

Turkey’s Kurdish Insurgency Reappraised (Part II)

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Abstract

This reappraisal of Turkey’s Kurdish insurgency picks up from where the earlier Part I left off, by revisiting from the perspective of a decade the involved rise and fall of the Kurdish Opening (2009-2015), Erdogan’s continuing “train to authoritarianism,” the failed Gulenist coup on 15 July 2016, and the surprising presidential elections held in May 2023 that reelected Erdogan yet again despite the polls seemingly showing that Kemal Kilicdaroglu, the opposition leader whom the pro-Kurdish HDP supported, might win.

Introduction

In August 2005, Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan declared that Turkey had a “Kurdish problem,” had made “grave mistakes” in the past, and now needed “more democracy to solve the problem.”³ Never before had a Turkish leader made so explicit a statement regarding the Kurdish problem. As progressive Islamists, however, the AKP was increasingly opposed by the reactionary

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³ Cited in “The Sun Also Rises in the South East,” Briefing (Ankara), August 15, 2005.



Kemalist establishment which included Turkey's influential military fearful of losing their long held privileged positions.⁴

This situation eventually led to the crisis of 2007 over the election of the AKP's Abdullah Gul as Turkey's new president. The AKP triumphed in this struggle by winning an enormous electoral victory on 22 July 2007 (even slightly outpolling the pro-Kurdish DTP in the southeast) and then electing Gul as president. Gradually the AKP began to reduce the political influence of Turkey's military and secretive Deep State,⁵ which was opposed to Turkey's democratization and Kurdish rights.

Rise and Fall of the Kurdish Opening

During the summer and fall of 2009, the continuing and often violent Kurdish problem in Turkey seemed on the verge of a solution when the ruling AKP government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and President Abdullah Gul announced a Kurdish Opening or Initiative (aka as the Democratic Opening/Initiative). Stressing the policy of change and reform, Gul declared that "the biggest problem of Turkey is the Kurdish question" and that "there is an opportunity [to solve it] and it should not be missed."⁶ Erdogan asked: "If Turkey had not spent its energy, budget, peace and young people on [combating] terrorism, if Turkey had not spent the last 25 years in conflict, where would we be today?"⁷ Even the insurgent PKK, still led ultimately by its imprisoned leader Abdullah Ocalan,

⁴ For background, see Michael M. Gunter and M. Hakan Yavuz, "Turkish Paradox: Progressive Islamists versus Reactionary Secularists," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 16 (Fall 2007), pp. 289-301.

⁵ On Turkey's Deep State, see Michael M. Gunter, "Turkey, Kemalism and the 'Deep State,'" in *Conflict, Democratization and the Kurds in the Middle East* eds. by Mehmet Gurses and David Romano (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 17-39.

⁶ Cited in "Gul: Kurdish Problem is the Most Important Problem of Turkey," *Today's Zaman*, May 11, 2009.

⁷ Cited in *Today's Zaman*, August 12, 2009.



itself briefly took Turkey's Kurdish Opening seriously.⁸ For a fleeting moment optimism ran rampant.

Problems

However, it soon became evident that the AKP government had not thought its Kurdish Opening out very well and then proved rather inept in trying to implement it. Specific proposals were lacking. Furthermore, despite AKP appeals to support its Kurdish Opening, all three of the parliamentary opposition parties declined. Indeed, the *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* (CHP) or Republican Peoples Party (Kemalists or Nationalists) accused the AKP of "separatism, cowing to the goals of the terrorist PKK, violating the Constitution, causing fratricide and/or ethnic polarization between Kurds and Turks, being an agent of foreign states, and even betraying the country,"⁹ while the *Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi* (MHP) or Nationalist Action Party (Ultra Turkish Nationalists) "declared AKP to be dangerous and accused it of treason and weakness."¹⁰ Even the pro-Kurdish DTP failed to be engaged because it declined to condemn the PKK as the AKP government had demanded. Erdogan too began to fear that any perceived concessions to the Kurds would hurt his Turkish nationalist base and future presidential hopes.

Then on 11 December 2009, the Constitutional Court, after mulling over the issue for more than two years, suddenly banned the pro-Kurdish DTP because of its close association with the PKK. Although the BDP quickly took the DTP's place, coming when it did, the state-ordered banning of the pro-Kurdish DTP could not have come at a worse time and put the kiss of death to the Kurdish Opening. In addition, more than 1,000 BDP and other Kurdish

⁸ Authors' contacts with Kurdish sources in Europe and the Middle East. For background, see Michael M. Gunter, *The Kurds Ascending: The Evolving Solution to the Kurdish Problem in Iraq and Turkey* (2nd ed.; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 155-188. Also see, Cengiz Candar, *Turkey's Mission Impossible: War and Peace with the Kurds* (Lanham MD: Lexington Books, 2020), pp. 111-163.

⁹ *Hürriyet*, issues of November 18, 2009; December 2, 2009; December 9, 2009; and December 14, 2009; as cited in Menderes Cinar, "The Militarization of Secular Opposition in Turkey," *Insight Turkey* 12 (Spring 2010), p. 119.

