

Turkey: intensification of repression against the opposition

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Over the past year, pressure on the opposition, the media, and government critics in Turkey has reached levels unseen in the country's recent history, with the Republican People's Party (CHP) emerging as the principal target of the state apparatus. Repression has focused primarily on local government officials, many of whom have been arrested or removed from office by a politicised judiciary. The crackdown has culminated in a complex case against Istanbul mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, who is widely regarded as President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's most serious challenger. In parallel, further investigations have been launched against other CHP figures, including Ankara mayor Mansur Yavaş and the party's chairman, Özgür Özel.

International reactions have been restrained, reflecting Turkey's growing importance as a key actor in security policy and as a mediator in regional conflicts. International institutions are also increasingly reluctant to condition their relations with Turkey on adherence to democratic standards. In these circumstances, repression against opposition circles is likely to intensify further.

Commentary

- **Pressure from the government has focused on the CHP, which in recent years has begun to pose a challenge to the ruling camp.** In 2024, it won the local elections, securing control in 35 of Turkey's 81 provinces. It also achieved strong results in Istanbul: İmamoğlu, the incumbent mayor of the metropolis, was re-elected, and the CHP took control of 26 of the city's 39 districts (see: '[Turkey: opposition wins local elections](#)'). As a result of actions by the politicised judiciary, six CHP city mayors, including İmamoğlu, have been arrested and removed from office. In Istanbul, the party's structures have faced particularly severe repression: nearly half (twelve) of the district mayors elected in 2024 have been arrested and removed from their positions. Moreover, since February this year, a trial has been under way in Istanbul against İmamoğlu and 402 of his associates, who have been charged with embezzlement and participation in an organised criminal group. The mayor, until recently regarded as Erdoğan's most serious rival in the next presidential election, faces a cumulative sentence of up to 2,400 years' imprisonment. Following İmamoğlu's arrest, mass demonstrations took place in Turkey's largest cities, but their momentum has since diminished. Seeking to sustain voter engagement, the CHP has been organising weekly rallies across the country.
- **At present, the government is targeting Ankara mayor Mansur Yavaş and CHP chairman Özgür Özel.** The former, a popular politician and a likely presidential candidate, is under

investigation over alleged irregularities in the use of public funds. Özel, who has emerged as a leading figure of the opposition following the arrest of İmamoğlu, is facing charges of insulting the head of state. It is also likely that a court will annul the CHP's general congress that elected Özel as the party's chairman. In that case, his predecessor Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu would return to the post, triggering a deep crisis and internal divisions within the party (see: '[Awaiting a verdict. Turkish opposition under pressure](#)'). The government insists that the judiciary is independent, but this claim is undermined by developments such as February's appointment of Akın Gürlek, formerly Istanbul's chief prosecutor responsible for the case against İmamoğlu, as Minister of Justice. Public opinion has interpreted this promotion as a signal of an impending intensification of repression against the opposition.

- **The scale and nature of the government's actions indicate an instrumental and systemic use of the judiciary.** This is reflected in the record number of proceedings initiated by prosecutors (approximately 5.5 million in 2025, according to a report by the Ministry of Justice), one of the world's highest incarceration rates (around 400,000 prisoners, according to the World Prison Brief) and the broad range of individuals targeted by repression. Since the beginning of April alone, more than 27 journalists have been detained or summoned for questioning. They are most frequently charged with disseminating disinformation or insulting the head of state. Artists and figures from the entertainment industry have also faced increased pressure. In recent months, numerous performers have been detained in connection with the content of their work.
- **The Turkish government is leveraging the international situation to consolidate power.** Western partners view Turkey through the lens of its contribution to European security and the unsuccessful efforts in previous decades to induce the country to improve its democratic standards. The hardening of domestic policy has coincided with growing instability in Turkey's neighbourhood. Against this backdrop, Turkey presents itself as the only predictable actor in the region and as an indispensable ally in efforts to stabilise it, positioning itself as a mediator in peace negotiations, for example between Iran and the United States.