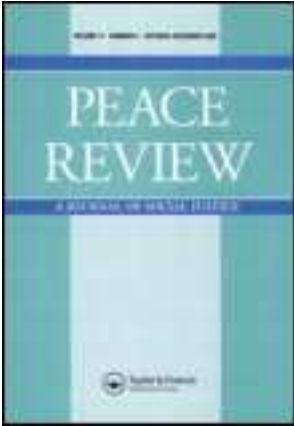


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Unblocking the Impasse in Turkey's Kurdish Question

CENGİZ GÜNES

The re-emergence of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey from the 1960s onward and, more specifically, the subsequent conflict has become a significant political problem that Turkey found particularly difficult to deal with constructively. The Kurds' early attempts during the 1960s and 1970s to seek a remedy through legitimate channels and raise their demands democratically (previously suppressed), led them to seek other avenues to address their demands. The most vital expression of the Kurdish question in Turkey has been the guerrilla insurgency by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partîya Karkerên Kurdistan*, PKK) and the conflict that started in 1984 that has had major social, political, and economic consequences, including significant loss of life.

The limited recognition of Kurdish identity and cultural rights in the past decade indicates that the Kurdish challenge has succeeded in bringing about a discussion on the need to re-conceptualize the uniform Turkish national identity. The significant reduction in the military activities of the PKK since the withdrawal of its guerrillas and the declaration of a permanent ceasefire in August 1999 has significantly contributed to this change in Turkey's Kurdish policy. Overall however, the Kurdish question still remains without a permanent solution and the conflict is ongoing, with periods of relative tranquility followed by intensification of antagonisms and escalation of violence.

Hence, the rise of the contemporary Kurdish national movement in Turkey since the 1960s has provided a sterner challenge for Turkey. With the rise of Leftist, Islamist, and Turkish nationalist oppositional movements in the same period, Turkey has been experiencing widespread social and political polarization, especially since the 1980s. A number of political proposals have been put forward by different political groups during the 1990s and the 2000s to overcome the political polarization, reform the republican institutions and build a new overarching "common identity" in Turkey. One such proposal by President Turgut Özal during the early 1990s attempted to re-conceptualize the national identity to make it more sensitive to cultural differences while at the same time emphasizing the communalities such as the Islamic and the Ottoman

heritage. As steps towards raising the democratic standards in Turkey and to meet the European Union (EU) membership criteria, the current Justice and Development Party government (*Adalet Ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) has also been carrying out political reforms that have resulted in the limited recognition of Kurdish identity and demands. Again, the Islamic and Ottoman heritage is emphasized as the base of the new common identity.

The consolidation of the democratic regime in Turkey is closely linked to the successful institution of a pluralist, democratic framework that is capable of including representation from the country's significant Kurdish minority. The Kurds constitute the majority of the population in the "South-East" and the "East" Anatolian regions; however, due to internal displacements during the 1920s and 1930s, the voluntary migration during the 1960s and 1970s, and the 1990s as part of the counteroffensive against the PKK, currently they are dispersed. It is quite common to find Kurds residing in almost all major towns and cities in Turkey. Additionally, since the 1980s there has been a steady increase in the Kurdish refugee communities in many of the West European countries, yet the exact number of the Kurds is unknown. The Kurd population is estimated to be between 15 and 20 million, constituting roughly 20 to 28 percent of Turkey's population.

In the current environment, the Kurdish question in Turkey manifests itself as part of a broader problem of pluralism and public recognition of cultural identity and difference. It is now accepted by many, especially by the Kurdish national movement, that any possible solution of the Kurdish question involves the deepening of democracy in civil society, respect for cultural and national diversity, and the further development of and changes to the democratic institutions in Turkey. Since 1990 a number of pro-Kurdish political parties have been active in Turkey and, despite the oppressive and delimited political environment within which they found themselves conducting their activities, they have succeeded in providing a platform for Kurdish representation and political engagement. In contrast to the democratization proposals mentioned above, the pro-Kurdish movement has been contesting the Kurds' national demands and rights on the basis of reformulating the conception of national identity and citizenship in Turkey to institute a territorial, civic, and pluralist conception of citizenship that recognizes national and cultural pluralism in Turkey. This re-formulation seeks to transcend the narrow, Turkish nationalist interpretation of citizenship in Turkey, which denies cultural pluralism by imposing a homogenous national identity on the Kurds and other minorities.