¹⁰ Odul Celep, "Turkey's Radical Right and the Kurdish Issue: The MHP's Reaction to the 'Democratic Opening,'" *Insight Turkey* 12 (Spring 2010), p. 136.

notables were placed under arrest for their supposed support of the PKK, yet another body blow to the Kurdish Opening. Soon the entire country was ablaze from the fury that had arisen, and the Kurdish Opening seemed closed.

Newly reelected prime minister Erdogan also turned his back on an earlier promise to seek consensus on the drafting of a new constitution that would help solve the Kurdish problem, broke off contact with the BDP, and continued to declare that the Kurdish problem had been solved and only a PKK problem remained. Once again Turkey was falling back on its continuity policy of security in regards to the Kurds. How could the new AKP government begin to solve the Kurdish problem when it refused to deal with its main interlocutor?

Moreover, others took the security thesis even further and argued that the ultimate problem was the inherent ethnic Turkish inability to accept the fact that Turkey should be considered a multi-ethnic state in which the Kurds have similar constitutional rights as co-stakeholders with the Turks. Moreover, during 2011 and 2012, more leading intellectuals were rounded up for alleged affiliations with the KCK/PKK, whose proposals for democratic autonomy seemed to suggest an alternative government. Many of those arrested were also affiliated with the pro-Kurdish BDP.

These arrests pointed to serious problems. First, there was the nature of the crimes, which alleged no violence. Mere “association” was enough to be counted as a terrorist. In addition, the connections were tenuous. As Human Rights Watch noted, these arrests seem less aimed at addressing terror than on attacking “legal pro-Kurdish political organizations.”¹¹ Second, the arrests come at a time when Turkey was planning to develop a new constitution. The silencing of pro-Kurdish voices as constitutional debates went forward was counter-productive for Turkey’s future. Finally, there was the way

¹¹ Human Rights Watch, “Turkey Arrests Expose Flawed Justice System,” November 1, 2011. [Http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/11/01/turkey-arrests-expose...](http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/11/01/turkey-arrests-expose...), accessed November 13, 2011.



suspects were treated. Virtually all were subject to pre-trial detentions, effectively denying them freedom without any proof that they had committed a crime. Although precise figures are unavailable, Human Rights Watch declared that several thousand were on trial and another 605 in pretrial detention on KCK/PKK-related charges.¹²

Despite these myriad of problems contacts between the government and the PKK continued with the result that in 2013 a formal cease-fire was proclaimed and negotiations of a sort began. However, the great optimism that these events aroused quickly receded and the peace process began to stall. It is to these unfortunate events that this article will now turn.

Static Security vs. Dynamic Change: The Stalled Peace Process

Peace can be a relative concept. Recep Tayyip Erdogan is first and foremost an adept politician. Thus, his main purpose has been to maintain and even expand his electoral mandate in Turkey. In so doing, he has many opposing constituencies to appease and satisfy. If he goes too far in satisfying the Kurds, he will surely alienate other, maybe even more important elements of the electorate. As a result, he seems to have treated the mere agreement to begin the peace process as the goal itself, rather than as a part of a process to address the root causes of the conflict. Once again, the continuity policy of security had to be balanced against that of change. Erdogan's so-called democratic package released on 30 September 2013 failed to implement any of the reforms the Kurds were looking for. Gone were the earlier hopes of a new, more democratic Turkish constitution. Instead, Erdogan seemed more interested in what the political implications of women's headscarves were.

When the peace process began, the Kurds expected the government to take the following steps to facilitate matters. 1. Release from prison the approximately 5,000 KCK non-violent activists being held on terrorism charges. 2. Improve Ocalan's prison conditions to

¹² Ibid.

facilitate his ability to pursue peace. 3. Introduce mother-tongue education for the Kurds. 4. Reduce the 10 per cent electoral threshold for parliament that made it very difficult for pro-Kurdish parties to win seats in the Turkish parliament. 5. Expand the boundaries for civil liberties regarding organizing, assembly, and speech. 6. Delist the PKK from the terrorism list since the government was now engaging it in a peace process.

Although a report in May 2014 indicated that Erdogan had promised that Ocalan would be moved from his isolated island prison on Imrali to some form of more lenient house arrest, among other concessions, in return for Kurdish support for his presidential ambitions,¹³ the government never took any of these steps. Instead Erdogan's democratization package announced on September 30, 2013 merely granted the following rights. 1. Established private schools for Kurdish-language education. 2. Restored the Kurdish village names that had been changed into Turkish. 3. Permitted the use of the letters X, Q, and W of the Kurdish alphabet on signposts and identification cards. 4. Granted freedom for political campaigning in Kurdish. 5. Abolished the student's daily vow of allegiance that began, "I am a Turk."

