

A good time for disaster capitalists – a weekly news review

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Turkey's Presidential Decree number 126, published on 24 February, is a disaster capitalists' charter. As has been increasingly emphasised in the analysis of the 6 February earthquake, a large part of the blame for the appalling number of casualties must be taken by poor quality construction that did not comply with regulations; and this was the product of a deeply corrupt economy and power structure based around building development. Contracts for housing and other projects were awarded to government supporters, and contractors and governing authorities helped each other by turning a blind eye to safety regulations. This was facilitated through official

amnesties that allowed non-compliant buildings to be passed as fit on the payment of a fee. This partnership between government and government-supporting developers has been the cause of thousands of deaths, and the responsibility goes up to the very top. A symbolic handful of developers have been [arrested](#) and will be brought before the courts – as will the mayor of Nurdağı district in Gaziantep, who is from the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) – but most of the main players and the system of which they are part will not only be left unscathed, but will be rewarded with a lucrative role in the region's rebuilding.

Just days after the earthquakes, President Erdoğan was promising to rebuild the lost homes within a year. As a first step, Decree 126 – brought in under the emergency regulations – abolishes all control over the new developments. Yeni Özgür Politika interviewed Ayhan Erdoğan, Secretary General of the Chamber of City Planners in the Union of Chambers of Turkish Engineers and Architects, who explained how the decree will open up villages, pasture and forest land for development, and will mean no site investigations, no planning, no public participation, and no environmental impact assessments. He stresses that a city is much more than a collection of housing units, and he points to the precedent of the redevelopment of Sur in Diyarbakır, where, after they had destroyed the major part of the historic old city in an all-out war against Kurdish autonomy, the government constructed a grid of regimented housing units. These brought in higher rents and, like the new soulless developments in Afrîn, also mentioned by planner Ayhan Erdoğan, are a mechanism for replacing the population with a different group of people. He [observes](#) that past precedent suggests that the developers will appropriate the land of high rental value, and that construction on agricultural and pastoral land will make return impossible for those who relied on this land for their livelihoods.

The state of emergency is only scheduled to last three months, but it could be extended, and so long as construction is started within the emergency period, it can be finished later. Even if this new development is focused on more stable mountainous areas, we can have little faith that settlements built this way will be in any sense fit for purpose.

Borzou Daragahi, writing in the Independent, notes that “Authorities allegedly began signing no-bid contracts for reconstruction within days of the quake, preparing a ‘Disaster Area Design Areas Guide’ to rebuild parts of Kahramanmaraş, Malatya, Osmaniye, Hatay and Adana provinces. Nine companies ‘close to the government’ were named in the [document](#), according to [Turkish news agency] Anka.” And Daragahi warns that “Geologists and urban planners said it was a grave mistake to rush into building projects without thorough geological surveys in an area where the earth has yet to settle.”

A hollowed-out state

President Erdoğan’s promise to build new homes rapidly was intended to garner popular support, but in compromising the quality of those homes through using development to reward his supporters, he may squander that support. This is an example of the autocrat’s dilemma described by Gonul Tol. In an article for Foreign Policy headed “Turkey’s weak strongman”, she wrote, “If an autocrat chooses to please his cronies at the expense of the people, he might face popular protest. If he decides to serve the public by redirecting government spending at his cronies’ expense, he might be challenged by the small circle around him.”

Tol also explains that autocratic leaders “mobilize support by promising to get things done, but the things they must do to build their one-person rule end up undermining their capacity to deliver on that promise.” And she [observes](#), “Erdoğan, in his 20 years at the helm, has hollowed out the country’s institutions and placed incompetent loyalists in key positions to centralize power in his own hands. This made Erdoğan the strongest man in the country but left the state barely functioning.” The disastrous failure of the state disaster relief agency that Erdoğan established, AFAD, exemplifies this point.

To make matters even worse, the Turkish state also attempts to disrupt all civic organisation, which it sees as competition to its own power. The Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) have been especially in their sights, and Gaziantep MP Mahmut Toğrul has [given a further example of the disastrous results](#). “On the third day of the earthquake, we made a visit to Nurdağı, they

said that they were given new tents, but there was no stove to heat them. Their demand was the urgent need for a stove. We also took trucks of stoves from Sert and Êlih. They made us wait for 48 hours at the entrance to Antep. On the one hand, are people in danger of frostbite, on the other hand, are trucks full of stoves that are kept waiting for 48 hours. We suggested that we distribute them wherever they wanted, and they said that they were waiting for instructions from Ankara. Then, the stoves brought to AFAD's warehouse were unloaded from the truck even though they were fragile. We do not know whether that aid reached the earthquake victims or not." On Tuesday, there was yet another [report of aid](#) organised by the HDP being blocked and seized by AFAD, and also, in this case, by the pro-government, Islamist Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH).

