

Report

The AK Party and the Kurdish Question: Conflict to Negotiation

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Dozens of Turks stage a protest outside a hotel hosting a group of journalists, academics and artists who have been appointed by the government to promote a peace process with the Kurdish PKK rebels [AP]

Abstract

This report explains the failure of Turkey's politics of assimilation, repression and containment used until the late 1990s against the Kurds, and the shift towards politics of 'soft' recognition at the turn of the new millennium, including Kurdish responses and opening to it. The Turkish state's engagement with the Kurdish question relied on three approaches: Assimilation, repression and containment. In engaging with the Kurdish question, the state used the instruments of assimilation and repression inside Turkey and that of containment abroad.

Introduction

The Turkish state's engagement with the Kurdish question relied on three approaches: Assimilation, repression and containment. In engaging with the Kurdish question, the state used the instruments of assimilation and repression inside Turkey and that of containment abroad. Since the foundation of the republic by Ataturk up to the late 1990s, this brand of politics worked. Kurds' resistance in Turkey did not become sufficiently powerful as to change the politics of assimilation and repression by the state. Moreover, the international climate between 1920s and 1980s eased the enforcement of containing Kurds outside Turkey. Throughout all these years, Turkey, Iran and Iraq have, in principal, been in cooperation to contain Kurds. The Treaty of Sadaabad, signed

in 1937 between Iran, Turkey, Iraq and Afghanistan ensured the parties of the pact “to respect the inviolability of their common borders, to refrain from acts of aggression, not to interfere in one another’s internal affairs, and not to allow the formation or operation on their territory of armed groups or organizations pursuing aims hostile to any of the parties to the agreement.”⁽¹⁾ Signed with the encouragement of Britain in 1937, the Sadaabad Treaty remained binding after the Second World War when the NATO and the USSR patronized the international politics.

The 1990s: The Status quo Cracks

The status quo which was based on the aforementioned three approaches became untenable in the 1990s. Why? The Turkish state faced two important developments, making it difficult to sustain the status quo of the past seventy years. First, Kurds’ resistance to the politics of assimilation and repression reached such a peak and intensity in the mid- to late- 1990s that maintaining the status quo became too costly for the Turkish army. While, the PKK turned into a huge military organisation maintaining a low profile war against the army, the pro-Kurdish party allied with the PKK was now being supported by one third of Kurdish citizens inside Turkey. Second, the protection provided by the USA and the NATO for the Kurds in Iraq after the Gulf War in 1991 ended seven decades of containment.

In addition to these two developments, by the 1990s the politics of assimilation and repression faced huge resistance from the Kurds, rendering them useless as realistic approaches for the Turkish state, and the politics of containment was no longer viable. In other words, the status quo maintained by means of assimilation, repression and containment was shaken to the core.

This generated a crack within the Turkish establishment. While the classical elite of the republic⁽²⁾ insisted on maintaining the politics of the past seventy years, the then president Turgut Özal wanted to introduce a politics of low profile recognition and terminate the politics of containment to cope with the Kurdish question. However, the sudden death of Özal in 1993 prevented the deepening of the crack in the establishment. Following the death of Özal, the Turkish state introduced harsher politics of repression than ever. This campaign of brutal repression, which was maintained at the expense of huge losses and sufferings,⁽³⁾ ended in 1999 when the leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, was captured. This was followed by the withdrawal of the PKK militants from Turkey. The Turkish state seemed to have ended the Kurds’ resistance to the status quo.

The 2000s: The EU and the new era

The 1990s closed with a very important development. On 10-11 December 1999, Turkey's candidacy for a full membership for the EU was accepted. However, candidacy for EU membership had terms of conditionality built into it. Turkey was asked to introduce many reforms including those concerning the Kurdish question too, before the negotiations for full membership got started. Accordingly, in 2002, capital punishment was removed and several constitutional amendments were made. These amendments spared the life of Öcalan and ended the ban on publication and broadcasting in Kurdish. In accordance with these constitutional amendments, laws enabling learning, teaching, and broadcasting in Kurdish were enacted in August 2002. (4)

In a nutshell, owing to the withdrawal of the PKK and the beginning of the EU accession process, by 2002, the Turkish state relaxed the politics of repression and began to introduce a weak policy of recognition.

Such was the ground when the AK Party started to engage with the Kurdish question.

