

Then they came for the CHP – a weekly news review

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Ekrem İmamoğlu, the Mayor of Istanbul, has often been touted as the person who could beat President Erdoğan in the forthcoming Presidential election – although the opposition coalition is yet to announce its candidate. On Wednesday, an Istanbul court [sentenced](#) him to 2 years, 7 months, and 15 days in prison for “insulting a public official.” Although the prison sentence would likely be suspended, if the appeal court approves the ruling, he will be removed from his post and banned from politics.

İmamoğlu is a politician with broad appeal, despite having lost some of his original shine, and he had proved his popularity in opinion polls. As if this were not enough to raise Erdoğan's ire, his election as mayor in 2019, for the Republican People's Party (CHP), ended the 25-year reign of Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its predecessors over the city; and his win was made possible thanks to the Kurdish vote, though İmamoğlu himself never acknowledges as much. İmamoğlu's card had long been marked.

When İmamoğlu narrowly squeezed ahead in the mayoral election held in March 2019, the government had responded by annulling the election and calling for a rerun in June. Second time around, he increased his majority to nearly 10%. That autumn, İmamoğlu criticised the initial annulment at the Council of Europe, whereupon Turkey's Interior Minister, Süleyman Soylu, called him a "fool" who would pay for this. İmamoğlu responded, to journalists, that, "Those who cancelled the elections are fools". A year and a half later, on the basis of this response, he was sued for insulting the members of the Supreme Electoral Council. "Insulting a public official" is punishable with up to four years imprisonment. Turkey's judicial system has become heavily politicised, and it appears that, in this case, a change of judge helped secure the desired result.

This verdict follows a ruling in May, when the Court of Cassation [approved](#) a four-year eleven-month sentence for the CHP's İstanbul Provincial Chair, Canan Kaftancıoğlu, who is credited as a key architect of İmamoğlu's victory. Old social media posts were deemed to prove Kaftancıoğlu guilty of "insulting a public official", "openly degrading the state of the Republic of Turkey" and "insulting the president". Although she was immediately released from prison under judicial supervision, she is forbidden from standing for political office.

The government is also [prosecuting](#) Funda Buyruk, the CHP Deputy Mayor of the District of Seyhan, in metropolitan Adana, who was arrested in June, along with Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) politicians and Kurdish activists, in one of the many cases that [claim](#) to be targeting PKK links. Buyruk spent ten days in prison before being released under judicial control, and has been suspended from her post.

On the afternoon of İmamoğlu's trial, thousands of people attended an impromptu rally to listen to him and to other opposition leaders, and there was another rally the next day. This attack on Istanbul's mayor has galvanized the opposition coalition into a unity that had seemed to be eluding them, and many people – including some members of the AKP – are wondering if the government has not made a tactical error. Parallels have been drawn with Erdoğan's own political trajectory. This was founded on his term as mayor of Istanbul, and Erdoğan's own mayorship was [curtailed](#) when he was sent to prison for a poem he had recited.

There has been international condemnation against what Human Rights Watch has [described](#) as “a travesty of justice and an attack on the democratic process, demonstrating that as the 2023 elections approach the government is prepared to misuse courts to sideline or silence key opposition figures.” However, to anyone familiar with the Turkish government's abuse of the judicial system against the pro-Kurdish, leftist HDP, these moves should come as no surprise. A presidential decree, brought in during the emergency following the 2016 coup attempt, was used to oust 97 of the 102 HDP mayors elected in 2014, and 53 of the 65 HDP mayors elected in 2019 – with a further six prevented from taking up their posts. The deposed mayors and their councils were replaced by state-appointed governors, with many of the mayors themselves either sent to prison or forced into exile. Kurdish politicians in Turkey have always faced the prospect of jail sentences, and HDP politicians are no exception. In a press conference for Human Rights Day last Saturday, the HDP's Serhat Eren summarised the state's attacks on his party. He [noted](#) that, since 2015, “approximately 16 thousand people have been detained, and at least 5 thousand people, including our former co-chairs, deputies, provincial-district co-chairs, executives and members, have been arrested... [and] at least 340 physical attacks have been carried out on HDP city-district buildings, stands, rallies, actions and people.” Two connected ongoing court cases could see leading party members jailed for life without parole and the party [closed down](#) with 451 named members banned from politics for five years. The court processes have been demonstrated to be systematically flawed, including by rulings from the European Court of Human Rights, which are routinely ignored. The inadequacy of the international

response to Turkey's attacks on the HDP has emboldened the Turkish government to broaden its use of the courts to attack other political opponents.

