

Prominent leftists figures Veli Sacilik and Ahmet Sik on HDP candidate list

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On Wednesday, the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) in Turkey released a list of candidates it seeks to put forward for parliament in the upcoming elections.

Among the candidates are figures like Veli Sacilik, a one-armed protester whom -- with images of him charging against riot police circulating nationwide -- has come to symbolise the struggle of laid-off workers against Erdogan's purge. Ahmet Sik, a journalist persecuted for writing a book identifying the historic ties between the AKP government and the Gulenist movement (prescribed as a terrorist organisation by Turkey) is also on the HDP list of candidates for parliament.

On Tuesday, the 17th of April, Turkey's president Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced snap elections which would be held on 24 June 2018. The elections will take place under a state of emergency. Human rights organisations insist that ever since the State of Emergency was declared following a failed coup in 2016, the ruling AKP party has stifled dissent, persecuted journalists, and pressured the peoples' of Turkey

to agree with the ruling government's domestic and foreign policy. It is likely, therefore, that the broader environment will not be conducive to the civic process.

Selahattin Demirtas, the HDP candidate for President of Turkey, is still in prison where he is charged with having ties to the PKK, an allegation that he denies. Critics of the government argue that Demirtas is being punished for co-leading the HDP in 2015 to surpass the 10% threshold which ensures that the ruling party would hold an absolute majority in parliament. Others allege that the government is engaging in Kurdophobia.

Some analysts argue that the call for a snap-election comes on the eve of a potential economic crisis. The announcement of the founding of the new ultra-right wing IYI party, a breakaway from the MHP party which is part of a ruling alliance running the country, could further compromise the power that the ruling AKP-MHP alliance has over Turkey. The ruling AKP party, in other words, may fear that the IYI party could follow the precedent set by the left-wing HDP.

Formed in 2012, The HDP has come to symbolise a voice for liberals and leftists that have been persecuted by the government for committing themselves to public health, investigative journalism, advocacy for Kurdish rights, and education. The HDP has often risked persecution to criticise Erdogan's purge.

And whereas some critics insist that the HDP has focused mostly on its stronghold in Turkey's south-east, the HDP has denied these allegations, arguing that its focus is on the whole country, including the western regions of Turkey. It's likely that the latest candidate list released will bolster those claims.

Ahmet Sik, one of its candidates was a trade unionist and is an investigative journalist who has worked for alternative media and the large opposition Cumhuriyet newspaper. He was arrested on 29 December 2016, on charges of disseminating "propaganda for terrorist organisations on Twitter. Critics allege that his true crime was to expose links between the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Gulenist movement it has listed as a terrorist organisation.

An Istanbul court ordered Sik's release on March 9th. Perhaps unhindered and unafraid, he agreed to be a candidate for the criminalised HDP party only a month later.

Veli Sacilik, currently a sociologist who lost his job in Erdogan's ongoing purge, has also been in prison. He was arrested for trade union activities in the late 90's, and in 2000 -- after prisoners went on a hunger strike for better conditions of confinement -- his arm was torn off and later found in a garbage can near his prison. More than a decade later, he was targetted by the ruling government for his academic work and

joined thousands of others in being laid off after a purge of Turkey's public and private institutions. Alongside Nuriye Gulmen and Semih Ozakca -- two hunger strikers -- Sacilik has been an inspiration to the resistance against Erdogan's purge.

Other candidates include Onur Hamzaoglu, a professor of Public Health whose supporters claim was targeted for arrest due to his academic work linking environmental pollution by industries in Kocaeli with infant mortality and cancer, and for his advocacy for peace in the southeast of Turkey. Leyla Guven, a former municipal mayor of Sanliurfa Province, who won her seat as a member of the Democratic Society Party, is also on the list. Symbolizing the struggle for Kurdish rights in south-east Turkey, she was detained months after featuring as a key speaker during the Plenary session debate for the Congress of the Council of Europe in 2009.

"As the AKP and its leadership approach the end of their life, they keep making greater mistakes." Demirtas recently wrote from his prison cell, "The AKP's trying to break the hand that the Kurdish people offered for peace -- instead of embracing it -- was the beginning of the end for the AKP."