

Acceding to Erdoğan's demand

Turkish election authorities order re-vote in Istanbul

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After weeks of disputation, Turkey's Supreme Election Council (YSK) has bowed to the demands of the country's president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and the AKP (Justice and Development Party)-led government and ordered Istanbul's March 31 mayoral election be re-run on June 23.

Earlier, election authorities had dismissed the AKP's complaints about election irregularities in Turkey's largest city and allowed the candidate of the opposition Nation Alliance, the CHP's Ekrem İmamoğlu, to be sworn in as Istanbul's mayor. The Nation Alliance is a coalition between the far-right Good Party and the CHP or Republican People's Party, the party of the traditional Kemalist capitalist elite that dominated the politics of the Turkish Republic till the turn of the 21st Century.

During the five weeks culminating in Monday's 7 to 4 YSK ruling annulling the results of the March 31 election, Erdoğan and his AKP advanced a long series of dubious and outright anti-democratic arguments to press for the March 31 Istanbul mayoral election to be set aside. Erdoğan proclaimed, for example, that İmamoğlu's 14,000 vote margin of victory was immaterial given the number of votes cast.

Ultimately, the YSK justified its decision to cancel the mayoral election on the grounds that some of those who supervised the vote were not, as required by law, civil servants. However, it did not annul the other elections held simultaneously with the vote for mayor, including for the city's various districts, a majority of which were won by the AKP-led People's Alliance.

Only the latest in a long series of authoritarian actions by Erdoğan and his right-wing Islamist populist regime, Monday's canceling of the March 31 Istanbul election sparked an immediate popular outcry, including large angry spontaneous protests in the streets of Istanbul.

It comes as the 17-year-old AKP national government and the Turkish bourgeoisie and its republic face a confluence of political, economic and geopolitical crises. Turkey's economy fell into recession in the fall of last year, driving the official unemployment rate to 14.7 percent in the December–February quarter, even as inflation hovered around 20 percent and the lira continued to depreciate significantly.

The economic crisis has been exacerbated by the unraveling of relations between Ankara and Washington, for seven decades the Turkish bourgeoisie's principal military-security partner. The US

and Turkey are at loggerheads on multiple fronts. These include: Turkey's purchase of the Russian-made S-400 air defence system; Washington's partnering 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; the US sanctions and war preparations against Iran; Washington's promotion of Israel and Saudi Arabia as its principal Mideast allies; and Washington's push to exclude Turkey from a significant role in the development of offshore Eastern Mediterranean energy resources.

If Erdoğan and his AKP went to such lengths to overturn their defeat in the Istanbul mayoral election, it is because they calculate they cannot accept divisions within the state apparatus as they seek to negotiate the geopolitical and economic headwinds—a threatened breakdown of the US-Turkish alliance and an eruption of class struggle.

Home to one-fifth of Turkey's population and responsible for almost a third of the country's total economic output, Istanbul plays an outsized role in Turkish politics. Erdoğan's own rise to power began with his election as the city's mayor in 1994 and he and his supporters have controlled the city's administration ever since.

The principal target of Erdoğan's authoritarian measures, including what no doubt were extreme behind the scenes pressures to bully the YSK into ordering the re-vote in Istanbul, is not his capitalist political rivals, but the working class.

Erdoğan and his top ministers have repeatedly pledged to Turkish big business and foreign investors that in the coming months the AKP led government will carry through sweeping economic “reforms”—i.e., social spending cuts and other “pro-market” measures aimed at bolstering the competitive position of Turkish capitalism. In so doing, Erdoğan has frequently drawn attention to the four-year period before Turks next go to the polls, suggesting that this places the government in a strong position to ram through unpopular measures.

As around the world, the past period has seen a growth in working class militancy in Turkey. The March 31 nationwide local elections gave distorted expression to the growing anger against the AKP government. Although the combined vote for the AKP and its electoral ally, the ultra-chauvinist MHP (Nationalist Movement Party), narrowly surpassed 50 percent, there was a

sharp turn against the ruling bloc in Ankara and the major cities of western Turkey. This was rooted in anger over the increasingly dire economic situation and indicates a major erosion of support for the AKP among the urban poor, whose support it had cultivated through limited social-welfare programs provided by the state and AKP-aligned Islamist charitable foundations.

