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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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01.04.2025

Hundreds of thousands protest İmamoğlu's arrest in Istanbul as CHP and Erdoğan accuse each other of being "pro-imperialist"

Hundreds of thousands of people gathered in Istanbul's Maltepe district on Saturday to protest the arrest of Ekrem İmamoğlu, mayor of Istanbul and presidential candidate of the Republican People's Party (CHP).

The CHP said that 2.2 million people attended the rally, while the Security Directorate claimed that only 150,000 people gathered.



A scene from a mass rally organized by the Republican People's Party (CHP) in Maltepe, Istanbul on Saturday demanding "Freedom for İmamoğlu", March 29, 2025 [Photo: X/@herkesicinCHP]

On March 19, İmamoğlu was detained on charges of "corruption" and "aiding terrorism," and on March 23, he was arrested and sent to prison on charges of "corruption" based on secret

witness allegations. On the same day, 15.5 million people voted in the CHP's presidential primaries, in which İmamoğlu was the only candidate. In recent polls, İmamoğlu was ahead of Erdoğan in opinion polls, and it had been expected for some time that increasing police operations targeting political opponents was moving toward İmamoğlu.

İmamoğlu's arrest sparked mass protests involving millions across the country. The government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan responded with a wave of police repression and arrests. More than 2,000 people have been detained and over 300 have been unlawfully jailed. Erdoğan has also tried to end the boycotts and mass protests, especially at universities, by extending the Eid al-Fitr holiday, which ends on Wednesday.

The Sosyalist Eşitlik Grubu (Socialist Equality Group), the Turkish section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, reiterates its demand for the release of all political prisoners. The masses of workers and youth must mobilize independently to defend democratic rights and carry the struggle forward. This requires fighting for the revolutionary perspective put forward by SEG and ICFI.

CHP leader Özgür Özel announced in his speech in Maltepe that they will start a petition demanding İmamoğlu's release and early elections. Although Özel insists that they will continue their struggle "in the streets", he seeks to control the mass movement that erupted spontaneously at the beginning by directing it towards the next elections.

Özel widened the boycott campaign against several media outlets and companies that ignored or opposed the protests. He also stated that the secret witness who played a critical role in İmamoğlu's arrest has 55 criminal records. "The man who used to get a job from the [Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party] AKP and is now slandering Mayor Ekrem has more than 100 crimes. We will not allow you to try and defame Mayor Ekrem by inventing witnesses from rapists and harassers," he said.

In his message for Eid al-Fitr, which began on Sunday, Erdoğan hinted that the operations targeting CHP would continue: "They [İmamoğlu and CHP] have surrounded the municipalities like an octopus. They are trying to cover up street terror and robbery. We are following the investigations into terror and corruption. We see where the arms of the criminal organization extend. The street terror is an attempt to cover up the robbery. Of course, as the investigation continues and deepens, the reach of the arms of the criminal organization that surrounds the communities like an octopus will be revealed."

In response to Erdoğan's accusation that he was "complaining about Turkey to the world," Özel said, "When democracy is threatened in a country, when those who are elected do not leave with elections, when there is a coup, the world is interested in it." Bringing up

significant historical issues, Özel declared, “You are the political continuation of those who signed Sèvres [Treaty], but we are on the path of those who tore Sèvres and made Lausanne.”



Treaty of Sèvres with zones of influence [Photo: Str1977 - Self-made]

The Treaty of Sèvres, signed in 1920 after the First World War, divided the Ottoman territories, including modern-day Turkey, between the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Greece and Armenia. The treaty was accepted by the Ottoman government in Istanbul but rejected by the rebellious Grand National Assembly and the Turkish nationalist movement led by Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) in Ankara. As a result of the War of National Liberation waged with the support of the young Soviet Republic led by Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky, the occupation of Turkey by British, French, Italian, Greek and Armenian troops or militias ended, the Treaty of Lausanne was signed, and a republic was proclaimed in 1923.

Following Özel’s interview with the BBC, Erdoğan said, “The CHP leader is begging for help from a foreign media organization that has lost credibility due to its hypocritical coverage of the Gaza genocide,” adding, “We have seen that they have lost control to the point of begging the West,” and argued that the CHP is demanding a “political mandate.” This was a reference to those who demanded a British or US mandate at the end of the First World War.

On his X account, Erdoğan asked, “Is it appropriate for the leader of the main opposition party to complain about his country and ask for help from the West? ... Can such a politician defend his country’s interests against the imperialists? Can someone who begs for help on the [TV] screens stand upright against the imperialists?”

In the interview, Özel had lamented the lack of opposition to Erdoğan's regime from his British ally, Labour Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer, stating: "We feel abandoned... What kind of friendship is this, what kind of sister party is this? How can we defend democracy together?"

In Turkey, where the overwhelming majority of the population opposes NATO and its wars and war plans across the regions, Erdoğan, who leads the Islamist AKP in power since 2002, and Özel, the leader of the Kemalist CHP, accuse each other of being pro-imperialist, while in reality the accusation applies to both bourgeois parties.

Calculating that there would be no major backlash from the Trump administration in the United States or his allies in Europe, Erdoğan set out to liquidate his main political rival, İmamoğlu. The fact that his imperialist allies see Turkey as a critical partner in their predatory plans in the Middle East and Ukraine played an important role. Trump, who has threatened to "bomb Iran," sees Erdoğan's support as crucial in a possible war with Iran. Even as Erdoğan criticizes the genocide in Gaza and declares his support for Hamas, he continues to supply Israel's war machine with oil and other critical materials.

The claims of "anti-imperialism" of CHP leader Özel--who emphasised in interviews with CNN and the BBC during the protests that they are more of a "NATO party" than Erdoğan--are also groundless. Both the AKP and the CHP voted for the expansion of NATO against Russia by admitting Finland and Sweden as new members and are allied with the US and European imperialism, which support the genocide in Gaza by all means.

The pro-imperialist character of these parties is the political expression of the deep-rooted ties of the Turkish bourgeoisie they both represent to imperialism and its hostility to the working class. A coherent anti-imperialist policy can only be advanced from an international socialist perspective based on the working class against both NATO and Zionism and against "its" ruling class and all its parties. This is also the only way forward in the struggle for democracy against Erdoğan's dictatorial regime.

Ulas Atesci.