

Amid deepening economic and political crisis, Turkey holds local elections

By Ulas Atesci
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Amid a mounting economic and political crisis, voters across Turkey will go to the polls March 31 in local elections.

Facing bitter tensions with Washington and Turkey's other NATO allies over the decades-long wars in Iraq and Syria and an economic crisis triggered by the Trump administration's trade war measures, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) faces possible defeat in the country's principal cities. This raises the prospect that the government led by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his right-wing populist AKP, which has ruled the country since late 2002, could unravel and fall.

Whatever the elections' outcome, they will solve nothing. The main rival of the "People's Alliance" of the AKP and the fascistic Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) is the so-called "Nation Alliance." It unites the Republican People's Party or CHP—the party of the capitalist-military-bureaucratic Kemalist elite that dominated the institutions of the Turkish Republic in the 20th Century—with the Good Party, a split-off from the MHP. The Nation Alliance is backed by the Kurdish nationalist Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) and a wide swathe of petty-bourgeois pseudo-left organizations.

The CHP-Good Party-Kurdish bourgeois alliance is no less hostile to the interests of the working class than the AKP-MHP alliance, from which it is distinguished mainly by its more pronounced orientation to, and closer relations with, the imperialist powers. Amid growing class struggles internationally, including the emergence of a revolutionary movement among workers and youth against Algeria's military regime, the Nation Alliance-HDP partnership serves to chain growing working class anger against Erdogan to the capitalist system and to imperialist war.

The AKP-MHP alliance emerged after the MHP backed the AKP against an abortive US- and German-backed coup attempt, launched from NATO's Incirlik air base on July 15, 2016, that aimed to kill Erdogan and topple his government. This alliance, which has controlled the national government since then, now faces a deepening economic slump, growing popular anger over social inequality, and mounting pressure and threats from Turkey's traditional imperialist allies.

Increasing tensions between Turkey and the US came to a head when Washington made the Syrian offshoot of the PKK—the Kurdish nationalist group against which Ankara has been waging a bloody war for the past 35 years—its principal proxy army in the fight to overthrow the Assad regime in Syria. Incensed, Ankara

refocused its intervention in Syria from regime change in Damascus to blocking the emergence of a PKK proto-state there. In pursuit of this goal, it has entered into a shaky alliance of convenience with Russia and Iran, who share the objective of rolling back US influence in Syria.

Since the 2016 aborted coup, Erdogan has attempted to straddle the fault lines of world geopolitics, insisting Turkey wants to maintain close relations with the US and pursue membership of the European Union. But Washington has responded with bullying and ever more strident threats.

Deepening economic crisis

US efforts to punish Turkey economically have had a significant impact on an economy that was already facing turbulence.

After Trump imposed tariffs on Turkish exports to the United States last year, Turkey's economy entered its first recession in a decade, falling 2.4 percent in the last three months of 2018. Turkey last fell into recession in 2009 amid the global economic crisis triggered by the 2008 Wall Street crash. Unemployment has surged to 13.5 percent, and 24.5 percent among the youth. In the last six months, almost 1 million people have applied for unemployment pay.

At the beginning of 2018, the minimum wage, paid to almost half of Turkish workers, was 1,603 TL (US\$424). As Turkey's currency collapses and prices soar, particularly for food, the purchasing power of the minimum wage—despite a 26 percent rise to 2,020 TL—has fallen to US\$370.

As the AKP falls in the polls and faces possible defeat in Istanbul, Ankara and other cities, there are signs that the AKP could disintegrate. Ex-Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, ex-President Abdullah Gul and other ex-AKP officials are reportedly considering launching a new party. Some sources claim they have more than 50 parliamentary deputies from both the AKP and CHP—enough to potentially bring down the AKP-MHP alliance in the national parliament.

Erdogan has responded by running a bellicose nationalist campaign, claiming an AKP victory is crucial to the Turkish people's survival against its "external and internal enemies." At an AKP rally, he also attacked AKP turncoats, denouncing those who "have gotten off the [AKP] train and boarded another. ... Those who betray us today will betray the place they go in the future."

Erdogan and MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli are branding the CHP,

the Good Party and the HDP as “terrorist” groups, saying they are aligned with the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) and what they call the Fethullahist Terrorist Organization (FETO) of Fethullah Gulen—the US-based preacher Ankara blames for the 2016 coup attempt.

