

# Turkish President Erdoğan's rival Yılmaz faces up to 2,400 years in jail

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13 November 2025

The indictment in the “corruption” investigation, in which Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (İBB) Mayor and Republican People’s Party (CHP) presidential candidate Ekrem Yılmaz has been arrested since March, was finalised Tuesday.

The CHP won the most votes nationwide in the 2024 local elections. But the charges in the indictment portray its municipal work, election activities, and presidential candidate as criminal.

Increasing pressure on the CHP through the judiciary occupies an important place in the agenda of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s government to eliminate fundamental democratic rights, including the right to vote and be elected, the right to a fair trial, freedom of the press and expression, as he builds a presidential dictatorship. However, this authoritarian regime, built not in the interests of one person but of the ruling class, primarily targets the working class amid growing class tensions and social inequality.

The 3,900-page indictment named 402 people as “suspects,” 105 of whom are prisoners. Yılmaz faces charges for 142 offenses, with sentences ranging from 828 to 2,430 years in prison.

The Istanbul Chief Public Prosecutor’s Office alleges that Yılmaz established and led a “criminal organization.” The allegations date back to 2014, when he was elected mayor of Beylikdüzü district. All the accused are charged with establishing and managing a criminal organization, bribery, laundering criminal proceeds, fraud against public institutions and organizations, bid rigging, and other crimes. The indictment alleges that the accused caused 160 billion Turkish lira (approximately US\$3.8 billion) in financial damages to the state and the loss of an additional \$24 million in foreign funds. In addition, the prosecution said it had identified 95 real estate properties suspected of being linked to the case.

In the section titled “purpose of the organization” in the indictment, the prosecution states that Yılmaz’s primary and initial goal was financial enrichment; his second goal

was to take over the CHP with the financial capital he acquired; and his third goal was to become the CHP’s candidate in the presidential elections.

The prosecutor’s office notified the Supreme Court of Appeals Prosecutor’s Office, requesting that “necessary action be taken” in accordance with the provisions on the closure of political parties within the scope of the indictment.

Yılmaz denied the allegations in a statement posted on his X account, saying: “The issue has gone beyond the alleged corruption and bribery slander and has become an attack on the CHP, the founder of our Republic... The indictment you wrote consists of lies that threaten people, hold them hostage, and coerce them into making false accusations under pressure... Broadcast the trial live so everyone can see your lies and slander!”

CHP leader Özgür Özel said on X, “This time, the coup plotters didn’t come with tanks or combat boots, but with judicial robes... This case is not judicial, it is entirely political. Its purpose is to stop the Republican People’s Party, the leading party in the last elections, and to prevent its presidential candidate from running.”

Özel stated that the notification submitted to the Supreme Court Chief Prosecutor’s Office to file a closure case against his party was “proof that the matter was not a [corruption] investigation targeting the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality”. He added, “What happened today is a clear case of judicial interference in democratic politics and the results of future elections.”

The Constitutional Court in Turkey has a long record of closing down left-wing parties, particularly Kurdish political parties. However, in 2008, Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) also faced a closure case on the grounds of “actions contrary to secularism.” The AKP was not closed because a qualified majority could not be achieved in the court members’ vote (six in favor, five against). The most recent Kurdish political party to be closed was the Democratic Society Party (DTP) in 2009, accused of having links to the illegal Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK).

In Turkey, municipalities serve as an important steppingstone for bourgeois politicians in terms of enrichment and political career advancement. Erdoğan's political career took off with his position as mayor of Istanbul. However, the aim of the ?mamo?lu case is not to "fight corruption." In this investigation, alongside normal municipal activities, the tender and rent seeking processes found in every municipality are being selectively evaluated and combined with fabricated allegations.

Thus, while the results of elections in which millions of people participated are being discredited, the change in CHP leadership during the congress process, running for president, and conducting normal election campaigns are being portrayed as crimes. ?mamo?lu's imprisonment and designation as the leader of a "criminal organization" essentially stems from his status as Erdoğan's main political rival.

The Erdoğan government's construction of a presidential dictatorship has gained momentum amid the genocide in Gaza, attacks by US and Israel targeting Iran and its allies in the Middle East, NATO's war against Russia in Ukraine, and the implementation of a harsh austerity program against the working class at home.

This judicial operation, while directly targeting the CHP and ?mamo?lu, is fueled by the same processes driving ruling classes globally toward authoritarianism and the far-right. As ruling elites around the world, particularly in imperialist centers, seek an escape from the deepening economic, social, and political crisis of the capitalist system, they are turning to war both abroad and at home. Amid massive social inequality and discontent, they require dictatorship to implement militarist and austerity programs to protect their power and wealth.

This process has accelerated even further with Trump, who returned to the White House in the US and is attempted to establish a presidential dictatorship. ?mamo?lu's arrest took place three days after Trump and Erdoğan's phone call on March 16.

In the weeks before the indictment was finalized, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz and British Prime Minister Keir Starmer visited Erdoğan. Their agenda did not focus on the escalation of attacks on democratic rights in Turkey, but rather on increasing military cooperation with Erdoğan.

The open or tacit approval of these imperialist powers for the increasing pressure exerted by Erdoğan on the CHP, a pro-NATO party, is closely linked to their growing cooperation with Turkey in the Middle East. This includes Ankara's complicity in the Gaza "peace" agreement. However, it is not only Trump but also the major European powers who are pursuing the establishment of dictatorial regimes similar to that in Turkey against the working class

in their own countries.

The CHP's response to the support given to Erdoğan by major NATO leaders consists of complaining and trying to prove that it would be a better ally than the AKP. A recent report submitted by the CHP to NATO was fully in line with the US's anti-China, anti-Russia, and anti-Iran stance and backed Washington's "new Middle East" project.

As a pro-imperialist party defending the interests of the same ruling class behind the construction of the dictatorial regime, the CHP is inherently incapable of defending democratic rights. The Erdoğan government's reckless escalation of attacks on democratic rights has been facilitated by the CHP's efforts to end the mass movement that erupted in March and reach a compromise with the government. Like Erdoğan, the CHP fears the eruption of an independent working-class movement that could threaten the rotten social and political system.

On the other hand, the judicial operation against the CHP and the increasing attacks on democratic rights expose the falseness of the claim that negotiations between the government and the PKK will bring "peace and democracy." It reveals the role of pseudo-left parties that participated in the parliamentary commission established to make these claims acceptable to the public or that supported these negotiations.

The mass protests demonstrated the existence of a broad opposition among workers and youth seeking to defend democratic rights and oppose social inequality. However, to move this opposition forward, the following fundamental lessons must be learned: To defend democratic rights a political break with the CHP and other establishment parties is essential and the only social force capable of ending the bourgeoisie's dictatorship is the international working class. The working class must build its own revolutionary party to secure its political independence.

Everyone who shares this perspective should join the Socialist Equality Party, the Turkish section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), and its student and youth movement, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE).



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