



# Turkey; a regime on the way to Bonapartism

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Although, in an interview with Germany's public broadcaster, ARD, Angela Merkel ducked the question, 'how democratic is Turkey now?', the answer has been clear for a long time: the political strength that President Erdogan and his party, the Justice and development Party, AKP, have built up in Turkey in the last 14 years was from the very beginning not based on the legitimate development of democratic rights but on the exploitation of undemocratic elements rooted in the constitution.

## The rise of the AKP

Let us recall first of all the election of 2002 which the AKP won with a surprising 34 percent of votes cast, entering Parliament alongside only one other party, the Republican People's Party, CHP, which represents the Kemalist tradition. Had there not been a 10 percent threshold but, for example, 5 percent, there would have been a further five parties in Parliament, whose votes, in fact, counted for nothing. The AKP, which had only been founded one year earlier, brought together two conservative sections of society; Anatolian capital, which had established itself in the 90s and is often referred to as "Green Capital" or Islamist capital, and the simple religious-conservative population which had long felt itself excluded from the secular politics of the Kemal Atatürk tradition. Because the 90s had been marked by economic and financial crises and political instability, it was already clear before the elections of 2002 that the coalition parties; the Democratic Left Party, DSP, the Nationalist Movement, MHP and the Motherland Party, ANAP, would be punished.

'Green' capital, which had already succeeded in gaining considerable economic influence, now wanted to extend this to the political level and saw the new AKP as a good means of achieving its goal. One particularly important organisation for this fraction of capital is the Independent Industrialists and Businessmen's Association, MUSIAD, which combines a focused neoliberal economic policy with religious-conservative ethics. The companies that belong to this association encompass sectors such as construction, services, textiles and food production in which there is a high degree of informal and non-unionised labour. However, it is in competition with other economic associations such as, for example, the rather more internationally oriented Turkish Industrialists and Businessmen's Association, TUSIAD.

In 2009, there was an open conflict between these two bosses' organisations over whether to support the IMF austerity programme after the economic crisis. Such conflicts between different sectors of capital had existed, unresolved, for decades and it was clear from its first period in office that resolving them would be the most important task of President Erdogan and his party.

Since the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923, economic strategy had been focused on the attempt to overcome the import dependence of the country through a comprehensive industrialisation programme within an economic system that could contain the conflicting interests of the classes through a degree of social compromise. This went along with political oppression in a one-party system. Political and economic liberalisation in the 80s, and the increased independence of foreign capital in the country, led to instability. The attempt to unify the various interests of the bourgeoisie through a coalition government failed and resulted in a deep mistrust of coalition governments in Turkish society that lasts to the present day.

Time and again, there were military coups through which Islamist parties were removed from government but which also eliminated left parties and trade unions. Traditionally, the military has been the protector not only of secularism

but, above all, of the interests of the middle class, Western-oriented elite. For decades, it was also the protector of the general interests of Turkish capital, but, with the establishment of a stronger bourgeoisie which was not closely tied to the military, coupled with the economic collapse of Kemalist politics, it was less and less able to ensure this.

### The power base of the AKP

How did the Islamist AKP managed to stay in power for so long in a rapidly developing country like Turkey? Particularly in a country that lies in a region of high tension between the Balkans, the Black Sea and the Middle East?

The key to its success lay in its combination of neoliberalism, conservative traditions, a favourable starting point and, of course, massive oppression. If one were to ask any AKP elector to explain their continued allegiance, the answer, particularly within the rural population, would be that they were grateful to the AKP for its extensive programme of infrastructure development, the building of schools and the welfare payments which the party distributes. Leaving aside the bribes paid immediately before elections, for a long time the AKP paid poorer families \$500 per month. Since there was absolutely no legal entitlement to this money, many people voted for the party simply to secure this.

In fact, the successful economic policy at the beginning of its period in government, which raised the credibility of the government, was actually a continuation of the economic policy already established by the coalition government before 2002. Equally deceptive was the attempt to approach and eventually join the European Union, which was much vaunted in the West. The AKP made use of the reforms demanded by the EU so long as they were useful for the disarming of the military, thereafter, the negotiations stagnated. It has always been clear that such a regime is just as unwilling as its predecessors, or the military itself, to change the "terrorism laws" which have been fundamental to the maintenance of its stability when confronted by opposition movements or ethnic conflicts in the country. After the economic crisis of 2008, as exports to the EU declined and Turkey turned more towards the Middle East, the EU accession negotiations came to a standstill.

### Turkey and the Middle East

Although Turkey is, of course, not an Arab country, it was deeply affected by the outbreak of the Arab Spring. The failure to establish either a stable Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt or a regime change in Syria, wrecked the hopes and plans of Erdogan and the AKP. These had anticipated that, having concentrated his power at home, he would then project it beyond the country's frontiers. As Erdogan himself has repeatedly said, he wants to be the co-president in the "project of a Greater Middle East".

