

The Emergence of the 'Government's Perspective on the Kurdish Issue

ÜMIT CİZRE*

ABSTRACT

The AK Party's chronic 'political insecurity' may have passed a threshold as the ruling party resurfaces as an actor taking advantage of its pro-European Union sentiments to begin a 'grand negotiation' with Turkey's thus-far publicly shunned Kurdish leaders after decades of bloodshed. This new window of opportunity could not have emerged without the explosion of the Ergenekon incident, which has offered a persuasive critique of the closed, dark, intolerant and secret communities friendly with the military bureaucracy and state officials but insidiously devoted to destroying the government. In the post-Ergenekon era, the new democratic opening represents a significant departure from a military solution to the Kurdish issue which has blocked civilian imaginations by declaring the Kurdish identity demands as a security threat to the officially proscribed Turkish identity. The real issue at stake now for the AK Party government is a redefinition of the locus and space where the phenomenon of real political power takes place in Turkey.

Insight Turkey Vol. 11 / No. 4 / 2009
pp. 1-12

All Turkish governments have been historically presented with hard choices in launching democratization strategies; such attempts always risk shattering the existing balance of power which favors the political role of the military as the leading force of an establishment that may react to democratic reforms. Fearing the risks of a showdown with the military, Turkish governments have, more often than not, chosen not to challenge the conditions of military prominence in politics without very strong domestic and international backing. The lack of serious reaction from international actors in regard to Turkey's internal military interventions has played a role in further emboldening these forces within Turkey, and continues to normalize the utilization of extreme measures. The political class has found it more worthwhile to guard itself against a potential showdown with the military by building up a power base for itself while in

* *Bilkent University, Ankara. Currently Public Scholar, Woodrow Wilson International Center, Washington DC, Umit.Cizre@wilsoncenter.org*

The 'military solution' to the Kurdish question has been responsible for the decline of democratic discourse and its replacement by repackaged conservative nationalist reactionism

government has also been presented with difficult choices in determining the tradeoffs between security in office and democracy. Like its predecessor governments, the AK Party implicitly accepts that the "code" of being in power is to avoid conflict with the strong secular bloc which is led by the military. Indeed, the bloc forged new partnerships against the AK Party with the segments of the judiciary dealing with regime issues (including public prosecutors and the constitutional court); with the high echelons of the civilian bureaucracy; and with significant sectors of Turkish secular civil society. With the AK Party's victories in a total of five consecutive local, general and presidential elections since 2002, the security-conscious establishment has stepped up its ideologically and emotionally-charged efforts to portray the ruling party's postures and policies as endangering the regime's 'secular' character.

Over the past few years, this situation has brought out the ruling party's system-supportive, conservative and nationalist streaks, which leave no room for launching a new liberal and civilian-initiated constitution that would seek to protect all of its citizens from the state. Democratizing Turkey's party system and its election laws and brokering a democratic peace in the southeast were components of the AK Party's reform repertoire that have thus, so far, failed to materialize. In fact, until very recently, the party appeared to have abandoned these aspirations.

Toward the end of its first term in office, the ruling party went with the flow of "street nationalism;" converged with the military perspective on the Kurdish question, and failed to consider a more open-minded approach to the Kurdish issue as part of its agenda. The opportunity created by the capture of PKK terrorist leader Öcalan never turned into a process of peace and resolution; rather, the military acquired an increasingly influential voice in the political calculations of Ankara and the vitality of the EU bid slipped. As the violence escalated, increased military casualties in the early years of this century have caused many to question the military's motivations and strategies in its fight against the Kurdish separatists.

power. That is, it has opted for doling out benefits as part of the system of paying and receiving political payoffs from the rent-seeking networks.

Not unlike the governments of all colors preceding itself, but more so because it has been perceived as a threat to the secular establishment from day one, the AK Party (Justice and Development)

Nevertheless, aided by the fact that despite unilateral ceasefires, the PKK did not give up the armed struggle or surrender, and abetted by a media that shored up the army's martyr ideology, which promotes dying for one's country as a citizen's highest duty, the 'military solution' to the PKK issue has almost turned into a common-sense discourse.

