

Turkey: 12 years since the last military intervention, new coup feared

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Twelve years ago, the Turkish military presented an ultimatum to the Islamist-dominated coalition government following a meeting of the National Security Council (MGK) on February 28, 1997. This was the fourth military intervention in Turkey since the end of the Second World War. The Turkish military had previously carried out coups in 1960, 1971 and 1980.

In the course of the military intervention in 1997, General Cevik Bir, the deputy chief of general staff, cynically declared that the aim of the army “was to readjust the balance of democracy.” Twelve years on there is renewed discussion in Turkey of the dangers of a military coup under conditions in which the country is being rocked by the current financial and economic crisis.

Two years ago, the weekly magazine *Nokta* printed lengthy excerpts from a diary alleged to have been written by a former navy commander, Admiral Ozden Ornek. According to the diary, some former commanders led by the commander of the gendarmerie, General Sener Aydin, had planned two separate military coups in 2003 and 2004 under the codenames *Sarikiz* (Daisy) and *Ayisigi* (Moonlight).

Following these two failed coup attempts, a new campaign was conducted by the Turkish military against the Islamist AKP (Justice and Development Party) government in 2006. (See [“Turkey: A new military intervention in the making”](#)).

During the last two decades many bourgeois commentators, including certain sections of the so-called “left,” have claimed there is no longer any possibility of a major military intervention in Turkey—either overtly or covertly. Any careful examination of Turkish politics is sufficient to refute this claim, which ignores the deep and ongoing historical internal divisions within the Turkish bourgeoisie, going back to the last years of the Ottoman Empire, as well as the critical role played by the Turkish military as the last-ditch weapon of the leading (or so-called “secular”) faction of the Turkish bourgeoisie.

On January 14, an editorial in the *Boston Globe* warned the new US administration of the danger of a “fifth military coup.” The article concludes, “American officials should be counseling Turkey’s leaders to resolve their differences peaceably. There is trouble enough awaiting the new Obama team without a military putsch or civil war in Turkey.” Of course, the paper is mainly concerned about the “national interests” of the US. However, no serious analyst can categorically dismiss the possibility of a new military intervention, even in the form of a direct coup.

The threat of renewed action by the Turkish military has also come to light in the high-

profile court case and investigation into a conspiracy known as Ergenekon, in which a clandestine ultra-nationalist group is charged with attempting to create a chaotic political environment with the aim of triggering a direct military intervention.

The police investigation into Ergenekon was launched in June 2007 after the discovery of explosives—said to be of the same make used by the military—in a house in a shantytown district of Istanbul. There are also indications that the investigation has managed to link Ergenekon with the two failed military coup attempts devised by military commanders (since retired) against the AKP government in 2003 and 2004.

The military is also linked to some “civic” organisations, such as the Ataturkist Thought Association (ADD) and the Association for Supporting Modern Life (CYDD), which organised “Republic Rallies” in 2006, in different parts of the country against the AKP and its candidate for the Turkish presidency. General Sener Eruygur is the head of the ADD.

In order to be able to understand and analyse the current developments and ongoing deep and bitter political crisis, it is necessary to once again review and draw the lessons from the February 28 military intervention.

Pre-military intervention period

In the general elections of 1995, no political party managed to garner enough votes to establish a government on its own. Necmettin Erbakan’s Islamist Welfare Party (RP) was the leading party, with 21 percent of the votes.

Although a bourgeois party, the RP, unlike the traditional major political parties of the establishment, had been able to increase its popularity among working people and the urban poor. The RP mobilised a substantial amount of rank-and-file militants seeking direct contact with potential voters, listening to their problems, providing food and other types of charitable support.

Under conditions in which Stalinist and Maoist parties had been totally discredited, the RP resorted to rhetoric usually associated with Social Democratic parties. The RP promised to achieve a “just order.” Coupled with the material help they received, the RP was able to win support from people living in shantytowns of big cities and facing deep financial difficulties. The RP mayors also channelled some resources to social assistance programs. The AKP has inherited much of this tradition while junking the “just order” slogan, which sounded too socialistic for the leaders of the party.

