

Growing crackdown on Turkey's left-wing opposition

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While the discontent of relevant sections of the Turkish population with current government policies is growing, Turkish government has escalated its campaign of repression against the left-wing opposition party HDP. At this point, the reaction of moderate Turkish civil society actors will be crucial.

The backdrop against which Turkey's General Prosecutor announced his request to outlaw the HDP (*People's Democratic Party*) offered yet more proof that this was not a legitimate move but a politically motivated attack on an unwelcome left-wing opposition party ordered by government leaders. In recent weeks, the far-right MHP (*Nationalist Movement Party*), the de facto coalition partners of Erdoğan's governing AKP (*Justice and Development Party*), has been running a smear campaign against the HDP, with the party's parliamentary members coming under particularly sharp attack. Absurd and completely fabricated accusations alleging that HDP politicians were terrorists or supported terrorist activities were circulated by pro-government media. A request was then submitted to strip 20 HDP parliamentarians of their immunity so that they could be detained. Meanwhile, the MHP suggested that this did not go far enough, instead calling for an outright ban of the HDP. The prosecutor's subsequent request to ban the party echoed many of the arguments of the smear campaign, accusing the HDP not only of terrorism and aiding terrorist activities, but of showing inadequate support for Turkey's national interests, a slightly cryptic way of saying the HDP criticises and rejects the policies pursued by the ruling AKP-MHP alliance.

These renewed attacks on the HDP are the culmination of a years-long crackdown on the left-wing opposition party. Ever since the June 2015 parliamentary elections, in which the HDP received 13 per cent of the vote and the AKP lost its majority in the Turkish parliament, the left-wing opponents have increasingly found themselves the target of state repression. In the years since, the Turkish government has used various methods to undermine and marginalise the HDP. One such approach has been allowing the resumption of fighting in Turkey's Kurdish areas, with the aim of limiting the scope for a peaceful, democratic opposition. Increasingly nationalist rhetoric is also frequently being used to unite government and opposition parties in a single bloc against the HDP. In 2016, for instance, the immunity of twelve HDP members of parliament, including the party's joint leaders Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ, was removed with the help of votes from the opposition CHP (*Republican People's Party*). This decision paved the way for the subsequent arrest of twelve HDP members of parliament; Demirtaş, Yüksekdağ and five other former HDP parliamentarians still remain behind bars. A collective nationalist front – involving all parties except the HDP – also took shape as the parliament voted on Turkey's military interventions in Rojava/northern Syria and Kurdistan/northern Iraq. According to a report by the HDP released in December 2020, 16,490 HDP members, including party leaders, members of parliament, district chairs and rank-and-file party members, have been arrested since the June 2015 election.

In addition to mass detentions that target the party as a whole, other forms of repression are being used that focus on undermining the HDP's local structures. In recent years, for instance, a growing

number of HDP co-mayors have been dismissed and replaced by Ankara-appointed provincial and district governor 'trustees'. This has taken place in 48 of the 65 municipalities that the left-wing party won in recent local elections and that have HDP mayors. A total of 72 co-mayors were arrested and 39 were detained. In addition to this illegitimate move to force out democratically elected mayors, government trustees have also shelved countless measures and projects initiated under the watch of HDP mayors, for instance schemes to combat gender-based violence and to encourage the equal status of Turkey's many native languages (e.g. by installing multilingual street signs). As a result, women's centres in Sur, Özalp and Muradeyi and a helpline for victims of gender-based violence in Mardin were closed by government trustees.

Despite this severe repression, the Turkish government has so far failed to decisively weaken or even deliver a knockout blow to the HDP. Although the HDP's share of the vote has fallen slightly in recent elections compared to June 2015, the left-wing opposition party was able to hold its ground, especially in Turkey's Kurdish heartlands. Yet the government is renewing efforts to suppress the HDP's activities despite the country battling an ongoing economic crisis and the pandemic: on a single day in February 2021, a total of 718 HDP members and party supporters were arrested. Police raids and arrests happen almost daily. The situation will intensify further with the planned removal of the immunity of 20 HDP members of parliament, including the party's co-chair Pervin Buldan, thus allowing the parliamentarians' detention. There is a possibility that this is a prelude to an even more aggressive attack on the overall party, with the aim of effectively crushing the HDP.

The timing of this large-scale repression is no coincidence. It is impossible to overlook the fact that relevant sections of the Turkish population are unhappy with current government policies. There is plenty of cause for discontentment, whether it is the unresolved economic crisis, the government's handling of the pandemic or Erdoğan's authoritarian decision-making. Recent surveys show that the Turkish government's attempts to distract from its internal political struggles by pursuing an aggressive foreign policy have largely failed. One survey conducted by Turkish polling firm Metropoll shows that the governing AKP is currently on course to win 38.9 per cent of the vote (-3.7 percentage points in comparison to the 2018 parliamentary elections) and the MHP 7.7 per cent (-3.4 percentage points). This would mean the governing parties miss out on a majority. As for the opposition, the Kemalist CHP stands at 25.5 per cent (+2.9), while the right-wing IYI, a breakaway party from the MHP, would receive 11.3 per cent (+1.3); the left-wing HDP is currently on track to win 11 per cent of the vote (-0.7).

In such a scenario, the response of other opposition parties and Turkish civil society will be crucial. Until now, the Turkish government has always managed to win the opposition over by stoking Turkish nationalism and hostility towards politically active Kurds. Many more moderate civil society actors, such as trade unions, have also chosen not to oppose the government's attacks on the HDP, either out of fear of also falling victim to state repression or because they shun the HDP as a pro-Kurdish party. But as long as the Turkish government successfully continues to keep the HDP at the margins and isolated from other opposition forces, the opposition as a whole has no hope of succeeding.

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