The Oxymoron of 'Military Solution'

The 1990s were instrumental in the formation of a 'military solution' to the Kurdish issue which has blocked civilian imaginations: refusing to discuss the legitimacy of identities other than the officially proscribed Turkish one, the security-minded secular establishment has invested considerable energy throughout this decade to establish Kurdish nationalism and Islamic challenges as the sole emphases of internal security threats. Moreover, the establishment has insisted that these challenges be addressed through emergency military measures rather than through parliamentary decisions, governmental policies and civilian wisdom. Thus, purely political problems have been brought within a national security framework; in other words, military functions became politicized and civilian politics became securitized. Security ceased to be discussed through interagency dialogue between civilian and military institutions that might have reinforced and counterbalanced each other's authority. On the contrary, the establishment's single-minded concern for securing the country against threats originating from Islamic activism and Kurdish nationalism has led to a stifled public debate on key issues, as all political persuasions have adopted a new form of the "politics of inertia—that is, politics characterized by the absence of political synergy or a credible parliamentary alternative, and the officials' abject disregard for the concerns of those they represent."¹ The 'military solution' to the Kurdish question has thus been responsible for the decline of democratic discourse and its replacement by repackaged conservative nationalist reactionism.

The official view held by the progenitors of the military solution, the military establishment, suffers from two blind spots. The first entails a lack of will and creativity. Turkish governments have traditionally endorsed the standard military understanding of the fight against Kurdish terrorism as a zero-sum game. Those Kurdish political parties demanding a "democratic solution" while not dissociating themselves from the PKK, such as the People's Democracy Party (HADEP) and its present-day successor the Democratic Society Party (DTP), were not acknowledged by Turkey's military and civilian leadership even when the latter were confronted with the necessity to rethink, discuss and review the intricacies of the issue and devise ways of managing it more successfully.

The second blind spot is a failure to make simple connections. The conflict with the PKK has displaced an estimated one million people from the eastern part of the country.² Ironically enough, many have fled the region and sought refuge in slums at the outskirts of Turkey's major cities, becoming reservoirs of moral and electoral support for the Islam-friendly AK Party.

The new democracy move by the present government seems to carry the potential for bringing fundamental conflicts and tensions within the civilian political orbit, which would enhance the indispensable quality of civilian politicians, their advisers, the parliament and the government. The military-led establishment forces, including the opposition party, are cognizant of the fact that switching from security-oriented and military dominated solutions to parliamentary decisions, civilian initiatives and imaginations can correct the power imbalance between civilians and the military by limiting the latter's political role and influence.

The reemergence of a democratic "civilian" perspective on the part of the government represents a change in the perennial tradeoff between civilians and the military in Turkish politics. The AK Party's chronic "political insecurity" may have passed a threshold as the ruling party resurfaces as an actor taking advantage of its pro-European Union facet in order to shape new opportunities for restructuring the power balances and addressing the Kurdish question.

Why Now? Answer: Ergenekon

The new opportunities now available to the AK Party could hardly have emerged without the explosion of the Ergenekon incident, which has offered a persuasive critique of the closed, dark, intolerant and secret communities friendly with the military bureaucracy and state officials but insidiously devoted to destroying the government. The arrests of retired four-star generals, a few active duty officers, prominent former politicians, journalists, academics and conservative nationalist activists on charges of planning to provoke the military to intervene and bring down the Islam-sensitive government of Turkey, commonly known as the "Ergenekon incident," highlights the formidable barriers to achieving a working liberal democracy and 'normal' civil-military relations, but also raises the prospect of long-awaited change. By associating the Turkish military with the coup plotters, the revelations accompanying the arrests and court trials of the Ergenekon actors delivered an embarrassing blow to the image that the military has favored for itself: that of standing 'above' narrow political interests. The immediate response of the high command was naturally to deny any connection with the con-

spiracy and to distance itself from the conspirators. Despite such statements, the involvement of state bureaucrats, including military personnel, right-wing intellectuals and professionals in illicit and unconstitutional activities has created an unprecedented opportunity for the government to repair and reset, more intentionally and intensely than ever before, the lopsided balance between civil and military authorities in Turkey, in favor of constitutionally elected organs.

