

TURKEY'S PRESIDENTIAL SYSTEM AND THE KURDS

INCREASED RESENTMENT, FRAGMENTATION, OR DEAL-MAKING?

Toni Alaranta



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- The Kurds are an ethnic group of approximately 35 million people, half of whom live inside the Republic of Turkey, where the conflict between the state and the Kurdish separatist PKK organization has now lasted for over three decades.
- After a promising peace process in 2009–2015, the AKP government under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has now reduced Turkey's Kurdish question to anti-terror operations, and marginalized the legal Kurdish HDP party, echoing the failed policy of the 1990s.
- Turkey is now a presidential system where power is tightly concentrated in the hands of President Erdoğan, a development directly opposed to Kurdish demands for greater local autonomy in the Kurdish-majority districts.
- Through the PKK network and transnational Kurdish sympathies, the fate of Syria's and Turkey's Kurds is now inextricably intertwined.
- The current way of building the new regime in Turkey is likely to produce more PKK attacks, but also widespread resentment among ordinary Kurds, including those opposing the PKK.



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INTRODUCTION

In a short space of time from March 2015 until now, the Turkish government's take on the Kurdish question – the status of the large Kurdish minority in the unitary Turkish nation-state – has changed drastically. From the first serious peace process in 2009–2015, the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) government's stance has shifted to an attempt not only to militarily annihilate the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, PKK)¹ but also to completely marginalize the HDP (Halkların Demokrat Partisi), the legal Kurdish political party with elected representatives in Turkey's parliament.

This Briefing Paper analyzes the characteristics of Turkey's Kurdish question in the newly established presidential system, formally in place since the presidential and parliamentary elections held on 24 June 2018. It first summarizes the origins and main phases of the Kurdish question in Turkey and the Middle East. This is followed by recounting the most recent developments since March 2015, especially in terms of how key actors and constituencies have tried to address the issue at hand, including the wider conflict-ridden regional context. The third section analyzes the prospects for Turkey's Kurdish question in the newly established presidential system, based on how the key determinants defining the issue have previously interacted with each other.

The paper concludes by noting that even if President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan were to change course anytime soon in an attempt to strike a 'grand bargain' with conservative Kurdish constituencies – of which there have been some indications in recent years – this would in all likelihood still fail to produce a lasting solution. Based on previous experiences and the internal logics of the conflict, the paper assumes that the current situation will eventually lead to a violent reaction by the PKK and mass protests by ordinary Kurds in Kurdish-majority towns.

THE PHASES OF THE KURDISH QUESTION IN TURKEY

The Kurdish ethnic group consists of approximately 35 million people. This makes them the largest ethnic group in the world without a state of their own. Nearly half of the Kurds live within the Republic of Turkey. However, the Iraqi Kurdish region has often played a vanguard role in the Kurdish struggle, a trait increasingly relevant since the establishment of the autonomous Kurdish enclave of northern Iraq in 1992. The autonomous status of Iraqi Kurds was subsequently confirmed in the new Iraqi federal Constitution of 2005. This means that the political autonomy of Iraqi Kurds is now both a source of inspiration and a problem for Kurds in other countries, especially in Turkey and Syria. The Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq is an obstacle to PKK-affiliated groups that currently aspire to democratic confederalism throughout Kurdistan, a governance model similar to the one currently under construction in Northern Syria (Rojava). It is also noteworthy that even though PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan and the transnational PKK family espousing his ideas have abandoned a Kurdish nation-state as a recipe for alleviating the Kurds' agony, the democratic confederal model nevertheless envisages a region-wide democratic confederal union of Middle Eastern peoples. It is difficult to imagine that this would not threaten the existing nation-states.

It is an oversimplification to say that Turkey's Kurdish question started with the establishment of the Turkish nation-state in 1923. The large-scale modernization attempts by the central state that led to the curbing of the Kurds' semi-autonomous tribal society started as early as the nineteenth century in the Ottoman Empire. However, there is no doubting the fact that the establishment of a modern unitary state based on Turkish nationalism created a structure within which the question of Kurdish collective rights as an ethnic group became blocked by the republican nationalist ideology. During the years of the Anatolian Resistance Struggle (1919–1922), waged against imperialist powers eager to partition Ottoman Anatolia, the community defending its rights and property was

