

# An inmate's plea to save Turkish democracy

*President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his party are using the state of emergency and other underhanded measures to suppress Kurdish votes*



**SELAHATTIN DEMIRTAS**

Turkey will vote in presidential and parliamentary elections today. I am one of six candidates running for president. I am running from my prison cell.

I am writing from a maximum-security prison in Edirne, a city in northwestern Turkey, near the border with Bulgaria. I was arrested one year and eight months ago while I was a member of the Turkish parliament and the co-chairman of the Peoples' Democratic Party, known as the HDP, for which six million people voted in the last election.

My jailers chose to imprison me here because Edirne is far from my home, family and friends in the southeastern Kurdish region of the country. My cellmate is, like me, an elected member of the parliament.

For the past few months, we have been hearing the nearly unrelenting noise of construction. A large new prison is being built next door. A state of emergency was imposed on Turkey after the failed coup attempt in 2016, and existing prisons are stretched beyond their limits. The right to free expression and assem-

bly has been cast aside, and the number of ordinary people incarcerated is growing by the day.

The Turkish government led by Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Justice and Development Party, known as the AKP, has turned its back on universal democratic values and pushed the country to the brink of political and economic crisis.

With the exception of President Erdogan, all of my fellow candidates have declared that I should be freed. They cast aside ideological differences and came to my defence because they know the government is holding me for its own political gain and not for any crime I committed. They understand that if I were free, Erdogan's chances of winning the elections would be far slimmer. They recognise that no matter who wins, the imprisonment of a presidential candidate casts a pall over the legitimacy of the elections.

I am among the tens of thousands of dissidents who have been targeted by punitive measures normalised under the state of emergency. The government has so far started 102 investigations and filed 34 separate court cases against me. If it has its way, I will face 183 years in prison.

The accusations against me in the indictments by prosecutors are based entirely on political speeches and statements that

I made. If only the Turkish judiciary hadn't buckled under government pressure and had adhered solely to the law. After my arrest I was not allowed a courtroom hearing for more than a year. My prosecution has been unjust. My arrest was a political decision. I remain a political hostage.

Only the democratic struggle of the people for their own freedom will free Turkey from authoritarianism and fear and free its institutions — the judiciary and the press — from tutelary control by the government.

I am deprived of the right to hold rallies or communicate directly with the people. The men and women of the HDP are campaigning with great determination. I reach you and the world beyond the prison walls through messages conveyed by my lawyers. I address the people through social media accounts my advisers help me run.

My Twitter account was dormant for a long while after my arrest. When tweets from my account started appearing again in September 2017, prison guards rushed in to inspect my cell. The search was pretty invasive. When I asked them what they were searching for, they replied that they were looking for the source of my tweets.

The only vaguely sophisticat-

**Turkey now understands that the collective punishment of the Kurds on the southeastern periphery affects freedoms and democratic culture across the country. What was limited to the Kurds has become the norm for Erdogan's opponents elsewhere too.**



ed device they found in my cell was the electric kettle I use to boil water. After establishing that I could not have used the kettle to tweet, the guards left. Despite the absurdity of the incident, it was quite revelatory about the indescribable fear that engulfs authoritarian leaders when confronted with opponents who persevere despite persecution. How acute must Erdogan's fear be?

For the past three years, the AKP has conducted a relentless propaganda campaign with the acquiescence of the media to undermine the Peoples' Democratic Party by portraying our members as "terrorist collaborators." Yet our voters and supporters have remained steadfast.

In the summer of 2015, after the peace process broke down and armed conflict returned to the southeastern Kurdish areas of Turkey, my party did its best to prevent conflict through dialogue. We could have devised more effective ways to stop the fighting.

But everything changed after the June 2015 elections, which saw Erdogan's party lose a parliamentary majority. His government insisted on military intervention, and the Turkish army moved in against the militant Kurdish youth who had set up barricades in various towns and cities.

Erdogan sought to punish the Kurds, who robbed his party of its parliamentary majority, and to consolidate the nationalist vote. His party won the November 2015 elections and he continued to intensify the conflict thereafter.

The coming elections will shape the future of Turkey. It is statistically unlikely that any candidate who shuns the support of Turkey's Kurdish population — around one-fifth of its 81 million people — and their demands for peace can win.

An inherently anti-democratic rule in Turkey bars a political party that does not win 10 per cent of the national vote from taking its seats in the parliament. The seats are transferred

to a party that has crossed a threshold and has the second-highest number of votes on those seats.

We are confident of crossing the steep threshold, but we fail to get 10pc of the vote around 80 of our parliamentary seats will go to Erdogan's party, which would deliver him a comfortable majority in parliament and further erode his executive presidency. In essence, the AKP rule will be justly secured through the vote of millions of disenfranchised Kurdish citizens.

Erdogan and his government are using the prolonged state of emergency and other underhanded measures to ensure that the HDP doesn't get 10pc of the vote.

Thousands of polling stations have been relocated in the southeastern Kurdish region, which will force rural voters to travel miles through military checkpoints to cast their votes instead of voting in their own villages. An increased number of security personnel are also being deployed at the polling stations in the region, which could cause intimidation of our voters.

In a video of Erdogan addressing his party workers that leaked last week, he emphasised the importance of the HDP falling below the election threshold and asks them to mark HDP support-

## Colombia's left to right



**LUIS CARLOS REYES**

The victory of Iván Duque in the Colombian presidential race on June 17 is the result of a series of unfortunate ideological exports from the United States.

Duque, who clearly paid attention to the antics of the Republican Party while living in Washington, won on a platform of trickle-down economics and so-called family values. While catering to the social values of conservative voters has been a common strategy in Colombia, appealing to trickle-down economics has not. Duque's success in a country whose constitution enshrines the right to universal health care, education and a progressive taxation system should

be a warning to progressives and advocates for the poor across the region, as well as to academic economists, who may soon find themselves fighting the same kind of right-wing economic populism that has until now been regarded as an American oddity.

The president-elect claimed that the Colombian government was bloated and that taxation levels were extremely high. Americans are used to hearing this canard when discussing their own tax system, and those who bother to look up the statistics know this to be false: Whereas average tax revenues in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development countries are around 34 per cent of the gross domestic product, in the United States they hover around 26pc. It is downright alarming, then, that the same claim could be successfully made in a country like Colombia, where tax revenues are a modest 20pc of a much smaller gross domestic prod-



The prospect of a negotiated peace in Colombia has enthused some but angered others

uct, well below OECD and Latin American averages.

Duque adopted the Republican rhetoric according to which "job creators" are treated unfairly, and he campaigned for tax reductions for these "creadores de empleo." The fact of the matter, however, is that the rich receive preferential treatment, and even more so in Colombia than in the United States.

In 2010 — the latest year for which data in Colombia are available — the effective tax rate paid by the top 1pc of income earners was 11.5pc, a bargain compared with the 23pc paid by the top 1pc in the United States during that same year.

The new president has called for national unity, and Colombians should give him the benefit of the doubt. While it may

be hard for him to completely escape the influence of former president Álvaro Uribe, whose support was instrumental in his election since he was mostly unknown to the public a year ago, he may move to the center nonetheless. Some of his key allies in Congress, such as the Liberal Party, may block his intended changes to the constitution to alter presidential term limits,

**The new president deserves the benefit of the doubt, but his economic policies should remain a cause of concern**