Although the uneven character of civil-military relations has long been common knowledge, as evidenced by continuous calls for reform by the EU since 1999, Ergenekon has done something more critical: it has provoked the population's sense of justice by what they see as an embarrassingly crude and archaic plan to overthrow a popularly elected government.

As a result, within a year of the closure case crisis of the AK Party which seemed helpless to withstand the pressure at the time, the government now stands enabled to start an inquiry and a court case on the plotters of a coup against itself and to challenge the arch secularists and the Constitutional Court. Furthermore, the AK Party seems to be reengaged in new initiatives to renew its commitment to EU reforms and to begin a "grand negotiation" with Turkey's thus-far publicly shunned Kurdish leaders after decades of bloodshed. In the post-Ergenekon context, the new democratic opening represents a significant departure from the AK Party's past attempts at reform; the real issue at stake now is a redefinition of the locus and space in which the phenomenon of political power takes place in Turkey. The critical question facing the government is how to build its 'own' legitimacy that would allow it to formulate its 'own' clear choices free from non-civilian, undemocratic constraints.

Ergenekon's excessiveness has acted as a catalyst for the government to curtail its traditional impulse to simply follow along with the powerful military. It has raised the need to institute genuine forces and processes of democratic politics in Turkey in order to displace preoccupation with the futile issue of the dichotomy between secularism and Islam, which has wasted the country's energy and time for the last two decades. The question now is whether the AK Party can emerge from the Ergenekon episode newly positioned to renegotiate a robust role for it-

The new opportunities now available to the AK Party could hardly have emerged without the explosion of the Ergenekon incident, which has offered a persuasive critique of the closed, dark, intolerant and secret communities friendly with the military bureaucracy



The AK Party's chronic "political insecurity" may have passed a threshold as the ruling party resurfaces as an actor taking advantage of its pro-European Union facet in order to shape new opportunities for restructuring the power balances and addressing the Kurdish question.

self and articulate a new relationship between Kurdish actors and Turkish politics. The emergence of a popular consensus regarding the government's new, post-Firgenekon Kurdish initiatives attests to a positive social momentum.

Changing Conceptions of Kurdish Aspirations

The dominant perception among the non-Kurdish public has always been that, despite the appearance of a rights-based discourse, Kurdish nationalism is a territory-aspiring and divisive force challenging Turkey's political existence. The root causes for this suspicion can be found in the problematic history of the interac-

tion between the two communities. The harshness of the armed conflict between the state security forces and the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) has played its part in reinforcing the belief that Kurdish nationalism is not a simple expression of discontent, but a movement that demands changing the boundaries of the Turkish entity. It is also true that, in actual fact, the specter of territory-hungry Kurds has been instrumental for the master narrative of Turkish nationalism.³ The effect of Kurdish nationalism on Turkish homogeneity bears a striking parallel to the impact Islamic activism has on closing the ranks of secular-minded Turks. In the final analysis, Turkish identity remains a constitutive element in the legitimization of the political rule of the Republic. National integration and national security have become conflated and mutually reinforcing.

