

Turkey: Police brutality intensifies along with the political crisis

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Last week, daily papers in Turkey reported widely the case brought by Cigdem Nalbantoglu before a Republican Court against the conduct of police officers, including women, in Istanbul's Beyoglu district. She stated in her complaint that the police assaulted, beat and threatened her in the course of a random street search.

Cigdem Nalbantoglu is the elected head of the Gümüssuyu quarter of Beyoglu. She is also one of the founders of the Purple Roof Women's Refuge Foundation.

According to her complaint, two female officers stopped her on the street and asked for ID. They searched her bag and found the names and phone numbers of former security chiefs in her address book. She told them she was the head of a quarter. They responded by saying that the new security chief had said that he "would take care of all transvestites, gays and prostitutes" in the area, indicating that she was dressed like a prostitute.

When she asked how they could speak like that, the tone of the conversation changed for the worse. They said, "You are coming with us to the Public Interrogation Center."

She was then dragged to a Legal Medical center for blood tests after being sworn at and hit by some of the male police officers, of whom there were some 20. All this was recorded by police cameras and some TV crews that were on the scene.

In the past, such an incident would have prompted a cover-up of the "heroic" police force. The fact that it has been reported by almost all daily newspapers is itself a reflection of deep currents within the Turkish political landscape. No newspapers alleged police wrong-doing, but neither did they suppress the story.

The Turkish police have a long-standing reputation

and proven record of brutality, especially when it comes to political dissidents. The force has always been dominated by Islamist and fascistic elements. They are well trained in torture techniques, especially since their counterparts in the CIA trained them during the years of the Cold War.

In four years after the September, 1980 military coup, 178,565 people were detained and nearly all of them badly tortured. In addition to official detentions, hundreds disappeared and are presumed dead. Hundreds of officially detained people lost their lives in torture chambers. The police organization as whole was deeply implicated in this horrific and systematic practice.

More recently, powerful sections of the Turkish ruling elite have pressed for Turkey to enter the European Union (EU), and as a result the police force has been kept in check. Nevertheless, outbursts of police brutality have regularly occurred.

For example, in the midst of negotiations between Turkey and the EU, demonstrators on Women's Day in 2005 were beaten, embarrassing the Turkish government. For its part, the European press largely ignores police brutality in Turkey, bringing it forward as an issue only when it serves the interests of the European powers in their negotiations with Turkey.

Recently, however, the Turkish military has made a sharp turn to the right, from a pro-EU to an anti-EU stance, and this has been reflected in a shift by the governing AKP (Justice and Development Party) in the same direction. With right-wing elements once again gaining substantial influence and the hopes of EU membership evaporating, the Turkish police feel more emboldened.

It would be a mistake to believe that what happened to Cigdem Nalbantoglu was the result of a few right-

wing officers reacting to a liberal woman. This type of behavior is well on its way to becoming public policy at the highest level of the Turkish state.

For some time now, this process has not been confined to police activity. Politics have moved in the same direction. Judicial attacks on intellectuals are now commonplace.

Orhan Pamuk, currently the most prominent writer in Turkey, was charged last year with “impairment of Turkish identity,” which became a major issue in negotiations with the EU. More recently, journalist Elif Safak, who has received international acclaim, was attacked in the same manner. Today, dozens of journalists, writers and publishers are being dragged before the courts.

This is a sign that Turkey is returning to the days of systematic oppression. With the political situation in the region deteriorating—the North Cyprus situation deteriorating, the Armenian genocide dispute growing under pressure from the EU—and the economic situation growing more fragile—is not difficult to understand the turn to intensified repression.

Those sections of the ruling elite that still believe Turkey can win membership in the EU hope to rectify this situation. The publicity given to Cigdem Nalbantoglu’s complaint can be viewed in this light. This is essentially an exercise in damage control.

These forces have no desire to go to the roots of the problem. And for good reason! Under the capitalist form of democracy, in which oppressive measures are essential to the survival of the system, these layers require a brutal police force.

Such methods can be ended only by the working people of Turkey, but not without the help of their counterparts in other countries—the international working class.



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