

Systematic Oppression as the Basis for Erdogan's 'New Turkey'

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HDP

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Recep Tayyip Erdogan's 'New Turkey' is defined by intimidation of the democratic opposition, prosecution of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), and extermination of any remnants of civil society. Overseas, it manifests itself as blackmailing the European Union, intervening in neighboring countries, and employing ruthless military aggression. Another aspect of 'New Turkey' is that Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) has built a coalition with the ultra-nationalist right-wing Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) to stay in power.

Lack of democracy in Turkey is by no means a new or recent issue. It has deep-rooted causes that date back to the foundation of the state. Yet, throughout the course of Turkish history, the struggle for a democratic Turkey has never stopped – and it is still going on. When the AKP came into power in 2002, Erdogan, as party chairman, declared to both the “nation” and the “international community” that the AKP would pursue a policy geared towards a stable and democratic Turkey.

According to this, the collective rights of unrepresented people and of women, and the elements of democratic society should have been ensured in a new Turkish constitution. And the 'Policy of Zero Problems with our Neighbors' should have been adopted in response to the rapid changes engulfing the world. In a nutshell, Erdogan convinced both the national and international community that Turkey's deep-rooted problems, including the Kurdish question, would be resolved within the framework of democratisation.

In contrast to this rhetoric, the weak Turkish democracy regressed further: the rule of law and international conventions were permanently abused, and transparency and accountability were laid aside. Today, exercising any of the democratic rights ostensibly guaranteed by law is de-facto prohibited. Under his authoritarian regime, Erdoğan proclaims "the new Turkey". But there are structural and political problems. He is dismantling the last remnants of democracy and trying to eliminate his opponents by any means in order to institutionalise his regime.

Within this framework, the HDP, the second largest opposition party, is subjected to constant prosecutions, and its members, deputies and co-mayors are unlawfully arrested and dismissed, despite acting in compliance with the law. At the same time, “New Turkey's” foreign policy, which is described as *'pre-emptive rather than being reactive'*, consists of training and equipping the extremist armed groups – including Islamic State (Daesh) – that fueled wars in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh. In today's “New Turkey”, social justice, peace, and the democratic development of the Republic are no longer in effect. The deteriorating situation also jeopardises hopes for peace and prosperity in the wider Middle East.

HDP joining the elections as a new political party

In democracies, the promotion of political representation and participation, and the enactment of laws and legislation in accordance with pluralism and democratic principles are acknowledged as fundamental principles.

There is no electoral threshold for independent candidates joining in the elections. Predecessor parties to HDP were joining the elections as independent candidates in order to bypass the 10 percent election threshold needed to win seats. The elected deputies were then forming a group in the assembly. However, this is not an alternative

to the 10 percent electoral threshold because with the independent candidates a political party cannot disclose its full potential due to juridical and electoral restrictions. In Turkey, at every election, millions of people (mostly Kurds) are deprived of representation in the National Assembly due to the party they voted for not reaching the extraordinarily high 10 percent electoral threshold. The HDP, founded in 2012, decided to try and overcome the 10 percent threshold when it competed in the June 7, 2015 elections as a political party. This raised fears in the AKP, which, so far, had never had to form a coalition government. Not least of their worries was that if the HDP were to succeed in crossing the threshold, this could endanger their plans to change the constitution, which they considered a high priority. Prior to these elections, several predecessor parties to the HDP that were banned or prevented from running in the elections ran as independent candidates, which allowed the AKP to win more seats in the predominantly Kurdish regions. Under this unfair system, the ruling AKP was always the winner, and they therefore advocate for retaining the 10 percent threshold.

HDP's election campaigns under bloody attack

Following the HDP's decision to join the 7 June 2015 elections as a political party, they were subjected to systematic and continuing oppression, including a series of bomb attacks. A bouquet of flowers that included explosives and a parcel bomb destroyed the [HDP regional headquarters](#) in Mersin and Adana. On the eve of the elections, [a twin bomb blast in the HDP's Diyarbakir rally](#) killed three people and left more than two hundred people wounded.

