

# “The Turkish Revolution”: changing civil-military relations in Turkey

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While the so-called Arab spring attracted world-attention, events of a revolutionary character took place in Turkey. Less than two months after the landslide victory of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the Turkish national elections of June 12, 2011, the entire top brass of the military resigned in connection with the continuous detention of military officers accused to be part of a plot against the government known as the *Ergenekon* investigation. The resignation of Turkey's leading officers indicates a major change in the civil-military relations of the country in which until recently the military dominated over civilian governments.

In 2011, the so-called Arab Spring has almost completely absorbed the international attention toward the Middle East. Yet at the same time, revolutionary events have taken place in Turkey. While the landslide victory of the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the national elections on June 12, 2011, did not come as a surprise, the resignation of the entire leadership of the Turkish Armed Forces on July 29 was certainly unexpected. Prior to their resignation, the generals demanded from Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to prolong the positions of those officers who have been put in detention in the course of the so-called *Ergenekon* investigations; a demand that the prime minister rejected. These *Ergenekon* investigations started after the police detected stocks of illegal weaponry in Istanbul in June 2007. Until May 2009, Turkey's state prosecutor initiated more than 150 law cases against army officers, journalists, politicians and police officers accused of conspiring against the government. Meanwhile, *Ergenekon* has developed into an ugly struggle between the AKP government and its Kemalist counterparts in military, bureaucracy and politics.

Most likely, the general staff officers aimed at provoking a political earthquake with their resignations; however, such an earthquake did not take place. On the contrary, it took Prime Minister Erdoğan only one week to appoint a new military leadership and the bold action of the generals quickly passed without causing major political unrest. This last confrontation between the incumbent government and the military indicates that the AKP might have won the battle against the institutional incarnation of the Kemalist establishment. For decades, not Turkey's elected governments but the general staff officers of its armed forces determined essential parts of the country's domestic and external policies. The Turkish officer corps represented the ultimate guardian of Kemalism and therewith of Atatürk's revolution. In light of this important political role that the Turkish military hold for decades, this essay poses the question whether the events of summer 2011 suggest that the end of Turkey's Kemalist republic has come?

In order to judge the political importance of these events, I will sketch out the historical evolution and the nature of the autonomous role that the Turkish military has played until recently. Only in light of this unique position of the military in Turkish society, we can understand the revolutionary character of this episode in July 2011. With the resignation of the general staff officers the struggle between the Kemalist establishment and a new Turkish counter-elite seems to be decided; a development that was already clearly on its way with the AKP's landslide victory in the national election of June 12, 2011, in which the party secured 49.8 % of the total votes.

Since the military coup in 1960, the Turkish armed forces established themselves in Turkey's polity as an autonomous political force whose political role was not subject to the uncertainties of electoral processes. For decades the military was above the constitutional authority of Turkey's democratically elected governments. The Turkish generals regularly issued policy suggestions and sent warnings on all kinds of political matters. In the 1970, the army achieved the unquestioned prerogative to autonomously determine defence policies. Moreover, the defence budget was neither subject to parliamentary debate nor to a critical discussion in Turkey's media. Due to an enlarged security concep-

tion that did not distinguish between external and internal threats, the Turkish military also acquired the power to draw the limits to politics in a much more general way. Furthermore, the Turkish armed forces developed both an economic and an educational system detached from the rest of society.

In the political realm, this extraordinary position of the army was fixed in the National Security Council. As stipulated in article 118 of the 1982 constitution, which was written under the supervision of the military after the coup of September 1980, the NSC was composed of the prime minister, the ministers of defence, interior and foreign affairs, the chief of general staff, and the four commanders of the army, the navy, the air force and the gendarmerie. Under the chairmanship of the president of the republic, the NSC met with the director of national intelligence and the secretary-general of the NSC, who is a high-ranking officer responsible to the chief of general staff. Its task was to guarantee the formulation and implementation of a national security policy. According to the Law on the National Security Council of November 1983, national security entailed the protection and safeguarding of the state against any foreign or domestic threats, including aspects of political, social, cultural and economic life. Since its inception as a constitutional body in 1961, the NSC developed from an institution that provides information to the government to one that issues policy recommendations to which the council of ministers has to give priority. During the 1990s, the recommendations of the NSC on economy, foreign policy, education, human rights and university administration obtained government approval without exception.

While the NSC highlights the political influence of the Turkish army, the foundation of the "Army Mutual Assistance Association" (OYAK) in September 1961 marks the emergence of the military as entrepreneur. With the creation of OYAK, the army departed from its previous anti-business attitude and established military-business relations. Supported by subsidies, legal privileges and tax-exemptions, OYAK developed to an important business holding in Turkey, involved in supermarket chains, real estate developments, joint ventures in industry and agriculture, as well as in stock, bond and insurance operations. In 1987, the "Foundation for Strengthening the Turkish Armed Forces" (TSKGV) was created. This second economic pillar of the military aimed at the development of a national defence industry.

The autonomous status of the military was further strengthened by its own educational system that provided the career officers with both academic knowledge and military ethics based on the values of Kemalist ideology. The educational system of the army produced a military cast whose social and ideological formation made them into a group that stayed apart from and above the rest of society. The officer career was an elite career that with its military high-schools and academies also provided an important upward avenue for lower economic strata of Turkish society. Like the Janissaries, who were obliged to the sultan and the Ottoman State, the modern Turkish officer was obliged to Atatürk and the Kemalist republic. In a genealogical spirit, tracing via its elders a direct line from Atatürk, the military conceived itself as guardian and trustee of the Turkish state.

The striking autonomy that the Turkish military developed in the political, economic and educational realms turned it virtually into a state within the state. Holding the monopoly of physical force, the army additionally had substantial economic means at hand and socialised its officer corps within its own symbolic

order. Although the military career did not lead to a brilliant material future, the army was able to independently provide its members with all necessary means of life. In addition, the moral superiority of the soldier was constantly emphasised, and the military conceived itself as the institutional incarnation of the Turkish state. Given this prominent position of the Turkish Armed Forces in society, the resignation of its top brass in light of political pressure can be interpreted as a decisive step in the subordination of the military to civilian politics.

From an institutional perspective, the dominance of the civilian political institutions over the army is a key element of democratic politics. Consequently, the EU Commission has criticized Turkey's civil-military relationship for years and the political role of the military has been perceived as one of the major obstacles in Ankara's EU accession process. In this sense, Turkey's "summer revolution" is good news. It marks the tentative end of a process in which the AKP succeeded to reduce the political influence of the military in reforming the constitutional prerogatives that guaranteed the military's autonomous role via institutions such as the National Security Council and the parallel military legal system. However, given the weakness of Turkey's opposition parties, the military represented the last competitor to the power aspirations of the AKP under Prime Minister Erdoğan, who increasingly shows signs of authoritarian and self-centred political behaviour. In the absence of a real political alternative to the AKP, Turkey risks to fall hostage to a political leader whose democratic credentials increasingly come into doubt. With its electoral mandate and the domestication of the armed forces, the AKP has now to show whether it moves on with the democratization of Turkish politics and society, or if it tries to consolidate its power position by authoritarian means. On his recent tour to Tunisia, Libya and Egypt, Erdoğan lectured the three "Arab spring countries" on democracy and secularism. In his third period in office, the Turkish prime minister must stand the test at home. While the end of the Kemalist republic seems close, the true political nature of Turkey's new republic still remains unclear.