The Kurds were not satisfied with these provisions and also objected to their unilateral formulation, which negated their desire to commence equal negotiations with the government. The PKK wanted the government's mere dialogue with Ocalan to segue into real, in-depth negotiations in which specific proposals for a solution of the Kurdish problem were discussed. As Selahattin Dermirtas, the co-chair of the pro-Kurdish BDP explained: "If you prepare the package without consulting us, we will not link it to the [peace] process. If we hear about this package for the first time from the mouth of the prime minister, then it will remain as your package."¹⁴

¹³ "Disillusioned and Divided," *The Economist*, May 24, 2014, p. 45.

¹⁴ Cited in Kadri Gursel, "Time Running Out for Turkey-PKK Peace Process," *Al-Monitor*, November 4, 2013. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/11/akp-stall-kurd-peace-process.html>, accessed November 11, 2013.



In addition, the PKK wanted Ocalan's prison conditions to be improved so that some of the BDP parliamentarians who wished to meet with him would not be arbitrarily vetoed by the government. The BDP, for example, stated that the government had prevented the delivery of letters from the PKK fighters in Kandil to Ocalan. Indeed, the death of Nelson Mandela in December 2013 reminded how the South African peace process was forwarded successfully by the government releasing Mandela from prison where he had been held on terrorism charges for some 27 years.

Along these lines, Ocalan had three more requests: 1. The right to have external contacts in addition to his meetings with the BDP and the government. 2. Some sort of a neutral third-party observer or facilitator to monitor the negotiations as occurred in the earlier (2009-2011), but secret Oslo talks between the government and PKK. Given the longstanding struggle and resulting level of mistrust between the two sides, the peace process inevitably would continue to founder without some neutral facilitator to bring them together and transparently serve as a witness and encourager. 3. The government should offer serious proposals and solutions. As Ocalan cautiously concluded: "While I maintain my belief in the [peace] process I expect the government to take a more positive initiative on negotiations."¹⁵

Instead, the government seemed to be flirting with the idea of shutting Ocalan and the PKK out of the peace process and instead somehow negotiating with Massoud Barzani, the president of the KRG in northern Iraq, who had become Turkey's de facto Kurdish ally in recent years. Indeed, in June 2014, Turkey actually, but as it proved disingenuously, announced that it now would recognize the KRG's independence if Iraq split up, which seemed increasingly possible after the Sunni Islamic extremist organization the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) captured Mosul and effectively divided Iraq into separate Sunni and Shia parts plus the KRG. Previously,

¹⁵ Cited in "Ocalan: This Process Has Three Components," Kurdish Info, December 8, 2013, accessed December 14, 2013.

Turkey's policy had been exactly the opposite; it would have gone to war to prevent KRG independence that might have served as an unwanted model for Turkey's Kurds.¹⁶ Subsequently, on 16-17 November 2013 Erdogan and Barzani met in Diyarbakir, Turkey. Here Erdogan seemingly sought to leverage his energy and other economic and political dealings with Barzani to seek the Kurdish vote in the up-coming cycle of Turkish elections that began in 2014. The Turkish prime minister went so far as to encourage Barzani to establish a new, more moderate Kurdish party in Turkey with more Islamic characteristics than the secular and nationalist PKK.¹⁷ By using the ancient technique of divide and rule, Erdogan appeared to be seeking to split and weaken the Kurdish movement and make it more applicable to his wishes not only in regards to the current peace process but also in the many other avenues of Middle Eastern politics dealing with energy resources and the continuing civil war in Syria. In other words Erdogan was seeking to marry the seemingly contradictory policy of security continuity to changing reform. However, to the extent that Erdogan was trying to use Barzani to marginalize the PKK, the Turkish-Kurdish peace process would fail because the PKK was the main Kurdish party in Turkey, not Barzani's Iraqi KDP.

Syria

The continuing civil war in Syria interjected the security continuity dimension as a further factor into the problems of the peace process. De facto Kurdish autonomy just across the Turkish border in Hasaka (Jazira) province stoked Turkey's fears regarding what it perceived as the PKK threat. The problem was even greater because the leading Kurdish party in Syria was the *Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat* (PYD) or Democrat Union Party, an affiliate of the PKK. In effect, this meant that even though the PKK was supposed to be withdrawing across

¹⁶ "Celik Signals Turkey to Welcome Independent Kurdish State in Iraq," *Today's Zaman*, June 29, 2014. [Http://www.mesop.de/2014/06/29/mesop-news-celik-signals...](http://www.mesop.de/2014/06/29/mesop-news-celik-signals...), accessed June 30, 2014.

¹⁷ Ulas Doga Eralp, "Turkey's Rapprochement with Iraqi Kurdistan: An Obstacle to Kurdish Peace Process?" *Eurasiareview*, November 28, 2013. [Http://www.mesop.de/2013/11/28/turkeys-rapprochement...](http://www.mesop.de/2013/11/28/turkeys-rapprochement...), accessed November 28, 2013.



the border into Iraq's Kandil Mountains, it now had extended its cross-border presence next to Turkey by several hundred miles in Syria. In addition, this new Syrian position granted the PKK a type of strategic depth that added to its influence.

