Opposition leader named Istanbul mayor, but election dispute continues amid multiple crises

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On Wednesday, seventeen days after Turkey's March 31 local elections, Ekrem ?mamo?lu, the Istanbul mayoral candidate of the main opposition party, the Republican People's Party's (CHP), received the mandate of the electoral authorities officially making him mayor of the country's largest city.

However, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) had already submitted an extraordinary appeal to the country's Supreme Election Council (YSK) the day before to demand that the Istanbul mayoral election be annulled, alleging widespread electoral fraud. AKP officials claim that more than 300,000 votes in Istanbul were questionable as a result of irregularities in electoral records and voting procedures.

Were the YSK to accept the AKP's objections, a new election for Istanbul mayor would be held in June.

Loss of control of Istanbul, home to fully a fifth of the country's 80 million people, would be a significant blow to Turkey's Islamist populist president, Recep Tayyip Erdo?an, and his AKP. Erdo?an personally led his party's campaign in the March 31 election.

Although the AKP and its ultra-right wing alliance partner, the Nationalist Movement Party or MHP, won just under 52 percent of votes nationwide, their candidates were defeated in five of the county's eight most populous cities, including Istanbul, the national capital Ankara, and Izmir.

The electoral losses represent a significant erosion of the AKP's support among the urban poor and other sections of working people, and under conditions where Erdo?an, heeding the demands of big business, is moving to impose a new round of savage austerity.

Late last year, Turkey's economy fell into slump for the first time since 2009. Big business, which is facing large losses due to falling demand and the plummet in the value of the Turkish lira, is pressing the government to create conditions for intensified exploitation of the working class, even as working-class anger over spiraling food prices and unemployment mounts. Earlier this week, the Turkish Statistical Institute reported that the unemployment rate in January jumped to 14.7 percent, a 3.9 percentage-point increase from a year before, while youth unemployment rose to 26.7 percent.

Further compounding the government's crisis is the unravelling of relations with Washington, for the past seven decades the Turkish bourgeoisie's principal military-security partner and bulwark.

With bipartisan support, the Trump administration is threatening economic sanctions and other reprisals if the Erdo?an government proceeds with the purchase of the Russian-made S-400 air defence system. Ankara, for its part, is adamant that the US back away from its alliance with the YPG—the Syrian offshoot of the PKK, the Kurdish nationalist movement against which the Turkish state has waged a bloody counter-insurgency war in the country's southeast for the past 35 years—and allow Turkey to establish a "buffer zone" in northern Syria extending through predominantly Kurdish regions.

The initial vote count in Istanbul showed the CHP candidate winning by about 28,000 votes. A recount of invalidated votes, undertaken at the demand of the AKP, reduced ?mamo?lu's margin of victory to 13,000 votes. A subsequent AKP request for a recount of all 8.8 million votes cast was denied.

The AKP's official demand to the Supreme Election Council for the cancelling of the Istanbul election is based on allegations of improprieties. However, Erdo?an has publicly challenged the validity of ?mamo?lu's victory on the basis of the patently anti-democratic argument that a 13,000 vote difference is irrelevant.

The Supreme Election Council and various provincial and district electoral boards have already overturned some elections. In an unabashed violation of fundamental democratic rights, electoral authorities refused to recognize the district election victories of six candidates of the Kurdish nationalist Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), and instead gave the government mandates to the second place finishers, all of them AKP candidates. The electoral authorities justified this with the claim that the eight were barred from holding office, because they had been dismissed from their civil servant jobs as part of the sweeping purge the Erdo?an regime mounted against its political opponents after the failed 2016 NATO-backed military coup. However, the same electoral authorities had approved the eight standing as candidates in the March 31 elections.

The HDP has long been the target of arbitrary and blatantly anti-democratic acts on the part of the AKP government and state authorities, with many of its leaders jailed for supporting "terrorism," a reference to their ties to the PKK. In 2016–17, the government replaced more than 90 HDP-backed mayors elected in the 2014 local elections with "trustees."

According to a report, in the two-and-half weeks since the March 31 vote, electoral authorities have accepted 87 percent of the AKP's challenges to the initial results (68 out of 78) and 68 percent of those of its ally, the MHP. Of the CHP's objections 43 have been accepted, while its partner in the Nation Alliance, the Good Party, has been successful 26 percent of the time. Three of the 17 objections filed by the HDP have been accepted.

