

Turkish police crack down on internal opposition

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As part of an ongoing crackdown on political opposition, the Istanbul police carried out a series of raids last week.

Early in the morning of July 16, police anti-terror units broke into more than 100 homes in Istanbul, including some student dormitories. More than 30 people were detained on charges of being members of terrorist organisations and damaging public property connected to the Gezi Park protests. In separate raids, police also arrested 15 people in the İzmir, Balıkesir, Manisa and Bursa provinces.

The draconian action of the Turkish state comes in the wake of a wave of demonstrations and protests in Istanbul and nationwide in the course of the past six weeks. The protests were triggered by the decision of the Istanbul council to bulldoze large parts of one of the city's central parks in order to rebuild an Ottoman-era military barracks, which in turn was to house a large shopping centre.

The protests spread quickly in June, engulfing a number of major cities, and increasingly assumed the character of demonstrations against the right-wing policies of the Islamic Justice and Development Party government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

According to the Turkish Interior Ministry, 2.5 million protesters have so far taken part in the protests, with major demonstrations in no fewer than 79 cities. The Ministry reports that around 4,900 protesters were detained and 4,000 people injured in clashes with riot police.

In Istanbul, riot police have repeatedly resorted to tear gas, water cannon and rubber bullets to disperse protesters. In addition to the thousands of injured, five people have been killed in the course of violent clashes with police.

On Saturday, July 20, a young couple who first met in

the course of the demonstrations attempted to hold their wedding ceremony in Gezi Park. The couple, accompanied by a crowd of thousands, were met by units of riot police who first blocked any access to nearby Taksim Square and then used water cannon to drive the couple and their supporters out of the area.

Speaking on Sunday, Prime Minister Erdogan repeated his mantra that terrorist groups were behind the protests. At an AKP dinner, he declared: "It was seen that behind the wedding were members of a terrorist organisation, people wearing black masks. Why are you setting the ground for such things?"

Police also clashed with protesters in Hatay, Eskişehir and Ankara last week. Thousands had taken to the streets of Hatay following the announcement that 19-year-old Ali Şmail Korkmaz had died in hospital from his injuries.

During protests in Eskişehir on June 2, Korkmaz was savagely beaten by a group regarded to be either police provocateurs or supporters of the Erdogan government. After the beating, Korkmaz fell into a coma from which he never recovered. Video footage showing the attack has been removed from the Internet.

At the same time, a person allegedly identified in the videos as a key figure in Korkmaz's beating was released from custody by a court in Eskişehir.

The government has also sought to censor media coverage of anti-government protests. According to a report by the Association of Photographers, a total of 111 photographers were detained, and victims of violence had their photos erased by the police during the demos in Istanbul and Ankara in June and the first week of July. Many photographers complained that their cameras had been broken or pictures erased by the police.

In a series of recent speeches in Turkey and abroad,

Erdogan has repeatedly linked the alleged threat of domestic terrorism to recent developments in Egypt. Erdogan is a firm ally of ousted Egyptian president Mohammed Morsi and has criticised Western governments for not directly intervening in Egypt to restore Morsi to power after the July 3 Egyptian military coup.

In his vicious response to the latest protests in Turkey, Erdogan makes clear that he fears his own regime could suffer the same fate of his ally, Morsi.

At the same time, because of his support for US Middle East wars, Erdogan has been able to rely on unconditional support from the US government, and particularly President Barack Obama, in his suppression of dissent inside Turkey.

While mass opposition to Erdogan is fueled by class antagonisms and deep social inequality, combined with growing hostility to Erdogan's pro-US foreign policy, these issues find no reflection in the perspective of the groups organising the Gezi Park protests.

From the very start, the 127 groups involved in the Taksim Solidarity Platform have sought to ensure that broader social and political questions are kept off the agenda.

In its statement of June 5, the Solidarity Committee restricted its demands to an end to the construction work in the park and an end to police violence.

Following a massive police action authorised by Erdogan in mid-June to clear Gezi Park of protesters, the Committee subsequently entered into talks with government representatives. It accepted assurances from the Istanbul council that a referendum would be held to decide the fate of the park.



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