The RP was much more organised and systematic in its approach compared to the traditional parties, which were in organisational disarray both on the right and the “left.”

Under the leadership of Erbakan and now under the leadership of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Islamist movement in Turkey has channelled a few crumbs to the poorest segments of society while attacking any organised movement of the working class with the same venom as the Kemalists.

The organisational abilities of MUSIAD (the Association of Independent Industrialists and Businessmen)—and more importantly its financial support—also played an important role in the successes notched up by Islamic parties in the national elections of 1995, 1999 and 2002.

A coalition government of two “centre-right” parties, Mesut Yilmaz’s Motherland Party (ANAP) and Tansu Ciller’s True Path Party (DYP), was formed on March 5, 1996, with Mesut Yilmaz as prime minister. This coalition was popularly called the “Anayol” (Main Path) government. However, both the ANAP and DYP were steadily losing credibility and electoral support, and the coalition government of these two bitter rivals lasted only four months.

Although Tansu Ciller had stressed the importance of stopping the Islamists and declared during her election campaign that she would categorically reject any coalition with the RP, she decided to end the coalition government and ally her party with the RP. At the time, Ciller was faced with a number of parliamentary investigations on serious charges of corruption. Erbakan’s welcoming words to his new coalition partner were very telling: “The ones who join hands with us also deserve to be acquitted.”

Today Islamists pose as the determined opponents of the “state within a state,” but Ciller was in fact known for her involvement with such clandestine circles. When the Susurluk scandal came to light and exposed close links between the security forces, mafia gangs and fascist death squads, Ciller praised the fascist gunman Abdullah Catli, killed during the Susurluk car crash. “Those who fire bullets or suffer their wounds in the name of this country, this nation and this state will always be respectfully remembered by us,” she said. Erbakan raised no objections to these remarks. Moreover, he called the Susurluk affair “nonsense.”

Addressing the Susurluk commission, the Republican Peoples Party (CHP) deputy Fikri Saglar said that DYP leaders Ciller and Mehmet Agar were at the heart of the scandal and personally responsible for the “politics and economy becoming Mafia-like.” Saglar attempted but failed to obtain the testimony of several people, including Teoman Koman (former gendarme commander general), Necdet Urug (former chief of the general staff), Veli Kucuk (former general who has been arrested in connection with the Ergenekon investigations), Tansu and Ozer Ciller (Tansu Ciller’s husband). When Tansu Ciller threatened to bring down the coalition government, Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan prevented Ciller’s testimony from being taken.

The RP’s “national view”

The Islamist movement had been able to acquire strength in the early 1990s, took hold of the municipalities of most big cities in the local elections of 1994, and came to power through a coalition government in 1996.

This movement represented a certain faction of the bourgeoisie, mostly concentrated in provincial cities and towns, which had an inferior position relative to the bigger monopoly groups in industrial and financial centres such as Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, Kocaeli and Adana.

There has always been a struggle between these two factions of the bourgeoisie over resources. Control of the municipalities of big cities provided an important opportunity for Islamist capital to redistribute surplus value into its coffers. Many relatively small Islamist companies were able to flourish, and this process has continued since then.

On foreign policy, the RP—like its Islamist forerunners—was explicitly anti-Western and opposed the European Union, claiming that Western nations represented colonialism, oppression, immorality and ultimately Christianity. The RP criticised Kemalism as the embodiment of these “foreign” interests corrupting Muslims inside the country itself. This

“national view” openly preached the superiority of Islam and the inferiority of the West.

In parallel, the Islamist bourgeoisie and its political representatives advocated a very different international strategy on economic, foreign and military policy. The RP, openly hostile to the EU and the Western world in general, defended a clear orientation towards Islamic countries. In line with this policy the RP was opposed to any institutional integration with the Western world, including NATO, the US or becoming a member of the EU.

Therefore the February 28 coup was in effect an intervention by the so-called “secular” wing of the bourgeoisie against the threat created by the Islamists to Turkish capitalism’s integration into Western capitalism. The problem wasn’t simply a matter of lifestyle, as many petty bourgeois tendencies claim, but about the future international orientation of Turkish capitalism.

