

Dynamics of Communal Violence in the Turkish-Kurdish Conflict

Imren Borsuk¹

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Abstract

Since the 2000s, Turkish-Kurdish communal violence has emerged as a new mode of confrontation in the recent history of Turkey's Kurdish conflict. Based upon contentious politics literature, this article traces two causal dynamics that have enabled communal violence as a new challenge in the recent history of Turkey's Kurdish conflict: racialization and countermobilization. While racialization has already been underlined in the literature on the Kurdish conflict, I will argue, however, that a new analytical mechanism that is somewhat neglected in the literature, countermobilization, plays a crucial role in the onset and diffusion of communal violence, especially during high-intensity electoral competitions.

Introduction

Since the 2000s, Turkish-Kurdish communal violence has emerged as one of the most striking challenges of Turkey's Kurdish conflict. Ethnic violence against Kurds surged particularly after 2005, and continued—in the form of attacks and assaults against pro-Kurdish party's offices and activists, brawls, and riots between Turks and Kurds—at an increasing pace until 2015. Whereas previous

¹ Dr. Imren Borsuk, Einstein Researcher, Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, Germany.

scholarships has examined Turkish-Kurdish communal violence as a consequence of lynch culture (Bora 2014), polarization (O'Connor and Baser 2018) and xenophobia against Kurds (Kurt 2021), here I introduce an approach to the study of Turkish-Kurdish communal violence informed by the concept of contentious politics, and shed light on two causal dynamics that have enabled communal violence as a mode of confrontation in the recent history of Turkey's Kurdish conflict: racialization and countermobilization. These causal mechanisms are not exhaustive; there are other mechanisms at play in the dynamics of Turkish-Kurdish communal violence, as I will detail in my future work. I hope, however, to illustrate, through such a focus, a number of important points about the dynamics of Turkish-Kurdish communal violence.

My reflections are based on data on Turkish-Kurdish communal violence that I collected for the period of 1999 to 2015 from media sources (*Cumhuriyet*, *Ozgur Gundem*, and *Dicle Haber Ajansi*), eyewitness accounts, and semi-structured interviews that I conducted in 2015 in Muğla, Balıkesir, Canakkale, Bursa and Istanbul with local Kurds and with representatives and activists from a pro-Kurdish party. I use incidents of communal violence as an analytical category to describe violence in which one of the motives of mobilization is the targeting of the communal identity of certain persons or groups. The precipitating motives involve expressions of Kurdish identity such as speaking in Kurdish, listening to Kurdish songs, singing in Kurdish, or participating in demonstrations that reveal the possible attachment of people to a pro-Kurdish cause such as protests organized by pro-Kurdish party, Newroz celebrations, civil disobedience acts, or commemoration of wartime losses. This article proceeds as follow. I will first give a brief overview of a theoretical framework on contentious politics. Secondly, based upon an approach informed by the concept of contentious politics, I will highlight how two causal mechanisms, racialization and countermobilization, play an important role in unfolding incidents of Turkish-Kurdish communal violence. While racialization has already been underlined in the literature on the Kurdish conflict (Ergin 2014,



Kurt 2021), countermobilization is an under-researched theme (see for example, Emrence and Aydin 2017). I will argue, however, this analytical mechanism that is somewhat neglected in the literature, countermobilization, plays a crucial role in the onset and diffusion of communal violence, especially during high-intensity electoral competitions. Empirically, I will use illustrative data from instances of Turkish-Kurdish communal violence to demonstrate how the mechanisms of racialization and countermobilization play out in the heat of communal contention.

Contentious politics of collective violence

Seeing both non-violent and violent contention as part of contentious politics, scholars of contentious politics have contributed broadly to conflict studies, going beyond static, macro-structural understandings of political violence to explore the complex social, political, economic dynamics (e.g., riots, civil wars, ethnic conflict) that underpin the onset of a particular form of political violence (McAdam et al. 2001, Alimi 2006, 2011, Bosi and Della Porta 2012, Della Porta 1995, 2008, 2013, Tilly 2003). Against the grain of the classical structural arguments of conflict studies, these studies explain the causal mechanisms and processes that coalesce into political violence. Such mechanisms are defined by Tilly and Goodin (2006: 15) as ‘a delimited class of events that alter relations among specified sets of elements in identical or closely similar ways over a variety of situations’. They also draw attention to the complex causality that drives the onset of political violence, as the same mechanisms may produce different outcomes in different social settings depending on the contingent and interactive operating dynamics.

