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Yeğen, Mesut

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Erdoğan and the Turkish Opposition Revisit the Kurdish Question

Mesut Yeğen

Not long ago, the Kurdish question (KQ) topped the agenda of Turkish politics. Thanks mainly to what was called the Resolution Process between 2009 and 2015, there was a tense but lively political and public discussion on this colossal problem that the Turkish republic has long been tackling with since its foundation. In the past few years, however, the KQ ceased to be a priority issue in Turkish politics. So much so that the “terror question”, a watchword for the KQ in the daily lexicon of mainstream Turkish politics, is no longer regarded by the Turkish public as being among the country’s top political problems. However, recently, there have appeared some new signs which indicate that the KQ will most likely return to the political agenda. Both Turkish President Erdoğan and the leaders of the country’s opposition parties have taken steps that reveal that they will revisit the KQ as the 2023 Turkish general election approaches.

The foremost two reasons behind the silence on the KQ over the past few years are the collapse of the Resolution Process in 2015 and the failed coup attempt in 2016. The termination of the Resolution Process in July 2015 was followed by the so-called “city war” that lasted several months between the security forces and the affiliated militants and militia of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in the Kurdish-populated urban areas. Empowering the idea that the KQ is mainly a security one, these clashes weakened the argument that it mandates a political solution. What is more, the defeat of the PKK in these city wars and in the ensuing clashes in the countryside were taken as a confirmation

of the effectiveness of military means and discredited even more the idea that the KQ requires a non-military solution. The coup attempt in July 2016, however, played an even more fundamental role in the waning of public interest in the KQ. In enhancing the securitisation of the KQ, the massive campaign of political oppression targeting pro-Kurdish MPs, mayors, NGOs, media institutions and civilians in the two-year-long rule of emergency following the coup proved that engagement with the KQ would be costly for everybody who even dares.

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The Withering Away of the KQ Debate

Another reason for the silence on the KQ concerns the Turkish state's consecutive military incursions into Syria starting from August 2016. Targeting mainly the areas ruled by the PKK-affiliated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Syria, these operations fortified the securitisation of the KQ, while the SDF's prompt withdrawal from Jarablus, Afrin, and Tel Abyad in northern Syria convinced the Turkish decisionmakers and the general public that a political solution to the KQ was avoidable. Enacted in April 2017, in the euphoria ensuing the coup attempt, the presidential system also worked to weaken the public debate on the KQ and on all other critical political issues, which paved the way for a more authoritarian political regime. Furthermore, high rates of inflation and economic downturn, justice becoming more partisan and growing nepotism in the administration have all in recent years prevailed across the political landscape in Turkey, thus pushing the KQ further down the pecking order.

Settled or Denied?

The KQ's fall from the political agenda in Turkey was also reflected in the shift in Erdoğan's rhetoric. Erdoğan, who had happened to be the first prime minister in Turkey acknowledging, in 2005, the existence of the KQ as such, announced before the election in June 2018 that the KQ was no more in Turkey. Having won both the presidency and the majority of the seats in the parliament in the country's 2018 presidential election, Erdoğan became even more determined not to return back to his pre-2015 position of viewing the KQ as a political one that needs a solution which mandates the utilisation of political means.

However, while the PKK was defeated, the SDF in Syria were forced to withdraw from Jarablus, Afrin, and Tel Abyad by Turkey's military operations, and the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) in Turkey

was oppressed by the judiciary and the security forces, the KQ was neither settled nor did it disappear completely. Moreover, despite the fact that many HDP deputies and mayors as well as thousands of ordinary HDP supporters were imprisoned and that the party's daily political activities were often banned after the coup attempt in 2016, electoral support of the Kurds for the HDP endured. In this regard, while the HDP's share of votes had decreased from 13.1 per cent to 10.8 per cent from the election in June 2015 to the snap election in November 2015, its support increased up to 11.7 per cent in the election in June 2018, revealing that Kurdish voters had not withdrawn their support from the HDP despite the post-2015 securitisation of the KQ. In other words, the Kurds' incessant support for the pro-Kurdish HDP refuted Erdoğan's claim that the KQ was settled.

On the other hand, the enduring support of the majority of Kurds for the HDP did not push for a shift in Erdoğan's rhetoric or policies on the KQ because Kurdish voters were not seen as game changers in national politics. The referendum for the presidential system in 2017 and the election in 2018 had shown that Erdoğan's approach to the KQ was endorsed by a sufficient number of voters to make him president and give his Justice and Development Party (AKP) and his partner the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) the majority of seats in the parliament.

