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Turkey

Turkey in 2019: an assessment

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In a snap election on June 24, 2018, Turkish President Tayyip Recep Erdoğan received more than 52% of the vote for president. The rightwing “People’s Alliance” that brought together Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) obtained over 53% of the vote, giving the coalition a solid majority in parliament.

In Erdoğan's view, the election was an endorsement of his decade-plus rule (he was prime minister between 2003 and 2014); and the ushering in of a new executive system greatly enhancing his powers as president. After the election he triumphantly declared Turkish democracy was “an example for the world.”

Although Erdoğan and his party had overwhelming, and highly undemocratic, advantages during the campaign, a sense of optimism in the leadup to the election had grown in some opposition circles. Many believed there would be a second round in the presidential election (which would have been profoundly damaging to Erdoğan's legitimacy), while the AKP's majority in government seemed to be in jeopardy.

A new term for Erdoğan, together with a parliamentary majority and vastly expanded executive powers (approved by a disputed referendum in 2017 during a state of emergency), is a disappointing “and frightening” reality in today's Turkey.

Some writers have pointed out, however, that despite his party's advantages over the political opposition in money and media exposure, to say nothing of the atmosphere of intimidation and fear in which the election was conducted, Erdoğan was unable to substantially increase his percentage of the vote over previous elections.

The AKP, moreover, lost seven percentage points from the last election, falling from 49.5% to 42.5% (although to everyone's surprise the ultranationalist MHP increased its share of the vote to over 11%, more than making up for AKP losses). The inability of Erdoğan and his regime to extend their dominance thus suggests the persistence of opposition and resistance in the face of severe repression.

Prior to the election, some analysts went so far as to suggest there is a new left in the making in Turkey. In particular, the Kurdish movement and the relative success of the pro-Kurdish and leftist People's Democracy Party (HDP) since its creation in 2012 has been a cause for optimism for some on the Turkish and international left.

The HDP's passing of the 10% threshold to enter parliament in the June election in a deeply oppressive environment, and the party's presidential candidate Selahattin Demirtaş's garnering of more than eight percent of the vote despite being imprisoned “and therefore silenced in the media and unable to campaign” further suggests there exists a base for radical social change in Turkey. [\[1\]](#)

Such a base could conceivably expand with worsening economic conditions, which reached crisis levels in the months after the election. The Turkish lira, whose value has steadily declined since 2015, plunged to new lows after the Trump administration's imposition of steel and aluminum tariffs two months after the election. [\[2\]](#)

Over the course of 2018 the lira lost a staggering 66% of its value. With no end to serious and deep-rooted economic problems in sight, it might be expected that popular support for the government could, and should, decline along with people's economic prospects.

Repression and Electoral Politics

Thus, there are two ways in which to view Turkish society from a socialist perspective in 2019. On the one hand, the election results of 2018 appear to further entrench the authoritarian AKP regime government while providing it with a veneer of democratic legitimacy, as Erdoğan and his rightist coalition continue to suppress dissent and supporters rally around the populist-conservative appeal of the Great Leader.

On the other, the inability of the conservative alliance to make deeper electoral inroads demonstrates the failure of the AKP's hegemonic project, and portends instead a possible progressive future. Which of these of these interpretations is more persuasive?

Perhaps more importantly, what does an accurate analysis of Turkish society today portend for the future of social justice and the left in the country?

The regime strategy was transparent. With unemployment and inflation rising, and the value of the Turkish lira daily reaching new lows, President Erdoğan moved elections scheduled for November of 2019 up to June 24, 2018 – a year and a half earlier than scheduled.

Although it justified the early election by claiming the country needed stability in a chaotic geopolitical context (mainly a reference to the civil war in Syria), the government was clearly scared and knew the situation not going to improve anytime soon.