The first signs of instability in the AKP regime could already be seen in 2013 at the time of the Gezi Park protests. What began as a small protest against a construction project in a park in the city, developed into national anti-government demonstrations which were joined by many socially oppressed groups demanding the resignation of the government. The fact that nine people were killed by the police and that Erdogan mocked the victims and protesters was the first clear signal of how the AKP intended to deal with the opposition.

At the end of 2013, the AKP had to defend itself against another serious attack but this time from within its own camp. The religious movement around Fethullah Gulen, who had founded the AKP together with Erdogan, published recordings that revealed a serious corruption scandal around Erdogan and his son. In response, there was the first campaign of purges against alleged Gulen supporters. These are not just a religious sect but rather are quite significant fraction of capital to which many schools, universities and companies, and even a bank, belong.

One result of all the turmoil was the re-establishment of the left, pro-Kurdish alliance the HDP, which became a threat to the AKP because it drew its members and supporters from different regions of the whole country and many socially oppressed groups joined it. However, in order to try to turn this into an advantage for itself, the AKP at first tried to make use of the HDP in its peace negotiations with the Kurdish Workers' Party, the PKK.

These negotiations were important for the AKP as it attempted to strengthen its support within the Kurdish population by making the PKK so tame that it could no longer maintain itself as an armed opposition. However, during these

negotiations the influence of the Kurdish party in northern Syria, the Democratic Union Party, PYD, was strengthened and it became a model for the members of its sister party, the PKK.

The struggle against the Islamic State by the Kurds is well known worldwide and celebrated by the left movement for its heroism. Many young people from Turkish organisations are today fighting in the international brigades in Rojava. Although Turkey was one of the first countries to support the opposition in the Syrian civil war, it sided with the reactionary Islamist movements rather than the democratic and progressive forces. As it became clear that the Kurds might take advantage of the long drawn out war to establish an autonomous region in the North from which, in combination with the PKK, they might thwart Erdogan's hopes of power in the region, he changed his tactics towards the HDP.

Having previously been considered an important negotiating partner because of its connection with the Kurdish population, the rhetoric quickly changed and proceedings were launched against the leaders of the HDP, accusing them of membership and support of a terrorist organisation. Until the elections of June 2015, there was still hope in the opposition that entry into Parliament by the HDP might make it possible to change the course of political events in Turkey by legal means.

For the AKP, however, that was out of the question. When the HDP unexpectedly overcame the 10 percent hurdle and gained seats in Parliament, this denied the AKP the parliamentary majority it needed to amend the Constitution. In no time at all, there were military attacks on the Kurdish population, the peace negotiations were declared at an end and bombs exploded at HDP meetings. In the run up to new elections in November, a climate of collective punishment and fear was created and Erdogan himself said quite clearly, "if you had given us our 400 Parliamentary seats this chaos would not have broken out."

### Increasing power

Despite the scandal revealed by Gulen and his supporters, Erdogan was elected president in 2014 and put a fundamental change in the constitution on the agenda. The increase in his electoral support, from 34 percent in 2002 to 51 percent in 2014, shows that although, for example, real wages have stagnated since 2002 and private debt rose by 478 percent between 2004 and 2014, there is still great trust in the AKP. Moreover, the entire state apparatus is so oriented that for many people an alternative is unthinkable. The AKP has constructed a huge media empire and introduced a law by which Erdogan personally has the right to censor and block any unwanted content. All possible measures are taken against journalists such as Can Dundar who publicise scandals related to the government. The organisation "reporters without frontiers" has meanwhile put Turkey at 149 in its league table of press freedoms.

A government which in its rhetoric bases itself on the mass of the people but tells critical politicians and journalists from other countries that it would be best for them not to intervene and which, step-by-step, introduces ever more repressive laws in order to nip any opposition in the bud, is actually standing on shaky ground. The feeling amongst the people that they are financially secure is based above all on the housebuilding that has been based on a huge credit bubble and this will inevitably burst.

Support for the Islamist parties in Syria has brought the civil war there into Turkey and the collapse of the tourist trade is only one consequence of this. Another is the 3 million refugees, mainly from Syria, who have become part of a campaign by the AKP to divide the already oppressed population. Thus the new refugee camps, which are to hold several tens of thousands, are to be built on the farming lands of the Allouites, who are now protesting against this. Equally, many Kurds have lost their property in the shattered towns. The state building company will build new houses but not for the Kurdish population, which has been expelled, but for loyal civil servants as well as some Syrian refugees in order to stir up the Kurdish population against them.