Significantly, much of the criticism emanating from Turkish big business circles and foreign investors of Erdoğan's successful push to overturn the outcome of the Istanbul election is that it will delay the government's promised austerity drive as the AKP will be loath to alienate voters prior to the June 23 re-vote.

The CHP responded to the YSK's decision to force a re-vote by accusing the government of a "civil coup." It also called into question the legitimacy of the results of both the April 16, 2017, referendum, which approved constitutional changes vastly increasing the powers of the president, and the June 2018 parliamentary and presidential elections. There were widespread allegations of electoral improprieties in both 2017 and 2018. Notably the Supreme Election Council played a significant role in determining the referendum outcome, which Erdoğan won only narrowly despite severe limits being placed on the opposition campaign due to a state of emergency, when it ruled that it would count ballots that "had not been stamped" by its officials "as valid unless they could be proved fraudulent."

However, the CHP quickly made clear it would contest the June 23 elections and is determined to channel the opposition to Erdoğan's anti-democratic actions into establishment channels. Reprising the role it had played in April 2017 when there were widespread protests against the referendum result, the CHP appealed for calm and an end to street demonstrations. Eager to demonstrate to both big business and Erdoğan that the CHP shares their apprehension that anti-government protests could quickly spin out of the establishment's control, Istanbul's defrocked mayor Imamoglu sought to becalm the protests by declaring "everything is going to be all right," and this soon became the opposition's mantra.

Much of Turkey's pseudo-left openly supported the CHP, a right-wing pro-imperialist party, in the March 31 election. Now they are using the canceling of the March 31 Istanbul election to redouble their efforts to subordinate the working class, in the name of the "defence of democracy," to the Turkish bourgeoisie and in particular that faction most orientated to Washington, NATO and the European Union.

Several pseudo-left groups that stood their own candidates, including the Stalinist Turkish Communist Party (TKP), have already announced they will withdraw in favour of the candidate of the CHP and Good Party's Nation Alliance, Imamoglu.

The Kurdish nationalist People's Democratic Party (HDP), which is closely aligned with the illegal PKK, backed the Nation Alliance mayoral candidates in the major cities of western Turkey, although the CHP and Good Party leadership have, if anything, been even more hostile to the recognition of the democratic rights of the Kurds than the AKP.

Sharing the CHP's more pronounced orientation to Washington and the EU, the HDP will likely endorse Imamoglu in the re-vote. But an HDP member of Parliament signaled that if Erdoğan was

ready to make concessions to the Kurdish bourgeoisie, the AKP could yet garner the HDP's support. "If you want to win the elections in Istanbul," HDP MP Mam Tascier told Rudaw, "you have to gain Kurds' votes... Whoever takes a step to solve the Kurdish question, Kurds [will] vote for it. If AKP do this, they might vote for AKP. If it does not and CHP does, they might for it."

This horse-trading underscores the right-wing, anti-working class character of all the parties of the Turkish and Kurdish bourgeoisie.

The European imperialist powers, which are adamantly opposed to Erdoğan's attempts to fashion a more independent role for the Turkish bourgeoisie in the Middle East, the Balkans and elsewhere, were quick to condemn the election commission's canceling of Imamoglu's election win.

The EU demanded the YSK justify its "far-reaching" decision "without delay" and Germany's Foreign Minister Heiko Mass called the canceling of the election "incomprehensible."

It is very possible Washington and the EU will join forces to cynically invoke Erdoğan's authoritarian actions to increase pressure on Ankara to fall more in line with their respective predatory policies.

However to date, the reaction of the Trump administration has been low-key. The State Department did not oppose the call for a re-vote. It merely noted it was "extraordinary" and urged the re-vote be "free, fair and transparent."

Behind the scenes high-stakes negotiations between Ankara and Washington are ongoing, with Turkey pressing its claim for the establishment of a buffer zone in north-eastern Syria at the expense of American imperialism's YPG proxies, and the US threatening Turkey with a massive downgrade in military-security ties, even possible expulsion from NATO, if it doesn't abandon the S-400 purchase.

The democratic rights of working people can't be defended by aligning with any faction of the Turkish or Kurdish bourgeoisie. Rather the deepening crisis and fissures within the Turkish bourgeoisie and its state, rooted as they are in the breakdown of world capitalism, must be answered by the development of an independent political movement of the working class, fighting for workers' power and the perspective of international socialism.



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