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‘Arrests have taken place almost every day’

Turkey faced a second night of protests following opposition arrests. Tina Blohm and Stefan Hibbeler on the growing political unrest

What do we know so far about the arrest of Istanbul mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu? Who else has been arrested and why?

Tina Blohm: Over 100 arrest warrants were issued on Wednesday within the framework of three separate investigations. Mayor of Istanbul Ekrem İmamoğlu was among them. The investigations are focused on allegations of corruption, alleged links to the PKK and the Gezi Park protests of 2013. While the government claims that the charges are legally justified, the opposition sees them as a politically motivated attack on democracy.

The most serious investigation concerns alleged corruption and bribery within Istanbul’s administration. İmamoğlu is accused of fixing public tenders, conducting illegal financial transactions through municipal companies and unlawful abuse of personal data. Those taken into custody include close associates of İmamoğlu, such as his adviser and head of a state media company, his election campaign manager and the secretary general of the city of Istanbul. The managing director of *Kültür İstanbul* and other business people were also detained.

Another investigation is looking into İmamoğlu’s alleged links with the PKK. This concerns the so-called city consensus strategy implemented in the municipal elections by the pro-Kurdish DEM Party and the CHP. The DEM Party refrained from putting up its own candidates in major cities in western Turkey and backed the CHP instead. The aim was to form a larger opposition front against the ruling AKP. According to the public prosecutor, this collaboration helped to boost the PKK in urban centres. The city administration is also alleged to have employed people with suspected PKK links in municipal companies. The third investigation concerns the Gezi protests and is directed in particular against a well-known

journalist. He is accused of playing an active role in organising and expanding the protests.

Was İmamoğlu's arrest anticipated? What does it say about the independence of the Turkish judiciary?

Stefan Hibbeler: The arrests did not come completely out of the blue. Three CHP district mayors have already been arrested since a new senior prosecutor was appointed in Istanbul in October last year. Over the past three weeks, there have been waves of arrests affecting local CHP and DEM politicians. Arrests have taken place almost every day and were calculated to maximise media attention. Particularly controversial was the court indictment of two leading representatives of the employers' federation TÜSIAD after they had criticised the political weaponisation of the judiciary.

It cannot be emphasised too strongly that the whole business is extremely questionable. Investigations by the public prosecutor and the police are supposed to be conducted in secret. An arrest or judicial indictment is justified only if there is a risk of flight or destruction of evidence. Arresting people after tipping off the media beforehand is totally unjustifiable. The alleged criminal offences appear to be highly tendentious. The district mayor of Beykoz is now being held illegally after the period of lawful detention expired.

All this can be traced back to the judicial reforms in the wake of the transition to a presidential system in 2018. Since then, the Council of Judges and Prosecutors has been partly elected by a simple parliamentary majority and partly appointed by the president. The minister of justice and his deputies are also mandatory Council members. This amounts to the politicisation of the body responsible for judicial appointments. A long-promised protection of judges from disciplinary transfers to other positions has not yet been implemented.

What is the government's strategy here, not least in relation to the upcoming presidential elections in 2028? Does it have anything to do with the PKK's offer of a ceasefire?

Stefan Hibbeler: The timing is curious. The Nowruz festival is celebrated on 21 March, which President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is expected to attend. It is also anticipated that there will be developments in Kurdish policy. There will be a primary to choose the CHP's presidential candidate on 23 March. İmamoğlu is the only contender and the CHP is counting on a high turnout to maximise support for him. The suspicion is that the revocation of İmamoğlu's degree and his arrest shortly before the election primary amount to a

deliberate government effort to disrupt the vote. The massive police presence in Istanbul can also be interpreted as an attempt at intimidation. The arrest of well-known journalist İsmail Saymaz is also part of this intimidation effort. He has been accused of using social media to fan the flames of the Gezi protests nationwide.

To date, the government has made no specific reform promises in the Kurdish conflict. After the appeal by the PKK's imprisoned leader Abdullah Öcalan and its unilateral ceasefire, the logical next step is to convene an assembly to officially resolve its winding up. In exchange, the PKK wants guarantees that the assembly will not be raided. This seems like an obvious move on the government's part. But the PKK's decision to disband goes hand in hand with expectations about democratisation. The government's renewed efforts to browbeat the public, however, show that it is still not ready for that.

How have the opposition parties – first and foremost the CHP – and the population reacted so far?

Tina Blohm: The CHP is understandably outraged. Immediately after the arrests, leader Özgür Özel travelled to Istanbul. In his first statements, he declared that the nation was being prevented from nominating its next president and that this was tantamount to an attempted coup against Turkey's next head of state. The selection of the leading candidate for the upcoming presidential elections is still set for 23 March.

The arrests have triggered massive popular protests. Because of the blanket protest ban in Istanbul, there are now constant clashes with the police. The University of Istanbul has been a particular flashpoint as the security forces cracked down hard against the protestors. There were major demonstrations in several cities on Wednesday evening, including Ankara and Istanbul. They were addressed by Özel and Dilek İmamoğlu, Ekrem İmamoğlu's wife. The situation remains extremely volatile.

What do the arrests mean for political struggles within Turkey? What effects will they have on democracy itself and Turkey's international image?

Tina Blohm: People are still reeling from these events and things could yet change very quickly. But the dominant view is that the arrests represent a ratcheting up of Turkish political repression. Few had believed that İmamoğlu, popular both at home and abroad, would actually be arrested. The strength and unity of the CHP will be sorely tested over the coming weeks and months. We shall see how effective they will be both among the public and in parliament. Whether their

supporters and oppositional civil society come out onto the streets in protest will be decisive. But even then, there's a danger that they may fizzle out after a few weeks. Still worse, the arrested politicians' continued detention could become the new normal.

The outlook is grim for democracy in Turkey. Media reporting is already in the government's pocket and all too many people have bought into the accusations. There is political interference in the judicial system and its independence is under threat. The government has many weapons at its disposal to deal with its critics, including words and deeds from long ago. But it remains to be seen whether this will do much damage to the regime. In a geopolitical climate in which authoritarianism is on the up and foreign political alliances could scarcely be more important, the issues of democracy and human rights could easily be sidelined. But that is precisely why we simply must not tolerate today's arrests. After all, there are enough people in both Turkey and the rest of the world who will not accept these developments.

This interview was conducted by Philipp Kauppert.



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