

# Turkish comedian Deniz Gökta? detained at Istanbul airport over political satire

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2 July 2026

Turkish stand-up comedian Deniz Gökta? was detained at passport control at an Istanbul airport on Thursday while returning to Türkiye from abroad. Since June 24, Gökta? had been targeted by pro-government media and right-wing circles, with open calls for his arrest over his widely acclaimed political comedy special “Ölü Deniz” (Dead Sea). His detention marks a dangerous escalation of attacks on art and freedom of expression in Türkiye.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Sosyalist E?itlik Partisi - Dördüncü Enternasyonal (Socialist Equality Party - Fourth International) demand the immediate release of Deniz Gökta?, the dropping of the investigation against him and a halt to all attacks on art and freedom of expression.

The Istanbul Chief Public Prosecutor’s Office had launched an investigation into Gökta? on the baseless charge of “publicly denigrating the religious values embraced by a section of the population” over jokes in the show, which was staged on June 1 at the Harbiye Cemil Topuzlu Open-Air Theatre and released on YouTube on June 24. The prosecutor’s office publicly announced the investigation, describing Gökta? as a “suspect” in whose social media content “elements of a crime” had been identified. Earlier, posts on X containing excerpts from the show had been blocked by court order on the grounds of “protecting national security and public order.” In a statement before his detention, Gökta? said that “no official information” had reached him and that he had no plans to live outside Türkiye.

The roughly 90-minute show was viewed more than 1 million times within 24 hours of its release and had surpassed 8.5 million views as of July 2. Notably, Gökta? made the show freely available to everyone on YouTube rather than on a paid digital platform, with monetization turned off and no ads. Reaching millions of workers and young people, the show became “dangerous” in the eyes of the ruling elite. At the same time, this immense public interest was itself a mass response to the attempt to suppress Gökta?.

“Ölü Deniz” is a satire directed not at individuals but at the political and media establishment as a whole. Gökta?’s subjects included the 32-year political career of President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an; the revocation of the university diploma of Ekrem ?mamo?lu, the jailed Istanbul metropolitan mayor from the Kemalist Republican People’s Party (CHP); the police raid on the CHP’s headquarters following a court’s “absolute nullity” ruling against the party; the mass protests that erupted against ?mamo?lu’s arrest; the ensuing widespread arrests; and mainstream media figures. While directing his sharpest political barbs at Erdo?an’s Justice and Development Party (AKP), in power since 2002, he did not spare the CHP, and he also satirized Turkish nationalism and its contradictions on the Kurdish question.

One of the most striking features of the show was that censorship is itself its subject. Gökta? recounts that the legal opinion he received from lawyers on “Selam Selam,” his first show, was: “Never release it.” On stage, he satirizes a nightmare in which he sees himself on the gallows, and the ranks of the “intellectuals” in his family—the intellectual in exile, the intellectual in prison, the dead intellectual. He is fully aware of the historical price of being a dissident artist in Turkey.

In the show, Gökta? also refers to Erdo?an being jailed in 1998 for reciting a poem. The state apparatus now headed by a politician once imprisoned over a poem is prosecuting a comedian over a joke.

The part that has been used as a pretext for the investigation and access restrictions is Gökta?’s jokes about the Islamic “holy books.” The comedian makes jokes about the translation of the Quran—the “fourth book”—and its claim to be the “final book” at a very early stage in 7th century. The prosecution considers these remarks to be “elements of a crime.”

Although the official pretext for the investigation is “religious values,” the real target is clearly the political content, which gives voice to—and at the same time encourages—the anti-government sentiments of broad layers of the population through powerful humor. The “national security” invoked to justify the access bans betrays the state’s real concern. What is meant is the security not of the people, but of the ruling class and the government.

The persecution of Gökta? has been accompanied by a coordinated smear campaign in the pro-government media. While the daily *Sabah* and similar outlets insistently referred to Gökta? as a “so-called comedian,” former AKP deputy ?amil Tayyar openly targeted him. After the show’s release, rumors spread that he had “fled abroad.” Gökta? responded that he had gone on a previously planned holiday and would “be in the country for many years to come”—and, true to his word, he was detained at the airport the moment he returned. That it is now a matter of debate whether an artist can remain in his own country for telling jokes is itself a measure of the level of political repression.

On Wednesday, the threats against Gökta?—who denigrated no “religious values” but whose political criticism caused discomfort—escalated into open threats of physical violence. Mustafa Destici, chairman of the fascist Great Unity Party (BBP), a partner in the ruling People’s Alliance led by Erdo?an, directly threatened Gökta? at his weekly press conference on July 1, stating: “If you raise your tongue against my holy book, we will rip that tongue out... Everyone will know their limits and where the line is.”

This open threat to “rip out” a tongue over a comedy show is rooted in the BBP’s political lineage. The party was founded in 1993 by

Muhsin Yaz?c?o?lu, who split from the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and had been a leading figure of the Grey Wolves (Ülkü Ocaklar?) in the 1970s. Its roots lie in the fascist Grey Wolves movement that carried out the very massacres Gökta? recalled in his show: the 1978 Bahçelievler massacre, in which seven students belonging to the Workers Party of Türkiye (T?P) were murdered, and the Mara? massacre, in which more than 100 Alevi and leftists were slaughtered.