I have noted that my analysis stresses the importance of racialization and countermobilization as two crucial causal dynamics in the onset and spread of Turkish-Kurdish communal violence. Let us now examine these two terms.

Racialization is defined as the ‘extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified social relationship, social practice or

group' (Omi and Winant 2014: 111). Applied to population and groups, racial meanings permeate not only institutional structures but also common-sense categories and hierarchies in society, setting expectations for racial behaviours, ordering people hierarchically, and asserting racial dominance over the racially subordinated (Bashi Treitler 2016). Racial practices and activities vary across societies, but racially subordinated groups are often categorized as different and undeserving. Ergin (2014) argues that the racialization of Kurdish identity in Turkey demonstrates itself in four ways: an emphasis on physical characteristics specific to Kurds; associating Kurdish identity with certain moral characteristics.

Three common modes of treatment toward racially subordinated groups are underlined by Gans (2017). The first involves 'name-calling, blaming, demonization and other forms of stigmatization'; the second consists of 'discrimination, segregation, eviction and other forms of exclusion from the society of the racial dominants'; third are forms of violence including 'harassment, persecution, prosecution, incarceration and other forms of punishment, including the ultimate one: lynching' (Gans 2017: 346). Leaving aside the first two modes of treatment, which are beyond the scope of this paper, I demonstrate below how racialization operates in episodes of communal violence, and how it takes shape in the activation of boundaries during contentious action.

Countermobilization is an under-researched dynamic in social movement studies. Meyer and Staggenborg (1996) identify three important factors behind the emergence of counter-movements: the support of a social movement to achieve its goals, the perception that entrenched interests are threatened, and political support for opposing movements. Countermobilization may arise when any social movement with political significance challenges material interests and symbolic values (Lee and Kane 2012). Interactions between protesters, counterprotesters, and state actors have important implications for the dynamics of contention. The use of repression by state and non-state actors can raise the costs of collective action for protesters and heighten the likelihood of



political violence between implicated actors (Tilly and Tarrow 2007). Especially when hostile counter-protesters align with state actors against the goals of challengers, protesters may change the tactics of contention that can lead to the racialization of contention, diverting peaceful strategies of contention into violent tactics (De Fazio 2017).

Using illustrative incidents from Turkish-Kurdish communal violence incidents, I will now highlight how racialization and countermobilization play out in the heat of communal contention. Intersecting with these causal mechanisms, we will also observe how communal contention unfold in an interactive, eventful manner as part of the contentious politics in Turkey—which is to say, in a way that could not have been predicted by an approach shaped by structural or cultural determinism.

Racialization

At some point in the early 2000s in Turkey, Kurdish identity went from a largely forbidden to a relatively tolerated, standard feature of social life. A series of democratization reforms, encouraged by the EU process and by AKP's (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, Justice and Development Party) motivation to tame the military's tutelage over politics, brought about significant progress in Kurdish rights and claims, including democratic amendments to political party laws, the press, associations, and anti-terror laws, the abolishment of the State Security Courts, improvements in imprisonment and custody regulations, the extension of the right to broadcast and education in non-Turkish languages, and the founding of a state TV service in Kurdish. State emergency rule, in place in ten provinces of the southeast since 1987, was lifted in 2002, along with the passage of partial amnesties for low-ranking PKK (*Partiya Karkeşên Kurdistan*, or the Kurdistan Workers' Party) militants. Significant Kurdish support for AKP also provided leverage for the implementation of democratic reforms related to Kurdish rights. These reforms, in turn changed local encounters in Western regions, replacing the image of Kurds as 'villagers', predominant in the 1990s in the eyes of Turks, with Kurdishness (Interview with a human rights activist, 17 May

2015, Canakkale). In a context where Kurdish rights were further validated by government-supported reforms, Kurds grew more confident in cultural expression. In the words of a Kurdish interviewee, ‘The AKP made me proud to be a Kurd. I would not utter such a word before’ (Interview with a local businessman in Bursa, 20 May 2015).