1 Turkey, the EU, and the USA have designated the PKK as a terrorist organization.

composed of a common Muslim-majority population. Everyone, including the founders of Turkey, knew that this group mainly comprised two large ethnic groups, the Turks and the Kurds. The documents of the resistance era explicitly speak about the rights of a Muslim-majority constituency, not only the Turks.² By the time that the 1924 Constitution was penned, however, the Turkish leadership headed by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk came to see Kurdish collective rights as an obstacle to the modernizing Turkish state. Subsequently, all citizens, regardless of their ethnic origin, were required to adhere to the official Turkish nationalist ideology. In the Lausanne Peace Treaty recognizing the new republic, minority status was given only to non-Muslim groups, which in practice meant Armenians, Jews, and Greeks.³

In the newly established republic, ethnic pluralism was duly seen as a threatening component that could also be used by malevolent external powers against Turkey. This anxiety was further heightened in 1925 when a religious leader called Sheik Said, belonging to the influential Naqshbandi order, incited the Kurds to rise against the republican regime. The Sheik Said Rebellion was framed both in religious and Kurdish ethnic vocabulary, and it thus represented a dual threat to the young secular Turkish nation-state.

From this incident onwards, the Kemalist regime confirmed the assimilation of the Kurdish population as its official doctrine. By the 1950s and the emergence of a multiparty regime, the new political system based on free elections required that parties also needed to court Kurdish voters. This increased the Kurds' ability to have their preferences heard in Ankara. However, as competing parties courted Kurdish clan leaders, this produced an unhealthy situation whereby whole villages or tribes were forced to vote for a party or candidate preferred by the community leader. The period from the 1950s to the beginning of the 1980s consequently saw more opportunities for the Kurds to advance their cultural distinctiveness. On the other hand, the attempt to build a common political cause with the Turkish Left in particular ultimately failed, leading to the emergence of distinctively Kurdish political parties that were repeatedly excluded from the political process by party closures.

From today's perspective, the most important events determining the relationship between the

Turkish state and the Kurds of Turkey was the establishment of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) by Abdullah Öcalan in 1978, and the military intervention of 1980. The military regime saw the domestic Left and especially the leftist Kurdish movement as its antithesis, and it ruthlessly hunted down Kurdish activists. This radicalized the PKK founders, who are known to have endured severe torture in Diyarbakır Prison. This experience, together with disillusionment about the possibility to advance the Kurdish cause within the Turkish parties, gave birth to the PKK as it is known today. In 1984, the PKK embarked on its brutal, violent struggle against the Turkish state, with the original desire to create an independent Kurdish state. The PKK saw as its enemy not only the official Turkish state institutions but also those Kurds who cooperated with the enemy. More recently, the PKK has officially abandoned its struggle for an independent Kurdish state, and now espouses a local governance model, titled 'democratic confederalism', which would give local constituencies more power, presumably within the existing states.

Originally a radical organization based on Marxism-Leninism with strong ideological indoctrination, the PKK also aimed to crush the traditional, hierarchical social order among the Kurdish constituency. The traditional order was preserved by the dual mechanism of the specific Kurdish clan-based social structure and the peculiarities of Turkey's political system, which unintentionally perpetuated the existing structures by incorporating the Kurdish regions into the political system via elite-level cooperation with Kurdish leaders. The PKK not only attacked Turkish soldiers and police officers, but also the traditional Kurdish society and those it deemed collaborators, namely the Kurdish teachers working in state schools. The state responded to the PKK presence in Kurdish towns by establishing so-called village guards – ethnic Kurds paid by the government, who fought against the PKK in the villages.

During the 1990s, the fight between the PKK and the Turkish army devastated entire districts in the southeast part of the country, with both parties engaging in a dirty war that included kidnappings, murders, and narcotics trafficking. A mechanism thus emerged whereby PKK violence allowed the state to frame the Kurdish issue as a security problem reduced to anti-terror operations. Up to the present time, some 40,000 people have died as a result of the conflict. The fight with the PKK changed in nature as the Turkish

2 David McDowall, *The Modern History of Kurds* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2003), p. 127.

3 Baskın Oran, *Türkiye'de Azınlıklar: Kavramlar, Teori, Lozan, İç Mevzuat, İçtihat, Uygulama* (Istanbul: İletişim, 2004), p. 47.

intelligence agency managed to capture Abdullah Öcalan in 1999. Öcalan's death sentence was subsequently commuted to life in prison as Turkey inaugurated its EU reforms in 2002. The hopes among the Turkish security establishment that Öcalan's capture would mean the end of the PKK proved false, however. Among the majority of the Turkish political class, the lesson learned from the 1990s was that the Kurdish question could not be resolved by military means. The question of how to resolve it politically, on the other hand, has remained deeply controversial.

