

Istanbul Mayor Bans Freedom and Solidarity Party Campaign

December 18, 2012

While in Istanbul last week I participated in a march and demonstration by the Freedom and Solidarity Party (ODP) on Dec. 9 to launch a campaign to link grassroots community organizations to a broader program for social and political change in Turkey. The march of hundreds of ODP members of all ages, some of them families with children, was a peaceful event though the chants were militant. "Let us live like human beings. Take the government's hands off the people," was one. And periodically the marchers shouted, "Revolt!"

When the marchers had assembled in one of the city's many squares, ODP Co-Chair Alper Taş spoke, explaining the campaign. Taş talked about the need to end the rule of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and to create a genuinely democratic Turkey. This would be done, he said, through the campaign to build grassroots organizations in local communities throughout the country. The community organizations would take up local issues, and the party would link them to the broader agenda of democracy and socialism. (To understand more about the ODP's motivation in launching its most recent campaign see the concluding declaration of the Charter Congress held in October.)

The crowd took up the campaign slogan: "Let's Demolish AKP Order and Build a New Turkey." The ODP hopes to "demolish" the AKP regime of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan which has been in power for eleven years by building a democratic mass movement for socialism. The Freedom and Solidarity Party (Özgürlük ve Dayanışma Partisi—ODP) is a mass, socialist party that places itself in the tradition of Devrimci Yol (Revolutionary Path), an earlier Marxist party that rejected both the Soviet and Chinese Communist models. That party was crushed after the military coup of September 12, 1980. More than 30,000 were jailed and many subjected to torture. The ODP has approximately 20,000 members with a periphery of 100,000. It received 250,000 votes in the general elections of 1999 representing 0.8% of the total. They were barred from participation in the last elections in 2011. The ODP publishes a daily newspaper, BirGün with a circulation of 6,000.

The ODP is committed to fighting for democracy and socialism, including workers control, full civil liberties, full religious freedom and the total separation of church and state, full equality for Kurds and other ethnic groups, the rights of women and of gays and lesbians. (See the party's program in brief.)

Campaign Banned

The campaign had hardly been launched when Istanbul Mayor Hüseyin Avni Mutlu banned the ODP campaign. This included a ban on all meetings, banners, and ODP posters associated with the campaign. The ODP is now organizing protests against the ban with the slogan, "You have your bans, we have the streets."

The Istanbul ODP Provincial Organization had applied to the mayor's office for permission for the campaign "Let's Demolish AKP Order and Build a New Turkey" on the 4th of December but the Mayor informed the Party that the Party campaign wasn't found appropriate and the main poster of the campaign was banned.

Provincial Chairperson of the Party, Avni Gündoğan said: "We won't give up the campaign that

will be held all over Turkey including Istanbul between 9th December and 9th June. We are eager to pursue this campaign with the slogan of 'Let's Demolish AKP Order and Build a New Turkey.' We made a call, as ODP, to develop and organize a resistance against AKP in order to make the voice of the oppressed and the working class heard all over the country against this terrible regime. We are reiterating our call once again today. We won't take a step back."

Typical of Turkish Politics

The Istanbul mayor's ban on the ODP is typical of the ADP government and unfortunately of politics in Turkey throughout its modern history. Turkey's prisons are full of journalists, students, and Kurdish activists. Just a week ago the Committee to Protect Journalists announced that there are 232 journalists in jail around the world, with Turkey the leading violator of journalists' rights, having imprisoned 49 of them.

In August the Turkish press reported that there were then 2,824 high school and college students languishing in Turkish prisons. Deputy Özgür Özel of the main opposition party, the conservative Republican People's Party (CHP), said at the time, "This is even more than we had thought. Even the students unfurling banners about free education are charged with [crimes related to] the armed terrorist organizations. The prosecutors trying to create criminals seemed to have achieved that," Özel said.

Many Kurds are also held in Turkish prisons on charges of terrorism. In November, Turkey's government admitted that at least 682 inmates were participating in a hunger strike in at least 67 prisons across the country. The hunger strike ended on November 21 because of health risks to the participants.

As Human Rights Watch stated in its World Report for 2012, the Turkish government "has not prioritized human rights reforms since 2005, and freedom of expression and association have both been damaged by the ongoing prosecution and incarceration of journalists, writers, and hundreds of Kurdish political activists." In November, Amnesty International condemned the Turkish authorities for the killing of two civilians.

The ODP pledges to continue the struggle against repression and for democracy in Turkey.