In spite of this conflation, one significant dimension of the AK Party government's Kurdish opening is its tacit subscription to the view which has always been expressed in a series of opinion surveys since 1994⁴ – but has failed to convince the mainstream population – that the normative Kurdish demands do not entail a special status for the Kurds; on the contrary, they include a forthright emphasis on leveling the field to make the concept of Turkish citizenship more inclusive, equal, and democratic.⁵ When the demands revolve around cultural rights, it is the ethnic singularity of Kurds that emerges as the conscious object; when they are centered on material entitlements, social improvement and legal protection, the discourse is tilted toward ensuring the equality of all Turkish citizens. The EU has likewise tended to see the Kurdish question as a minority rights issue, and has therefore adopted a rights-based perspective. Thus, in the EU-anchored reform process, the AK Party has, since 2002, supported reforms in cultural rights in order to meet Copenhagen criteria as an external support in its struggle against the establishment.

Even if it amounts to the celebration of cultural difference, it is clear that a cultural rights-based discourse can be an important strategy in achieving equality and justice for the Kurds in two senses: first, in eliminating the injustice of not acknowledging the Kurdish identity,⁶ and second, in deepening Turkey's democratic practices and institutions for the entirety of the population. The government's emphasis on 'brotherly unity' between the Turks and Kurds, however, raises a different question, namely:⁷ "whether Islam provides a unity between Kurdish and Turkish people that supersedes ethnicity and other particularisms or, alternatively, whether it sharpens nationalist consciousness by putting its weight behind the formation of a Kurdish identity."⁸ While Islam may be able to offer common ground, Islamic discourse in non-Kurdish and Kurdish communities has not been

free of ethnicity. Just as Kurdish Islamic discourse is a discourse on Kurdish identity, Turkey's Islamic movement "is also stained with the conceit of Turkish nationalism."⁹ Even though religiosity does not necessarily translate into support for a Kurdish nation-state in the region, it stresses the unique characteristics of Kurds rather than what the government intends by its key concept of "brotherly embrace and unity."

Over and above the fantasy of a religion-induced togetherness, there is a resurgence of hope for forging a new peaceful Turkey simply because Turkey is going through a process of "Kurdish-fatigue." Almost any departure from the prevalent (even incessant) defensive discourse represented by the Prime Minister and his government is a welcome move—even if such a departure does not intend or produce radical changes in the established definitions of Kurdish identity. A psychological threshold has been passed, but will it bring significant change? Moreover, with what degree of commitment can the ruling party embrace the issue?

The Substance of the Kurdish Initiative

There is little to suggest that the government intends to use this context to generate a de facto radical shift in the civil-military balance by executing bold new policies regarding the Kurdish issue. In fact, the issue has always been the Achilles heel of the government, bringing out its conservative-nationalist support of the status quo. The Prime Minister's statement four years ago, on April 11, 2005 during his state visit to Norway, showed his party's total convergence with the official discourse of Turkish nationalism: "We have three red lines: ethnic nationalism, regional nationalism, and religious nationalism... there is no 'Kurdish minority' in Turkey."¹⁰

Despite this long-held stance, the government wishes to regain public support in the region and seeks to recoup the votes it lost there in the last local elections of March 2009. The time has also come, after a long hiatus in which the military solution and nationalist narratives dominated the political discourse, for the AK Party to satisfy the pressure of its own Kurdish deputies for new forms of response to the region's problems, not all of which are identity-related. The economic recession, with its substantial impact on people's lives and employment, has also played a part in the new move. More to the point, given the fact that several retired or active-duty officers stand accused of being involved in a conspiracy to overthrow a democratically elected and widely supported government, the AK Party believes it now has the opportunity to take advantage of the army's tarnished image. The TAF high command risks its long-term survival if it ignores the AK Party's elec-

toral popularity or obstructs its agenda; indeed it will likely look the other way now so long as the new reforms leave a zone of comfort for the military to keep its institutional autonomy intact by, for instance, maintaining a public voice and its core corporate interests.¹¹

Although the substance of the Kurdish initiative is not absolutely clear, one can imagine the emerging contours of the new policy now being directed toward bringing peace and tranquillity to the southeast through a declaration of some kind of amnesty; injecting substantial capital in the region to increase economic development; and significantly enhancing the existing programs of Kurdish-language broadcasting and education.

