



## **Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing**

### **Can Turkey Find Its Way Back to Freedom? Authoritarian Consolidation versus the Defense of Turkish Democracy**

**June 3, 2026 – 2:00 p.m. 2128 Rayburn House Office Building**

**Statement Submitted by Amnesty International USA**

#### **Introduction**

Amnesty International USA submits the following statement on human rights in Türkiye. More information can be found in the [Türkiye chapter of Amnesty International's 2025 annual report](#).

The Turkish government's repression of political opponents reached a milestone with the March 19, 2025 arrest and ongoing pretrial detention of Ekrem İmamoğlu, the mayor of Istanbul and the main opposition party's presidential candidate. The targeting of Mr. İmamoğlu is just one in a series of assaults on the rule of law and civic space, executed through crackdowns targeting the institutions that protect against arbitrary or undue applications of power and protect human rights. Political opponents, protesters, human rights lawyers, independent journalists, and members of marginalized or at-risk communities have long borne the brunt of the Turkish government's crackdowns, and they continue to face violations of their rights as part of the deepening repression. Congress and the Trump Administration must not allow Türkiye's government to use its geopolitical position to distract from or trade away its responsibility for upholding its human rights obligations. Instead, they should recognize that silence from Washington is interpreted as a "green light" in Ankara to continue the crackdowns, and make clear that such crackdowns are detrimental to the U.S.-Türkiye relationship.

#### **Targeting of the Republican People's Party (CHP)**

Beginning in late 2024, Turkish authorities [launched criminal investigations](#) and prosecutions against scores of elected representatives and members of the CHP across Türkiye. These investigations culminated in a widespread clampdown on the main opposition party. Key figures were imprisoned in March of 2025, including İmamoğlu, who faces up to 2,352 years in prison on a slew of charges including corruption and establishing and leading a criminal organization. As of this writing, 414 defendants have been named, with 77 including İmamoğlu remanded in pretrial detention and 40

released pending prosecution after having spent over a year in prison. Most of the defendants worked for the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality. Amnesty International has declared these as politically-motivated prosecutions and a disturbing weaponization of Türkiye's justice system, based almost entirely on secret witness testimony and riddled with serious international fair trial and rule of law issues.

Authorities further escalated this campaign against the CHP on May 21, 2026, when an Ankara regional administrative appeals court ruled 'null and void' the 2023 CHP congress, and the subsequent congresses in which the current leader of the party Özgür Özel was elected. The court ruled that Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the previous CHP leader, would resume office. Whereas Özel has led the CHP's efforts to resist the crackdown, Kılıçdaroğlu has a history of losing pivotal elections to the Erdoğan-led Justice and Development Party (AKP) party. A CHP challenge to the ruling was rejected by the Supreme Election Council on May 22, while a decision on the appeal submitted to the Court of Cassation is still pending as of this writing. On May 24, riot police forced their way into CHP headquarters in Ankara after party members barricaded the entrances in protest of the court ruling and Kılıçdaroğlu called for the police to step in.

### **Assaults on the right to peaceful assembly**

Amnesty International's research into the policing of protests that took place across the country in March 2025 in response to İmamoğlu's arrest and remand in pre-trial detention found [clear patterns of police unlawful use of force](#) during and after protests which, at times, may have amounted to torture and other ill-treatment. Tens of thousands of people defied pre-emptive bans on all assemblies (whether they knew about the bans or not) in Türkiye's largest cities in response to the arrests, turning out for mass CHP rallies that were overwhelmingly peaceful.

Yet following the CHP rallies, law enforcement officials used unnecessary or excessive force to disperse the crowds and according to the authorities, detained 1879 people, either at the location of the protests or from their homes, between March 19-26, 2025 across the country. By the end of March, over 300 people – mainly university students from different provinces including Istanbul, Ankara and İzmir – were remanded in pre-trial detention for exercising their right to peaceful assembly while hundreds of others were subjected to judicial control measures, including house arrest, foreign travel bans, and reporting requirements. The students' right to education was also violated when many among them faced additional disciplinary punishment by their universities as a consequence of their peaceful participation in protests.