The PKK's withdrawal of its guerrillas and declaration of a permanent ceasefire in 1999 have brought about a significant reduction in the political violence in the region. The occasional eruption of violence in the past decade has neither been continuous nor as severe as past violence, indicating the previous intensity of the conflict may return. Although political violence has

not been totally eliminated, the demands raised by the PKK and the pro-Kurdish democratic movement can be satisfied without endangering Turkey's territorial integrity. Hence, an institutional framework that can facilitate the co-existence within the same polity and transform antagonisms—the conditions that gave rise to political violence in the first place—is possible. The PKK's discursive transformations coincide with Turkey's EU integration process and the political reforms that country has undertaken to satisfy membership criteria. The prospect of EU membership and the accession process has so far been a major motivating factor in raising the country's democratic standards and recognition of cultural pluralism, but has resulted in the limited recognition of the Kurdish identity and demands.

Without a doubt the EU accession process offers new opportunities for Turkey to develop a new policy to manage diversity and cultural difference, which in turn can open opportunities of new democratic subjectivities in the constitution. The democratization of state institutions and of society, and the growth of norms and values commensurate with a democratic regime and politics (such as political freedoms and the practice of compromise and deliberation) can have a significant impact on the sustenance of Kurdish democratic politics and also the democratic values taking root in both Turkish and Kurdish societies. During the past five years, however, the AKP's initial enthusiasm for EU membership seems to be replaced with a complacent attitude. Also, given that there is widespread opposition to Turkey's membership within the EU member states, most notably in Germany and France, Turkey's internal political dynamics take more centrality in the push for democratization and political reconciliation.

Given that the Kurdish rights and demands are articulated within the discourse of democracy and as national cultural demands, a new political framework that takes the existing polity in Turkey as its basis but recognizes the existence of the Kurds as a national group and accord their national cultural rights, can satisfy the popular Kurdish political demands in Turkey. Furthermore, the territorial dispersion of the Kurds in Turkey and their integration to the Turkish society, a new framework based on the "National cultural autonomy" model seems particular suitable because it can provide an effective method to accommodate Kurdish demands within Turkey. Given that within such a framework cultural autonomy would be accorded on the basis of the "personality principle" and would not be confined to a particular territory. The geographically dispersed Kurds around Turkey could enjoy Kurdish cultural rights as well as maintain and develop their identity and culture without endangering their status as "citizens" and "residents" of Turkey.

However, prior to any discussion of possible models that will provide suitable solutions to accommodating Kurdish demands in Turkey, a major shift in the way the Kurdish question is represented in the political discourses in

Turkey is needed. The developments Turkey has witnessed in the past decade concerning the peaceful and political solution to the conflict as well as the accommodation of Kurdish national demands have not been very encouraging. In addition, the multifaceted difficulties that hinder the development of political reconciliation in Turkey have become much more visible, despite the fact that the past decade witnessed significant reductions in political violence in the majority Kurdish regions.

There were reductions to violence led on July 30, 2002 to bring an end to the Emergency Rule in the provinces of Hakkari and Tunceli and on November 30, 2002 in the last two remaining provinces of Diyarbakır and Şırnak. The legal reforms carried out by successive governments since 2001 as steps to meet the EU membership criteria—including uplifting capital punishment, allowing limited use of Kurdish language in radio and TV broadcasts, teaching Kurdish in private institutions, and establishing a predominantly Kurdish language TV station in January 2009 within the state's broadcasting organization TRT (Radio and Television Corporation of Turkey)—has contributed positively to the creation of an environment of optimism. In fact, such reforms can be interpreted as signs that the state's policy concerning the Kurdish question is changing. Although these changes are seen as steps in the right direction by the main Kurdish political actors and the Kurds in general, the need to follow such changes with more comprehensive, legal reforms that will meet the Kurds' national cultural demands and institute a plural and participatory democratic framework are often emphasized.