The CHP can be blamed not only for failing to take a stand in defence of the HDP, but for abetting the government in one of its most significant attacks. The CHP is rooted in Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's ethnic nationalism, and it is the CHP, rather than the AKP, that has a history of anti-Kurdish ideology. While the party leadership may want to move on from this, they do not want to antagonise their supporters, especially with the government competing for the nationalist vote and stoking anti-Kurdish racism; and they do not want to alienate their right-wing allies in the İYİ Party. The CHP has publicly criticised the attempt to ban the HDP, and the government's dismissal of binding European Court of Human Rights rulings; but they have not made these into campaigning issues. And, in 2016, they supported the AKP government's constitutional amendment that allowed for the en bloc removal of parliamentary immunity for MPs under criminal investigation: an amendment that has subsequently been ruled out of order by the European Court, but which still exists. This amendment has been used to enable the arrest and charging of a large number of HDP MPs, and, just last week, proceedings were [started](#) that could result in the lifting of parliamentary immunity from a further 25 MPs – 21 from the HDP, and one each from the (HDP-related) Democratic Regions Party (DBP), the CHP, the Turkish Workers' Party, and the far-right, anti-immigrant Victory Party. Parliamentary immunity is never absolute, but it is [deemed necessary](#) in order to allow elected representatives to do their job without fear of interference from government or judiciary. Erdoğan is adept at keeping the CHP on the back foot, but, as they are discovering, appeasing bullies never works.

Swedish concessions

This is a lesson that also needs to be taken on board by Sweden and Finland as they attempt to persuade Turkey to lift their veto and allow them to join NATO. Erdoğan is determined to milk the situation for every concession he can get. The Swedish paper, Dagens Nyheter, has seen a document compiled

by the Swedish government on 25 November that lists what Sweden has done so far to implement last August's rather vaguely worded agreement with Turkey. Sweden's chief negotiator told the paper that they have used the list to show both Turkey and NATO the seriousness of their commitment.

The [article](#) makes grim reading. It talks about paying more attention to "PKK-related security problems" in applications for residence and work permits, and it claims that, "So far, a dozen individuals have recently been prevented from entering Sweden for that reason, and a number have been forced to leave". It talks about building "long-term cooperation to counter international terrorism", and about "new analyses" that will deal with the "PKK's role in the threat to Swedish national security and in organized crime" and "lead to concrete results". The reference to "Swedish national security" is especially alarming, as even Europol admit in their [annual report](#) that, "No PKK terrorist attacks have been reported by [EU] Member States during 2021" and, "[a]lthough violence appears to be integral to PKK ideology, regular PKK demonstrations throughout the EU are typically carried out in a non-violent manner and have not, to date, posed a significant terrorist threat to the EU."

Dagens Nyheter showed the government list to Michael Sahlin, who was ambassador to Turkey in the mid-nineties, and who confessed to "a kind of astonishment... that we are prepared to stretch this far." In his words, the list signals "that Sweden has really tried to operationalize the whole thing in a way that meets Turkey's description of reality." And, even so, he warns that, "it is easy for it to end up in a "slippery slope" where the Turks constantly demand more." Indeed, Turkey still appears not to be satisfied.

The next individual to fall foul of Sweden's new approach could be Nahsan Keser, a Kurdish pizza baker from Turkey and father of a six-year-old son, who has been [denied](#) residency on the grounds that Sweden's secret services claim that his Kurdish journalist wife, who is a Swedish citizen, has "terror links". This recent targeting of Kurdish immigrants comes on top of more general problematic and arbitrary immigration laws introduced in reaction to the influx of refugees in 2015.

But Swedish concessions don't just affect individuals and Sweden's Kurdish community. They also have strategic consequences, and not just for Sweden.

Swedish journalist, Bitte Hammargren, argues that Turkey is [aiming](#) to use the Nordic countries to force NATO as a whole to begin to distance itself from the Kurdish Peoples Protection Units (YPG) in Syria; and she recalls that this is not the first time that Turkey has tried to exploit an unrelated issue to force NATO to treat the YPG as terrorists. In 2019, Turkey held back approval of [NATO's defence plans](#) for Poland and the Balkans to try force a change of line.

