

Turkish Constitutional Court bans Kurdish party

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On December 11, Turkey's highest court announced that the Kurdish nationalist Democratic Society Party (DTP) was being banned and disbanded, with a number of its functionaries barred from holding political office for five years. According to the court, the party was a "focal point" of separatist activities and was organically linked to the "terrorist" PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party). The court also withdrew the parliamentary mandates from DTP Chairman Ahmet Turk and former chairman Aysel Tugluk.

In the wake of the court ruling, demonstrators have taken to the streets in daily protests in the Kurdish-populated southeast and east of the country, as well as in western towns with large numbers of Kurdish migrants. Spontaneous protests against the ban have been violently dispersed by police.

While the Kurdish nationalists have always placed their hopes on help from Western countries, this time they cannot count on it. The US says the ban was an "internal Turkish affair." A state department spokesperson said merely that the "democratic system in Turkey" should "continue" to expand political freedoms and that constraints on political freedoms should be exercised with extreme caution. The EU also did not condemn the court decision, only regretting a setback for the democratisation of Turkey.

While the *World Socialist Web Site* is politically opposed to the DTP and the PKK, we condemn the ban as an attack on the basic democratic rights of expression and freedom of organisation. Once again, Turkey has proved to be a "graveyard of parties." While the Western media bluster about a setback for the efforts of the government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan's moderate Islamist AKP to find a democratic solution to the Kurdish problem, the ban actually shows the inability of all the factions of the Turkish establishment—Kemalist and Islamist alike—to come up with such a solution.

The Constitutional Court has banned four Kurdish nationalist parties since 1993: HEP (People's Labor Party), DEP (Democracy Party), and HADEP (Pro-democracy Party of the People), predecessor of the DTP, as well as ÖZDEP (Freedom and Democracy Party). The DTP is the fifth such party to be banned.

It was founded in 2005, winning 20 seats in the 2007 elections and qualifying as a faction in the Turkish National Assembly. Formally, the party stood "independent" candidates in order to circumvent the 10 percent entry threshold. Its supporters and voters come overwhelmingly from the majority Kurdish provinces of southeastern Turkey, its "left"-tinged Kurdish nationalism finding little support in the rest of the country. Conversely, for a

time, it looked as if the AKP might even outstrip it in the Kurdish areas. The AKP was also seen by many Kurds as an alternative to the corrupt and repressive Kemalist establishment; its commitment to limited political liberalisation gave the AKP a degree of credibility, mainly because of its conflict with the Turkish military.

That changed, at least after 2007, when Erdogan collaborated with the military on the Kurdish issue. In October of that year, he also gave the green light for attacks on neighbouring Kurdish-dominated northern Iraq. The application for a prohibition of the DTP was also lodged with the Constitutional Court in 2007. The AKP is politically responsible for continued military aggression against northern Iraq since 2008, as well as for the brutal suppression of the May Day rally in Istanbul that year. Despite its occasional limited attempts at reforms, it has revealed its true colours as a purely bourgeois party with Islamist, nationalist and liberal economic tendencies—an enemy of the working class and oppressed masses.

In the absence of a genuinely progressive political alternative uniting Turkish and Kurdish working people, the DTP has profited from disappointment with the rightward turn of the AKP. In the March 2009 local elections, the DTP nearly doubled its result compared to its predecessor, winning the mayor's office in 99 cities and municipalities, including the city of Diyarbakir. In southeast Turkey, it received the majority of the votes. This was followed by a massive wave of police repression against the party, while Erdogan, in the form of an ultimatum, called on the DTP to condemn the PKK as "terrorists." The DTP has not done this. It has spoken out for peace between the PKK and the Turkish state, for recognition of the Kurds as a nation within the existing borders of Turkey, for the IMF and for membership in the EU.

In other words, it is a completely bourgeois party that does not speak for the poverty-stricken Kurdish population, afflicted by backwardness and repression. Rather, it speaks for Kurdish landowners and entrepreneurs, and partly for the aspiring middle classes who want their share of the good life and who regard the centralism and Turkish nationalism in Turkey as an obstacle to their own advancement.