On top of that, there came the unforeseeable attempted coup by sections of the military with the possible, but not yet proven, involvement of the Gulen movement in July 2016. This led to a three-month state of emergency and a purging of the state apparatus as well as a widespread wave of oppression against the left. New changes in the law mean that

Erdogan is now the chief of the general staff as well as of the secret services.

Now, through a massive propaganda campaign of public meetings and in the media the picture is being created of a people who are who are standing behind Erdogan against the coup and the military. On the evening of the coup itself, however, it was mainly the hard-core of Islamist AKP members that confronted the tanks. At the same time as Erdogan tried to deal with one potential threat to his rule by purging the military, the People's Protection Units, YPG, in Syria, in consultation with the USA, began to advance.

Erdogan saw himself obliged to send the army into Syria under the pretext of fighting IS, but actually to attack the YPG. While there has been no evidence from the side of the state press agency of any actual conflict with the IS, there are more and more pictures and videos of the assassination and torture of Kurdish and Syrian Democratic Forces by the Turkish army or its allies, the Islamist sections of the former Free Syrian Army. This attack had the very clear objective of preventing the consolidation of the three Kurdish cantons in Syria and thus the establishment of an autonomous region. In all this, it is important to note the role of the USA which initially supported the Kurds against the IS but then supported the invasion by its Nato ally, Turkey. The Kurds have had to live through many historic examples of betrayal by their (imperialist) allies and the fatal mistake of relying on them not only militarily but politically could now seal their fate.

The Erdogan regime, on the other hand, is now trying to re-establish diplomatic relations with other imperialist countries as it has done for some months with Russia and, within the EU, particularly to Germany. It has also reached out to regional powers such as Israel and Iran. The Lebanese newspaper As-Safir, reported a likely deal between the Turkish government and the Assad regime by which the cities of Aleppo and Darayya would be left to Assad when Turkey moved to prevent the consolidation of the Kurdish cantons. The pseudo-enmity between Assad and Erdogan was therefore interrupted in order for them to oppose a common enemy which threatened the current system of national states and suddenly Turkey found itself at war.

The working class

Against this background of major problems and conflicts, there remains the ongoing issue of the organisation of the oppressed and of the working class. Only some 8 percent of workers belong to trade unions and the majority of them are in unions close to the AKP. In addition, there is no workers' party in Turkey and left parties such as the HDP focus on collaboration and fraternisation between the peoples or else are marginalised. Naturally, fraternisation is an attractive concept, but it will convince neither the majority of the Kurdish population after months of being plagued by 'the Turkish People' nor even the greater part of the Turks who have grown up in an extremely nationalist education system which gives them privileges which, for some, are vital to survival. Permanent war against the Kurdish people is therefore one means by which ruling class maintains its position and keeps the masses in a state of national turmoil.

In the current situation, containing the conflict between the working class and capital is not Erdogan's most urgent task because class consciousness in the working class is low and the level of organisation even lower. All the same, he has to develop a policy which can secure the common interests of all the capitalists despite their conflicting short-term interests and to keep the country stable despite sharpening economic crisis.

One can, therefore, characterise Erdogan's regime as a developing Bonapartism, that is a regime in which one person, the Bonaparte, tries to suppress the conflict between classes or, as in Turkey today, between the different fractions of capital, from above, through a strong bureaucracy in order to keep the overall capitalist system stable.

The need for a Bonapartist regime, personified by Erdogan as the 'strong man' stems from social instability and the difficulties the various fractions of capital have in creating their own political force which could represent their common interests. Whatever ambitions Turkey has to become a strong regional power, as a semi-colonial country, it is unavoidably dependent on developments in other countries and on international finance capital. Creating a stable authoritarian regime is therefore a very difficult task as can be seen from Erdogan's ever more aggressive, militarist, repressive and risky reactions. An important step towards the formation of a fully Bonapartist regime that is able to

intervene even harder, would be the amendment of the constitution, which can only be done through a referendum.

After the failed coup and the "countercoup" of the AKP, Erdogan's grasp for a further consolidation of his power and the establishment of a fully Bonapartist regime seems almost impossible to stop. It is true that the Kurdish population has waged a heroic resistance against the military and the special police units but, politically, the left and the working class movement, indeed all democratic forces and social movements, find themselves in an extremely weak position. In such a defensive situation, an alliance between the HDP and other Kurdish organisations, those trade unions which are independent of the regime, above all DISK and KESK, together with the Turkish left and social movements, is urgently needed to oppose repression and arbitrary imprisonment and defend democratic rights, in particular, the right of self-determination of the Kurdish people.

Such a united front could, of course, be extended to numerous other fields of political, trade union and social struggle in order to build a real opposition against the regime and the ruling class. Within such a framework, the question of political strategy, orientation and the programme for the building of a workers' party, would be posed as a concrete task.

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