

İstanbul mayor, Erdoğan's main rival İmamoğlu jailed amid mass protests

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İstanbul mayor and Republican People's Party (CHP) presidential candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu, detained on Wednesday on corruption and terror charges, was arrested and sent to prison on Sunday.

The Sosyalist Eşitlik Grubu (Socialist Equality Group), Turkish section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), demands the release of İmamoğlu and all political prisoners.

İmamoğlu was the sole candidate in CHP's presidential primary scheduled for March 23 and had recently polled ahead of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The normal date for presidential elections is 2028, but according to the constitution an early election is likely to be held to allow Erdoğan to run again.

İmamoğlu was initially arrested on charges of "corruption" but released on charges of "aiding a terrorist organisation. The second allegation was based on the CHP's legal electoral alliance with the Kurdish nationalist Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (DEM), the "urban consensus."

Detention warrants were issued for 106 people along with İmamoğlu. In addition to İmamoğlu, the mayors of Beylikdüzü and İli municipalities in Istanbul were also arrested. While 48 of the 92 detainees were arrested, 41 were released with a "travel abroad ban and judicial control" condition.

The Interior Ministry has announced that it had dismissed İmamoğlu and two other mayors. A trustee was appointed for İli, whose mayor was arrested for "aiding a terrorist organization."

In a statement, the Istanbul Chief Public Prosecutor's Office declared: "It has been decided to arrest Ekrem İmamoğlu for the crimes of establishing and leading a criminal organization, accepting bribes, extortion, illegal recording of personal data and bid rigging."

It added, "Although there is a strong suspicion that he is guilty of the crime of aiding an armed terrorist organization, since it has already been decided to arrest him for financial crimes, it is not considered necessary at this stage and it has been decided to reject the request."

The decision to arrest İmamoğlu was made by the Erdoğan government well in advance. The arrest warrant was leaked to pro-government media without being read to the suspects and

published widely.

The Chief Public Prosecutor's Office had called İmamoğlu a "leader of a criminal organization" in a statement following his detention on Wednesday. Claiming that İmamoğlu's right to a fair trial and the presumption of innocence had been violated, his lawyer Mehmet Pehlivan explained the unlawfulness of the investigation as follows:

Unlawful detention, so-called evidence, secret witnesses, witnesses whose names are not mentioned although they are normal witnesses and thus hidden, untrue allegations such as audio recordings that were not obtained legally and have nothing to do with Mr. İmamoğlu... There is nothing logical, legal and convincing about this investigation based on these allegations.

On its report on the arrest and the secret witness statements used to justify it, BBC Türkçe said: "In their statements, the secret witnesses made various allegations, including obtaining unfair gains by mentioning different people and institutions, bribery, corruption, irregularities, financing some journalists, money transactions during the local election process, money distribution to delegates during the CHP congress period, and these allegations were asked to İmamoğlu."

Lawyer and CHP deputy Mahmut Tanal said, "After Ekrem İmamoğlu's testimony, a 20-page reasoned verdict was prepared in just 20 minutes! 1 page per minute... There is no lawyer who would believe that this verdict was not written in advance. There is clearly a pre-prepared scenario and the weaponization of the judiciary."

Erdoğan foreshadowed the verdict on Saturday night with a series of tweets on X/Twitter in which he portrayed İmamoğlu as a convicted criminal. "At this point, we can see this very clearly: Under the current leadership, the CHP has turned into an apparatus that launders a handful of money-grubbing municipal robbers, not a party that carries the demands of its voters to Parliament," he wrote, adding, "The interest groups that benefit from the municipalities are up to their necks in dirt,

rust, mud, corruption and lawlessness.”

In a message sent after his arrest, ?mamo?lu said, “Turkey woke up to a big betrayal today. The judicial process is not a legal action. It is a complete extrajudicial execution. I call upon our nation to fight for rights with a sense of responsibility. This struggle for rights is a matter of the future of our nation and our children.”

