

Municipal Politics and the PKK in the late 1970s: A citizenship perspective

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Abstract

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This paper examines the Kurdistan Workers Party's (PKK) municipal politics in the late 1970s through the lens of citizenship politics. The article introduces two concepts—activist citizenship and fugitive citizenship to analyse the PKK's mobilisation in this period, before the 1980 military coup in Turkey. Activist citizenship challenges the restrictive boundaries of state-sanctioned citizenship, while fugitive citizenship creates alternative political spaces for marginalized groups. Both concepts highlight how individuals and groups, such as the PKK, can assert their political agency in contexts where they are denied formal citizenship. The research questions linear understandings of the PKK's emergence as a political movement inevitably destined to become an insurgent movement.

Introduction

The Kurdistan Workers Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, PKK) is often understood as having undergone a radical ideological

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reconfiguration after the imprisonment of its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, in 1999, when it gradually changed from a classical, centrally led, national liberation movement to a de-centralised, radical-democratic and ideologically heterogeneous movement of movements. Much of the academic work on the PKK has emphasised the influence of Murray Bookchin and other thinkers on this reorientation. Our research shows how this development was also linked to the experiments in revolutionary practises and traditions undertaken by a wide array of revolutionary groups of the 1970s in Turkey, including the PKK's own lived history and experiences (O'Connor and Jongerden 2023). This work also introduces a novel approach to the politics of the PKK by adopting a citizenship perspective (Jongerden and O'Connor forthcoming).

In this short research note, we introduce two concepts through which we propose to further explore this approach, namely activist citizenship (Isin 2024) and fugitive citizenship (Stancliff 2023), and briefly indicate the contribution this makes to the literature on the PKK in particular, as well as insurgent movements in general. Conflict is increasingly recognised as a 'social process' (Wood 2008) and much recent literature foregrounds movements' efforts to build popular support, particularly research by scholars working in the fields of rebel governance and social movement studies. Indeed, these efforts are a response to multiple calls for greater inter-disciplinarity in the study of conflict (Shesterinina 2022; Staniland 2023; Tarrow 2007; Wood 2015). Our project takes this call a step further by incorporating complementary perspectives from the field of citizenship studies in order to shift the analytical scope more toward the social and political context in which the PKK was active rather than prioritising a movement focused lens. The data for this work is based on empirical research on the PKK's political activities among rural workers, peasants, women and workers in the petrol industry in Batman and Hilvan, including 24 interviews with witnesses and activists engaged in the PKK's electoral and representative municipal political work in the 1970s, and extensive



fieldwork on the representative PKK's transformation since the 1990s.

Activist and fugitive citizenship

A close look at the PKK's evolution since the mid-1970s demonstrates certain continuities between that period and more recent developments, which have been largely neglected in research on the organisation. Between 1977 and 1980, the PKK was an active participant in municipal electoral and representative politics. The PKK's first electoral participation was 1977, when, under its original name, the 'Kurdistan Revolutionaries', the party backed an independent candidate in the municipal elections in Batman. Two years later, as the PKK, it stood two candidates, Edip Solmaz, who won the elections in Batman and Nadir Temel, who became mayor in Hilvan. As the PKK was a clandestine organisation and it was constitutionally prohibited to run for election on a expressly pro-Kurdish platform, in common with its Kurdish contemporaries at the time, radical movements formally proposed independent candidates. Furthermore, in Hilvan, three PKK backed women—Dürre Kaya, Saadet Yavuz, and Emine Hacı Yusufoglu—became city councillors, thereby challenging a patriarchal system in which women were the de-facto property of men (Personal communication with female activist, August 11, 2023). Alongside participating in municipal elections, the party was active in union politics, successfully undermining the exploitative patronage networks, local Kurdish tribal powerbrokers exerted at the time. (Jongerden and O'Connor forthcoming). This period of municipal politics was violently suppressed. The 1980 military coup ended any remaining opportunities for political engagement. One of our interviewees, at the time a high school student, recalled

The following days [after the 1980 coup] PKK sympathisers passed through our village. Some asked for weapons, others asked for food or horses. They all moved into the mountains. (Personal communication, December 20, 2022).

