

İstanbul mayor Kamil Gökçek in custody: What lies behind Turkey's drift into a dictatorial regime?

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The arrest of Ekrem Kamil Gökçek, the mayor of Istanbul, Turkey's largest city with a population of 16 million, by police raiding his home on Wednesday morning, marks a new stage in President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's establishment of a presidential dictatorship.

The Sosyalist E?itlik Grubu (Socialist Equality Group), the Turkish section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, and the *World Socialist Web Site* demand the immediate release of Kamil Gökçek and countless other political prisoners. Those charged with "terrorism" are actually imprisoned for exercising their basic democratic rights, including freedom of expression and political activity.

It is an open secret that the Erdoğan government uses the judiciary as a weapon to suppress its political opponents. The fact that the methods that have been used to persecute Kurdish politicians and leftists in particular are now being turned against the Republican People's Party (CHP), the largest bourgeois opposition party, marks a major escalation. The CHP is the party that founded the Turkish Republic and, after two decades in opposition, overtook Erdoğan's AKP in the local elections in 2024 to become the first party, with Kamil Gökçek one of its main political figures.

Kamil Gökçek's potential arrest had been hinted at by Erdoğan himself for some time. The immediate reason was growing indications in polls that Kamil Gökçek could defeat Erdoğan in the next election, set for 2028, as the CHP's presidential candidate. To prevent this, Kamil Gökçek's university diploma was first revoked on Tuesday, and then he was taken into custody by police on Wednesday morning for at least four days. This was a "preventive coup" against a future president likely to be elected by more than 50 percent of voters.

The government knew this illegitimate operation would trigger mass protests, but the Istanbul Governorate's attempt to suppress social opposition quickly failed. A four-day ban on demonstrations, declared in violation of the constitution, was overturned by mass protests by workers and students, while large crowds across the country took to the streets to protest this anti-democratic attack. On Wednesday evening, tens of thousands of people filled the area in front of the municipality building in Istanbul. On Thursday, mass demonstrations continued in Istanbul and many other provinces, particularly at universities.

Kamil Gökçek's arrest follows a broad state crackdown over the past few months. Elected mayors from the CHP and its ally in the 2024 local elections, the Kurdish nationalist Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (DEM), as well as leaders of various "left" groups allied with these parties, were targeted. An investigation involving

approximately 6,000 people was revealed, and the will of millions of voters was disregarded as the Interior Ministry appointed trustees in many municipalities to replace elected mayors.

The Erdoğan government's drive to get rid of its bourgeois opposition is due to two main factors that reflect the deepening crisis of the global capitalist system. The first is growing social inequality and class tensions.

According to the Credit Suisse 2023 report, Turkey leads Europe in wealth inequality, with the top 1 percent of the population controlling 40 percent of wealth and the richest 10 percent controlling 70 percent. Eurostat also ranks Turkey first in income inequality in Europe. Official data show that in Turkey, where 32 million people are employed, 43 percent of workers, or about 14 million people, earn a minimum wage equivalent to about a quarter of the poverty line for a family of four.

These conditions, combined with a severe cost-of-living crisis, provoke growing struggles of workers. The Erdoğan government responds by banning strikes on the grounds that they are "harmful to national security." Mehmet Türkmen, the leader of the independent union B?RTEK-SEN, who was targeted for a wildcat strike movement of the textile workers in Gaziantep, has been in prison since February.

The second factor is the escalating imperialist wars in the region surrounding Turkey, in which the Turkish bourgeoisie is deeply involved. The consequences of the US-NATO regime-change war in Syria since 2011 and the far-right coup in Ukraine in 2014, which ultimately led to war with Russia, have accelerated Turkey's moves toward dictatorship.

Ankara enthusiastically participated in the US-led reactionary war in Syria using Islamist militias as proxies. Later, as Kurdish militias emerged as the main proxy of the Pentagon, forming the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Ankara responded by strengthening ties with Moscow. The tensions that led Turkey to be labeled an "unreliable ally" in the West culminated in the 2016 attempted military coup aimed at overthrowing Erdoğan.

After defeating the NATO-backed coup thanks to mass opposition, he launched a severe counterattack by declaring a state of emergency that lasted nearly two years. The 2017 constitutional referendum, whose results were disputed, granted Erdoğan broad powers.

Erdoğan's government's offensive against the Kurdish nationalist movement, both in Syria and within Turkey, received support from the CHP. The Kurdish deputies of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), the predecessor of the DEM Party, were imprisoned on fabricated "terrorism" charges after their immunities were lifted with CHP

support. Multiple military invasions into Syria targeting the SDF were also authorized with CHP votes. Mass protests that erupted over irregularities in the 2017 referendum were quickly brought under control by the CHP.

Turkey's transition to a new stage of presidential dictatorship is closely linked to the deepening of war in the Middle East and the impetus given to authoritarian forms of rule worldwide by Donald Trump's second presidency.

