Parliamentary Assembly
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Resolution 2597 (2025)[1]

The arrest of the Mayor of Istanbul and the state of democracy and human rights in Türkiye

Parliamentary Assembly

1. On 19 March 2025, Ekrem İmamoğlu, Mayor of the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality and President of the Union of Municipalities of Türkiye (UMT), was arrested on charges of "corruption" and "aiding terrorism", together with 106 people, including the district mayors of Şişli, Resul Emrah Şahan, and Beylikdüzü, Mehmet Murat Çalık, as well as other local officials, politicians, journalists and business people. On 23 March, Mr İmamoğlu was placed in pretrial detention on corruption charges, together with 47 other suspects. He was also removed from office, along with the district mayors of Şişli and Beylikdüzü, who were also detained in connection with the same investigation.

2. Mr İmamoğlu's arrest came just four days before he was nominated as the candidate of the main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP), for the 2028 presidential election, in a primary in which over 15 million voters participated. In addition, on 18 March 2025, Istanbul University revoked Mr İmamoğlu's university degree, which is a prerequisite, under the Turkish Constitution, for running for the country's presidency.

3. The decision to detain Mr İmamoğlu, the criminal investigation launched against him and the revocation of his university degree effectively prevent him from standing as a presidential candidate. Recognising that respect for the will of the people to freely express their opinions and choose their elected representatives is the foundation of democracy, the Parliamentary Assembly expresses its deepest concern at these decisions, which appear politically motivated and an attempt to intimidate the opposition, obstruct its actions, stifle pluralism and limit freedom of political debate.

4. The Assembly notes that the arrest of Mr İmamoğlu triggered an unprecedented wave of largely peaceful mass protests, primarily by young people – especially students – across the country, particularly in Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir. These protests culminated in a protest organised by the CHP, which took place in Istanbul on 29 March 2025 and brought together around 2.2 million people, according to the organisers. The protests in Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir took place despite a blanket ban on demonstrations imposed by the authorities. During the demonstrations, the police used pepper spray, stun grenades, plastic bullets and water cannons against the demonstrators, causing injuries, especially in the three aforementioned cities. Numerous protesters also reported that they had been beaten with batons and kicked violently by the police while already lying on the ground. While the ministry of the interior reported that over 150 police officers had been injured during the demonstrations, the official number of injured protesters is unknown. According to the same ministry, following the protests, almost 2 000 people were arrested and over 300 detained. There have been reports of cases of physical ill-treatment, unlawful strip-searches, sexual harassment, insults and other human rights violations against people held in custody.

5. The Assembly strongly condemns the unjustified arrests and detention of demonstrators, as well as the disproportionate use of force by the law-enforcement authorities during protests, and cases of ill-treatment or other human rights violations of people held in custody. It is also dismayed by the fact that President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan described the protests as "street terrorism".

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1. *Assembly debate* on 9 April 2025 (15th sitting) (see Doc. 16151, report of the Committee on the Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Member States of the Council of Europe (Monitoring Committee), co-rapporteurs: Mr Stefan Schennach and Lord David Blencathra). *Text adopted by the Assembly* on 9 April 2025 (15th sitting).

6. Similarly, the Assembly expresses its concern at reports of physical attacks against journalists and media professionals who were covering the protests, as well as their arrest and detention in connection with their reporting activities. At least 20 local journalists were physically assaulted by the police or protesters while covering the protests and at least 10 of them were detained; some of them have already been released after appeal, pending trial. The Assembly is also worried about measures targeting foreign media journalists: on 27 March 2025, a British journalist from the British Broadcasting Corporation, Mark Lowen, was expelled on grounds of being a "threat to public order", after having been detained for over seventeen hours; and, on 28 March 2025, Swedish journalist Joakim Medin, who intended to cover the protests, was detained upon his arrival in Türkiye. Moreover, a photographer for Agence France-Presse, Yasin Akgül, was detained for three days for having covered protests in Istanbul.

7. The Assembly also deplores the widespread restrictions of the right to receive and impart information in the context of these protests. The Turkish Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK) imposed administrative fines and/or temporary suspensions of up to ten days on the television channels Halk TV, SZC TV, Tele 1 and Now TV. In addition, for almost two days after Mr İmamoğlu's arrest, access to major social media and messaging applications (including X, Instagram, Facebook and WhatsApp) was temporarily restricted in Istanbul, with reported bandwidth restrictions and numerous accounts in Türkiye being blocked and/or made invisible on the orders of the Information and Communication Technologies Authority, a regulatory body. During these two days, the internet was thus almost unusable. Furthermore, dozens of people were detained or subjected to judicial control measures as a result of their social media posts related to the protests.