The sham defenders of democracy

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During the election campaign, the CHP-led Nation Alliance cast itself as the defender of democracy against the increasingly authoritarian Erdo?an regime.

This was a monstrous fraud, one however that received the blessing of the HDP. It declined to stand mayoral candidates in Istanbul and the other major cities of western Turkey and instead urged its supporters to vote for the CHP.

The CHP is the party of the traditional Kemalist bourgeois elite that dominated the Turkish Republic till the beginning of this century and is complicit in all its crimes, including repeated military coups, the violent suppression of the working class, and the oppression of the Kurdish minority.

Underscoring the utterly reactionary character of the CHP, just days after coming first in the Istanbul polls ?mamo?lu sent out a tweet honouring the NATO-trained army officer, Colonel Türke?, who founded the ultra-right-wing MHP and was at the center of promoting fascist violence against the left and the working class in the 1970s.

The CHP's Nation Alliance partner, the Good Party, is itself a recent split-off from MHP and its leader, Meral Ak?ener, presided over savage repression of the Kurds when she served as Interior Minister in the late 1990s.

As for the HDP, it speaks for sections of the Kurdish bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie who hope to gain increased political and economic power within a reconfigured Turkey by courting the US, NATO and the European Union.

Indeed, while they posture as defenders of democracy, the CHP and HDP are if anything even more openly orientated to imperialism—the principal force of world reaction responsible for the oppression and wars that have ravaged the Middle East—than their AKP rival.

Washington and the major European powers have been closely following the controversy over the Istanbul election, and have signaled that if the AKP is successful in prevailing on the election authorities to cancel the Istanbul result they could seek to leverage the ensuing controversy to pressure, even seek to oust, the Erdo?an regime.

In early April, the US State Department issued a statement demanding the AKP forego any challenge to the election results, and, as if on cue, the *New York Times* published an editorial lauding the CHP as the "democratic" opposition to the authoritarian Islamist Erdo?an.

AKP initiates new offensive against the working class

In recent days, Erdo?an and his chief minsters have been trying to placate Washington, while reassuring domestic and international big business.

Turkey's Finance Minister and Erdo?an's son-in-law, Berat Albayrak, met with Trump in the White House on Monday, and in this and other Washington meetings, he and Defence Minister Hulusi Akar pleaded that the S-400 purchase did not represent any change in Ankara's commitment to NATO and the US-Turkey military-security alliance.

Speaking at a US-Turkish business leaders' conference, organized under the title "Back to Business: Maintaining Partnership in Difficult Times," Albayrak declared Turkey "open for business," and emphasized its commitment to "the free market system" and the government's resolve to "increase predictability and reduce policy uncertainty for businesses and investors."

Yesterday, Erdo?an called at a conference organized by the pro-government Confederation of Public Servants Trade Unions for "national unity," saying now that the local elections had been held, "political discussion" should be put "behind," so as to "focus on our real agenda, particularly on economy and security"—that is on intensifying the assault on the working class and pursuing the Turkish bourgeoisie's repression of the Kurds and regional power ambitions.

As he and his top ministers have done repeatedly, Erdo?an emphasized that there are now four-and-a half years before the next round of elections in Turkey meaning the government can focus on "economic transformation." While this is meant as a pledge to big business that the government has the time and political space to pursue unpopular measures, it is also a threat that the government will immediately label opposition from the working class as "illegitimate" and "undemocratic" to justify its repression.

Already on April 10, Finance Minister Albayrak unveiled the first steps in a promised "new economic program." While it was labeled as "insufficient" by some international commentators, it signaled a new offensive against the working class and on this basis won the enthusiastic endorsement of the country's main business organization, TUSIAD.

One of the most important anti-worker measures is the creation of a fund for severance payments which is to be integrated with the private retirement insurance fund to finance big business. The Erdo?an government has already plundered the unemployment insurance fund along the same lines.

The CHP and HDP have hypocritically criticized the government's economic reforms as an attack on the working class. The CHP accused the government of attacking "the last stronghold" of working people, a statement that only serves to expose its own role in implementing the Turkish bourgeoisie's social counter-revolution against the working class since 1980.

As for the pro-EU, pro-NATO HDP, the value of its claims to oppose austerity are shown by the actions of its sister party Syriza in Greece, as well as the pro-business policies it has implemented wherever it has held power at the municipal level.

The only way the working class can secure its social and democratic rights is by constituting itself as an independent political force through the building of its own socialist internationalist party in opposition to imperialism and all the rival parties and factions of the bourgeoisie.

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