However, recognition of Kurdish identity did not bring about an inclusive social coexistence. There were heightened anxieties about ‘Kurdification’ expressed in media, social media, and social life (Yegen 2009). Democratization reforms met with critics of military and bureaucratic elites and rival parties such as CHP (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, or the Republican People’s Party) and MHP (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, or the Nationalist Action Party). Pro-Kurdish parties also put pressure on the AKP government for further democratic reforms, including the initiation of a peace process with the PKK. Under the pressure of outbidding by rival parties, the government adopted a double-speak strategy that moved back and forth between recognizing the legitimacy of Kurdish claims and reproducing official narratives based upon securitization discourses against Kurdish claims and rights (Rumelili and Celik 2017). While the main targets of communal violence were more limited to pro-Kurdish parties and activists in the early 2000s, we also observe a rising number of attacks against ordinary Kurdish residents following 2005, on the grounds of being a Kurd, speaking Kurdish, singing and listening to Kurdish songs, organizing Kurdish weddings, carrying Kurdish symbols, or being sympathetic to the PKK or to a Kurdish party. Nationalist performance, claims, and rituals are adopted to activate boundaries between Turks and Kurds, scaling daily conflicts into ethnic struggles. Consider the following incidents from the time, reported in the press:

August 2008. Balıkesir. (...) A fight broke out on the island of Alibey in the district of Ayvalık in Balıkesir, alleging that a person of Eastern Anatolian origin struck shoulders (*omuz atmak*) with a young man named Serkan last night. While stones and sticks were used in the fight, in which about 100



people were involved, police fired into the air to separate those involved in the fight. The police, upon the blockading of people of Eastern origin (*abluka*), tried to protect the people there by putting them on a municipal bus. However, the crowded group, reported to be from the island of Alibey, broke the windows of the municipal bus and chanted 'Down with the PKK' and 'Cunda will be a grave for the PKK'. While incidents were prevented from escalating through the efforts of the police, a buffet belonging to someone of Eastern Anatolian origin (*Doğu Anadolu kökenlilere*) was destroyed (...) (Cumhuriyet, 'Dogulu-Batili' gerginligi, 27 August 2005: 8).

July 2012. Istanbul. According to allegations, a group of young people from the neighborhood said, to workers who had gone to a park after work yesterday evening in Ayazağa in the district of Şişli, "Why are you walking here, you are terrorists, we will not accommodate you here". Thereupon, an argument broke out between the workers and neighborhood youth. Hundreds of people gathered following the disagreement, chanting "Turkey is indivisible" and "This is Ayazağa, there is no way out" and attacked the workers. Thereupon, a fight broke out, with stones and sticks, between the workers and hundreds of people gathered in the neighborhood. A large number of police forces, including riot police from the districts of Şişli and Kağıthane, were sent to the scene.(...) Yasin Gönültaş, one of the workers laboring at a construction site close to the construction company in Ayazağa, where the incident took place, stated that the media's reports that "the workers spoke to the girls, the young people from the neighborhood reacted" were false and that they had been defamed, saying:

"Our young friends went to an amusement park and a group of young people from the neighborhood came up to them and taunted our friends, saying, 'Why are you going around here, you are terrorists, we cannot accommodate you here. Why are you coming here? Our brothers are becoming martyrs because of you.' During the discussion, hundreds of

people gathered from the neighborhood as if they were waiting, and attacked these young friends of ours. This is the cause of the incident. Currently, hundreds of people, including my nephews, are stuck at the construction site. The police have blockaded the construction site. We can't even reach their phones. They tell us 'don't walk around in the neighborhood.'" (...) (Dicle News Agency, 31 July 2012, Ayazağa'da Kürt işçilere 'sizi barındırmayız' saldırısı).

