

INCLUSIVE WAYS TO PEACE AND DEMOCRACY IN TURKEY

Renewed fighting between the the Turkish state and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in southeastern Turkey, has flung the peace process in this 30-year conflict into doubt and highlighted the urgency of initiating an inclusive political-led process to solve the Kurdish issue. In this article, the author frames her analysis of the current situation around four dimensions: the political terrain in Turkey after two consecutive general elections, the challenges of the problem, a civic approach to a solution, and expectations. Touting the success of two civil initiatives Women's Solidarity for Peace (WSP) and Life Is What Matters (Aslolan Hayattır), the author argues that before a solution can be found, confidence must be restored between Turkey's political parties and important divergences must be bridged.

Gülseren Onanç*



TURKISH POLICY
QUARTERLY

Winter 2016

* Gülseren Onanç is a member of the Party Assembly of the Republican People's Party (CHP).

As a politician and women's rights activist, the Kurdish issue in Turkey is a priority for me. I was one of the organizers of two civic initiatives Women's Solidarity for Peace (WSP) and Life Is What Matters (*Aslolan Hayattır*), which aim to understand the situation and achieve solidarity with Kurdish inhabitants, especially women, in Cizre and Diyarbakır. I would like to provide my perspective on the current status of the Kurdish issue based on my observations and discussions with local citizens and authorities. My aim is to search for an inclusive political solution to end the internal war taking place in Turkey's south-east as a result of broken peace talks.



I would like to frame my analysis in four dimensions: the political terrain in Turkey after two consecutive general elections, the challenges of the problem, a civic approach to a solution, and expectations.

Political terrain: Although there are four political parties in Parliament, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) determine almost every issue without the participation of other political parties or civil society. The President's aim is to fundamentally rewrite the Turkish constitution to establish a powerful presidency that would replace the current parliamentary system. Although constitutionally the prime minister has executive power, Erdoğan currently holds the reins of executive power firmly in his hands.

Elected to office for a fourth term in 2015 with a strong majority, the AKP has demonstrated a growing intolerance of political opposition, public protest, and critical media. Government interference with the courts and prosecutors has undermined judicial independence and the rule of law.

On the other hand, the opposition parties hold diverse positions on the Kurdish issue.

As the founder of the Turkish republic, the Republican People's Party (CHP) is trying to evolve from a state party to a social democratic one. The CHP has two

major reflexes towards unitary state structure and the secularization of the system. The party gained just less than two percent of the total electorates in southeast Turkey. Therefore, the prevailing tendency regarding the Kurdish issue is “maintaining balance between the Turkish sensitivity to the unity of the Republic and Kurdish claims.” The CHP does not want to change the first

four articles of the Constitution. It is skeptical of mother-tongue education, but supports autonomy being granted to local governments, an issue mentioned in the European Charter of Local Self-Government, which Turkey signed in 1991. The CHP is proposing to withdraw reservations on five articles held by the government. The AKP insists on these reservations because it wishes to control every major infrastructure and administrative project without the inclusion of elected local municipalities. The central government does not want to transfer any administrative or financial autonomy to local administrations.

“President Erdoğan and his ruling AKP determine almost every issue without the participation of other political parties or civil society.”

To resolve the Kurdish issue, the CHP proposed establishing the Social Reconciliation Commission and consensus commission in Parliament consisting of representatives from four parties.

The Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) is strongly opposed to the peace process and favors excluding the People’s Democratic Party (HDP), the pro-Kurdish party. It is the most enthusiastic supporter of security measures to resolve the Kurdish issue.

The HDP has difficulty taking an uncompromising stand against violence perpetrated by the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) as it has ties, but no power over the PKK. The HDP together with the Peoples’ Democratic Congress (HDK) proclaimed democratic autonomy as the solution to Turkey’s long-standing Kurdish issue. It was declared that a settlement can only be achieved by granting autonomy to not only Turkey’s predominantly Kurdish southeast, but also the rest of the country. They believe that self-governance is a right and legitimate demand which is guaranteed by international conventions.

The courage for such an ambitious declaration originated from the success of the Democratic Union Party’s (PYD) experiment in Syria. PYD, a branch of the PKK, declared the formation of three autonomous administrations in an area called Rojava close to the border with Turkey at the beginning of 2014. Confident of governing autonomous

regions, the PKK tried to instigate a revolt among Kurdish people in southeast Turkey, starting primarily in Cizre. The PKK has supplied weapons to the YPG as well as to some neighborhoods in southeast cities, mainly in Şırnak and Diyarbakır.

“The HDP has difficulty taking an uncompromising stand against violence perpetrated by the PKK as it has ties, but no power over the PKK.”

From the perspective of international relations, the US and Russia are supporting the secular PYD as one of the most powerful forces in the region effectively fighting the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). With such confidence and international support, the PKK is escalating the city wars against Turkish security forces and does not look like it will back down.

Current Situation

The Kurdish problem in Turkey is a long-standing political problem and it must be resolved civilly by politicians. The peace process which was going on for three years between the government and imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan broke down after the 7 June 2015 parliamentary election. The conflict between Turkish security forces and the youth branch of the PKK has been escalating in towns across southeast Turkey. Since the conflict started in July 2015, over 100,000 people have left the region due to extended curfews and increased tensions. Over 200 soldiers and police officers have died, over 400 civilians, including women and children, have been killed, 18 mayors are under arrest and 25 mayors have been removed from office. In this atmosphere of armed conflict, the security forces have committed a number of human rights violations. Human Rights Watch, Turkey reported on 22 December 2015: “Kurdish civilians, including women, children and elderly residents, have been killed during security operations and armed clashes since July 2015 in southeastern Turkey.”¹

The government supports the security measures, and the military and security forces hold the reins of power in this conflict. Prime Minister Davutoğlu has announced a 10-point action plan to rebuild embattled regions through stricter security and urban transformation measures. The new approach of the government redefines its Kurdish politics as a “unilateral” action to ease future tensions in the southeast without negotiating with PKK, or involving the HDP. This approach has not been successful for the last 32 years, and it will not be successful now. However, the AKP

¹ “Turkey: Mounting Security Operation Deaths,” *Human Rights Watch*, 22 December 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/12/22/turkey-mounting-security-operation-deaths>

is calculating to gain support from devastated Kurdish citizens who blame the PKK for the deadly clashes.