Syria

Threats and bullying are Erdoğan's negotiating style, and he has proved that he is not afraid to use violence to back these up. He is still threatening an imminent ground invasion into North and East Syria – as well as a surprise attack on Greece – but the most significant developments at the moment are probably taking place on phones and in meeting rooms. Both Washington and Moscow are attempting to arrange compromise deals that would appease Turkey. They want to pre-empt another full-scale Turkish invasion that would destroy America's fight against ISIS and weaken Russia's Syrian allies.

Russian plans appear to consist of a strengthening of their 2019 agreement, which saw the Autonomous Administration's Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) officially withdrawing from the 30km border strip, leaving the actual border manned by Syrian regime forces, but with internal control still in the hands of the administration and protected by the administration's internal security forces (Asayish). Meanwhile, Erdoğan is [courting](#) Syria's President Assad and proposing three-way meetings between the leaders of Turkey, Syria, and Russia. A lot hinges on Assad, who is, understandably, hesitant to trust Erdoğan, but who also still aims to recreate the centralised control he had in 2011, and doesn't want to accept any sort of local autonomy. He is, even now, [blocking](#) essential supplies from those autonomous regions that are disconnected from the rest, in order to try and force them to surrender control. Fehim Tastekin comments in al Monitor, "In the event of an SDF withdrawal in favor of government forces, the normalization pace between Ankara and Damascus is expected to accelerate. The [prevailing view](#) among the Kurds is that an eventual Turkish-Syrian reconciliation would rest on the goal of fully undoing the Kurdish gains, so reaching a deal with Damascus before that happens is seen as vital.

Iran

It is not clear what role is anticipated for Iran in Turkey's planned three-way meetings. They have been the third partner in meetings with Turkey and Russia over Syria's future. Although Iran and Turkey are perceived as regional rivals, they are capable of cooperating when they have shared interests. A week ago, al Monitor even [reported](#) on an Iranian journalist who had been living in Ankara with conditional refugee status and who appears to have been abducted back to Iran in a joint operation by both countries' intelligence services.

Each week, the revolution in Iran becomes more firmly entrenched, with people determined not to let down those who have already been lost to its cause. On Monday, in Mashhad, where the regime had executed 23-year-old Majidreza Rahnavaard, protestors [chanted](#) "To those who are still (silent) the next youth (to be killed) will be your loved one!" Just before his death, Rahnavaard was interviewed on video. He [told](#) the interviewer that he did not want people to mourn at his grave, or to recite the Quran and say the funeral prayer. He wanted them to be happy and play music.

Sonia Karimi, representing the Community of Free Women in Rojhelat, [warned](#) an emergency meeting at the UK Parliament that the official statistics for deaths, arrests, and injuries are much too low and "purposefully and vastly misleading".

International responses

On Wednesday, American diplomats congratulated themselves as the United Nations' Economic and Social Council adopted a US-drafted resolution to [remove](#) the Islamic Republic of Iran from the UN's Commission on the Status of Women. However, UN credibility was not helped by the significant number of members who chose not to support what they perceived as American high handedness, and by the fact that the Council had elected Iran to that role in the first place.

On Tuesday, Kurds were on the international agenda here in Strasbourg, when the European Parliament discussed Turkish aggression in Syria and Iraq. There were strong speeches of condemnation from MEPs across the political spectrum – pointing out EU hypocrisy in the different approaches taken towards Turkey and Russia, highlighting the threat of a revived ISIS and the sacrifice made by the Kurdish forces, and calling for a no-fly zone for North and East Syria. But the speech from the European Commissioner [demonstrated](#) that the powers behind the scenes are still prepared to parrot the talking points of their “key partner”, Turkey, even to the extent of implying that North and East Syria was responsible for the bomb attack in Istanbul – a claim that doesn’t stand up to a moment’s serious scrutiny.

I will end with another piece of European window dressing: Berlin’s Brandenburg Gate (rather beautifully) [illuminated](#) with the words Jin Jiyan Azadî. This, and similar gestures, have been rightly criticised for emptying these words of their content in a society that continues to criminalise the movement and the ideas that [produced](#) them. But, after acknowledging this, it is up to us to use such public displays as a stepping-stone to show the world what is missing.

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