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Turkey

Continuity and Change in Turkish Politics

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On the 21st of February, Berfo Ana, the mother of Cemil Kirbayir, who “disappeared” while in custody during the 1980 military coup died at the age of 105 in Istanbul. She was one of the “Saturday Mothers’ who have been gathering in Galatasaray Square in Istanbul on Saturdays since 1995, for 17 years, to claim their sons and daughters who were declared to have disappeared during custody. Hers was a 33-year-long struggle to find the remains of her son. Despite the 2011 reports of the parliamentary commission, which recorded Cemil Kirbayir’s death under torture, no measures were taken to bring the culprits to court. Her last will was not to be buried before the remains of her son were found, a wish that could not be realized.

The very same day, Mazlum Aksu, a 20-year-old soldier, was declared to have committed suicide with a G3 rifle. A bullet entered his left temporal bone. He was Kurdish and the district director of the leftist EMEP party. Before his supposed suicide, he mentioned to his family and friends the repression in the military he was under due to his ethnic and political identity. The right to conscientious objection is not recognized in Turkey and military service is still obligatory. It was recently reported by State officials that 949 soldiers committed suicide in the last ten years, a number which exceeds that of soldiers that were killed in battle operations. Mazlum’s friends and family are not buying the suicide claim.

Last year on the 24th of April, the day of commemoration for the Armenian Genocide, Sevag Balikci, a 25 year-old Armenian from Istanbul was killed by another soldier in his unit. Allegedly it was an accident. The perpetrator was known to be a Turkish nationalist and the trial is still continuing without him being arrested. Sevag’s family and friends are also not buying the official explanation for their loved one’s death.

These events act as reminders of the axis of continuity that persists in the Turkish political system. It has been ten years that the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has been governing Turkey and the change they brought to Turkish politics has attracted the attention of many commentators in Turkey and abroad. The fact that some generals are taken to court and a number of them arrested builds the image of a Turkey that is much more democratic than it was ten years ago. But the referendum by AKP in 2010 that was propagandized as to end the regime founded by the military coup of 1980 brought clear attacks on labor rights and paved the way to the authoritarian rule of the governing party. Just like the arrest of some generals does not bring an end to the repressive and discriminatory structure of the military, speaking of the Kurdish issue and taking timid steps only to stop and turn back after a while does not bring forth constructive change with regards to the Kurdish question either.

Starting on the anniversary of the 12th of September 1980 coup, a hunger strike of Kurdish political prisoners that had lasted for 68 days with the participation of more than 700 hundred people came to an end with a message from imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan. During this hunger strike, the government chose to ignore the reality of the hunger strike as well as its demands. However, the primary demand, which was the end to Abdullah Ocalan’s isolation that lasted for one and a half years due to an alleged problem in the coaster that enabled the transportation to the island where Ocalan resides, was de facto met. Ocalan’s brother was able to visit him and bring his message that ended the hunger strike. This started a new process of dialogue with Ocalan. On the 23rd of February, the second delegation from the Kurdish civil-rights-oriented Democratic Society Party (BDP) visited Ocalan. State Intelligence Service members were also present in the meeting. Despite the official non-recognition of the hunger strike and even severe pressure on the groups that had organized solidarity actions with the hunger strikers, this new process owes its existence to the Kurdish political movement. This movement has persevered despite what are possibly the harshest conditions since the foundation of the Turkish republic and through the post 1980 military coup regime.

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This process of dialogue with the leader of the Kurdish political movement runs parallel to the government's plans for the new constitution. The draft of the new constitution that is planned to be presented to parliament in March involves a new definition of citizenship, which does not define Turkish citizenship in ethnic terms (i.e., the Turkish Citizens are Turks) but in civic terms (i.e., anyone tied to the Turkish State with the bond of citizenship is a citizen of Turkey). This is a standpoint that brings the governing party AKP and the BDP to common ground and makes them face the opposition of particularly the Nationalist Action Party (MHP). However, the new draft does not involve the Kurdish side's demands of decentralization and a focus on increasing the importance of local governing bodies. Instead, the governing party wants to introduce a presidential system, which would strengthen the post of present Prime Minister Erdogan, and enable him to rule for at least another term. The BDP leadership and the governing AKP made declarations that hint to the possibility of working together to subject the draft to a referendum. However, the terms are not yet clear and the practice of the government does not point to an initiative that has peace as its ultimate goal.

While rhetorically the government and BDP are giving signals that they are not opposite poles in the process of negotiation for the new constitution and Abdullah Ocalan is semi officially consulted for his views on the "road map" to peace, the Black-Sea tour of BDP deputies, involving three deputies' visits to three Black Sea region cities, was violently sabotaged by local fascist groups. The police neither took any pre-emptive measures, nor stopped the violent groups from attacking the speakers. After assaults in the cities of Sinop and Samsun, the group chose not to go to Trabzon considering the inactivity of the police. It was in November that Kurdish people in Diyarbakir were pepper-sprayed as they were organizing solidarity sit-ins with the Kurdish prisoners on hunger strike. Since 2009 there have been more than 2000 people in courts due to their "links" with KCK, which is supposedly the urban branch of the PKK. According to these claims, all Kurdish civil rights oriented NGOs, journalists, academicians and artists are suspects of being a part of this "urban branch".

It is not only Kurdish activists that are faced with arrests and trials. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) recently reported that Turkey jailed the most journalists in 2012 "ahead of Iran and China. From the Confederation of Trade Unions of Public Employees (KESK) alone 115 jailed trade unionists are jailed. Plays that criticize the repressive political environment and books such as John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* and Jose Mauro de Vasconcelos's *My Sweet Orange Tree* are considered to be "at odds with Turkish values".

It is not possible to say that nothing has changed since the 1980 coup or that in the ten years rule of the Justice and Development Party, no long lasted taboos in the Turkish political scene were broken.

However, giving all the credit to the ruling party and not to the grassroots political movements that persistently fight for freedom of speech and freedom of unionization at all levels; to the anti-militarist movements struggling for the recognition of the right to conscientious objection and to the contemporary Kurdish political struggle that has a life of more than 30 years and vast experience of local governance does not do justice to reality. Such a top-down picture of Turkish politics is exactly what the ruling party has: to negotiate with the elites and suppress the grassroots movements. However, the "road-map" to peace has to be developed from below, by means of the very same urban movements that are under persecution these days in both the east and the west parts of Turkey.