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Turkey removes HDP mayors amid impending military attack on Syria

Yesterday morning, the co-mayors of the Kurdish-majority cities of Diyarbakir, Mardin and Van, Adnan Selçuk Mızraklı, Ahmet Türk and Bedia Özgökçe Ertan, respectively, were undemocratically removed from office by an Interior Ministry order accusing them of “supporting terrorism.” President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) government appointed “trustees” to replace these elected mayors.

This comes amid Ankara’s growing preparations to launch a new military operation targeting the Kurdish nationalist People’s Protection Units (YPG)—the Syrian offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), the Kurdish nationalist movement against which the Turkish state has waged a bloody counterinsurgency war in the country’s southeast for the past 35 years.

All three co-mayors who were removed yesterday are members of the Kurdish nationalist Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) and had gained more than 50 percent of the votes in the March 31 election.

After its illegitimate operation, Turkey’s Interior Ministry released a lengthy statement, claiming that the “PKK/KCK terrorist organization and its extensions, having suffered significant losses due to the decisive struggle against terrorism in recent years, have exploited the municipalities for illegal purposes through some mayors.”

This is not the first time that elected Kurdish mayors have been dismissed. The HDP has long been the target of arbitrary and blatantly antidemocratic acts by the AKP government

and state authorities, with many of its leaders jailed for supporting “terrorism.” In 2016–17, during the state of emergency imposed by Ankara after the failed 2016 NATO-backed military coup, the government ousted more than 90 HDP-backed mayors elected in 2014, replacing them with “trustees.”

After the operations in the morning, police forces surrounded municipal buildings in these cities, preventing entry and exit. In Van, internet and phone lines reportedly have been cut off and all roads leading to the city center have been closed off by police and soldiers. Hundreds of policemen and dozens of armored vehicles are stationed around the municipal building, and helicopters have started to patrol the city. In Diyarbakır, thousands who went to protest this operation were harshly attacked by police with water cannon, leaving many injured.

In some other cities, including İstanbul, police attacked protesters and carried out dozens of arrests.

The Erdoğan government’s operation was not limited to removing elected mayors. In the same hours on Sunday morning, the Turkish Interior Ministry issued a statement declaring, “418 people were detained in 29 cities.” Wide-ranging police raids targeted HDP executives and members. This followed the arrest of dozens of HDP members and supporters over the last week.

The Turkish armed forces also launched a domestic operation against PKK militants in the east and southeast on Sunday. Moreover, the Turkish army has continued a cross-border air offensive named “Operation Claw” against the PKK forces in Iraq since May 27 and increased its military deployment on the Turkish-Syrian border.

Following the repressive operations Sunday morning, the HDP issued a statement titled “We will not be silenced, we will not be stopped.” It declared, “A severe detention operation targeting our municipal council members and employees continues at this moment,” adding that “During the period of kayyıms,” that is the unelected administrators appointed by the state, “the resources of all municipalities were squandered.”

Although the HDP leadership claims the government launched these antidemocratic operations because of its anger over HDP revelations of the corruption of the Ankara-appointed “kayyıms,” this preemptive operation is closely bound up with impending Turkish military operations targeting Syria.

On August 7, Turkish and US military officials agreed to build a “safe zone” in northern Syria, east of the Euphrates, which will be controlled by Turkey in coordination with the United States. Despite the uncertainty as to the exact conditions of the “safe zone,” Ankara’s main aim is to smash the Kurdish-led proto-state there and chase the YPG militias, which are linked to the PKK and constitute the main proxy force of the US in Syria, out of the region. The Erdoğan government also declared that it has plans to relocate Syrian refugees in Turkey to the “zone.”

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The Kurdish nationalist forces accuse Ankara of planning to organize a forced population exchange in the region against the Kurdish people.

After the uncertain agreement between Washington and Ankara on the “safe zone,” top Turkish officials repeatedly declared that they will not tolerate any delay from the United States over setting up a safe zone in northern Syria.

On Thursday, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu said: “What we say since the beginning is that a US stalling tactic will not work. Unfortunately, they employed such stalling on Manbij; they did not keep their promise,” adding that the US continued “to provide aid to terrorists in the region.” This was a reference to ongoing US military aid to the YPG in the region. Although there is no official confirmation about this statement, Çavuşoğlu claimed that US President Donald Trump promised that Turkish troops would be allowed to march 20 miles into Syria.

On the same day, the Defense Ministry stated that a US military delegation led by the deputy commander of the US European Command, Gen. Stephen Twitty, visited Turkey's southeastern Şanlıurfa city as part of preparations to set up a “Joint Operations Center” under the terms of the agreement.

Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar also emphasized Ankara’s determination to invade northern Syria. In an interview aired on the TRT Haber news channel, he declared, “Call it a plan B or plan C; if things do not work, we will have recourse to unilateral activities and actions in northern Syria.”

According to the Defense Ministry, after they came under attack and harassment fire from YPG, Turkish forces in northern Syria hit YPG targets in the northern Syrian region of Tel Rifaat on Monday.

In the last three years, Ankara has maintained its support for Al Qaeda-linked Islamist forces in northern Syria against the Russian- and Iranian-backed Syrian regime, while launching two military operations against the YPG and developing a shaky alliance with Moscow and Tehran based on limiting US power in Syria. After the agreement between Washington and Ankara, not only Damascus, but also Moscow, Tehran and Beijing denounced the illegal US-Turkish preparations to invade and occupy northern Syria.

On Monday, as a clear sign of the dangerous complexity of the situation in Syria, the Assad regime accused the Turkish government of trying to save Al Qaeda-linked forces in the northern province of Idlib that have been under attack by Damascus and Moscow for weeks.

According to the Syrian state-run SANA news agency, an official source at the Foreign and Expatriates Ministry said: “Turkish vehicles loaded with ammunition, weapons and material equipment passed through the Syrian-Turkish borders on Monday morning and they entered Saraqeb City in their way to Khan Sheikhoun to help the defeated terrorists of Jabhat al-Nusra.” On the same day, the Turkish Defense Ministry stated that a Syrian air strike killed three civilians and injured 12 others.

“Despite repeated warnings we made to the authorities of the Russian Federation, the military operations by regime forces continue in the Idlib region in violation of the existing memorandums and agreements with the Russian Federation, causing great harm to the civilians and innocent people and gradually turning this into a humanitarian drama,” the statement said.

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