THE END OF THE PEACE PROCESS SINCE MARCH 2015

When the Arab revolts started in 2011, the main question was whether a more democratic future would finally emerge in the regions' nation-states. However, another debate concerned whether or not the post-World War I political map of the Middle East was about to explode after the rise of Daesh (Islamic State) and its territorial expansion in Syria and Iraq. Beyond that horrific scenario, a much more ambiguous possibility also emerged, namely the prospect of an autonomous Kurdish 'state', not only in Iraq but also in Syria. For the Kurds of Turkey, this provided a completely new horizon where the four nation-states of Iraq, Turkey, Iran, and Syria could no longer crush their freedom-seeking Kurdish citizens, as in previous decades.

However, even before the Arab revolts, the events in Iraq and the aim to make Turkey the most powerful actor in the Middle East had induced Turkey's AKP leaders to inaugurate the so-called 'Kurdish opening'. This was formulated by the AKP as a peace process to be implemented in several stages, some of which were hesitantly attempted before the change of course in March 2015. First, there were some symbolic trust-building initiatives, such as allowing Kurdish-language prayers in mosques and public recognition of Kurdish place and streets names in some of the Kurdish-majority towns. The next step, which was never implemented, was supposed to be a political road map in order to disarm the PKK and grant general amnesty to ex-PKK militants and Kurdish activists. The third phase included all the difficult plans to rewrite the Turkish Constitution based on non-ethnic premises and allowing Kurdish-language teaching in state schools, issues causing much resentment among the Turkish-speaking majority. All of these issues

were allegedly part of the behind-the-scenes talks between AKP government representatives and the imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, with HDP parliamentarians working as intermediaries.⁴ These talks, much criticized by the main opposition Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP) for their non-transparent and extra-parliamentary nature, were suddenly ended by President Erdoğan in March 2015 in the run-up to Turkey's parliamentary election on June 7. It is widely held among scholars that Erdoğan abandoned the 'Kurdish opening' when he realized that instead of his own AKP party, it was the left-liberal Kurdish-focused HDP that seemed to be increasing its votes due to the ongoing peace process.

It is obvious by now that the so-called 'Kurdish opening' – which was later referred to as the 'democratic opening' – remained highly constrained by a multidimensional mechanism with several actors striving for contradictory goals, and with equally contradictory motives. The incumbent AKP initiated its peace plan within the wider Islamic-conservative state transformation project that has now altered the very regime type from a parliamentary to a presidential system. Further, in order to conquer the state apparatuses, the AKP needed to crush the secularist actors within the state bureaucracy and the Armed Forces that had always preferred a military solution to the Kurdish question. Within AKP circles, the Kurds, many of whom are religious Sunni conservatives, were seen as a partner that would help elevate the AKP to power in elections, and then to liquidate the old guard in state institutions. In addition, the Iraqi autonomous Kurdish region seemed to be an irreversible fact, and the AKP leaders had managed to build a practical, mutually beneficial relationship with the Iraqi Kurdistan authority led by Masoud Barzani. The AKP leaders correctly concluded that Turkey could become a regional powerhouse only if it first secured a lasting peace with its own Kurdish population. The Iraqi Kurds could duly be used as a midwife in these attempts.

However, soon after the Arab revolts reached Syria, the AKP leadership became convinced that an Islamic-conservative state transformation project similar to the one they had launched at home was the future recipe for Syria as well. After futile talks with President Assad, Turkey started to push for a violent regime change in Syria, with a wish to elevate the Syrian

4 'Dolmabahçe Anlaşması', Cumhuriyet, 28 February 2015. Available at: http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiye/224047/Dolmabahce_anlasmasi.html#. Last accessed 9 November 2018.

Muslim brotherhood, the AKP's ideological equivalent, to power. However, the internal mechanisms of the situation in Syria helped to bring Syrian Kurds dominated by the PKK-affiliate Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, PYD) and the Syrian government to an unwritten contract within which the Sunni Islamist opposition, with its deeply religious agenda and exclusionary faith-based worldview, was their common enemy. As the Syrian state had provided a safe haven for the Turkish PKK during the 1990s, the organization was well placed to take control of northern Syrian territories as soon as the government forces were withdrawn under pressure. This de facto PKK-ruled autonomous area adjacent to Turkey's border has been framed as an existential threat among Turkey's leadership, not least because it points to a future where Turkey has autonomous Kurdish entities all over its southern borders. This perspective on the issue has meant that Turkey has preferred to see Sunni Islamists, including Daesh, controlling northern Syria, a policy⁵ that has aroused tremendous anger towards the AKP government also among Turkey's Kurds – often including those without any PKK sympathies.

