

Turkey: Labyrinth of bourgeois politics

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Since the military coup of September 12, 1980, two underlying processes have structured Turkey's political and social evolution: the development of Turkish capitalism in the direction of greater integration in globalized capitalism, and the sharpening of the Kurdish national question.

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These two phenomena of course existed well before 1980. The Turkish economy was borne by an export-oriented industry which constituted the outlet for the rural exodus from the overpopulated countryside of Anatolia. Meanwhile, after the major Kurdish revolts supported by the traditional structures against the new centralising Turkish Republic which denied national diversity within its territory, in particular the Sheikh Said rebellion of 1925, a Kurdish national movement had emerged during the 1970s based on Kurdish students originating from the Turkish left. Nevertheless an essential element of this period has disappeared: the movements of workers and youth were crushed by the military coup of 1980. The brutal repression that followed paved the way for a neo-liberal reformatting of society.

Two structuring dynamics

1. An export economy firmly anchored in globalized capitalism. The integration of Turkish capitalism in the world economy is not new but it has particularly increased over the past thirty years. From the beginning of the 1980s Turkish capitalism increasingly rested on exports rather than the domestic market. This evolution was strongly encouraged by neoliberal governments under the leadership of Turgut Özal, whose policy aimed at integrating Turkey into global capitalism by greater authorisation of imports and, above all, by transforming it into a competitive country on the international market. Thus, Turkey exported 3 billion dollars worth of goods in 1980 as against 132 billion dollars worth in 2008. This growth was not linear, Turkish exports were still “only” \$28 billion in 2000 but grew sharply between 2001 and 2005. This phenomenon has gone hand in hand with increased industrialization destined mainly for the European Union (EU) and the United States. The share of manufactured products, notably textile and car products, in exports rose from 10% to 92% over the same period with the emergence of new industrial areas in Anatolia in cities like Mersin, Konya, Kayseri, Denizli and with the appearance of many SMEs and a provincial industrial bourgeoisie. This evolution has thus accelerated since 2002 and the coming to power of the AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, Party of Justice and Development, founded in August 2001), especially with the three-year strategic plan for exports and the transformation of labour relations legislation.

Turkish capitalism thus became, during the 2000s, regionally dominant and capable of achieving unprecedented levels of accumulation. In an anecdotal but significant way, Istanbul has become the fourth biggest city of the world in terms of billionaires - twenty-eight! - behind New York, Moscow and London.

2. A still unresolved national question. Out of the many Kurdish organisations arising at the end of the 1970s, only the PKK (Partiya karkerên Kurdistan, founded in 1978 by Kurdish leftist students) plays a major role and can claim to be the political movement of the Kurds in the southeast of the Turkey. After some difficult initial years, the PKK succeeded both in maintaining its organization under the dictatorship, conquering a broad social base and attracting many activists particularly due to state racism and the extreme harshness of repression against the vast majority of the Kurdish population in the southeast of the country. Clashes between the PKK and the Turkish army and its allies - Kurdish village militias (korucu) and Kurdish Hizbullah, an ultra-sectarian and violent religious grouping, divided into two rival factions, Menzil and Ilim - degenerated into a genuine civil war with its theatre of operations in Turkish Kurdistan (in the southeast of the Turkish state) but also occasionally the big cities of the country. These clashes reached their climax between 1995 and 1996, a period during which the security institutions (the army but also the secret services) thoroughly used their autonomy through the “state of emergency” procedures in Turkish Kurdistan or through the Jitem units (clandestine police cells responsible for counter-terrorism).

The “Kurdish question” was thus relegated to a “simple” military matter while the plural nature of the Turkey was denied for the benefit of the “flag, language, nation” triptych. The deaths of many conscripts during clashes between the army and the PKK, in the absence of an alternative audible discourse, strengthened Kurdish nationalism while military ceremonies and the funerals of conscripts were an opportunity for demonstrations of Turkish ultra-nationalist force.

