
CONFERENCE ARTICLE

MAY 1960 INCIDENT IN TURKEY

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the economic and political processes that took place in Turkey between 1950 and 1960 during the rule of the Democratic Party (DP). It examines the results of the 1957 elections, the growing tension between the government and the opposition, student demonstrations, and the increasing political instability in the country. The study also explores the negative impact of the economic crisis on the social conditions of the military, particularly young officers, and reveals how these factors led to the military coup of May 27, 1960. The research evaluates this event as a significant turning point in Turkey's political life, highlighting the conflict between the principle of the "national will" and the concept of legitimacy based on republican values and the principles of Atatürk.

KEYWORDS

Democratic Party (DP), Turkish economy, economic growth and crisis, inflation, import policy, decline in exports, the 1957 elections, political tensions, Republican People's Party (CHP), student demonstrations, young officers, military intervention in politics, the military coup of May 27, 1960.

INTRODUCTION

The years 1950–1953 were a period of rapid growth and prosperity in the Turkish economy. The increase in national income was largely driven by agricultural production. However, in 1954–1955, due to unfavorable climatic conditions, agricultural production declined and exports stagnated. At the same time, the liberal economic policy pursued by the government led to an increase in imports, which contributed to rising inflation. In addition, the refusal of the United States to provide further loans and the industrial sector reaching a saturation point in creating jobs for the population migrating to cities caused a slowdown in the economy.

Considering also the global economic recession of 1956, the rapid economic growth of the early 1950s, which had reached approximately 10 percent annually, came to a halt. Under such conditions, the attitude of the population with stable incomes toward the rule of the Democratic Party began to change. Realizing this situation, the government of the Democratic Party decided to hold early elections in 1957. Although the Democratic Party again received the majority of votes in the 1957 elections, this time it obtained less than 50 percent of the vote and could not prevent a significant increase in the number of seats held by the Republican People's Party (CHP) in the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (TBMM). On the other hand, the CHP claimed that electoral fraud had occurred and began to question the legitimacy of the Democratic Party's rule.

By 1957, as resources were depleted, a shortage of goods emerged. The 330 percent devaluation of the Turkish lira caused a sharp decline in the purchasing power of those with fixed incomes. Under these conditions, the intensification of tensions between the government and the opposition pushed Turkey toward an atmosphere of political unrest.

Beginning in 1955, as the economic expectations of the population turned into disappointment, the legitimacy of the government increasingly came under question. At the same time,

the efforts of the Democratic Party to suppress the opposition heightened political tensions both inside and outside the TBMM. After the government of the Democratic Party established a "Investigation Commission" with parliamentary authority to examine the activities of the Republican People's Party, student demonstrations began in Istanbul and Ankara.

When the Democratic Party government began to deploy military forces in the spring of 1960 to control the growing unrest and student movements, the army was effectively drawn out of the barracks and into politics. It should be noted that one of the social groups most negatively affected by the economic deterioration of the late 1950s was young military officers. The purchasing power of officers' salaries rapidly declined, and at the same time their social prestige in society decreased.

The military intervention of 27 May 1960 occurred in the form of young officers seizing power. This movement developed outside the traditional chain of command within the army and therefore still retains its unique and exceptional character. The young officers who activated the May 27 revolution, and over whom there was no institutional control, were progressive and idealistic individuals who sincerely embraced the reforms of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

Those who supported the May 27 Revolution included university administrators, professors, bureaucrats, and other groups with high levels of education and social status who had become deeply discouraged by the severe economic crisis of the 1950s. The revolution of 27 May 1960 also brought to the forefront a clash between two different principles of political legitimacy. On the one hand was the view that the legitimacy of political power should be based solely on the "national will" expressed through elections. On the other hand was the understanding that political legitimacy must also be based on the foundations of the Republic and the principles of Atatürk. The conflict between these two perspectives continues to influence Turkey's political life to this day.