Despite these bloody attacks and widespread election fraud, the HDP surpassed the 10 percent threshold with 13.2 percent of the votes cast, securing 80 seats in the Turkish National Assembly. Political analysts expected that the HDP's electoral success would contribute to bringing lasting peace and to the democratisation of Turkey. The HDP was undertaking a key role in working towards peace by supporting the ongoing peace talks between the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and its leader Abdullah Öcalan (who has been incarcerated on the prison island of Imrali since 1999) and the Turkish government.

The electoral success of the HDP served as a warning to Erdogan over his ambitions to use the political vacuum in Turkey to build an authoritarian regime. This was the AKP's first major setback since Erdogan's party came into power in 2002. A single party government was no longer possible, and they had to form a coalition to stay in power.

However, on 1 November 2015, Erdogan declared a snap election to re-claim the AKP majority and form a single party government. His party's campaign was conceived according to the discourse, *'We understood your messages, we will sort them out.'* These seemingly positive words played out in the field as attacks on the HDP. [The former Prime Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu](#), commented: *"When the history of the Republic of Turkey is written one day, one of the most critical periods will be the one between June 7 and November 1."*

A dark new chapter...

The time period that Davutoglu highlighted was, indeed, extraordinary, and behind closed doors a range of plans were clearly being drawn up. First and foremost, the peace talks, which had lasted for three years, collapsed. In the predominantly Kurdish towns of Cizre, Sur, and Nusaybin, round the clock curfews were imposed that were followed by harsh military interventions. These caused the deaths of thousands and

the displacement of half a million people. Whole sections of these cities were destroyed, and warcrimes, including extrajudicial killings of civilians, were carried out by Turkish soldiers and by Islamist mercenaries under Turkish government oversight. Some of these warcrimes were documented and the evidence presented to [the United Nations and several European courts](#).

[HDP party offices and headquarters](#) across the country were stormed and burnt down by mobs. [In the Suruç bombings](#) (8 September 2015) the party lost 33 young people from one of their component organisations, *the Federation of Socialist Youth Associations (SGDF)*, in a suicide attack committed by an ISIS militant in this Kurdish town in Turkey. In Ankara, (10 October 2015) 103 HDP sympathisers were killed in two suicide bomb attacks by ISIS militants [at an HDP peace rally](#).

The months between the elections marked a dark new chapter in the Turkish political landscape, as the HDP was forced to halt all rallies due to a lack of security measures. Yet, once again, the party crossed the anti-democratic 10 percent threshold in the November 1 elections.

Repressions against all of civil society was 'legalised' when the so-called 'Turkish type presidential system' was established under emergency rule in 2017. With this system, Erdogan took all executive, legislative, and judicial powers under his control. [Human Rights Watch \(2020\) reported](#) that "Turkey has been experiencing a deepening human rights crisis over the past four years with a dramatic erosion of its rule of law and democracy framework."

AKP compensates for its defeats by prosecuting deputies and seizing municipalities

The AKP's primary strategy remains the obstruction of the HDP by all means, including by assigning unelected government-appointed trustees in place of elected representatives, and by show trials based on unfounded and insubstantial indictments. Exterminating the HDP in the political arena seems to have become an existential issue for the AKP. Laws and legislations, including the binding conventions associated with political representation and participation, have been permanently abused for this purpose.

Table-1: Penalties given to MPs elected for 2015-2018 electoral term

Members of Parliament	Penalties
Selahattin Demirtas*	4 years and 8 months
Figen Yüksekdağ*	1 year and 6 months
İdris Baluken	16 years and 8 months
Çağlar Demirel	7 years and 6 months
Abdullah Zeydan	8 years, 1 month and 15 days
Gülser Yıldırım	7 years and 6 months

Immunity from prosecution was lifted from eleven HDP deputies during the 2015-2018 and the current electoral terms. Table -1 shows those deputies who were elected for the 2015-2018 electoral term and were given aggravated penalties. Our former co-chairs, Figen Yüksekdağ* and Selahattin Demirtas*, were among these deputies.

