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Turkey

Some progress for Kurdish nationalists

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The Kurdish nationalists contested the elections under the rubric of DEHAP; a party of 'substitution' formed in the eventuality of a dissolution by the Constitutional Court of the Party of the Democracy of the People (HADEP, led by Murat Bozlak). The DEHAP lists ran in the form of a 'bloc', a last-minute alliance between the HADEP and two small far left formations: the EMEP (Stalinist, formerly pro-Albanian) and the SDP (a recent split from the \tilde{A} -DP), the bloc being supported from the exterior by other small groups which had broken with the \tilde{A} -DP. DEHAP's score (6.2% and nearly 2 million votes) represented real progress in relation to the 4.7% and 1.5 million votes registered by HADEP in 1999.

However, this remains far from the 10% necessary to be represented in Parliament and well below the hopes of the Kurdish nationalist leaders, who claimed they would score more than 10% and even 'come to power', as HADEP president Murat Bozlak imprudently claimed. DEHAP's impact was limited outside the traditional Kurdish nationalist fiefdoms in the south-east. They certainly had some excellent results in the cities where the nationalists have held municipal power since 1999: notable results included a vote of 56% in Diyarbakir, 47% in Batman, 46% in Sirnak, 45% in Hakkari and 40% in Van. The results were less satisfying in the more conservative Kurdish towns like Urfa (19%) or Bingol (22%), where DEHAP was beaten by the AKP. In Gaziantep, the main industrial city of the region, it came third with 8%, far behind the AKP (40%) and the CHP (19%). In some Mediterranean towns like Adana and Mersin, where there is a very strong and recent Kurdish immigration, DEHAP scored around 9%, higher than its national average. In the industrial areas in the west of the country where there is a historically a strong Kurdish presence and a recent immigration, it had a very low score, for example only 4% in Izmir and Kocaeli. In Istanbul, where 'at least' a quarter of the population (10 million inhabitants) are of Kurdish origin (and which is thus the town with the largest Kurdish population), DEHAP scored 287,000 votes (4%), far from the million votes predicted by its leadership; its vote increased by only 0.6% in relation to 1999. In Ankara, the capital, DEHAP just scraped 2%. Everywhere else, its vote was insignificant (less than 2%).

Yet the political context seemed a priori more favourable than ever: the end of the conflicts in the Kurdish region for the past three years; a climate of reduced tension and liberalization on the main themes of the Kurdish question (suppression of the death penalty, first steps towards the authorization of teaching in the Kurdish language, the broadcast of television programmes in Kurdish, and so on); access to the media (including television); no significant repression of the DEHAP campaign (as the leaders themselves recognized and as demonstrated by the electoral meetings of several hundred thousand people in Istanbul and Diyarbakir); the support of the municipalities in the Kurdish region (controlled for 3 years by HADEP); rejection of the policies of the government; a massive protest vote against the traditional parties across Turkey and so on.

But it is precisely on the political level that the chronic weaknesses of the leadership of the Kurdish national movement are most evident; in particular in the area of political strategy and electoral alliances. The HADEP leadership initially sought an alliance which would enable them to cross the 10% threshold and guarantee the biggest possible number of deputies, without too much concern for the precise politics of its eventual partner: social-democrats of right or left, liberal right and even hard-line Islamist.

Yet if the objective was to be represented in Parliament at any price, nothing stopped HADEP from presenting a series of independent candidates in its regional bastions, with a very strong chance of electing a couple of dozen thanks to its crushing hegemony in some towns (the nine independent right wing deputies were elected in towns in the Kurdish region). However, HADEP suddenly changed course radically, almost giving the impression that it no longer saw its presence in Parliament as being so opportune in the current national and international political conjuncture. Before the elections HADEP had initiated a process of fusion with the SHP (one of the main factions of

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Turkish social democracy, which had recently left the CHP), with a view of no longer appearing as an 'ethnic' and 'regional' party. Then, renouncing this project, it sought an electoral alliance with the CHP, then the ANAP and then with the traditional Islamists of Erbakan's SP. The negotiations for a common list with the Islamists broke down because of a dispute over how the number of seats would be shared out. DEHAP then came out in favour of a 'left bloc' with the SHP and the Ā-DP. There again negotiations broke down at the last minute. So the HADEP/Emep/SDP bloc was stitched together through a completely opaque and politically incoherent process: while Murat Bozlak said he favoured a US intervention in Iraq and Turkey's entry in the EU his far left collaborators castigated the 'imperialist war' and opposed EU entry!

In an article published in the daily paper 'Radikal' (November 24, 2002) and presented by its author as a 'inside view', Faik Bulut, a well-known researcher and writer of Kurdish origin, regrets that the DEHAP 'is confined to a simple assertion of Kurdish identity, without developing the least concrete project of solution and without making itself the spokesperson of the social and economic demands of the population'; with a regionalist emphasis, even in the big towns in the west of the country.

Bulut indicates that an internal debate is underway inside the Kurdish movement, with a stress on the necessity of renouncing 'ethnic discourse and simplistic nationalism, which do not lead anywhere'. The aim is to create a 'new programme and new cadres for transformation into a party for the whole of Turkey' so as to be able to 'approach all the chronic problems of the country including the Kurdish question, uniquely on the basis of concrete projects'. Recalling that HADEP is the socio-political product of a low intensity war, which lasted for 15 years inside the country, Bulut argues that it is time for a transformation. Stressing that 'internal training and recruitment take place solely on the basis of allegiance to the nucleus of the central leadership', Bulut also denounces the chronic lack of internal democracy, the mistrust of intellectuals, the outrageous manipulations, the lack of political coherence, the 'underhand interventions of certain hidden forces', as well as a certain undertone of blackmail to the violence which predominates in the Kurdish movement; 'it is clear that a radical change of mentality and strategy is needed... If we wish to create our own paradise, for all, we must speak to the living and not to the dead, with the language of the living and not that of the dead'.