Election calculations

A populist promise of rapid reconstruction has become central to Erdoğan's strategy for the forthcoming general and presidential elections – elections that have hung over Turkish politics for months. The earthquake has brought the impending battle into even starker focus.

By law, the elections have to be held by 18 June and can only be postponed in case of war. Erdoğan had previously expressed a desire to hold them on 14 May, and this week he reaffirmed plans to go to the polls on this date. This has not stopped people from speculating that he may still look for a route to postpone the elections, but others have argued that his support is likely to drop away, and he will find it unwise to delay. Soner Cagaptay, from the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, [told](#) Al Monitor's Nazlan Ertan, "Erdoğan realized that it is better to carry out the elections as soon as possible before a tsunami of angry protests replaces grief". And also before the already difficult economic situation gets even worse. He continues, "Earthquakes always create an economic crisis, as in 2001 after the 1999 quake that hit Turkey's industrial heartland. So, Erdoğan wants to use the emergency aid from international donors as he heads to the elections." Ertan notes that pollsters suggest that the post-earthquake fall in support for Erdoğan is still relatively small.

Erdoğan will take heart from the inability of the main opposition block, the Nation Alliance, to agree on their presidential candidate. The six parties that make up the Alliance are dominated by the Republican People's Party (CHP), with the right-wing İYİ Party – a break away from the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) – in second place, and the other parties having much less support. They have been meeting together for over a year, and on Thursday they [announced](#) that they had finally “reached a common understanding on our joint presidential candidate”. But the next day (yesterday) Meral Akşener, leader of the İYİ Party, stated that while the others all supported having CHP leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, as their presidential candidate, her party would not back him. Instead, she [called for](#) the nomination to be given to one of the CHP's mayors from Istanbul or Ankara; but both mayors have made clear that they support their party leader and are not in competition for the role. Some İYİ Party members have resigned in disgust at their party's position, while Kılıçdaroğlu tried to reassure people that they shouldn't worry.

Meanwhile, [protest against the government's lack of earthquake preparedness](#) and criminally inadequate response has been increasingly prominent and vocal, including on the football stands. Last weekend, first fans of Fenerbahçe and then of [Beşiktaş](#) called in chorus for the government to resign. Devlet Bahçeli, chair of the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), which is in coalition with the ruling AKP, [cancelled](#) his Beşiktaş membership and called for matches to be played to empty stadiums. Fenerbahçe fans were [banned](#) from attending their team's next match, but this ban was disallowed by the court.

When Erdoğan visited Elbistan, the epicentre of the second earthquake, he was [forced](#) to retreat into an AFAD container to escape local anger.

A continued focus of anger and protest has been the discovery that the Turkish Red Crescent (Türk Kızılay) had [sold tents](#) to charities helping earthquake victims – notably to AHBAP, a charity founded by the popstar Haluk Levent that has played an important role in organising and delivering earthquake relief. In our increasingly commercialised world, Kızılay also has a commercial arm, and this produces and sells tents. But there is a general

belief that, in a time of emergency, all Kızılay's tents should have been put to immediate use to meet the urgent needs of those who had lost their homes. There has been widespread outrage that with thousands of people desperate for shelter, Kızılay would think of selling their tents. The Union of Turkish Bar Associations has even filed a criminal complaint against the Red Crescent officials, accusing them of "abuse of trust". To make it worse, AHBAP was also charged VAT. When members of the Turkish Workers' Party [tried to protest](#) the sale, a large number of demonstrators were detained.

There is no shortage of reasons for people to be angry with the government. In Hatay, the authorities demanded the dismantling of an aid centre established by a group of organisations to serve local people, and when the organisers attempted to make a protest statement they were [detained](#).

Also in Hatay, a military officer recorded a blog of the developing situation in the eight days following the earthquake. He highlighted the absence of AFAD and Kızılay, and observed that "*the armed forces waited for orders from above in its 'rapid decision making' system*". Allegedly because of this account, the blog website on which it was share was [blocked](#) by the Turkish authorities.