Turkey reacted to this situation by bitterly opposing the PYD politically and diplomatically and also covertly supporting armed Jihadists/Salafists groups such as Jablat al-Nusra which was affiliated with al-Qaeda, and the even more extremist Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which even al-Qaeda had disowned. These Salafists/Jihadists looked upon both the Assad regime and the secular Kurds as *Takfiri* or apostates. Bitter fighting broke out between them and the Syrian Kurds largely led by the PKK-affiliated PYD. Soon Turkey found itself in the unenviable position of seemingly siding with al-Qaeda affiliated Salafists/Jihadists fanatics against secular, even pro-Western Syrian Kurds. This became all the more apparent when Turkey disdained to join the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS during the bitter fighting in Kobane Syria during September-October 2014.

In the end, Erdogan's negotiation with the PKK failed and fighting resumed because, as mentioned above, Erdogan's AKP lost its parliamentary majority in the national elections held on 7 June 2015 when it won only 40.86 per cent of the vote. The pro-Kurdish HDP's winning 13.12 per cent of the tally proved a major reason for Erdogan's loss. Thus, the Turkish president now calculated he had to take a stronger Turkish nationalist position to survive politically. The peace process had ended in abject failure. Thus, at this point, it is necessary to turn to Erdogan's grand ambitions and strategy.

Erdogan's Train to Authoritarianism

Erdogan infamously once declared that "democracy is like a train; you get off once you have reached your [real] destination."¹⁸ In other words, one can use democratic means to achieve non-democratic

¹⁸ Cited in "Getting Off the Train," *The Economist*, February 4, 2016. <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2016/02/04/getting-off-the-train>, accessed December 18, 2017.

goals. Analyzing Erdogan's imaginary train journey, one must conclude that the Turkish leader never intended to reach democracy or a genuine peace with the Kurds. Indeed, now that he largely has achieved his actual authoritarian goal, he has jumped off the train.

However, his journey did not always seem to be destined for such a terminus. Indeed, in his first decade in power, Erdogan won three parliamentary elections by ever-larger shares of the popular vote because he had helped to build Turkey into a burgeoning economic powerhouse and a moderate Islamic democracy. In the past decade, however, despite winning Turkey's first popular election for president in August 2014, presiding over another great parliamentary victory in November 2015, and then winning re-election as president as well as retaining control of parliament in June 2018, Erdogan's increasing authoritarianism has helped precipitate an accelerating crisis both domestically and externally for Turkey. Specifically, he is blamed for a dreadful economy featuring inflation rates as high as 80 per cent. His actions have also negatively affected the Kurds. Although his partial setback in the local elections held in March and June 2019 did seem to affect his hold on power, his successful creation of a Turkish safety zone against the Kurds in Northern (Syrian) Kurdistan in January 2018, October 2019, and again in November 2022 helped to revive his flailing international and domestic fortunes. He impressively was reelected in May 2023.

Based on his performance to date, one might conclude that Erdogan does not grasp the depth of the Kurdish issue because he has little sense of ethnic or civic nationalism. His dominant identity is Muslim, and he thinks that Islamic identity will magically solve the problem.¹⁹ Although he has been somewhat more concerned with the Kurds than most other Turkish leaders, Erdogan has failed to develop any coherent, peaceful policy. Indeed, since his cease-fire with the PKK

¹⁹ For background, see M. Hakan Yavuz, *Secularism and Muslim Democracy in Turkey* (Cambridge University Press, 2009); and M. Hakan Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey* (Oxford University Press, 2003).



broke down in July 2015, Erdogan has seemingly turned his back on any approach other than military force.

In recent years, Erdogan has also converted Turkey's government into a presidential system that would grant him significant new powers.²⁰ Indeed, he became Turkey's first popularly elected president in August 2014, forcing former ally and one-time president Abdullah Gul out of politics and hand-picking his new prime minister, Ahmet Davutoglu — whom he then fired in May 2016 to appoint the even more compliant Binali Yildirim. Erdogan has also jailed many perceived political opponents: journalists, academics, military officers, and Kurdish leaders, among others. Media freedom in Turkey, as ranked by Freedom House,²¹ Reporters Without Borders²² and Bianet,²³ has deteriorated at an alarming rate as Erdogan aggressively used the penal code, criminal defamation legislation, and the country's antiterrorism law to punish critical reporting.

Journalists have faced growing violence, harassment and intimidation. Can Dundar and Erdem Gul — editor-in-chief and Ankara bureau chief, respectively, of the leading opposition newspaper, *Cumhuriyet* — are two examples of this egregious situation. Erdogan personally filed a criminal complaint against them for leaking state secrets, and both were sentenced to five-year prison terms in May 2016 for reporting on how Erdogan's government had tried to ship arms to jihadists in Syria. *Zaman*, a well-respected (but Gulenist-run) newspaper and Turkey's largest, was placed under

²⁰ See, for example, Soner Cagaptay, "Erdogan's Nationalist Path to a Full Presidential System," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 24, 2016. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/erdogans-nationalist-path-to-a-full-presidential-system>, accessed May 30, 2016.