Today, Abdullah Öcalan (“Apo”, one of the founders of the PKK, captured in Kenya by the Turkish secret services in 1999 and sentenced to death in June 1999, though this was subsequently commuted to life imprisonment), the historic leader of the PKK and the subject of a strong cult of personality, remains the centre of gravity of the Kurdish movement despite the crisis undergone by the movement after his arrest. It is the main, if not the only source of legitimacy for the vast majority of the Kurdish masses of the country, particularly among young people who are primarily “Apoists” rather than supporters of the BDP (Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi, Party of Peace and Democracy, founded in 2008, when the previous legal Kurdish party, the DIP was banned) as such. The crisis undergone by the PKK after the arrest of Öcalan has in no way finished it off.

Thus, the AKP’s project of “democratic opening”, which sought to make changes in relation to a Kurdish situation which had become intolerable, while avoiding dialogue with the PKK, failed precisely because of the extremely determined and tough reaction of the organization which did not intend to become thus marginalized. These clashes, leading to the deaths of Kurdish combatants and civilians on the one hand and Turkish army conscripts on the other, led to an increased ethnicization of politics. Further evidence was the success of the boycott of the constitutional referendum organized by the BDP in Turkish Kurdistan in its campaign for “democratic self-government” (a quasi-federal model). These are two indications that it is definitively impossible to have a political settlement of the issue excluding the main component of the Kurdish movement. Such a solution has been advanced by the most important capitalist sectors, like the Özal government in 1993 before the military escalation in the mid-1990s so as to strengthen Turkish capitalism.

The meaning of the AKP government

Discussions aimed at politically and socially situating the AKP party in power since 2002 are obfuscated by its “Islamist” label, some of its initiatives of “opening” and the question of “social base”.

The adjective “Islamist”, often joined with that of “moderate”, is probably the most problematic as regards the AKP, since this category means nothing other than the use of a certain religious lexicon without taking account of the real social content and political project characterising an organization. Undoubtedly, on the one hand, the AKP originates from the Milli Görüş (National Vision) current, the main current which granted a central place to religious references in its speech and discourse, while on the other hand the AKP has “moderated” this reference in the sense that it is less marked - with acceptance of the principle of “secularism” (Turkish “secularism” relates much more to control of religious institutions by the state than to separation, and thus the directorate of religious affairs is a state body; while imams are normally trained in public schools and are on the public payroll) and the view that religion is not considered as a source of political legitimacy. However, these notes do not teach us anything about the class character of the AKP. If its electoral base is undoubtedly popular, allowing it to obtain an absolute majority in Parliament, the AKP is located firmly in the framework of bourgeois interests.

It is possible to schematically distinguish three sectors of this bourgeoisie:

1. The conservative-nationalist petty bourgeoisie: artisans and small Anatolian and urban employers, more significant employers originating more recently from this petty bourgeoisie and constituting the spinal column of “Muslim” capital, junior civil servants, landowners and so on. Its aspirations are essentially the defence of small capital faced with the upheavals of global capitalism, moral conservatism and nationalism. It has traditionally formed the base of the parliamentary conservative parties or political Islam and has been divided between the current ruling party (AKP) and ultra-nationalist formations (MHP, Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, the Nationalist Movement Party) or Islamic parties outside the AKP (Saadet Partisi, Party of Bliss). However, a part of this petty bourgeoisie is integrated into the export strategy and has benefitted from it, directly or indirectly. It has accumulated sufficient capital to direct large SMEs which are the motors of capitalism in the cities and the many industrialized towns of Anatolia. This former petty bourgeoisie in full ascent is the AKP’s most faithful base.

2. The “liberal” bourgeoisie - a big bourgeoisie deeply integrated into globalized capitalism, business leaders, intellectual and academic sectors, which, despite tensions, back the AKP in the absence of a credible “liberal” political alternative. Its aspirations are a transformation of society in accordance with neo-liberalism which would allow further integration into global capitalism using the advantages of the country (industrial fabric, basic infrastructure, a skilled workforce at relatively low cost). From this point of view, accession to the European Union, including the democratic transformations that entails, comes before any other project of this “liberal” bourgeoisie, even if this perspective, vaguely equated with a better quality of life, benefits from much broader support (notably from Kurdish nationalism, to which we will return). The AKP’s strength comes from its ability to unite, during its accession to power, the small conservative petty bourgeoisie with the “liberal” bourgeoisie. The quotation marks we employ here are just to highlight the extremely ambiguous nature of this “liberalism”. The bourgeoisie has emerged over the course of decades but not against the existing political authority (as in France or Britain) but completely in its shadow. Under the regime established by Mustafa Kemal the first large industrial fortunes were made in the shadow of the new state and its desire to create a bourgeoisie which was “industrial, Turkish and Muslim”, as against the Jewish and Christian commercial bourgeoisie (despite the great declarations

on the secular nature of the new regime).

