

Turkey and the Tactic of the Military Bloc

Adaire Hannah & Barbara Dorn

27 March 2017

[HaPe Breitman] and [Tom] Riley's document, "On Erdogan's Bonapartist Regime," begins with a quote from "Turkey: A War of Two Coups" by Sungur Savan, which concludes as follows:

"...the outcome of the 15 July episode was not democracy defeating despotism, but the victory of the more gradualist despotism in the face of a more abrupt repression of all democratic forms."

"As opposed to the immediate ending of any semblance of democracy that the coup represented, Erdoğan's is a long-drawn-out strategy of infusing extremely anti-democratic substance into seemingly formal democratic structures. "

This poses a strong argument for a position of a military bloc with those forces (including those commanded by Erdogan himself) opposed to the 15 July 2016 military coup – that is, blocking with a "more gradualist despotism" against "more abrupt repression" to buy time for the working class. It is usual in a military conflict over governmental power for revolutionaries to give military support to the more gradualist enemy against those that pose a more immediate threat to the interests of the working class.

Unfortunately, despite their use of this quote, HaPe and Tom are not arguing for this position and instead see no important difference between immediate dictatorship and the prospect of one.

Erdogan was elected to power through the mechanisms of bourgeois democracy but, as those comrades opposed to a military bloc against the putsch correctly say, he was no "democrat". There is no valid basis, however, to argue that there was no bourgeois democracy worth defending on 15 July 2016. Erdogan has been chipping away at the bourgeois democratic structures, but he has had to move very carefully to extend his powers through parliament and referenda. As Josh [Decker] put it in a previous contribution, Erdogan is "resting on (an attenuated form of) democracy".

It is indisputable that since the coup we have seen a phenomenal number of arrests and suspensions of trade unionists, teachers, academics, journalists, judges, prosecutors, military and dissidents. And yet there has continued to be opposition shown to Erdogan and the AKP. Despite repression, opposition parties existed and continue to exist after the coup, indicating that Turkey is not yet ruled by a completely autocratic dictatorship. Erdogan clamped down on the media after the 2013 mass protests, and his attacks on his critics intensified after the 2014 Taksim Square demonstration. But this did not stop organised opposition to Erdogan's increasingly repressive actions. While the 2015 elections ended the possibility of rapprochement with the Kurds, the HDP held 59 of the 559 parliamentary seats and remain in parliament even after the rerun election, although many of their MPs face severe legal threats and some are in jail. This paints a very mixed picture of the state of "democracy" in Turkey.

HaPe and Tom's document provides some interesting material on the history of military coups in Turkey, pointing out that different coups take different forms and can occasionally result in more democracy than the regime they replace. The comrades are not, of course, arguing for support to the coup, but rather that the situation was already lost for bourgeois democracy whichever side prevailed. This is ignoring the status quo on the night of 15 July as the battle for power in Turkey was played out over approximately six hours. Erdogan was in the contradictory situation of resting on the nominal structures of bourgeois democracy that elected him but which he was trying to destroy.

In his "Comments on M's 7 Points on the Turkish coup" [18 October 2016] Tom says:

“I think that if it can be shown that the coup was aimed at the interests of the working class (as for example Pinochet’s and Franco’s was) then we have a side in defending militarily the lesser evil bourgeois regime. ... to have a side it is necessary to show that there was a qualitative distinction.”

In her document of 11 December 2016 Roxie [Baker] says:

“This was a struggle between two elements of the bourgeoisie. The coupists were not directing themselves primarily against the WC, and there was no working class power to direct against anyway.”

A military coup, by definition, is naked power or violence alone – it may be murderous and cruel or even relatively benevolent, but there is no pretence that power comes from anywhere else than the barrel of a gun. The elements of bourgeois democracy still apparent in Turkey in July – parliament, opposition parties, freedom of assembly, however restricted they were – are of vital importance to the working class because they permit organisation in defence of working-class interests. From a class standpoint, there is no difference between Erdogan and the military. But from the standpoint of the working class’s ability to organise itself, there is indeed a qualitative difference, and that is why we had a side. Disputes between bourgeois forces are always about who is going to exploit the working class. And the weakness of working-class organisation at any point in time is no argument for failing to fight a force that will weaken us further.