The AK Party and the Kurdish Question

A first-hand document revealing the AK Party's approach to the Kurdish question is the party program of 2001.(5) This program manifests that the AK Party both pursued and departed from the way in which the former mainstream parties of the republic approached the Kurdish question. Discussing the Kurdish question under the ambiguous title of "the Southeast", the program indicates that the AK Party would, quite like the other former mainstream parties, perceive the Kurdish question in relation to 'terror', 'foreign incitement', and 'underdevelopment'. However, the program also indicates that the AK Party intended to depart from the establishment's approach to the Kurdish question. Admitting that the economic development alone would not be sufficient to resolve the question, the program suggested recognising cultural differences. Moreover, the program suggested seeing citizenship as the main point of reference for national identity. This was of greatest importance because hitherto all the mainstream political parties and all the three constitutions of the republic had pointed to Turkishness instead.(6)

The program manifested that as of 2001 the AK Party would intend to leave the politics of repression behind; aim to pursue the politics of soft recognition, which was introduced by the former government during the reforms introduced for the purpose of EU accession; tend to develop this politics of weak recognition (this was revealed by the fact that the AK Party suggested seeing citizenship as the main point of reference for national

identity, and that it had its own priorities and that the issues related to enhancing popular sovereignty and administrative efficiency was evidently prior to the Kurdish question).

However, the first deliberations and acts of the AK Party in power revealed that the party was not so enthusiastic to develop the politics of recognition at that stage. There was no single mention of the Kurdish question in the programs of the first two governments established by the AK Party.(7)

This low priority accorded to the Kurdish question continued throughout the first few years of the Ak AK Party power. In some instances, the AK Party even denied the existence of the Kurdish question. In a visit to Moscow in December 2002, Tayyip Erdoğan stated that there was no such thing as Kurdish question. Likewise, in an interview broadcasted at the CNN Turk on 24 February 2004 the Prime Minister wrapped up his views on the Kurdish question as follows: "At the foundation of the question lies economy not politics. [...] Let the citizen make his/her living and then you will see if such a question remains or not."(8)

This apathy to or say 'conservatism' in the Kurdish question was due to three reasons. First, a reformism in the Kurdish question would increase the tension between the AK Party and the still mighty classical republican elite. Second, the AK Party devoted much of its political energy to implement those EU reforms, which would reduce the power of the tutelage regime in Turkish politics. Lastly, that there was no armed clash since the withdrawal of the PKK enabled the AK Party to afford ignoring the Kurdish question in its first years in power.

However, despite this conservative attitude, it would be unfair to say that the AK Party remained entirely indifferent to the Kurdish question. Rather, a few important reforms were introduced in these years. For instance, the twenty-year long emergency rule in the southeast was lifted immediately after the AK Party came to power. Afterwards, the AK Party introduced legislation to remove bans against broadcasting and teaching in Kurdish.(9) Plus, the compensation law was enacted in 2005.(10) However, the fact that all these reforms were already spelled out by the 57th government in the famous national program indicated that the AK Party's engagement with the Kurdish question in these years did not go any further than the former government's politics of 'weak recognition plus no repression.'

In the meantime, although the termination of the guerrilla warfare in the southeast lessened the importance of the Kurdish question in Turkish politics, there were signs that

this was a temporary situation. In the elections in 2002, the pro-Kurdish HADEP received 6.2 % of the national vote, still the highest percentage ever a pro-Kurdish party received in a national election. As a matter of fact, it did not take long for the Kurdish question to return to the agenda of Turkish politics. In May 2004, the PKK decided to resume the guerrilla warfare and this was followed by the armed clashes between the PKK and the army.

In this context, the AK Party started to invest more energy into the resolution of the Kurdish question. In a historic speech delivered in Diyarbakır in 2005, Erdoğan used the most liberal discourse a prime minister has ever employed in Turkey. Conceding that the Turkish state had made mistakes in the past, the prime minister utterly used the term the Kurdish question and promised to resolve it by means of more democracy, more citizenship laws, and more prosperity.(11)

However, this liberal speech was not followed by a firm politics of recognition. It appears that in fact the AK Party changed its way of engagement with the Kurdish question only after 2007. As it is revealed today that in a National Security Council meeting in 2007, it was decided to get in touch with the PKK and introduce reforms concerning rights.(12) In other words, the AK Party decided to follow a firmer politics of recognition and negotiation in 2007.

However, it was only in 2009 that this change yielded its fruits. In that year, all the main actors involved in the Kurdish question renewed their positions. First, the chief of staff emphasised that the army would endorse the recognition of cultural rights at individual level. Likewise, he announced that they would rather dissolve the PKK instead of terminating it. In the same vein, the AK Party government started to take the most important steps of recognition. The TRT launched, at the beginning of 2009, a 24-hour Kurdish language channel, TRT 6.(13) Also, the Higher Education Board (YÖK) resolved to establish Kurdish language and literature departments in universities.(14) These still rank among the most radical gestures on the road to true recognition of Kurdish identity in Turkish history.

