1 July 2025

Unlawful detention of lawyer Mehmet Pehlivan and escalating repression of the legal profession in Turkey

The undersigned international legal and human rights non-governmental organisations strongly condemn the arbitrary detention of lawyer Mehmet Pehlivan, defence counsel to detained Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, and the intensifying reprisals against members of the legal profession in Turkey. These measures, targeting lawyers for their professional activity and for exercising their right to freedom of expression, constitute a direct attack on human rights and the rule of law and they imped access to justice.

I. Targeting, prosecution and detention of lawyer Mehmet Pehlivan

Lawyer Mehmet Pehlivan, a member of the Istanbul Bar Association and defence counsel to detained Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, has been subjected to a sustained pattern of judicial persecution since early 2025:

- He was arrested by police and accused of alleged "money laundering" (Article 282 of the Penal Code) based on vague and unsubstantiated allegations. He was released under judicial control on 28 March 2025, including a travel ban that obstructed his ability to carry out international legal work.
- In March and April 2025, he was targeted again after publicly criticising a report issued by the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) which led to the annulment of his client Mr İmamoğlu's university diploma, a decision which, if finalised, would bar him from running for president. Mr Pehlivan denounced the report as baseless and unlawfully drafted based on concealed documents and withheld information. In March, three members of YÖK who signed this report filed a criminal complaint against Mr Pehlivan. This led the Istanbul Public Prosecutor to open a new criminal investigation and invite him for questioning in April, based on multiple allegations, including "insult" and "attempting to influence a fair trial" (Articles 125 and 288 of the Penal Code). The charges carry a potential sentence of imprisonment of over 13 years.
- In May 2025, pro-government media reports claimed that - based on the statement of an individual who decided to cooperate with the prosecuting authorities with a view of obtaining a reduction in punishment under the "effective remorse" provision (*etkin pişmanlık*) - Mr Pehlivan and Kemal Polat, another defence lawyer of Mr İmamoğlu, were under investigation for the alleged offence of "attempting to coerce witnesses" (Article 277 of the Penal Code).
- On 19 June 2025, following a call from the Istanbul Public Prosecutor's Office, Mr Pehlivan voluntarily went to the Istanbul Courthouse where he was informed that a criminal investigation had been opened against him. He reminded the Prosecutor that, pursuant to Article 58 of Turkey's Attorneyship Law, authorisation from the Ministry of Justice was required to proceed. The Prosecutor dismissed this and requested his pre-trial detention from a judge. Mr Pehlivan was subsequently remanded into pre-trial detention on alleged charges of "membership in a criminal organisation" (Article 220(2) of the Penal Code), based solely on his legitimate coordination of legal defence strategies, a core element of legal representation.

Since the imprisonment of Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu in March, Mr Pehlivan has been subjected to a sustained harassment in pro-government media, attacking both his professional and personal integrity. To date, no evidence of coercion, violence, or otherwise unlawful conduct on his part has been presented. The latest prosecution was initiated without the required authorisation from the Ministry of Justice under Article 58 of Attorneyship Law, a safeguard intended to prevent politically motivated prosecutions of lawyers for acts carried out in connection with their professional duties.

The targeting of lawyers representing Mr İmamoğlu or others professionally involved in the same criminal proceedings, including lawyers Kemal Polat, Serkan Günel, Kazım Yiğit Akalın, and Yiğit Gökçehan Koçoğlu, since March strongly indicates a pattern of interference designed to hinder this group of lawyers in the legitimate exercise of their professional activities and to undermine the right to a fair trial of their clients.

II. Continuing reprisals against the legal profession and their professional associations

The case of Mr Pehlivan and others is not isolated; it is part of a broader, systematic campaign to target legal professionals across Turkey, a pattern that two joint statements issued by members of the international legal and human rights community have previously addressed[1]:

- The Istanbul Bar Association is facing both civil and criminal proceedings for its December 2024 public statement calling for an independent investigation into the killings of two journalists from Turkey working for Kurdish media outlets in Syria. Prosecutors have charged the President İbrahim Kaboğlu and ten executive board members of the Istanbul Bar Association with alleged "terrorist propaganda" and "disseminating misleading information," seeking up to 12 years' imprisonment and political bans. In parallel, a civil lawsuit seeks their dismissal under Article 77(5) of the Attorneyship Law.
- Istanbul Bar Association board member Fırat Epözdemir was arbitrarily detained pending trial on 25 January 2025 on his return from an advocacy visit to the Council of Europe. He was held in pre-trial detention until 29 May 2025 and remains under judicial control.
- Since the March 2025 protests - started after the arrest of Mr İmamoğlu - dozens of lawyers, including the former President of the İzmir Bar Association, have been arrested for their support for the protestors and their efforts to provide legal assistance to them.
- Lawyers have been prevented from accessing their detained clients; they have been denied entry into courthouses; and have been informed that key hearings took place in their absence. In some instances, the authorities have refused to confirm the identities, whereabouts and current locations of their detained clients, giving rise to serious concern that they have been subjected to enforced disappearance.

