

Notes for Discussion on Turkey 2016 Coup

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What are we debating here?

We agree that Erdogan has been systematically attacking democratic structures in Turkey, including attacking the freedom of opposition parties to operate and of citizens to protest, and attacking journalists, teachers and civil servants who disagree with the government. He has been expanding his personal power and increasingly integrating Islamic principles into the operation of the state. HaPe [Breitman] and Tom [Riley] have written a very useful description of this process. We oppose all this, and if we had a group in Turkey we would be mobilising against Erdogan on many of these issues.

We disagree on whether the process of dismantling bourgeois democracy in Turkey is finished, or whether there are elements of bourgeois democracy that are worth defending against a greater threat. Tom and HaPe describe Erdogan's regime as equivalent to that of Pilsudski in Poland, which Trotsky described as somewhere between Bonapartism and fascism. I would say that his regime has elements of Bonapartism, but is also tied in some respect to the structures of bourgeois democracy that elected him.

This means that we disagree on what the working class should have done on the night of 15 July 2016 when forces in the military opposed to Erdogan attempted to take power by force. I am arguing that the coup was a greater threat to the immediate interests of the working class and for six hours that night, until the coup was defeated, the working class should have formed a military bloc with forces opposed to the coup, including those led by Erdogan. This would put the independent organisations of the working class in a better position to move against Erdogan the following day.

Tom argues that there is no qualitative differences between the two sides and any forces we had in Turkey should be mobilised that night either against both sides at once or not mobilised at all. It seems he sees this as a matter of principle, of revolutionary continuity, that somehow the military bloc we propose is a betrayal of Trotskyism. My objective today is to convince the comrades that this is not the case, and that a military bloc that night would involve no political support to Erdogan and was the smartest, and in fact the only, tactic that would enable mobilising forces against Erdogan the next day. If this had happened, it would weaken Erdogan's ability to claim the role as sole defender of the state and to so easily declare a state of emergency and intensify his anti-democratic moves.

The night of the coup

From approximately 10pm to 4am on 15-16 July, forces within the army attempted to take key strategic positions in Istanbul and detain key military leaders opposed to their plans. They succeeded in taking over the two bridges across the Bosphorus, the links between the European and Asian sides of the city, some key army posts and media outlets, but eventually were forced into retreat and many were arrested. Erdogan himself evaded them and put out a video statement on his mobile phone calling citizens to the streets to oppose the coup and many did. Opposition parties, including those deeply opposed to Erdogan such as the Kurdish/leftist HDP, also opposed the coup.

It seems likely that the majority of those that took to the streets were supporters of Erdogan's AKP, including the Ottoman Hearths and fascistic youth groups that he had mobilised in the past (as documented by Tom and HaPe). One reason for this is that accounts of the night describe AKP supporters attacking those oppositionists who came out against the coup. It was not a safe environment for non-AKP citizens but many nevertheless came out and were attacked and even killed by forces on both sides.

Not being in Turkey, our call is necessarily somewhat algebraic, but in calling for a military bloc, we anticipate what could be done if Trotskyists in Turkey had forces at their disposal, perhaps trade union militias – let’s imagine forces that are nowhere near being able to take state power but are able to rally numbers on the streets. What would we do? An organised force of that type could have provided a counterweight to the AKP that night, and gathered other oppositionists around it. It is not inconceivable that such a force could have retaken one of the bridges. If we made it clear at the time in our slogans that we saw this military bloc as temporary and that we were strategically opposed to Erdogan, it would enable those forces to grow, and fight again the next day, this time against the regime. For example, against Erdogan’s attempts to ban trade unions, a move that Tom and HaPe present as a foregone conclusion.

This is our classic approach to a military bloc, based on Lenin’s bloc with Kerensky against Kornilov, and implemented by us in 1991 against Yeltsin. Neither of these scenarios is exactly applicable, but they have the common feature of using a bloc with a temporarily less dangerous opponent, in order to better rally forces against that opponent. Adaire [Hannah] and I wrote about this in our recent document, and we cited Lenin on Kerensky:

“We shall fight, we are fighting against Kornilov, *just as Kerensky’s troops do*, but we do not support Kerensky. *On the contrary*, we expose his weakness. There is the difference. It is rather a subtle difference, but it is highly essential and must not be forgotten.”

Of course a major difference is that in Russia in 1917 the working class intervened as an organised independent force, led by the Bolsheviks. This did not happen in Turkey. But this is no reason to claim that it would have made no difference if it had.

Iran

Tom prefers to compare the situation in Turkey to the 1979 struggle between the mullahs under Khomeini on the one hand and the Shah on the other, where the revolutionary Spartacist League denounced both side in contrast to most of the left. He compares the political basis of the Islamists under Khomeini to Erdogan’s regime and indeed they do share some political characteristics and history. But we do not judge whether to carry out a military bloc because of the political nature of the force, but base it on what the forces represent in a particular context. It is very different to give military support to a force aiming to take power based on promises and hope, as the centrists did over Khomeini, than to bloc militarily to defend the status quo, based on some aspects of bourgeois democracy, against a immediate threat to rule by force, ie, a military coup.