What is a military bloc?

In 1917 #11 p 9 we wrote: “The working class must defend democratic liberties in capitalist society against all attempts to curtail or suspend them.” Christoph [Lichtenberg] also expressed this well in his 18 December 2016 response to Roxie:

“If the military launches a coup against the existing government it does not do so in order to boost the rule of parliament. The generals strike in order to shatter the democratic framework, and often the working class organizations with it.”

The working class therefore had a side to defeat the coupists and then turn their forces against Erdogan. The call for a military bloc against the coupists was essential to give the working class the space to intervene as an independent force. By acting independently, the working class would have provided leadership to gather the oppressed within its fold.

Barbara [Dorn] followed up on Christoph’s email on 6 January 2017 with the following points:

“I understand that comrades are cautious about taking sides in a clear intra-bourgeois struggle but when the immediate interests of the working class and our ability to organise are threatened, it is necessary to do so. We are always clear that this does not imply any political support for the forces we are blocking with. We don’t say Erdogan has a commitment to democracy but that his objective situation made it difficult to dismantle democratic structures. We didn’t argue that Yanavev was committed to the maintenance of the Soviet Union, just that his material interests coincided with it. We didn’t argue that Kerensky was more committed to the revolution than Kornilov, just that at that point he was less of a threat to it. We didn’t argue that Allende had the way forward for the Chilean working class.”

After the Kornilov affair, this is how Lenin described the military bloc with Kerensky he had advocated:

“*Even now* we must not support Kerensky’s government. This is unprincipled. We may be asked: aren’t we going to fight against Kornilov? Of course we must! But this is not the same thing; there is a dividing line here, which is being stepped over by some Bolsheviks who fall into compromise and allow themselves to be *carried away* by the course of events.

“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.

“What, then, constitutes our change of tactics after the Kornilov revolt?

“We are changing the *form* of our struggle against Kerensky. Without in the least relaxing our hostility towards him, without taking back a single word said against him, without renouncing the task of overthrowing him, we say that we must *take into account* the present situation. We shall not overthrow Kerensky right now. We shall approach the task of fighting against him *in a different way*, namely, we shall point out to the people (who are fighting against Kornilov) Kerensky’s *weakness and vacillation*.”

—“To the Central Committee of the R.S.D.L.P.”, 30 August 1917

In this debate, every analogy that has been raised by either side has been dismissed by the other side as not relevant and it is true that no comparison is perfect. It is, however, useful to examine cases where we advocated a military bloc and *why* we did so – always because there was something to defend, though in many cases that something can merely be the buying of time for the working class. The military bloc with Kerensky against Kornilov is the classic example from which we derive our military bloc understanding. While the circumstances of Russia 1917 and Turkey 2016 were undeniably different, this classic case provides a model because it shows that although Kerensky was no democrat and no revolutionary and ultimately had to be dealt with, it was necessary to bloc with him against a more immediate threat.

Kerensky imprisoned opponents such as Trotsky and Kamenev, forced Lenin and Zinoviev into hiding, suppressed Pravda, reinstated the order in the army and the death penalty, arrested agitators and appointed Kornilov as head of the armed forces. Trotsky and Sukhanov described him as follows:

““Kerensky needed an energetic pressure upon him from the right, from the capitalist cliques, the Allied embassies, and especially from headquarters [ie the military],” wrote Trotsky early in September, “in order to enable him to get his own hands absolutely free. Kerensky wanted to use the revolt of the generals in order to reinforce his own dictatorship.””

—P190, Vol 2, Trotsky’s *History of the Russian Revolution*

“Sukhanov rightly says of Kerensky: “He was a Kornilovist—only on the condition that he himself should stand at the head of the Kornilovists.””

