

Turkey's COVID-19 prison amnesty excludes political prisoners, journalists

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Turkey has one of the world's fastest-spreading coronavirus epidemics, with over 52,000 cases and 1,100 deaths since the first case was diagnosed on March 10. A new bill proposed by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its government coalition ally, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) brings a partial amnesty to some prison inmates. This comes amid fears that Turkey's spiraling epidemic could lead to mass deaths if COVID-19 spreads across the prisons.

As many as 90,000 prisoners, roughly one-third of the total, could benefit from the bill, but tens of thousands of political prisoners are excluded, as they have been charged on fraudulent "terrorism" charges. These detainees, including journalists critical of the government, whose trials continue without any concrete evidence, will not be eligible for the amnesty.

The Turkish government is thus taking as an example the British government, which is refusing to release WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange as it releases thousands of prisoners.

In 1998, as mayor of Istanbul, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was imprisoned and banned from political activity for four months for inciting religious hatred after he read a poem by Ziya Gökalp. However, he returned to politics in 2002 thanks to a special law supported by the Republican People's Party (CHP). Today's amnesty, had it been implemented in 2002, would not have amnestied Erdoğan himself.

Fearing the constitutional court will annul sentences or apply the amnesty to all prisoners in accordance with the principle of equality in the constitution, Erdoğan's government insists that the bill is not an amnesty but only an "execution arrangement." This arrangement also paves the way for arbitrary prison sentences for articles or social media posts criticizing the

government.

During the pandemic, Turkish prisons have become very dangerous. Overcrowding, insufficient ventilation, lack of sunlight, common toilets and bathrooms, insufficient access to hygienic products and cleaning of dining halls and kitchens, inadequate medical staff, long waiting times for medical treatment, all make it easy for the virus to rapidly spread across an entire prison population.

The crisis in prisons is an international phenomenon. With COVID-19 cases already detected in several Turkish prisons, last week prisoners revolted in the southeastern city of Batman because they are not included in the execution bill. Iran has already released 70,000 in an attempt to prevent the spread of COVID-19, while prison protests and riots have erupted in Italy and Colombia.

The opposition CHP's mild criticisms of the bill have focused on promoting trust in the state. CHP spokesperson Faik Öztrak complained, "You arrange a remission on execution because of an epidemic. You keep journalists in prisons, you release the thieves. This is clearly political opportunism. ... With the execution arrangement, those who accept bribes will go out; those who report bribery will go to prison."

CHP officials hypocritically criticize the bill under the mask of democracy, but they are complicit in the AKP's police state policies. In 2016, the CHP voted for an AKP-backed constitutional amendment stripping the Kurdish nationalist Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) deputies of parliamentary immunity. As a result, former HDP leaders Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ and several former HDP deputies are still in prison. Nonetheless, the HDP unhesitatingly formed an alliance with the CHP in the last year's local elections.

In a statement, the HDP, together with various

smaller petty-bourgeois parties, reacted to the bill as follows: “The right to health and life of prisoners is supposed to be secured by the state and the government. However, the new regulation proposed by the government shows that the AKP-MHP bloc only thinks of those close to it in this respect. The rights of the opposition members are openly violated. ... Imprisoned politicians, former members of parliament, mayors, journalists, academics, students and citizens who have used their right to freedom of expression in the social media are excluded from this regulation.”

This simply covers up the reactionary record of the Kurdish nationalists themselves. The People’s Protection Units (YPG), the main US proxy force in Syria, holds political prisoners in northern Syria in appalling conditions. Alleged Islamic State (ISIS) fighters and their families are kept in prison camps in horrific conditions, without sufficient food, on the orders of Washington and the other NATO imperialist powers.

According to 2020 data, there are a total of 282,703 prisoners in 355 prisons in Turkey. T24 reported that about 37,000 were jailed on “terrorism” charges, according to the Ministry of Justice statistics. In Turkey, it mostly means non-violent political offences.

When Erdogan’s AKP came to power in 2002, the number of prisoners in the country was just 60,000. While the total population increased less than 20 percent from 65 million in 2002, the prison population almost quintupled. The AKP has built 178 new prisons in this period and 61 new prisons are expected to open in 2020.

The turn towards a mass jailing policy is in line with the AKP’s long-standing drive toward a police state, authoritarian rule at home targeting the working class, and involvement in imperialist wars across the Middle East.

As the WSWs stated in 2017: “Erdogan’s attempt to seize dictatorial powers flows from the war drive with which the imperialist powers responded to the Egyptian Revolution. Under pressure from NATO, the Turkish ruling class abandoned Erdogan’s ‘zero problems with neighbors’ policy and backed imperialist wars for regime change in Libya and then in Syria, initially using Al Qaeda forces as proxies.”

After the defeat of their Al Qaeda proxies in Syria, the imperialist powers settled on working with Syrian

and Iraqi Kurdish nationalist groups, instead of the Islamist Free Syrian Army.

The AKP government saw this as a fundamental threat to Turkey’s territorial integrity and stepped up its offensive against Kurdish nationalist groups, ending the “peace process” with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). As a result, thousands of Kurdish politicians, including lawmakers, mayors, and journalists, were imprisoned.

The Syrian war also led to a major shift by the AKP toward a rapprochement with Russia and China, igniting a bitter conflict with the US administration and its European allies. In July 2016, a section of Turkey’s military launched an abortive putsch out of NATO’s Incirlik air base, encouraged by Washington and Berlin.

After the coup attempt, Erdogan imposed a state of emergency and set about drafting a new constitution to consolidate his power. Some 150,000 public servants and soldiers have been dismissed from their jobs and more than 500,000 people were arrested. More than 30,000 people are in prison, most of whom did not participate in the coup. Hundreds of critical journalists and academics were jailed or forced into exile.

According to a recent Journalists’ Union of Turkey (TGS) report, there are 85 journalists in Turkish prisons, though the real number may be well over 100.

Class conscious workers will defend the rights of political prisoners and journalists. During the pandemic, measures must be taken to protect all prisoners and other vulnerable sections of society. Political prisoners and imprisoned journalists should be released immediately.



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