Although the violent elimination of the nationwide Gezi Park protest movement in the summer of 2013 already revealed the AKP government's willingness to suppress opposition with brute force, a failed military coup in July of 2016 provided the pretext for the wholesale eradication of perceived enemies of the Turkish regime.

During a state of emergency lasting more than two years, approximately 107,000 public sector workers were sacked by emergency decree. The centrist opposition People's Republican Party (CHP) has claimed that at least 5,000 academics and more than 33,000 teachers have lost their jobs. [\[3\]](#)

The government's position is that this massive number of people have links to "terrorist organizations" – that they are either followers of Fetullah Gülen, a U.S.-based cleric and alleged mastermind of the coup; or they are members of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK); or even more implausibly, that they belong to both.

The mass firing of academics and the closure or state takeover of numerous media outlets added to the atmosphere of fear while substantially limiting the range of available views. Turkey led the world in the imprisonment of reporters in 2016 and 2017; it will in all likelihood have the same distinction for the foreseeable future. [\[4\]](#)

The sale of the popular mainstream newspaper Hürriyet to pro-Erdoğan Demiroren Holding in 2018 further cemented mass media support for the government. Although opposition newspapers like Cumhuriyet and Birgün continue to exist, they remain on the margins of public life while fear of government prosecution and closure is unceasing.

Television coverage prior to the election suggests the extent of pro-government bias in the mainstream media. According to the official broadcasting watchdog RTÜK, between May 14 and May 30 Turkish state television provided Erdoğan and the AKP with over 67 hours of coverage; the Kemalist CHP and its candidate Muharrem İnce received 12 hours. The new nationalist İyi Parti (the "Good Party," a splinter group from the MHP) got 12 minutes

while the HDP and Demirtaş received no airtime.

Privately-owned stations were no better. In the first three weeks of May, news channels CNN Türk and NTV between them gave 70 hours to Erdoğan, 22 hours to the CHP and ANCA, and 17 minutes to the İYİ Parti. [5]

The silencing of the HDP was not confined to a media blackout. Since the party's electoral breakthrough in the summer of 2015 approximately 10,000 party members, including mayors and city officials, have been arrested. Between the coup attempt in July 2016 and November of the same year 6,000 HDP members were detained and 2,000 were imprisoned.

Party co-leaders Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ were arrested with eight other party members for "making terrorist propaganda" or "being a member of a terrorist organization." Yüksekdağ received a 10-month prison sentence and was stripped of her party membership in 2017; in September of 2018 Demirtaş was sentenced to four years in prison. [6]

Finally, the election was conducted during a state of emergency – historically a frequent occurrence in Kurdish areas that went national after the coup attempt. Since the summer of 2015 curfews were declared at least 332 times in 11 provinces in at least 50 districts, affecting close to two million people and creating a permanent state of exception in much of the southeast. [7]

Although officially ended after the election in July, the new system implemented during the state of emergency allows presidential decrees and executive control over the judiciary. According to Amnesty International, there remains a "suffocating climate of fear" in Turkey despite a supposed return to normalcy. [8]

With all these advantages, the fact that the AKP was compelled to make an alliance with the MHP (members of whom were formerly highly critical of many AKP policies – particularly those recognizing the existence of Kurdish people) prior to the June election suggests the extent of the regime's fear of election losses.

The rightwing electoral alliance was made possible, in large part, by the breakdown of a peace process with the PKK in 2015, thus allowing the government to appeal to the ultranationalist MHP. That large numbers of former AKP supporters voted for the MHP while still voting for Erdoğan indicates that many Turkish conservatives, though unhappy with the economy and ruling party, were unwilling to abandon the Great Leader or vote for a secular-centrist CHP or liberal-leftist HDP.

Piety and nationalism run deep in Turkish culture, and as elsewhere ethno-nationalist groups in Turkey have fanned hostility to minorities, immigrants, and refugees. Appropriately symbolic of the times was that the first head of state to congratulate Erdoğan on his victory was Victor Orbán, the nationalist rightwing prime minister of Hungary.

