

Turkey, the Erdogan Government and the Left Today

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(Translation By Özlem İlyas Tolunay; Turkish version here.)

Oğuzhan Müftüoğlu was born in Anamur, Turkey in 1944. He joined the Revolutionary Youth (Dev-Genç) movement while he was a law student at Ankara University during the 1960s.

Müftüoğlu participated in activities of the People's Liberation Party-Front of Turkey (THKP-C) together with its leader Mahir Çayan and his comrades, until the Kızıldere incident of 1972. He was put on trial that year because of his association with Dev-Genç and THKP-C, found guilty and sentenced to prison, though he was released by the 1974 general amnesty after having served nearly three years. During the 70s, he played a crucial role in establishing the Revolutionary Youth (Dev-Genç) movement and then the Revolutionary Path (Dev-Yol). He was tried as the number one defendant during the main Revolutionary Path trial that followed the military coup of September 12, 1980. He was released in 1991 after serving 11 years in the prison. He subsequently played a part in the establishment of the Foundation for Social Research, Culture and Art (TAKSAV), of the Freedom and Solidarity Party (öDP) and of the daily newspaper *BirGün*. He is today a member of the öDP.

New Politics: Outside of Turkey and especially in the United States, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is often portrayed as a leader who ended decades of military rule in Turkey, established a more democratic government, created economic prosperity, and allowed Muslims to practice their religion. Knowing that you do not share that assessment, how do you characterize Erdoğan and his government?

Oğuzhan Müftüoğlu: The military governments that we experienced in Turkey during the last half-century were extensions of the Cold War policies of the capitalist world. They were a fascist system of oppression for curbing the left and the working classes, and—unlike the image Erdoğan would now very much like to present to the Western world—they were not used to oppress the Muslims. As a matter of fact, generally there weren't any problems regarding Muslims practicing their religion in Turkey; on the contrary, today there is continuous pressure attempting to impose sectarian religious rules on society.

I see the Tayyip Erdoğan government as a project supported by the U.S. government, especially regarding the regional politics within the framework of the Greater Middle East Initiative. Erdoğan came to prominence as a politician within the "National Vision" tradition promoted by Refah (the Welfare Party), which embodied Turkey's most conservative, radical Islamist segments. The "postmodern coup" of February 28, 1997, put an end to the coalition government of which the Welfare Party was a member. The background to this crisis was formed by the obstacles raised by the Welfare Party against the implementation of the neoliberal policies of international capital. The dissolution of the Welfare Party opened the road to a new political formation, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), introduced on the political scene by a group including Tayyip Erdoğan. Unlike the Welfare Party, the AKP aligned itself with the Middle East policies of the United States and was supported by the military as well as by the religious elites with commercial relations to international capital. The AKP rose to power by marketing itself as reformist and pro-change.

The Erdoğan government has eliminated the dissident components with pro-coup tendencies within the military bureaucracy remaining from the Cold War period. This has led to the government being perceived as having a democratic vision opposed to military domination, a perception that has

provided significant support for the AKP by liberal politicians who favor the demilitarization of politics. However, the actual function of this policy has been to eliminate components within the Turkish Armed Forces that resisted their new tasks in line with the new NATO and U.S. policies, which have changed considerably since the Cold War.

To sum up, the AKP is not a reformist and pro-change democratic Party, despite the image created both in and out of the country. It exerts an intense pressure against the struggles of dissident youth, workers, ecologists and working class people. Religious pressures on segments of society with minority religious beliefs are gradually being intensified everywhere and the secular state is being transformed, step by step, into a moderate Islamic state on the basis of Sunni Islam principles. I personally think all these developments pose a serious risk to the country's future in terms of freedom and democracy.



NP: What is the nature of the opposition to Erdoğan within Turkey? What are the major political parties and what are their differences with the government? How important is the left? And how significant is your own party?

OM: There is a large-scale social opposition to the practices of the AKP government. However, these large-scale opposition tendencies, such as they are, don't bear the character of an organized political opposition. The most organized and active opposition is the Kurdish Movement, represented by the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) in Parliament. The main opposition party in Parliament, the Republican People's Party (CHP), has not been able to free itself from the nationalist conservative political line towards which it was dragged during the Cold War period. The country is in need of a powerful left movement. At present, my party, the Freedom and Solidarity Party (öDP) does not have the possibility of being represented in the parliament due to the election thresholds. Taking strength from a tradition of revolutionary struggle embracing a large-scale social base, öDP is in favor of freedom and equality based democratic resolutions to the main problems of the country, especially the Kurdish issue.

NP: Under Erdoğan Turkey has seen a great deal of repression of students, Kurds, journalists, and the left. But in the last several weeks things seem to have gotten worse with the arrest of human rights lawyers. Why this crackdown at this time?

