

Turkey's political crisis escalates after mob attack on CHP leader

By Ulas Atesci
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Kemal Kilicdaroglu, the leader of Turkey's main opposition party, the Republican People's Party, or CHP, was physically attacked by a right-wing mob Sunday, when he attended the funeral of a fallen soldier, Yener Kirikci, in the capital Ankara.

This reactionary, near lynching is the outcome of the frenzied atmosphere created by the bellicose nationalist campaign mounted by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), and his ultra-right wing alliance partner, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). It must be unreservedly condemned by workers and youth.

However, our opposition to this attack does not imply any support for the CHP, a right-wing, pro-NATO party, which has itself whipped up aggressive nationalism and is formally allied with a split-off from the MHP, the Good Party. The CHP is the party of the traditional Kemalist bourgeois elite that dominated the Turkish Republic until the beginning of this century and is complicit in all its crimes, including repeated military coups, the violent suppression of the working class, and the oppression of the Kurdish people.

Kirikci and three other soldiers were killed on April 19 during military operations near the Iraqi border targeting the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), the Kurdish nationalist movement against which the Turkish state has waged a bloody counter-insurgency war in the country's southeast for the past 35 years.

The attack on Kilicdaroglu came in the midst of an ongoing dispute over the outcome of the March 31 local elections in which the ruling AKP suffered significant losses in five of Turkey's six largest cities; the unravelling of relations with Washington, for seven decades the Turkish ruling elite's principal military-security partner; growing military clashes between the Turkish army and the PKK near the border with Iraq and elsewhere; and intense preparations for a new military intervention in Syria directed against the YPG —the Syrian offshoot of the PKK.

Last Thursday, Erdogan called at a conference organized by the pro-government Confederation of Public Servants Trade Unions for "national unity," saying now that the local elections had been held, "political discussion" should be put "behind," so as to "focus on our real agenda, particularly on economy and security."

Kilicdaroglu, in an interview with *Haberturk* on Saturday, supported this reactionary call, declaring, "Turkey must form an alliance on national issues." He then added, "Erdogan said 'The Turkish lira will gain value and the economy will get back on the rails.' We expect him to do this. If he does, we will applaud him." This was a clear message that the CHP fully supports the government's plans for a new austerity offensive against the working class at the behest of the country's main business organization, TUSIAD.

Camera footage shows the mob punching and kicking at Kilicdaroglu, who had to be hustled away by security officials. The group then gathered outside a nearby house where he had taken refuge, chanting "PKK out." There were also shouts of "burn the house down."

Security forces routinely violently attack worker and other anti-government protests. But in this case, they did not resort to tear gas or truncheons. Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar, who was also present at the funeral, told those who had gathered outside the house, "My brothers, you have given your messages, showed your reactions, now we're evacuating this place peacefully."

Under conditions where there was a growing public outcry and Turkey's Supreme Election Council was still deliberating over the AKP's request that it annul the CHP's election victory in Istanbul and order a revote, the government thought it politic to distance itself from the attack on Kilicdaroglu.

On Sunday and Monday, government and AKP spokesmen issued a series of statements condemning the attack. President Erdogan's spokesperson Ibrahim Kalin, for example, said, "I denounce this heinous attack against Mr. Kemal Kilicdaroglu." Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu declared, "Such an incident at a martyr's funeral is unacceptable."

These condemnations are entirely hypocritical and self-serving. Interior Minister Soylu himself recently declared that CHP officials should not be allowed to attend soldiers' funerals. More importantly, President Erdogan, his officials and his ultra-right-wing alliance partner, the MHP, repeatedly denounced the CHP leader as a "terrorist collaborator" in the run-up to the March 31 elections. This was an attempt to "weaponize" against the CHP the support that it was receiving from the Kurdish nationalist People's Democratic Party

(HDP). Although there is no formal alliance between them, the HDP called for a vote for the CHP mayoral candidates in the major cities of western Turkey, claiming their victory would strike a blow against the “fascist,” Erdogan-led AKP regime.

On the very day of the attack on Kilicdaroglu, a pro-government tabloid, *Gunes*, blared across its front-page an article on Friday’s killing of the four Turkish soldiers by PKK militants under the heading “Are you happy Ekrem?” This was a crude attempt to tie the soldiers’ deaths to the CHP—and in particular the newly-inducted mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem Imamoglu, whose election the government is seeking to overturn.

