

The AKP and the Kurdish Issue: What Went Wrong?

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Summary

In the parliamentary elections of July 22, 2007, AKP (Justice and Development Party) won 47% of the votes, obtaining a very strong mandate to take issue with Turkey's outstanding problems. In the predominantly Kurdish east and southeast region, the AKP doubled its vote from 26% to 53%. The AKP seemed to have persuaded the Kurds thanks to the party's earlier moves to solve the Kurdish problem by granting more rights and freedoms as well as jobs and economic prosperity. Having started the negotiation process with the EU and obtaining such a strong mandate from the Kurdish voters, why did the AKP turn its back to the Kurdish issue? This can be explained with reference to three groups of factors working at the domestic, the EU and international levels.

In the parliamentary elections of July 22, 2007, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) increased its votes from 34% in 2002 to 47%, obtaining a very strong mandate to take issue with Turkey's outstanding problems. In the predominantly Kurdish southeast region, the AKP doubled its vote from around 26% to approximately 53%. The AKP seemed to have persuaded the Kurds to come aboard, thanks to the party's earlier moves indicating a willingness to solve the Kurdish problem by granting more rights and freedoms, as well as jobs and economic prosperity to the Kurds. The vote share of the AKP surpassed that of the Democratic Society Party (DTP) in many parts of the region, suggesting that improvements in human rights and democracy during the first AKP government may have stripped Kurdish nationalism of its popular support. Moreover, the AKP government departed from previous attitudes by repeatedly emphasizing the Kurds' right to express their culture and identity. Marking a significant turning point in 2005, Erdoğan became the first prime minister to acknowledge that 'the [Turkish] state has made mistakes about the Kurdish issue'. The courage to make this admission came at least to some extent from the EU's legal and normative framework. This is not to claim that the opening up of the Kurdish issue can only be attributed to such external factors as the EU process. Erdoğan's personal history of fighting for more religious freedom (and his subsequent imprisonment under the Article 312 of the Turkish criminal code for reading a few lines from a poem) may have caused him to challenge the status quo not only in matters of religion/secularism but also those of ethnicity.

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Nevertheless, the normalization of the state and, with it, the mainstream discourses in regard to the Kurdish issue would not have been possible without the external legitimization provided by the EU. During the Helsinki Summit of 1999, Turkey's candidacy was approved by the European Union. With this decision, Turkey's membership became more likely than ever. In light of this event, Turkish governments, especially since 2001, have pursued an unprecedented process of domestic political reform. A second trigger for the reforms has undoubtedly been the capture of the PKK (Kurdish Workers Party) leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1999. Following Öcalan's capture, the PKK announced a ceasefire followed by a sudden halt in PKK terror. The removal of the immediate threat of terror opened new spaces for debating the Kurdish issue without necessarily framing it as a security issue. Moreover, Öcalan's capture broke the hopes of those who supported the PKK's methods and left them with only democratic means to voice their demands. Moderate Kurdish groups became one of the biggest supporters of the EU membership process in the hope that the process would bring more democratization and guarantees of human rights.

As part of the EU integration process, the right of education and broadcasting in a mother tongue was granted in 2002. Previously, the granting of this basic right to the Kurdish minority had not been considered from the perspective of basic rights and freedoms but rather through the lens of national security. The abolition of the death penalty, the release of former Kurdish MPs from prison, and the end of emergency rule in the southeastern region represent other significant steps away from the policies of securitization. The AKP capitalized on these developments and accelerated the reform process with the assistance of the external legitimization provided by the EU. Erdoğan pushed the limits of the establishment by suggesting that the Turkish identity is the primary identity while the Kurdish identity should also be recognized as a sub-identity.

So, what went wrong? Why did this political climate not continue? Having started the negotiation process with the EU and having obtained such a strong mandate from the Kurdish people in the 2007 elections, why did the AKP turn its back on the Kurdish issue? The slowing down of the reform process and the worsening of the Kurdish issue can be explained with reference to three groups of factors working at domestic, EU and international levels.

