

Turkish police renew attacks on protesters

By Justus Leicht
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After six days of relative calm, the Turkish police resumed their violently attacks on demonstrators Saturday evening, using tear gas, water cannon, rubber bullets and batons.

Following the suppression of a demonstration in Taksim Square in central Istanbul. Hours of clashes between police and demonstrators took place on Istiklal Street and its side streets, and in the neighboring districts of Tarlabasi, Harbiye and Cihangir. Police made many arrests, and dozens of protesters were injured. A rally in Ankara was also forcibly broken up. A number of arrests were made in Izmir in western Turkey and in the predominantly Kurdish region of Tunceli.

In the early evening, about 10,000 people assembled in Taksim Square to commemorate the five demonstrators killed so far during the protests against the government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Initially the crowd was able to hold back special police forces with human chains. But then police responded with water cannon, using water mixed with a corrosive liquid which burned the skin after a few splashes.

After a makeshift hospital was set up in the rooms of the Chamber of Engineers, police broke windows and hurled gas grenades into the building. According to press reports, 30 of the injured were treated in the emergency hospital, including ten hit by rubber bullets fired by the police. Nine more were treated at the Istanbul Bar Association office, four of them were taken to hospital.

A report by the Istanbul Chamber of Physicians reveals the brutality employed by police since protests began on May 28 with a demonstration against the planned construction of a shopping center on the site of the Gezi Park, next to Taksim Square. The protests rapidly expanded to a nationwide wave of protests against the government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Following 20 days of protest across the country, 7,833 have been injured, with five dead, including one policeman. Thirteen people have lost eyes due to gas grenades; four of the wounded are still in intensive care. There are reports of serious abuses of individual demonstrators by plainclothes policemen, and of doctors prevented by police from treating the injured.

One Turkish newspaper reported that no less than 130,000 tear gas cartridges have been fired by police at demonstrators over the past three weeks. There are now plans to procure 100,000 cartridges of tear gas and pepper spray to replenish police stocks, plus an additional 60 water cannon.

The number of arrests is in the thousands. Not only demonstrators were arrested, but also people who supported the protests on Twitter and social networks.

The brutality of the government arises from its anxiety that the working class could intervene as an independent force. Behind the facade of economic growth marking the ten-year reign of Prime Minister Erdogan and his Islamist AKP (Justice and Development Party), social inequality has worsened dramatically. This is why the suppression of a demonstration directed against the destruction of a park triggered a nationwide protest movement with hundreds of thousands participating.

In addition, the foreign policy of the Erdogan government, which is pressing for military intervention in Syria in close cooperation with the US and European powers, is highly unpopular in the Turkish population.

Along with the police repression, Erdogan is trying to whip up national chauvinism and religious backwardness to suppress and defuse the protest movement. At the same time, he is trying to lure support from privileged layers of the country's religious and ethnic minorities.

While the police in Istanbul were preparing their crackdown on the demonstration, Erdogan spoke in the city of Samsun in front of 15,000 supporters and warned of an international conspiracy—with unmistakably anti-Semitic undertones. He claimed that protesters were entering mosques wearing shoes, drank alcohol in the mosques and threatened girls in headscarves. Orchestrating the protests, according to Erdogan, was an “international interest rate lobby” that, after Turkey, was now seeking to destabilize Brazil.

Erdogan made his speech shortly before the twentieth anniversary of the massacre in Central Anatolian Sivas. On July 2, 1993 an Islamist mob set a hotel on fire where Alevis were holding a cultural festival with many leftist intellectuals and artists in attendance. Unable to escape, 35 people died. Some of the perpetrators were members of predecessor parties to the AKP. Erdogan hinted that he will now hold an AKP party event in Sivas.

At the same time, he called on his followers to show their support by hanging a Turkish national flag out of their windows—a flag without the “accessory”, i.e., the image of the founder of modern Turkey, Kemal Ataturk, whose picture is rejected by radical Islamists.