The penchant for political liberalism of the Turkish big bourgeoisie has generally proved limited. Faced with the emergence of social protest movements during the 1970s, it quickly fell behind army and state repression. Thus the TÜSIAD (Association of Businessmen and Industrialists of Turkey), one of the main organizations of big business, clearly supported the coup of 1980. Today, the same employers' organization still representing the big bourgeoisie defends the European perspective and in this context the cultural rights of the Kurds (such as the use of their mother tongue in education). Indeed, in the current phase of capitalism and in the absence of a real social and political opposition this bourgeoisie defends the political changes of "liberalisation" of the regime in order to resolve those questions which, in its opinion, may "weaken Turkey" (i.e. Turkish capitalism), particularly the Kurdish national question. It is, in essence, a desire for parliamentary democracy laced with federalism which does not however find any significant political outlet.

3. The intermediate categories and the statist, militarist and nationalist bourgeoisie: high and middle civil servants, judges, some "liberal" professional factions such as lawyers or university "intellectuals" and especially military personnel (officers and general staff) who constitute the backbone of the defenders of "Kemalism". We should add to this non-exhaustive list a military bourgeoisie which not only developed in the shadow of the state but owes its existence to the very significant military budgets. Thus, the work of the academic İsmet Akça (See İsmet Akça: Military-Economic Structure in Turkey — Present Situation, Problems, and Solutions, TESEV, July 2010) has particularly well demonstrated the "collective capitalist" nature of the military institution. The leadership of the Turkish army not only constitute the armed fist of capital but are themselves capitalists, either through the direct economic investment of the army, the activities of foundations that are linked to the latter or more widely the military-industrial sector which exists thanks to military contracts and recycles retired officers and their families.

Success and impasses of the referendum

The position of the AKP as well as the specific features of its constitutional project can be understood by its relations with these three sectors. The maintenance of a large number of old provisions which suit the conservative nationalist petty bourgeoisie (the unitary character of the State and no reference to national diversity), the cosmetic and formal advances of political liberalization (reduction in the powers of military courts) and, above all, a taking in hand of the judicial milieu close to the third sector of the bourgeoisie and hostile to the AKP. It has thus used its dominant political position very logically to consolidate its position and to strengthen itself in relation to the sectors of the bourgeoisie that are hostile to it, by adopting a project falling short of "parliamentary democracy" despite the impotent criticisms of a certain number of liberals and the frontal opposition, although doomed to failure, of the statist bourgeoisie. It should of course be noted that these tensions are strictly confined within the limits of capitalism. Thus, it appears that the "new" Constitution of the AKP is the adapted declension of relations between capitalist sectors of the long process of neoliberal reformatting of society launched globally at the beginning of the 1980s and initiated in Turkey by Turgut Özal.

In the face of this project several opposition fronts have emerged:

- The neoliberal "no" with notably the TÜSIAD representing big capital and finding this project too far from bourgeois parliamentarianism.
- The ultra-nationalist "no" of the MHP. Seeking to differentiate itself, the extreme right denounces the general policy of the AKP believing that the latter makes too many concessions to the Kurds (in

its attempt at “democratic opening”) even if there is no provision for the rights of the Kurds in the draft constitution. It amounts then to a reactionary opposition.

- The ambiguous “no” of the main parliamentary opposition party, the “Kemalist” CHP mixing some vague social considerations with a nationalist and statist discourse.