Residents of Istanbul have become increasingly concerned about the risks of an earthquake there and the lack of action to strengthen their homes. Experts [point out](#) that after the 1999 İzmit earthquake it was calculated that there was an over 60% chance of a major tremor in Istanbul within thirty years.

Meanwhile, the latest economic data records Turkey's growing inequality. In 2016 employees received 36% of the country's Gross Value Added. This year their [share](#) was down to 26.5%.

However, censorship and a heavily controlled media ensure that the Turkish public are served a picture of state officials battling bravely against a natural disaster of unprecedented proportions, in which the villains are a limited group of cost-cutting contractors, and the people who speak ill of the authorities. For many of Erdoğan's die-hard supporters this will be enough for them to rally behind their leader; but there are worries about what he might do to tip the scales if he feels he is going to lose the election.

Opposition parties do not want to postpone the election, but holding it in the current situation presents logistical problems as to how and where to arrange voting for the many people displaced from their homes. There are concerns that the government has not been addressing this, and the HDP has been working on how best to enable voting to take place – starting off by recording how the population has been [redistributed](#).

Turkey's war business as usual

It is not yet four weeks since south-east Turkey and north-west Syria were shaken into rubble, and many people are still lacking even a tent to protect them from the rain and snow. The earthquake has added a catastrophic burden, but it is clear that pre-earthquake concerns have not gone away.

Despite the earthquake devastation, the Turkish military, which was generally absent when help was needed to save people from the rubble, continues its attacks against the Kurds in Syria and in Iraq.

In North and East Syria, since 6 February, Turkey and their mercenaries have carried out 24 armed attacks with tanks and heavy weapons, Turkish planes have carried out two airstrikes against the civilian population, and IEDs have been detonated in Sheikh Maqsoud and Hasakah. Four civilians have been [killed](#) and three injured; and a Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) fighter was [killed](#) by Turkish shelling in Ain Issa.

Across the border in Iraq, Turkey has again been targeting members of the autonomous Yazidi security forces. Two YBŞ commanders were [killed](#) on Monday, and on Wednesday, Turkey [killed](#) a member of the executive board of the Yazidi Asayish and his bodyguard.

And Turkish forces continue to attack the PKK guerrilla bases in the northern mountains of Iraq, including with chemical weapons.

Turkey also [claimed](#) to have captured a PKK fighter, but the PKK states that the man had left the organisation three years previously, and his

wife [reported](#) that he was actually taken by Turkish security in September, with the help of the security forces of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).

Turkey has been holding back water from the Euphrates since the beginning of 2021 – a clear war crime. Downstream in Syria, this has had severe impacts on drinking water supplies and on agriculture, and also on the ability to generate electricity. This week, low water levels meant that the Tishrin Dam in Manbij had to [suspend](#) operation of its turbines completely.

As the occupying power, Turkey is responsible for ensuring that aid gets to the people of Afrîn, but reports [claim](#) that it is not being given to Kurdish families.

Talks continue between Turkey and Sweden, with Turkey using their power of veto over Sweden's NATO membership application to force Sweden to act against the Kurds. Proposals for new Swedish anti-terrorism laws have been [criticised](#) for being so vague that they can be used against freedom movements and journalists. The laws were conceived by the previous Social Democratic government well before Sweden's NATO membership; but they have become an important negotiating tool in the discussions over the veto, and concerns over misuse have been brushed aside.

In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

All is far from well in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, too. Fathers of teenagers arrested in Erbil and charged with being involved with ISIS, have described how their sons were brutally [tortured](#) into confessions; and the leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), Bafel Talabani, has cast doubts on whether [elections](#) will take place in the region.

However, on a more positive note, Talabani has also [called](#) for the KDP to work with them to try and achieve a peace deal between Turkey and the PKK. As Cemil Bayik has again made clear, in an [interview](#) with the Kurdish Peace Institute, the PKK remain very ready for negotiations.

In Iran

In Iran, the counter-revolutionary crackdown appears to have taken a new and dangerous turn. There had previously been reports about schoolgirls in Qom being taken to hospital after breathing something toxic. Now, clearly [targeted](#) attacks are hospitalising girls across the country, from primary school children to university students. The government response has been dilatory, except when it comes to detaining protesting parents – there is a much-shared video of a mother being [dragged](#) by her hair. At the very least, the authorities have been complacent. Many believe the poisonings are a deliberate government response in reaction to the leading role taken by women and girls in the protests. Like the repression that preceded it, these attacks only make the revolutionaries more determined.

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