Amnesty International collected evidence indicating that law enforcement officials attacked peaceful protesters who were either dispersing or not resisting. Individuals who were already restrained were also sometimes beaten by law enforcement officials with batons – and in several instances, kicked while on the ground or dragged along the street. Law enforcement officials not only breached the right to freedom of peaceful assembly, but the violence unleashed by some also violated the absolute prohibition of

torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. Specifically, Amnesty International considers that in certain instances, law enforcement officials intentionally inflicted severe pain or suffering on individual protesters with the intention of punishing or intimidating them. Amnesty also found that police unlawfully used less lethal weapons and beatings that amounted to torture and other ill-treatment and documented numerous instances in which police were reported to have intimidated detained protesters into staying silent about their beatings when questioned by doctors.

Although the unlawful use of force against protesters in March 2025 was significant for its scale, it extended a longstanding pattern of undue restrictions on the right to peaceful assembly. Such restrictions have been applied to the longstanding and peaceful weekly “[Saturday Mothers/People](#)” vigils in Istanbul for victims of enforced disappearances. The Istanbul Governorship has also, in recent years, illegally banned planned night marches marking the International Day for the [Elimination of Violence Against Women](#). [Istanbul Pride marches](#) have been unlawfully banned since 2015, and in August of 2025, 53 people were charged, and three arbitrarily detained for more than a month, in relation to their peaceful defiance of the ban.

Blanket bans on peaceful protests are an inherently disproportionate restriction on the right of peaceful assembly and should not have been applied by Turkish authorities in any of the above cases. Any restriction on the right of peaceful assembly should be based on an individualized assessment of the conduct of participants and the assembly concerned and meet the three-part test, i.e., that the restrictions have a legal basis, pursue one or more legitimate aims, and are necessary and proportionate in pursuit of the aim(s).

### **Crackdowns on the legal and journalistic professions**

Last year, the president and 10 members of the executive board of the [Istanbul Bar Association](#) were charged with “spreading terrorist propaganda” and “publicly disseminating misleading information” for issuing a public statement on December 21, 2024, concerning the killing of two journalists in northern Syria and the arrest of journalists and lawyers at a related peaceful protest in Istanbul the day before. Amnesty International considers that all of those prosecuted in this case were targeted for carrying out their professional duties and speaking out in defense of human rights and the rule of law. Fortunately, all 11 defendants were acquitted on January 9, 2026. Yet the case stands as a prime example of how Türkiye’s overly broad anti-terrorism laws are open to abuse and are frequently misused by the judiciary to clamp down on protected rights.

Particularly concerning, on January 28, 2026, 10 members of the Association of Lawyers for Freedom (ÖHD by its Turkish acronym) and 20 executives and staff of the Prisoners’ Families Solidarity Association (TUAD by its Turkish acronym) were convicted and given [lengthy prison sentences](#) for their lawful professional and human rights work. The case originates from a criminal investigation launched in 2016 against ÖHD lawyers and TUAD members, based on allegations that they had facilitated communication

between prisoners held in separate prisons and the outside world between 2011 and 2014. All defendants in the case were charged with “membership of an armed organization” and, in some cases, with “making propaganda for an armed organization”. Yet the evidence presented by the prosecution appears to consist entirely of lawful professional and advocacy activities. This includes prison visits, trial monitoring, legal representation of clients, public statements, and communications with colleagues and clients carried out by ÖHD lawyers, as well as TUAD’s work documenting prison conditions, issuing public statements on rights violations, and monitoring the health of prisoners during the 2012 hunger strikes. None of these activities involved incitement to violence, coercion, or any form of unlawful conduct. The nearly ten-year trial was marked by numerous fair trial violations.

Meanwhile, according to the Journalists Union of Türkiye, there are 14 journalists and other media workers in prison as of March 2026. Scores of others are being subjected to baseless criminal investigations, prosecutions and convictions which are both harmful to the individuals concerned and create a chilling effect over the media landscape in the country. These investigations, prosecutions, and convictions constitute an [unlawful crackdown on journalists](#) for reporting on matters of public concern such as alleged corruption. Overly broad and problematic laws such as Article 217/A, dubbed the ‘disinformation law’, and Article 299 of the penal code, which criminalizes ‘insulting the President’, are instrumentalized to pursue journalists merely for conducting their profession.

Such instrumentalization of the criminal justice system against journalists is not new. In the aftermath of the 2016 failed coup, at least 156 media outlets were shut down by executive decree, leading to an estimated 2,500 journalists losing their jobs and the Directorate General of Press and Information revoked the press credentials of 778 journalists. The broadcast regulator Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK) used its powers to [censor](#) a vast array of news providers, imposing crippling fines of critical channels and, in 2024 for example, revoking the license of prominent independent radio station Açık Radyo. The crackdown on individual journalists intensified following the arrest of İmamoğlu and targeting of CHP mayors and municipal bureaucrats in 2025.

