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Turkish government moves to crush Kurdish parliamentary HDP party

By Alex Lantier

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Yesterday, Turkish police arrested at least 11 top members of the majority-Kurdish Democratic Peoples' Party (HDP), including party cochair Figen Yüksekdağ and Selahattin Demirtaş.

Leading Turkish parliamentarians across the country were assaulted, arrested and frog-marched into police custody. Police seized Demirtaş after raiding his home in the capital, Ankara, and stormed Yüksekdağ's residence in Diyarbakır, the largest city in Turkey's mainly Kurdish southeast. Also arrested were HDP lawmakers Ferhat Encü, Leyla Birlik, Selma Irmak, Abdullah Zeydan, İdris Baluken, Sırrı Süreyya Önder, Ziya Pir, Gülser Yıldırım and Nursel Aydoğan.

A crowd protested around Baluken's home in Diyarbakır as police seized him and tried to force him into their vehicle. "Get your hands off me! I represent thousands of votes. You can't shove my head and take me like that," Baluken told police officers before they forced him into the vehicle and drove him away to detention.

As HDP officials were rounded up, a car bomb exploded in Diyarbakır, killing two police and seven civilians and wounding over 100 people. The attack, claimed by the banned Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), reportedly targeted a police building. The HDP denies having links to the PKK.

The move to decapitate the HDP, a major parliamentary party in Turkey, shows that the state of emergency imposed in response to the failed NATO-backed coup in July against President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is rapidly transforming Turkey into a presidential dictatorship. These powers will, sooner rather than later, be turned against social and political opposition in the working class. With Kurdish nationalist fighters in Turkey and Syria already clashing with Turkish forces, moreover, the arrest of top HDP officials will only intensify the ethnic tensions and bloodshed in the Near East.

After Demirtaş posted a statement on Twitter that “Police are at my door with a warrant to forcibly take me away,” social media sites including Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and YouTube were taken down in Turkey. Ars Technica reported that Skype was also being choked inside the country. Turkish officials have often blocked Internet access after major crises—including the October 2015 bombings in Ankara, and the arrests of two co-mayors of Diyarbakır last month—in order to censor information and limit social protest.

Yüksekdağ, Demirtaş, and the other HDP officials were arrested for refusing to testify in probes of their alleged support for terrorism. These charges relate to the October 2014 battle between Kurdish and Islamic State (IS) forces in Kobane, Syria; a December 2015 Democratic Society Congress (DTK) meeting in Diyarbakır province, where HDP officials demanded broad autonomy for Kurdish areas in the region; and for alleged ties to the banned Kurdish Communities Union (KCK).

HDP members are reportedly issuing a common defense against these charges, which was prepared when the Turkish parliament voted to lift its own immunity in June in order to facilitate crushing the HDP.

“Only the people who have elected me can question me about my political activities,” the joint defense declares. “We are the elected representatives of the people. We represent the people who voted for us, not ourselves. I am standing in front of you as a parliamentary representative and a member of parliament with impunity. I will never allow anyone disrespect to the identity that I represent and the will of my people.” The defense adds that HDP officials will not “be extras in a judicial theater play ordered by Erdoğan.”

Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım supported the arrests yesterday, insisting that officials should “pay the price” for “terror” activities. He confirmed that the state had deliberately taken down the Internet for “security” purposes, adding that the shutdowns were temporary.

The arrests came only days after the arrest Monday of a dozen top journalists, including editor Murat Sabuncu, at the opposition newspaper Cumhuriyet. They face charges of working for the PKK and for Feithullah Gülen, a Muslim cleric exiled in the United States whom Erdoğan accuses of launching the July coup against him.

US and European officials condemned the crackdown on the HDP, with White House spokesman Josh Earnest declaring Washington “deeply disturbed” by events in Turkey.

European Union (EU) chief diplomat Federica Mogherini issued a statement declaring that the HDP coleaders were “trusted and valued interlocutors” of the EU. It added that the arrests “compromise parliamentary democracy in Turkey and exacerbate the already very tense situation in the South East of the country.”

US and EU warnings about the accelerating collapse of Turkish parliamentary democracy are hypocritical and false, painting the imperialist powers as defenders of democracy in Turkey. Above all, they have worked to undermine parliamentary democracy in Turkey, criticizing Erdoğan’s policies from the standpoint of their imperialist interests.

Less than four months ago, Washington and Berlin tacitly backed a coup, organized out of NATO’s Incirlik air base in Turkey, that nearly toppled Erdoğan. While fighters from Incirlik and army troops tried to murder Erdoğan and seize key infrastructure around Turkey—reprising plans of NATO-backed coups in Turkey of 1960, 1971, and 1980—US and European officials made only bland statements calling for “continuity” in Turkey. The coup was aimed above all at breaking up Erdoğan’s developing ties with Russia and China.

Erdoğan, having narrowly escaped with his life, is now launching a broad crackdown inside Turkey, targeting all suspected supporters of Gülen, Kurdish nationalist groups and the media.

The policy being pursued by Erdoğan is no doubt deeply reactionary. However, it does not require deep political insight to see that he is above all reacting to crises caused by the Syrian war, for which the United States and the European powers bear primary responsibility.

When Washington and the EU pressured Erdoğan to drop his “zero problems with neighbors” foreign policy and embrace their war for regime change in Syria five years ago, this proved to have vast and unforeseen consequences. Turkey became a key transit point for the supplying of NATO-backed Islamist opposition militias in Syria like ISIS and the Al Nusra Front.

Above all, the precarious peace in Turkey between Turks and Kurds collapsed when Washington then sought to use Syrian Kurdish militias as proxies on the ground in Syria. By nourishing Kurdish separatist aspirations in Syria and nearby regions of Turkey, which also fell victim to terror bombings by IS networks in Turkey, the NATO proxy war in Syria dragged Turkey itself into a civil war.

The Erdoğan government’s current aggressive military intervention in Syria and Iraq, primarily in an attempt to block the emergence of a separate Kurdish state along its southern border, goes hand in hand with an attempt to crush internal opposition.

Both are also sharpening tensions with the imperialist powers. As Erdoğan clashes with Washington over the Obama administration’s refusal to allow Turkish troops to fully participate in the US-led onslaught against Mosul, tensions are also erupting between Erdoğan and EU officials over the crackdown on the media.

On Thursday, Erdoğan sharply attacked German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who had said the day before that the detention of the Cumhuriyet journalists was “highly alarming,” and he accused Germany of supporting terrorism.

“Terror is like a scorpion. Eventually it will bite the one who is carrying it. I don’t see a bright future for Germany. It has become a place where terrorists take refuge. There are racist attacks against Turks in Germany. It is unacceptable that Germany protects terrorists,” Erdoğan said, adding, “If Germany doubts whether [the Gülen organization] is a terrorist group, I invite them to come and visit the Turkish Parliament and Special Forces buildings, which were bombed on July 15.”