²¹ Freedom House, "Turkey 2015 Press Freedom Report," <https://freedomofhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2015/turkey>, accessed August 23, 2016, which ranked Turkey as "Not Free."

²² Reporters Without Borders Turkey, <https://index.rs.org/#!/index-details/TUR>, accessed August 23, 2016, where Turkey ranked 149th out of over 180 states.

²³ Bianet, "Increasing Pressure on Press: Democracy in Question," *Media Monitoring Report* 2015, 3rd Quarter. <http://bianet.org/english/freedom-of-expression/168464-increasing-pressure-on-press-democracy-in-question>, accessed August 23, 2016. Bianet is an independent Turkish press agency based in Istanbul that has somehow managed to survive.

state control, another instance, among many, of Erdogan's effort to curb public criticism of his actions. Subsequently, *Zaman* was closed.

In addition, the Ergenekon trials of supposed ultranationalists and retired military officers charged with planning violent campaigns to destabilize Erdogan's AKP and seize power began on 28 July 2008, and continued until February 2011.²⁴ The original 2,455-page indictment (ultimately reaching 8,000 pages) described an elaborate plot ultimately connecting 531 military officers, mafiosi, ultranationalists, lawyers and academic figures who supposedly attempted an illegal intervention against the Erdogan government. Critics, however, accused Erdogan—in league with his then Gulenist allies who had infiltrated the police and judiciary—of simply trying to take revenge on their military and Kemalist opponents with all these charges.

On 5 August 2013, Istanbul's High Criminal Court sentenced 275 of the accused, including the former chief of the General Staff, General Ilker Basbug, to life or long prison terms. However, on 21 April 2016, the High Court of Appeals overturned the convictions because of procedural flaws and the case's lack of merit. Although a new trial remained possible, many felt that dismissal of the case indicated that the original charges were based on little more than conspiracy theories promoting Erdogan's and increasingly the Gulenists' agenda.²⁵

Failed Coup

On the night of 15 July 2016, as previously mentioned, a failed, supposedly Gulenist-directed coup occurred in Turkey; its aftermath has led to drastically changed conditions likely to make the political

²⁴ For background, see Yusuf Ziya Durmus, "Court Overturns Verdicts in Coup Case Allegedly Tied to Gulenists," *Daily Sabah*, April 21, 2016. [Http://www.dailysabah.com/investigations/2016/04/21/court-overturns-verdicts-in-coup-case-allegedly-tied-to-gulenists](http://www.dailysabah.com/investigations/2016/04/21/court-overturns-verdicts-in-coup-case-allegedly-tied-to-gulenists), accessed May 2, 2016; and "Justice or Revenge?" *The Economist*, August 10, 2013.

²⁵ In 2014, former Turkish president Kenan Evren — the general who had led Turkey's military coup in 1980 that most observers felt saved the country from the violence it had fallen into although at considerable cost to human rights — was convicted of crimes against the state, demoted to the rank of private, and sentenced to life imprisonment. He died a year later. Erdogan had secured amendments to the Turkish constitution allowing Evren's trial.



situation, including the Kurdish problem, much worse. At least 260 people were killed and more than 2,000 were injured, according to government reports. Erdogan himself, however, declared to his supporters that the failed coup was a “gift from God.”²⁶ The failed coup gave him an excuse to further his own authoritarian ambitions, while purging his few remaining opponents.

For example, Amnesty International (AI) initially reported that the Turkish government had fired or suspended at least 50,000 people from various institutions, including judges, teachers, soldiers, police and journalists.²⁷ The government was calling anyone it did not like or agree with “terrorists.” Turkish police were keeping detainees in stress positions for up to two days at a time, beating them and denying them food, water and medical treatment. The detainees were being held arbitrarily and denied access to lawyers and family, and were not properly informed of the charges against them.

Because of the failed coup, the Turkish government also declared a sweeping three-month state of emergency, which gave it the power to rule by decree and simply bypass the duly elected Turkish Parliament. Under one decree suspects could be detained for as long as 30 days without charge and the government could listen in on all conversations they had with their attorneys. If conditions had become so bad for many ethnic Turks such as the military, judges, lawyers, journalists, and teachers, among others, what could hated and feared minorities such as the Kurds expect? As close friends of the Turkish Kurds concluded: “Kurds across the country are now threatened with suspension of their civil rights and freedoms by the

²⁶ Cited in “After the Coup, the Counter-coup,” *The Economist*, July 23, 2016: 14. Some now believe that the coup was really controlled by Erdogan in order to consolidate his authoritarian rule. These pundits have even called it Turkey’s Reichstag Fire in allusion to the events in Germany during 1933, which helped lead to Hitler’s Nazi dictatorship. Others also point to the alleged Izmir conspiracy against Ataturk in 1926 that helped him defeat his domestic opponents of the time. Such speculation, of course, can lead down the slippery slope of crazy conspiracy theories.