These had been the same activists who had been the driving force behind the municipal campaigns, who escaped the country and who would eventually return as guerrillas. Our examination of the PKK's involvement in municipal politics – shows political tendencies that have been generally overlooked or only superficially referred to in the relevant literature. It makes several contributions to better understanding the PKK and insurgency:

First, this work contextualises the PKK's ideological evolution by shifting the emphasis away from ideologically oriented studies of the organisation to a *practice-focused* analysis. More specifically, it traces the PKK's contemporary understanding of radical democracy back to its mobilisation in the late 1970s (O'Connor and Jongerden 2023).

Second, although most studies on the nature and qualities of the Turkish state reveal the limitations of democratic institutions in the country, there is another, Kurdish-specific violent layer of oppression that has conditioned and limited all forms of pro-Kurdish mobilization (see Hintz and Ercan 2024). This is an explicitly ethnically prejudiced citizenship regime, one in which the state continuously securitises and pushes back against the struggles for rights as Kurds (at both the individual and organisational level). Although others have made similar arguments (Barkey and Fuller 1998), by focusing on the PKK's municipalism in Batman and Hilvan and their trade-union organizing, we develop an original line of inquiry in showing how the PKK aimed at transforming state structures by rewriting the restrictive citizenship regime (O'Connor and Jongerden 2023, Jongerden and O'Connor forthcoming). We investigate how the PKK attempted to change this restrictive citizenship regime through electoral and representative politics, how it tried to make change through existing state institutions in the late 1970s, before falling victim to violent practices that aimed to '*de-state*' it. These practices included the killing, removal and



imprisonment of mayors and councillors, along with the appointment of replacement trustees in their stead.

Third, this all invites a novel reading, a vital *inversion*, in fact, of the normal understanding of the struggle of the PKK in Turkey, which typically starts from the assumption of the PKK as an insurgent separatist movement. It questions linear understandings of its emergence as a political movement inevitably destined to become an insurgent movement. Our work illustrates that representative and electoral politics preceded – by at least seven years – the PKK's shift to insurgency. It was only in 1984, four years after the 1980 coup and the party's reorganisation in Lebanon, that it launched its guerilla insurgency.

The PKK's politics in the 1970s, we argue, should be understood in terms of a claim for the right to appear in the public arena, to be visible and audible, present and recognized. We argue against a simplistic or linear understanding of the PKK's origins and eventual adaptation of violence. By engaging in a behavioural analysis of the PKK's actual actions in the late 1970s, rather than retrospectively considering it through the lens of the insurgency that followed, we emphasise the relational dynamics among contentious movements, their rivalries and alliances, as well as interactions with the state itself, as the driver of the PKK's strategy. In other words, the PKK's adoption of an insurgent strategy was a response to a state that refused to allow a political space for Kurdish issues to be addressed (Dorransoro and Watts 2009; O'Connor 2021, 92; Romano 2006, 52). A history that was reproduced in the 1990s and 2000s with the repeated banning of political parties that sought to rewrite the restrictive citizenship framework in which Kurds were afforded no political recognition and which eventually involved an attempt to implement a reconfigured participatory and inclusive

citizenship regime in areas under its influence (Jongerden 2019).¹

Looking back over the almost 50-year history of the PKK, we need new analytical approaches to rethink the reductionist labelling of it simply as an “insurgent movement.” Our research shows that this fails to cover the organisation’s broader mobilisation and its engagement in electoral and representative politics that preceded the insurgency. The social movement literature generally has excelled in the explication of escalatory mechanisms and transformative events, retrospectively tracing and correctly identifying points where movements have prioritised armed forms of contention. However, this can overlook the broader dynamics of contentious mobilisation that did not play a causal role in the shift to violence but presented a different challenge to the state at the time. The benefit of hindsight and consolidation of narratives (both the state and the PKK’s own narratives) over time can blind researchers to the less evident dynamics of the period.

