strike a resonance in poorer city districts and in the rural areas. In these regions the AKP has lost influence amongst workers and farmers due to its implementation of free market policies dictated by the International Monetary Fund and European Union, but the Kemalist establishment is even more discredited. In response, the latter is increasingly appealing to chauvinism and anti-Kurdish sentiment to defend its interests.

Politicians of legal Kurdish parties have been prosecuted merely for speaking in a respectful fashion about the imprisoned leader of the Kurdish Worker's Party (PKK) Abdullah Öcalan or, in their function as mayors, making official announcements in the Kurdish language.

Turkey's Supreme Court recently dismissed the conviction of two NCOs who were caught in Semdinli in

2005 carrying out an assassination in which a number of people were killed. Soldiers, who in 2004 shot a 12-year-old Kurdish boy in the back as part of an “anti-terror deployment” were also acquitted. Through a last minute legal move, the AKP and the parliamentary opposition have made it more difficult for the legally recognized Kurdish party, the DTP (Democratic Society Party), to put up independent candidates. The DTP currently has no parliamentary representation, having failed to acquire the necessary ten percent threshold.

The AKP has reacted to the nationalist campaign of the military by adaptations and concessions. In an express procedure it passed a law that gives the police wide-ranging powers in the name of the “fight against terrorism.” Erdogan has also refrained from including a large number of the religious hard liners around the parliamentary president Bülent Arinc from re-standing as candidates in the election.

This has not been sufficient, however, for the “unarmed armed forces” which have renewed their offensive. Attacks and attempted assaults on soldiers and civilians, by actual or alleged supporters of the PKK, have been used to whip up a pogrom-type hysteria.

Television channels and most large newspapers have been filled with the photos for weeks: crying mothers, coffins draped with the national flag, large groups of people waving flags and crying out nationalist slogans. Officers, even including the head of the General Staff Yasar Büyükanit, have appeared at the scenes of attacks and warned of the dangers of terrorism while praising the army and expressing their sympathy or even weeping alongside mourning mothers.

The army has shifted large numbers of troops to the border with northern Iraq, has declared the areas close to the border, which are mainly occupied by Kurds, to be “security zones,” recalling times when martial law prevailed in the region. At the same time the army has invited selected journalists to take part in information tours of the region, while retired generals grumble in newspaper commentaries over the AKP government, which is allegedly ceding ground to “terrorism.” The AKP was even charged with being a “government of murder.”

Activists from the Grey Wolves have been prominent at the funerals of victims, denouncing the PKK and calling for the overthrow of the government.

An important part of this campaign is the demand for a Turkish invasion of northern Iraq. The army command has been conducting a systematic campaign against the Kurdish regional government of Masud Barzani in northern Iraq, seeking to sabotage any agreement between the Turkish government and the Iraqi Kurds.

The Turkish generals have repeatedly declared their

readiness to march into northern Iraq if only the government gave the go-ahead. In fact, such an intervention is rejected in the first place by the US, which is dependent on the loyal support of Kurdish organizations for the maintenance of their occupation of the country. For its part, the Turkish army, which plays a key role on the east flank of NATO, owes a debt to the US, which has repeatedly supported its putsches and has played a major role in providing military equipment. Under these conditions, the military has qualms about snubbing its most important sponsor and taking responsibility for a Turkish-Kurdish war. This has not prevented the high command from denouncing members of the Erdogan government as traitors for failing to give the go-ahead for an invasion.

The pinnacle of the military campaign was an appeal by the general staff published in the internet calling for “collective resistance” to terrorism and all those hiding behind “peace, liberty and democracy” who in reality would support terrorism. The statement goes on to say that the unity of the Turkish national state is threatened, and the Turkish nation must respond with street protests—in fact a thinly veiled call for the overthrow of the elected government.

There was an immediate response to this call. A day later two workers in west Turkey were beaten up by a right wing mob and almost killed. Their offence was that they were wearing t-shirts featuring the deceased Kurdish singer Ahmet Kaya. Such appeals by the military to fascist elements means playing with fire, which threatens to plunge the country into civil war and a regional war against Iraq.

As the representative of the “Anatolian bourgeoisie,” the AKP is neither willing nor able to oppose the offensive by the Turkish military against basic democratic rights. Erdogan has not ruled out an invasion of northern Iraq and has stressed his solidarity with the military. One had to carry out the “fight against terrorism” firstly in Turkey instead of in northern Iraq, he declared. The AKP has already made clear what this means: more power for the Turkish police. Foreign minister Abdullah Gül recently repeated that the government would be ready to call a special session of parliament in order to authorize military action against northern Iraq, if the military formally requested it, which the general staff has so far refused to do.

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