²⁷ A subsequent report increased the figure to as many as 100,000 civil servants suspended from their jobs and more than 20,000 arrested. Mustafa Akyol, “Turkey’s Great Purge,” *New York Times*, August 23, 2016. [Http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/24/opinion/turkey’s-great-purge.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/24/opinion/turkey’s-great-purge.html), accessed August 25, 2016.

widespread crackdown that Erdogan has launched in the wake of the attempted coup.”²⁸

This new state of emergency was in addition to the government-enforced curfews that had allowed its forces to roam freely against the civilian Kurdish population in southeastern Anatolia since the summer of 2015 when, as noted above, the Turkish-Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) cease-fire had broken down and heavy fighting resumed. Indeed, Turkey's southeast then experienced a level of desolation virtually unknown outside of active war zones such as parts of civil-war-torn Syria.²⁹ The historic Turkish city centers of Nusaybin, Cizre, and old Diyarbakir were razed, leaving gaping holes in their former makeup. The entire city of Sirnak was leveled, so that it resembled Homs or Aleppo. Some 2,000 people died in the fighting.

On 11 September 2016, Turkey's Interior Ministry announced that it was taking direct control of 25 local government municipalities in the southeast, removing the elected pro-Kurdish Peoples Democratic Party (HDP) city mayors, and replacing them with government-appointed trustees. Ramazan Tunc, the main adviser to Kamuran Yuksek, the co-president of the Democratic Regions Party (DBP), which was affiliated with the HDP, declared: “This isn't lawful. It's only possible because there is a state of emergency in Turkey, and what we have here are occupation forces taking over the democratically elected local governments in the Kurdish areas.”³⁰ Turkey repeated the same pattern following the local elections held on 31 March 2019. By October 2019, Erdogan had removed 12 HDP

²⁸ Peace in Kurdistan Campaign, “Neither Coup nor State of Emergency: Turkey Needs Peace and Democracy,” July 25, 2016. <https://peaceinkurdistancampaign.com/2016/07/25/neither-coup-nor-state-of-emergency>, accessed July 29, 2016.

²⁹ The following discussion was largely taken from Tom Stevenson, “Loss and Depression in Turkey's Kurdish Southeast,” Deutsche Welle (DW), September 28, 2016. <http://www.dw.com/en/loss-and-depression-in-turkeys-kurdish-southeast/a-19557734>, accessed September 28, 2016.

³⁰ Cited in *Ibid.*



mayors from office including those in Diyarbakir, Mardin, and Van, replacing them with trustees responsible to his government.³¹

In September 2016, Turkey's Education Ministry also suspended 11,285 teachers for allegedly supporting Kurdish separatists.³² Erdogan claimed that the firing of the teachers and local mayors was part of the campaign against Kurdish terrorism. However, Figen Yuksekdag, the co-chair of the HDP, replied: "There is a systematic embargo against us . . . that will raise the risk of a coup and civil war." These firings of the teachers and mayors worried some in Turkey that such policies were fueling ethnic rivalries and renewed violence.

The 11,000 plus detained teachers were all reportedly union members who had participated in a strike calling for a peaceful solution to the armed conflict between the government and the PKK. Sezgin Tanrikulu, a human rights lawyer and deputy leader of the main opposition party, the Republican Peoples Party (CHP), declared: "The dismissal of more than 11,000 teachers who had nothing to do with the coup attempt, and now the taking of teachers in custody in Diyarbakir, is a completely unlawful process against union-related activities."³³ Kemal Kilicdaroglu—CHP leader and presidential opponent of Erdogan in the national elections held on 14 May 2023—who earlier had supported the introduction of emergency rule, now accused the government of using its powers to target opponents, rather than coup plotters. Human rights groups added that the crackdown on the PKK was increasingly targeting members of Kurdish civil society, including locally elected officials of the HDP, who continued to condemn PKK attacks.

³¹ Diego Cupolo, "Crackdown on Kurdish Mayors Raises Pressures on Turkish Opposition," *Al-Monitor*, October 24, 2019. <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/10/turkey-replaces-seven-more-kurdish-hdp-mayors.html>, accessed November 1, 2019.

³² The following discussion and citation are taken from Emre Peker, "Turkey's Post-Coup Crackdown Hits Kurds," *Wall Street Journal*, September 26, 2016. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/turkeys-post-coup-crackdown-hits-kurds-1474934122>, accessed September 28, 2016.

³³ This citation and following discussion were taken from Dorian Jones, "Kurdish Teachers' Arrests Heighten Concerns about Turkey's Emergency Rule," *Voice of America*, September 26, 2016. <http://www.voanews.com/a/arrests-kurdish-teachers-turkey-emergency-rule/3525498.html>, accessed September 28, 2016.