Erdogan even addressed an appeal to supporters of the

extreme right-wing MHP (Nationalist Movement Party, or “Grey Wolves”), the second largest opposition party. “We would be proud when you unroll the three crescents, because they belong to the Ottoman Empire,” he said, referring to the flag of the MHP, which features three half-moons. The Grey Wolves are notorious for a number of massacres of Turkish Alevites.

On Sunday, the government newspaper *Today’s Zaman*, announced that the government was planning an initiative for people of the Alevi faith. Their meeting houses (Cemevi) are to be officially recognized in future and receive free building space from municipalities. Alevi clergy are also to be officially recognized and remunerated, and the government also wants to name two universities after prominent Alevi figures.

These are obvious attempts by the government to woo more conservative layers of the Alevite minority, whose number is estimated at between 10 to 20 million and play very active part in the protests.

The negotiations between the Turkish government and the Kurdish PKK (Workers’ Party of Kurdistan) must be regarded in this context. Erdogan needs the support of the PKK to pacify the desperately poor Kurdish regions in Turkey and in order to neutralize the Kurds in Syria.

The PKK has an influential affiliated section in the Kurdish areas of Syria (the Democratic Union Party – PYD), and is therefore an important factor in the Syrian civil war.

The Syrian Kurds fear the Islamist rebels, who are supported by Turkey, but are also wary of the Assad regime. The PKK may deter them from openly siding with the latter.

The PKK has responded to the overtures of the Turkish government by acting as a moderating force in the protests against Erdogan. One of its prominent leaders, Murat Karayilan, praised the Erdogan government in an interview, declaring that representatives of the regime had held talks with representatives of the Taksim movement and agreed to wait for a court decision on Gezi Park. “The resistance forces should regard this as a success,” he said. They should have abandoned their resistance and limited themselves to democratic means. This they unfortunately failed to do, he concluded.

In his crackdown on the protest movement, Erdogan can count on the support of the United States, the European Union and Germany, which all need Erdogan to prepare war against Syria.

There was a brief spat between Berlin and Ankara after German Chancellor Angela Merkel criticized the violent crackdown on the protests. In response, she was publicly admonished by the Turkish EU Minister Egemen Bagis. Then both sides summoned their ambassadors.

However, fences were mended between the two sides Saturday at the conference in Doha, which focused on preparations for escalating the war against Syria. German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle met his Turkish counterpart Ahmet Davutoglu to talk in private. It was then

reported that the two men had discussed current issues, including EU relations with Turkey, in a “constructive and friendly atmosphere”.

Merkel’s criticism of the Turkish police is also thoroughly hypocritical. In Germany, the police regularly use water cannon, tear gas and mass arrests against demonstrators—as was the case in 2007 at the G8 summit in Heiligendamm, and against the “Blockupy” protests this year in Frankfurt. Merkel’s main priority is to block Turkish-EU accession negotiations out of consideration for anti-Turkish forces in her own camp. Last week, the planned resumption of the negotiations was vetoed by Berlin.

The German opposition parties, the Social Democratic Party, the Greens and Left Party, have criticized Merkel’s hardline attitude and tried to orient the organizers of the Turkish protests to the European Union.

In *Die Welt*, the SPD general secretary, Andrea Nahles, argued against any interruption of the EU accession negotiations. “The demonstrators in Istanbul and elsewhere impress us all. These people certainly want to enter the EU with Turkey. It would be an indictment of Europe if we were to slam the door now,” she said. The leader of the Greens, Claudia Roth, made similar comments.

On Saturday, Volker Beck of the Greens, Rolf Mützenich of the SPD and Gregor Gysi of the Left Party took part in a Turkish solidarity demonstration in Cologne organized by the Alevite community in Germany with 40,000 participants. Here too, the accession of Turkey to the EU was promoted.

Meanwhile members of the Taksim Platform—including entrepreneurs, writers and professors—published an open letter appealing to EU foreign ministers to continue EU negotiations with Turkey.

This is a political dead end. Far from being a guarantor of democratic rights, the EU is an instrument of finance capital responsible for the sharpest attacks on the social and democratic rights of the working population all over Europe.

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