Prison sentences for mayors in politically motivated trial in Türkiye

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25 August 2026

On Monday, August 24 the Istanbul 1st High Criminal Court announced its verdict in the trial known publicly as the “Aziz ?hsan Akta? criminal organization case,” in which 200 defendants stood accused. The 60-page summary ruling, delivered after seven months of proceedings, made clear that this was not a legal case but a political one.

The court acquitted all defendants of the charges of forming a criminal organization, membership in one, and aiding it. Akta?, the construction contractor whom the prosecution had presented as the “leader of the criminal organization”, demanding up to 280 years in prison as a sentence, was acquitted of “forming an organization for the purpose of committing crimes.” On the bribery charge, he was granted the benefit of the “effective remorse” provisions, under which a defendant who incriminates others may have his own punishment reduced or lifted altogether.

The sentence of two years, eight months and 15 days handed down for rigging public tenders was suspended under the procedure known as the deferral of the announcement of the verdict. The court further ordered that the 23 companies of Akta? placed under state trusteeship, together with his seized assets, be returned to him.

While Akta? emerged from the trial unscathed, sentences rained down on mayors elected from the Kemalist Republican People’s Party (CHP) based on his “confessions” and his statement, “I paid bribes”, that formed the foundation of the case. The mayors on trial had been elected in the local elections of March 31, 2024, in which the CHP won the largest share of the vote nationwide.

R?za Akpolat, the mayor of Be?ikta?, who was suspended from office following his arrest, received a total of 23 years and three months in prison for rigging public tenders, bribery and money laundering. His wife, Ye?im Akpolat, was sentenced to four years and two months for “laundering assets derived from crime,” and three of her houses and her car were confiscated.

On charges of accepting bribes, Seyhan Mayor Oya Tekin and her husband Celal Tekin were each sentenced to eight years and four months; Avc?lar Mayor Utku Caner Çaykara to six years and eight months; Adana Metropolitan Mayor Zeydan Karalar to six years and three months; and Ceyhan Mayor Kadir Aydar to five years and 10 months. Each was additionally banned from holding public office.

Ad?yaman Mayor Abdurrahman Tutdere was acquitted, while Esenyurt Mayor Ahmet Özer was given eight months and 10 days for “misconduct in office through negligence.”

The court, in other words, ruled that no criminal organization had existed at all. The assessments of the defense lawyers point to how weak the ruling is in legal terms. They described as a flagrant violation of the principle of equality the fact that a case of this scope was concluded so rapidly without a single technical expert examination; that the party alleged to have paid the bribes went unpunished while those alleged to have received them were convicted; and that Akta?, for whom hundreds of years of imprisonment had been demanded, was tried at liberty while mayors facing far shorter sentences were held in prison.

Murat Emir, parliamentary group deputy chair of the NEW Party—founded under the leadership of Özgür Özel after the elected leadership of the CHP was removed by a politically motivated court ruling—called the case a “judicial murder” and added: “The person for whom 280 years in prison was demanded, and who forms the very foundation of this case, received only two years and eight months. Why? Because this man did not turn confessor; he carried out the political order placed before him and became a slanderer!”

Emir asked: “Did this man tell what he knew, or did he buy back his fortune and his freedom in return for striking the political targets set before him?”

Akta? is an example of the tender bourgeoisie that has emerged over the past two decades—the layer of contractors enriched through public procurement. Reported to have run school canteens in Diyarbak?r that he obtained through tenders before 2010, he went on to build a network of companies spanning vehicle rental, cleaning services, construction and fuel transport.

The principal source of his wealth and his rise, however, was not the contracts he obtained from CHP-run municipalities. According to reporting by Bahad?r Özgür, a columnist for Halk TV, roughly 60 percent of the tenders won by the company treated in the investigation as the “center of the gang” came from state institutions.

These companies also secured contracts from municipalities

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run by Erdo?an's Justice and Development Party (AKP)—in Isparta, Kütahya, ?anl?urfa, Elaz??, and the Istanbul districts of Zeytinburnu and Bahçelievler—and even from the state-appointed trustee administration installed in Diyarbak?r. In 2019, it was documented that Akta? had presented the Isparta municipality with a luxury official car in return for a tender he had been awarded.