8. The Assembly acknowledges that the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and to freedom of expression, which are fundamental to the conduct of public debate in a well-functioning democracy, may be restricted only under certain conditions provided for in the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 5, the Convention), to which Türkiye is a State party: these restrictions must be prescribed by law and "necessary in a democratic society", namely proportionate to the legitimate aim pursued. A blanket ban on demonstrations is disproportionate and unjustifiable, while the use of force by law-enforcement authorities must be strictly necessary and proportionate to that aim, and those who use it must be held accountable before the law. Journalists and media outlets should be free to report on issues of public interest, including protests and other related events, and should not be punished or harassed for carrying out their journalistic activities. In addition, the public has the right to receive impartial information about ongoing protests and all related events.

9. The Assembly also reiterates its previously expressed concerns about the independence of the judiciary and prosecution services and about the respect for the right to a fair trial in Türkiye, voiced in particular in its Resolution 2459 (2022) "The honouring of obligations and commitments by Türkiye" and its Resolution 2518 (2023) "Call for the immediate release of Osman Kavala". One of the most problematic issues in this context is the structure of the Council of Judges and Prosecutors (HSK), which was recently criticised in an opinion of the European Commission for Democracy through Law (the Venice Commission) (CDL-AD(2024)041), and which is at the origin of the violations of the Convention found by the European Court of Human Rights in the Kavala, Selahattin Demirtaş (No. 2) and Yüksekdağ Şenoğlu and Others judgments concerning the politically motivated detention of activists and/or politicians. The Assembly strongly deplores the fact that these judgments remain unimplemented despite various calls made by the Committee of Ministers, in the context of its supervision under Article 46, paragraph 2, of the Convention, and by the Assembly. The Assembly urges the Turkish authorities to implement these judgments without delay, in particular by releasing the applicants and conducting a comprehensive reform of the justice system to fully guarantee judicial independence, in line with the recommendations of the Committee of Ministers and the Venice Commission.

10. Türkiye is a State with thousands of years of history and more than a century of democracy. It is a long-standing member of the Council of Europe and an important partner in ensuring security, stability and peace in Europe, and has played an important role in supporting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine. The Assembly also notes the recent positive developments in the peace process in the country, following the call on 27 February 2025 by the imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Abdullah Öcalan, for the PKK to lay down its arms and disband. Against this background, the Assembly is all the more disappointed by the arrest and detention of Mr İmamoğlu and the worrying events related to these actions. The Assembly also notes with great concern and condemns a pattern of arrests on spurious charges, including terrorism-related offences, of anyone who might challenge President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and/or criticise the government. All these worrying developments represent a retreat from democratic values and go against the will of the Turkish people.

11. Reiterating its previous resolutions on Türkiye, including Resolution 2459 (2022) and Resolution 2518 (2023), the Assembly recalls that Türkiye, as a member State of the Council of Europe, has committed itself to upholding and promoting democratic values, the rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms. It therefore demands that the authorities implement immediately all these resolutions as well as the recommendations contained in the Venice Commission's opinions concerning Türkiye. Moreover, the Assembly urges the Turkish authorities to:

11.1. release Mr İmamoğlu immediately and drop all unfounded charges against him and others involved in the same investigation;

11.2. repeal the decision of Istanbul University to revoke Mr İmamoğlu's university degree;

11.3. fully respect the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of assembly, as well as other human rights and fundamental freedoms in the context of the ongoing mass protests;

11.4. stop any disproportionate use of force against protesters during protests and against those who are held in custody;

11.5. release all protesters who have been detained on unfounded charges;

11.6. ensure an effective investigation into cases of violence and other human rights violations by law-enforcement bodies against protesters during protests and against those who are held in custody;

11.7. with regard to all those detained in connection with the investigation into Mr İmamoğlu and the protests, ensure that their right to a fair trial by an independent and impartial court, and their right to a defence are fully respected, in accordance with Article 6 of the Convention;

11.8. release all journalists and media professionals detained for having reported on protests;

11.9. ensure that journalists can report on public assemblies freely and safely, and remove any obstacles to their work;

11.10. ensure that no more blanket bans on public demonstrations are imposed;

11.11. create an environment that allows the media to provide the public with necessary information and report on events, free from State pressure;

11.12. ensure full access to social media and the internet;

11.13. remove all restrictions on the right to receive and impart information in the context of protests, in particular to:

11.13.1. repeal all sanctions imposed on broadcasters;

11.13.2. annul all unlawful orders to block social media accounts of people exercising their right to freedom of expression;

11.13.3. refrain from using legal and extralegal means to exert pressure on social media platforms to censor online content involving political discourse;

11.14. end the repression of opposition politicians, civil society activists and dissenting voices in the media;

11.15. implement all the Venice Commission's and Assembly's recommendations on reforming the electoral framework;

11.16. ensure genuine free and fair elections, in line with international standards.

12. Finally, noting the statements of the European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and its Commissioner for Enlargement of 19 March 2025, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights of 24 March 2025 and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe of 27 March 2025, the Assembly calls on all Council of Europe member States, if they have not already done so, to condemn the arrest and detention of Mr İmamoğlu and the subsequent reprisals against demonstrators calling for his release.