We give no political support to either Islamic reaction or military rule or the Shah’s dictatorship, but even the Spartacists in 1980 acknowledge that a temporary military bloc is a possibility even among these deeply reactionary forces. In footnote 4 of his document on Iran, Tom notes that the 16 February 1979 *WV* saying:

“The Imperial Guard was ready and willing to carry out His Majesty's kill-crazy orders. Had such a confrontation erupted into civil war, Marxists would have militarily supported the popular forces rallied by the mullahs against an intact officer caste, even as our intransigent *political* opposition to the reactionary-led movement sought to polarize the masses along class lines and rally the workers and lower strata of the petty-bourgeois masses, around the proletarian pole.”

Again, I’m not claiming an exact analogy, but it is clear that a military bloc with Islamic forces was not considered unprincipled in the right circumstances. This contrasts with Tom’s claims of our betrayal of revolutionary continuity.

Egypt

Another comparable case that we've been discussing is the coup against Mohammed Morsi in Egypt in 2013. Most comrades seem to take the same position on this as they do on Turkey. Christoph [Lichtenberg] recently changed his position on Turkey, based on the facts provided in Tom and HaPe's document, but I remember that he wrote a rather good email about Egypt. I have asked him if he still stands by this and didn't receive a reply, but I'm going to cite it here because (whether he agrees with it or not) it provides a good outline of how we approach these questions, dividing the Egyptian events into four periods: before, just before, during and after the coup:

From April onwards we probably would have joined the anti-Morsi demonstrations, linking transitional demands to the outrage against Morsi's undemocratic measures and the mass unemployment etc. We would have sought to distinguish ourselves from the liberals and "rebels" with a proletarian perspective.

By the end of June, the beginning of the mass demonstrations, the protesters started to call on the military to oust Morsi. We would have advanced slogans that showed the need for the workers to oust Morsi vs. a military takeover, thus beginning an even sharper differentiation from the other demonstrators at this point.

Then the tipping point was reached with the ultimatum by the military on July 1, and Morsi's defiant speech, followed by his arrest the next day. I think around this short period it would have been principled to have a military bloc with all those who opposed the military coup, Morsi supporters and Cliffites alike. Our objective would have been to oppose the coup while giving no political support to Morsi. (We are on record as having an identical position for Venezuela by the way. We stated that we would have blocked with Chavez against an attempt by the opposition to overthrow him as it would have been imperialist initiated. - Guess who has trained and equipped the Egyptian military: the CIA.)

Neither in Egypt nor in Venezuela would this episodic bloc have continued into an ongoing alliance with the Morsi/Chavez supporters. We are not their friends but their enemies, however, for a short period of time there was an overlap of interests and therefore ground for a military bloc.

At the time I didn't agree with Christoph, and I was wrong. But after we started discussing the events in Turkey, I saw the parallels and reconsidered. I said in an email on 24 July:

I think the mistake I made there was the one that some comrades are making here, of seeing a military bloc as making a qualitative distinction between two reactionary movements as an ongoing characterisation. Naturally we oppose both alternatives in Egypt and Turkey, but it is a question of what the working class should do in a particular point of conflict. In Egypt, as in Turkey, there were ongoing protests against the existing government, which we would have to some degree supported, but as in Turkey I think there is reason to believe that the military takeover of the state posed a greater threat, and if it were possible to mobilise the Egyptian working class (politically independent of the Muslim Brotherhood) against that threat that would be an opportunity to strengthen the position of the working class in general.

I think we can apply Christoph's analysis to Turkey, in which our ongoing opposition to Erdogan would temporarily be seen as subordinate to fighting the immediate threat of the military coup, only to be resumed. As Christoph says, in no way should this be seen as an "ongoing alliance".

Bonapartism in Turkey?

Tom and the other comrades claim that the regime in Turkey is qualitatively similar to Pilsudski's in Poland in the 1930s, which Trosky described as between Bonapartism and fascism. I've asked several times if the comrades really consider Erdogan as part way to fascism without a satisfactory reply. In his reply to the document by me and Adaire, Tom refutes our suggestion that Erdogan's situation is contradictory. For Tom, everything is resolved, bourgeois democracy is gutted, and military rule would make no difference – despite the ongoing existence of parliament, opposition parties, protests in the street, all things that would not last long under military rule.

Let's look at some concrete examples – the two elections in 2015 and next week's referendum. It is true that both elections and referenda occur in dictatorships as pro forma means of establishing power. But Erdogan is not yet able to entirely manipulate the results.

2015 elections

Tom claims that massive thuggery reversed the result of the first election in 2015, in which the opposition HDP did surprisingly well, thwarting Erdogan's plans to gain a two-thirds majority to carry out constitutional change. With a combination of stonewalling any hope of a coalition and intimidation on the streets, he managed to reduce the HDP vote substantially, but not below the 10% threshold for gaining parliamentary seats (they ended up with 60), which had been his objective.

2017 referendum

The referendum next week poses difficult questions for Tom and the other comrades. If they are right and there is no bourgeois democracy, then this referendum is entirely fake and should be boycotted. But they argue correctly for a No vote. There is still something to fight for, just as there was on 15 July 2015.