Politics of the Turkish Conflict: The Kurdish Issue

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OMER TEKDEMIR, APR 15 2016

If we are to analyse and discuss the recent turmoil in Turkey, and perhaps in the broader Middle East region, we need to make sure that we understand how the hegemonic Kurdish political movement is divided between two main political actors. On the one hand, Kurdish parliamentarian politics represented by the People's Democracy Party (HDP), and on the other, the armed politics of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) enacted through their discourse, methods, political strategies and techniques, as well as human capital, social ground and geopolitics. However, before considering this in detail we should briefly look at the political landscape of the country before and after the 7 June 2015 election.

The Islamic-based neoliberal and conservative democrat ruling party, the Justice and Development Party (AK Party), who have been in power for 13 years supporting a new right-wing populist agenda both domestically and internationally, also attempted to solve the knotty hundred-year-old Kurdish question in the late 2000s. This fragile peace-seeking process was initiated by the leader of the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), Abdullah Öcalan, jailed since 1999, and the Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who 'became the first Turkish leader ever to admit that Turkey had mishandled its rebellious Kurds' in 2005, and apologized on behalf of the state while accepting the Kurdish issue as his own problem. He also opened the first state-run Kurdish TV channel, TRT6 (now TRT Kurdi), in the history of the Republic. As a result, the PKK sent a group of guerrillas to Turkey as 'peace ambassadors' in 2009.

This positive approach was followed by the 'Kurdish Initiative' project with a democratic guarantee of Kurdish basic human rights. The Oslo peace negotiation between the state and PKK representatives also started at this time (2008-11) and completed the ten items of the 'Dolmabahçe Palace consensus' in February 2015. At the same time, Öcalan called for the full disarmament of the PKK in his historical 2013 Newroz/Nevruz speech that also created a strong hope for peace. Afterwards, the PKK officially declared on 25 April 2013 that they would withdraw their armed members from Turkish territory. Moreover, Turkey in a joint operation with the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) relocated the tomb of Süleyman Shah in Syria despite the treat of the Salafi-jihadist paramilitary group, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS/DAHES), in February 2015.

But this process has not had a fairy-tale ending. There have been a series of damaging incidents that have occurred along the roadmap towards ending the three-decade-old insurgency and concluding a peace building process. One example was the Uludere/Roboski massacre of 34 Kurdish civilian smugglers, many of them children, who were killed by a Turkish warplane on the border of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq in December 2011. In another, thirteen soldiers were killed and seven wounded in a clash with the PKK in Silvan (Diyarbakır) in 2011, while in January 2013 three Kurdish female political activists, one who was a co-founder of the PKK, were assassinated in Paris by a Turkish secret agent in which MİT was accused of having a link with the killer. Further, between 6 and 7 October, 2014, anti-government protests took place in the Kurdish provinces resulting in 50 deaths as a result of conflict between PKK sympathizers and state security forces alongside with the Turkish radical Islamists from Hizbullah, formed predominantly by Kurds, after tension between the PYD forces and ISIS/DAESH in Kobanê/Ayn al-Arab, Rojava north Syria.

Meanwhile, pro-peace activists (for example, secularists, leftist, liberals) and HDP supporters were targeted in suicide bomb attacks by ISIS/DAESH. The Diyarbakır rally bombing took place in June 2015 and killed four people, injuring 100. Immediately after, another attack occurred in Suruç in July 2015 killing 33 people with again more than

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100 badly injured. For both terror attacks the MİT were accused by some of having links with the jihadists. These attacks surpassed the 2013 Reyhanlı bombing in which 51 people were killed. The PKK blamed the government for these attacks and embarked on counter-attacks killing two police officers in their home in Ceylanpınar, which led to the breakdown of the peace building process.

In the light of these crucial events the Kurdish expert, Michael Gunter, stated that 'the failure of the minimal Dolmabahçe Consensus—an attempt in March 2015 to establish a monitoring committee to oversee the failing peace process—and simmering Kurdish anger over the Turkish government's failure to support the Syrian Kurdish struggle in Kobanê that raged from September 2014 until January 2015 proved to be two of the final blows to the peace process'. Therefore, the success of the People's Defence Unit (YPG), an armed wing of the PYD of Syrian Kurds, and the Kobanê experiment was a key factor that resulted in the ongoing war in Turkey between the state and the PKK (as mentioned by the Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu). The AK Party got increasingly nervous about the Kobanê success story, also annoyed by the ideological affinity between the YPG, and the PKK, deciding to wage war to reduce the PKK's ability to build a similar experiment in Turkey (within Şırnak, Hakkari, Diyarbakır, Urfa districts etc.). As a result both sides in the conflict had already made up their mind to engage in a hegemonic power struggle.

At the macro level, the AK Party were also faced with a powerful protest movement, namely the Gezi Park in Taksim Square in June 2013, which could be compared to events such as the Arab Spring, the occupy movement in the US, and the anti-austerity movements (for example, Indignados) in Europe. Four million people took part in protests all over the country against the state's authoritarianism that ended in eleven dead and thousands injured. In addition, there have been fierce protests against the AK Party government after the corruption and bribery scandal in December 2013 and the Soma mine disaster, which left 301 miners dead in May 2014, among other incidents.

In this political atmosphere, the HDP for the first time in the Republic's history successfully synergized and mobilized new social movements within Turkish and Kurdish society to emerge as an alternative coalition party representing multi-identities and advocating a left-leaning populism. This must be seen in relation to the social and political crisis taking place and to the main opposition party, the Republican People's Party's (CHP), which paradoxically represented both the state's Kemalist principles and civil society's political dissatisfaction. In addition, the HDP started to challenge the AK Party's hegemonic power, not only in the Kurdish region but the country as a whole, by targeting Erdoğan with the motto 'we will not make you president' during the election campaign which resulted in the unexpected success of the HDP (with 13.1% of the votes) in June 2015. This was also an important turning point in the relation between Erdoğan and the Kurdish political actors.

In fact, expectations and understanding of 'peace' meant different things to the AK Party government and the HDP and the PKK, alongside other stakeholders. The AK Party's understanding of conflict resolution was still interpreted within the Turkish political realm and the balance of power between different social groups along with its own political future and prospects. On the other hand, the Kurdish political actors read the notion of peace in very different ways.

The Autonomist Marxism of the PKK: Withdrawal from the Nation-State

The PKK has been conducting an armed struggle against the Turkish state since 1984 from the political base of orthodox Marxism. The low-intensity armed-conflict has been the cause of 50,000 deaths, the internal displacement of three million people and a deep polarization between Turkish and Kurdish societies. Due to many internal and external factors, since the 1990s the PKK's classic Marxist ideology and perception of the nation state has changed into a critical and postmodern Marxist discourse. As a result, the idea of radical democracy has been given everyday meaning by Öcalan in terms of 'a democratic republic', 'democratic autonomy' and 'democratic federalism' inspired by the American anarchist, ecologist and communal political theorist Murray Bookchin. According to this philosophy the PKK, as a hegemonic power, rejects the existing nation(alist) state and take its position as an outsider, in the way of Michael Hardt's and Antonio Negri's (2004) 'absolute democracy', while it demands a role in Kurdish geopolitics as a regional dominant actor by shifting its objective from an independent Kurdistan to democratic autonomy, moreover a radical democracy. However, there are two traditions and understandings of radical democracy in the contemporary Kurdish political struggle.

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The PKK has always been completely excluded from Turkey's democratic and public space, and in this context the PKK strives to build an alternative governance and society through claims for self-governance outside of the state's control in the form of direct democracy. The PKK has already constructed an alternative Kurdish political identity in Turkish and Kurdish politics, and is now attempting to create a new political platform to challenge the existing hegemonic culture of Turkish nationalism, Islamism, and neoliberalism by denying the idea of the AK Party's 'new Turkey' or 'neo-Ottomanism'.

As a result, the PKK instead of consenting to the new AKP's hegemonic order, struggles to build a new one in the Kurdish region. Therefore, the recent escalating violence, urban warfare and curfew in the many Kurdish cities, such as Sur, Cizre, Silopi, Nusaybin, Yüksekova among others which border Syria and the Iraqi conflict zone and hold organic ties with the Kurds these territories, is the result of a hegemonic struggle between the AKP and the PKK in the context of coercion by the Turkish state. In connection with this, Oktem states that 'tensions in Turkey have escalated since June, when the ruling AKP party lost its parliamentary majority in a major defeat for President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The opposition HDP party won 13 percent of the vote, securing seats in Parliament for the first time. Since the elections, hostilities between Turkish security forces and Kurdish militants have sharply escalated'.

The End of Politics: Violence, Armed-Conflict and Social Division

The desire for self-governance without the form of a nation-state is already implemented in Rojava in north Syria, 'west Kurdistan', where the idea of radical democratic autonomy is articulated in practice—particularly after the heroic defence of Kobanê city against the jihadi groups, ISIS/DAESH—under a canton regime and co-chair administration of one woman and one man, which was recently progressed towards federalism by the PYD. While in Başur in north Iraq, 'south Kurdistan', the KRG is preparing to declare its independence.

Therefore, after the Iraqi and recently the Syrian civil war, the PKK's political idea of a pre-Sykes-Picot Middle East and the demand for Kurdish autonomy, as was the case in the Ottoman era, has intensively revived. The PKK has created a power struggle around the discourse of nationalism by re-imagining the post-Ottoman borders of the nation states and nationhood and offering a new picture of the political frontiers between Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran with talk of Bakur, Rojava, Başur, and Rojhelat. It also shows how the Kurdish issue within Turkey has become a wider regional, indeed a transborder and transnational concern. In this sense, the PKK has begun to re-engage in an armed struggle against state security forces in Bakur in southern east Turkey, 'north Kurdistan' but now using a new strategy of a *hendek* (trenches) style urban warfare conducted by the PKK's local youth branch, the Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement (YDG-H). In this respect, as Jongerden and Simsek argue (November 24, 2014) 'the development in Rojava offers not only a viable alternative to authoritarian and sectarianism but, for many in the region, also the last chance'.

According to the International Crisis Group (ICG) around 700 people have been killed in the last six months. The response of the AKP government has been extremely harsh and non-compromising due to its own political agenda. Even one of the PKK co-founders, Murat Karayılan, remarked that they had not expected such an extreme response from the state. The Human Rights Foundation of Turkey (TIHV) on March 3, 2016 reported that 'between the dates August 16th, 2015 and March 18th, 2016 there has been 63 officially confirmed, open-ended and round-the-clock curfews in at least 22 districts of 7 cities in Southeastern Turkey'. The consequent escalating violence and armed conflict caused many deaths, including civilians, and during the curfew 310 civilians lost their lives of which 72 were children, 62 women and 30 elderly among others, while 79 of the bodies could not be identified. At the same time thousands of people have been internally displaced. In this respect, Akkoyunlu (October 23, 2015) describes the situation: 'In the ensuing conflict, paramilitary police forces descended upon Kurdish towns and villages with tactics and cruelty all too familiar to those who lived through the 90s: killing squads driving unidentifiable vehicles in cities under curfew; children and the elderly shot by sniper fire; dead young Kurds being dragged behind armoured police vehicles; the violated corpse of a female PKK fighter; fascist graffiti adorning the bullet-sprayed walls of besieged Kurdish towns'. And on 28 November 2015, Tahir Elçi, a prominent Kurdish human rights lawyer, who was there to promote peace, was assassinated in front of the cameras during the press conference.

From all the pictures from the region, that are interestingly not be found in the Turkish media, which according to

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Freedom House is not free, but in the social media, Western newspapers, and on international TV (BBC, CNN and RT), it is hard not to believe that this is not Syria or Palestine. In such illiberal, majoritarian democracy and armed politics, the politics of Turkey is witnessing the transformation of the AK Party's political rule from a neoliberal oriented conservative democracy to an illiberal, nationalist, Islamist and popular authoritarianism, while the PKK has again taken up weapons in their demand for Kurdish national, cultural, linguistic and democratic rights and self-governance.

During this, Ankara has suffered from the twin suicide bombings in October 2015 mounted by ISIS/DAESH when at least 103 people were killed and around 250 wounded in this deadliest of terror attacks. But soon in February 2016 the capital city woke to a suicide bombing by the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (TAK), an offshoot of the PKK, in an attack on a convoy carrying both civilian and military personnel who work at the military headquarters. This killed 28 people with 60 injured. The attack was claimed by the TAK as revenge for military operations in the Kurdish region. Ankara was hit again on 13 March 2016 by its worst wave of violence with another deadly suicide terror attack by the TAK which killed 37 people. At the same time, Turkish jets attacked Kandil as Ankara blamed the bombing on the PKK. This vicious cycle of violence only shows that the path of violence is a dark tunnel with death at its end.

The Post-Marxism of the HDP: Engage with the Existence State

In contrast, the HDP has emerged in the Kurdish political sphere as something different from its predecessors and has replaced the tradition of pro-Kurdish political parties such as the HEP, DEP, HADEP, and BDP as a new Kurdish-led and left-leaning populist party by embracing democratic pluralism (Tekdemir, June 2, 2015). One can see this new politics in the discourses and election manifesto of the HDP, especially before the 7 June election and the start of the violence. The HDP as a hegemonic political project does not argue for a 'retreat from politics', and hence an exit from the parliamentarian system, instead the party has constructed a politics influenced by the critiques of Ernasto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) of liberal democracy which is to be replaced by a neo-Gramscian radical democracy. As a long-term strategy, it asks the many stakeholders of this conflict to keep faith with the HDP in order to meditate between the AK Party and PKK and return to the peace process.

The HDP's goal of a collective political identity ('We are') and a collectivity finds space in the context of representative democracy. In doing so, the HDP is inspired by the idea of constructing a collective political identity through a horizontal party structure by mobilizing a social movement within the various democratic struggles, thus targeting a wider audience in the aspiration of an agonistic pluralism and emancipation of society. It brings together Alevis, non-Muslims, devout Muslims, leftists, LGBTs and other forms of 'otherised' identities in a chain of equivalence between different democratic struggles. This chain of equivalence makes the HDP, as a collation of identities, different from the other pro-Kurdish parties. The HDP did and does not essentialise only Kurdish ethno-political identity and hence does not try to unite all democratic demands into a single homogenous movement, but rather it constructs a democratic symbolic public space in a normative sense by using a new political grammar, such as 'Turkeyness', 'new life', 'great humanity', and 'great peace'.

Nevertheless, we need to distinguish between the real politics, existing conditions and the formulation of a political project that is derived from a certain theoretical framework. The idea of radical democracy is a political project which proposes a struggle that uses a left-leaning populist strategy. In doing so the HDP seeks to radicalise, or at least to challenge, the existing AK Party's hegemonic right-wing populism which has created an illiberal, conservative, authoritarian and majoritarian regime. Ironically, not long ago the AK Party saw itself essentially as an Islamic-oriented political party that criticised the Kemalist secular order and Kemalist form of democracy and was instead a representative of liberalism, equality and justice.

It has been the HDP's objective to bring people together under the democratic ethical-political principles of liberty and equality for all. However, the recent violence has meant that the HDP has found the struggle to keep this radical pluralism and diversity of leftists, Islamists, secularists and Kurdish nationalists in the party bloc very challenging while simultaneously holding its position between the Kurdish people and the PKK. It seems that convincing the PKK to end the armed struggle, and perhaps cease its guerrilla operations in Turkey, and to convince the AK Party to return to the conditions of 2013 and seek a political resolution is a very difficult task for the HDP.

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Hope for Peace or Cease-Fire

The HDP gained a historical success in the June 2015 general election, which continued in the November 'renewal election'. However before and after the November election the violence and security policies caused the HDP to become more marginalized, criminalized and terrorized. It is futile to continue to have a debate about which side started the armed conflict as in this dispute nationalism prevails on both sides and this creates the risk of civil war. The HDP's radical pluralist and democratic politics has been hijacked by the security crackdown, Turkish-Islam nationalism, and authoritarianism of the AK Party government on the one hand, and by Kurdish nationalism, separatism, suicide attacks, and the PKK's dominance in homogenising Kurdish politics on the other, alongside the civilian casualties, polarisation of the society and economic damage. These political realities have occurred as a result of the failure of the cease-fire, conflict resolution and the peace building process. The armed-struggle increased dramatically since November 2015 and the news of death is now part of daily life.

At this moment, it is very hard for the HDP to articulate the idea of radical democracy and pluralism, as well as peace, and instead it endeavours to protect existing democratic gains and its legitimacy. There is a strong civil demand for a peace process and an expectation on the HDP to take a strong position in calling for a renewal of dialogue and negotiation and to call on the PKK for a cease-fire. This despite everything that is going on and the harsh, uncompromising political behaviour of both Erdoğan and the PKK.

The HDP's popular leader, Selahattin Demirtaş, from time to time attempts to play the role of mediator between the state and the PKK and, moreover, criticises the PKK's armed struggle. In 2016, at his Newroz/Nevruz speech there were far less significant participants than there used to be and the celebration was muted after all the deaths in the country. In the speech he highlighted the necessity of a ceasefire, peace, and political resolution, which also reflected the wish of a significant numbers of Kurd. But it was not at all clear how this could be achieved.

There is, however, still a weak civil movement and a slowly growing number of people and NGOs who wish to re-open the dispute resolution process in search of peace and socio-political reconciliation despite the fact that a collective and intense nationalism, concern with security, polarisation, high emotion and pain dominate political and social life. The attitude of the government is illustrated in the way that 'the case of the 1128 academics, who signed a petition for peace and have been facing harassment and persecution since has become a cause célèbre for global liberal academia. Many academics have lost their jobs, and three [recently four] scholars are in jail for reading out the petition at a press conference. They are being hounded on pro-government media, exposed with their institutional affiliations and photographs so that they can be spotted on the street'. At the same time, despite the President Erdoğan's negative concern, the Prime Minister Davutoğlu states that 'what the public expects from the peace process is the complete abandonment of arms. If that happens and we go back to May 2013, and if the PKK sends all of its armed components abroad, leaving no armed element in Turkey, then everything can be talked about', while the US ambassador to Ankara, John Bass also calls the PKK to leave the armed struggle and the state to protect civilians. These weak but alternative initiatives may offer some hope that after decades of expected peace it might just be attainable.

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