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Turkey

‘Well dug, old mole!': Mass resistance in Turkey

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Erdogan's attempt to eliminate his likely rival in the upcoming presidential elections by arbitrarily placing him under detention has sparked mobilizations of rare magnitude. Faced with what could be a major turning point in the construction of Erdogan's neo-fascist autocratic regime, millions of citizens, including a newly radicalized generation of youth, have taken to the streets once again.

The arrest of an elected representative is, of course, nothing new in Turkey. In recent years, in the majority of Kurdish municipalities in the south-east of the country, the pro-Kurdish party has won elections with a large majority (50-80% of the vote). But the state systematically accuses their elected representatives of supporting terrorism and imprisoned them, replacing the elected mayors with administrators appointed by the government. Similarly, dozens of MPs from the pro-Kurdish DEM Party (formerly HDP), as well as one MP from the TIP/Workers' Party of Turkey (where our comrades from the Fourth International are active) are still behind bars.

Now, the same scenario is repeating itself in the country's largest city, Istanbul. The state is seeking to gradually stifle the CHP, even though it is a very moderate opposition party.

Radicalization of youth

The new element in these mobilizations is the participation of university and high school students. After years of depoliticization and repression, particularly in the universities, such a mobilization was unexpected. But the old mole had continued to dig, very deeply. The commodification of education – the opening of hundreds of private universities, rendering degrees obsolete – combined with a disastrous economic crisis, has meant that young people no longer have any hope for the future. It was therefore largely this discontent that encouraged such a mobilization of young people, bringing along the CHP, which was aiming for a more legal or symbolic opposition, and paved the way for wider demonstrations.

Although the scale of the protests was not enough to prevent the arrest of Istanbul mayor Ekrem Imamoglu, the fact that the regime has – for now – backed down, particularly on the issue of appointing an administrator (kayyum) to head the municipality, is an important victory. After the Ramadan holidays, the student movement seems to have resumed, with demands for the release of several hundred young people who are still in prison awaiting trial.

Political heterogeneity

The Gezi Park uprising in 2013, which was also a mass resistance movement against the Erdogan regime, seems to be an important reference point for today's protests. However, one important difference is that the revolutionary left, despite all the political diversity present in Gezi, managed to establish its hegemony there. This is no longer the case today, after years of repression of the left. The figure of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founder of the Turkish Republic, is obviously very present as a symbol – mythical, of course – of the aspiration for a return to a secular and democratic republic. But beyond that, we are seeing the development of ultra-nationalist currents that favour a secular nationalism (unrelated to the Ottoman Islamic-Turkish imaginary) but also an ethnic, racist and sexist nationalism.

Fortunately, these currents are not dominant, but they do exist and are growing among young people. Our goal must therefore be to introduce left-wing values into this movement to prevent it from drifting towards extreme nationalism, sexism or racism. This is particularly important in the current context, where the Erdogan regime is negotiating with the imprisoned leader of the Kurdish movement, Abdullah Öcalan, with the aim of dissolving the PKK and creating a ‘Turkey without terrorism’, in the words of the regime. The Kurdish movement is therefore seen by ultra-nationalist sectors as an ally of Erdogan, which further reinforces the ethnic nationalism of these factions.

A double boycott

Although the nine-day Ramadan holiday brought the protests to a halt (with a final mass rally attended by two million people), a double boycott took over. On the one hand, there is a permanent boycott of around 20 brands openly affiliated with the regime, initiated by the CHP. On the other, there is a weekly boycott initiated by students on Wednesdays, inspired by the Serbian example, where all consumption is boycotted but which also allows for the creation of an atmosphere of solidarity and sharing, notably with ‘boycott cafés’ (on the initiative of the TIP), where everyone brings and distributes their own drinks. Both boycotts were widely followed in the first few weeks, and several well-known figures and actors were taken into custody for calling for the boycott, which the regime considered ‘economic sabotage.’

It should also be noted that the trade unions have played virtually no role in the protest movement that is building in response to Imamoglu's arrest. Of course, the idea of a general strike has been widely discussed (as has the slogan ‘General strike, general resistance’). But for the moment, it is difficult to say that the working class identifies with this movement. A significant section is still receptive to Erdogan's propaganda. Left-wing trade union confederations such as DISK and KESK have called for symbolic work stoppages. However, very little effort has been made to explain that the democratic question and the social question are closely linked. This is also one of the most important tasks facing the radical left in order to steer this extraordinary protest movement towards a revolutionary break.

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Translated by **International Viewpoint**.

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