

Erdoğan tries to quell mass protests as 15 million turn out for CHP's presidential primary

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The mass protests that began last Wednesday with the detention of İstanbul mayor and Republican People's Party (CHP) presidential candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu, on corruption and terror charges, expanded with his formal arrest on Sunday.

Millions defied governorates' bans on demonstrations in the most populous cities of İstanbul, Ankara and İzmir, and a nationwide police crackdown, to protest against the attack on their basic democratic rights to vote and freedom of speech and assembly, and against the moves to a presidential dictatorship.

In İstanbul, Turkey's largest city, Ekrem İmamoğlu—who defeated President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) in three elections—had been leading the polls for the presidential race. The Republican People's Party (CHP) held a primary election on Sunday, where İmamoğlu ran as the sole candidate, drawing massive participation. According to the CHP, around 15 million people, including 1.65 million party members and 13.5 million solidarity voters, cast their ballots to endorse İmamoğlu as the party's presidential candidate for 2028 or a potential early election.

The CHP leadership sought to channel the mass movement that erupted after İmamoğlu's arrest into the primary election—originally intended only for party members—in an attempt to control and demobilize the protests.

In İstanbul's Sarıyer district, the epicenter of the protests, hundreds of thousands—or nearly a million, according to the CHP—gathered on Sunday. While workers and youth seek a revolutionary way forward in the struggle against dictatorship and for democracy, the CHP leadership has made it clear that its role is to steer the movement into a dead end under capitalist rule.

CHP leader Özgür Özel highlighted the high turnout in the primary and called for early elections: “Our candidate is imprisoned in your dungeons. But we challenge you from this square. If you are too afraid to release our candidate İmamoğlu, we are ready for an election where he runs against you.”

Rejecting growing calls on social media and in the streets for a general strike by the working class, Özel said, “We are launching a great struggle starting this morning [Monday],” and added they would use “the power of consumers.”

İmamoğlu was sent to Silivri Prison, where Selahattin Demirtaş, the former co-chair of the Peoples' Democracy Party (HDP) who was jailed in 2016 thanks to the CHP's support for Erdoğan in parliament at the time, is being held. In a message sent from prison, İmamoğlu also pointed to the ballot box as a way out for the masses.

İmamoğlu stated in his message: “There was a record level of participation in the presidential primary election of our Republican People's Party. 15 million citizens voted. Tens of millions of people of this country, who were hurt by the tyranny of the government, the destroyed economy, meritlessness and lawlessness, ran to the polls. They said ‘enough is enough’ to Erdoğan... That ballot box will come and the nation will give this government a slap it will never forget.”

In a letter from prison on Monday, İmamoğlu urged youth to “avoid clashes” and added: “To our beloved security forces and police, you treat our people well.”

Meanwhile, the Erdoğan government is trying to suppress the growing mass opposition with police violence, detentions, and social media bans.

Late on Sunday night, after the CHP ended its rally in Sarıyer and MPs left the square, police violently attacked peaceful protesters.

Similar scenes unfolded across the country throughout the night and the government launched an intimidation operation against journalists in the morning.

In a statement, Basın-İş Sendikası (UNI Graphical and Packaging affiliate) announced that *NOW TV* reporter Ali Onur Tosun, photojournalist Bülent Kılıç, journalist Zeynep Kuray, AFP reporter Yasin Akgül, journalist Hayri Tunç, photojournalist Kurtuluş Ar, *Sendika.org* reporter Zihvan Gür and photojournalist Murat Kocabaş were detained because of covering the protests.

The wave of detentions continued with leftist political party officials who supported the protests. In a statement released by the Communist Party of Turkey (TKP), the party's İstanbul Provincial Chairman Ahmet Dincel, Party Assembly member Arda Hacıyusufoğlu and three other party members were detained. The Communist Movement of Turkey (TKH) announced that three of its members were detained in early morning raids on the grounds of "participating in a banned protest".

Left Party İzmir Provincial Chairman Barış Önce and Left Party İzmir Provincial Executive Mehmet Duman were among those detained. The Enerji-Sen Trade Union headquarters in İstanbul was raided and its leader Süleyman Keskin was detained.

Interior Minister Ali Yerlikaya announced on X that 1,133 people were detained between March 19 and March 23, 2025.

The Socialist Equality Group, Turkish section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), demands the release of all political prisoners and those detained for exercising their constitutional rights.

The government has also tightened restrictions on social media. In the first days after Mamamolu's arrest, the government tried to block access to the Internet through "bandwidth restrictions", but has now moved directly to closing down opposition accounts.

The authoritarian moves in Turkey are part of an international trend. The re-election of the fascist Donald Trump to the US presidency in January and his attempt to build a presidential dictatorship that abolishes the constitution has accelerated this process worldwide. The government's attempt to arrest Mamoglu followed a phone call between Erdoğan and Trump.

X/Twitter, the social media platform owned by Trump's assistant, the fascist billionaire Elon Musk, has suspended a large number of accounts in the country at the request of the Turkish government.

Most of the suspended accounts were "university-associated activist accounts, basically sharing protest

information, locations for students to go," Yusuf Can, coordinator and analyst at the Wilson Center's Middle East Program, told *POLITICO*. Many of these accounts are "grassroots activists" with their followings in the low tens of thousands, said Can.

In a statement on Monday, Güçlü Yaman, who prepared reports on "excess deaths" in the Turkish Medical Association (TTB) Pandemic Working Group and played a critical role exposing the deadly response of the government, said: "X blocked access to my account from Turkey, so I am now using this [new] account. I have not received any notification/warning from the court or X, but I think the reason for the block was my posts about police brutality."

The fear driving the government to violently suppress the democratic demands of the masses is the possibility that protests led by the students could mobilise the social anger of the working class, which has been deepened by the rising cost of living and impoverishment in recent years.

That is why the authorities and the pro-government media are trying to smear the legitimate democratic protests as "street terrorism". The CHP, as another representative of the ruling class, is as afraid as the government that these protests will mobilise the working class as an independent social force.

The way forward for the mass movement in the face of government repression and attempts by the bourgeois opposition to rein it in is to turn to the working class, the only social force that can consistently defend democratic rights, and fight for a revolutionary socialist program.



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