Many Kurds in Turkey feared that the HDP's enforced exclusion from Erdogan's post-coup rallies and other peaceful events would further disenfranchise and push the Kurds toward greater extremism, which they believed was Erdogan's intention in order to secure Turkish nationalist support. Erdogan's earlier attempt to criminalize the 1,128 Turkish and Kurdish academics who had signed a petition to the Turkish government in January 2016 asking that it end its renewed violence in the southeast,³⁴ and his successful campaign to strip HDP co-leader Selahattin Demirtas and other HDP MPs of their parliamentary immunity so they could be tried for trumped up charges of treason, had already served to marginalize the Kurds.³⁵ Indeed, on 4 November 2016, Demirtas and the other co-leader of the HDP Figen Yuksekdag were arrested and remain in prison as of this writing in March 2024.³⁶

Thus, one does not need to be a confirmed Turkophobe or Kurdophile to see something has gone badly amiss with Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan's over-all Kurdish policies. However, Selahattin Demirtas, the co-chair of the HDP, also made a strategic error by declaring that Erdogan would never achieve his ambition of becoming a powerful executive president when the Kurdish leader, possibly alluding to the required three repetitions of the traditional Islamic formula for divorce, three times declared: "Mr. Recep Tayyip Erdogan, you will never be able to be the head of the nation as long as the HDP exists and as long as the HDP people are

³⁴ "Turkish President Vows 'Treasonous' Academics Will Pay the Price," *Hurriyet Daily News*, January 20, 2016. <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-president-vows-treasonous-academics-will-pay-the-price.aspx?pageID...>, accessed March 5, 2016.

³⁵ Ceylan Yeginsu, "Turkish Parliament Approves Stripping Lawmakers of Their Immunity," *New York Times*, May 20, 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/21/world/europe/turkey-parliament-immunity-kurds.html>, accessed September 26, 2016.

³⁶ The now imprisoned Selahattin Demirtas won 9.76 percent of the vote and came in third in the first popular Turkish presidential election held on August 10, 2014. Erdogan won with 51.79 percent. Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, who ran as the joint candidate of 13 opposition parties including the CHP and rightwing Nationalist Action Party (MHP), came in second with 38.44 percent. In the next presidential election held on June 24, 2018 and again won by Erdogan, this time with a slightly higher 52.59 per cent, Demirtas, again placed in third place, but with a fall off of 1.30 per cent. The CHP candidate Muharrem Ince won 30.64 per cent and Meral Assener of the newly created Iyi Party took 7.29 per cent.



on this soil. . . . We will not make you the president.”³⁷ This unwise stand against Erdogan’s ambitions failed to deny him the presidency and clearly helped to provoke the Turkish leader’s anti-Kurdish reaction.

Conclusion

Although several opinion polls for the presidential election held on 14 May 2023 showed the opposition’s Kemal Kilicdaroglu with a slight lead over Recep Tayyip Erdogan,³⁸ the president once again prevailed with 49.5 per cent of the vote, while his opponent trailed with 44.9 per cent. Sinan Ogan’s far-right ATA Alliance came in a distant third with 5.2 per cent. Almost 90 per cent of the eligible voters participated in what for the most part was a fair election. However, since Erdogan just missed winning over 50 per cent of the vote, a second-round election between him and Kilicdaroglu had to be held on 28 May 2023 to determine the ultimate winner.³⁹ Thus, two weeks later Erdogan rather perfunctorily prevailed with slightly better than 52-48 percent, which represented more than two million more popular votes.⁴⁰ Why?

The pro-Kurdish HDP/Green Left Party support for Kilicdaroglu seemed to have helped Erdogan’s Turkish nationalist position as he accused the former of cooperating with terrorists. Kilicdaroglu’s more conciliatory position was not able to overcome this anti-Kurdish rhetoric. In addition, many Turks still thanked Erdogan for the earlier economic growth he had stimulated, while others took pride in his nationalist policies of grandeur. Pious Muslims in

³⁷ “We Will Not Make You the President, HDP Co-Chair Tells Erdogan,” *Hurriyet Daily News*, March 17, 2015. <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/we-will-not-make-you-the-president-hdp-co-chair-tells-erdogan-79792>, accessed November 15, 2017.

³⁸ Ece Toksabay and Birsan Altayli, “Erdogan’s Rival Boosted by Withdrawal, Poll Lead Ahead of Turkey Vote,” Reuters, May 11, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkeys-erdogan-lags-election-rival-closely-watched-poll-2023-05-11/>, accessed July 13, 2023.

³⁹ Gulsin Harman and Ben Hubbard, “Four Takeaways from Turkey’s Nail-Biting Presidential Election,” *The New York Times*, May 15, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/15/world/middleeast/turkey-election-results-erdogan-runoff.html>, accessed May 15, 2023.

⁴⁰ Andrew Wilks, “Turkey’s Erdogan Celebrates Presidential Election Run-Off Win,” Aljazeera, May 28, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/28/turkey-presidential-election-results-3>, accessed July 13, 2023.

Anatolia credited him for successfully representing their previously neglected culture. The disastrous earthquake a few months earlier in February 2023 did not hurt the incumbent president. Given this situation, the policy of force and denial against the Kurds would continue, instead of the failed hope of peace and accommodation Kilicdaroglu represented.