### **Arbitrary detention and unfair trials**

In January of 2025, Istanbul Bar Association board member [Fırat Epözdemir](#) was arbitrarily detained after returning from an advocacy visit to the Council of Europe and held in pretrial detention on allegations of “membership of an armed terrorist organization” and “making propaganda for a terrorist organization”. He was released in May of that year under restrictive judicial control measures, and acquitted in January 2026 by court for 'lack of evidence'. Like so many in similar cases, he should never have been prosecuted and deprived of his liberty in the first place.

In February of 2025, at least 50 people across 10 provinces, including journalists, political activists, lawyers and human rights defenders, were detained in the context of

an investigation carried out by the Istanbul Chief Public Prosecutor. Thirty people, including journalists [Yıldız Tar](#), [Elif Akgül](#) and [Ercüment Akdeniz](#), were subsequently remanded in prison by Istanbul courts for “membership of an armed terrorist organization”. They were alleged to have links to the People’s Democratic Congress, a lawful platform established in 2011 and including various opposition political parties and groups focused on gender, the environment and the rights of religious minorities. Akgül was acquitted in January 2026, and Akdeniz was acquitted in June 2026, while the prosecution of Yıldız Tar continues on June 24, 2026

In June 2025, [Mehmet Pehlivan](#), İmamoğlu’s lawyer of detained Istanbul Mayor Ekrem, was arbitrarily detained for “membership of a criminal organization” amid intensifying reprisals against members of the legal profession. He remains in pretrial detention at the time of writing.

In October 2025, a ruling by the Constitutional Court found that prisoner of conscience [Tayfun Kahraman’s](#) right to a fair trial had been violated when he was convicted in 2022 in relation to the 2013 Gezi Park protests. Yet his appeal for release following the ruling was rejected in November. In April 2026, the Constitutional Court again ruled that Kahraman's rights were violated as a result of the non-implementation of the Court's first ruling.

Prisoner of conscience [Osman Kavala](#) remains in prison despite two binding European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) judgments to release him and infringement proceedings against Türkiye initiated by the Council of Europe in 2022. Two Constitutional Court applications challenging Osman Kavala’s 2022 conviction, and the 2023 Court of Cassation decision upholding his conviction, remain pending. A further ruling by the European Court, following a fresh application by Kavala, was heard by the Grand Chamber of the Court in March 2026 is currently pending.

[Selahattin Demirtaş](#) and [Figen Yüksekdağ](#), former leaders of the People’s Democratic Party, also remain in prison despite ECtHR rulings ordering their immediate release. In July 2025, the court published a new judgment finding that Selahattin Demirtaş’ continued detention was “based on inadequate reasoning and had pursued an ulterior purpose”.

### **Targeting defenders of the rights of LGBTI+ people**

When Turkish authorities target the above institutions, marginalized or at-risk groups become more vulnerable to human rights violations. In December, a court ruled to dissolve the Izmir-based [Genç LGBTI+ Association](#) on the grounds of ‘obscenity’ for five illustrations posted on their social media accounts between 2019 and 2022, based on an audit report in 2024. In October 2025, a related criminal prosecution was launched against eleven people in the leadership position of the association for violating the Law on Associations. If found guilty, they could face a jail sentence of up to three years. The prosecution of Amnesty International Türkiye’s former Chair Kerem Dikmen and ten other

members of the executive and supervisory boards of Genç LGBTI+ (Young LGBTI+) Association is part of an orchestrated strategy of harassment of LGBTI+ organizations and their supporters.

High-level public officials have continued to use discriminatory speech that entrenches harmful gender stereotypes and institutional homophobia and transphobia. In June, the Turkish Medicines and Medical Devices Agency, part of the Ministry of Health, banned the prescription and supply of specific hormones for gender affirmative procedures for people under 21. The move, purportedly aimed at preventing the use of these hormones “for purposes other than their intended use”, violated the existing law which permitted access for those over 18. Three draft law packages [targeting LGBTI+ people](#) were made public in 2025, marking an unprecedented assault on the human rights of LGBTI+ people and their allies. The proposals, which would criminalize any expression of LGBTI+ identities and consensual same-sex relations and make legal gender recognition nearly impossible to obtain, were ultimately not submitted to parliament. As of June 2026, another attempt to unlawfully restrict the rights of LGBTI+ people is being pursued in an omnibus package of laws referred to as the 12<sup>th</sup> Judicial Package.