The Domestic Level

Concerning domestic politics, two issues stand out. The first issue is the AKP's unwillingness and incapacity to take stronger steps on the Kurdish issue. Although the Kurdish voters chose AKP as a means to claim more rights, freedoms and economic prosperity, their message has not been taken up by the party. Particularly since the beginning of its second term in office in July 2007, the AKP chose to focus on the issue of the headscarf, which has proved to be a fault line in Turkish society. After having fought a judiciary battle to choose the next president and being threatened by a memorandum from the army, the AKP promised to introduce a new constitution that would widen the political space *vis-à-vis* the civilian-military bureaucracy and improve individual rights and freedoms. However, these promises did not deliver any concrete results except for the

referendum on a constitutional change, including the popular election of the president. The headscarf issue dominated the agenda after the parliamentary election when the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) challenged the AKP to find a solution to the ban. Rather than responding to this challenge with a more comprehensive 'democratization package', the AKP used all its credit on the headscarf issue.

With this narrow agenda, the AKP attracted harsh criticisms from the civilian-military bureaucracy, media groups and certain civil society organizations despite the fact that the vast majority of Turkish society supports the lifting of the headscarf ban. Under such circumstances, the party could not take an additional political risk by bringing the Kurdish issue to the agenda. Moreover, the AKP is unlikely to be supported by other political parties in the parliament. The MHP, which supported the AKP on the headscarf issue, is unlikely to give its backing to any reforms of the Kurdish issue. MHP's election campaign was dominated by themes of PKK terror and a military incursion into Northern Iraq. The pro-Kurdish DTP is also unlikely to be an ally of the AKP on the Kurdish issue. In the July 2007 elections, the party managed to gain parliamentary representation for the first time since 1991. However, the DTP so far has not denounced the PKK, and has isolated itself both in parliament and in domestic politics in general. In short, although the EU integration process enabled the AKP by providing external legitimization for its political agenda and policies, the AKP has been unwilling or incapable to use this opportunity to introduce a bold reform agenda for the Kurdish issue. Now that there is a closure case against it in the Constitutional Court, AK Party is busily working on alternative scenarios for its future. It seems that the Kurdish issue, once again, is back on the shelf.

The second issue regarding domestic politics is related to the role of the army. Despite all the decrease in its formal power, such as the reduction of the number of military members in the National Security Council, the army still acts as a major securitizer of the Kurdish issue. Through the 27 April 2007 electronic memorandum, the military emphasized the ethnic separatist (Kurdish) threat and stated, 'the army will be against those who oppose the Kemalist motto "Happy is he who calls himself a Turk"'. Although the memorandum was mostly perceived as a warning against the allegedly Islamist policies of the AKP-led government, the army used the opportunity to remind voters of its sensitivities regarding the Kurdish issue as well. The increase in PKK terror since 2006 provided a pretext for the army to disseminate its views through press releases, briefings to journalists and interviews with top officers. In 2007, the army, through its website, invited the public to get organized in protesting the terrorist attacks. This call was immediately withdrawn when the army realized that this would lead to a polarization of society. Another recent example of the army's influence on the Kurdish issue is its intervention in Turkey's policy towards Northern Iraq. In short, despite the decrease in its formal power, the army continues to influence the framing of the Kurdish issue simply as a national security problem. Combined with increasing terror, this reduction creates a perception of emergency and threat that prevents the emergence of more democratic/civilian suggestions that could go beyond military operations and economic measures.

The European Union Level

Regarding the limitations arising from the EU, the confusing messages from the EU overshadow Turkey's reform process, including the Kurdish issue. As Turkey approaches the EU, it moves away from a politics of fear since the securitizing actors, such as the army, lose their legitimacy. As Turkey moves away from the EU, however, a feeling of being left behind gives rise to the language of 'us' and 'them' and fuels paranoia-driven politics. The most radical reform moves coincided with the period in which relations with the EU were at their best. Since 2005, however, confusing messages from the EU, the slowing down of the membership process especially after the start of the membership talks, the failure of the Annan Plan in Cyprus despite Turkey's good will, and the coming to power of non-friendly governments in Germany and France have enhanced the discourse of double-standards (i.e. claims that the EU does not evaluate Turkey according to the same standards as other candidates), and the discourse of encirclement and distrust (i.e. claims that the EU wants to divide Turkey up by promoting ethnic identities). Distrust toward Europe feeds distrust among local elements. Those who advocate cultural-linguistic and political rights for Kurds are alienated and suspected of having links to foreign powers.

