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## The Facts of Earthquakes in Turkey



Photograph Source: Onur Erdoğan – Public Domain

On 6 February 2023, two earthquakes centred in the Pazarcık and Elbistan districts of Kahramanmaraş province hit Turkey, with magnitudes of 7.7 and 7.6 on the Richter scale, respectively, affecting 11 cities and 13.5 million people, and causing destruction in Syria as well. Aftershocks are still ongoing.

Due to weaknesses caused by the neoliberal, rent-seeking, and political Islamist policies of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government, which lasted more than 20 years and eliminated institutional capacities, the earthquakes destroyed an area of 350 square kilometres, becoming a tragedy and social disaster. Official estimates report more than 50,000 fatalities, while some sources suggest the death toll may be three to four times higher.

Additionally, possibly 100,000, if not more, people were injured, hundreds of thousands of buildings were destroyed or damaged, and millions had to leave their homes and regions, struggling to rebuild their lives from scratch and facing helplessness, poverty, and unemployment.

Significant portions of Turkey's land, population, industrial establishments, dams, and power plants are in earthquake zones. Despite this reality, it is apparent that the country learned almost nothing from the 17 August 1999 Marmara Earthquakes, in which approximately 340,000 structures were destroyed or damaged, tens of thousands of citizens lost their lives, and subsequent earthquakes occurred. Those in power opened the country to legislation and development and urban transformation programmes focused on rent-seeking. They did not see the earthquakes as a multidisciplinary engineering, architecture, and urban planning concern. Despite decades of voicing systemic problems related to design, planning, engineering, architecture, construction, and supervision by the Union of Chambers of Turkish Engineers and Architects (TMMOB) and others, earthquakes are still causing significant social devastation, as was seen once more on 6 February 2023.

In the aftermath of the 1999 Marmara Earthquakes, the government neglected the crucial need for public oversight and, instead, opted to commercialise the necessary building inspections, despite recommendations from professional associations. As a result, the regulations excluded the professional qualifications, training, certification, and inspection requirements, previously essential duties of the chambers associated with the TMMOB.

It is also worth noting that the warnings made by the chambers of the TMMOB, earth scientists, and many other institutions and organizations regarding the fault lines for years have been ignored by a government whose only obsession is profit, and there now is no capacity for prevention and intervention.

It is truly heart-breaking to witness the numerous issues that have arisen in the aftermath of the earthquake, including the untimely removal of debris from collapsed buildings, inadequate government assistance, a failure to address the housing crisis with compassion, and a controversial religious ruling issued by Turkey's Presidency of Religious Affairs, known as the Diyanet, allowing earthquake orphans to marry members of their adoptive families. These only serve to compound the ongoing suffering and frustration.

The weaknesses witnessed in the rescue operations following the earthquake clearly expose vulnerabilities of authoritarian rule. The absence of democratic decision-making processes, the elevation of loyalty and obedience over merit in appointments and promotions, and the incapacity to take charge during critical moments are all defining characteristics of such

regimes with serious repercussions. The sluggish response, incompetence, lack of skills, poor management, and inadequacies in organisation and coordination during the rescue operations, which resulted in the loss of many lives that should still be with us today, all point to the systemic nature of the issue. Consequently, those responsible must be held accountable and brought to justice by the people.

The earthquake that struck the country exposed the urgent need for scientific enlightenment and preparation in the face of natural disasters. While there was an impressive display of social solidarity from citizens and organizations alike, including the TMMOB involvement, the government's restrictions on civil society groups and emergency aid convoys hindered the country's response to the disaster. The social media was restricted with the government insisting on being the only visible entity in the rescue efforts. These emphasize the importance of resisting the current ruling power's efforts to dispose of democracy, secularism, public interest, merit-based systems and institutional structures, and national heritage. The government's disregard for the people's vital issues and the future of the country is driving it towards corruption, conservatism, and other forms of darkness. Therefore, it is essential to rescue the country from these disasters and promote values that will ensure a better future for all.