While Erdogan and his AKP have tried to distance themselves from Sunday’s attack, MHP leader Devlet Bahceli’s has not been so circumspect. Insinuating Kilicdaroglu deserved to be attacked, Bahceli asked rhetorically, “What did Kilicdaroglu do to make the people so angry?” In the same statement, Bahceli threatened anyone who tries to defy the government’s ban on May Day demonstrations in Istanbul’s Taksim Square.

The AKP has admitted that one of its members was involved in the attack on Kilicdaroglu and party spokesman Omer Celik has said that he will be expelled. According to the attorney general’s office, nine persons were arrested for their suspected involvement. All but one have now been released.

Addressing his supporters later Sunday near the CHP headquarters in Ankara, Kilicdaroglu denounced the attack on him as an attack on the “unity and integrity” of the country. He then boasted that the CHP has martyrs in “Canakkale We have martyrs in Afrin.” The former is a reference to the First World War, in which the Ottoman Empire functioned as a junior partner of German imperialism and which all the Turkish and Kurdish bourgeois nationalist parties falsely glorify as the beginning of Turkey’s “war of independence.” By invoking “Afrin,” Kilicdaroglu was emphasizing his party’s support for Turkey’s illegal invasion of Syria.

Once again highlighting the need for unity within the Turkish ruling class and political establishment, Kilicdaroglu told an interview with several newspapers Monday that with the country “cornered on many fronts ... Turkey should, at least in the field of politics, act and react together.”

HDP leaders Sezai Temelli and Pervin Buldan denounced Sunday’s attack on Kilicdaroglu, charged the AKP-MHP alliance with responsibility for it, and then visited the CHP leader at his party’s headquarters.

On April 17, police had attacked an HDP protest in the southeastern city of Diyarbakir against the Supreme Board of Elections’ (YSK) decision to arbitrarily prevent several HDP mayoral candidates elected on March 31 from taking office and award the mayoralities instead to the second-place finishers from the AKP. The HDP MP for Diyarbakir, Remziye Tosun, was injured by police water-cannon fire during the protest and later taken to a hospital.

On Friday, in an action that provoked widespread anger, police attacked the mothers of jailed PKK members who are on hunger strike, when they tried to stage a sit-in in front of Gebze prison. Video footage shows police harassing and attacking several elderly women. There are ongoing widespread hunger strikes in prisons in Turkey and internationally to demand an end to the solitary confinement of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan at Imrali Island Prison, in violation of international law.

Underscoring the party’s longstanding orientation to the western imperialist powers, the HDP is calling upon “the authorities of the Council of Europe ... the European Union and European Parliament,” to press “the Turkish government to terminate the policy of isolation on Mr. Öcalan and other prisoners.”

While today the HDP is in an increasingly close alliance with the CHP, during the so-called “peace process” between Ankara and the PKK at the beginning of the decade the HDP was a key supporter of the AKP government in its anti-working class, pro-imperialist policies. It came into conflict with Erdogan only after he fell out with Ankara’s NATO partners.

As for the CHP, in 2015 it supported a brutal crackdown on Kurdish towns in which 4,000 people were killed, more than 10,000 jailed and 200,000 people forced to flee their homes, and in 2016 it voted for an AKP-backed constitutional amendment lifting parliamentary immunity. As a result, many HDP MPs, including its leaders, were arrested and jailed. The CHP has also supported all the government’s cross-border military operations against Syria and Iraq targeting the Kurds.

While they posture as defenders of democracy, the CHP and HDP are principally distinguished from the AKP by their more pronounced orientation to, and closer relations with, the imperialist powers. Both parties are determined supporters of the US-led imperialist wars in the Middle East.

The reality is the most basic struggle for democratic rights requires a genuinely socialist politics that must be fully independent of and hostile to imperialism and all the parties and factions of the Turkish and Kurdish bourgeoisie. In opposition to the CHP and HDP, and their orientation to the very imperialist forces that are responsible for the oppression and wars that have ravaged the Middle East, including the inciting of ethnic and communal divisions and the continuing oppression of the Kurds, workers in Turkey must base their struggle for democratic rights and social equality on the fight for workers’ power and the unity of the international working class.

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