

Jacobin backs Kiliçdarolu's reactionary campaign in Turkish elections

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On Sunday, tens of millions of voters will go to the polls in Turkey, the Middle East's largest economic and military power, just across the Black Sea from the NATO-Russia war in Ukraine. The election in this critical, strategically located country holds enormous lessons for workers and youth not only in Turkey, but around the world.

Initially, right-wing incumbent President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan faced the prospect of defeat. He was discredited by mass preventable deaths in substandard housing during the Kahramanmaraş earthquake in February. He helped NATO arm Ukraine with drones against Russia, despite the deep unpopularity of NATO in Turkey, where NATO backed bloody coups in 1960, 1971, 1980 and 2016. Moreover, waves of wildcat strikes have erupted against inflation and collapsing real wages, as well as the mass deaths caused by the official handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

If today Erdoğan is poised to win reelection, it is because of the bankruptcy of the forces capitalist media falsely promote as the “left.” Pseudo-left groups internationally all applauded Erdoğan's bourgeois rival, Kemal Kiliçdarolu. But Kiliçdarolu denounced Russia, pledged to more closely support the major NATO powers, then made a filthy election deal with far-right groups to deport millions of refugees and wage a “war on terror” targeting Turkey's Kurdish minority.

These events expose *Jacobin*, a magazine linked to the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) that promotes Stalinists and Kurdish nationalists who support Kiliçdarolu in Turkey. Speaking for layers of the upper-middle class oriented to the Democratic Party and the union bureaucracy, it was silent on Kiliçdarolu's bitter hostility to the developing movement in the working class and instead hailed Kiliçdarolu's support for US imperialism.

Before the election, *Jacobin* published an article titled “Turkey's Election Offers a Glimmer of Hope for the Left,” hailing the support for Kiliçdarolu from the alliance between the Kurdish nationalist People's Democratic Party (HDP) and the Stalinist Workers Party of Turkey's (T?P).

“At this crucial juncture, Kiliçdarolu, who has a slight

poll lead, certainly represents the best hope for an exhausted nation,” *Jacobin* wrote. Kiliçdarolu, it wrote, would “reintroduce the separation of powers and rule of law” and save “what remains of Turkish parliamentary democracy.” His victory, it added, would give “space for the progressive opposition to begin broadening its program of empowering local democracy, municipalities, and grassroots political organizing.”

The “local democracy” and “grassroots organizing” *Jacobin* had in mind was not oriented to the wildcat strikes erupting against the Turkish union bureaucracies and Erdoğan's regime. Nor did it seek to mobilize working class opposition to the NATO-Russia war. Rather, *Jacobin* was calling to build in Turkey the intimate relationship between the capitalist state and pseudo-left academics, union bureaucrats and local organizers that it supports in America.

Jacobin was, in fact, quite aware of Kiliçdarolu's anti-worker politics. Kiliçdarolu pledged to impose economic sanctions on Russia, though he subsequently dropped the issue, and massively raise interest rates, which would strangle the Turkish economy and threaten millions of jobs. *Jacobin* dressed this up as follows: “Kiliçdarolu is yet to offer a serious, systemic alternative to the neoliberal economic policies [that] have left many ordinary Turkish citizens laboring for a pittance.”

It also vaguely noted Kiliçdarolu's ties to fascistic paramilitary groups with long traditions of attacking workers, Kurds and other minorities, and backing military coups, and his plans for deportations of millions of innocent Syrian, Afghan and Iraqi refugees fleeing US-led NATO wars. It admitted that Kiliçdarolu “has formed the symbol of the ultranationalist, hard-right Grey Wolves paramilitary group” (a hand gesture with the forefinger and little finger extended). It noted that he is “promising to repatriate the millions of Syrian refugees currently living in his country.”

Jacobin nonetheless continued to promote Kiliçdarolu—despite his savage austerity policies against workers, anti-refugee xenophobia, and ties to violent fascistic forces—as a “left.” This raises one obvious question:

Why did *Jacobin* feel it necessary to lie so shamelessly about Kiliçdarolu?