It did not take long to see that the PKK was also ready to renew its position. In an interview given in 2009, Murat Karayılan, the then head of the Koma Civakên Kurdistan (KCK),(15) stated that the PKK was ready to engage in a dialogue with the final aim of disarmament.(16) Meanwhile, the local elections held in March 2009 resulted in the absolute victory of the pro-Kurdish DTP in the southeast.(17) Immediately after the local elections, the PKK announced a ceasefire in May 2009.

It was in this context that the famous Kurdish opening started.(18) However, the demonstrations made by the Kurdish masses on the arrival of 34 PKK militants at Habur prompted a nationalist opposition to the process with the result that the AK Party decided to slow down the opening process. Nonetheless, the fact that the PKK did not end the ceasefire implied that the opening process was still on.(19) The ceasefire and the negotiations lasted until the elections held in June 2011.

In the elections, both the AK Party and the DTP were successful. This made the negotiating actors more uncompromising. After the elections the clashes between the PKK and the army resumed. While the PKK claimed that it would implement a Revolutionary People's War with the final aim of defeating the state in the Southeast, the columnists supporting the government alleged that Turkey would defeat the PKK as the Sri Lanka forces defeated the separatists Tamil guerrillas.(20)

However, neither the PKK nor the government achieved their goals. The government remained cautious enough not to return to the politics of repression of 1990's with the result that the PKK failed to convince the civilians to get involved into the clashes between the PKK and the army. Yet, on the other hand, the government did not defeat the PKK. Despite some heavy losses, the PKK was able to recruit new militants and despite a massive campaign of discrediting the PKK, the Kurdistan Workers' Party sustained its positive image in the eyes of the Kurdish masses.

The Resolution/Peace Process

It was in this context that the PKK and the state resumed the negotiations. However, it was not the context itself that convinced the parties of the conflict that they should resume the negotiations. Rather the routine of the context itself was sustainable for both parties. But the developments abroad revealed that such routine was likely to change. The crisis in Syria and the one in Iraq between the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Iran-supported Maliki regime produced a situation that could result in a fundamental shift in the leadership and programme of the PKK. As the crisis in Syria and Iraq deepened, it was realised that the PKK's loyalty to Öcalan and to its long-lasting principle of territorial integrity of Turkey was at risk. Ostensibly, this was in the interest of neither Öcalan, nor the PKK, and certainly not in the Turkish state's interest.

The risk for Öcalan was obvious: If Öcalan were 'freed from the leadership of the PKK', he would politically be no one. The risk was no small for the PKK. A PKK 'freed from the leadership of Öcalan' would ultimately risk division. Besides, abandoning the principle of loyalty to the territorial integrity of Turkey would very likely produce the risk of losing

some of the mass support from Kurds in Turkey. Lastly, the AK Party did not want to face with the results of a PKK freed from Öcalan's leadership and the principle of unity.

For the AK Party, resuming the negotiations was reasonable due to an entirely different reason too. It is known that the Prime Minister and the AK Party want to make some constitutional amendments that would empower the presidency and elect Erdoğan as the new president. This means that in 2014 there will be two referendums in which Erdoğan needs to get at least half of the votes. If the negotiations did not start, it was likely that the AK Party would be challenged by a political front composed of Republican People's Party, Nationalist Action Party, Peace and Democracy Party and possibly Gülen community. That the negotiations started has made the PDP a good ally for the prospective referendums. This of course will depend on whether the AK Party meets certain demands of PDP in the prospective constitutional amendments.

Conclusion

The current peace process has been working for almost a year without major trouble. After a set of meetings with the deputies from the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party and correspondence with the top cadres of the PKK, Öcalan convinced the PKK to withdraw its armed forces to Iraqi Kurdistan.

It is now expected that the AK Party government will introduce a set of reforms concerning the Kurdish question. Reducing the 10 % election threshold and releasing the Kurdish politicians in jail seem to be the first steps of these reforms. Once these reforms are introduced, the final stage of the resolution process is expected to take place. It is understood that this last phase will involve the disarmament of the PKK in return of some major steps of recognition such as allowing education in Kurdish and implementing a kind of decentralisation in administration.

On the whole, it looks possible to conclude that the AK Party is now convinced that it should address the Kurdish question by means of negotiation and recognition instead of repression and denial.