The general staff's strategic calculus in coping with the changing balance of forces is naturally based on protecting its underlying interests, goals and strengths after the Ergenekon storm has exposed the general fault lines of Turkey's civil-military relations and of the internal splits within the army. At this point in time, hard-line elements in the military seeking to subvert the ruling party's new commitment to deal with an intractable conflict in any way stand no chance of obtaining sufficient support from the army commanders themselves, the media, the public, or the international community. That said, there is no doubt that the high command will take this opportunity to continue influencing political outcomes by working to rid its own house, which is rumoured to have been infiltrated by some Islamic elements as well, and to restore esprit de corps.

Where is the European Union in This?

It is true that the new Kurdish opening is bound up with the re-emergence of the EU: when paid sufficient regard, the EU conditionality has once more proven to be an effective instrument contributing to better governance. The revival of the AK Party government's vision of full membership in the Union has been one of the central factors for the government's new engagement to introduce democratic policies. However, unless the EU's Copenhagen guidelines capture the imaginations of political leaders and the public and result in a moral consensus, many features of the opening remain insecure.

To date, the EU accession process has provided an important incentive for reform in Turkey. However, faltering support for Turkey's accession among some EU states has arguably undermined the reformists in Turkey over the last four years as many of Turkey's EU-related reforms have been stalled. For example, article 301 of the penal code, which has marred Turkey's record on freedom-of

The foreign policy and international environment for the settlement of the Kurdish issue in Turkey has never been riper for success

expression by punishing those who have “insulted Turkishness,” remains relatively unchanged despite an amendment by the government. Meanwhile, the draft version of a new civilian-minded constitution, meant to replace the one written by the military after the 1980 coup, has been put aside. As the AK Party’s initial EU-driven agenda faltered, the military bureaucracy and the other secular agencies sharpened their attacks on the government’s anti-secular activities.

From the perspective of the Turkish government, unfortunately, Turkey’s Kurdish-fatigue coincides with a widespread Euro-fatigue. Resentment and disenchantment with the EU’s ‘shaming’ rhetoric, to which the country has been subjected for a very long time, is partly responsible for xenophobia and for the revival of the conservative-nationalist instincts of the AK Party government. Moreover, the accession process is caught up in a further set of problems: although the EU reform agenda is critical for the reappearance of the reformist side of the AK Party government, in order to alter the political power balance that has sustained the military solution to the Kurdish problem, Ankara needs to break its pattern of behavior and address the Cyprus issue as well as align the civil-military relations with EU practices. If the government puts its mind to it, it could rebuild a sufficiently broad coalition on this matter too and regain legitimacy among the disillusioned liberals who had supported the party in its initial days in office, when it moved forward forcefully on reforms and freedoms.

Regarding the EU itself, there is no doubt that the Brussels bureaucracy needs to work harder to lend its strong support to the re-emergence of the AK Party by overcoming considerable resistance inside the bloc and fully endorse the message that Turkish democracy matters to the EU and to the broader international community. Without pursuing the EU reform agenda, the AK Party will find it difficult to normalize civil-military relations or anything else in Turkey’s domestic politics, even if there is consensus on issues such as the Kurdish question.

Conclusion

Today there is reason for cautious optimism on the domestic level, but on the international level, there are more realistic signs for hope on the government’s Kurdish initiatives. The foreign policy and international environment for the settlement of the Kurdish issue in Turkey has never been riper for success.

While the US withdrawal from Iraq has created positive momentum on the Kurdish issue and regional cooperation with Turkey's neighbors, Turkey's new self-confidence has transformed a static Cold-War bulwark into a potential catalyst for regional stability. However, the Ergenekon affair, and the series of alleged coup plots that preceded it, have all been unprecedented enough to lead significant segments of Turkish society to begin questioning those measures' compatibility with the hallmarks of twenty-first century democracy they keep hearing, watching and reading about, thanks to globalization.