Gökta? was born in 1994 in Mamak, a working class district of Ankara, as the child of what he describes as a communist and Alevi family of a worker and a civil servant. He studied psychology at Middle East Technical University (ODTÜ) after switching from engineering, and he first took the stage in 2019 at an open-mic night organized by the TuzBiber Comedy Club.

He became known for his columns in the satirical journal *Uykusuz*, his podcasts, which reached wide audiences during the pandemic, and “Selam Selam,” which he likewise released for free on YouTube in 2023. His storytelling—built on long narratives, observations of everyday life and unexpected connections rather than rapid-fire punchlines—has made him the voice of a generation of young people who grew up amid economic crisis, political repression, an uncertain future and wars. The targeting of Gökta? reflects the fear that this generation might recognize its own experiences on stage through humor, and that millions might not just laugh it off.

On stage, Gökta? also addressed class divisions directly through his own experiences. Describing a vacation home he rented for his family after becoming famous as “a museum of the life we couldn’t live,” he explained that moving up the social ladder is possible not through a single show but only over generations, and he remarked that he observes the people at close quarters—and that things are bad.

The investigation into Gökta? is not an isolated incident. Numerous elected CHP mayors have been jailed, from the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality to the Adalar Municipality. The CHP’s elected leadership has been removed and its headquarters raided by police. An emerging workers’ movement faces growing repression, while journalists and social media users face prosecution. Ahead of the NATO summit to be held in Ankara on July 7–8, large numbers of NATO opponents have been arrested, and bans on demonstrations and assemblies—amounting to a de facto state of emergency, above all in the capital—have been imposed. All of this expresses the response of Erdo?an, backed by the dominant sections of the Turkish ruling class and by NATO, to the escalation of imperialist war from Ukraine to the Middle East and to the growth of the class struggle amid mounting social inequality. That response is the drive to consolidate a dictatorship.

The ruling class cannot tolerate even humor, because it fears the growing opposition of the working class and youth. This atmosphere of political repression is not unique to Türkiye. It is increasingly being normalized from the United States to Europe and throughout the world.

History shows that attacks on satire are always bound up with broader attacks on the working class and democratic rights. In Türkiye, *Markopa?a*, the weekly political satire magazine published by Sabahattin Ali, Aziz Nesin and R?fat Ilgaz, was repeatedly shut down in the late 1940s during the CHP era, and its writers were prosecuted again and again; Sabahattin Ali was murdered at the border in 1948.

Exactly 33 years ago, on July 2, 1993, Aziz Nesin narrowly survived the massacre at the Mad?mak Hotel in Sivas, in which 33 intellectuals

and artists and two hotel workers were killed in a violent attack incited by religious reaction while the state stood by. The charge of “denigrating religious values” leveled at Gökta? today is the legal cloak of the same reactionary tradition.

This is also an international tradition that the bourgeoisie has inherited from the ruling elites that preceded it: no sooner had the Nazi regime come to power than it shut down the cabaret stages and sent satirists to concentration camps; the McCarthyite witch-hunt drove Charlie Chaplin into exile from the United States, while the comedian Lenny Bruce was targeted with “obscenity” trials. When humor is put on trial, basic democratic rights—freedom of expression, freedom of the press, the right to strike and to organize—are either next in line or already under attack.

Özgür Özel, the CHP’s elected chairman, responded to the investigation by saying that he had watched the show, and he stressed the need for freedom of expression. But the limits of Özel’s response—and his inability to defend democratic rights consistently—are determined by the very history and class character of his party.

The parallels between the Erdo?an government’s political censorship and mounting repression and the CHP’s one-party regime of 1923–1946 are undeniable. Moreover, that Özel’s conception of “democracy” differs little from Erdo?an’s is laid bare by his appeals to the NATO powers—first in *Newsweek* and now in the *Financial Times*—and his warning of a social explosion. Despite the anti-democratic crackdown the CHP is facing, Erdo?an and Özel are representatives of the same ruling class.

No faction of the ruling class—firmly tied to imperialism, and prepared to eliminate, indeed actively promoting the elimination of, civil liberties in order to protect its wealth and power—can defend democracy. This task falls to the masses of workers and young people who have so widely embraced Gökta?’s show.

Workers and young people must demand Gökta?’s immediate release, the dropping of the investigation against him, the lifting of all access bans and an end to the campaign targeting the artist. This is a matter of fundamental democratic principle: art is subject to the judgment of audiences, not of prosecutors.

The silencing of a comedian and the destruction of democratic rights spring from the same capitalist system as the growing repression of striking workers and opponents of war. That is why the defense of freedom of expression and art is inseparable from the mobilization of the working class on the basis of an international socialist program against war, dictatorship and social inequality.

The Sosyalist E?itlik Partisi calls on all workers and young people who oppose the persecution of Deniz Gökta? to join this struggle.



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