Second, the EU seems to be more successful in promoting change in formal institutions while its influence on changing values, norms and identities is limited. Despite the various harmonization packages that introduced new laws, there has not been, to date, a sufficiently deep societal change in the values and norms associated with a more pluralist understanding of democracy such as human rights, cultural-linguistic rights for minorities, religious freedom and the rule of law. This situation attracted the attention of EU officials and institutions who warned Turkey, through their progress reports, about an implementation gap. One recent example is a court case against the mayor of a Kurdish-populated province for publishing a leaflet, in Kurdish, about organ donation. A leaflet aiming to inform the public (the majority of whose mother tongue is Kurdish) is perceived as a threat to the national unity and territorial integrity of the state. The lack of internalization of the reforms can be partly explained through the difficulties of introducing top-down change to a society. Formal changes introduced as part of the EU membership process must be supported by more democratic discourses in the media and education.

The International Level

At the international level, the U.S. occupation of Iraq created a *de facto* Kurdish state in Northern Iraq and provided a safe environment for the PKK which increased its attacks considerably since 2006. Both increasing terror and the gradual emergence of an independent Kurdish state raised alarm bells in Turkey and brought the securitizing language back. The perception that neither the U.S. nor the EU support Turkey's fight against terror added insult to injury. The momentum that was seized with the arrest of the PKK leader is now lost; instead, uncertainty reigns both in Turkey and Iraq. The issue of the PKK and Northern Iraq became a dominant theme in the 2007 election campaign. Throughout the election period, the Kurdish issue was almost marginalized. There was debate on PKK terror and on the benefits (or drawbacks) of a military incursion into

Northern Iraq, but these were not linked to Turkey's Kurdish problem. Apart from some marginal left-wing parties and the DTP, the political parties chose to use a language of hawkish nationalism to appeal to the widely-nationalist voters. They competed with each other to convince the electorate that they would launch the toughest crackdown on the PKK. The AKP also became part of this campaign with the aim of retaining its nationalist votes. After the military incursion, rumours about a comprehensive reform package emerged, although the AKP has not provided any details of such a package to date. Moreover, the abundance of reports and reform packages on the Kurdish issue since the early 1990s has created a sense of fatigue and reduced the credibility of any new initiatives.

Prospects and Policy Recommendations

Since the beginning of 2007, Turkish domestic politics seems to have been taken hostage by the constant conflict between the AKP and the establishment. The latest stage of this conflict is the closure case against the party. The Constitutional Court is nowadays also busy with another closure case against the DTP. The AKP and the DTP together received about 95% of the votes in the Kurdish-populated areas of Turkey. Their closure will leave the people of the region completely unrepresented. For the short and mid-term management of the problem, the following points should be taken into consideration:

1. Kurdish voters were one of the largest constituencies of the AKP both in the 2002 and 2007 elections. If the party insists on pursuing the headscarf issue to address the demands of its pious constituency, it should not avoid taking further political risk to address the problems and demands of its Kurdish constituency as well. Otherwise, the party will face accusations that its understanding of democracy is purely instrumental.
2. Economic measures are important to improve living standards and reduce unemployment in the region. Recent plans to finalize the GAP (Southeastern Anatolian Project) with an investment of approximately \$12 billion over the next five years will have a direct impact on increasing economic prosperity and integrating the region more closely with the rest of the country.
3. The Kurdish issue should be acknowledged as a political issue with economic and security dimensions. If the AKP's reform package, yet to be announced, does not go beyond economic measures, it will only add to feelings of fatigue and disappointment.
4. The increase in terror should not lead to the framing of Kurdish identity as an existential threat to the state. In a panic to avoid criticisms about the management of cross-border operations in Northern Iraq, Erdoğan noted that his party is in the same line with the army. The AKP should develop a 'political' perspective irrespective of the views of the army.
5. The Kurdish issue should be considered in conjunction with Turkey's democratization in general. The struggle against terror should not reverse the achievements in democratization, political freedoms and human rights. Despite the

implementation gap and the limited internalization of the reforms, continued reforms will gradually start to take root by means of more socialization and internalization of reforms.

6. Formal/legal changes must be supported by more democratic discourses in the media and in education to allow for non-conflictual expressions of ethnic identities. In addition to formal changes, there is a need to emphasize such values as multiculturalism, human rights and the rule of law starting from early childhood on.
7. At the international level, Turkey's policy toward Northern Iraq should not lead to the isolation of Kurdish people either in Turkey or Iraq. Turkey should refrain from actions that might give Kurdish nationalists a pretext to create an imagined "Turkish threat" for nation-building in Iraq.²

² Bülent Aras, "Turkey's War on Terror," SETA Policy Brief, No: 2, November 2007, Ankara: SETA.