



The Army or the Mosque?

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The mass demonstrations in Turkey and the political manoeuvrings by the military and the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) have exposed the contradiction that exists at the heart of Turkish politics. The battle lines are drawn around the fight for secularism against an encroaching Islamisation of society by the AKP, yet this is not the full story.

In Turkey MPs elect the president, not the people. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan of the AKP, who has overseen massive neoliberal reforms at the behest of the International Monetary Fund, had been priming himself for years to be the next president. But a huge demonstration on 14 April forced him to step back, and his party appointed Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül as the candidate instead.

The opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) received the signal from its masters in the military that the AKP must be stopped from taking presidential power. The CHP argued that there must be a two-thirds majority in parliament to call the elections, but then boycotted the voting session. The army posted a statement on their website firmly outlining their opposition to the AKP's choice of candidate. Another demonstration against the AKP was organised the next day and high court judges annulled the parliamentary vote.

More mass demonstrations followed across the country. In Izmir between one and two million people marched against the AKP, raising slogans against Sharia law, the EU and USA. While sections of the intelligentsia and the middle classes called the demonstration, workers and trade union federations have supported some of the protests.

Contradictions

But this is not simply a fight against Islamist politics. In Turkey, 99 per cent of the population is Muslim and the AKP has considerable support. The party is popular because it has presided over five years of economic growth. In another popular measure, it refused permission for the US military to use Turkey as a staging post for the invasion of Iraq. The party appeals to many workers and youth, who despise the military for its repressive actions and the traditional establishment for its pro-Western policies.

The masses hate Turkey's military because, since 1945, it has carried out four military coups to stop both the Communists and the Islamists from challenging the power of the secular capitalists. The army is also the driving force for some of the most brutal attacks on the Kurds in the east of the country.

Are the pro-secular rallies an expression of popular discontent with the government, or a stage army being used by the generals to exert political pressure on the Islamists? The protests link secularism up with nationalism, invoking the ideals of the founder of Turkey, Kemal Ataturk. The middle classes see Islamisation as a threat to their way of life, but their defence of democracy is only half-hearted. Few of them rallied to defend the left wing journalists that have been recently persecuted or killed by the army.

The struggle for power

AKP are now pushing for an early general election towards the end of the year. They believe this will give them the democratic mandate they need to push for a new presidential candidate from their own ranks. The only force they have against a military coup is to mobilise their electoral base. This is a risky strategy because resorting to extra-parliamentary actions could give the army the excuse to intervene to preserve 'law and order'.

They had hoped to change the constitution to allow the people, instead of the MPs, to elect the president, then they could bypass the opposition in parliament and rally the people behind a candidate through the electoral process. But the current President Necdet Sezer vetoed the bill on 25th May.

The military will no doubt resort to past practice, which can only result in bloodshed on the streets. Any military coup to defend secularism will be thoroughly reactionary.

The working class, however, must resist simply being used as pawns in the power games of the Turkish ruling classes. They need an independent strategy that can navigate the political minefield and allow them to struggle against the capitalists in the future. The mobilisation of the working class is crucial because only it can consistently defend democratic rights for all.

The way forward

A movement, which links the fight for secularism, democracy and against the neoliberal economic policies of the government, can provide a genuine alternative. A fight against the undemocratic laws in Turkey, which prohibit insulting the nation, and the attacks on press freedom can rally wider progressive forces.

This year's May Day protests which marked the 30th anniversary of the massacre of 34 workers by the army in 1977 saw thousands raise slogans against both the Islamist parties and the military. The traditional site of the Mayday rallies, Taksim Square, was blocked off by thousands of police, but the workers fought their way through and entered the square. This victory was an important symbol of the combativity of the workers, despite the baton blows and mass arrests.

The AKP wants to change the constitution to ensure a victory for their party; instead we must call for a constituent assembly to decide a constitution that defends national minority rights, women's rights and workers' rights. Most importantly, the assembly must decide who owns the means of production and how society's wealth is distributed. The workers' movement must carry out strike action against any assault on democracy.

Finally, workers in Turkey must fight for an independent party of the working class to combat political Islam and the army, and link this fight to the struggle for socialism. The nationalists and Islamists have failed to combat poverty, extend democratic rights or solve the national question - only the struggle of the working class can achieve these things.

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