There is no scientific and comprehensive regulation in site selection, soil survey, building design, production, project alterations, and building inspection in the current state of affairs. The government, driven by profit motives, has allowed construction in areas, including those where fault lines pass through and problematic fill areas, without adequately considering appropriate settlement and urban transformation practices, thus amplifying the destructive effects of earthquakes. This attitude, compounded by the implementation of numerous amnesty laws, has not prioritised increasing earthquake-resistant building stocks and allowed for the hasty construction of buildings where earthquake-gathering spots should be situated. Additionally, the impact of the heavy rainfall that followed the earthquakes with a short time lag compounded the damage. Loss of life and property occurred. All resettlement areas, particularly the tent areas, were affected. It turned out that the selection of locations for tent and container areas was haphazard and disregarded scientific, technical, engineering, and planning criteria. Commencing construction activities without conducting soil surveys in an environment where aftershocks continued and selling them to earthquake victims solely through credit (debt) channels was another example of the government's recklessness and pursuit of profits. There is need to go beyond this corrupt and disastrous government that has impoverished the country and its people in economic and social terms, and as seen in the

recent earthquakes and floods, offered no genuine solution to the problems of the people, only seeking “forgiveness” and constant donations.

Two days after the hit of the earthquakes, President Erdoğan declared a state of emergency on 8 February 2023. Two weeks later, he issued a presidential decree titled ” Presidential Decree on Settlement and Construction under the State of Emergency,” published in the Official Gazette on 24 February 2023. And since then, the country has been debating this decree.

For example, in response to the decree, the faculty members of the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at İstanbul Technical University released a joint statement on their website on March 28, 2023. The university administration initially blocked access to their website but restored it a few hours later after news of the incident spread on Turkish social media. The statement emphasized that the decree aimed to address immediate housing needs after the earthquake but ignored Turkey’s extensive expertise and knowledge in the field of urban and regional planning. The faculty warned that this approach may pose significant risks and problems in the medium and long term. They issued a call to action, which read as follows:

*As the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at İstanbul Technical University, our call is for the planning of all rural and urban settlements as well as new settlement areas in the earthquake-affected region of Kahramanmaraş and Gaziantep, in accordance with principles of social and spatial justice, environmental and economic sustainability, and fair governance. We share with the public and relevant authorities that in order to avoid environmental risks and new disasters in the region, a participatory and transparent process should be established, in which citizens, civil society organizations, and relevant administrations are involved, and in which different disciplines participate according to their competencies and professional ethics, while scientific methods are applied.*

Whether the AKP government will respond to such calls positively remains to be seen. The problem is that because of the approaching 14 May 2023 Presidential and Parliamentary General Elections, the country is practically on hold.

Estimates of the total cost of the February 2023 Kahramanmaraş earthquakes to the Turkish economy vary from \$80 billion to \$130 billion, which amounts to 8.8% to 14.3% of the 2022 Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of \$905.5 billion, according to the Turkish Statistical Institute. The estimated total economic loss of the August 1999 Marmara earthquake ranged from \$23 billion to \$30 billion, which was 7.8% to 11.7% of the 1999 GDP of \$256.4 billion, again according to the Turkish Statistical Institute. Therefore, the economic loss from these two earthquakes is comparable, although the death toll in the February 2023 earthquakes was about three times larger than that of the August 1999 earthquake. Both earthquakes rank high

in terms of casualties and material damage to property among the global earthquake disasters since World War II.

One difference is that while the Marmara region is the industrial heartland of Turkey, producing more than 40% of the Turkish GDP, the current earthquake region, consisting of Kahramanmaraş and the remaining ten affected cities, is not. Its contribution to the Turkish GDP is only about 9% to 12% of the GDP, depending on what source you look at. So the impact of the 2023 earthquake on economic activity may be less severe than that of the 1999 earthquake. While the 1999 earthquake played a significant role in the 2000-02 Turkish banking and currency crises, it is difficult to predict what role the 2032 earthquake will play in the Turkish economy.

Turkey has recently experienced two major currency crises, in August 2018 and December 2021, and their aftershocks continue. Therefore, the performance of the Turkish economy, particularly amid a high inflation environment and the upcoming 14 May 2023 Presidential and Parliamentary General Elections, does not look promising. If this election brings the 20-year reign of the AKP to an end, it is difficult to predict whether the outcome will be economic recovery or another economic slump. If it does not, another currency crisis, possibly accompanied by a balance of payments crisis, appears likely, and the near future seems bleak.

When we look at the practices and the current state of the AKP government that has lasted for more than 20 years, the danger and alternative ahead of the country are obvious: Either a political Islamist open fascism or the struggle for the salvation of the country, its people, their common future and a new establishment. To avoid the former; to establish democratic and popular sovereignty; to create opportunities for the introduction of for people, social, and public planning-development policies, a new political will is necessary to initiate a new struggle process. We hope that the Presidential and Parliamentary General Elections on 14 May 2023 will yield results in this direction for which we are working towards.

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