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Endnotes

- (1) <http://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/Saadabad+Pact+of+1937>
- (2) The classical elite of the Republic was mainly composed of the top cadres of the military, the judiciary, and the foreign affairs segments of the bureaucracy. The state-sponsored bourgeoisie backed this bureaucratic coalition with strong secular inclinations.
- (3) It is estimated that more than 35.000 Turkish citizens were killed during the clashes between the PKK and the security forces in Turkey between 1984 and 2012. Of these citizens, more than 20.000 were PKK militants. For figures see <http://siyaset.milliyet.com.tr/28-yilin-aci-bilancosu-35-bin-300-kisi-teror-kurbani-oldu/siyaset/siyasetdetay/16.08.2012/1581690/default.htm> [give date of access]. In the same process, more than a million Kurdish citizens were displaced and more than 3000 villages or helmets in the southeast were evacuated. A research conducted by the Population Studies Institute in 2006 indicated that more than a million Kurdish citizens were displaced in due course. Likewise, it is stated in an investigation report prepared by the Turkish Assembly Commission that more than three thousand villages or helmets were evacuated. For these two reports see Hacettepe Üniversitesi Nüfus Etütleri Enstitüsü (HÜNEE), 2006, Türkiye’de Göç ve Yerinden Olmuş Nüfus Araştırması, Ankara and Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi (TBMM), 1998, “Doğu ve Güneydoğu Anadolu’da Boşaltılan Yerleşim Birimleri Nedeniyle Göç Eden Yurttaşlarımızın Sorunlarının Araştırılarak Alınması Gereken Tedbirlerin Tespit Edilmesi Amacıyla Kurulan Meclis Araştırması Komisyonu Raporu”, Tutanak Dergisi, Dönem:53, Cilt:20, Ankara.
- (4) For the amendments made in August 2002 see <http://webarsiv.hurriyet.com.tr/2002/08/03/161165.asp> [give date of access]
- (5) For the program of the AK Party see <http://www.akparti.org.tr/site/akparti/parti-programi#bolum> [give date of access]
- (6) In the Turkish constitutions of 1924, 1961 and 1982 citizenship and Turkishness are not identical. Turkishness has been ‘more’ than (Turkish) citizenship in Turkish constitutions. For an examination of the gap between citizenship and Turkishness see Mesut Yegen “Citizenship and Ethnicity in Turkey”, Middle Eastern Studies, v. 40 n. 6, 2004, pp. 51-66.
- (7) For the programs of the 58th and 59th governments founded by Ak Party in 2002 and 2003 see <http://www.tbmm.gov.tr/hukümetler/HP58.htm> and <http://www.tbmm.gov.tr/hukümetler/HP59.htm> [dates of access must be entered]
- (8) Mithat Sancar “Kürt Açılımı Dinamikler, İhtimaller, İmkanlar”, Birikim, No. 246. <http://www.birikimdergisi.com/birikim/dergiyazi.aspx?did=1&dsid=381&dyid=5635>
- (9) See <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/uyum-paketi-ne-meclis-ten-onay/siyaset/haberdetayarsiv/20.06.2003/13863/default.htm> [date of access?]
- (10) The aim of the law was to compensate the losses of those who were displaced during the clashes between the PKK and the security forces. For a work on displacement and the Compensation Law see Dilek Kurban and Mesut Yeğen Adaletin Kiyısında: ‘Zorunlu’ Göç Sonrasında Devlet ve Kürtler 5233 sayılı Tazminat Yasası’nın bir Değerlendirmesi – Van Örneği, (İstanbul, TESEV Yayınları: 2012).
- (11) See <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/2005/08/12/> [accessed 8 December 2013]
- (12) See İsmet Berkan Asker Bize İktidarı Verir mi (İstanbul: Everest, 2011), pp. 156-7.
- (13) <http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/detaylar.do?load=detay&link=162452> (15 February 2009).
- (14) <http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/detaylar.do?load=detay&link=163330> (15 February 2009).
- (15) KCK (Koma Civaken Kurdistan –Union of Kurdistan Communities) is an umbrella organisation involving the PKK.
- (16) <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/default.aspx?aType=YazarDetay&ArticleID=1090963> [accessed 8 December 2013]
- (17) While DTP had won mayorship in 52 towns in 2004 elections, it won in 99 towns in 2009.

- (18)** In due course, the Minister of Interior Affairs, Beşir Atalay, organised subsequent meetings with the journalists, authors and the NGO's to open a public debate on the resolution of the Kurdish question. Likewise, the PKK sent 34 of its militants to Turkey with the aim of expressing its support for the opening process in November 2009.
- (19)** Meanwhile, as the secret negotiations between the PKK and state went on, the police and the judiciary pursued a relentless politics of pressure on Kurdish politicians. Thousands of Kurds, including BDP mayors, politicians, journalists, trade unionists were arrested in almost two years with the charge that they would work for the KCK. Despite the KCK trials and the reluctance of the Ak AK Party to deepen the politics of recognition, the ceasefire and negotiations lasted until the elections held in June 2011.
- (20)** See for instance http://www.sabah.com.tr/Yazarlar/safak/2009/02/04/PKK_ve_Tamil_Kaplanlari. Also, İskender Okyay, the first-ever Turkish ambassador to Sri Lanka stated immediately after the current peace process started that "Sri Lanka's experience in fighting against terrorism could be a good example for Turkey". See <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-304935-sri-lanka-good-example-for-turkey-in-fighting-terrorism.html> .