A New Left?

Though worsening economic conditions and a spirited campaign by opposition parties failed to dent Erdoğan's electoral popularity, proponents of a new left in Turkey emphasize the bitter hostility of half the population to Erdoğan and his vision of a pious, obedient population. Crucial in this vision is the Kurdish movement and its supporters, particularly as manifested in the HDP.

Pro-Kurdish parties were first formed in Turkey after a 1980 military coup decimated the Turkish left. New social movements around Kurdish and women's rights developed in the 1980s and 1990s, while the Marxist-Leninist PKK attempted to achieve an independent Kurdish state in the region through guerilla warfare.

The government's war against the PKK destroyed thousands of villages and created an estimated two million refugees. The New Internationalist accused Turkey's prime minister, Tansu Çiller, of war crimes in 1994 for profiting from land dispossession and ties to the mafia. [9]

The Turkish state has portrayed all pro-Kurdish parties and groups as extensions of the PKK. Since 1990 the People's Labor Party (HEP), the Freedom and Democracy Party (ÖZDEP), the People's Democracy Party (HADEP), the Democratic People's Party (DEHAP), and the Democratic Society Party (DTP) were all closed by Turkey's Constitutional Court.

With the possibility of a political solution to the conflict in the south and east foreclosed, the continued existence of the PKK serves to fan Turkish ethno-nationalism while militarizing a large segment of society.

After its formation in the early 2000s, the AKP appealed ideologically to conservative Kurds while establishing clientelist relationships with Kurdish economic elites and Islamist groups. The superficiality of the party's ostensible commitment to democratic norms were revealed in 2009, when the DTP was closed.

A ceasefire and peace process between the state and PKK launched in 2012 broke down in 2015; shortly afterward the government began its crackdown on the HDP.

Founded in 2012 as the political wing of the Peoples' Democratic Congress, a coalition of leftwing groups, the HDP is an associate member of the Party of European Socialists and consultative member of the Socialist International.

Between 2013 and 2015 its supporters often likened the HDP to other parties of "radical democracy," specifically Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain.

In contrast to liberal-left populism (espoused by the political theorists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe), however, HDP ideology is primarily indebted to the American libertarian-socialist Murray Bookchin's ideas on municipalism and social ecology (and, to a lesser extent, the works of Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt).

The HDP describes itself as representing the forces of peace and democracy in Turkey, and is comprised of "representatives of labor, ecology and women's rights associations, artists, writers, intellectuals, independent individuals, workers, representatives of different ethnic and religious groups, the unemployed, the retired, farmers, the handicapped, scientists and those whose cities are being destroyed." Important also is the party's stated emphasis on grassroots organizing in streets, neighborhoods, and cities throughout the country.

While there is nothing objectionable in the HDP's progressive agenda, there are a number of problems in the party that might impede hope for radical change in Turkey. The fact that the party was established on the suggestion of imprisoned PKK founder Abdullah Öcalan is enough to forever damn it in the view of a substantial portion of the Turkish population, who see Öcalan and all who support him as advocates of terrorism.

As Cengiz Güneş has noted, electoral support for the HDP has come overwhelmingly from Kurds — only nine percent of the party's supporters identified as ethnically Turkish in 2015. [10] For large numbers of Turks influenced by anti-Kurdish Kemalist ideology as well as pro-government media, the HDP is, like previous pro-Kurdish parties,

nothing more than the political arm of a terrorist organization.

The party's commitment to "democratic autonomy," or "democratic confederalism," is inspired by the writings of Ã–calan whose main theoretical influence is now Bookchin. When he abandoned Marxist-Leninism after his arrest in Italy in 1998, Ã–calan also abandoned his vision of an independent Kurdish state, adopting over time a position calling for equal democratic rights for Kurds and political decentralization within Turkey.