Table-2: Penalties given to MPs elected for 2018-2023 electoral term

Members of Parliament	Penalties
Musa Farisoğulları	9 years
Leyla Güven	22 years
Omer Faruk Gergerlioglu	2,5 years

Table-2 displays the 3 HDP deputies who were elected for the 2018-2023 electoral term and have been given aggravated penalties.

Our former deputies Nazmi Gür, Ayla Akat Ata, Ayhan Bilgen (suspended mayor of Kars), Beyza Üstün, and Emine Ayna were arrested in 2020 on charges based on parliamentary activities they engaged in before the 2015 elections. As of May 2021, 14 HDP deputies are under arrest.

Elected municipalities replaced by unelected government-appointed trustees

Following the local elections held on 31 March 2019, Erdogan replaced the elected representatives in 49 out of the 65 municipalities won by the HDP with government-appointed trustees. These municipalities included three metropolitan areas, five provinces and 33 districts. 37 municipal co-chairs, including 19 women, were imprisoned. As of March - 2021, 15 Co-Mayors, including Diyarbakır Metropolitan Co-Mayor Adnan Selçuk Mızraklı, Co-Mayor of Kars Ayhan Bilgen and seven women, remain in detention. A further six Co-Mayors are under house arrest.

Assigning unelected government-appointed trustees in place of elected representatives is not new. Those co-mayors elected on 30 March 2014 local elections were replaced by unelected government-appointed trustees in September 2016. Thus, 95 elected municipalities run by the HDP's main coalition component, the Democratic Regions Party's (DBP), were seized and trustees imposed, and 93 co-mayors were subsequently arrested. This removed the co-leadership system, which had been adopted to achieve gender-equality, and also resulted in the abolition of many women-led organisations. Among the several Co-Mayors detained at that time are the Co-Mayor of Diyarbakır Metropolitan Gültan Kisanak, Co-Mayor of Van Metropolitan Bekir Kaya, Co-Mayor of Hakkari Dilek Hatipoglu, and Co-Mayor of Dersim Nurhayat Altun.

Prosecutions of HDP members between 2015 – 2021

Our records show that over 10 thousands HDP members have been under arrest since 2015. Some thousands of HDP members have been released after being behind bars - sometimes for years - but there are still more than 4 thousands HDP members, including MPs and co-mayors, in prison. There are also thousands of HDP members living abroad, including MPs and former co-mayors who had to escape from politically-motivated arrest warrants issued by the pro-AKP judiciary.

'Kobani Case'

'Kobani Case' has started on 26 April 2021 and postponed. The second trial for the case to be held on 18 May 2021 and could go on.

In October 2014, the HDP called on people to support legitimate popular protests for Kobani against the ISIS attack on the city and the ongoing support for ISIS being shown by the Turkish regime. For years, the HDP has been calling for a parliamentary inquiry to shed light on what led to the violence, but Erdogan's regime has always rejected this proposal.

- Selahattin Demirtas, former Co-Chair of the HDP, was detained on 4 November 2016 as part of this case, which thus fell under the scrutiny of the European Court of Human Rights.

- On 22 December 2020, The [ECHR called](#) for his immediate release arguing that the case had no basis, and the detention was purely political.
- Erdogan, instead of implementing the decision of the ECHR began a new step with his control of the judicial system and justice.
- On 28 December 2020, Erdogan held HDP responsible as *“the main perpetrator of the incidents of 6-8 October 2014”*.
- On 30 December 2020, the prosecutor's office filed an indictment.
- On 7 January 2021, the indictment was filed and 'Kobani Case' was accepted by the Criminal Court in Ankara. This series of events shows that the 'Kobani Case' is in fact a political trial that was carried out by the Erdogan regime.

