

Section 3. Pushed into Politics

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Chapter 6. Deepening economic inequality and authoritarianism: the need for a democratic alliance in Turkey

The excessive depreciation of the Turkish Lira and high inflation are causing a serious decrease in the purchasing power of the Turkish people. While the state's statistics agency, at the end of January 2022, announced a yearly 48.7% inflation rate, independent research groups calculated it at around 114.9% (ENAG 2022). In this context, the 50% increase in the minimum wage announced by the government for 2022 is far from sufficient in the face of rapid impoverishment. The increases in wages and salaries remain below the inflation rate. Small businesses are in a difficult situation, especially because of the recent increase in rents and utility bills. Farmers have serious difficulties in sustaining their lives as agricultural production is highly dependent on imports. The situation of informal workers who have suffered throughout 2021 due to the pandemic is also getting worse.

The government tries to evade responsibility by blaming chain markets, the so called 'dollar lobby,' foreign powers and so on, as if it were not itself the architect of this impoverishment. As the government is promoting loans with its low interest policy, households are more and more stuck in debt. Household debt has increased 138 times in the last 18 years (Indyturk 2021). Workers are trying to survive far below the poverty line while facing increasing debt burden and fear of unemployment. According to the Disk-Ar union report, the unemployment rate is 22.1%, while youth and women's unemployment is even higher (Diskar 2022). In such an environment, young people see no future: seven out of ten young people wish to live abroad (Sputnik 2022).

However, it would be rather apolitical to expect the economic crisis to automatically turn into a political opposition against the government, even though public anger has undoubtedly increased in response to these deteriorating economic conditions. The year 2022 has indeed started with protests and strikes. Couriers and delivery workers, in particular, have launched wildcat strikes as their yearly wage increases fall below the inflation rate even though the companies they work for have dramatically increased their profits during the pandemic. As in the case of the food delivery giant Yemeksepeti, workers are protesting the company's union busting actions

as well as demanding decent wages. Indeed, in Turkey, it is very difficult for a union to gain the authorization to make a collective agreement in a workplace due to the existing laws. In addition, companies are trying to rule out the few, barely organized unions with a wide variety of tactics. Despite all this, workers in many sectors such as textiles, metal and delivery have started workplace-based actions on their own. In addition, students, neighbourhood residents, in short, ordinary people, have organized in different parts of the country under the slogan ‘we can’t sustain ourselves’ against the increasing cost of living and bills, despite the government’s strong crack-down on any kind of street opposition.

Lacking perspective

Without a pro-labour agenda, the National Alliance, the opposition alliance led by the CHP (Republican People’s Party) and İYİ Party against the AKP-MHP¹, lacks the perspective to connect with the social opposition that people are currently trying to articulate. Instead of enlarging or strengthening the small-scale actions that people have organized in different parts of the country, and building a political strength from there, the National Alliance has remained silent in the face of government’s pressure against these actions and has left these movements unclaimed. At the most expressing timid support for labour actions, it is not clear what this alliance promises to labour. Rather than address the crucial economic and social problems, they are only pressing for early elections by preparing a joint declaration for the return to the parliamentary system.

Thus, by disdaining to organize social unrest and to build an opposition and a popular program around peoples’ concrete demands, the National Alliance is both accepting the government’s terrorization of street opposition, and, by not acting, even jeopardizing its victory in a possible election. By not allowing any genuine opposition, the government narrows the political field. The sole call for a return to the parliamentary system, devoid of economic and social content, is not enough to form a powerful, convincing, and hence popularly supported opposition.

1 The MHP (Nationalist Movement Party), as a part of the AKP-MHP alliance currently in power, is an ultra-nationalist right-wing party. As for the opposition National Alliance, the İYİ Party (Good Party) is a liberal, nationalist party founded by a group that split from the MHP. The CHP (Republican People’s Party) is the oldest party in the country, founded by Atatürk. As a secular and republican party, it includes mixed elements such as social democracy and nationalism.