The perception of threat, imagined or real, is a common mode of racialization worldwide, mostly applied to new immigrants, especially the poor (Gans 2017). The fact that Kurds living in very different cities of Turkey are imagined as a potential threat to local and national security and common people act upon this, inflaming nationalist performances and violent action, shows the existence of racialization against Kurds in Turkey as a means to stigmatize, exclude and punish.

Countermobilization

The post-2007 period has witnessed the growing power of the executive branch, a broader erosion checks and balances, and increasing social polarization not only between Turks and Kurds, but also between conservatives and seculars. Police brutality against peaceful protests grew more visible and attracted more concern particularly with the 2013 Gezi protests. There were also intermittent peace negotiations between the PKK and the state. The period after 2007 also saw a crucial shift in patterns of communal violence, making it a modular form of action mediated by political entrepreneurs. The pro-Kurdish party—named DTP (*Demokratik Toplum Partisi*, or the Democratic Society Party) at the time of the 2007 elections, and BDP (*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi*, or the Peace and Democracy Party) at the time of the 2011 elections—began to compete with other parties in national elections, having put forward independent candidates to bypass the 10% electoral threshold. We also see, during the periods around elections, an increase in the number of incidents of communal violence. While pro-Kurdish



parties broadened their mass mobilization through electoral campaigns during national elections, such acts of contentious politics often met with hostile counterprotesters and attacks. There were also many instances in which acts of nationalist contention—such as rallies against terrorism or funerals—became occasions for attacks against the pro-Kurdish party and its activists. And nor were the latter the sole target of these attacks; they also extended, in many instances, to Kurdish residents and local political elites who had established good relationships with pro-Kurdish parties and Kurdish residents. The perpetrators of these attacks have included Turkish nationalist *ülkücü* groups, Neo-Ottoman groups, football fans, or local groups organized under various rubrics (e.g., Patriots/*Vatanseverler*). There are also many instances in which the precise perpetrators remain unknown. As Kumral shows (2017), the extreme right in Turkey, led by MHP, has turned more and more to political violence against the Kurdish movement and Kurdish residents as an electoral means to increase its votes, just as the scale of nationalist political violence has increased with pro-Kurdish mobilization in cities.

Before the 2015 elections, the Kurdish movement had reconstituted itself under the leadership of HDP (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, or the Peoples' Democratic Party). The party embraced a left-leaning pluralism, with greater emphasis on diversity and the unity of a range of sub-identities (Tekdemir 2016). In 2015, and for the first time, HDP decided to enter national elections as a party challenging the 10% electoral threshold. The HDP envisioned *Türkiyelileşme* (literally "Turkeyfication") and aimed at appealing to all segments of society and collective plural identities, going beyond its established base of Kurdish voters. In line with the requirements of electoral law, HDP opened more offices in western Turkey to enter into elections as a political party in 2015, thus broadening its mass mobilization activities. Despite the increasing political violence against HDP offices and activists before the June 2015 elections, many activists were confident, during my fieldwork in 2015, that they would bypass the 10% electoral threshold. In a context where it was highly unusual

for Turks to vote for the HDP, people ‘were whispering into their ears’ that they would do so. HDP was furthermore more involved in pro-Kurdish contentious politics, such as Kobane protests, in previously un-imaginable localities (interview with a HDP activist, 28 May 2015, Balıkesir). The party also pursued a more conciliatory strategy based upon appeasement against counterprotesters that had potential to antagonize societal relations. The party strategies turned out to be effective, with HDP increasing its votes in June 2015 elections to 13% and gaining significant support among Turkish voters. However, after the June 2015 elections, the resumption of the war between the PKK and the Turkish state in urban areas, as well as an increase in repressive politics, more PKK attacks, and a growing number of bomb attacks, stirred up a broader perception that HDP represented a threat to the country. This sense of threat was also amplified by the empowerment of the PKK in Northern Syria, which became another conflict zone between the PKK and the Turkish state. The year 2015 saw waves of diffuse counterprotests, attacks, and bombings against HDP, targeting HDP activities, offices, activists, and Kurdish residents before the June elections and the December snap elections. While HDP tried to continue its contentious politics, especially electoral rallies in-between elections, the rallies against terrorism that erupted due to the escalation of the war in Kurdish regions turned into violent counterprotests targeting HDP activities, offices, activists, and Kurdish residents. Many incidents were diffused in localities across Turkey, as reported in the press:

Extract from 8 September, *Tehlikeli Gerginlik* (Cumhuriyet 2015: 14). HDP buildings were attacked in many provinces. Property (*esyalara*) was destroyed in Balıkesir, Manavgat, Çorlu and Niğde, some being burned.