### **Obligations as COP31 Host Country**

The safe and meaningful participation of frontline communities, environmental human rights defenders (EHRDs), and other representatives of civil society in multilateral climate negotiations leads to fairer, more sustainable decisions. When governments and institutions restrict protests, limit side events or block access to negotiations, they make policy less inclusive, less effective and less just. In Türkiye, the [host country for COP31](#), Amnesty International and other organizations have long raised concerns over violations of the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly that target human rights defenders and others. [Journalists](#) reporting critically about matters of public concern are targeted in abusive criminal investigations and prosecutions, and are subjected to arbitrary use of punitive pretrial detention under overly broad and vague criminal code provisions such as the ‘disinformation law’. Protests critical of the authorities are routinely banned and peaceful protesters subjected to excessive use of police force and arbitrary detention. Civil society organizations face [punitive and burdensome audits and even closure](#) for their legitimate activities.

There are currently a number of campaigns across Türkiye involving protests by local communities in opposition to environmental destruction and degradation. These include İzikköy/Akbelen (Muğla province), where protests continue against coal mining and deforestation; Afşin–Elbistan (Kahramanmaraş province), where communities oppose coal-fired power plants due to health and environmental impacts; Soma (Manisa province), where demands persist for accountability and safer conditions following the 2014 coal mining disaster in which 301 miners were killed; as well as İzikdere (Rize province) and the Kazdağları (Çanakkale province), where local populations resist quarrying, mining and other large-scale extractive projects. These cases reflect a broader

pattern of localized resistance against extractive industries across the country, including through the courts, despite the deepening erosion of the rule of law. These communities are facing intransigence from the authorities, invariably favoring companies against local people.

On March 31, 2026, [Esra Işık](#), an EHRD in İkizköy/Akbelen (Muğla province), was remanded in pretrial detention for her participation in a protest against forced expropriation of land and property in favor of a coal mining company. At the first hearing of her prosecution on April 27, her pretrial detention was extended even though the charges she faces would potentially result in a suspended sentence, if found guilty. She was subsequently released on 11 May after 42 days in prison, following the Council of State suspending the execution of the expropriation order. This case and other similar attempts to silence EHRDs and civil society organizations opposing environmental devastation in Türkiye ahead of COP31 signal a seriously restrictive environment for their meaningful and safe participation in COP31 without fear of retaliation before, during or after the conference.

## Recommendations

While any time is the right time to raise alarm about these serious human rights violations, several upcoming dates provide especially worthwhile opportunities for Congress and the Trump Administration to make their concerns known: A [rumored visit](#) by President Erdoğan to the United States around the time of the June 25<sup>th</sup> Türkiye-USA FIFA World Cup match; President Trump's expected attendance at the [NATO Summit](#) in Ankara July 7-8; and the COP31 meeting starting November 9 in Antalya, which some members of Congress may choose to attend in spite of the U.S. withdrawal from the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Congress should:

- Urge the Trump Administration to use all diplomatic levers to facilitate and sustain the release of all prisoners sentenced through unfair and politically-motivated trials, including İmamoğlu, Istanbul Municipality officials and other elected CHP representatives;
- Call on Turkish authorities to drop charges immediately and unconditionally against all those protesters who have been charged with criminal offences solely for exercising their right of peaceful assembly;
- Demand that all allegations of unlawful use of force and other human rights violations by law enforcement officials, including threats of sexual violence and torture and other ill-treatment inflicted on protesters, are subject to effective, independent, impartial and prompt investigations and that survivors are compensated;
- Call for an end to the use of blanket bans on peaceful protests, as they are a disproportionate restriction on the right of peaceful assembly;
- Demand that Turkish authorities let lawyers do their jobs and stop using overly broad anti-terror legislation to chill the legal profession;

- Demand that the authorities end their gross misuse of criminal law and the justice system to crackdown on journalists for simply carrying out their vital work;
- Call for an end to the widespread use of pretrial detention and restrictive judicial control measures as a means of chilling political opponents and all those exercising their right to freedom of expression, and ensure due process and fair trials for all those arrested, including longstanding cases like Osman Kavala, Selahattin Demirtaş, and Figen Yüksekdağ; and
- Hold the Turkish government, as Host Country of COP31, accountable for ensuring that all persons including EHRDs can freely express themselves, individually or in association with others, and peacefully demonstrate including about the climate crisis and environmental issues without discrimination or fear of reprisals.

*Disclaimer: Amnesty International is independent of any political system or ideology.*

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