

Turkey to hold first popular election for president

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On Sunday, more than 52 million Turkish citizens are eligible to vote in an election to select the country's next president. For the first time in Turkey's history, the president is being elected by popular vote and not chosen by parliament. If no candidate wins more than half of the valid votes, a second ballot will be held between the two leading candidates on August 24.

The Justice and Development Party (AKP) sees the election of the president by the public as an important step in the transition to a presidential system. It has the support of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democracy Party (HDP). The HDP's support—for now—is based on the demand for Kurdish "democratic autonomy" within the framework of the European Charter of Local Self Government and for the release of Kurdish political prisoners.

Initially, the main opposition parties—the Republican People's Party (CHP) and the far right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP)—supported maintaining the selection of the president by parliament. In the meantime, however, they have also accepted the popular election of the president.

The support of all the main bourgeois parties for the election of the president by the public indicates that they are lining up behind the ruling class's drive toward authoritarian means of rule and war. This drive, which is part of an international tendency, is part of the Turkish ruling class's preparation for coming mass working class struggles against the ongoing social counterrevolution and repression, as well as the government's war policies.

At his party's parliamentary caucus on June 1, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan insisted that a president elected by the public would be a strong president who could actively intervene politically, while a president elected by parliament was "under tutelage". Erdogan is considered the favourite in the election.

However, the constitutional and legal basis for the concentration of strong executive power in the hands of the president has yet to be created. Serious academics and media commentators acknowledge that the absence of a legal basis will engender substantial political problems, no matter which candidate is elected president and which party wins the parliamentary elections next year. The AKP's strategy of first imposing a de facto presidential system and then creating the

necessary constitutional and legislative framework, when problems arise, reveals how cynically the Turkish ruling class and its political representatives regard their own constitution.

The ideological and political credentials of the two leading candidates—the AKP's Erdogan and the CHP's and MHP's candidate Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, who is also supported by some other bourgeois parties—demonstrate that Turkish bourgeois politics as a whole is being reshaped on a religious axis.

This turn has also been adopted by CHP and MHP, which have hitherto been seen as the representatives of the secular wing of the Turkish political establishment. The motto, "opposition to Erdogan at any cost" cannot explain the CHP's nomination of Ihsanoglu, the Secretary-General of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) from 2004 to 2013, as its presidential candidate.

The former Kemalist (referring to Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkish republic, and the ideology of Turkey's nationalist and secular bourgeoisie) CHP, supposedly the main defender of secularism, is signalling to the Turkish bourgeoisie and the imperialist powers that it is in support of recasting the Middle East along sectarian and ethnic lines.

The CHP's and MHP's nomination of Ihsanoglu demonstrates that the radical change in Ankara's foreign policy, especially in the Middle East, has largely been accepted by the entire Turkish ruling class. There is no doubt that the imperialist powers, which have partly discredited Erdogan as "unreliable", look favourably upon the candidacy of Ihsanoglu.

There are differences of class origin and political culture between Ihsanoglu, an internationally known academic and diplomat, and Erdogan, who—in his own words—"sold bagels and lemons" in his childhood, entered politics at a young age and is an Islamist militant and politician by trade. However, these differences do not mean that Erdogan will pursue "militant", "authoritarian" and "aggressive" policies, while Ihsanoglu, as an "intellectual" will follow a "democratic" and "pacifist" path.

There is no stark contrast between the two. Regardless of their personal backgrounds, they both have entered the service of the same bourgeois class interests and of imperialism. What is underlying the differences and conflicts between Erdogan

and Ihsanoglu are the tactical solutions they are offering to the problems facing US imperialism and the Turkish bourgeoisie in the Middle East.

Ihsanoglu was sharply attacked by the AKP government when he did not come out against the July 2013 coup that overthrew the Muslim Brotherhood's President Mohamed Mursi in Egypt, but instead criticized Mursi for "promoting social polarisation."

In August 2013, Prime Minister Erdogan declared that the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation should be ashamed of itself. AKP Deputy Chairman Huseyin Celik wrote on Twitter, "Does anyone know what Ihsanoglu does? Following the coup, this person accused Mursi. I can only say 'shame on you!', as I recall the efforts made by our esteemed President and Prime Minister for Ihsanoglu's election as the Secretary General of the OIC".

Bekir Bozdag, then deputy premier, urged Ihsanoglu to resign. He said: "If I were the Secretary General of the OIC, I would have called Islamic countries to cooperate. I could not bear the dishonour of staying silent and would resign, if they do not give an inch."

The second important conflict between Erdogan and Ihsanoglu erupted over Syria. In a press conference in Ramallah, Palestine, Ihsanoglu objected to military intervention in Syria and said that it would only exacerbate the situation. In an interview with the Turkish daily *Cumhuriyet* on June 17, 2014 he insisted on a "transition in agreement with the current Syrian regime" of Bashar al-Assad.

Ihsanoglu does not reject a re-division of the region. At his press conference in Ramallah he called the boundaries drawn in 1916 by British and French imperialism in the "Sykes-Picot map", "a premature baby in the uterus of the Ottoman Empire", adding that they had been "shattered" and that the time was "ripe for remedy". His positions on the coup in Egypt are similar to those of the US and European imperialists, while his proposal on Syria has long found expression in Washington and other imperialist centres. In short, Ihsanoglu's attitudes on Turkish foreign policy correspond to the imperialist plans for reshaping the Middle East.

What distinguishes his offer of a "solution" from Erdogan's is the use of "soft power" (economic, diplomatic, sanctions) before a military intervention and instead of immediate warmongering. Having a more global perspective, he defends the interests of imperialism and the Turkish ruling class with—at least for the moment—more "moderate" means.

The perspective of Erdogan with his strong "neo-Ottomanist" ethos and a narrow-minded outlook limited to Ankara is—despite its "doctrinaire face"—a pragmatic one. This brings him occasionally into conflict with his main supporters in the West. He also does not hesitate to appeal to populist Turkish nationalist sentiments if he deems it necessary, even at the risk of scaring off his Kurdish nationalist supporters.

The presidential election on Sunday is marked by large-scale

war preparations in the Middle East, which has already been dragged into a bloody sectarian conflict. Thus, none of the bourgeois parties talks about growing unemployment, poverty, corruption and social inequality. They do not say anything about the daily police terror or Ankara's destructive role in Libya, Syria and Iraq. They all base their political discourse on the reactionary themes of religion, sectarianism and ethnicity.

The Sunni Islamic policies embraced by AKP government along with the dream of "neo-Ottomanism" has also created an ideological framework for the close cooperation between Ankara and the Kurdish nationalist leaderships, both in Turkey and Iraq.

The Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), created for the purpose of providing Kurdish nationalism with a "left" mask, nominated its co-chairperson Selahattin Demirtas as the party's presidential candidate at its caucus on July 1. It is almost certain that his candidacy will be limited to the first round, and the supporters of the HDP will then vote for one of the two main candidates, Erdogan or Ihsanoglu, in the second ballot.

The HDP makes use of the presidential election for securing its position and getting concessions from the government. On June 26, under the pressure of the developments in Iraq, the AKP government submitted a bill titled "Draft Law to End Terror and Strengthen Social Integration" to provide a legal framework for talks between the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) and the government and granted immunity to the people involved in the negotiations.

The law is used by Erdogan to appeal to Kurdish voters. It is supported by the imprisoned Kurdish leader Abdullah Ocalan and provides the Kurdish nationalist movement represented by the HDP an opportunity to strengthen the so-called "peace" alliance with the AKP.



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