

Left activism in Turkey

Thursday 28 March 2024, by [AYDIN Uraz](#), [KELLAWAY Dave](#) (Date first published: 17 March 2024).

Dave Kellaway was recently in Istanbul and was able to interview Uraz Aydin, member of the Central Committee of the Workers Party of Turkey (TIP) about the situation in Turkey following Erdogan's better than expected success in last year's presidential elections. Uraz was removed from his university post for political reasons by the Erdogan regime. We were also able to talk about the development of the TIP and the difficulties for the left organizing under an authoritarian regime.

Why does Erdogan keep winning? There have been problems with the economy, the earthquake exposed corruption both in the construction quality of houses and in the aid distribution and the restrictions on freedom of expression must surely be fuelling opposition to the regime?

Erdogan has been able to build his power base by exploiting the intense polarization in Turkish society. On the one hand we have a cultural and religious polarization and on the other a social, class polarization. After the foundation of the republic (Kemal Ataturk, 1923) which had a strong secular aspect, religious people were excluded from positions of power for a long time. Even though the conservative religious political currents survived, the dominant ideology in society was secular and urban and it excluded those forces. Outside the towns, in rural society and among poorer layers the story is different. That is why whenever there were elections the conservative, religious parties had a base among the peasantry and in rural areas. In the towns you had the intellectuals, the working class, the urban petty bourgeois and bourgeois classes.

These conservative religious parties were always there challenging the Kemalist republican party. That is also why there were military coup d'états so that this republican/bourgeois/military elite could maintain its power. However in 1994 in the local elections, including Istanbul, Erdogan's Islamist party emerged very strongly. Its profile was not just religious but also had a social programme. But the Islamist parties, even where they won votes and could get into government, were repressed by the military.

At a certain point, just after 2000, Erdogan understood that another sort of party was needed that would avoid immediately provoking the military to take action against it. He put forward proposals for Turkey to become a member of the European Union and he entered into dialogue with other political parties. Neo-liberalism was embraced and it tried to project itself as a modern Islamist party. So in 2002 he won power after centre parties had failed to deal with the economic crisis. He has been in power ever since – 22 years.

His first ten years was less authoritarian, and he tried to avoid any confrontation with the military. Remember this was also a period of economic growth internationally which ended in the 2008 crash. The crash came later in Turkey. There was a lot of money around that the bourgeoisie was happy

with and he was able to take certain measures to help working people and the poor. However Erdogan did not establish a real welfare state or social security system – it was more a system of hand-outs. After 2010 he had more difficulties with the military. So Erdogan constructed an electoral base on one side of the historic polarization among the religious minded, the poor and especially in rural areas. His party won many local councils and he used that as a transmission belt to hand out money and resources like charcoal to deprived layers of society. Also the party could use the distribution of local authority jobs to cement its support – people voting would know their jobs and hand-outs relied on re-electing Erdogan's party. Non-government organizations that were fronts for the government were also set up to distribute support.

Twenty years of this regime has meant other changes. Islam is no longer excluded from the public institutions – before it was forbidden for women students to wear scarves (hijabs) but now they are allowed and encouraged. Today there is increased poverty and deprivation but that in itself does not mean the masses will switch allegiance away from Erdogan.

So religious ideology can cancel or balance out other concerns. We thought with the earthquake and the opinion polls that Erdogan was in trouble last year with the elections. But it did not turn out as predicted.

We all thought the same. When we were arrested after protests after the earthquake, we even were told by the police agents that they thought Erdogan was a goner. Erdogan has become much more nationalist, more far right. Previously he had started an exchange with the Kurds about dealing with their demands. That process did not work and he made a turn to ultra-nationalism. He made an alliance with the “traditional” fascist party of Turkey, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP).

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Is there a possibility that in coming elections an even more extreme right wing current could replace Erdogan?