The violence and nationalist security concerns have consolidated AKP voters, and the party is trying to gain the support of mainly religious Kurds living in the conflict area by providing economic support. Erdoğan does not want to go back to the negotiating table or find a political solution. Erdoğan and the AKP government unfortunately insist on solving this political issue with security measures.

Difficult Challenges

Based on the political environment and my observations in the area, these are the major reasons we are nowhere near finding a solution.

Political and Social Climate: Exclusion and the AKP's one-man political approach coupled with Erdoğan's presidential agenda have resulted in a lack of communication and loss of trust among politicians and political parties, especially between the AKP and HDP. The President and the Prime Minister are attempting to lift the immunity of the HDP members in Parliament, and the President has accused the HDP of supporting terrorism and alienated its elected MPs.

Lack of cooperation between local authorities has also resulted in deadlock. For example, the governor of Diyarbakır is not working in cooperation with the co-mayors of Diyarbakır who are members of the HDP. The political sphere is narrowing while the impact of the security forces is growing.

Polarization: The political climate creates polarization among people who support different political parties. The population of Turkey is divided into different sub groups based on the party they support. These groups do not even want to socialize with the other groups.

Loss of problem solving capacity: Due to the suppression of opposition parties, journalists, researchers, and academics, there is a lack of problem-solving capacity in society. Opposition parties have difficulty providing solutions. Dominating the majority in the Parliament, the AKP does not leave any space for alternative solutions. The HDP, who should be an active player, is caught between the PKK and the government and has lost its focus on inclusive policy development. For example, it was wrong to declare democratic autonomy in the Kurdish provinces without negotiating with the other parties in the Parliament.

The CHP shall play a critical role in facilitating bridges between the east and the west of Turkey. CHP representatives from all over Turkey have visited the region and have shown solidarity with the Kurdish victims of human rights violations. However, we do not see collective minds developing between political parties.

“CHP representatives from all over Turkey have visited the [southeast] region and have shown solidarity with the Kurdish victims of human rights violations.”

Moreover, Turkey is backsliding on freedom of speech and the independence of media, while also losing its problem solving capacity by putting political pressure on intellectuals, academics, journalists. For example, the Academics for Peace initiative, which was a petition signed by 1,400 signatories – mostly Turkish, but also including other nationalities including Noam Chomsky and Slavoj Žižek – calling for

an end to the violence against Kurds in the southeast, was received with furious anger by the President. Prosecutors launched an investigation into the academics with charges of insulting the state and engaging in terrorist propaganda. Some of the academics were fired by their privately owned universities, others have been threatened with disciplinary action by their management, and others have been the subject of a backlash by nationalist students.

The main objective of the repressive AKP government and President Erdoğan is to punish or at least intimidate all opposition to government policies by accusing them of engaging in terrorist activities.

Loss of an Anchor: The EU used to be an anchor for the democratization process in Turkey and a major referee, but not anymore. The European Union bows to Erdoğan in hopes that he will relieve the refugee crisis. Even though Turkey has moved significantly away from the Copenhagen Criteria, the EU does not properly criticize the AKP and Erdoğan. Under such desperate and complex circumstances, Europeans, Turks, and Kurds must find roads that lead to peace and democracy.

Roads That Lead to Peace and Democracy: Two Examples of Civil Initiatives

Women’s Solidarity for Peace (WSP) and Life Is What Matters (*Aslolan Hayattır*) are two initiatives which try to open ways to peaceful solutions. Based on our experience, there are four points critical to achieving effective results.

Engaging opinion leaders who are respected/listened to by different social and political groups: In a society as polarized as Turkey, one can easily be stigmatized for opposing others. We tried to be inclusive by embracing different people representing different political perspectives and social groups.

Issuing powerful declarations written by senior authors: We used the power of words and consensus. Our messages were, “We, women coming from the West of Turkey we hear you, we feel you, we are in solidarity and unity with you (the women in Cizre). Stop the conflict. Start negotiating (from Diyarbakır to authorities in Ankara).

Communicating with local authorities equally: In southeast Turkey, local municipalities are governed by the HDP, the pro-Kurdish party, while the governor feels responsible to the AKP, the ruling party. We communicate and engage all local authorities equally, holding all accountable.

Drawing the attention of the media: The media pays attention to our events because we involve celebrities carrying a powerful message and visiting at the right time. As a result, we were able to communicate our stance.

Expectations from EU Friends and Active Citizens

We are disappointed that the EU is violating its fundamental values in dealing with the refugee crisis. It is time to fight for the EU’s core values of respect for human dignity, liberty, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights, including the rights of minorities. The world needs European values more than ever before.

We must develop a peace campaign to stop the war in Syria and southeast Turkey. We must engage and inform the large majority of the EU population and thereby put pressure on governments to solve the problem.

We shall take control of our future by becoming active citizens who are capable of searching for peace and putting pressure on decision makers. We must find creative ways to build peace within and outside our borders.

My favorite slogan, the one we shouted at the Gezi demonstrations and afterwards, says, “Salvation cannot be achieved alone; it is either all of us or none of us.”