OM: I don't have any special information regarding the timing. It seems that Erdoğan's distress regarding his Syrian policies turning into a failure from his own point of view, is being reflected in these kinds of repressive practices within the internal politics of Turkey. AKP is a coalition of several tendencies and the tensions between "The Community" (the Fethullah Gulen Movement), and the aspirations of Erdoğan himself may sometimes reveal themselves through the policies of the courts and security agencies, which have been politicized completely lately. Since the practices of the government are never executed on the basis of clarity and legality, I don't think it would be correct to make more specific speculative comments not supported by data.

NP: Surprisingly, even as this crackdown has taken place, there is talk of progress on the Kurdish issue. During the last few weeks, several of America's and Britain's most important news media have suggested that Turkey may be at a turning point, that is, that there may be some negotiated end to the hostilities between the Turkish government and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). Why is this happening now? What is the significance of recent developments? What outcome would you like to see? What do you think is the likely outcome?

OM: The Kurdish issue is no longer only an internal problem of Turkey. Therefore, solutions proposed to resolve this issue should be interpreted within the framework of political strategies of the international power groups for the region. So it seems very difficult for us to make a clear prediction in terms of the outcome in view of the numerous factors that shall have an effect on the possible outcomes and the process comprising not only one but many uncertainties.

In conducting these opening steps regarding the Kurdish issue, Erdoğan may be hoping to achieve an extended period without conflicts, especially in regard of his aspiration to the Presidency in the upcoming election process.

However, whatever Erdoğan's or others' interests might be, we support every development towards the peaceful resolution of this issue. We believe that it is necessary to have a social negotiation platform for an actual resolution of the issue on the basis of the principle of peaceful coexistence and that is impossible in an environment of war. If the government/state and the Kurdish movement/PKK can come to some sort of an agreement, regardless of the current aims of both parties, that will be a real achievement considering where we are today. I hope that putting an end to the persistent armed conflict, which bears the danger of people drifting gradually into an ethnic conflict, may lead to a social/political conjuncture in which the struggles of workers and proletarian classes will become prominent. In my opinion, the Kurdish people retrieving their freedom as part of Turkey's society, even if only partially, will pave the way for the actual freedom of all the working class people.

NP: Does Erdoğan's apparent opening on the Kurdish question suggest a liberalizing of the regime? Do you expect other changes to take place in other areas, such as democratic rights and labor rights?

OM: It is a widespread view among the left public opinion that the AKP government doesn't have a goal of liberalization as part of its own agenda. They are walking along a road aiming in the long run to reshape the country and society step by step on the basis of a sectarian fundamentalism and don't refrain from applying unlawful suppression against various dissident movements. Erdoğan suggests that he is creating a political opening. One of the goals of the opening policies is essentially to neutralize the Kurdish opposition, that being the strongest and the most organized power vis-à-vis the government. Most of the commentators in Turkey think that the parliamentary group of the BDP (Peace and Democratic Party) might give support to the AKP's Constitution proposals within the context of the new Constitution rewriting efforts going on in Parliament in exchange for some democratic rights. Although I think the chances for such an exchange are not high, this development

will probably drag the country into an even more oppressive and authoritarian regime.

NP: What do you see as the path for the emergence of a left movement in Turkey? What do you see as the central elements of its program? Do you think it is realistic to imagine that Erdoğan and his party can be driven from power in the short term? Do you see a leftist government in Turkey's future in the longer term?

OM: Turkey's society, being under a heavy load of social problems sustained by the Republican regime that lasted nearly a century, seriously demands a real change and innovation. However, leftist movements have not been able to regain their strength after having been weakened and neutralized by the military coup of September 12, 1980, and have not been able to create a persuasive and effective power that will meet the demands of society. Making use of this vacuum on the left, the AKP party was rolled out together with a neoliberal "change" program, the party and its program both reflecting the demands of the capitalist world, and it succeeded in winning support from people both on the basis of their Islamic beliefs and their desire for change.

That's why the leftist movements are now generally deprived of a strong social support. Therefore now, in the first place, it is a prerequisite to obtain the people's support with an actual program for change against the AKP's policies whose content is now coming into sight more clearly. There is no alternative for the left other than an informed and organized grassroots movement against the governments backed by the capitalist powers.

One important difficulty is that the Social-Democratic Party, being a government alternative in Parliament, lost the support of the anti-system poor people after pursuing for years a nationalist conservative policy based on secularism. This situation, as also implied in your question, results in the assessment that it is not realistic to assume that the AKP government will be overthrown in the short run.

On the other hand, it is obvious that the established systems in Turkey as well as in America and Europe are leading humanity towards a complete disaster. Under these conditions I think the left is not only possible, but inevitable. If we can make it before humanity gets lost in an everlasting chaos....

Footnotes