- We should give a specific place to the “boycott” campaign initiated by the BDP. Indeed, the Kurdish movement and its leadership realize that this draft contributes absolutely nothing for the Kurds, which is undeniable, and call for a boycott rather than a “no” vote. This tactic reflects the structuring character of the Kurdish national question. Indeed, the political situation in Turkish Kurdistan is quite different from the rest of the country. Benefiting from mass support, the BDP (at the instigation of Ocalan) has boycotted the referendum, and has launched a campaign in favour of “democratic self-government” (meaning something close to the German federalism model) as an alternative. If the boycott makes sense from the point of view of the BDP, it should be noted that this campaign has been supported by a few isolated radical left formations, which however have no serious perspective comparable to the “democratic autonomy” of the BDP to propose in the rest of the country. So apart from Turkish Kurdistan, it should be noted that no social condition allowing the successful use of this tactic is present.

- Distinct from these various oppositions, although less audible, there is a unitary “left no” putting forward democratic and social demands and consisting of several associations, professional organisations and national political organizations: the ÖDP (Özgürlük ve Dayanışma party, Party of Freedom and Solidarity in which members of the Turkish section of the Fourth International are active) the TKP (Communist Party of Turkey), the Emep (Emeğin Partisi, Labour Party, formerly pro-Albanian) as well as the Houses of the People who have declared a common position. This position has also benefited from the support of a number of unions and associations. Its effect has remained limited due to the weakness of the left in Turkey but also because this campaign was launched late and is not supported by rank and file structures such as local committees bringing together all the supporters of the “left no”. These limits work against a dynamic born of this collaboration, but its existence is still positive and also allows a little clarification of the confusion emerging from the “left Yes”.

Indeed, although this might be surprising after an overview of the characteristics of AKP and its constitutional draft, even on the radical left individuals and groups (most notably the EDP (Eşitlik ve Demokrasi Partisi), Antikapitalist linked to the International Socialist Tendency and DSİP (Devrimci Sosyalist İşçi Partisi) formerly linked to the IST but still with links to the latter) have campaigned for a “critical yes”, arguing that the adoption of such a referendum would turn the page of the coup of 1980. This, even though the AKP’s draft does not integrate political and social freedoms opening the possibility for self-organization of workers’ self-organisation. Thus, lifting of the ban on political and solidarity strikes of which much has been made has little meaning to the extent that the possibility of “postponing “a strike on the grounds of “national security” has been maintained and that in case of lack of agreement, the final decision is taken by an arbitration committee (obviously unfavourable to workers) whose decision cannot be questioned (article 54). A procedure which governments, especially that of the AKP, have repeatedly used. The “critical yes” thus amounts to expecting major democratic advances from the party of President Abdullah Gül, whereas the latter has said in relation to the Kurdish question: “it is harmful for the fight [“against terrorism”] to give details after a decision is taken (...).” A program is already being implemented, it would be detrimental to talk about it” and thus criticized the army chief of staff indirectly accused of talking too much to the press (!) without the slightest stir in his camp. In the magazine “Yeniyol”, Masis Kürkçügil characterized this as being “lost in the labyrinth of bourgeois politics”, that is losing sight of the fact that real progress for workers can result only from the real movement of the workers themselves to the extent that they can establish a relationship of forces.

The AKP draft was adopted with a 57.9% “Yes” vote and a rate of participation of 73.4%, (significantly lower than in the parliamentary elections). This was particularly due to the success of the BDP boycott campaign in Turkish Kurdistan with a rate of participation of only 34.9% in Diyarbakır, 40.7% in Batman, 43.7% in Van, 22.5% in Şırnak and only 9% Hakkari. The “no” vote was focused mainly on the Aegean and Mediterranean coasts, and Eastern Thrace, areas where the vote for the AKP is traditionally low, as well as a few other departments where the implantation of the left is notable (Dersim with the “record” no vote of more than 81% and Eskişehir in Anatolia or Artvin on the Black Sea).

Exemplary struggle of Tekel workers

The adoption of this Constitution by referendum took place while the labour movement was extremely weak, with the corollary of the evacuation of the social question from the political agenda and the inability of a fragmented left to emerge from its isolation. The political agenda is generally trapped between the imperative of “fighting terrorism” (the Kurdish movement) and the refraction of tensions between sectors of the bourgeoisie.