The May 27 Revolution was carried out by officers loyal to Atatürk's ideals who sought to put an end to the policies of the ruling Democratic Party government, which they believed were harmful to the country. This revolutionary action was seen as a response to what was perceived as the authoritarian rule of the Democratic Party. The increasingly harsh domestic policies and the economic crisis during the final years of the Democratic Party's rule (1950–1960) made the intervention of the Turkish military and the establishment of a new administration inevitable.

On the morning of 27 May 1960, an announcement broadcast on Ankara Radio stated that the Turkish Armed Forces had assumed control of the country. It was declared that the purpose of this action was "to rescue political parties from the irreconcilable situation into which they had fallen and, under the supervision and arbitration of an impartial administration, to hold fair and free elections in a short period of time and transfer power to the winner of the elections, regardless of which side it may be." In other words, the aim of the Turkish Armed Forces was to restore a democratic regime in the country. It was also emphasized that the May 27 movement was not directed against any individual. On the evening of the same day, the National Unity Committee took power peacefully.

However, there was no consensus among the members of the National Unity Committee regarding how long they should remain in power and what policies they should pursue. The primary task of the military administration was to determine the future political structure of Turkey.

Shortly before the revolution of 27 May 1960, the commander of the land forces, General Cemal Gürsel, who had been retired and sent on compulsory leave to İzmir by the Democratic Party government, was brought to Ankara at the invitation of the National Unity Committee and recognized as the leader of the revolution.

The first government of the National Unity Committee under General Cemal Gürsel ruled from 27 May 1960 to 5 January 1961, while the second Gürsel government governed from 5 January 1961 to 27 October 1961. Another non-civilian government led by Emin Fahrettin Özdilek remained in power from 27 October 1961 to 20 November 1961.

At the request of the Republican People's Party, led by İsmet İnönü, who enjoyed high prestige within the army, the National Unity Committee agreed in January 1961 to establish a Constituent Assembly. The Constituent Assembly functioned from 6 January to 24 October 1961 as a special legislative body.

The Constituent Assembly consisted of the House of Representatives and the National Unity Committee. It completed the new constitution and the electoral law and transferred legislative authority to the newly elected Grand National Assembly of Turkey on 29 October 1961, while exercising supervisory authority over the executive during the transitional period.

Although the House of Representatives was not formed through universal elections, its members were directly selected without interference from the National Unity Committee by existing political parties and various organizations such as bar associations, the press, industrial and youth organizations, trade unions, professional chambers, teachers' associations, agricultural organizations, universities, and judicial institutions.

Members of the Democratic Party were prohibited from being represented in the House of Representatives. The political parties represented in the chamber were the Republican People's Party and the Republican Peasants' Nation Party led by Osman. In the House of Representatives, the Republican People's Party held 222 seats, while 25 representatives belonged to the Republican Peasants' Nation Party and 25 were independent members.

Since the CHP held the majority of representation in the

Constituent Assembly, it effectively became an indirect partner in the actions of political authority. Consequently, the perception that the Armed Forces and the CHP jointly shaped political power became widespread.

It is evident that the National Unity Committee chose to share some of its authority with the partially elected House of Representatives and allowed it to play a particularly significant role in finalizing the draft constitution.

On 27 May 1961, the new constitution and the new electoral law were adopted by the Constituent Assembly, and the constitution was approved by the public in a referendum on 9 July 1961. The 1961 Constitution, prepared by the National Unity Committee and submitted to the Constituent Assembly, provided a broad framework for the protection of citizens' fundamental rights and freedoms.

After the May 27 intervention, political parties whose activities had been suspended were allowed to resume their activities in preparation for elections.

Following judicial proceedings, the Democratic Party government's Foreign Minister Fatin Rüştü Zorlu and Finance Minister Hasan Polatkan were executed on 16 September 1961, and Prime Minister Adnan Menderes was executed on 17 September 1961.

The foreign policy of the Democratic Party governments that ruled Turkey between 1950 and 1960 was largely shaped not by prioritizing Turkey's national interests but by the policies of the Western alliance to which Turkey was closely connected.

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