—P189, Vol 2, Trotsky’s *History of the Russian Revolution*

Another classic military bloc that defines our organisation was when in 1991, after an internal fight, we called for military support to the forces behind Yanayev against Yeltsin. We recognised that both were for the restoration of capitalism in the USSR, but Yanayev in charge would have delayed this reinstatement and this would have given the workers space to mobilise in defence of proletarian property forms. We argued:

“A military bloc with the coupists against Yeltsin was not counterposed to the struggle for soviet democracy. Just as Lenin’s bloc with Kerensky against Kornilov in August 1917 prepared the overthrow of the bourgeois Provisional Government, a struggle against Yeltsin in which independent working-class formations pointed their guns the same way as the coupists would have strengthened the forces favoring political revolution, and blocked efforts by Yanayev, Pugo et al to resurrect their system of political repression.”

—“Soviet Rubicon & the Left”, 1917, No. 11, p13

The argument we make here is that a serious bloc *with* Yanayev would lay the ground to *defeat* Yanayev through the organisation of forces in his defence that were ultimately hostile to him, just as the Bolsheviks' bloc with Kerensky set the stage for them to defeat him a few months later.

That no working-class forces were independently mobilised to oppose the immediate threat of the coup in Turkey allowed the AKP to assume leadership of the anti-coup movement and pose as democrats. Had a revolutionary party intervened independently of the AKP but in a bloc with it, it would then be well placed to oppose Erdogan taking advantage of the coup to further his dictatorial aims.

HaPe and Tom are absolutely right that by July 2016 Erdogan was well on the way to building a dictatorship and has intensified that process since the coup. Their instincts to thoroughly oppose this are well founded. Where they err is to argue that Erdogan's planned destruction of the structures of bourgeois democracy was already complete, and by doing so they reject the best tactical approach to reversing that process.

Tom, in his document "Comment on M's 7 points on the Turkish coup" says "The question is, should we *defend* Erdogan's government, the coups target." This is the wrong question. We have never called for the defence of Erdogan's government, which implies political support. We argue for the necessity of turning the guns on Erdogan after the defeat of the coupists. As well as calling for workers' defence guards to stop the coup, during the coup and intensifying afterwards our slogans would have included: Stop AKP attacks on democratic rights! Defence guards to stop AKP/fascist attacks on workers/Kurds! For freedom of the press! Release all working-class political prisoners! For a workers' government!

Pilsudski, Erdogan and Referenda

HaPe and Tom argue that the "2015 elections demonstrated that Erdogan's regime had moved from the authoritarian edge of the bourgeois democratic spectrum, to something qualitatively similar to Pilsudski's in Poland in the 1920s and '30". They cite Trotsky describing Pilsudski as somewhere between Bonapartism and fascism and comparing him with contemporaries Hitler and Mussolini, rising to power on the back of a petty-bourgeois movement, but unlike them not strong enough to consolidate a fascist regime. Do HaPe and Tom really consider that Erdogan is that close to fascism?

That Erdogan was not fully a Bonaparte in July, or even now, is illustrated by the forthcoming 16 April referendum in which he needs a yes vote to consolidate his power, demonstrated by his desperate efforts to seek support from the European Turkish diaspora, souring relations with EU powers in the process. Despite extreme repression which may well swing the result in Erdogan's favour, polls indicate that the Turkish population is closely split. The referendum poses something of a conundrum for comrades who claim that Erdogan was already a dictator prior to the July 2016 putsch. Josh sharply posed this issue in his 16 March email to Tom:

"Could you clarify your position? Are you in favor of voting "No," abstaining or calling for a spoiled ballot?

"My understanding is that your position is that the Erdogan government is already the equivalent of a military dictatorship, so I would have thought you'd call for a spoiled ballot (or abstention, presuming that abstaining would not sign one's death warrant)".

Tom and HaPe continue to argue that either a "No" vote or abstention would be a possible position.

For Marxists, as has been concluded by most organisations in Turkey representing workers and the oppressed, "No" is the correct response, because there is an important difference between the status quo and the proposed "presidential" system. The position that HaPe and Tom would have us take on the July 2016 coup would disarm the Turkish workers as to the importance of this referendum.

There is still something to fight for in this referendum, just as there was on 15 July. In both cases, victory would only be the very beginning of the fight for the rights of workers and the oppressed and ultimately a socialist Turkey, but unless the working class is mobilised as an independent force to take all tactical opportunities, that time will never come.