These tensions can be reflected in the media in an artificial manner, as in the case of the dismantling of the “Ergenekon” network, often presented in Turkey and abroad as a dramatic struggle between the AKP and a putschist sector of army. It only amounted to the sidelining of the most hardcore fringes of the Kemalist opposition to the AKP, not in the least capable of carrying out a coup d’etat.

The Kurdish question is also often used to pull the strings of national unity and thus disqualify any subversive discourse. This is evident in relation to the wearing of the foulard in public buildings by women (public universities and so on). Because of the resolute opposition of a statist bourgeoisie increasingly nervous over its successive losses of positions, the “foulard question” allows the AKP to appear anew as the champion of popular causes while pursuing a brutal policy against workers’ mobilisations.

Indeed it is precisely such mobilisations which have brought the social question back on the political agenda. Examples have been the big march of miners from Zonguldak to Ankara in 1991 or the civil service struggle in 1995. The most striking mobilisation of recent years has been that of the workers at Tekel (a formerly state owned alcohol and tobacco company) in 2010 in struggle against the imposition of a new particularly disadvantageous status after its privatisation and dismantling.

This huge and lasting mobilisation, which kept a continuous presence in Ankara for 78 days, was revealing in a number of ways. It was a direct reaction to neoliberalism in Turkey but, since the essence of the waves of unprecedented privatisation has already been accomplished, a very late reaction which thus took on the character of a rearguard struggle. The AKP once again demonstrated its character as a bourgeois party violently opposed to the working class by using the most violent forms of repression. Finally, this mobilisation was confronted by silence from the trade union bureaucracies opposed to the emergence of a movement radicalised by the length and breadth of the struggle. The Tekel workers were confronted not only with police violence but also numerous manœuvres from the leadership of the Türk-İş trade union confederation, of which their union is a member, to channel and thus weaken their movement. The reaction of the Tekel workers, joined by other sectors in struggle, was determined and took a completely radical turn when the May 1st platform where the leaders of the different confederations were seated was invaded by workers intent on ejecting the president of Türk-İş from it. This action was condemned by all the leaderships of the six confederations including that considered as the most “left”, KESK, to which the Tekel workers responded by occupying the offices of Türk-İş in İstanbul and obtaining the support of

numerous trade union activists. The mobilisation allowed them to win their case at the Council of State and bring it to the Constitutional Court where a decision is still awaited.

The movement of the Tekel workers cannot of course in itself change the path which Turkey has gone a long way down and of which the new Constitution is only the last paving stone, that is to say the path of neoliberal remodelling of the whole of society in which the social dimension has disappeared from political debate and where the oppositions are reduced to tensions between different sectors of the bourgeoisie.

The “yes” victory strengthens the hand of the AKP in its will to consolidate its power and to thus obtain for its supporters the most significant share of the profits resulting from Turkey’s transformation into an exporter country. It disarms somewhat the bourgeois factions which are most hostile to it. Nonetheless, several questions remain unresolved. The AKP has proved incapable of resolving the “Kurdish” question whereas even five years ago, it could claim to compete with the Kurdish movement on its own terrain, in Turkish Kurdistan. Its falling back on its nationalist base and the resumption of a bellicose discourse has led to its failure in this region. This failure has been sanctioned successively by the local elections of 2008, the defeat of the “democratic opening” which sought to marginalise the PKK and finally the success of the boycott in Turkish Kurdistan. In addition the continued retraction of the social question from political debate cannot go on. In a way, the new leader of the CHP parliamentary party has grasped this by reintroducing a dose of the “social” in his discourse, to the detriment of the ultra-nationalism that characterised his predecessor.

From the viewpoint of the socialist left in Turkey, it is important to be in a position to grasp these questions and act on the class antagonisms, which can only deepen with the integration of Turkey into globalised capitalism, articulating with this a political settlement ensuring the emancipation and self-determination of Turkey’s Kurds. The Tekel movement constitutes a remarkable example showing the basis on which the socialist left can rebuild itself in Turkey so as to change course. An immense task which begins with awareness that there are no short cuts like an artificial parliamentary election, crumbs of democracy falling from the table of the bourgeois parties or cooptation inside union bureaucracies without real links with the working class.

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* Translation: International Viewpoint.

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