Tremor in Turkey

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The July 29 resignations of all but one of the Turkish Senior Force Commanders marks a severe turning point in the troubled relations between Turkey’s military and the government that have been in a process of deterioration since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) took power in 2002. Ongoing arrests of senior military officials – including about ten percent of Turkey’s senior generals and admirals – led to the historic step down of the military leadership. The proximate causes involve disagreement over whether those being held in prison, some of whom have been indicted and some not in a series of confusing and seemingly never-ending trials alleging plots to overthrow the government, would be allowed to compete for promotion in this year’s Senior Military Council meeting, which takes place this week. Apparently, the civilian leadership insisted on retirement rather than eligibility for promotion competition for those being held, although so far no one has been convicted in the ongoing trials which range back several years. The recent arrest of the head of the Turkish military academies was one turning point, and a July 28 indictment that led to orders for the arrest of another 22 senior officers, including the head of Turkey’s Aegean army, clinched the decision for the military leaders.

In some cases, the decisions were symbolic, since two of the four who asked for retirement were due to retire anyway in August. Joint Staff Commander Kosaner however, who had two more years to serve, made the headlines with his request to resign “for reasons I have seen.” Air Force Commander Aksay had been expected to be extended for another year. Le Monde noted that the real fight is about “laicisme” – secularism, an issue with which the French are very familiar. For others, including European observers with their own history of civilian-military relations, the issue has been couched as one where civilians are beating back the heavy-handed military who have stood as the stern guardians of Turkey’s secular republic since the 1950s. It takes place in the framework of a larger change in Turkish society, as economic and political power have moved to a different class with Islamist affiliations at a time when the equational realities of the Cold War that dictated much of Turkey’s behavior have been essentially changed. Along with a dramatic shift in who owns what in Turkey, it has also meant a shift in who says what and who runs what, with the military clearly on the losing end at this point.

President Gul was quick to appoint the only remaining senior commander Gendarme Commander Necdet Ozel as Ground Forces Commander and Acting Joint Chiefs Commander. President Gul said that the resignations should be treated as “normal.” The daily Cumhuriyet, a bastion of the old opposition, for its part referred to the affair as an “earthquake.” Turks are waiting to see what, if any, aftershocks there will be.