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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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Bariş Demir

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Crackdown on protesters in Turkey: police violence, torture allegations surface

As the wave of unlawful arrests and detentions launched by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government to suppress mass protests continues, videos and testimonies of brutal police violence and torture are emerging.

A video shot by photojournalist Kemal Aslan and viewed millions of times on social media documents the police's unbridled attack on protesters peacefully dispersing after the CHP-led rally in Saraçhane ended on Sunday, March 23. Protesters heading towards the metro station were brutally beaten and tear-gassed in the face at close range by the police.

Burcu Altunpolat, who said she was subjected to police violence and torture, described the horrific moments in detail on X/Twitter. Akpolat said she was kicked and punched by 6 or 7 police officers, had her eyelids and mouth forced open and was pepper-sprayed. The young woman said the policemen eventually threw her aside and said: "She's going to die in our hands, let's throw her there, she gets the f*ck out of here".

CHP Diyarbakır deputy and lawyer Sezgin Tanrıkulu said that young people detained in Saraçhane had told him that they had been tortured. As an example, Tanrıkulu cited the testimony of a young university student who said she had been sexually harassed and tortured by the police.

In the transcript, the young woman describes her experience while being handcuffed as follows: "...the male police officer touched my breasts and said: 'Do you have breasts'. I wet my trousers out of fear and pressure. My dress is still soaked with urine. Then a female police officer came and took me away from the policeman who was bullying and harassing me and said to him: 'OK, enough, stop it'".

The young woman continued, “The male police officer pressed my head with his foot. The doctor’s report I received said that I had oedema and swelling on the left side of my head. I was taken to the detention vehicle by [another] female police officer who insulted me by calling me a ‘bastard’”.

In its information note titled “Violations between 19 and 26 March 2025”, the Human Rights Association stated: “Many people were subjected to torture and ill-treatment during the police intervention on the protests, such as beatings, close range canisters, gas and water cannons, reverse handcuffs and strip searches. In Ankara, 7 people were subjected to strip searches”.

In a statement, the İstanbul Medical Chamber emphasised that medical examinations during capture and detention are necessary to prevent torture and ill-treatment incompatible with human dignity. However, detainees were forced to undergo medical examinations at police headquarters in violation of the law.



Police squads surround protesters in Sarayhane, March 21, 2025 [Photo by Mellonsapka / [CC BY 4.0](#)]

Mass protests began in İstanbul on 19 March and spread across the country after Ekrem İmamoğlu, the mayor of İstanbul and presidential candidate of the Republican People's Party (CHP), was detained on charges of “corruption” and “terrorism”. İmamoğlu, seen as Erdogan's main political rival, was leading in recent presidential polls. He was arrested on Sunday on charges of “corruption” based on allegations from “secret witnesses”.

Interior Minister Ali Yerlikaya announced on X Thursday that 1,879 demonstrators had been detained since 19 March, of whom 260 were arrested, 468 were placed under judicial control, 489 were released and 662 are still being processed.

The *Evrensel* newspaper reporter Nisa Sude Demirel and ETHA reporter Elif Bayburt were reportedly detained on Friday morning.

As boycotts continued in many universities, more than a hundred students and some lawyers were detained in Şişli, İstanbul, where they gathered to protest on Thursday evening. On Friday morning, police raided the Middle East Technical University (METU) in Ankara and detained nine students.

The Socialist Equality Group (SEG) and its youth movement, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), call for the release of all political prisoners. Workers must mobilise in defence of students and democratic rights, and students must turn to the working class. This means fighting for the revolutionary perspective put forward by the SEG. The persecution of the demonstrators, mostly university students, is aimed at intimidating and suppressing any public challenge to the government's unpopular war and class-war agenda.

The arrest of those who took part in the protest in exercise of their constitutional rights, without legal justification, material evidence or due process, shows that the government is using the judiciary as a weapon against both political and social opponents.

Arif Anıl Öztürk, a volunteer lawyer for the detained protesters, said of the arrests: "It is an illegal trial from beginning to end. There is no evidence, no footage. Moreover, the Article they are accused of does not require imprisonment. Moreover, there are people who are mistreated, starting with being handcuffed behind their backs. There are people whose legs have been put in plaster casts and who have bruises on their bodies."

Öztürk added: "The judges don't even look at the lawyers' faces during the verdict. They don't even read the full verdict, they just say 'arrested' and run out of the courtroom."

Arbitrary arrests have increased since last year. Participants in demonstrations against the closure of İstanbul's iconic Taksim Square for May Day celebrations, in violation of a Constitutional Court ruling, or against the government's continued trade with Israel, which is committing genocide in Gaza, have been released after months of unlawful detention.

In early February, during a wave of wildcat strikes by workers in more than twenty factories in the Baspınar Organised Industrial Zone in Gaziantep against the imposition of low wage increases, Mehmet Turkmen, leader of the independent rank-and-file union, the United Textile, Weaving and Leather Workers' Union (BİRTEK-SEN), was arrested.

Turkmen's release on Monday after 35 days in detention is a de facto admission of the arbitrariness and lack of legal basis for this arrest. As the WSWS wrote, the arrest was "aimed at criminalising all workers' struggles and expressions of support for these struggles." After his release, Türkmen was again illegally sentenced to "house arrest".

As the government escalates police repression and arrests attempting to bring mass protests to an end, the CHP claims to have won a 'victory'. CHP leader Özgür Özel said on Wednesday,

“The nation defeated the coup on 19 March... Ekrem İmamoğlu is sitting in his cell in the Palace of Democracy. Erdogan is in his palace seven floors down, under stress.”

This absurd statement turns reality upside down and normalises a dictatorial regime and political imprisonment. The government’s drive to violently suppress the mass protests stems from fear that these will trigger a wider movement within the working class, which is subjected to a brutal austerity programme. This fear is shared by the CHP, which represents a rival bourgeois faction.