But in a highly centralized country "where memories of nationalist movements attempting to undermine the integrity of the state predate the Turkish Republic (dating to the Ottoman Empire in the early 19th century)" any suggestion of federalism or local autonomy reeks of separatism.

Critics on the left have also pointed to the reformist nature of Ã–calan's ideological turn; some believe Ã–calan's ideas have conveniently shifted with the political winds. [11] While advocates of a new Turkish left like Güneş see the HDP's links to European parties as boding well for international solidarity, the desire to appeal to mainstream Western public opinion greatly restricts the party's ability to formulate a radical agenda.

Appeals to the European Court of Human Rights (of which Turkey is a signatory) may be an understandable legal tactic, but it is difficult to see how international solidarity can compensate for an absence of domestic mass support in the long term.

The state's efforts to simply destroy the party is yet another "and probably the most important" reason for caution. It is entirely possible that, as it has in the past, the Turkish state will simply shutter the party and justify its closure with an avalanche of anti-terror propaganda.

While the HDP, in contrast to other Kurdish parties, has made electoral inroads in northern and western parts of the country (especially in the large cities of Istanbul and Izmir), it seems unlikely that the party can expand its electoral base beyond 10-15% of the vote. The best-case scenario for the party in the foreseeable future, it seems, is for it to become a vocal oppositional voice within the government "if it can survive."

Challenges and Possibilities

A number of writers have noted how the AKP in the early 2000s sought to incorporate those previously excluded from the traditional Kemalist elite into its "hegemonic project." Importantly, the party copied traditional tactics of the Turkish left in neighborhood organizing strategies, while deploying a liberal rhetoric to demand women's freedom to wear headscarves and allowing religious expression in public life. Erdoğan's appeal as a "man of the people" solidified the party's power in the early 2000s. [12]

Yet during AKP rule violence against women has skyrocketed, union density has plummeted, and strikes have been repeatedly suppressed by the government.

The murder of women has increased 14-fold since 2002, while reports of domestic violence and archaic patriarchal practices like child brides and so-called honor killings (of gay men as well as women) have also grown dramatically.

As of 2016, Turkey ranked 130 out of 145 countries in terms of gender equality according to the World Economic Forum Gender Gap Report; it was 69 in the Gender Inequality Index Rank. [13]

The state of workers and the labor movement are particularly illustrative of the challenges as well as the possibilities for a resurgent left in Turkey. In addition to limiting press and individual freedoms, a post-coup constitution in 1982 banned strikes if deemed “prejudicial to public health or national security.” While the 1980s and 1990s witnessed the important emergence of new Kurdish and women’s rights organizations, the labor movement atrophied in a “capitalist free-for-all” environment. [14]

Since coming to power in 2002 the AKP government has repeatedly invoked the anti-strike law to disallow labor actions while accelerating privatizations and relaxing labor laws. In 2017 union density stood at 8.6%, down from close to 30% in 2001. Turkey now vies with Hungary for lowest union membership in the OECD, with the United States a close third. [15]

Worker accidents and deaths — most shockingly the killing of more than 300 coal miners from a mine explosion in 2014 — have increased dramatically, especially in the construction, agricultural, and mining industries. [16]

Yet evidence of labor militancy in recent years is abundant. In May, 2015 workers in the auto industry engaged in a series of wildcat strikes across the country. Workers defied management-friendly unions and occupied factories; negotiations were led by worker-run strike committees and union representatives were absent. [17] Their demands included higher wages, job security, and — significantly — recognition of worker representatives and the elimination of company unions in bargaining. [18]

Strike actions spread to 30,000 workers, forcing European auto companies to agree to workers’ demands. Yet struggles in the industry continue, and the state has unsurprisingly sided with capital.

In early 2018 the Erdoğan government banned a sector-wide strike scheduled for February 2. Although an agreement reached shortly after was hailed by union representatives as a victory, wage increases lag far behind inflation and some sections of metalworkers rejected the agreement.

