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COP 31: Resisting Erdoğan's Authoritarian Greenwashing

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As Turkey prepares to host the world's largest climate summit in Antalya, its official rhetoric masks a long-running policy of expanding fossil fuel exploration and accelerating nuclear projects under foreign dependency. In this context, COP31 is bound to become yet another greenwashing spectacle. Still, Turkey's grassroots movement continue to resist the government's authoritarian push for more extraction, fighting instead for energy democracy and ecological justice.

The 31st United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP31) will be held from 9 to 20 November in the Turkish city of Antalya. Touted as the "implementation COP", the hope is that it will provide a platform for forging global consensus on realistic emission cuts and fossil fuel phaseout.

This edition of the world's largest climate summit will be held against a backdrop of intense geopolitical rivalry and tension. China, the world's foremost producer of green energy, has signalled its intent to use the conference to push back against Western tariffs on its clean technology, including solar panels, wind turbines, batteries, and electric cars. Meanwhile, the US under Trump 2.0 has cast its lot with fossil fuels, while the EU faces energy insecurity due to oil and gas supply chain disruptions, and slashes green policies in the name of competitiveness despite growing climate impacts.

Turkey itself is heading to this COP as a country that imports two-thirds of its primary energy – nearly all of it fossil fuels. Still, a centrepiece of the summit is Ankara's "35 by 35" proposal, a global target for electricity to meet 35 per cent of the world's energy demand by 2035 (compared to today's approximately 20 per cent). This comes even as, under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey has made no secret of its ambitions to become a major fossil fuel transit hub between the Middle East and Europe. And while Ankara has struck deals with China covering mining, critical minerals, renewables, and nuclear power, it has also intensified oil and gas exploration in the Mediterranean, putting it at loggerheads with Greece and the EU.

For the Turkish government, COP31 is an opportunity to divert attention from a prolonged macroeconomic crisis. Climate diplomacy serves Erdoğan not as a genuine ecological commitment but as a pragmatic instrument of governance, designed to attract foreign capital and secure international legitimacy in a domestic context where social opposition has already been silenced.

Greenwashing continues

Just as Egypt (COP27), the UAE (COP28) and Azerbaijan (COP29) used their host status to pursue energy deals worth billions, and Brazil (COP30) pressed ahead with oil licensing and auctions in the run-up to its summit, Turkey is approaching COP31 with a dual strategy: it is leveraging the global electrification narrative to mask deep-seated policy contradictions and position itself as a hub for clean technology.

On the one hand, the Turkish government has negotiated with China on battery investments, urging

Western donors to shift defence spending toward climate finance, and staging high-profile domestic events including the state-sponsored "NextGenCOP30.5" youth summit on Yassi Island (renamed Democracy and Freedom Island in commemoration of the 1960 coup). On the other hand, rather than outlining a coal phaseout strategy, Ankara has said it would raise national emissions through 2035, signed new international natural gas agreements, and regularly issues emergency expropriation decrees for domestic oil and gas exploration activities. In other words, COP31 will be another act of greenwashing by a government that is actively increasing carbon emissions and promoting fossil fuels.

This contradiction became most evident on 10 October, when a presidential decree authorised urgent land expropriations across Antalya and the Mediterranean coast to accelerate oil and gas exploration led by the Turkish Petroleum Corporation (TPAO). Indeed, this institutional greenwashing was already embedded in Turkey's official climate commitments for the 2053 net-zero goal, as the state's updated Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) promised a 41 per cent reduction by 2030, which in fact implies an additional 11 per cent increase beyond the roughly 30 per cent emission level that would occur without mitigation measures. After the launch of Turkey's Emissions Trading System (ETS) in August, this policy environment became even more complex, as the system risks legitimising continued industrial pollution through tradable allowances instead of enforcing real emissions limits.

In fact, with Turkey's emissions expected to rise by 16 per cent by 2035, absolute reduction targets have been deferred to an unspecified future date. This trend is also confirmed by 2026 data from the European Commission's Emissions Database for Global Atmospheric Research. According to these data, Turkey rose two places in the global emitter ranking, now accounting for 1.13 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions and standing as the world's 14th-largest greenhouse gas emitter.

Ultimately, behind Ankara's climate diplomacy lies a familiar calculus of regime survival. Just as growth in the construction and energy sectors was leveraged to maintain political hegemony in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis, the government now regards ESG funds, green loans, and the revenues expected from COP31-related economic activity as vital liquidity to manage macroeconomic tensions before the 2028 presidential election. These pressures stem from inflation, which peaked at 85 per cent in late 2022 before stabilising at around 30 percent, as well as the roughly 80 percent depreciation of the Turkish lira.

Murky renewables

Beyond political rhetoric, an analysis of the Turkish Electricity Transmission Corporation's national power grid data reveals that these contradictions have roots in the energy system itself. At first glance, while fossil fuels constitute 38 per cent of total installed capacity – with imported natural gas alone making up 19 per cent – the remaining 62 per cent is officially labelled as renewable energy. However, 40 per cent of this renewable share comes from hydroelectric projects that disrupt river flows, exacerbate regional water stress, and face persistent local opposition, while solar and wind account for only 21 per cent and 15 per cent of installed capacity, respectively.