This is a possible trend. Erdogan's party is more of a movement than a party. There is no real internal debate – it is the court of Erdogan. Of course there are a lot of arrivistes or careerists who have flocked into the party of power. They have to submit to the Erdogan's will if they want to get on. It is a bit like the Stalinist system. The most sycophantic rise the highest. Corruption is key too – with Erdogan you have the green light for all sorts of speculation in property or other business. In return Erdogan gets a contribution from your profits. He has built up a section of the bourgeoisie that is dependent on him. There are no longer really any rules or regulations. Every decision is based on the current interests of Erdogan. This applies to foreign policy too. He flirts with Putin but he can speak in favour of NATO too. Erdogan puts himself forward as an intermediary between Ukraine and Russia. The transition to a multipolar imperialism and the relative decline of the USA in the Middle East increased the capacity of medium-sized powers such as Turkey to act more

autonomously. Erdoğan is using this new advantageous international situation to the fullest and is pursuing a more aggressive foreign policy.

The bourgeois opposition to Erdogan is very divided. Is there a possibility of a military coup down the road if there is a stalemate or vacuum of bourgeois leadership?

Nothing is certain but the military too have subordinated itself to Erdogan. We did have an attempted coup in 2016 orchestrated by another Islamist group that were his former allies. This group had worked at infiltrating itself into some positions within the state. It was a real coup – not something manipulated all along by Erdogan. But it is possible that he allowed it to develop a bit without intervening in order to gain more out of its failure.

Could we talk a bit about your party, the Turkish Workers Party (TIP) because even with the success of Erdogan in the 2023 election you managed to win 1.7% of the vote and to hold on to 4 MPs. If you looked at these results in the context of the performance of other radical left parties in Europe - for example there are no longer any left MPs in the Italian parliament - this is not so bad for a party that calls itself Marxist.

One of the MPs on our list, Can Atalay, is still in prison. We already had 4 MPs in the previous parliament and we had worked in coalition with the Kurdish parties which have a significant electoral and social base. The TIP has a very combative approach unlike the official left of centre opposition and attracted support from people who wanted to fight against Erdogan's AKP party. The party has grown very fast, when I joined two years ago it had 6000 members, today it has 43,000, in January 2023 we had 10,000, so we quadrupled our membership in a few months. There were three steps.

First, one of our MPs made a YouTube video where he was asked various questions by a hostile audience about the right, the left, the Kurds, on Marxism and he responded very effectively – that helped us win thousands of new members. We could hardly handle all this rush of applications to join.

Second, we had the earthquake and our comrades responded very quickly, the whole organization turned to the task of mobilizing citizens to support the people suffering in that region. TIP was able to mobilize a very effective mutual aid and solidarity organization in the face of the earthquake disaster. Hundreds of lorries were organized. People saw they could trust us as we helped organize vital supplies to the area. We were not seen as corrupt. Even some bourgeois organizations sent stuff through us.

Third, the mobilization around our election campaign drew even more people around us. However with the victory of Erdogan there was a general demoralization of the whole opposition and it has affected us too. We may still have 40,000 but realistically we have ten thousand or so activists at the moment. People have not necessarily left the party but they have become inactive and could be re-mobilized. What was interesting in our vote was that we did not only win votes where we expected among the urban, secular, educated parts of the population but we also have begun to win votes where the AKP is strong. We are talking about a few percent but this is something new for us. We are beginning to cut through with a line focused on working class interests rather than making a dividing line on a religious or cultural basis. The presidential elections were held at the same time as the parliamentary ones and we saw people splitting their votes between ourselves in the parliamentary elections and Erdogan for the president. So these people still saw Erdogan as the great father figure, the "Reis", but saw that we could be useful in defending their interests. This is new. On the left we have to overcome the rigidity of the polarization between secular, nationalist and religious identities. The current political polarization in Turkey is not class-based. As I

mentioned before, it is a polarization that has developed mainly on a cultural basis. TIP aims to transform this polarization with a new and essentially class-based political polarization.

Does the TIP see itself like the left populist currents such as Podemos or Syriza building mass left parties?

Not exactly since TIP came out of a split inside the Turkish Communist Party which was rather Stalinist and nationalist. The split was in part over the attitude to the Kurdish question. The people who split are also more open on feminism and LBGT+ issues too. Its guiding ideology is Marxist. Its publication is called *Communist*. But it was involved in the uprising around the Gezi park in 2013 when people stopped speculators taking over this public green space despite brutal state repression. The new party was impregnated by the diverse strands of the people involved in this campaign, particularly the youth.