On the other hand, if Erdogan's main opponent and begrudging choice of the pro-Kurdish HDP/Green Left Party, Kemal Kilicdaroglu, had won, the result would not have necessarily been a victory for the Kurds.⁴¹ After all, Kilicdaroglu was first and foremost the leader of the long-time Turkish nationalist, only recently supposedly social democratic CHP, originally established by Kemal Ataturk himself almost a century ago. Over the years, the CHP arguably had been the Kurds' main political nemesis in Turkey. Although Kilicdaroglu was an Alevi and Zaza, groups often associated with the Kurds, he did not identify as a Kurd. Therefore, it would seem too much to assume that he would have taken much of a pro-Kurdish stance even if had been elected.

In addition, the six-party alliance supporting Kilicdaroglu also included the center-right, nationalist, and Kemalist Iyi (Good) Party, which could not have been expected to view the Kurdish agenda favorably. Winning is not just gaining the presidency, but successfully governing. Team government is unusual in Turkey. How long would the Kilicdaroglu coalition have held together, especially since Erdogan and his allies had again won control of the parliament, elections for which had also been held on 14 May 2023. Finally, if he had lost, Erdogan would have likely still have remained active

⁴¹ A member of the religious Alevi minority and ethnic Zaza minority in Turkey by his own testimony, Kilicdaroglu recently declared about his ancestors, "We are members of a Turkmen tribe that came from Khorasan [eastern Iran]. They came from Khorasan and settled in Aksehir in Konya [western Turkey]. Then, when the war between Yavuz Sultan Selim and Shah Ismail took place [1514], they migrated to Dersim [eastern Turkey]. They come from the Turkmen tribe. They are not Kurds. But I'm not an ethnic person." Cited in Ali Kemal Erdam, "Do Kilicdaroglu's Roots Go Back to Kermansah?" *Independent Turkey*, October 24, 2021. Zazas are usually regarded as Kurds, while Alevis are considered by many as a branch of Shiism. Turkmen, of course, are Turkic. Erdam, the author of the citation, goes on to cite Kirar Tas's book *The Quarry of Quraysan* that Kilicdaroglu's roots are in the Kermanshah region of Iran which is in western Iran next to northern Iraq, not in Khorasan. Therefore, by his own testimony, Kilicdaroglu's heritage is mixed and rather uncertain.



politically, waiting for the new Kilicdaroglu government to fail so that he might return to power, a la Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu.

Nevertheless, during his campaign for the presidency, Kilicdaroglu cautiously offered hope on the Kurdish issue when he declared his desire for peace and justice on the basis of promoting a new national dialogue to overcome the explosive politics of identity that polarizes Turkish society: "There is a destiny that makes Turks and Kurds brothers. Fate brought us together. Fate told us to be brothers. Fate laid us down in Canakkale, Sakarya and Dumlupinar. There is no deep love like brotherly love. We've been together for centuries. . . . I will never, ever let anyone harm the brotherhood."⁴² Thus, a Kilicdaroglu victory would have presumably signaled that once again Turkey would have changed its attitude towards the Kurdish issue and moved from Erdogan's strategy of war and denial to one of change and accommodation. However, given the results of the run-off Turkish national election for president on 28 May 2023, such a new path will have to wait.

Victorious again, at the NATO meeting in Vilnius, Lithuania on 11 July 2023, Erdogan signaled his decision finally to support Swedish membership in the Western alliance in return for further Swedish crackdowns on PKK activities in that state and tacit promise for the United States to sell much needed, upgraded F-16 fighter jets to Turkey. The PKK reacted vehemently against what it saw as an update of the Lausanne Treaty almost exactly a century ago that had supported Kemalist Turkey against Kurdish interests. Indeed, Turkey continues to launch strikes against the PKK in northern Iraq with sophisticated weapons partially supplied by NATO.⁴³ Duran Kalkan, a senior PKK official, proclaimed: "They [Turkey] want to update Lausanne, make everyone accept the genocide of the Kurds, carry out attacks to destroy Kurdishness saying that it is attacking

⁴² Cited in *Politikyo*, April 18, 2023. <https://www.politikyol.com/millet-itifakinin-cumhurbaskani-adayi-kilicdaroglundan-kurtler-baslikli-video-mesaji-3-5-oy-icin-kardeslige-kimsenin-zarar-vermesine-asla-ve-asla-izin-vermeyecegim/>, accessed May 12, 2023.

⁴³ See, for example, Nazlan Ertan, "Turkey Launches Offensive against PKK Targets in Northern Iraq," *Al-Monitor*, April 18, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/04/turkey-launches-offensive-against-pkk-targets-northern-iraq>, accessed July 14, 2023.

terrorism.”⁴⁴ However by taking such a strong stance against NATO, including its support for Ukraine against Russia, the Kurds risked isolating themselves in their continuing struggle against Turkey. Even more, the Gaza War and its aftermath looked to push the Kurdish cause further to the back burner in regional and world politics.

⁴⁴ “Kalkan: Turkey Wants to Force NATO to Agree to a Genocide in Kurdistan,” ANF Behdinan, July 13, 2023, <https://anfenglishmobile.com/features/Kalkan-Turkey-wants-to-force-nato-to-agree-to-a-genocide-in-kurdistan-68278>, accessed July 13, 2023.