But that is not the full picture. According to Ember Climate data, actual production levels reveal the structural limitations of Turkey's renewable energy production more clearly. For instance, solar energy accounted for only 6 per cent in January 2026; in June, one of the peak summer months, solar contributed just 16.5 per cent of total generation, while wind contributed 13.5 per cent. In contrast, countries with broadly comparable solar resources, such as Portugal and Italy, regularly derive around 20 to 30 per cent of their monthly electricity generation from solar during peak months. Italy's renewable energy output can exceed 40 per cent of total electricity demand during high-generation summer periods, while Germany, despite having only a third of Turkey's solar potential, generates more than 20

per cent of its summer electricity from solar through more effective use of its infrastructure.

Addressing these structural shortfalls requires a drastic acceleration: as officially declared in its 2053 net-zero targets, Turkey must urgently develop a concrete roadmap to deploy 120 GW of solar and wind energy by 2035. This has not been done so far, and current solar generation capacity remains limited due to institutional barriers. Moreover, the lack of mechanisms within the current legal framework to encourage households or local communities to feed the electricity they generate back into the grid has left small-scale projects mired in licensing procedures, bureaucratic delays, and inadequate grid capacity.

Complicating these problems is the fact that while small-scale initiatives are systematically obstructed, land allocations and financial support flow directly to large corporations and foreign capital. For example, despite having 185 GW of solar energy potential and 300 sunny days per year, Turkey has instead signed an intergovernmental agreement with Saudi Arabia, akin to the Akkuyu nuclear deal with Russia, for energy production on its own territory. In domestic discourse, the government portrays such projects as cost-free investments that will leave Turkey with new facilities. Yet these agreements in fact oblige Turkey to purchase the energy from the producing state, turning these ventures into a source of economic loss in the long run, even if they appear beneficial in the short term before elections. What is more, when renewable energy projects are pursued through centralised state-backed deals, they also trigger dispossession, which in turn fuels social opposition.

The nuclear gamble

The critical reliance on foreign sources embedded in Turkey's energy policy is most evident in its long-standing nuclear ambitions, officially framed as a 20-GW capacity target under the 2053 net-zero strategy. Beyond the 4.8-GW Akkuyu plant currently under construction, revised plans include a 5.6-GW facility in Thrace, a 4.8-GW plant on the Black Sea coast in Sinop, and a 4.8 GW allocation for Small Modular Reactors (SMRs).

As the Akkuyu project illustrates, this ambitious roadmap faces serious limits: 16 years after the intergovernmental agreement with Russia to complete the plant was signed, not a single reactor has entered commercial operation. That is more than double the global average construction timeframe of seven to eight years. As the world's first nuclear power plant built under the "Build-Own-Operate" (BOO) model, Akkuyu does not reduce dependence on Russian energy, as Turkish officials initially claimed. On the contrary, by granting a foreign state ownership over sovereign national territory, it deepens Turkey's strategic dependence on Russia. Moreover, while officials often claim Akkuyu NPP will meet 10 per cent of national electricity demand, long-term energy projections suggest that its contribution will be lower. With electricity consumption projected to approach 500 TWh by 2035, Akkuyu's expected annual generation of 35 TWh would cover only about 7 to 8 percent of demand.

This structural mismatch is compounded by severe ecological risks: Akkuyu relies on cooling water from the Mediterranean Sea, which is warming 20 per cent faster than the global average, heightening the risk of climate-driven operational disruptions. Yet, instead of adapting ecological safeguards to these climate realities, the government has granted regulatory exemptions. Crucially, the discharge water temperature from the Akkuyu plant has been exempted from the 35°-Celsius thermal limit set by the national Water Pollution Control Regulation.

The project's waste management framework exposes another structural inequality in the allocation of risk. Although official statements suggest that spent fuel will be managed domestically, existing

regulations and international practice indicate that fuel from the VVER-1200 reactors, which are also used at Akkuyu, will instead be shipped to Russia for reprocessing. Under Russian federal law, foreign radioactive waste cannot be permanently stored on Russian territory. Consequently, once plutonium and uranium are extracted, the remaining high-level waste must be returned to Turkey. As a result, while Russia extracts usable materials for strategic and industrial purposes, Turkey is left with the burden of managing high-level radioactive waste that will remain hazardous for up to a million years.

This waste will force Ankara to confront the question of long-term disposal, and there is even a possibility that the management of long-lived isotopes may ultimately compel Turkey to build a deep geological repository; a multi-billion-euro infrastructure project akin to Finland's Onkalo facility, which is designed to isolate waste for 100,000 years. Under centralised and authoritarian governance, however, even the siting of a radioactive waste management facility follows a rigid top-down approach. Indeed, in 2022, Turkey's Ministry of Energy was reportedly considering Polatlı, an agrarian region near the capital Ankara with relatively lower seismic activity, as a potential site for a radioactive waste facility, without consulting local populations or securing community consent.