As its own article makes clear, *Jacobin* supported Kiliçdarolu mainly because it viewed his victory as critical to securing Turkish support for military aggression against Russia. After noting some of what it treated as Kiliçdarolu's minor political drawbacks, it added:

“But overall, he is likely to pursue a more unambiguously pro-NATO, pro-Western line than Erdoğan, who has sought to play Washington against Moscow and style himself a crucial interlocutor between the two blocs. ... “Europe and the United States will be happy to see Turkey return to the fold — so happy, in fact, they may well reward Kiliçdarolu with reentry into crucial Western weapons technology, perhaps even the F-35 fighter jet program from which Erdoğan is currently excluded. Seen through the NATO prism, Syrian refugees who may suffer forcible return into Assad's brutal prison system, and the civilians and Kurdish political, civil society, and military leaders who continue to lose their lives in Turkey's brutal air war across northern Iraq and Syria, are disposable collateral.”

While *Jacobin* pointed to the cynical contempt for refugees and Kurds in Turkey underlying the NATO powers' support for Kiliçdarolu, its own calculations were no less cynical. Indeed, it presented HDP-T?P support for Kiliçdarolu as a “glimmer of hope for the left,” even though it knew full well Kiliçdarolu would attack refugees, Kurds, and the working class. Indeed, it evidently hoped a Kiliçdarolu victory would facilitate its own propaganda lies presenting the NATO war on Russia as a struggle for Ukrainian democracy.

Certain political realities have since intruded on *Jacobin*'s reactionary fantasies about imposing Kiliçdarolu as NATO's man in Ankara. Kiliçdarolu won less than 45 percent of the vote in the first round, compared to over 49 percent for Erdoğan, who polls show winning over 50 percent of the vote Sunday. Kurdish HDP voters are outraged at their party's support for a candidate cutting deals with fascist forces to unleash the Turkish security forces against them.

This allowed Erdoğan to criticize Kiliçdarolu's aggressive anti-Russian and anti-refugee positions, allowing Erdoğan to demagogically posture as a more reasonable, even anti-imperialist or anti-fascist candidate. He mocked

Kiliçdarolu for having “started his political journey as ‘Gandhi Kemal’ and will end it as ‘Nazi Kemal.’”

Jacobin responded with a bankrupt article by HDP official Devri? Çimen, bitterly attacking Turkish voters for refusing to vote for Kiliçdarolu and accusing them of racism.

“The grim situation reminds us of Turkey's weak democratic norms and the extent of nationalist, racist, hard-right sentiments,” Çimen wrote. Hailing the HDP's supposedly “unyielding fight for progressive, democratic values,” Çimen tried to find a silver lining to the cloud. Kiliçdarolu, he wrote pathetically, “was supported by the HDP and its bloc. With this help, Kiliçdarolu did at least manage to force a runoff against Erdoğan.”

Çimen's article is a slander against the working class. Kiliçdarolu's campaign was a miserable failure not because xenophobia and racism are deeply anchored. It is because Kiliçdarolu's attempt to promote his unpopular agenda of austerity and war with appeals to xenophobia and racism failed to win support. The HDP's decision this week to nonetheless back Kiliçdarolu, over the opposition of its own electorate, exposes its bankrupt bourgeois nationalist politics.

It also exposes *Jacobin*, the DSA and countless other pseudo-left groups who hailed Kiliçdarolu as the hero of Turkish democracy. These petty-bourgeois groups are not left, but pseudo-left. They support imperialist war and the capitalist nation-state machine, acquiesce to collaboration with far-right groups on nationalist grounds, and oppose workers' struggles now erupting outside the control of national union bureaucracies in Turkey and internationally.

The revolutionary alternative to the pseudo-left positions of *Jacobin*, the HDP and the T?P was advanced by the Sosyalist E?itlik Grubu, the Turkish organization of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement. They irreconcilably opposed both Erdoğan and Kiliçdarolu, as well as all the pseudo-left groups who supported Kiliçdarolu. They fought for the unification of the working class across national lines in the Middle East in an international movement against imperialist war and capitalism, and for socialism.



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