

Turkish government launches crackdown on Internet, opposition parties

By Halil Celik
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In the aftermath of its extremely narrow victory in the April 16 constitutional referendum and amid widespread allegations of voting fraud, the Turkish government is escalating its crackdown on political opposition and the Internet as part of the country's ongoing state of emergency.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's constitutional amendment aims to give the president dictatorial powers over other branches of government. The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) is now moving ahead with attempts to intimidate and crush any organization that could potentially pose an obstacle to its rule.

With a new statutory decree issued on April 29, the government dismissed 3,974 people from state institutions, including 484 academics, on allegations of being connected with "terrorist groups." This came two days after the suspension of some 9,000 police officers and arrest of about 1,000 others for alleged links to US-based cleric Fethullah Gulen, who was declared by the Turkish government to be the main suspect in last year's failed July 15 coup attempt.

The Republican People's Party (CHP), the leading force of the bourgeois "No" campaign, has itself become a target in the crackdown. According to the daily *Cumhuriyet*, the AKP has drawn up a motion to lift the parliamentary immunity of the CHP's chairperson and six other deputies and sent it to parliament.

The same CHP voted for a bill to amend the constitution to strip MPs of immunity from prosecution on May 20, 2016. The amendment was proposed by the AKP after Erdogan accused the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) of being a legal extension of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has waged a three-decade insurgency against Turkey for Kurdish autonomy. Since then, 14 deputies, including two chairpersons, of the HDP have been arrested.

On April 29, in another move to suppress dissent, the Information and Communication Technologies Authority, Turkey's telecommunications watchdog, blocked online encyclopedia Wikipedia "for the protection of public order, national security or the well-being of the public." The state-run Anadolu News Agency cited the statement as declaring that Wikipedia "has become part of an information source which is running a smear campaign against Turkey in the international arena."

Under the eight months of state of emergency, Turkish government has repeatedly blocked access to Twitter or Facebook and banned hundreds of web sites, and closed down hundreds of media outlets, jailing some 230 journalists.

The escalating crackdown is a clear sign of growing crisis in the Turkish ruling class. Being well aware of mounting unrest and anger within the working masses, Erdogan plans to more strictly hold the reins of his own party. On May 2, he rejoined the AKP and became the first Turkish president with party membership since 1961, when a constitution banning presidential party membership came into force after a military coup in 1960 overthrew the Democrat Party government of then-President Celal Bayar.

It is expected that Erdogan will be elected as chairperson of the AKP and launch extensive changes, including a possible purge within his party, at the extraordinary congress scheduled for May 21.

The CHP former chairperson and long-time leading member Deniz Baykal has also called for a party congress. In a televised interview on Tuesday evening, Baykal said that he told Kilicdaroglu that the CHP congress should elect a chairperson who would also be the party's candidate in the 2019 presidential elections.

Baykal's proposal points to the CHP leadership's readiness to accept Erdogan's anti-democratic amendment leading Turkey into a presidential

dictatorship. The CHP has already made clear that it has no intention of opposing the drive to dictatorship. Immediately after the referendum, it declared the “necessity of a social consensus on the constitution,” while cynically calling the legitimacy of the referendum into question. As thousands of people went into the streets to protest the fraudulent referendum results, the CHP moved to end the protests.

Meanwhile, the Turkish army is also escalating cross-border operations against both the PKK and the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its People’s Protection Units (YPG) militia, the main US proxy fighting the Islamic State (IS), further worsening Ankara’s relations with its NATO partners. Turkish air and artillery strikes have also provoked sharp criticism from Moscow, which said that they violated fundamental principles of international relations.

At a meeting with Turkey’s Chief of General Staff on April 28, U.S. European Command General Curtis Scaparrotti explained growing concerns over Turkish artillery attacks on Kurdish forces working with US troops in Syria. After Turkish strikes in the last week of April, US State Department spokesman Mark Toner said they “were not approved by the coalition and had led to the unfortunate loss of life of our partner forces” in the fight against IS.

Following the Turkish attacks and cross-border fire between the Turkish military and YPG, US forces have begun monitoring the Syria-Turkey border along with Syrian Kurdish forces. Meanwhile, Moscow has reinforced its troops in Afrin, another PYD/YPG-controlled region at the western end of the Turkish-Syrian border, further away from the main Syrian Kurdish area.

Erdogan’s dictatorial and militarist agenda has further undermined Turkish–European Union (EU) relations, which have fallen to an unprecedented low point since the July 15 coup attempt. The EU denounced Erdogan’s mass crackdown and “human right violations,” refusing to hand over dozens of Turkish officers and officials who fled to Europe after the failed coup. Ankara responded by slamming the EU for harboring “terrorists.”

After weeks of political conflict, escalated by reactionary bans by the Austrian, German and Dutch governments on Turkish government officials’ campaigning for a “Yes” vote in the referendum, EU lawmakers called last week for a formal halt to talks over Turkey’s EU membership. They cited Erdogan’s dictatorial policies and large-scale electoral fraud in the

referendum.

On May 2, European Commissioner Johannes Hahn told reporters, “The focus of our [Turkish-EU] relationship has to be something else,” while cynically stating that Turkey was “moving away from a European perspective.”

Only days before, however, German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel sounded a different note on the issue. At a meeting of European foreign ministers on 28-29 April in Malta, he told reporters he was “strictly against” nullifying Ankara’s bid for EU membership: “It does not improve things by cancelling something before we have something new to offer.”

These words, signaling the willingness of the EU to focus on working with Erdogan to block immigration to Europe and prosecute the Syrian war, were followed by German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s remarks that Europe “should not push Turkey away.” Speaking to the *Berliner Zeitung*, she stated that as a NATO member, Turkey is “an important partner in the fight against Islamist terror. ... You should not just push away such a partner, even in view of negative developments that we must address.”

The EU is Turkey’s biggest foreign investor and trading partner, and has reached a reactionary agreement with Ankara to keep Syrian refugees out of the EU.

Turkish President Erdogan continues his cynical thundering against the EU. On May 2, he insisted that Turkey was not the EU’s “door keeper.” He added: “There is no option other than opening chapters that you have not opened until now. If you open them, that’s great. If you don’t, then goodbye.” Pointing to the hypocrisy of European governments’ criticisms of his ongoing crackdown and state of emergency, Erdogan called on Brussels to “lift the state of emergency in France, first.”

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