Afterwards, the Turkish Attorney General has started 'Kobani Case' and ordered the detention of 108 individuals, among them leading representatives of the HDP; 28 of whom are being held hostage as already mentioned. There is an ongoing manhunt for 75 people. With this show trial, they want to portray known politicians as criminals in order for social support to the HDP to be arrested. The 3530-page indictment contains evidence that has nothing to do with the truth. If things go according to Erdogan's wishes, Selahattin Demirtas should spend up to 15,000 years in prison. This is the request of the Office of the Attorney General. But this is a proxy trial to avenge the victory against ISIS at Kobani. Thus, they want to criminalise resistance and solidarity with Kobani and oppress the HDP by legal system that does not exist in Turkey. As stated by the HDP's former Co-Chair, Selahattin Demirtas, *“What really devastates Erdogan is not our people who have been brutally murdered, but ISIS's defeat in Kobani.”*

Attempts to dissolve HDP

The indictment filed by Turkey's Court of Cassation prosecutor at the Constitutional Court seeking the dissolution of the HDP and the political ban on more than 687 HDP members. This case is also being used as the basis for closing down the HDP completely. The Prosecutor General's Office issued an indictment calling for closure on 17 March. The Constitutional Court found the indictment 'duly incomplete and wrong': namely, the prosecutor's allegations regarding the closure of the HDP were found to be insubstantial. Yet, the closure of the HDP is still at stake since the rule of law has been instrumentalised to incarcerate HDP members.

Ending press freedom

Under Erdogan, 90-95 percent of the media in Turkey has been brought under control of the government. After preventing democratic, free, and independent information networks, and banning and blocking thousands of websites and dozens of newspapers, magazines, and other information sources, Erdogan is able to impose his own opinion on society as he tries to institutionalise his regime. On World Press Freedom Day – 3 May 2021 - with at least 68 journalists deprived of their freedom, the Co-Chair of Turkey's Human Rights Association, Eren Keskin, summarized the situation as follows: *“I really describe the process we are going through as 'terrible'. I have been fighting for human rights for 30 years. There has never been a time when I felt so unpredictable and unprotected. I really do not remember a process where the law is dependent on a single center and the judges and prosecutors were so afraid.”*

Intervening in university autonomy

Since 2018, Recep Tayyip Erdogan has himself been deciding on appointments to top university posts.

Bosphorus (Bogazici) University is one of Turkey's leading universities and used to elect its rectors from its own ranks. But in early January 2021, Erdoğan appointed the AKP's Melih Bulu as the new university rector. Protests against Melih Bulu have been violently suppressed and over 500 students have been arrested. There are no official figures stating how many are still imprisoned.

In the "New Turkey", universities are losing their universal perspective and are becoming ideological centers for the Turkish-Islamic-conservative worldview.

Withdrawing from the Istanbul Convention

On 20 March 2021, the Turkish government withdrew from the [Istanbul convention](#) – the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. A report released by Human Rights Watch addressing Turkey's regression in fundamental democratic rights describes how Erdoğan's onslaught on rights and democracy targets women, Kurds, LGBT people, and democratic safeguards.

According to the organisation called "[We Will End Femicide Platform](#)" at least 106 women were murdered by men in Turkey in the first quarter of 2021. The actual figure is believed to be much higher. The same organisation classified a further 171 deaths, including alleged suicides, as "suspicious". The ideal woman envisaged by the "new Turkey" is without rights and freedoms, apolitical, obedient to men, covered with a headscarf, and staying at home cooking and giving birth.

