

Erdo?an runs phony “anti-imperialist” populist campaign in Turkish elections

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The second round of Turkey’s presidential election, which is being closely watched around the world, will be held tomorrow. Incumbent President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an, the People’s Alliance candidate, who won 49.5 percent of the vote on the May 14 first round, will face Nation Alliance candidate Kemal K?l?çdarolu, who took 44.9 percent.

If Erdo?an is currently leading in the polls, after winning the first round with his Justice and Development Party (AKP) also coming in first in the parliamentary elections, it is not because living conditions are improving for workers in Turkey. Rather, it is due to the bankruptcy of the bourgeois opposition led by K?l?çdarolu, who is backed by the Kurdish nationalist People’s Democratic Party (HDP) and numerous pseudo-left parties.

Turkey, located a few hundred kilometers south of the NATO-Russia war in Ukraine, is in imminent danger of being drawn into the war. Officially, inflation is around 40 percent, though independent calculations show it to be around 105 percent, slashing the purchasing power of the working class. The Turkish-Syrian earthquake disaster, which claimed over 50,000 lives and left millions displaced in Turkey alone, has further exacerbated this crisis.

Erdo?an’s censorship of the opposition, widespread undemocratic arrests of HDP members and resort to state repression undoubtedly played a role in his electoral success. However, the decisive factor was his ability to exploit K?l?çdarolu’s brazen, reactionary orientation toward US imperialism and NATO, as well as his ties to international financial circles. On this basis, Erdo?an portrayed himself as a “lesser evil.”

Erdo?an, a right-wing Islamist politician, who over two decades as leader of Turkey served as a critical member of the US-led NATO alliance cooperating with imperialist powers with which the Turkish bourgeoisie has deep rooted military and economic ties. This continued despite tensions that led to a failed NATO-backed coup in Turkey in 2016 that nearly succeeded in assassinating Erdo?an.

Erdo?an can nevertheless exploit widespread opposition of broad sections of workers to the imperialist powers and

international finance capital, because K?l?çdarolu’s open orientation to imperialism allows him to falsely market himself as an “anti-imperialist leader.”

Erdo?an emphasized this issue from the beginning of his election campaign. At his first rally in April, he declared:

As you are witnesses, our entire political life has been spent fighting against imperialists and their subcontractors. We challenged imperialism. ... In the Syria and Iraq operations [by Turkey since 2016], we foiled their games against our country. On July 15, 2016, while Mr. Kemal ran away from the tanks and went to his mayor, we were with our people in Ye?ilköy [Atatürk Airport in Istanbul].

In fact, throughout the 21st century, Erdo?an has supported the NATO imperialist powers’ wars of occupation or regime change from Afghanistan to Iraq, Libya and Syria. The Turkish bourgeoisie was fully complicit in US-led efforts to plunder the Middle East.

The US decision to make the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK)-linked People’s Protection Units (YPG) its main proxy force in Syria and the possibility of an independent Kurdish state played a decisive role in the escalation of tensions between Ankara and Washington. Together with concern in Washington over Erdo?an’s ties with Russia, these conflicts led NATO to back the 2016 attempted coup against him.

Having survived thanks to mass protests that erupted against the coup, Erdo?an used it as a pretext to accelerate the construction of a police state. However, contrary to his claims, he never challenged imperialism.

On the contrary, even as he attacked the US proxy militia in Syria, the Kurdish nationalist YPG, he tried to restore relations with Washington and other NATO capitals and maneuver between Washington and Moscow.

Throughout the election, Erdo?an argued that the

supporters of Fethullah Gülen and the PKK-YPG were supporting K?l?çdaro?lu together with the imperialist powers. Gülen is a longtime CIA asset in the US whom Erdoğan accused of being behind the coup attempt in 2016. To this end, Erdoğan released a video, which his campaign later had to admit was fake, showing Kurdish nationalist officials cheering for K?l?çdaro?lu.

While continuing his government's provocations and repression targeting the Kurds, Erdoğan also repeatedly appealed to the people's anti-war sentiments. He said, "By keeping our country away from the conflicts in our region and working for peace, we have turned the imperialists' catastrophic scenarios into rags." In reality, Ankara worked in coordination with the CIA to foment a war of regime change in Syria in 2011, using Islamist proxies.

In the Ukraine war, Ankara pursues a policy based on maneuvering between NATO and Russia, mainly due to the Turkish bourgeoisie's sizable economic ties to Russia. However, Erdoğan is aware of the public sympathy for his attempts to mediate between the warring nations in the name of "peace." He was careful not to repeat the warmongering of the NATO powers against Russia.

In February 2022, in an Areda poll, 89 percent of respondents answered "no" to the question "Should Turkey change its policy of neutrality in the Russia-Ukraine conflict?" To the question "Do you think NATO can protect Turkey?", 90 percent answered "no." In another survey conducted by Kadir Has University in 2018, 82 percent saw the United States as the "biggest threat."

While demagogically appealing to widespread opposition to imperialism, Erdoğan has backed NATO's eastward expansion against Russia. As president of Turkey, he paved the way for Finland to join NATO, substantially escalating the risk of NATO's war on Russia's borders. In March, Erdoğan stated that Finland's membership would further strengthen NATO and said, "I believe that NATO will play an active role in maintaining global security and stability."

Erdoğan's social policies and promises also had an impact on the election campaign. He oversaw a massive transfer of wealth from the workers to finance capital, with the Turkish banking sector's net profits growing a staggering 350 percent in 2022. But at the same time, he blamed the imperialist powers and their sanctions on Turkey for the deepening economic crisis and the rising cost of living.

Erdoğan responded to the economic crisis with definite though limited measures. He raised the minimum wage, implemented an early retirement scheme and raised pensions, subsidized natural gas and agricultural input prices and pledged to build 650,000 houses in two years in response to the Turkish-Syrian earthquake. On this basis, Erdoğan tried to present himself as a friend of working

people.

While Erdoğan's concessions to workers were insufficient to halt a collapse of living standards due to inflation, they did let him campaign effectively against K?l?çdaro?lu. Indeed, K?l?çdaro?lu put forward an economic policy organized around raising interest rates to boost profitability, though at the cost of massive job losses if businesses and borrowers were then unable to pay interest on their debts. Against such a reactionary rival, Erdoğan was able to posture as the greater friend of the working man.

Erdoğan could also use K?l?çdaro?lu's reactionary anti-refugee campaign to his advantage, especially after May 14. Erdoğan, like K?l?çdaro?lu, has advocated sending back refugees fleeing imperialist wars, cynically using them as a bargaining chip in talks with the European Union. But he has responded to K?l?çdaro?lu's far-right rhetoric by comparing him and his allies to the Nazis. "We will never resort to Nazi era hate speech on the issue of refugees, as the CHP leader did," Erdoğan said yesterday.

Ultimately, tomorrow's elections will resolve nothing, no matter which reactionary candidate wins the elections. Neither K?l?çdaro?lu's open declarations of loyalty to imperialism nor Erdoğan's cynical populist posturing offers the working class a way out of the escalating global war and economic collapse caused by the crisis of capitalism.

Building a genuine anti-imperialist, international and socialist movement in the working class requires rejecting and politically exposing both pro-imperialist candidates and their political allies. The 2023 elections have confirmed the perspectives of the Sosyalist E?itlik Grubu, the Turkish section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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