A complementary way in which the broader repertoires of sociopolitical movements might be conceptualised, we suggest, is as *alternative* citizenship projects. Alternative citizenship practices challenge existing restrictive citizenship regimes. One such practice can be conceptualized as *activist citizenship*. Activist citizenship is the practise of generating events that aim to change a restrictive citizenship regime (Isin 2009). This is how we can define the concerted efforts of the PKK in the 1977-1980 period to become an actor in municipal electoral and representative politics. By claiming the right to self-representation, this had the objective of rewriting a restrictive state citizenship regime in which the Kurdish-identifying individuals were excluded from representation.

The other concept we draw on is that of *fugitive citizenship*. This refers to cases, in which the movement created alternative spaces where people could act politically – neighbourhood councils, women’s houses and councils and platforms for deliberation – as ways to foster forms of democratic self-administration. It makes visible how



groups adopt so-called “fugitive” forms of citizenship by operating outside the conventional structures of state control, creating alternative spaces and political communities where they assume and assert collective rights. This is a type of citizenship that is unrecognised by the state and which may not even seek recognition by the state but nonetheless claims political agency (Stancliff 2023). Here, the PKK’s subsequent development of *democratic confederalism*, an approach towards self-organisation, can be viewed as a form of fugitive citizenship as it emphasises participatory forms of self-organisation through which people administer their own affairs independently of and indifferent to the state’s recognition. Reflecting on the history of the PKK, its political trajectory can be characterized as a movement that has at specific times navigated both activist and fugitive citizenship as well as confronting the Turkish state in an armed insurgency

Conclusions

Activist and fugitive citizenship both aim to empower people in their capacity as citizens deprived of citizenship rights by proactively claiming and enacting these rights. While activist citizenship is oriented towards and aims to change a state’s restrictive or limited citizenship regime, fugitive citizenship creates alternative spaces for the building of a political community beyond the remit of the state. Both are responses to a restrictive citizenship regime, however, and they can operate together, in parallel. In Turkey, fugitive citizenship has been a response to the state’s making and remaking of its citizenship regime which in all of its forms (more Kemalist or more Islamist), has foregrounded Turkishness as *the* essential citizen criterion. The PKK’s participation in municipal electoral and representative politics in the late 1970s in Batman and Hilvan was the PKK’s first attempt to establish Kurds as citizens, a struggle which continued in activist and fugitive forms through the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, albeit in the shadow of the violent storm of insurgency, mass population displacement and suffering which characterised the years after 1984.

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¹ A simplified chronology of the history of banned parties that struggled for citizenship rights for Kurds:

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| 1990 | The People's Labour Party (HEP) is founded by 15 Kurdish MPs who were expelled from the Social Democratic People's Party (SHP) of Turkey for attending a Kurdish conference in Paris. |
| 1993 | The Constitutional Court outlaws the HEP and the Freedom and Democracy Party (ÖZDEP), which was established as an alternative to the HEP; its representatives join the Democracy Party (DEP). |
| 1994 | The Constitutional Court bans the DEP, its representatives join the People's Democracy Party (HADEP), which was established as an alternative to the DEP. |
| 2003 | The Constitutional Court bans HADEP, and its representatives join the Democratic People's Party (DEHAP), which had been established in 1997 as a reserve party |
| 2005 | Threatened by closure, DEHAP dissolves itself; the Democratic Society Party (DTP) is established. |
| 2009 | The Constitutional Court bans the DTP; its representatives join the Peace and Democracy Party BDP, later renamed the Democratic Regions Party (DBP), a constituent and sister party of the People's Democratic Party (HDP), established in 2012. |
| 2021 | The Constitutional Court accepts an indictment seeking the closure of the HDP. The Greens and Left Future Party (YSP) electoral alliance becomes the alternative under which movement continues to participate in elections. |
| 2023 | Under threat of closure, the party changed its name to the Peoples Equality and Democracy Party (HEDEP). Upon objections by the Chief Prosecutor of the Court of Cassation to the resemblance of the abbreviation with the earlier closed HADEP, the party continues as the People's Equality and Democracy Party (DEM), which had been established in 2012 as a possible reserve party. |