In addition to environmental and strategic risks, the Akkuyu project fails to integrate with Turkey's labour market and technical infrastructure. While official sources reported that construction employment once approached 30,000, Russia's economic bottlenecks due to the ongoing war in Ukraine have already reduced this figure to 10,000; it will decline even further upon operational launch, requiring only about 4,000 long-term workers. Because the specific terms of the BOO agreement with Turkey explicitly exclude technology transfer, local engineers and workers will be confined largely to mid-level technical support roles, reinforcing structural dependence on foreign expertise. This institutional gap is tied to a longer historical legacy: during the restructuring that followed the 1980 military coup, the ranks of experienced scientists in Turkey's public nuclear research sector were severely diminished.

Resistance and repression

Between 2018 and 2025, Turkey issued 22,855 mining licenses and received 13,342 initial applications, systematically converting agricultural land and ecologically sensitive zones into industrial sites. This expansion of extractive concessions and large-scale energy projects unfolded alongside escalating administrative and legal pressures on civil society and local environmental movements. By narrowing the channels of public participation in environmental decision-making and repressing opposition in the public sphere, the central government has systematically suppressed local resistance to secure compliance with large state-backed initiatives.

In recent years, a common thread among COP host countries has been not only high carbon emissions but also authoritarian forms of governance that refuse dialogue with social opposition and systematically rely on administrative coercion. In Turkey, grassroots activism against ecologically destructive projects has faced severe repression, particularly since the 2016 state of emergency, proclaimed after an attempted coup. Environmental activism is not merely a debate among urban intellectuals; as state-backed mining and energy projects steadily expand into rural areas, it has evolved into a direct struggle by local communities to defend their land, water, and livelihoods. As Human Rights Watch has documented in the lead-up to COP31, the state increasingly employs criminal investigations, arbitrary detentions, and administrative fines to suppress this local resistance.

For instance, in Mugla's Akbelen Forest, where local villagers have mobilised against coal mine expansion since 2019, state authorities have deployed law enforcement to safeguard corporate extraction. Security forces have repeatedly dispersed nonviolent protesters with tear gas, water

cannons, and pepper spray. Turkish activists and residents also face arbitrary detentions, administrative fines, and continuous identity checks around their protest encampments; a police strategy of spatial surveillance designed to intimidate the community and erode ongoing resistance.

Similar dynamics unfolded in the Black Sea region during the 2026 protests against gold mining on the Perşembe Plateau. Situated across the Korgan and Aybastı districts of Ordu city, this high-altitude plateau sustains pastoral livelihoods and livestock farming. Although the area holds legally protected pasture status, the Ministry of Environment granted a mining permit in 2024 without public consultation. Residents only became aware of the project after preliminary site operations directly contaminated their drinking and irrigation water supplies. In June 2026, a court-appointed expert report validated these concerns, warning that gold extraction through cyanide leaching posed a lasting threat to the region's groundwater reserves. Yet, despite these judicial findings and ongoing legal challenges, security forces repeatedly suppressed peaceful local demonstrations with pepper spray, tear gas, and arbitrary detentions.

Meanwhile, In Rize province's İkizdere Valley, state intervention assumed an explicitly coercive form when a limestone quarry was opened to supply raw materials for a state-backed logistics port. The quarry directly threatened local tea cultivation, old-growth forests, and essential water sources. To bypass community opposition, the government issued urgent expropriation decrees and imposed district-wide movement restrictions under the pretext of maintaining public order. Despite heavy security blockades and administrative fines, residents, spearheaded by rural women, sustained road blockades, direct physical interventions to protect trees, and legal petitions against the project.

Autocratic greenwashing vs. energy democracy

These cases demonstrate that Turkish state institutions and security forces have acted in tandem to guarantee corporate access to natural resources. By bypassing community consultations, disregarding judicial and scientific assessments, and criminalising nonviolent protest, the central government systematically shuts down public participation. Under the guise of regional development and energy security, state authority dispossesses local populations of their land, water, and livelihoods.

In countries where domestic opposition is suppressed, international climate conferences provide host governments with an opportunity to project a progressive image and secure foreign capital in a politically sanitised environment. For foreign investors and state delegations, this authoritarian arrangement ensures predictability and shields large-scale energy and infrastructure deals from public scrutiny.

At the same time, grassroots initiative networks such as the People's Climate Summit (PCS) – formed as a collective platform for excluded civil society to articulate a common voice against COP31, encompassing the local struggles discussed above in Akbelen, Persembe, and Ikizdere – are building solidarity across environmental, labour, and human rights movements. By confronting extractivist projects and demanding community-led energy democracy, these alliances articulate the most vital alternative vision of a just transition: they embody alternative imaginaries of ecological justice and democratic transition.



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