The fate of the Syrian Kurds' autonomous region has acquired great symbolic and practical significance as far as the Kurds in Turkey are concerned. Turkey's policy of supporting the jihadis against the Kurds in Syria, as well as Erdoğan's decision to put an end to the peace plan initiated by his own government, induced the Turkish PKK to renew its attacks during the summer of 2015. The PKK splinter group, TAK (Kurdistan Freedom Falcons), also attacked civilian targets in Western Turkey. This led to an all-out urban war as the Turkish army entered Kurdish-majority cities, such as Diyarbakır, where whole neighbourhoods were razed to the ground with heavy artillery. These operations were successful in the sense that the PKK needed to withdraw from urban centres. All of these events, however, created an elusive tranquility in the Kurdish-majority cities, of a kind that is hardly long lasting.

The events were also deemed to crush the domestic 'grand bargain', namely the idea that Turkey's Kurds, including the left-liberal HDP, would back Erdoğan's desire for a presidential system in exchange for wider Kurdish cultural rights and some form of local self-governance in the southeast. The HDP leadership explicitly rejected such ideas, with party leader

Selahattin Demirtaş famously saying that his party would not allow Erdoğan to become an all-powerful president. There is little doubt that this rejection also played a key role in Erdoğan's choice in spring 2015 to abandon the peace process and forge an alliance with Turkish nationalists instead – an alliance subsequently given formal expression before the June 2018 presidential election which the AKP entered into with the ultranationalist MHP (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*) as its partner.

It is noteworthy that there were, however, also a considerable number of Kurdish commentators expressing the positive view that perhaps Erdoğan would be able to crush the old system, maintaining structural violence against the Kurds through the executive presidency regime. In other words, some Kurds seemed to contemplate the option that with the new presidential powers, Erdoğan might refrain from acting against the Kurds and could, if he so wished, push through a peaceful settlement and wider rights for the Kurds by completely marginalizing the Turkish secular-nationalist old guard.⁶ Up to now at least, these hopes have proved to be completely misplaced.

THE PRESIDENTIAL SYSTEM: WHAT LIES AHEAD?

The stance taken by both the main opposition CHP party and subsequently the Kurdish HDP party is that the Kurdish question can only be resolved as a part of the wider democratization of the Turkish political system.⁷ After the recent consolidation of President Erdoğan's authoritarian one-man rule, this seems like a particularly remote prospect. Admittedly, the political solution was never going to be easy, and one must give the AKP leadership credit for even trying to do something positive, irrespective of its motives. The vast list of demands by the Kurdish constituency would be a hard nut to crack in almost all political systems. These include the release of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, or at least his transfer to house arrest from prison; the abolition of the village guard system of government-sponsored and armed Kurds; the right to maintain a local self-defence force; an amnesty for Kurdish fighters and imprisoned activists; reform of

5 This position adopted by Turkey is the reason why the US administration has chosen the YPG (the Syrian PYD's military wing), an integral part of the international PKK network, as its partner in the fight against Daesh (Islamic State).

6 See, for instance, Abdullah Kiran, 'Başkanlık ve Kürtler (IX)', *Serbestiyet*, 4 April 2017, available at: <http://serbestiyet.com/yazarlar/abdullah--kiran/baskanlik-ve-kurtler-x-777319>. Last accessed 9 November 2018.

7 'CHP'nin Türkiye'nin Kürt Sorununa Bakışı, Çözüm Çerçevesi, 22 Soru 22 Cevap', *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* 2018, available at: https://content.chp.org.tr/file/chp_kurt_meselesi_kitapcik.pdf. Last accessed 9 November 2018. 'HDP'den "Kürt Sorununa Çözüm Deklarasyonu"', *Cumhuriyet*, 23 May 2018.