This explains why the major Western powers supported the February 28 military intervention.

A number of critical events at the time—such as official visits by Erbakan to Libya and Nigeria, which raised the tensions between the government and the general staff, a fast-breaking dinner held with the participation of religious leaders at the official residence of Erbakan as prime minister, plans to build a mosque in Istanbul’s Taksim Square, and the re-conversion of the Hagia Sophia into a mosque—were just the reflections of the profound political rift within the ranks of the ruling class, coupled with the socio-cultural division of society at large.

The peculiarities of the February 28 military intervention

The military systematically ignored the government and refused to cooperate on a number of issues. On February 28, the military put forward a number of pre-planned measures aimed at “tackling religious fundamentalism efficiently” and presented them to Erbakan for approval. Initially Erbakan offered some resistance, but in the end he was forced to sign the decisions, which were aimed at the movement he represented.

Soon after the February 28 ultimatum, the first radical step taken was to open a case in the Constitutional Court against the RP, with the demand that the party be closed down. This was undoubtedly done under pressure from the military.

In January 1998 the Constitutional Court closed down the RP and banned its five top leaders, including Erbakan, from politics for a period of five years. In 2003 Turkey’s appeals court sentenced Erbakan to two years and four months in jail for misappropriating party funds. This was a clear sign of the regime’s determination to suppress the political Islamist movement in Turkey.

After filing the closure case against the RP, tensions between the military and the coalition government (comprised of Erbakan’s RP and Tansu Ciller’s DYP) were systematically encouraged according to a plan prepared long before by the top echelons of the military. To ease the pressure, Erbakan resigned, with the expectation that Ciller would form a new government with his party. He presented the signatures of 270 deputies stating that they would vote for the cabinet suggested by President Suleyman Demirel. However, Demirel, under the watchful eyes of top generals, then passed-on the baton to Mesut Yilmaz of the ANAP (Motherland Party), which formed a minority government in coalition with Bulent Ecevit’s DSP (Democratic Left Party) and external support from the CHP (Republican

People's Party).

The Turkish army had already staged three coups between 1960 and 1980. Although they all had their own peculiarities, the first three putsches were all more or less direct interventions to oust existing governments. However, in 1997 the military toppled the civilian government by pressurising it through different channels and replacing it with another civilian government—without abolishing or dissolving any of the existing institutions.

For this reason some journalists and politicians prefer to call this military intervention a “post-modern coup.” This is a completely misleading description in the name of journalistic “creativity,” causing more confusion than clarity. From information recently come to light, it is clear that transformation of the military intervention of February 28, 1997, into a full-fledged military takeover was a serious and immediate possibility.

On the other hand, in order to avoid the word “coup,” many others—including the military itself—prefer to refer to the “February 28 process.” Certainly, the word “process” aims to hide the seriousness of the intervention, the measures taken in the wake of it, and thus legitimise it in the eyes of the public.

The regime of February 28

In fact, these new arrangements were aiming at institutionalising a “military republic,” as the former speaker of parliament put it at the time. With these new measures the National Security Council (MGK) “legally” placed all state policy under the direct guardianship of the military. In March 1998 a “Crisis Management Unit” was formed within the command structure of the MGK. This granted a bigger say to the military in the administration of the country, bypassing existing constitutional procedures.

This “bureaucratic super-institution,” which had the authority to take real executive power into its hands in times of crisis, has been pushed backed through a series of EU reforms during the reign of the current ruling Islamist party, AKP. Between 2002 and 2005, the AKP government made use of EU reforms to eliminate many of the channels by which the military gained an upper hand. Many leftist commentators blindly interpreted and welcomed this move as a fresh step toward a fully-fledged bourgeois democracy. Today, most of these same people are shocked by the blatant authoritarian steps taken by the same government.

With the February 28 military intervention, the regime adopted a much more chauvinistic and militaristic tone. This played into the hands of the fascist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), and gave it the opportunity to expand its fascist and nationalist social base. A rapprochement between the state and the racist nationalism of the MHP ensued. This reinforced the secular tendency, which increasingly depicted the founder of Turkey, Kemal Atatürk, as an uncompromising Turkish nationalist.