Violating international conventions

The Turkish state under Erdoğan's rule has become known for its record of human rights violations and its constant postponement of the obligations that it is compelled to fulfil under international law. The latest report by the [Committee for the Prevention of Torture \(CPT\)](#) made clear that the situation in İmralı F-type High-Security Prison where Abdullah Öcalan and 4 prisoners are held is a matter of grave concern. The committee found the prison conditions unacceptable and urged the Turkish authorities to allow prisoners to exercise their fundamental rights without further delay. Abdullah Öcalan is under solitary confinement; he is not allowed to meet his attorneys or his family members, despite calls from the CPT.

The European Parliament resolution of 11 March 2021 on [the Syria conflict - 10 years after the uprising](#) made clear that Turkey is an occupier in contradiction of international law, and urged them to withdraw their troops from the occupied lands in North Syria. In external affairs, "New Turkey" takes a neo Ottoman orientation, leading to escalating tension with neighbouring countries and with Cyprus and Libya. In the following resolution, the European Parliament has also addressed Turkey's practice of ethnic cleansing.

The European Parliament "Calls on Turkey to withdraw its troops from Northern Syria which it is illegally occupying outside of any UN mandate; condemns Turkey's illegal transfers of Kurdish Syrians from occupied Northern Syria to Turkey for detention and prosecution in violation of Turkey's international obligations under the Geneva Conventions; urges that all Syrian detainees who have been transferred to Turkey be immediately repatriated to the occupied territories in Syria; is worried that Turkey's ongoing displacements could amount to ethnic cleansing against the Syrian Kurdish population; stresses that Turkey's illegal invasion and occupation has jeopardised

peace in Syria, the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean; firmly condemns Turkey's use of Syrian mercenaries in conflicts in Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh, in violation of international law."

Afrin, a Kurdish town and region in northern Syria, has been subjected to severe human rights violations since it was invaded by the Turkish Army in January 2018. These crimes have been reported by various organisations, including by [the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights](#). Reports reveal that Afrin women have been subjected to systematic torture, disappearance, kidnapping, rape and murder, raising grave concerns, including from [the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) and the [U.S. Department of State](#).

What we have described in this report is just the tip of the iceberg. To document all the human rights violations and war crimes committed by Erdogan's government would require many many more pages.

In conclusion

One result of the coalition between the AKP and the MHP is that policy against the Kurds and other religious and ethnic groups has become increasingly aggressive. To keep hold of power even in an economic crisis, the Government, and its coalition partner the MHP (whom they made the Turkish type presidential system together), have brought forward war in Syria and Iraq and pursued a policy of annihilation against the Kurds in Turkey, Syria and Iraq. As a result, the peace process initiated by Abdullah Öcalan from Imrali prison has been stopped since 2015. As long as the road of dialogue for peace is closed off, violence will go on. The political strategy of the government under Erdogan is based on authoritarianism, a feudalistic interpretation of Islam, coalitions with nationalists and radical jihadists, violence, war and oppression – all this leads to a dead end.

Turkey has moved away from democracy and plunged into authoritarianism. The state apparatus and institutions are being reconfigured to control state mechanisms. The primary task of the reconfigured state has become the suppression of democratic organisation so as to make space for the authoritarian regime. Democratic regression is observed in every sphere of life, damaging society both economically and morally.

The HDP plays a crucial role in ensuring the democratic rights of the Kurdish people, in building peace, and in bringing forward the democratisation of Turkey. The political achievements that the HDP managed to obtain through Turkey's weak democracy can also help other communities to work together for coexistence and democracy. But if Turkish democracy is allowed to regress further this will have severed consequences, not just regionally but also internationally. If democracy is to be strengthened, the Turkish government needs to be encouraged to accept the HDP's significant role.

We are asking international organisations – the United Nations, the Council of Europe, the European Union, and European governments – to sustain the necessary political pressure on the Turkish government so that they commit to human rights conventions and international law. Whenever Erdogan's "new Turkey" is accepted internationally as a "legitimate" partner, wars, violence, occupations, oppression, persecution, and imprisonment become normalised. These acts should not be normalised.

Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) Representation in Europe, 18.05.2021

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