He called on voters to participate in the CHP’s primaries and then take part in rallies. Following ?mamo?lu’s arrest, the CHP had called on its nearly 1.5 million members, as well as non-party members, to cast solidarity votes in Sunday’s primaries.

From the very beginning, the CHP has been seeking to control the mass anger over ?mamo?lu’s detention and channel it towards the next elections. For this, CHP leader Özgür Özel managed to find a “positive point” even in the arrest decision, saying: “On the one hand, it is important because it removes the possibility of appointing a trustee for the Istanbul Municipality. However, the necessary appeals will be made for the mayor to be released quickly.” Özel was claiming that the appointment of a trustee was prevented by the fact that ?mamo?lu was not arrested on “terror” charges.

Its efforts to contain the growing mass movement and to compromise with the Erdoğan government demonstrates once again that the CHP, which represents a faction of the same ruling class that is the force behind the construction of a dictatorial regime and orients towards the NATO and the European Union, is organically incapable of defending democratic rights.

The mass protests that erupted across the country after ?mamo?lu’s detention, mobilizing hundreds of thousands of people, have scared not only the Erdoğan government but also the CHP leadership. What drives the youth and working masses to the streets is the growing social inequality and crisis as much as the willingness to defend democratic rights. The last thing the CHP wants is for the quest for a revolutionary alternative to the bankruptcy of the capitalist social system and bourgeois rule to be on the agenda.

To keep the masses, who have moved too far to the left of the CHP, under control, Özel has resorted to radical rhetoric, which he fails to fulfill. One of them was promising to lead the masses from the Sarayhane, ?stanbul rally, where 300,000 people gathered on Saturday night according to official figures, or 1 million according to the CHP, to the Çalayan courthouse where ?mamo?lu’s testimony was taken.

The CHP decided not to do this because of the possibility that hundreds of thousands of people who would gather around the courthouse would prevent ?mamo?lu from being taken to prison, that is, would confront the state directly.

In the wake of the detentions, including of ?mamo?lu, on Wednesday, which marked a new stage in the construction of a presidential dictatorship by the Erdogan government, broad masses, especially students, took to the streets in defiance of a four-day “protest ban” imposed by the Istanbul Governorate.

They were followed by protests in many other cities. The protest bans announced in Ankara and Izmir also remained on paper. In Istanbul, the governorate extended the protest ban for four days but did not prevent the largest demonstration from taking place on Saturday. Police arrested more than 300 people on the same day.

At the Sarayhane rally, a student on the platform called for transforming the boycotts at the universities into a “general strike, general resistance” starting from Monday. This is a move that not only the pro-government trade union confederations but also the pro-CHP ones such as the DİSK are doing their best to prevent. The organization of a political general strike against the dictatorship and in defense of democratic rights is only possible through the mobilization of the workers through the rank-and-file committees they need to build.

?mamo?lu’s detention and subsequent arrest came shortly after a phone call on March 16, between US President Donald Trump, who is building a presidential dictatorship in the United States, and Erdoğan. The conversation was described as “great” and “transformational” by Steve Witkoff, Trump’s special envoy to Middle East, in an interview Friday.

The Trump administration sees the Erdogan government as critical to its plans for Ukraine and its aggression against Iran and its allies throughout the Middle East. During the meeting, Erdoğan reportedly raised the issue of ending CAATSA (Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act) sanctions on Turkey, as well as Turkey’s re-entry into the F-35 programme.

The European powers that have rhetorically criticized ?mamo?lu’s arrest also see ties with Ankara as crucial amid growing tensions with the US under Trump. Erdoğan’s government has declared Turkey indispensable to “Europe’s security,” and there have been suggestions that Turkey may send troops to Ukraine as part of the European-led “Coalition of the Willing.”

The defense of democratic rights cannot be separated from the struggle against imperialist war. The social constituency of this struggle is the working class, which produces all the social wealth and pays for war. The capitalist establishment parties, including the CHP, stand against this struggle.

The way forward is to build a revolutionary leadership that will unite the emerging struggle of the working people and youth for its social and democratic rights with the struggle against the war. This means building the Socialist Equality Party as the Turkish section of the ICFI.



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