For Perincek’s Maoist-Kemalist misnamed Workers Party (IP), this was enough to forge an open alliance with the fascist MHP, maintaining that nationalists had been deceived and exploited in the past. Now they realized their mistake and were ready to participate as a national force struggling in the name of full national sovereignty.

The alliance of “unarmed forces”

The military and its “civilian supporters” stepped up their pressure, and in June 1997 the

government was forced to step down under the threat of a direct military takeover. The February 28 military intervention was a carefully planned operation, supported by the bourgeois media (except the Islamist media), many of the political parties, business organisations, trade unions, women's groups, intellectuals, etc. Even one army general overtly explained the importance of this mobilisation by calling their civilian props "unarmed forces."

This alliance of "unarmed forces" was directly led by big business organisations and spokesmen—namely the Turkish Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association (TUSIAD) and the Union of Chambers of Commerce (TTOBB). The Turkish Trade Union Confederation (Turk-Is), and the Revolutionary Trade Union Confederation (DISK) also took part—albeit from the sidelines.

The bureaucracies of Turk-Is and DISK were quite prepared to ally themselves with the political representatives of a faction of the bourgeoisie—including, first and foremost, the military. For its part, the Islamist trade union confederation Hak-Is's bureaucracy supported the political representatives of the rival, Islamist faction of the Turkish bourgeoisie.

Public opinion against the RP was inflamed with the help of the secular bourgeois media, particularly the Dogan Media Group (DMG). An article published by the Economist in 2002 explained, "Aydin Dogan [the owner of DMG], Turkey's leading media magnate, and the chief object of Mr. Erbakan's ire, helped to accelerate his downfall through a sustained anti-Islamist campaign in his newspapers and television channels."

The rise of the AKP

In 2001 the AKP was formed under the leadership of Erdogan as a split from the main Islamist party and the "old guard." Along with sharp shifts within the Turkish bourgeoisie in general, the wing with Islamist sympathies had also changed profoundly.

Under the conditions created by liberalisation, pro-market policies and the globalisation of production, a section of Islamist capital has also entered the sphere of finance capital—albeit belatedly.

Based on this objective development, the AKP distanced itself from the traditional line of the Turkish Islamist movement known as the "national view" doctrine and adopted a very friendly approach to the West and global finance capital. At the same time, the AKP has sought to further the interests of the Islamist wing of the Turkish bourgeoisie and has steadily undermined the hegemonic position of the "secular" wing of the ruling class.

After winning the general election in 2002, the AKP followed policies similar to that of any right-wing party in Turkey. Nevertheless, its systematic favouring of Islamist capitalist interests was unacceptable to the secular faction of the bourgeoisie. Recently the AKP government hardened its line and started to hit out at leading members of the rival faction of the Turkish bourgeoisie. After a verbal row at the end of last year, the government attacked the leading Turkish media group, the DMG, with an unprecedented fine and demands for nearly \$500 million in taxes. Also, its deliberate refusal to support major industries badly affected by the global crisis and controlled by "secularist" capital has led to increased tensions.

Under the conditions of a global financial and economic meltdown, Turkish society today faces a new acute crisis and conditions of profound instability. Given the extreme divisions

and loss of credibility and influence on the part of the “secularist” parties—the once mighty “centre-right” parties have no representation in parliament at the moment—only one force is capable of providing a violent corrective to the AKP government: the Turkish military.

Turkish capitalism is once again passing into a period of intense political instability. To expect democratisation from any faction of the bourgeoisie is a dangerous illusion for the working class and other layers of the working population.

The history of modern Turkey has repeatedly vindicated Trotsky’s theory of Permanent Revolution and demonstrated the inability of the Turkish bourgeoisie, irrespective of what particular faction holds power, to fulfil the urgent democratic tasks that still confront the country—in particular the overcoming of the repression of the country’s minority peoples. These tasks can only be accomplished by the Turkish working class in cooperation with the world working class on the basis of a socialist perspective.

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