

Political lessons of the 2023 Turkish presidential elections

Sosyalist E?itlik Grubu
31 May 2023

The re-election of Islamist President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an in a run-off against Kemal K?l?çdarolu is a political experience of international significance for the working class. It is a devastating exposure of all the pseudo-left political organizations that supported K?l?çdarolu as a supposedly “left” or “democratic” candidate against Erdo?an.

The election outcome vindicates the analysis made by the Sosyalist E?itlik Grubu (SEG), the Turkish section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). Only a movement of the working class, independent of both Erdo?an and K?l?çdarolu and their petty-bourgeois supporters, can halt the attacks on the social conditions and democratic rights of workers and oppose the NATO-Russia war in nearby Ukraine.

Erdo?an, who ran for a third term in violation of the constitution, resorted to media censorship, police-state repression and the illegal use of state resources to win the election. These facts are not enough, however, to explain the election results.

Erdo?an entered the elections under very unfavorable political conditions. His government’s response to the pandemic led to nearly 300,000 excess deaths. He presided over a massive transfer of wealth from the workers to the ruling class and record profits for the Turkish banking sector. The rising cost of living crisis triggered a wave of wildcat strikes in Turkey starting in 2022, amid an upsurge in the class struggle across Europe and internationally.

He was further exposed by the historic earthquake disaster in February. It caused at least 50,000 preventable deaths in Turkey due to substandard housing. Some have warned the real toll could have been as high as 150,000.

If Erdo?an was nevertheless able to win the elections, this is due to the political bankruptcy of the bourgeois opposition led by K?l?çdarolu and, above all, the Kurdish nationalist HDP and the pseudo-left parties that lined up behind him.

In Turkey, where the overwhelming majority of the population opposes the US-NATO war in Ukraine, K?l?çdarolu ran against Erdo?an as a clearly pro-NATO candidate. In interviews with Western media outlets, he pledged to involve Ankara more in NATO’s war against Russia and then, without providing any evidence, accused the Russian

government of interfering in the Turkish elections.

K?l?çdarolu was hostile to the emerging movement in the working class against Erdo?an. Pledging closer ties with the international financial markets and Turkish business federations, he offered the working class nothing but austerity.

And, especially before the second round, K?l?çdarolu appealed to fascistic forces, publishing videos openly denouncing refugees as potential rapists and criminals. He sealed an electoral alliance with a far-right party based on pledges to deport millions of Syrian, Afghan and Iraqi refugees fleeing imperialist wars in their own countries. He also pledged to escalate the targeting of Kurds and their elected politicians, supposedly to “fight terrorism.”

K?l?çdarolu went down in a humiliating defeat because this fascistic campaign did not find broader popular support. Erdo?an ultimately won reelection with 52 percent of the vote.

This outcome of the Turkish presidential elections again confirms, in the negative, Trotsky’s theory of Permanent Revolution. This theory states that, in countries of belated capitalist development such as Turkey, the bourgeoisie is incapable of establishing a democratic regime, uniting the people across ethnic lines, or expelling the influence of imperialism. Such democratic tasks fall to the working class, which must fight to take power on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program.

Not only the Kurdish nationalist HDP but also the numerous Stalinist and Pabloite tendencies of the Turkish pseudo-left rejected this strategic understanding, which underlay the October 1917 Revolution in Russia led by Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky. The HDP and the pseudo-left groups reacted to the growing radicalization and activity of the working class and youth by shifting sharply to the right.

These parties, including the Stalinist Workers’ Party of Turkey (T?P), which won 1 million votes and four parliamentary seats, exposed themselves by fully supporting K?l?çdarolu’s filthy campaign. Their slogans hailed K?l?çdarolu for “opposing fascism” and “defending democracy” against Erdo?an. In this, they received the enthusiastic support of similar pseudo-left parties internationally, like the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and the Left Party and the Green Party in Germany.

In reality, however, all these parties promoted a right-wing, pro-imperialist candidate openly allied to fascistic forces. It was a historic exposure of these organizations, which are not left-wing parties of the working class but pseudo-left parties of the affluent middle class, aligned with imperialism.

They serve not to develop but to block a genuine revolutionary and socialist, i.e., Trotskyist movement within the working class, opposing the bourgeoisie and the capitalist system. They called on workers and youth to back one of the two pro-imperialist, right-wing candidates despite mounting opposition in the working class.

In 2015, David North, chairman of the International Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site*, made the following working definition of the pseudo-left as an international phenomenon:

The pseudo-left denotes political parties, organizations and theoretical/ideological tendencies which utilize populist slogans and democratic phrases to promote the socioeconomic interests of the privileged and affluent strata of the middle class. ... The pseudo-left is anti-Marxist. It rejects historical materialism. ... The pseudo-left is anti-socialist, opposes class struggle and denies the central role of the working class and the necessity of revolution in the progressive transformation of society. It counterposes supra-class populism to the independent political organization and mass mobilization of the working class against the capitalist system. The economic program of the pseudo-left is, in its essentials, pro-capitalist and nationalistic.

North also explained that the pseudo-left, which promotes “identity politics” and seeks a more favorable distribution of wealth among the richest 10 percent of the population, is generally pro-imperialist.

The Turkish pseudo-left groups are now responding to Erdoğan’s election by continuing their shift to the right. The political tendencies behind K?l?çdar?lu have declared that workers who voted for Erdoğan are “incorrigible” and pledged to turn to the “48 percent” who voted for K?l?çdar?lu.

The SEG utterly rejects this characterization, which denies the objectively revolutionary character of the working class and slanders workers as reactionary, after workers refused to vote for a candidate making fascistic appeals to xenophobia and anti-Kurdish hatred.

The 2023 elections in Turkey confirmed the SEG’s political perspective. The SEG rejected both Erdoğan and K?l?çdar?lu from the standpoint of the international working class and the struggle for socialism and against imperialist war. It rejected the nationalist propaganda of both bourgeois candidates against refugees and Turkey’s Kurdish minority, and it irreconcilably

opposed the various petty-bourgeois nationalist, Stalinist and Pabloite tendencies who called for supporting K?l?çdar?lu. In its election statement, the SEG explained:

Drawing upon the immense historical experience of the international Trotskyist movement and its struggle to establish the political independence of the working class from bourgeois and middle class parties, it [SEG] is intervening in these elections to explain the political issues to the most conscious sections of the working class and youth—presenting an international socialist program and explaining what they should do, not only on election day, but after.

The SEG’s program, which included transitional demands to defend basic democratic and social rights, explained that the conflict that increasingly pits workers everywhere against the capitalist state cannot be resolved by “reforming” state power, but by transferring power to the working class through a socialist revolution.

Lessons need to be drawn from this strategic experience. The election has not resolved any of the critical issues that faced the working class in this election. NATO’s war on Russia is escalating rapidly, and the government is preparing to launch brutal social austerity policies in the interests of the corporate-financial elite amid a mounting international financial crisis. Sooner rather than later, Erdoğan will face an explosive movement of opposition in the working class.

The main lesson of the 2023 elections in Turkey is that the working class needs its own revolutionary leadership in order to struggle against capitalism, police-state rule, austerity and war. The election process showed that the SEG is the only political tendency capable of building such a leadership in Turkey. Workers and youth who want to reject the dead end of the pseudo-left and fight for international socialism must join in the building of the Sosyalist E?itlik Partisi as the Turkish section of the ICFI.



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