Furthermore, the announcements made by the government in August 2009 in their preparation of a "Democratic Initiative" intended to accelerate the process of political reform and offered greater recognition of Kurdish cultural rights and hope of a new era in Kurdish politics in Turkey. However, the rejection by the main opposition political parties of the government's attempts to generate national consensus, necessary to carry out the widespread constitutional reforms and grant the Kurdish minority more rights and freedoms, have significantly hampered the progress toward political reconciliation. In fact, the Turkish nationalists' unequivocal rejection shows the strength and appeal of the Turkish nationalism and its hegemonic representation of the Kurdish question as strictly a "security concern" and "terrorism," which has been a main barrier on political reconciliation. Subsequently, the leaflet prepared to disseminate the "Democratic Initiative" to the public in Turkey is described as "The National Oneness and Brotherhood Project" (*Milli Birlik ve Kardeşlik Projesi*), which proposes to defend the unitary structure of the state and the indivisibility of the national community in Turkey. Additionally, despite emphasizing one of the project's key objectives to be lifting the restrictions on learning, teaching, and broadcasting in other languages spoken in Turkey, the possibility of education in mother tongue—a key demand of the Kurdish national movement—is firmly rejected.

The limited recognition of the Kurdish identity and rights granted to the Kurds throughout the past decade conceive Kurdish demands as narrow, ethnic demands that fall short of full linguistic rights. Additionally, the recognition does not extend to the political sphere as dialogue if the PKK has so far been rejected. Initially, the PKK responded to the governments' initiative by sending a "peace group" of 34 people in October 2010 that included eight PKK militants. The group was released after arrival; however, on June 17, 2010, 10 members were charged with being "members of the PKK" and "carrying out PKK propaganda." Furthermore, the commencement in October 2010 of the trial of pro-Kurdish political activists accused of being members of the KCK (Union of the Communities of Kurdistan)—which is seen by the state as the PKK's urban network in Turkey—has been interpreted by the PKK as a sign of the government's insincerity in solving the conflict through political means.

Overall, the government's "Democratic Initiative" has been interpreted by the PKK as an attempt to marginalize the Kurdish national movement and depoliticize Kurdish identity. This is because in line with the continuation of the security discourse, the leaflet emphasizes the elimination of the PKK in the region as a key objective. Given that the possibility of a negotiated agreement that would result in the disarmament of the PKK is weak, a large-scale military operation that will result in a significant intensification of the conflict may be attempted by the Turkish army to achieve its objective. The government's approach continues to see the Kurdish question within the parameters of security and does not seek to engage with the PKK or respond to its key political demands.

Additionally, so far, the Kurds' demands for the recognition of their identity as a national community and the congruent cultural and linguistic rights (such as the provision of education in Kurdish) have been opposed by the mainstream political parties in Turkey, which highlights the polarization in opinion concerning the characterization of Kurdish identity and the level of public recognition that it is expected to enjoy in Turkey. The nationalist Republican People's Party (CHP) and the ultra-nationalist Nationalist Action Party (MHP)—the two main opposition parties in Turkey—have been strongly opposing the recognition of Kurdish identity. The government's proposal for the cultural recognition describe Kurdish identity as an ethnic identity and does not recognize the Kurds as a separate national community, which is one of the main demands the Kurdish national movement is raising. The election of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu to the leadership of the CHP in May 2010, who is seen as a moderator and reformer, has raised the hopes that his election will lead to the party adopting a more flexible policy concerning the Kurdish question. However, so far there has not been a significant discursive shift or any clear and new policy proposal from the CHP concerning the Kurdish question and the recognition of Kurdish identity. Although some attempts to recognize Kurdish

identity and demands in Turkey have been made in the past decade, the scope has been limited and so far the main political groups representing the Kurds have been excluded from the process. The exclusion and the denial of Kurdish identity in the past have not caused the desired outcome of assimilation. In fact, the inflexible attitude that the successive governments maintained vis-à-vis the Kurdish demands has resulted in exacerbation rather than containment of violence.