HDP as a Game Changer

However, the results of the local elections in March 2019 revealed that the HDP and Kurdish voters could actually be game changers in Turkish politics if two major political alliances compete for power. The country's presidential system pushed major parties, other than the HDP, to gather under the umbrella of two alliance blocs: the People's Alliance (PA) and the Nation's Alliance (NA). Formed by the AKP and the MHP before the election in 2018, the conservative-nationalist PA was later joined by

the conservative-nationalist Grand Unity Party (BBP) and the conservative New Welfare Party (YRP). Established in the same year, the NA, however, is composed of the secular and nationalist Republican People's Party (CHP) and the Good Party (İYİP) as well as the centre-right Democratic Party (DP) and the conservative Felicity Party (SP). While the PA had won the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2018, in the 2019 local elections, the PA candidates were defeated by the HDP-backed NA candidates in Istanbul, Ankara, Adana, Antalya, Mersin and Hatay, Turkey's major cities that had been run prior by either AKP or MHP mayors. The 2019 local elections indicated that losing or gaining the support of Kurdish voters was important because in Turkey's presidential system consisting of two major alliances that compete for power, they can potentially swing the balance in favour of one party over the other.

Having realized the renewed importance of the Kurdish electorate, Erdoğan took two unexpected steps and ordered a rerun of the local election in Istanbul. While the NA's HDP-backed candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu had won the election on 31 March 2019 with a margin of around 13,000 votes, the Supreme Election Board annulled the results on 6 May 2019 over the AKP's and MHP's appeals with the charge of electoral fraud. On 18 June 2019, the HDP's imprisoned co-chair Selahattin Demirtaş called on support for İmamoğlu in the rerun Istanbul election that would be held on 23 June 2019. On 21 June 2019, however, and contrary to Demirtaş, PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan called on the HDP to remain neutral in the rerun election. In a similar vein, Osman Öcalan, Abdullah Öcalan's brother who, until his desertion in 2004, was in the top ranks of the PKK, appeared on the state-run TV channel TRT-Kurdî, again immediately before the election and voiced his concerns about İmamoğlu and the CHP. However, these hasty steps did not pay off, and İmamoğlu won the election with an indisputable margin of 800,000 votes. There should be little doubt that neither of these two steps would have taken place without

Erdoğan's approval and that of the top echelons of Turkey's bureaucracy.

Following the 2019 election, the main opposition party the CHP and smaller parties of the NA, began to disapprove of Erdoğan's wholesale securitisation of the KQ over the past few years, revealing that they did not agree with Erdoğan's claim that the KQ was settled. Of note in this regard are the Future Party (GP), chaired by Erdoğan's former prime minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, and the Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA), chaired by Erdoğan's former deputy prime minister Ali Babacan, and the Felicity Party, which, in 2001, had given birth to the AKP.

The CHP's chairperson Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, who had supported the constitutional amendment in 2016 that enabled the lifting of the immunities of HDP deputies and their imprisonment, described in September 2021 the HDP as the true and legitimate actor to negotiate the KQ. In addition, Kılıçdaroğlu also stated on several occasions that the CHP supports the idea of teaching Kurdish language in state-run schools. So did the GP and the DEVA, who also proposed a solution to the KQ in terms of equal citizenship rights. By the same token, the SP called for a settlement of the KQ and suggested removing certain barriers to the use of Kurdish language in schools. Furthermore, the chairpersons of all these four parties met with HDP co-chairs, in an attempt to project the notion that they had confronted Erdoğan's demonisation of the HDP who they considered as a legitimate actor in Turkish politics.

Meanwhile, the shift in the composition and the electoral support for the PA and the NA confirmed the fact that the HDP is now a key actor in Turkish politics. For instance, while the PA turned out to become less diverse and inclusive over Davutoğlu's and Babacan's split from the AKP, the NA became more heterogeneous over its cooperation with the GP and the DEVA. Furthermore, the CHP, İYİP, SP, and DP, i.e. the four members of the NA, and the DEVA and the GP have recently agreed upon a transition to a parliamentary government sys-

tem, demonstrating that six parties in opposition can unite despite their divergences. So, except for the HDP, all of the country's major political parties have gathered into two blocs, which are roughly equal in terms of their electoral support.

