

Turkey: Peace in Kurdistan?

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The resistance at Taksim raised new questions as to the fate of the Kurdish resistance which has gone on for around thirty years at the cost of around 35,000 deaths. The question is whether an increasingly authoritarian regime can satisfy Kurdish expectations.

Over the last five years a strange relationship has been established between the Kurdish question in its totality and Turkey. On the one hand the autonomy of Iraqi Kurdistan has evolved towards a quasi-independence and the region has entered a process of economic quasi-integration with Turkey; on the other, following the beginning of the uprising against the regime in Syria, western Kurdistan has acquired a de facto status of autonomy. And above all, the maintenance of the status quo — the continuation of the state of low intensity conflict — in Turkish Kurdistan goes increasingly against the regional interests of Turkish capitalism. All this has led the AKP to seek a solution to the Kurdish problem. The victory of the Kurds has not then been a military victory, but rather the fact that the balance of forces which has played against this people for centuries has changed in its favour.

In 2009, the AKP had entered into secret negotiations with the representatives of the PKK in Oslo, so as to find a solution to the Kurdish problem. Following this unexpected development a small guerrilla detachment symbolically crossed the frontier without weapons, to surrender to the authorities. They were brought before courts set up at the border to keep up appearances, and then released. However the enthusiastic welcome reserved for the guerrillas by huge crowds gathering at the customs posts irritated Turkish nationalist circles and also a large part of the AKP's electoral bases. Immediately, the AKP backtracked. Then came a great wave of arrests targeting the unarmed civilian wing of the Kurdish nationalist movement, the KCK (Union of Communities of Kurdistan): thousands of KCK members, including mayors, were imprisoned. Immediately the situation was worse than had been the case before.

By affirming that his party had the majority of Kurdish deputies and the majority of votes in the Kurdish region Erdogan declared that he recognised no other interlocutors than himself — his party being represented by its leader — to negotiate the Kurdish problem.

But the Party of Peace and Democracy (BDP) scored a considerable success in the parliamentary elections of 2011 and exceeded the threshold of 10 % by designating independent candidates. The BDP had 36 deputies elected including three socialists who were not BDP members in Istanbul, as well as a candidate known as a conservative Islamist in Diyarbakır. The party thus came to construct in its region a sort of national front including Islamists and conservatives in its ranks while appealing to socialists in the west of the country. Despite the success of the BDP, the AKP still refused to allow it as interlocutor. As for the BDP, it wanted the imprisoned PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan, to be its interlocutor.

With the withdrawal in 2012, of the Syrian army from the Syrian Kurdistan, the PYY (an extension of the PKK) gained a serious influence in the region. Suddenly, a de facto autonomous Kurdish region in joined the autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan. The PKK declared a revolutionary peoples' war to form a liberated zone in Hakkari, but this initiative ended with the loss of a thousand guerrillas.

Following these developments, the Turkish government began to seek means of recommencing negotiations with the Kurdish movement and now addressed itself directly to Öcalan. They knew very well that Öcalan was perfectly capable of imposing a ceasefire on the PKK, as had been shown during the discussion he had begun with the authorities since his arrest in 1999, including during the Oslo negotiations. Finally a BDP delegation made up of three deputies — approved by Erdogan himself — was sent to the island of Imrali where Öcalan is imprisoned, and the process of negotiations recommenced.

According to the terms of the pre-agreement between the parties, the PKK was first to take a decision to call a ceasefire and withdraw its armed forces from Turkish territory. Then there would be a series of constitutional and legislative amendments, beginning with a special status for the Kurds. Then the PKK would end the armed struggle, and finally the current situation of Öcalan would be revised and improved; also conditions would be created to allow the reintegration into normal life of PKK activists.

This agreement was never made public by the government, which did not wish to appear as being party to negotiations. The talk was solely of “putting an end to terror”, “stopping the bloodshed” and it was specified that was the National Information Agency (MIT) which was conducting the negotiations. However, the Kurds were open about the negotiation process, stressing that it was the “leadership”, that is Abdullah Öcalan, which had taken the initiative for them. But outside of some articles in the press there is still no written text listing openly the terms and conditions of the agreement. The fact that the handwritten texts drawn up by Öcalan were delivered by Turkish state agents to PKK leaders in Europe and to Kandil, who are fully behind their leader on the resumption of negotiations, demonstrate clearly that there must be a more detailed plan.