Trump has begun to rule as "dictator on day one," effectively declaring he will not recognize the Constitution or judicial decisions. As the commander-in-chief of NATO's second-largest army, Erdoğan is praised by his ally in the White House, not only for constructing a presidential dictatorship that suppresses any kind of opposition, but also for his lawless foreign policy.

In a statement in early January, Trump said that "President Erdoğan is a friend of mine. He's a guy I like, respect. I think he respects me also," before adding: "If you look at what happened with Syria, Russia was weakened, Iran was weakened, and he's a very smart guy. And he sent his people in there through different forms and different names, and they went in and they took over" in Damascus.

Erdoğan made a phone call to Trump just three days before Mamoğlu's arrest, their first conversation since November. It was reported that Erdoğan expressed his support for Trump's efforts to reach a negotiated settlement in the Ukraine war with Russia. The two leaders also reportedly discussed Syria, where al-Qaeda-linked groups backed by the United States and Turkey seized power in December.

While no details were given, the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza and plans against Iran and its allies, including the Houthis in Yemen, were certainly discussed. On Monday, US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent told his Turkish counterpart Mehmet Şimşek that the Trump administration was committed to "restoring maximum pressure on Iran."

The overthrow of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria and the Israeli offensive against Hezbollah in Lebanon have dealt a severe blow to Iran's influence in the region, while the genocide in Gaza continues to intensify. Washington has been targeting Yemen with airstrikes since last week, preparing for war against Tehran alongside its Zionist attack dog. Turkey's stance is crucial for Washington's plans, as it hosts numerous US-NATO bases, including a radar base monitoring Tehran, and shares a long border with Iran.

The recent increase in tensions between Turkey and Iran accompanies the US quest for a "new Middle East" under its full domination. In a late February interview with *Al Jazeera*, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan responded to allegations that Iran might be supporting the Kurdish SDF in Syria by saying, "If you support a group in another country to create unrest, another country might support a group in your country to create unrest." He was referring to the large Turkic-Azeri population in Iran. This interview was followed by the reciprocal summoning of ambassadors.

The Erdoğan government has begun negotiations with Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), in an attempt to dismantle the PKK and its affiliates in Iraq and Syria. The SDF, which considers Öcalan its leader, recently announced that it had agreed to be integrated into the new Ankara-backed regime in Damascus.

With this initiative, which has the support of parliamentary groups, including the DEM and the CHP, Erdoğan hopes to resolve a major point of conflict with Washington, which backs the SDF in Syria. It could also pave the way for bringing together Turkey, the new

Damascus regime and the Kurdish movement, in a US-led anti-Iranian axis. Erdoğan is making his domestic policy with the awareness that he is a critical ally for the Trump administration in the Middle East.

Erdoğan's escalation of state crackdown at home follows his call last September to "strengthen the internal front" in relation to the deepening Middle East war. He claimed that Israel, whose war machine he continues to feed, especially by intermediating the flow of Azeri oil, might target Turkey after Palestine and Lebanon.

In the event of such a conflict or a war against Iran, the goal of neutralizing the Kurdish nationalist movement as a threat to the interests of the Turkish bourgeoisie and potentially turning it into an ally in line with Turkey's ambitions in Syria and Iraq played a significant role in restarting negotiations with the PKK.

As the Erdoğan government seeks to strengthen ties with Washington, it also aims to exploit growing tensions between the US and European powers and advance its goal of joining the European Union.

In the wake of Trump's unilateral move toward a deal with Russia, Ankara has declared that Turkey is indispensable to "European security" and is among the countries considering sending troops to Ukraine. The Erdoğan government also continues to play its reactionary role in preventing millions of refugees in Turkey from crossing into Europe, using this as leverage.

Erdoğan calculates that his European allies, who are engaged in massive social attacks to finance unpopular wars and militarism and are promoting the rise of far-right forces, will not go beyond token criticisms of developments in Turkey.

This shows that the struggle against dictatorship and for democratic rights cannot be separated from the struggle against the ruling class and imperialist war. This is precisely why the CHP, which is a traditional faction of the ruling elites and oriented towards NATO and EU imperialism, is totally incapable of leading this struggle.

The first thing the CHP did after winning the local elections last year was to start a process of "normalization" with Erdoğan. At the same time, young people and workers who protested the government's complicity in the Israeli genocide in Gaza or who exercised their right to demonstrate on May Day were violently attacked by the police and arrested. Mamoğlu himself was the first leading figure who wanted to visit Damascus after the regime-change in Syria.

In his message from custody, Mamoğlu speaks of "changing this unequal, unjust and corrupt order," but this is not possible in the capitalist social system. The only social force that can ensure equality, justice and establish a democratic regime is the working class, which must be armed with an international socialist program to take power. This is the perspective for which the Sosyalist Eritlik Grubu fights.



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