In August, the AKP undertook a new turn in its Kurdish policy, with the tacit approval of the military. Erdogan suddenly met with DTP leader Ahmet Turk, though the latter had still not identified the PKK as terrorist. The government launched a "democratic initiative" to grant some limited concessions. Meanwhile, at various Turkish universities, Kurdish professorships were

established; the use of “non-Turkish” languages are to be allowed on private television stations, in prisons, mosques and in election campaigns; the previous Kurdish names of towns and places are being restored. The presence of the security forces in southeastern Turkey was also to be reduced. Turkish would remain the only official language, and the centralised state structure would not be affected.

Nevertheless, the DTP greeted the project with cautious support. The Turkish General Staff also signaled its approval, as long as article 3 of the constitution remained unchanged. This sets forth the national territory, language, flag, national anthem and capital of Turkey. On the other hand, the opposition parties, the Kemalist CHP (Republican Peoples Party) and fascist MHP (National Movement Party), protested loudly. The latter also made threats that it would now “go into the mountains” (like the PKK before)—i.e., take up the armed struggle.

The PKK, with whom the AKP government categorically ruled out any negotiations, has tried to use the “democratic initiative” in order to gain a negotiating position. Allegedly on the orders of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, who is currently on the prison island of Imrali serving a life sentence, the organisation sent two groups of members from northern Iraq as “peace ambassadors” to Turkey in October, where in consultation with the Interior Ministry they were received by the DTP. The nearly three-dozen people were briefly detained, but were soon released. The PKK members traveled through southeastern Turkey, where they were enthusiastically greeted by thousands of supporters of Kurdish nationalism in events organised by the DTP. MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli said that the AKP had now capitulated to the PKK, and Turkish nationalists organised angry protests against the government’s Kurdish policy. Another “peace group” from Europe was then refused entry to Turkey.

The PKK has since denounced the initiative as a ploy and as a “plan to liquidate the PKK,” accusing the AKP government that they have not relaxed Öcalan’s detention conditions as officially announced, but made them worse. Since then, hardly a week goes by without party offices or DTP members being attacked by Turkish nationalists, or Kurdish nationalists engaging in violent confrontations with the police. On one Kurdish demonstration, a student was killed by a police bullet to the back. Although the PKK is officially upholding a previously announced cease-fire, one of its units has undertaken a serious attack on the military, killing seven soldiers. The PKK leadership says the unit was acting on its own initiative.

Meanwhile, the AKP has hardly lifted a finger to prevent a ban of the DTP. This is despite the fact that the AKP enjoys an overwhelming majority in parliament, the government and the office of president. Some of its leaders even openly welcomed the repression against the DTP. At the end of November, Cemil Çicek—who belongs to the nationalist wing of the AKP, and who until 2007 was a government spokesman and justice minister, and is now deputy prime minister—had even openly declared that the DTP was responsible for the nationalist pogroms directed against it. He also called for the banning of the party. Prime Minister Erdogan spoke somewhat more critically, having spent time in prison for expressing his views. He has experienced a party ban

firsthand and knows that banning the DTP could set a precedent against the AKP.

In general, the Islamist wing of the establishment has taken no action against the ban. Unlike the decision regarding the AKP last year, this time the verdict was unanimous regarding the DTP. This means that it was also agreed on by all the Islamist-oriented judges. President Abdullah Gül, who earlier this year announced the democratic initiative on the Kurdish question, indicated his clear support for the ruling of the Constitutional Court: “I wish party executives would show the necessary care to protect parties. But the provisions of the constitution and the laws are clear. What can the court do? As long as a party cites a terrorist organisation as the reason for its existence, what can the court do?”

The deputy chairman of the AKP’s parliamentary group, Mustafa Elitas, said the AKP was against shutting down political parties in principle, but said it believed everyone should respect the decision of the Constitutional Court. The democratic initiative was not dependent on the DTP and would continue without it. A struggle for democratic rights and principles, which might require the mobilisation of broad layers of the population against the state, is anathema to a bourgeois party like the AKP.

DTP Chairman Ahmet Turk said something quite similar. He announced that all his party’s parliamentary deputies would leave the National Assembly—including those who, unlike him and Aysel Tuglukand, had not been stripped of their seats. He warned against “hopelessness” and declared that all problems could be solved through dialogue and understanding and that they would continue to support the “democratic process.” He was underscoring the fact that the DTP is basically nothing more than a bourgeois party that is neither willing nor able to seriously defend itself.

The only way forward for Turkish and Kurdish workers is to break with all forms of nationalism and to unite behind a socialist perspective.



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