In the run-up to the elections, the Erdogan government has intensified its political repression, targeting opposition leaders and candidates for legal attack. CHP leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu has been accused of insulting the interior minister in a TV speech 10 months ago, and prosecutors have begun proceedings to remove his parliamentary immunity so he can be charged and tried. HDP co-leader Sezai Temelli and the CHP’s Ankara candidate Mansur Yavas have also been hit with legal charges.

Erdogan is seeking to appeal to popular opposition to US imperialism and NATO, talking up plans to buy the S-400 air defense system from Russia, and denouncing as “terrorists” the Kurdish forces that the US and its other nominal NATO allies have used to wage their ruinous regime-change war in Syria.

The opposition Nation Alliance tries to put itself forward as the only alternative to “AKP-MHP fascism.” CHP leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu has pledged to fight for a “strong democracy” and a “strong social state” with “sustainability.” At the same time, the CHP and its allies are generally silent on relations with Turkey’s NATO allies—trying to signal to the imperialist powers that they would be more reliable allies than Erdogan.

The pledges of the Nation Alliance to fight for democracy, jobs and social spending are empty rhetoric. In fact, it is just as hostile to the struggles and social aspirations of the working class as the AKP—a point that the CHP made very clear by joining the AKP in denouncing the Izmir metro strike. Moreover, as the party of the traditional Kemalist elite, the CHP is directly implicated in all its crimes, including repeated coups and the brutal anti-Kurdish war.

Subordinating the working class to pro-imperialist parties in the name of fighting “fascism”

To present itself as to the “left” of Erdogan, the Nation Alliance relies on the services of the Kurdish nationalist HDP and the pseudo-left parties.

The HDP is endorsing the Nation Alliance even though it supports Erdogan’s cross-border military operations in Syria and Iraq, and Erdogan’s decision to jail thousands of HDP members, including former HDP leader Selahattin Demirtas and other HDP parliamentary deputies.

The HDP has refrained from nominating candidates in the major cities of western Turkey and is instead endorsing those of the Nation Alliance. The HDP is issuing empty promises to its voters that if they elect Nation Alliance candidates, these candidates will be obliged to listen to them. HDP co-chair Sezai Temelli recently said, “Mansur Yavas will know” if he becomes Ankara’s mayor “it is with HDP votes. He can’t run his politics ignoring HDP voters.”

The HDP is running its own candidates mainly in the Kurdish-majority areas of southeastern Turkey. It is also cooperating with the Felicity Party (SP, a smaller Islamist party) in some places.

From prison, where Erdogan has placed him for calling for

Kurdish autonomy in Turkey in alliance with US-backed Kurdish militias across the border in Syria, Demirtas has endorsed a Nation Alliance vote as an “anti-fascist” vote against Erdogan. He calls on HDP voters “to cast your vote for a strategic purpose to limit and retract the fascist bloc. HDP voters should never consider other parties or party members as enemies. The defeat of the AKP and the MHP depends on an effective outcome of votes you cast.”

The pseudo-left parties are claiming opposition to the AKP-MHP bloc is justification for supporting the bourgeois CHP and HDP, and even the far-right Good Party or the Islamist Felicity Party.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* stated before last June’s parliamentary and presidential elections, “The Turkish pseudo-left parties and organisations are lining up behind the pro-NATO and pro-EU bourgeois opposition parties. ... They are all in agreement on the rejection of an independent perspective for the working class—independent of all the discredited bourgeois camps.”

Alper Tas, the leader of the Freedom and Solidarity Party (ÖDP), has accepted the CHP’s nomination as a candidate for the Beyoglu district of Istanbul, with HDP and Good Party support.

On March 19, Labor Party (EMEP) leader Selma Gurkan also endorsed CHP candidates in Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir, telling the daily *Evrensel* that “the forces of labor and democracy, which includes us, have agreed to support CHP candidates” in Turkey’s major cities.

Turkey’s Socialist Equality Group endorses none of the bourgeois candidates in these elections, which will resolve nothing, regardless of which camp wins. It seeks to intervene in these elections to lay out the basis of an independent policy of the Turkish and international working class, oppose the wars and bankrupt political pretensions of the capitalist parties, and develop its struggle to build a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Turkey.

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