



What does the Turkish Referendum mean?

Chris Newcombe Fri, 17/09/2010 - 14:35

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Chris Newcombe looks at Turkey's constitutional debate in the context of the social and national questions

The September 12 referendum saw Turkish citizens approve a number of constitutional changes put forward by Turkey's governing Justice and Development Party (AKP), including several which strengthen the rights of workers and oppressed groups.

But some critics - notably the Republican People's Party (CHP) and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) - point to changes that undermine Turkey's secular status, as well as the independence of its judiciary.

One glaring omission in the reforms - ignored by the main parties - is any recognition of the national and cultural rights of Kurdish people, which led to a successful boycott by the Pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP).

What changes were proposed in the referendum and what response did they meet from voters?

The measures amend around twenty articles of the constitution. Improvements to equality rights, including positive discrimination, children and family rights, as well as data protection, can be seen as progressive.

The same goes for union and collective bargaining rights for public sector workers, and especially the lifting of a ban on general strikes, and political and solidarity strikes. On the other hand, the establishment of a conciliation body seeks to institutionalise class collaboration.

Many of the changes concern the military and the judiciary. One important measure is the annulment of Article 15, which bans the prosecution of the leaders of the 1980 military coup. Backed by the USA, the coup led to mass arrests, torture, disappearances, and even executions.

Having allowed far right terror groups like the Grey Wolves to attack and murder workers and left militants, the army intervened, posturing as a national saviour. While the fascist bands were now curtailed, the main crackdown was on the left parties and workers' organisations.

Economically, the coup meant neoliberalism, opening up to the global economy, a wage freeze and slashed public sector. Theoretically, with the immunity annulled, the perpetrators of the coup could now be prosecuted.

Other changes, however, are seen by many as an attempt by the AKP to undermine the independence of the judiciary in its own interests. For example, the Constitutional Court is to be expanded in size, with some of its members appointed by parliament - currently, only the president is able to appoint them.

While the AKP has formally broken with the Islamist tradition of its predecessor parties, critics claim they have a hidden agenda, and could use their parliamentary majority to influence the courts and thereby undermine Turkey's secular state.

58% voted 'Yes' to these reforms, but the high turnout of 74% masks important regional variations. Istanbul province - the largest - was around average, whereas Ankara province, which includes the capital itself, reached 80%, and others approached 90%.

In Kurdish provinces, however, the BDP boycott was widely observed, with turnout as low as 9% in Hakkâri. BDP deputy, S?rr? Sak?k, welcoming this, said: ?What Kurds call for is a new constitution to solve the Kurdish problem and a process for dialogue.?

Where should revolutionaries stand on the Turkish referendum?

Socialists should be well aware that proclaimed rights and real rights are two different things. Where democratic rights are realized under capitalism, they are always subordinated to the actual power of the ruling class.

Nevertheless, the existence of formal democracy greatly enhances the ability of workers to organize independently as a class in unions, parties, etc. Conversely, the restriction of rights, as in antiunion laws, materially restricts such organization.

In addition, the struggle to defend and extend democratic rights under capitalism is an essential element of workers' struggle. With the right tactics on the part of revolutionaries, the fight for democracy can help to expose the limitations of capitalism in the political sphere, thus forming a bridge between today's struggles and the fight for socialism. The alternative ? that socialists ignore democratic questions ? leaves the political field open to bourgeois and petty bourgeois forces, including the most reactionary and racist types.

Where workers are divided by nationality, the denial of minority rights ? including the right to full secession ? cannot be a matter of indifference. Revolutionary socialists in Turkey and everywhere must support unconditionally the rights of the Kurdish minority.

For this reason alone, we would have boycotted the September 12 referendum. Measures promoting class collaboration, along with dubious tinkering with the judicial system, further strengthen the case for boycott. The progressive changes in social and workers' rights do not outweigh these factors.

When we see Turkey's constitutional reform in the context of the wider aim of EU membership, designed to integrate the Turkish economy and state into the project of a Europe dominated in the main by Franco-German imperialism, its democratic credibility takes a further dive.

The outcome of the referendum mean the AKP will now work on a draft new constitution ahead of next year's general election. This would further consolidate their evolution into a mainstream centre-right, neoliberalist party.

The main opposition comes from the centre-left CHP, with the rightwing nationalist NHP waiting in the wings. While the CHP describes itself as social democratic, and is affiliated to the Socialist International, it is really a left populist party.

In these circumstances, a key task of revolutionary socialists in Turkey now is to work out tactics needed to bring workers into the arena of democratic struggle as an independent force. In the course of this, as part of the wider class struggle, opportunities can be created to build a new, revolutionary workers' party in Turkey.

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