As recent opinion polls have indicated, the electoral support for Erdoğan and the PA has decreased a little less than 10 points since the 2018 election and that the support for both Erdoğan and the two parties in power is between 40 and 45 per cent. The same polls show that the support for the CHP and the İYİP, the leading parties of the NA, is around 40 per cent and the support for four likely allies of the NA – the DEVA, the GP, the SP and the DP – in the coming election, is around 5 per cent. According to the same polls, support for the HDP is a little over 10 per cent. Overall, this picture shows that Erdoğan may lose the presidency in the coming election if the HDP supports the candidate of the NA and the PA may lose the majority in the parliament if again the HDP becomes a part of or supports the opposition bloc.

It is this crystallization of the two alliances' composition and electoral support that has made the HDP a game changer in Turkish politics. However, despite its key role, the HDP has not been invited to become a part of the NA largely due to the objections from the İYİP, the DP and even from some groups within the CHP. Therefore, the HDP intends to build a third alliance with a couple of small parties on the left and a few weak pro-Kurdish parties, indicating that the HDP and its allies will compete as the third bloc for the next parliamentary election. However, it is yet to be seen if the HDP will have its own candidate in the first round of the presidential election and, even if not, whether HDP electorates would vote for the candidate of the opposition in the first and the probable second round of the presidential election. So far, HDP leaders have consistently noted that they would only support the opposition's candidate if the possible candidate and their programme is negotiated with the HDP. Nonetheless, it is yet uncertain at this

particular moment if the opposition would admit such a negotiation with the HDP and what the party and its electorates would do if the opposition denies such a negotiation.

Revisiting the KQ

It is against this background that Erdoğan and the opposition began revisiting the KQ, albeit with different purposes. While the opposition's goal is to secure the HDP's support in the presidential election, Erdoğan aims to neutralize the HDP's impact thereon.

The six opposition party initiative has recently penned two important documents vaguely promising a retreat from the KQ's securitisation after 2023. Released on 12 February 2022, the first document of the oppositional bloc promised approaching “the basic rights and freedoms in terms of the norms of the European Council and the European Union” and pursuing an understanding of “living together with our differences”. Both of these promises, and especially the second, are taken in Turkish politics as catchphrases for the desecuritisation of the KQ. Having proved that six opposition parties are at the threshold of building an electoral bloc and that they have already agreed upon a transition to a parliamentary government system, the second document promised, among other things, ending the replacement of elected mayors by state-appointed trustees, ensuring a more impartial and independent judiciary, and making the state of emergency truly exceptional. Of these promises, while the first addresses one of the key demands of the HDP, the other two are essential for the desecuritisation of the KQ. On the other hand, the HDP will most likely bring such issues as deescalation, using Kurdish language in schools and empowering local administration to the fore, if it continues to be a key actor in Turkish politics after the 2023 election.

In addition to these two documents, Kılıçdaroğlu's recent moves also suggest that the opposition in Turkey is willing to revisit the KQ as the 2023 election

approaches. Since November 2021, the CHP's leader has often underlined the need for a politics of reconciliation. Referring to tragic events of the past such as the killing of 35 Kurdish civilians crossing the Iraqi border by a Turkish aircraft bombardment on 28 December 2011, Kılıçdaroğlu displayed his willingness for making amends with the victims of this and similar events. More recently, during his visit to the DEVA headquarters on 24 January 2022, Kılıçdaroğlu said that "the road to democracy runs through Diyarbakır", evoking the former vice Prime Minister Mesut Yılmaz's well-known 1999 statement, namely "the road to the European Union runs through Diyarbakır" and hinting that Kılıçdaroğlu perceives the resolution of the KQ as crucial to democratisation in Turkey. Furthermore, answering questions about reasons for the HDP's absence in the six opposition party initiative, Kılıçdaroğlu stated that the HDP was not excluded and that they would meet with HDP representatives too without, however, clarifying if such a prospective meeting would be one between the oppositional bloc and the HDP or between the CHP and the HDP only.

Erdoğan and the PA, on the other hand, have taken punitive, inclusive and manipulative steps regarding the KQ. Beginning with the punitive steps, first, following the MHP chairperson Devlet Bahçeli's insistent calls, the state prosecutor to the Court of Cassation filed a lawsuit demanding the closure of the HDP and a five-year prohibition of 451 HDP figures from engaging in political activities. Second, the immunity of HDP deputy Semra Güzel was recently lifted over the release of some photographs showing her standing next to a PKK militant. What is important in this second move is that the concerned photographs are understood to have been taken in 2014 during the Resolution Process and that these pictures have been at the disposal of the authorities since the PKK militant in the pictures was killed in a clash in 2017. Keeping hold of these pictures years after they were seized and releasing them at a specific point in time suggests that the

Turkish bureaucracy aimed to manipulate the public mood in such a way that would make the HDP's closure more digestible. In sum, it seems that the PA may try to neutralize the HDP's potential key role in the 2023 election by closing it down altogether.