According to the declarations of BDP spokespersons, the second phase of the plan — which would undoubtedly necessitate certain legal regulations — should begin following the withdrawal beyond the frontier of PKK militants, which seems to be taking place up until now without major problems.

On the other hand, those who have remained outside of this process of negotiation — in which the US and Barzani are also involved — express serious worries as to its result. While certain components of the socialist movement clearly oppose and agreement with the AKP or adopting a neutral position in relation to the process, others have raised serious doubts on possible concessions made by the Kurds (or rather by Öcalan) to the AKP in exchange for the granting of a status; all while being of the opinion that the process in itself is a positive development and in no way inadmissible. They affirm that the Kurds would be liable to support the Erdogan plan which seeks to establish a presidential system in exchange for the granting of a kind of autonomy by the strengthening of the powers of local government. However there are others who think that it will be necessary in any case to support the ending of the war and that the Kurds have the right to resolve their problem by the compromise that suits them.

However the themes of “the thousand year union of Kurds and Turks” as well as that of the “Islamic fraternity” that Öcalan sometimes uses in his discourse have begun to return in force. The famous Turkish sociologist Ismail Besikçi (who has devoted his whole life to defending the rights of the Kurdish people and spent a total of 17 years in prison for his sociological studies depicting Kurdish reality) condemns the use of this type of discourse. The publication by the press on February 28, 2013 of reports of an Öcalan interview with BDP deputies, as well as his message addressed to the peoples of Turkey (stressing “Islamic fraternity”, “the thousand year union of Kurds and Turks” ; as well as the “growth of Turkey” , hence all kinds of formulas which are not necessarily incompatible with the ideological and political line of the AKP) and which was read by the deputies of the BDP before a crowd gathered in Diyarbakır during the feast of Newroz [1] disturbed all those who did not recognise themselves in such a history and more especially the Alévis. It should be stressed however

that in the 1990s, at a time when PKK was supposed to be more radical, Öcalan adopted a similar discourse in an interview with the journalist Cengiz Çandar.

The initiative taken by the AKP to launch negotiations with the Kurds with a view to resolving the national question, which nobody had dared to do until now, has created an atmosphere of optimism among broad layers of the population, in the west and especially the east of the country. But this hope cannot in itself ensure the success of the peace process.

The Kurds have not been beaten. On the contrary, they have succeeded in developing their identity over the last thirty years. On the political level, they henceforth hold a force capable of forming for two consecutive legislatures a parliamentary group (minimum 20 deputies) in the National Assembly; the Kurdish movement which has been in power for three five-year terms in most of the local authorities in the region, and notably in Diyarbakır, is not made up of guerrillas in the mountains: it now rests on a huge and solid civilian base and participates in the everyday life of people.

Also, it should be noted that the limit of the armed struggle to achieve significant results had already been reached. Abdullah Öcalan affirmed that it was impossible to obtain a total military success, and he said that not only after his capture, but already twenty years ago.

Much more than the pursuit of the armed struggle “to the end” the demands of those who vote, help and support the movement, are rather to seek teaching in the mother tongue, the liberation of the prisoners, the normalisation of the situation of those in the mountains, and above all improved living conditions. From this point of view, we should not hesitate to proclaim loudly and strongly that “from wherever it comes, peace is welcome”!

It should nonetheless be noted that there is a serious gap between Kurdish demands and what the AKP is disposed to grant, a gap the personal prestige of Öcalan among the Kurdish people fills for the moment.

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Footnotes

[1] Here are some extracts from this text : “The Turkish people should know that if it can today live on the ancient lands of Anatolia, under the name of Turkey, it owes this to its thousand year alliance with the Kurds, under the banner of Islam... This is not the time for disunity, war and combat; it is the time for unity, alliance, reunion and forgiveness... The Kurdish and Turkish peoples fought together during the war of independence, and died side by side at Çanakkale. In 1920, they founded together the great national assembly of Turkey. The reality of our common history shows us the road to a common future, and forces us to adopt a shared project. The spirit of the foundation of the great national assembly of Turkey today enlightens the new era... The vow of the peoples of the Middle East and central Asia is to create a modern and democratic model in accord with their own history. It is necessary then to seek a model inside of which everyone can live in equality and fraternity; this quest is a need as vital as bread and water. To create this model we must draw anew from the ancient cultures of Mesopotamia and Anatolia... In the image of the war of national liberation led in recent history by the Turks and Kurds, allied around the National Pact, we must revive this relationship and live it in a manner which is still

more profound, broad and contemporary.”