Overall, the positive environment in Turkey in the past decade is yet to cultivate a lasting solution to the conflict and the gradual recognition of Kurdish identity and Kurdish demands, occurring at a time when the attempt to marginalize the Kurdish movement is continuing. In particular, the continued association in the media and the state discourse of the Kurds with "terrorism" in Turkey has been, and continues to be, used to significantly affect the marginalization and exclusion of Kurdish demands for cultural rights and political reconciliation.

The continued threat the PKK guerrillas and their sporadic attacks against the Turkish security forces enhance the association in the popular, Turkish mind of Kurdish demands to "separatism" and "terrorism." Such a representation plays a significant role in representing the Kurdish demands as "illegitimate," which has been a major barrier preventing the development of a process of political reconciliation and recognition of Kurdish identity in Turkey. In particular, its significance is that the pro-Kurdish, democratic movement has been unable to extend its appeal to the broad masses of Turkey. The assumed link between the pro-Kurdish political parties and the PKK and the attempts to show one to be the extension of the other has been given as the reason to close a number of pro-Kurdish political parties in the past, most recently the Democratic Society Party (DTP) in December 2009.

In fact, the marginalization and its associated difficulties that the pro-Kurdish democratic movement currently experiences have been ongoing since the early 1990s, despite the continuous efforts of numerous pro-Kurdish political parties that have sought to overcome such difficulties by putting forward political proposals to end the conflict and campaigned to bring about wide-ranging constitutional reforms that will widen the political space and provide recognition to the Kurdish identity and satisfy Kurdish rights and demands. In addition to the pro-Kurdish political parties, numerous civil society organizations have flourished in the recent years, such as the Peace Council of Turkey (*Türkiye Barış Meclisi*) and the Peace Mothers (*Barış Anneleri*). However, despite their efforts, it is highly difficult to envision in this environment whether the current limitations in front of the pro-Kurdish movement to contest democracy and pluralism in Turkey are totally surmounted.

Additionally, the possibilities offered by the politics of recognition and the difficulties involved in the institution of a post-national society in Turkey

are also of huge significance. The limitations that such a state of affairs places on the success of a process of political reconciliation has become quite visible and Turkey continues to face significant difficulties that prevent the emergence of a national consensus for a political solution to the conflict. This clearly shows that there are major barriers preventing the emergence of a political will and consensus that is needed to carry out the widespread reforms. The ensuing public debate, the Turkish nationalist's unequivocal rejections of any move toward peace, and the recognition of Kurdish identity shows the strength and appeal of Turkish nationalism and its hegemonic representation of the Kurdish question as strictly a "security concern" and "terrorism."

The experience of conflict management in Turkey in the past decade demonstrates the need for the development of a new institutional framework and/or new ethos of pluralism that could accommodate Kurdish demands in Turkey. Open dialogue and a participatory framework that includes Kurdish representation and engages with the Kurdish demands and concerns can unlock the current stalemate. Additionally, as a practical step and as demanded by numerous political groups in Turkey, drafting a new constitution, which embeds a new notion of citizenship that respects pluralism and cultural identity and difference, is also of significance. Such a process of comprehensive political reform needs to be complemented with a daring attempt to address, in particular, the human tragedies of the Kurdish conflict and its ongoing ramifications.

The success of any democratic initiative to end the conflict rests on Turkey's ability to generate a national consensus to recognize and accommodate Kurdish national demands and rights, such as education in Kurdish language, the constitutional recognition of Kurdish identity, and the extension of broadcast rights. Additionally, a host of other related significant issues, such as the issue of internal displacement as well as the widespread violence against the Kurdish civilians during the 1990s in which the state security forces played a key role (including the extrajudicial murders during the 1990s of an estimated 17,500 people) need to be investigated fully before the horrors and traumas of the conflict can heal.

In fact, the reconciliation process needs to address the past instances of the use of state violence against the Kurds (most notably during the suppression of the Dersim uprising in 1938), it needs to be broader, and it needs to include the traumas inflicted on the wider Turkish society in the period following the military coup in 1980. As the democratization experience elsewhere shows, in particular as the important role that the Truth of Reconciliation Commission played in South Africa's transition to democracy and its re-foundation as a democratic plural society demonstrates, comprehensive political reforms need to be complemented with the establishment of a neutral platform where the past horrors of the conflict can be expressed and the process of political reconciliation can begin.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

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