Erdoğan has taken 'inclusive' steps too. For instance, he elected a couple of well-known Kurdish figures to the AKP's executive board in 2021, creating the impression that the AKP would confront the KQ differently from how it had done so since 2015. More recently, a campaign urging Kurdish pupils to choose Kurdish language elective courses in high schools was powerfully supported by the AKP's Kurdish and non-Kurdish executives, and most surprisingly of all by the governor of Diyarbakır, who is expected to remain neutral in such issues as he represents the state bureaucracy.

Lastly, on 12 January 2022, Erdoğan alleged in his speech to AKP deputies that there is a rift between Öcalan and Demirtaş and that the latter would have to account to the former. He reiterated this claim on a TV show on 26 January 2022, hinting this time that there are negotiations between Öcalan and state officials. In the ensuing debate, a top AKP figure, who opted to remain anonymous, alleged that "Öcalan may pen a new letter", without specifying who would be the prospective addressee and without again stating whether this second letter would be similar to the one he penned immediately before the rerun Istanbul election or his famous March 2013 letter in which he announced that real peace negotiations had started between the Turkish state and himself. These two statements in the period of two weeks prompted some to question whether Erdoğan would have Öcalan involved in the course of the election yet again.

More Steps Ahead?

While Erdoğan and the opposition have started revisiting the KQ, it remains unclear as to whether the opposition can secure

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SWP
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3–4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

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the HDP's support or whether Erdoğan can neutralize the HDP's impact on the upcoming presidential election. The signs indicate that neither looks probable at the moment.

Securing the HDP's support for the opposition's presidential candidate looks unlikely because the HDP has explicitly stated that it would not support the opposition's candidate if it were not consulted with regarding the opposition's post-2023 programme. And as the İYİP and the DP may veto such an open negotiation between the opposition and the HDP, the problem here seems irresolvable as things stand.

Neither does it look probable for Erdoğan to neutralise or lessen the HDP's impact on the presidential election by the steps he has taken. For instance, if the HDP is banned, HDP voters may become even more determined to support the opposition's candidate in the presidential election. Moreover, some Kurdish voters, who would otherwise vote for Erdoğan or not vote at all, may opt to vote for the opposition's candidate due to their aversion to the HDP's closure. Similarly, given that Öcalan's former call did not help the PA win the rerun Istanbul election, his potential involvement may well yield a similar result. That said, the likelihood of a rift in the HDP before the election should not be underestimated. If the HDP is banned and or if Öcalan intervenes, four different voices may appear from the Kurdish side regarding what to do in the 2023 election namely, those of Öcalan, the PKK, Demirtaş, and the HDP headquarters. However, as each of these four possible actors is wise enough to realise that the HDP's game-changer role depends on holding HDP voters together, neither one should be expected to make a move that would jeopardise the unity in question.

Ultimately, and despite the steps taken, the opposition has still not secured the HDP's support and Erdoğan seems far from

weakening the party's impact. This, on the other hand, suggests that both Erdoğan's and the opposition's revisiting of the KQ will probably endure, and that both can take further steps as the election approach.

An Opportune Moment for the EU

Erdoğan's and the opposition's recent steps indicate that the KQ is gradually returning to the Turkish political agenda. However, these steps have been moulded by the goal of winning the election and not by improving democracy in Turkey, let alone actually settling the KQ. In such a context, the EU may encourage both Erdoğan and the opposition to move in the direction of a plausible settlement of the KQ after the election in 2023.

Given that there is now a rapprochement between the EU and Turkey over the Ukrainian crisis, Erdoğan as well as the opposition may become more open to the EU's suggestions regarding Turkish democracy. In addition, referring to the ECHR ruling that demands that Selahattin Demirtaş and Osman Kavala are to be released, AKP deputy chairman, Hayati Yazıcı, told to the mainstream daily *Hürriyet* that "Turkey has recognized the jurisdiction of the ECHR and that it has to find a way of complying with the ECHR ruling."

Accordingly, using the recent rapprochement between Turkey and the West and the AKP's above-stated willingness to adhere to the ECHR, the EU may push for the release of Kavala and Demirtaş as well as the imprisoned Kurdish deputies and mayors. If ensured, such a release could prove to be the opening move for a roll back from the post-2015 anti-democratic practises and for the desecuritisation of the KQ in Turkey.

Dr. Mesut Yeğen is an IPC-Stiftung Mercator Fellow at the Centre for Applied Turkish Studies (CATS) at SWP.

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