Turkey's wide anti-terror laws; education in Kurdish; establishing Kurdish as co-equal with Turkish as an official language of the Republic; the replacement of the current ethnic definition of citizenship with a civic one; an end to the 10 per cent electoral hurdle for parliamentary representation; and some form of 'democratic autonomy' that would in practice require changing Turkey to a federal political system.⁸

It is completely unrealistic to expect that the deep-rooted nationalist preferences of the ethnic Turkish majority would somehow vanish or become a considerably diminished determining element in domestic politics. This means that whoever wishes to seriously resolve the Kurdish issue by political instead of military means – which, ultimately, is the only option in the long run – needs to do two contradictory things at the same time. That is, while granting Kurds more cultural recognition and a considerable degree of local autonomy in Kurdish-majority districts, the Turkish nationalist sentiment must also be elevated. The nationalist ethos of the Turkish majority is strong, and large constituencies feel threatened by any policy that consolidates the Kurds' status as a distinct ethnic group with collective rights. This mechanism can be alleviated if there is a simultaneous consolidation of national pride.

To some degree, this is what President Erdoğan tried during his behind-the-scenes negotiations with PKK leader Öcalan. The 'great Turkey' discourse, increasingly independent foreign policy stance, and the elevation of Ottoman-Turkish grandeur can be seen as expressions of Erdoğan's attempt to redefine the Turkish nationalist discourse based on more Islamic and non-ethnic premises. It is also noteworthy that Abdullah Öcalan seemed to respond positively to this position by also emphasizing Islamic brotherhood as a means of bridging the ethnic divide. However, as Erdoğan was simultaneously primarily interested in concentrating all of the power in his own hands, many democratic-oriented constituencies, both Turks and Kurds, saw this as a nightmarish road to authoritarian one-man rule – which indeed it has now become in all practical terms.

As Erdoğan chose the 'divide and rule' principle as his strategy, the Kurdish constituency has also become increasingly fragmented. Today, one can single out at least six actors or constituencies among the Kurds that do not easily fit together, and which make the task of

finding a widely justified Kurdish counterpart for any possible future negotiations with the state even more difficult. Imprisoned PKK leader Öcalan, PKK operative leadership in the Kandil Mountains in Iraq, the splinter group Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (TAK), the radicalized youth in the south-east, the harassed HDP party, and the conservative Kurdish constituency traditionally more or less sympathetic to the AKP's Islamic-conservative agenda all have different preferences, and presumably react in conflicting ways when it comes to negotiating certain key issues, such as laying down arms.

CONCLUSIONS

The most obvious sign pointing to a perpetual dead-end at present in terms of resolving the Kurdish issue is the fact that, concurrent with the Kurds' desire for wider local governance, the government-appointed mayors have replaced the elected HDP mayors in the Kurdish-majority districts. It is clear from previous decades that the justified attempt to suppress the PKK militarily can only succeed if the Kurds are simultaneously offered a credible way to address their grievances through parliamentary representation. With the HDP leadership behind bars, the elected HDP mayors purged, and the state representatives taking an increasingly nationalist position without any prospect of a political solution process, taking a maximalist hard line against the PKK will presumably only end in more trouble – for all concerned.

To the extent that a peaceful solution to the Kurdish issue requires a regime type where power is delegated to a local administration, the most functional way of doing this would be some sort of federal state. This, however, seems to be directly opposed to the way in which Erdoğan has aimed to concentrate all powers in the institution of the presidency. Another key element – the non-ethnically defined Constitution – would require formulating a civic citizenship. At least up to now, as Erdoğan has chosen the ultranationalist MHP as his coalition partner, there is no way that such a Constitution could be part of the agenda. The attempt to resolve the Kurdish issue within a large parliamentary consensus, with various 'wise men groups' and 'fact-finding missions' researching past crimes, recently suggested by the main opposition CHP, also seems to be incongruous with the new presidential system in which the parliament has become a mere façade.

⁸ Bill Park, 'Turkey's Kurdish Problems, The Kurds' Turkish Problems', in *The Kurdish Question Revisited*, edited by Gareth Mansfield and Mohammed Shareef (London: Hurts, 2017), p. 202.

All of these recent developments and governing traits seemingly defining the newly established presidential system point to an unpleasant scenario where the current relative tranquility may be highly elusive. As noted, the Kurdish constituency, even the one sympathetic to the PKK's cause (if not all of its actions) is now composed of several sub-groups. Rather than strengthening the more compliant conservative Kurdish constituency, which Erdoğan may think he is able to co-opt with a mixture of religious conservatism and economic favouritism – and indeed possible for him to do as an authoritarian President – one could argue that the non-cooperative, increasingly Kurdish nationalist segment is instead on the rise, now preparing itself under heavy pressure for the next round of demonstrations and violence.