

Turkish Government Tries to Repress a Growing Wave of Protests

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Mass protests, boycotts and strikes sparked by the October 10 double suicide bombing targeting a peace march in Ankara have spread across Turkey. Burial ceremonies of the victims of the Ankara bombings have become anti-government rallies, with thousands of mourners chanting “Murderer Erdoğan” and “The murderous state will be held to account.”

On October 12 and 13, an alliance of labor unions affiliated to the main opposition parties and professional organisations held a two-day nationwide strike. Tens of thousands of medical staff, teachers, municipal employees and lawyers struck, while university students boycotted their lessons in some faculties.

The Confederation of Progressive Workers’ Unions (DİSK), the Confederation of Public Laborers’ Unions (KESK), the Union of Chambers of Turkish Engineers and Architects (TMMOB), and the Turkish Medical Association (TTB) took part in the action.

The Justice and Development Party (AKP) government has intensified its pressure on the media and mobilised the police to suppress the rising tide of opposition. The government used the police to impose bans on protest rallies.

On Tuesday, the Istanbul Governor’s Office refused to grant permission for the proposed march from Sirkeci and Cerrahpaşa Medical Faculty to Beyazıt Square, saying, “The governorate does not find the planned march and rally appropriate, regarding the sensitivity of the present period.” In other parts of Istanbul, riot police brutally attacked those who defied the ban.

Also on Wednesday, an Ankara court issued a broad media ban on reporting on the Ankara suicide bomber investigation. According to *Hürriyet Daily News*, the ban includes “all kinds of news, interviews, criticism and similar publications in print, visual, social media and all kinds of media on the Internet.”

The general strike, called by unions and associations affiliated with the pro-Kemalist Republican People’s Party (CHP) and the mainly Kurdish People’s Democratic Party (HDP), mobilised only a minority of the working class. DİSK limited its action to walkouts in municipalities under the CHP or HDP control, with the support of the mayors. It did not organise any strike in the factories, while KESK generally let its members stay at home.

The larger trade unions openly support the government. The main Confederation of Turkish Trade Unions (Türk-İş), for example, contented itself with expressing its “sorrow” for the bombings and laying red carnations at the main train station in Ankara, while another pro-government confederation, Hak-İş, issued a statement to condemn terror and offer

condolences to “the nation.”

Almost a month ago, these trade union confederations, along with business and industrialist organisations had participated in a rally “against terror”—i.e., against the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK)—organised by the government.

There are widespread accusations of state involvement in the Ankara bombings, with claims that the government knew the attacks would take place or directly staged them.

The government has carried out showpiece arrests of suspected members of the Islamic State (IS) in a number of provinces across Turkey. On Tuesday, the police claimed to have identified one of the suicide bomber suspects as Yunus Emre Alagoz, the brother of a bomber who killed 33 people in a separate suicide blast in Suruc in July, also said to be linked to IS. The other bomber was identified as Omer Deniz Dundar, using DNA from the blast. The two were reportedly on a list of 21 potential suicide bombers.

The government declared late on Tuesday that it had removed the police, intelligence and security chiefs of Ankara from their posts in an effort “to conduct an effective investigation into Saturday’s bombings.”

This came after a meeting between Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu and the leader of main opposition CHP, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, who asked for the resignation or removal of Interior Minister Selami Altınok and Justice Minister Kenan İpek.

After initially declaring that the attack on a pro-peace rally, with a heavy presence of the HDP, was most likely the work of IS—which is at war with the Kurds in Syria and Turkey—the AKP government is now floating an amalgam between the IS and PKK.

Davutoğlu said that the government and police had “made progress on the planning phase of this attack. All the evidence indicates the existence of two different terror organisations. We are trying to find out whether there was collaboration between these two gangs [i.e., IS and the PKK].”

Indicating that more repression is planned, he added that he had “instructed the cabinet to review our entire legal framework on the conduct of public demonstrations,” saying, “There is work for a new security concept.”

The AKP, unable to form a coalition government after elections in June, has called fresh elections for November 1. However, with opposition to its rule increasing, it is relying on whipping up anti-terror and anti-Kurd, pro-war sentiment to mobilise its own base and legitimise the suppression of its political opponents and the media.

“As we go to the November 1 elections, there are those now trying to block the establishment of long-term stability in the country,” Davutoğlu said.

“The main question of the June 7 elections was whether the HDP would pass the 10 percent threshold. The question before this election is whether the AKP will form a one-party government. The objective of this attack is to threaten democracy in Turkey. That’s why the AKP is under attack even before the incident in a bid to influence election results.”

There is rising concern within ruling circles over the stability of the country and the survival of the government. Powerful sections of the Turkish bourgeoisie have withdrawn their support, either from President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan or from the AKP itself. Some analysts in the media are speculating on the possibility of a broad-based coalition between the AKP and CHP, which would “re-establish stability and revitalise the peace process with the Kurds.”

But the AKP is also threatened by a growing rift with Turkey’s Western allies, above all the United States, over its well-established relations with IS and other Islamist groups and its ongoing war against the PKK. This is cutting across Washington’s alliance with the Kurds in Syria, a key element in US efforts to curb IS and pave the way for a long-desired regime change removing Syrian president Bashar al-Assad.

Even while pledging support for Turkey, and ignoring appeals from Ankara, which has been involved in conflicts with Russia over intrusions into its airspace, the US last Friday went ahead with plans to remove its Patriot air defence missiles from the Kurdish southeast. Germany said it would do the same.

Yesterday, Turkey summoned the US ambassador in Ankara to express concerns at a reported transfer of 120 tons of weapons and ammunition to the People’s Protection Units (YPG), the armed wing of the Syrian Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is an ally of the PKK.

“Turkey cannot accept cooperation with terrorist organisations that waged a war against us,” Davutoğlu said at a press conference with Bulgaria’s prime minister, Boyko Borisov, in Istanbul. “Turkey is determined to fight against all organisations linked to the PKK, in the same way the US and other allies fought against al-Qaeda affiliates while fighting al-Qaeda itself.”

With an eye to reports that Moscow has also sent arms to the Kurds, he stressed, “This stance has been conveyed to the US and Russia.”

The YPG has declared the formation of a new military alliance with a number of Arab groups, calling itself the Democratic Forces of Syria. A YPG statement, sent to Reuters on Monday, says, “The sensitive stage our country Syria is going through and rapid developments on the military and political front...require that there be a united national military force for all Syrians, joining Kurds, Arabs, Syrians and other groups.”

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