However, the National Alliance's stance is not simply a tactical mistake. The ideology of its member parties does not allow for any other political strategy. Apart from the fact that they do not have a clear program in favour of labour, their excluding of the HDP² from the alliance reveals their understanding of democracy, even though they claim to defend it. The fact that HDP cadres and leadership have been in prison for a long time and that the party is under heavy pressure from the state calls for condemnation by the opposition in the name of democracy. However, in addition to excluding the HDP from their alliance, the parties in the National Alliance are supporting the case for the closure of the HDP. The İYİ Party, true to its nationalist stance, has indeed already announced that it will vote in favour of the closure of the HDP. The CHP too is unsupportive of the HDP, whether because of its own nationalist conviction or doing so tactically because of the fear of alienating part of its more conservative and nationalistic base or because of its wish to take votes from the AKP's social base. Whatever the actual reason may be, CHP is choosing to make an alliance on a nationalist basis; instead of actively reaching out to protest movements and progressive forces, it manoeuvres itself into the nationalist and conservative frame predefined by the very government. In addition, the anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies of the National Alliance show its nationalistic views and discriminatory attitude at a time when racist attacks against immigrants are increasing. The National Alliance, as it stands, exactly presents the kind of opposition that the government could only wish for.

Not just a smokescreen

The Turkish government's repression against the social opposition, especially against the women's and LGBTI+ movements, is well known. In 2021, the government withdrew from the Istanbul Convention, the European Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women. The government also has not allowed LGBTI+ pride parades for years. This year, even the use of symbols such as rainbows and unicorns on commercial products was banned. During a recent speech at a mosque, President Erdoğan recently targeted the famous pop singer Sezen Aksu, threatening to 'pull out her tongue' on the grounds that a song she made five years ago insulted the Prophet Adam and Eve. Some opposition forces underestimate these attacks by saying that they are simply 'cultural issues' being used by

2 The HDP (The People's Democratic Party) is a pro-Kurdish-movement, left-wing party defending participatory and radical democracy.

the government as a ‘diversion’ tactic to cover up the existing economic situation. However, silence against these attacks does not lead to a labour struggle; moreover it contributes to reinforcing the state’s authoritarianism. The fact that the opposition has not been able to collectively respond to these attacks is not making it stronger either in the economic area nor against the government in general. Not only is the government trying to divide people into cultural camps and to consolidate its own religious social base by playing on cultural dualities, but it is also increasing its authoritarianism and obliterating any possible opposition. Hence, attacks against women’s and LGBTI+ movements or popular figures are not just a smokescreen to disguise its actual agenda or divert attention, but are a constituent element of its authoritarianism. Through these open attacks, Erdoğan intensifies the climate of oppression and fear and thus criminalizes even the most basic human rights and those who give voice to these rights. While Turkey already has the highest incarceration rate among the 47 member states of the Council of Europe, 216 new prisons have been built in the last six years, and 18 new prisons are planned to be opened in 2022 (Kizilkaya and Bakile 2021) - not to mention that most of them are being built using prisoner labour.

Despite an environment in which almost no demonstrations are allowed in the streets, and where those who oppose the government, be it even via social media posts, face the threat of lawsuits and imprisonment, workers’ protests are on the rise, and peasant actions and feminist struggles are still being carried out, often without the umbrella of a party or union. At the same time, radical left parties such as the HDP, TİP (Workers’ Party of Turkey) and EMEP (Labour Party) have started negotiations to form a third alliance, the ‘Democracy Alliance’. There is an urgent need for a political approach that connects with social movements, organizes together in these struggles, and is fed by these struggles. A new alliance should seek to combine these social forces and understand politics not only in electoral terms. Only such an alliance can enable people to have a say in their own lives, increase the power of collective action, and thus build a genuine counter power against AKP authoritarianism by opening up a real political space.

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