Acts of reprisal against lawyers reflect a systemic effort by the authorities to undermine the independence of lawyers and bar associations, intimidate those engaged in human rights defence, and obstruct access to justice for political detainees and civil society actors.

[1] https://www.turkeylitigationsupport.com/blog/2025/1/27/56-international-lawyers-and-human-rights-organisations-condemn-crackdown-on-istanbul-bar-associations-leadership-and-call-for-action and https://www.turkeylitigationsupport.com/blog/2025/4/14/joint-statement-by-the-international-legal-and-human-rights-community-on-unacceptable-attacks-on-the-legal-profession-in-turkey

III. Incompatibility with international legal standards

The targeting of Mr Pehlivan, the Istanbul Bar Association, and numerous other lawyers violates a range of binding international human rights standards.

Lawyers must not face harassment or sanctions for actions taken in line with their professional duties (*UN Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers, Principle 16; Council of Europe Committee of Ministers Recommendation no. R(2000)21, Principle I, paras. 1 and 4; Council of Europe Convention for the Protection of the Profession of Lawyer, Article 9*).

They must be able to exercise their rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, and must not be identified with their clients or their clients' causes (*UN Basic Principles, Principles 23 and 18; CoE Convention on Lawyers, Articles 7 and 6*).

Bar associations and lawyers' professional organisations must be independent and self-governing and must be able to speak publicly on legal and human rights issues without fear of reprisal or dissolution (*UN Basic Principles, Principle 24; CoE Recommendation, Principle V; CoE Convention on Lawyers, Articles 4 and 7*).

The baseless criminal investigations, prosecutions and arbitrary detention of Mr Pehlivan, other lawyers, and the judicial harassment of members of the Istanbul Bar Association violate these guarantees and threaten the institutional integrity and independence of the legal profession in Turkey. They also undermine the rights to freedom of expression, association, peaceful assembly, and the right to a fair trial, in breach of Articles 19, 22, and 14 of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* and Articles 10, 11, and 6 of the *European Convention on Human Rights* to which Turkey is a state party.

IV. Call to action

We, the undersigned legal and human rights organisations, call for immediate and coordinated action:

To the Government of Turkey:

- Immediately and unconditionally release Mehmet Pehlivan, and drop all charges and proceedings arising from his carrying out his professional activities or exercising his right to freedom of expression or peaceful exercise of his human rights;
- Cease all legal and administrative actions against the Istanbul Bar Association and other bar associations engaging in rights-based advocacy;
- End the intimidation and politically motivated and arbitrary prosecution of lawyers, their arbitrary detentions, as well as travel bans and surveillance against them;
- Ensure compliance with Article 58 of the Attorneyship Law and respect international standards protecting legal professionals and their associations.

To the United Nations, Council of Europe and European Union:

- Publicly condemn the detention of Mr Pehlivan and the broader pattern of reprisals against lawyers in Turkey;
- Engage the Turkish authorities through all available diplomatic and monitoring mechanisms to demand respect for the legal profession;
- Initiate urgent communications, conduct monitoring, and consider dispatching observation missions to Turkey;

- Support independent bar associations and human rights lawyers through trial observation, legal assistance, and international advocacy.

We stand in full solidarity with Mehmet Pehlivan, the Istanbul Bar Association and all other legal professionals in Turkey defending human rights and the rule of law. Their prosecution is not only an attack on their individual liberty but a threat to justice and the rule of law itself.

Signatories (in alphabetical order):

1. Amnesty International
2. Council of Bars and Law Societies of Europe (CCBE)
3. Defense Commission of the Barcelona Bar Association
4. Défense Sans Frontière-Avocats Solidaires (Lawyers Without Borders - Solidarity Lawyers, DSF-AS)
5. Deutscher Anwaltverein (German Bar Association, DAV)
6. European Association of Lawyers for Democracy and World Human Rights (ELDH)
7. European Criminal Bar Association (ECBA)
8. Fédération des Barreaux d'Europe (European Bars Federation, FBE)
9. Foundation Day of the Endangered Lawyer
10. Human Rights Institute of the Brussels Bar Association
11. Indian Association of Lawyers
12. International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute (IBAHRI)
13. International Commission of Jurists (ICJ)
14. International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), in the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders
15. Law Society of England and Wales (LSEW)
16. Lawyers for Lawyers
17. Lawyers' Rights Watch Canada (LRWC)
18. National Union of People's Lawyers (NUPL)
19. New York City Bar Association
20. Turkey Human Rights Litigation Support Project (TLSP)
21. World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), in the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders