

Report

The Kurdish Peace Process in the Shadow of Turkey's Power Struggle and the Upcoming Local Elections

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Kurds shout slogans praising Sakine Cansız, one of the founders of a militant group battling Turkish troops since 1984, as they protest against France outside the French consulate in Istanbul, Turkey (AP Photo)

Abstract

Turkey's ongoing power struggle between the governing AK Party and the Gülen Movement has been exacerbated by, among other factors, the parties' different conceptualisations of the Kurdish issue and methods of its settlement. These differences have impacted the course of the Kurdish peace process. The government considers victory in the upcoming local elections as the only way out of this debacle and for reenergising the process, a sentiment seemingly concurred by the Kurds. In this regard, both the government and Kurdish discourse and deeds suggest that a revitalisation of the process following the local elections is expected. This revitalisation can only be meaningful and enduring if it is premised on the political and legal steps, rather than discourse, merely.

Introduction

Turkey has come under the international spotlight due to a fierce power struggle between the AK Party government and the Gülen Movement, a religious movement with a large presence within the state apparatus. Various explanations have been offered to account for the root causes of this feud; ⁽¹⁾ however there has been almost unanimous agreement among seasoned scholars and pundits as to when, and on what issue, the discord first took place.

The first public contention between the AK Party and the Gülen Movement took place within the context of the Kurdish issue. Differing and contending visions of the Kurdish issue and of the methods of its settlement manifested themselves clearly when prosecutors, widely believed to be members of the Gülenist network, attempted to arrest Turkey's Chief of Intelligence, Hakan Fidan, in 2012, then the Prime Minister's Special Representative, for his role in conducting the negotiations with the representatives of the Kurdistan Worker Party (PKK) to bring the Kurdish issue to a peaceful conclusion. (2)

It is a widely shared belief that the Gülen Movement holds a negative view of the negotiated settlement with the PKK. (3) In recent months, however, the Movement's leader Fethullah Gülen, has publicly declared support for the process. (4) This move was broadly assumed to be precipitated by the growing acceptance of a negotiated settlement and increasing criticism of the Movement by a large segment of society due to its hawkish stance on the Kurdish issue. Nevertheless, the Movement's role in the mass arrest of Kurdish politicians and activists within the framework of the Union of Kurdistan Communities (KCK) trials, along with the attempted arrest of Fidan contradict the Movement's recently adopted parlance of supporting settlement talks with the PKK.

The Movement advocates granting some cultural and linguistic rights to the Kurds, yet, by echoing the old statist mantra, it still maintains that the issue could be solved through economic and educational improvements in Kurdish majority regions, as voiced by Gülen in an interview with BBC. (5) As such, the Movement is resistant to the political demands of the Kurds and has illustrated its distaste towards the government's decision to talk to Öcalan and the PKK to solve the Kurdish issue.

The AK Party tried this trite method of solving the Kurdish issue in its first term, to no avail. (6) Upon this failure, the AK Party developed a more political understanding of the issue. After 2009, it arrived at the understanding that it is imperative to engage the PKK, the most vocal and armed representative of Kurdish politics, to solve the issue. The gradual evolution of the AK Party's understanding of the Kurdish issue and the method of its settlement paved the way for the recent peace process, as one of the major differences that sets the current process apart from other trials; it is the direct involvement of Kurdish political representatives at the highest level.

As the method and content of the Kurdish issue's settlement have been major points of friction between the parties, the current intense and menacing power struggle between the two sides will inevitably impact the evolution of Turkey's Kurdish peace process. (7) Moreover, the government regards a victory in the upcoming local election as the only way out of this debacle, which is believed to pave the way for reenergising the process

as well. In this regard, both the discourse of the government and the Kurds suggest that a revitalisation of the process after the local elections can be expected. (8)

Challenges Posed and Opportunities Offered by the Current Struggle

The struggle and ensuing developments poses a danger to the process, while also offering an opportunity. First, the current struggle diverts focus from the peace process. Moreover, it drains energy that should have been spent tackling Turkey's challenges, ills and opportunities, of which Kurdish issue is the most prominent one. This line of thought is well echoed by the co-chairman of the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) Selahattin Demirtaş in an interview. When asked how the power struggle has affected the Kurdish peace process, Demirtaş replied that the struggle and ensuing events have directly hindered the advancement of the process. (9)

Second, as part of this struggle, there have been attempts to derail the process. Leaks of records of state security officials' investigations of Abdullah Öcalan, the incarcerated leader of the PKK, in February, is a case in point. (10) The content of the leaks was designed in a way to portray Öcalan as submissive to the Turkish state and willing to "sell off Kurds" in order to save his life, which was in danger as Turkey retained capital punishment as part of its legal system at that time, 1999. Given that Öcalan is the most important actor on the Kurdish side of the talks, these leaks aim to discredit him and drive a wedge between him and Kurdish public and other Kurdish actors, hence jeopardizing the whole peace process. Therefore, the longer this power struggle continues, the more likely that the public will witness similar acts of sabotage.

Furthermore, Erdoğan is the main target of this power struggle. Defaming him and undermining his popularity through election calendar-sensitive sensational graft inquiries and voice recordings, irrespective of whether they are genuine or photomontages, constitutes the essence of the Gülenist strategy in this power struggle. Given that Erdoğan and Öcalan are the primary architects of the peace process, attempts to discredit and weaken them, if proven successful, will inevitably negatively affect the process.

On the other hand, the power struggle reminds the government of the fragility of the process and the reason for enhanced engagement and commitment to bring the Kurdish issue to a peaceful end. As the government parted ways with its erstwhile liberal and Gülenist allies, the Kurds remain its most important ally and the Kurdish peace process is seen as Turkey's most important democratisation story both internally and internationally. Therefore, the government seems to do its utmost to keep process on

track because: a) to avoid turning one of the most important political and social forces against itself, especially at a time when its previous alliance block is broken; b) the process supports the government's claim that it is committed to further democratisation, despite the setbacks and stumbling blocks on the road. These factors seem to motivate the government to reinvigorate the process.

Local Elections as a Watershed for the Peace Process?

In this respect, the upcoming local elections scheduled for 30 March 2014 gains special importance for the course of the peace process. Öcalan and the Kurds have thus far refrained from openly challenging the government for its inability to undertake the anticipated legal measures in order to revitalise the process. Many people, including the Kurds, regard the loss of momentum in the peace process as expected due to the upcoming local elections and the intensifying struggle between the AK Party and the Gülen Movement. In this regard, the Kurdish side appears to have placed its hope in the post-election period for the process to regain the momentum. (11)

This approach is reflected in speeches and public announcements by Kurdish political representatives. During a visit by BDP MPs on 9 March, in his prison cell in İmralı, an island close to İstanbul, Öcalan said that, despite the setbacks, he is hopeful of the peace process and expects steps to be taken after the local elections. (12) Moreover, he said that he would write another letter to be read out to the gathering crowd in Diyarbakır, the largest Kurdish city in Turkey, to celebrate the Newroz, which is a day celebrated by the Kurds and other Mesopotamian people to celebrate the arrival of Spring. In his first letter, which was read to a similar crowd in Diyarbakır last year, he called upon the PKK to withdraw from Turkey in order to set the stage for politics to play a role in solving the Kurdish issue. As with his first letter, he defined the content of his second letter to be historic. (13)

Similar pronouncements stem from the government as well. At his campaign rallies, particularly in Kurdish plurality cities, Erdoğan has repeatedly said that the Gülen Movement's 'stifled coup attempts' primarily targeted at the Kurdish peace process. He added that his party remains firmly committed to the process and will bring the Kurdish issue to a successful end, despite such malicious attempts. (14) This discursive commitment was accompanied by the Parliament's approval of the democratisation package on 2 March (15), the content of which was announced by Prime Minister Erdoğan on 30 September 2013. This package markedly omitted much-anticipated provisions such as lowering the 10% election threshold for parties to enter the

parliament, a rule that particularly hurts Kurdish politics given that its parties usually receive around 5-6% of the vote.

Nevertheless, the package included some important articles that could energise the process. These include, but are not limited to, education in private schools and political campaigning to be conducted in languages other than Turkish; allowing former non-Turkish names of villages and neighborhoods to be reinstated; the reduction of eligibility for political parties to receive public funds from 7% to 3%; and allowance of the co-chairmanship system for political parties, a practice that has been exercised only by pro-Kurdish political parties thus far. Lastly, it introduced harsher penalties for hate crimes and discriminatory practices based on ethnicity, race, gender, confession, etc. (16) Though the package remains insufficient and falls short of meeting expectations, the approval of the package, coupled with discourse, was important as a sign of good-will and commitment on the part of the government, especially given that it was adopted within the context of a bitter power struggle.

A Legal Shield for the Process

Moreover, the proposed draft law to make fundamental changes to the National Intelligence Organization (MIT) law is another indication of the government's intention to reenergising the process after the local elections. Apart from the contentious aspects of this proposal, the draft law provides a legal basis for negotiations between Abdullah Öcalan, or any other representative of the PKK, and MIT officials. The related provision states: "[The MIT] may establish direct contacts with any local or foreign institution, organisation, entity or individual and employ appropriate coordination methods in cases when national security and the country's interests so require. While carrying out their duties, MIT members may meet with detainees or convicts in penal institutions after prior notice, and may contact any entity threatening national security, including 'terrorist' organisations, as part of their duties." (17) This proposed law can be regarded as a legal shield adopted by the government for the past, current, and prospective negotiations with Öcalan and PKK representatives. Given that the Chief of MIT, Hakan Fidan, barely avoided arrest in 2012 due to his role in the Oslo talks with PKK members, the value of and the idea behind this draft law become apparent. The draft law has rightly been seen by many as laying the groundwork for enhanced engagements with Öcalan and the PKK to seek a settlement to the issue.

Conclusion

The energy consuming and attention deviating nature of the ongoing struggle and ensuing developments will have a significant impact on the course of the resolution process. The fact that the two sides have different conceptualisations of the Kurdish issue and the method of settlement further aggravate the tension. In this respect, attempts to discredit and weaken both Öcalan and Erdoğan, the primary architects of the process, illustrate the challenge facing the process as a result of the current struggle.

Nevertheless, both the AK Party government and the Kurds possess sufficient incentives to keep the process on track. The Kurdish side aptly maintains that there is no alternative to the AK Party as a partner for the peace, in Turkey's present political configuration, whereas the AK Party, both for ideological and pragmatic reasons, believes that it cannot backtrack on the resolution process. Failure on this account would cost the party dearly in terms of domestic and international prestige, as the process gives credulity to the party's claim that it is committed to further reform and democratisation, despite recent unpalatable developments.

Lastly, both the Kurdish side and the AK Party seem to be geared toward the post-local elections period in order to revitalise the process. The ongoing cease-fire was the precondition for commencing a meaningful resolution process, but it is not intended to be a resolution by itself or a substitute for a final resolution. In this respect, right after the local elections and before the presidential election, scheduled for 14 August 2014, it is imperative for the government to take substantial legal and political steps in order to stimulate the process, and the PKK should reciprocate by continuing its withdrawal across the border into Iraq.

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Endnotes

- (1) For a structural analysis of Turkey's power struggle see Galip Dalay (February 2014), "The Structural Roots of Turkey's Power Struggle", German Marshall Fund on Turkey series.
- (2) See "Turkish spy chief summoned over PKK talks" Financial Times, retrieved 16 March 2014, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/12733aa0-5328-11e1-8aa1-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2wSijur81>
- (3) See "Gülen Movement stands against the peace process in Turkey", Basnews, retrieved 17 March 2014, <http://www.basnews.com/en/News/Details/Gulen-Movement-stands-against-the-peace-process-in-Turkey-/14089> and Wladimir van Wilgenburg (June 2013), "Turkey's Gulen Movement Could Endanger PKK Peace Process ", Rudaw, retrieved 17 March 2014, <http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/turkey/18062013>

- (4) He said that he is not against the peace process in BBC Türkçe interview, To read the whole interview see "Fethullah Gülen BBC'ye konuştu", BBC Türkçe, retrieved 17 March 2014, http://www.bbc.co.uk/turkce/haberler/2014/01/140126_fethullah_gulen_roportaj_guney.shtml
- (5) Ibid.
- (6) To gain a deeper understanding of the AK Party's Kurdish policy, see Mesut Yeğen (January 2014), "The AK Party and the Kurdish Question: Conflict to Negotiation" Al Jazeera Center for Studies.
- (7) See "Turkish power struggle leaves new questions on Kurdish issue", Al Monitor, retrieved 17 March 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/02/turkey-power-struggle-reveals-kurdish-questions.html> and "Turkey's power struggle affects Kurdish issue", Al Monitor, retrieved 17 March 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/01/kurdish-turkey-gulen-power-struggle.html#>
- (8) See the approach of Kurdish side as regards the relation between the local election and Kurdish peace process, Daren Butler (March 2014), "Turkey local election holds key to Kurdish peace talk", Reuters, retrieved 17 March 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/07/turkey-election-kurds-idUSL6NOM121920140307>
- (9) For BDP Co-Chairman Selahattin Demirtaş' interview see "Süreci ancak Öcalan bitirebilir", Al Jazeera Türk, retrieved 18 March 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com.tr/al-jazeera-ozel/sureci-ancak-ocalan-bitirebilir>
- (10) See the report on the leaks "Leak of İmralı record sparks controversy over its source", Hürriyet Daily News, retrieved 18 March 2014, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/leak-of-imrali-record-sparks-controversy-over-its-source.aspx?pageID=238&nID=42104&NewsCatID=338>
- (11) A top commander of PKK, Murat Karayılan, told to reporters that if the governing AK Party does not take the necessary steps after the local elections, the process will finish. To see the full interview, "Karayılan: AKP seçimden sonra adım atmazsa süreç biter", T 24, retrieved 18 March 2014, <http://t24.com.tr/haber/karayilan-akp-secimden-sonra-adim-atmazsa-surec-biter/253581>
- (12) Öcalan told to visiting BDP MPs despite the shortcomings of the process, he is still hopeful for a resolution. Because of this, he is willing to wait until 30 March local elections in order for the process to regain the steam, see the text, "Öcalan sürecin arkasında" Al Jazeera Türk, retrieved 12 March 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com.tr/haber/ocalan-surecin-arkasinda-0>
- (13) Ibid.
- (14) The peace process has been a constant topic in Erdoğan's election rallies speeches. See "Çözüm sürecini daha ileriye taşıyacağız", Sabah, retrieved 14 March 2014, <http://www.sabah.com.tr/Gundem/2014/03/11/cozum-surecini-daha-ileriye-goturecegiz>
- (15) See the discussion on the democratization package "Democratization package advances reconciliation", Daily Sabah, retrieved 14 March 2014, <http://www.dailysabah.com/politics/2014/03/05/democratization-package-advances-reconciliation>
- (16) Ibid.
- (17) See the discussion on and the content of the proposed draft law of Turkey's Intelligence Organization, "Draft law would drastically expand Turkish MIT's powers", Al Monitor, retrieved 15

