

Kurdish political prisoners on hunger strike in Turkey

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On November 27, political prisoners from the Kurdish nationalist movement in Turkey began a hunger strike. The hunger strike, announced to last until February 15, has spread to more than a hundred prisons across Turkey and is approaching its one-month mark. Hundreds of prisoners are on hunger strike in rotation.

Reyhan Gök presented a report prepared by the Coordination for Monitoring and Follow-up of Hunger Strikes and listed the demands of the hunger strikers as: '1) An end to human rights violations in prisons in Turkey; 2) Fixing of the aggravated conditions of execution; 3) An end to the long isolation of Abdullah Öcalan in ?mral? High Security Closed Prison, family and lawyer visits; and 4) A democratic solution to the Kurdish question.'

Gök stated that the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan should consider the hunger strikers' demands before the process reaches a more dangerous point, adding, 'The political power [Erdoğan government] will be responsible for the sad consequences that will arise regarding the prisoners' right to health and life.'

Öcalan, leader of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), who is kept in solitary confinement, has not been allowed to meet with his lawyers for four and a half years and with his family for almost three years due to "disciplinary measures" that the authorities have not disclosed. He has been imprisoned on ?mral? Island in the Marmara Sea since 1999, when he was captured in a CIA-backed Turkish operation.

The Erdoğan government was a key supporter of the CIA-orchestrated regime-change war attempting to overthrow Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in 2011, which killed more than 500,000 people. At the same time, Erdoğan's NATO-backed 'peace process' with the PKK collapsed in 2015 when Washington turned the

People's Protection Units (YPG) into its main proxy force in Syria. The YPG also recognises Öcalan as its leader and, together with the PKK, is under the umbrella of the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK).

The potential emergence of a US-backed Kurdish state in Syria could trigger similar sentiments among Kurds in Turkey, terrifying Ankara and driving it back into conflict with the PKK. Since 2015, a crackdown and arrests has been launched against legal Kurdish politicians while the Turkish army and police moved to violently crush the YPG in northern Syria and the PKK in Turkey's Kurdish provinces.

Last week, Nuray Özdoğan and Öztürk Türkdoğan, spokespersons of the Legal and Human Rights Commission of the Kurdish nationalist People's Equality and Democracy Party (DEM Party, formerly HDP-People's Democratic Party), released a report on the state crackdown since 2015. At least 22,818 party members have been detained since 2015 and at least 4,334 people have been arrested, including co-chairs, MPs, provincial and district co-chairs, party officials and ordinary members. The arrests include two party co-chairs, 24 MPs and 30 members of the party leadership.

The report highlights that 93 mayors elected on March 30 2014 were arrested and trustees appointed in 95 municipalities; 43 mayors elected on March 31, 2019 were arrested and trustees appointed in 48 municipalities; and currently 17 mayors, seven MPs and 14 other leaders are in prison.

The report also details acts of violence against the Kurdish movement in 2015. These include the Ankara train station massacre, in which over 100 were killed in bomb attacks, and the Suruç massacre, in which 34 people were killed. In 2015-2016, many Kurdish cities and towns were subjected to curfews and terrorised by state and paramilitary forces. While these operations,

which displaced hundreds of thousands of civilians, are nowhere near the scale of the Israeli genocide in Gaza, the methods of urban warfare are similar.

The Socialist Equality Group (SEG) has well-documented and irreconcilable political differences with the pro-imperialist and pro-NATO Kurdish bourgeois nationalist movements. But these do not in any way diminish our opposition to state repression. The SEG calls on workers and youth to demand in principle the release of all political prisoners, including Kurdish nationalists. This is about basic democratic rights.

This struggle cannot be advanced by appealing to the capitalist political establishment and by negotiations behind closed doors, whether with Erdoğan or with the bourgeois opposition led by the Kemalist Republican People's Party (CHP).

The crackdown launched by the Erdoğan government in 2015 was carried out with the active support of the CHP. The CHP backed several authorisations for cross-border invasions into Syria and Iraq targeting Kurdish militias. It also provided the government with crucial votes in the passage of the constitutional amendment to lift the immunity of Kurdish MPs. The Kurdish nationalist movement, which had previously negotiated and cooperated with Erdoğan, nevertheless saw fit to support CHP candidates in both the local elections in 2019 and the presidential elections this year.

Despite the anti-Kurdish and anti-refugee protocol that CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu signed with Ümit Özdağ—the leader of the far-right Victory Party—during last May's presidential elections, the HDP continued to back Kılıçdaroğlu. The protocol promised to maintain Erdoğan's “war on terror”, the pretext his government has used to arrest thousands of Kurdish politicians, dismiss elected mayors in Kurdish provinces and launch illegal military operations in Syria and Iraq.

The DEM (HDP)'s statements on the local elections scheduled for March 2024 again focus mainly on maneuvering and negotiations with the Erdoğan government and opposition parties led by the CHP. Their pro-imperialist and anti-working class character leads them to constantly seek reactionary rapprochements despite the fierce disagreements between them.

Murat Kalmaz, co-chairman of the DEM in Istanbul province, recently said that his party's doors were open

to both Erdoğan's AKP and the CHP in the Istanbul local elections. Kalmaz said that if they were to support an alliance this time, “there would be conditions of it” and that they would “focus on the gains.”

The conditions or gains that Kalmaz detailed in the rest of his speech were not related to democratic rights, but to the negotiation of seats in municipalities: “For example, districts such as Esenyurt, Adalar, there may be other places [for negotiation on a candidate]. We say let's run with our own candidate, you support us here and we support you there.”

The DEM leadership declared last week, “Turkey's problems can only be solved through negotiations. That is why we value dialogue and negotiations between political parties. We are ready to negotiate with anyone who is based on local democracy, democratic reconciliation, free politics, universal human rights and women's liberation politics,” addressing both Erdoğan and the bourgeois opposition parties.

Reha Ruhavioğlu, director of the Kurdish Studies Centre, commented on the *Medyascope*, “I think the first addressee of the DEM party's 'We are open to negotiations' discourse is the government. Issues such as the democratic solution to the Kurdish question and the trusteeship issue [in municipalities] are not problems that an opposition party can solve. Since these are demands related to a ruling power, I see that the first call is rather to the government.”

It is not possible for the Turkish and Kurdish bourgeois parties, allies and accomplices of NATO imperialism, which has turned the Middle East into a bloodbath for decades and is the facilitator of Israel's genocide against Palestinians in Gaza, to bring a “democratic solution” to the Kurdish question. This is the task of the working class, which must be united on the basis of an international and socialist programme against imperialism and its regional proxies.



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