Istanbul. Groups who carried out protests against terror in Bağcılar, Uskudar and Kağıthane attacked HDP buildings. According to information obtained, a group of five people walked to the HDP Bağcılar District Organization and then stoned the windows of the building. A group in Üsküdar walked to the HDP district building



carrying ladders. Police did not allow this. A group walking to the HDP district building in Kağıthane was also stopped.

Ankara: The Keçiören Office of the HDP was attacked. While attackers shared messages on Facebook account—“HDP building in Danishment!!! Operation complete”—some users made comments—‘great job’ (*eline sađlık*)—under these messages. Democratic Regions Party (DBP) in Balgat was attacked by unknown persons.

Corlu. A march was organized in Corlu, Tekirdag through a call by the TGB. A group that reacted to the declaration of CHP MP Emre Köprülü's statement “We are brothers” went to the HDP building. The attackers destroyed the building. HDP Provincial Co-Chair Ömer Güven said, “MHP supporters and AKP supporters joined in the call of the CHP to condemn terrorism. Despite the police, they broke in, broke the windows and frames, and burned the documents inside. The building became unusable” (...).

Balikesir. A group of youth who made [the far-right nationalist] *bozkurt* signs [i.e., hand gestures] raided the HDP Provincial Presidency, threw out property (*esyalar*) and documents, and burned party flags. Citizens who gathered in front of the Party [building] chanted slogans: ‘How happy is the one who says I am a Turk’. HDP Balikesir 2nd Rank Deputy Candidate Bedri Arik, who happened to be there during incidents, is reported to have been beaten.

Antalya. Demonstrators who scaled the HDP building in Manavgat threw out party signs, flags, and property inside. The crowd in the street burned the property that had been thrown out of the building.

Nigde. 500 people who gathered in Republic Square attacked the HDP Provincial Building with stones. 3-4 people from the group who did not disperse despite police intervention broke the party signboard, scaled the building, and threw out files. The crowd burned the signboard in Republic Square and walked to a martyr cemetery, chanting *tekbirs*.

Extract from 8 September, *Kürtçe konuştu diye öldürüldü*. (Cumhuriyet 2015:14).

Istanbul. (...) After a PKK attack against a military convoy in the Dağlıca region of Hakkari, Sedat Akbas, who spoke to his family in Kurdish, was stabbed to death by a group. Following the incident, the police took into custody four people involved (...).

These incidents illustrate how countermobilization against HDP turned into spirals of communal violence through the involvement of social agents, including both local people and political entrepreneurs. Anti-terror protests and rallies became reactionary campaigns against HDP, HDP activists and Kurdish residents. The Human Rights Association in Turkey (*İnsan Hakları Derneği*, IHD) (2015) reports that between the June elections and the December snap elections, HDP members experienced 133 attacks, and more than 5,000 HDP members were taken into custody, 1,004 of whom were subsequently charged with membership in an illegal organization.

Conclusion

Drawing upon the literature of contentious politics, this study underlined two causal dynamics, racialization and countermobilization, that have led communal violence against Kurds as a form of action in Turkey. While the mechanism of racialization has already been touched upon in the literature on communal violence in Turkey, this study highlights that countermobilization is also an important causal mechanism driving incidents of Turkish-Kurdish communal violence. While the causal mechanisms explored here are not exhaustive and do not cover the entire range of such mechanisms that play out in incidents of communal violence, they do nevertheless shed light on several important dynamics in the unfolding of episodes of Turkish-Kurdish collective violence.



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