Taking democratization further in an EU- and war-weary country would not only help stabilize Turkey's domestic politics but would enhance its regional role and international status. This reality should serve as a major impetus toward realizing the maxim of Turkey's role as a stabilizing force in one of the most unstable regions of the world. Turkey does not "automatically" foster stability simply because of where it is located, but should do so because of what it stands for.

Endnotes

1. Ümit Cizre and Menderes Çımar, "Turkey 2002: Kemalism, Islamism and Politics in the Light of the February 28 Process," *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 102(2/3), Spring/Summer 2003, p. 318.

2. On the issue, Istanbul based think-tank TESEV prepared a series of reports. The most recent one is by Deniz Yüksek and Dilek Kurban, *A Permanent Solution to the Internal Displacement? An Assessment of the Van Action Plan for IDPs*, (Istanbul: TESEV, May 2009).

3. Ümit Cizre "Turkey's Kurdish Problem: A Critical Analysis of Boundaries, Identity and Hegemony," in Ian Lustick, Brendan O'Leary and Thomas Callaghy, eds., *Rightsizing the State: The Politics of Moving Borders*, (Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 222-252.

4. A PIAR-GALLUP poll conducted in 1994 with 1,000 respondents representing Turkish public opinion and 500 Kurds from urban and rural areas in the southeast revealed that whereas 6.4 percent of the Kurds surveyed saw the Kurdish issue as a question of gaining autonomy within Turkish borders, only 4.3 percent regarded it as an issue of carving out a separate Kurdish state. 48.8 per cent (a plurality) of Turks see the problem to be caused by a terrorist movement which aims to divide Turkey (PIAR-GALLUP 1994). Another survey, sponsored by a powerful and state-friendly economic interest group, the Union of Turkish Chambers of Commerce and Stock Exchange (TOBB), interviewed 1,267 respondents in six urban centers, and showed that while 42.5% of the respondents opted for a federal administrative structure, only 13% sympathized with the idea of a completely independent Kurdish state. The most recent opinion survey was conducted in August 2009 among 10,577 respondents in 2,497 centers. This survey once again confirms the existence of a gap between Kurds and non-Kurds in the territorial perception of the Kurdish issue: While 71.3 percent of Turkish respondents thought Kurds wanted to form an independent state, only 30.3 percent of the Kurds answered affirmatively to independent state claims. See *Türkiyenin Kurt Sorunu Algisi*, Pollmark, Ankara, July 2009.

5. See the report prepared and published by Istanbul-centered think-tank TESEV (Türkiye Ekonomik ve Sosyal Etüdler Vakfı) based on the research carried out in the region: *A Roadmap for*

a Solution to the Kurdish Question: Policy Proposals from the Region for the Government (Istanbul: TESEV, 2008), p. 5 and 15.

6. Sezgin Tanrıkulu, *Demokratik Açılım: Kurt Meselesinde Hukuk ve Adalet*, Ekim 2009/10-70. Tanrıkulu poses the Kurdish issue as both a democracy and justice problem and suggests the legal changes to address the two aspects.

7. This issue was brought up in my article “Historicizing the Present and Problematizing the Future of the Kurdish Problem: A Critique of the TOBB Report on the Eastern Question,” *New Perspectives on Turkey*, 14 Spring 1996, 1-22. Chris Houston elaborated further on it in his, *Islam, Kurds and the Turkish Nation-State* (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2003), pp. 191-97.

8. Cizre, TOBB Report, p. 18.

9. Houston, *Islam, Kurds and the Turkish Nation-State*, p. 192.

10. The Prime Minister’s speech is quoted in “Mavi Kitaba Karşı Mektup,” *Radikal*, 12 April 2005.

11. One indication of this continued military autonomy was the government’s inability to have Dursun Cicek, one of the active duty officers indicted as an Ergenekon plotter, dismissed from the army during the annual meeting of the Supreme Military Board in August 2009.