Today it is however difficult to organize youth – it is very repressive in the secondary schools and university students cannot organize unions, they live at home because rents are so high and usually have to work to finance their studies. Student life as we knew it does not exist so much now. So it is rather people in their 30s that we are attracting.

Do you have an Iglesias (Podemos) type problem in the party where the main leader(s) with a big media profile can dominate and bypass the internal democracy of the party?

It is not really the same. Our MPs are very known because of their radical interventions at the parliament, and of course the leader (the “president”) of TIP, Erkan Baş is an important political figure. But we cannot say there is a domination of the leader, it is more a collective political leadership. We should not forget that unlike Podemos, TIP comes from a revolutionary tradition, from the Bolshevik tradition. So the structure of the party is based on committees (central, regional, local...). By the way the internal democracy, even in the Leninist-Trotskyist tradition was far from perfect. The internal democracy is a mechanism that you have to conquer, with internal debate of course, but also with concrete experiences.

I think it is important to build this party as it is currently the best instrument to carry forward the struggle for a socialist alternative in Turkey. Inside the party people know I come from a different political tradition to them but I have been able to take on some leadership roles - for example I am the secretary of the party in an important area of Istanbul and there is a range of views on the central committee.

One positive approach adopted by the TIP is not to only try and win new members and support from the secular, non-religious sectors, the educated youth and intellectuals but also to reach out to the base of the more religious orientated working class and poor through work around working class demands.

These divisions between different sectors of the working class -between graduates and non graduates, between the big cities and the smaller towns or more rural areas - also exist in European countries. In Britain we saw this with Brexit, in France with the Yellow Vests movement. So how you overcome this division is very important strategically.

Yes I agree. Even in Istanbul there are big differences between some of the suburban areas that are very working class but more conservative and religious and the more central areas where there are bigger numbers of young people, intellectuals and progressives.

What about Palestine solidarity here. We saw the brilliant multi-media exhibition in

Taksim square with digitalized art work from Palestinian children that is financed by the government.

Here we had eighty or so resignations from the party in my branch when we supported the right to resist the Israeli occupation. For activists who have been battling against AKP Islamism they see Hamas as a similar problem. We did not identify with Hamas's political line of course but it was controversial for us. Here of course it is the first time that the Erdogan government has supported mass demonstrations. We can take advantage to organise our solidarity demonstrations or contingents.

Although Erdogan's government claims that it is on the side of the Palestinian people, this is not the reality. While Israel's colonial aggression continue at full speed, Turkey's commercial relations with Israel continue to develop. Apart from some verbal statements, the Turkish government has not shown any concrete solidarity towards the Palestinian people. This situation causes objections among Erdoğan's base. I believe that socialists should listen to these objections and take the leadership of the solidarity movement with the Palestinian people.

The left here can win votes but it is difficult to mobilize many thousands on the streets - the repression over the years has made this difficult. Just to give an example, eighty of our activists (and I'm one of these) were on trial the other week because they had protested about the corruption connected to the distribution of tents to the earthquake area. The Red Crescent had been selling tents to the non-government organizations. The police had attacked our protest, which is the norm these days.

Can you tell us a little about [Can Atalay](#) (for more details about him and campaign click on his name) the MP who has still not been released from prison?

I have known Can for many years. He is a lawyer and was one of the spokespeople for the Gezi park campaign. He also defended people over labour laws and safety issues. He was condemned to 18 years in prison for his role in the Gezi park campaign. We put him on the TIP electoral slate as an independent. Once he was elected the state has taken action to remove his parliamentary immunity.

Different courts at different levels have given different verdicts. The constitutional court said he must be released but a lower court then said the opposite. But he remains in prison. We are calling it a constitutional coup because the lower court contradicted the higher court. So now we can talk about a state crisis around the legitimacy of the constitution.

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Amnesty International information and campaign for [Can Atalay here](#).

P.S.

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