None of these relationships became the subject of investigation. For the prosecution, Akta? turned into a "criminal organization leader" only when he crossed into the territory of CHP-run municipalities.

The sweeping operations against the CHP began with the appointment of Ak?n Gürlek to the post of Istanbul Chief Public Prosecutor in October 2024—roughly six months after the local elections in which the CHP came first. Gürlek was appointed justice minister in February of this year.

On October 30, 2024, the CHP mayor of Esenyurt, Özer, was arrested on the allegation of "membership in a [terror] organization" and removed from office, and a trustee was installed at the municipality. On January 13, 2025, the first operation in the "Akta? investigation" was carried out and the mayor of Be?ikta?, Akpolat, was arrested.

The decisive turning point came in the spring of 2025, when Akta? began giving statements under the "effective remorse" provisions. In May 2025, based on these statements, Avc?lar Mayor Çaykara, Ceyhan Mayor Aydar, Seyhan Mayor Tekin and various municipal officials were detained. In July 2025, Adana Metropolitan Mayor Karalar and Ad?yaman Mayor Tutdere were detained. The prosecution completed its 579-page indictment on October 20, 2025.

In the same period, Ekrem ?mamo?lu, mayor of the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, who was leading Erdo?an in presidential polls and widely identified as the principal target, was detained on March 19, 2025 and subsequently jailed. The Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality trial, with 402 defendants, opened in March 2026, with prosecutors demanding up to 2,352 years in prison for ?mamo?lu.

Over the past two years, 31 CHP mayors—seven of provinces and 26 of districts—have been arrested, while numerous mayors have defected to the AKP under the threat of arrest. The charges against several of the mayors who crossed over in this way were subsequently dropped. The direct political aim of these judicial operations was to neutralize the CHP and its presidential candidate.

Another indication of the politically motivated character of the case is the position of Esenyurt Mayor Özer. He was elected in 2024 within the framework of the alliance between the CHP and the Kurdish nationalist Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (DEM Party). The stated grounds for his arrest were not "corruption" but "membership in a terrorist organization."

The negotiations that opened between Ankara and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), however, removed the political basis of that charge. Judicial operations that had previously been directed above all against the Kurdish movement were turned against the CHP, and the investigations shifted their focus to allegations of corruption.

One of the clearest pieces of evidence that these operations are not independent of the government—and that their real motive is not "the fight against corruption"—lies in who has faced such allegations and who has not. Throughout this period, there has been no wave of operations directed against AKP-run municipalities.

According to figures from the Interior Ministry cited by DEM Party Co-Chair Tuncer Bak?rhan at the beginning of April, of the 1,048 municipalities placed under investigation since March 31, 2024, 472 were run by the AKP, 217 by the CHP, 78 by the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and only 16 by the DEM Party. Yet the appointment of trustees and the removal of mayors from office were applied solely to municipalities run by the DEM Party and the CHP. After February 2025, when Abdullah Öcalan issued his call for the PKK to lay down its arms, the pressure on the DEM Party ceased.

Workers and young people must oppose the use of the judiciary as a weapon to suppress and neutralize political opposition. At stake are fundamental rights, including the right to vote, to stand for election and the right to a fair trial.

The CHP, and now the NEW Party as well, have made clear, however, that they will not defend these rights consistently, according to their class nature.

They supported the government's "framework law," introduced to "strengthen the internal front" and to weld together the reactionary interests of the Turkish and Kurdish ruling elites amid the intensifying war and struggle for a redivision of the Middle East. In articles written for the American and European press, Özel appealed to his imperialist allies to rein in Erdo?an and to support him to head off a social explosion in Türkiye.

The working class can defend democratic rights only by establishing its political independence from all the capitalist parties and by opposing them. This struggle must be based on an international socialist program that unites the fight for democratic and social rights with the fight against war.

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