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# Top Generals Quit in Group, Stunning Turks

By **GUL TUYSUZ** and **SABRINA TAVERNISE**

ISTANBUL — Turkey's top military commanders resigned en masse on Friday, a move without precedent in Turkish history that many analysts saw as a failed effort by a beleaguered institution to exert what is left of its dwindling political power.

In the surprising series of events, Turkey's top commander, Gen. Isik Kosaner, together with the leaders of the navy, army and air force, simultaneously resigned in protest over the [sweeping arrests of dozens of generals](#) as suspects in conspiracy investigations that many people in Turkey have come to see as a witch hunt.

Hours later, Prime Minister [Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#) accepted the resignations and elevated his own choice to become the senior military commander: Gen. Necdet Ozel, who was until Friday the commander of the military police. The decision stamped Mr. Erdogan's civilian authority on the country's military, which has long regarded itself as a protector of Turkey's secular traditions.

The news stunned Turkey and left many people wondering whether they were witnessing the end of the power the military has long exercised over the nation's political system.

"This is effectively the end of the military's role in Turkish democracy," said Asli Aydintasbas, a columnist for the Turkish daily newspaper Milliyet. "This is the symbolic moment where the first Turkish republic ends and the second republic begins."

Mr. Erdogan has rolled back the military's political power substantially since he took office in 2002, in part through legal reforms that assert civilian control. But the single biggest blow to

the military's clout has been a sprawling series of investigations and trials in which a number of senior military commanders, as well as journalists and others, were charged with conspiring to overthrow Mr. Erdogan's government.

The resignations were the culmination of a year of frustrations, in which more than 40 generals — approximately a tenth of the senior military command — were taken into custody, an assault that has infuriated the military but left it essentially helpless to fight back.

A more immediate spark may have come in the form of new arrest warrants for 22 more people, among them two top generals, which were issued Friday, the semiofficial Anatolian News Agency reported.

"This is the first time in the history of the republic that we are seeing something like this," said Gursel Tekin, vice president of the main opposition political party, who was speaking in the seaside city of Canakkale. "Honestly, this situation is not good."

Historically, the military has wielded immense power in Turkey. The modern nation was founded in 1923 by Gen. Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, and the military remained involved in politics after the country went to a multiparty political system in the 1950s.

Military leaders have deposed elected governments four times in Turkish history, beginning in 1960, when they went so far as to execute the country's first democratically elected prime minister, Adnan Menderes. But the Turkish political system has gone through profound changes in recent years, and many analysts argued that resigning was the only weapon left in the military's arsenal. Few people interviewed on Friday thought that a coup was likely, both because Turkey's democracy now has deep roots and because the military appeared diminished.

"Besides this one act, the military doesn't really have that much left in the tank," said Steven Cook, an expert at the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington. Mr. Cook argued that the resignations also said a great deal about Turkey as a democracy, because its citizens — even those who dislike Mr. Erdogan's increasingly powerful Justice and Development Party — were no longer willing to accept military rule.

"Turkey has grown out of that," he said.

One of the sticking points between the military and the government has been that the military

wants to promote some of the officers who have been languishing as suspects in the conspiracy cases, but cannot because the officers have remained in custody. An important meeting of the military that would determine appointments is scheduled for Monday.

General Kosaner, who had two years left as Turkey's top military commander, spelled out that frustration in a statement circulated in the Turkish news media on Friday, noting that although the officers have not been convicted of any crimes, they will miss the chance for promotions.

He added bitterly that one of the aims of the conspiracy cases "is to create the impression that the Turkish Armed Forces are a criminal organization." He also said that the situation "has prevented me from fulfilling my duties to protect the rights of my personnel and thereby rendered me unable to continue this high office that I occupy."

By midnight, the Web site of Turkey's official newspaper published an announcement that General Kosaner had retired. According to protocol, Mr. Ozel, the new army chief, will be appointed as the top military commander by Turkey's president on Saturday.

Mr. Ozel was not a surprise choice for his new post. He had been expected to become head of the army after Monday's military meeting and to assume Turkey's top military post at the end of General Kosaner's term in 2013. The heads of the army, navy and air force had been scheduled to retire next month.

While Mr. Ozel is not seen as an ally of Mr. Erdogan, he is also not a foe, as are many other senior military officers.

Soner Cagaptay, director of the Turkish research program at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, said in an e-mail that the military's status as a trusted institution had plummeted, with only 60 percent of Turks saying in most surveys that they trusted the institution, compared with 90 percent in 2002, the year Mr. Erdogan took office.

"Turkey's moment of reckoning, delayed since 2002, seems to have arrived," Mr. Cagaptay said. "This is the Turkish military leadership's way of telling the government, 'We are done playing with you. Set up your own team if you can.'"

The resignations seemed intended to send a message that the military was still powerful enough to shake up the country's political system. But they seemed almost to have had the opposite

effect, with Mr. Erdogan acting fast to choose a new leader.

“This was their last resort,” Ms. Aydintasbas said of the resignations. “It is happening precisely because there is no likelihood of a coup. There is nothing else for them to do.”

*Gul Tuysuz reported from Istanbul, and Sabrina Tavernise from Washington. J. David Goodman contributed reporting from New York, and Landon Thomas Jr. from Spain.*