While strikes and labor protests continue in a number of industries, the state’s willingness to resort to blunt force to stop worker protests also persists. In September of 2018, workers at a massive new airport in Istanbul stopped work in protest over miserable working conditions and occupational fatalities.

Gendarmerie teams attacked strikers with pepper spray and over 400 workers were taken into custody. Arrested on a number of bogus charges, a message from those apprehended appearing on the website of the İTİB (Construction Workers Union) stated the “real culprits are the bosses at the IGA,” and “Construction workers are not slaves!” [19]

The Need for Unity

While class conflict is clearly not absent, a cultural and political movement vehicle with the capability of uniting disparate organizations and groups does not exist at present. In Turkey as elsewhere, rightwing demagoguery is currently more potent than leftwing formations.

A distinguishing feature of Turkey is, of course, a level of state repression that makes resistance extremely dangerous. Erdoğan and MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli have, for example, both warned of the “heavy price” Turkish activists who find inspiration in the French Yellow Vest movement would pay.

The fact that Erdoğan and Bahçeli feel compelled to preempt anti-government demonstrations is itself suggestive of their fears of popular opposition. However, while the roots of resistance exist, discussions of a “new left” are premature.

The joining of labor militancy with mass demands for an end to violence against women and for Kurdish rights may seem today like a utopian dream. It is, however, more realistic than a hope that elections or street demonstrations can in themselves radically alter the balance of power.

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[1] Though published before the most recent election, see Cengiz Güne?, “Turkey’s New Left,” *New Left Review* 107 (September/October 2017): 9-30; and Justus Links, “Religion, class, and Turkey’s new left,” *openDemocracy*, July 13, 2015

[2] Trump’s tariffs were mainly an attempt to appeal to Republicans’ evangelical base, which at the time was closely following Turkey’s imprisonment of a pastor, Andrew Brunson, who was suspected of involvement in the 2016 coup attempt.

[3] Chris Morris, “Reality Check: The numbers behind the crackdown in Turkey,” *BBC*, June 18, 2018.

[4] Committee to Protect Journalists, <https://cpj.org/europe/turkey/>.

[5] “Q & A: Turkey’s Elections,” *Human Rights Watch*, June 7, 2018.

[6] “Turkey: 6000 HDP members detained, 2000 arrested since July,” *Green Left Weekly*, November 11, 2016.

[7] “Curfew declared 332 times in 3 years,” *Bianet*, October 3, 2018

[8] Kareem Shaheen, “‘Suffocating climate of fear’ in Turkey despite end of state of emergency,” *Guardian*, July 19, 2018.

[9] Ivy Anderson, “The Mafia and Mrs. Ciller,” *New Internationalist*, no. 256 (June 1994). See also “Kurdish–Turkish conflict (1978–present),” *Wikipedia*.

[10] Güne?, “Turkey’s New Left.”

[11] Alex de Jong, “A Commune in Rojava?” *New Politics*, vol. xv-4, 60 (Winter 2016).

[12] Cihan Tu?al, *Passive Revolution: Absorbing the Islamic Challenge to Capitalism* (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 2009); Ismet Akça, Ahmed Bekman, Bar? Alp Ã–zden, eds., *Turkey Reframed: Constituting Neoliberal Hegemony* (London: Pluto Press, 2014).

[13] Daniel Johnson, “Women and the Nation,” *Jacobin*, November 1, 2017.

[14] Erik J. Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History*, 3rd ed. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 286.

[15] OECD.Stat, <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=TUD>.

[16] Daniel Johnson, "Workers in the New Turkey," Jacobin, April 2015.

[17] "Wildcat strikes spread across auto industry in Turkey," Free Speech Radio News, May 26, 2015.

[18] "IndustriALL backs metalworkers' struggle in Turkey," May 28, 2015

[19] "Arrested Airport Workers: Real Culprits are Bosses Condemning Us to Inhumane Conditions," Bianet, September 24, 2018.