

# Erdoğan and Turkey's Authoritarian Turn

Tuesday 19 July 2016, by [ÉWANJÉ-ÉPÉE Félix Boggio](#), [MAGLIANI-BELKACEM Stella](#), [ONGUN Emre](#) (Date first published: 24 May 2016).

## **Erdoğan's grip on power in Turkey is tightening. How did it come to this and how can his government be challenged?**

**Last** week, the deal between Turkey and the European Union meant to address the refugee crisis came into effect. Under the agreement, refugees who arrive in Greece may be sent back to Turkey, who, despite its policy of only granting refugee status to Europeans, will receive \$3.3 billion in aid and the “unfreezing” of its EU membership bid.

The deal's ratification implies that Europe will turn a blind eye to Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's ongoing offensive against the Kurds and their allies within the country.

The costs of this approach were demonstrated most painfully last year when a suicide bombing took the lives of thirty-one activists in Suruç. It is widely argued that Erdoğan's government tolerated this attack, and others, in order to instill fear in his political opposition.

The massacre preceded a months-long military operation against Kurdish militants in the country's southeast.

This campaign of violence and intimidation is the basis for the grip on power that Erdoğan and his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) maintain. A bill pending presidential approval will also revoke the immunity of lawmakers in order to oust the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) from parliament.

The government's power, however, is not absolute. The HDP had made encouraging electoral gains before Erdoğan's bloody counteroffensive; under the right conditions, it could do so again. The memory of the 2013 Gezi Park occupation has not disappeared and sparks of worker rebellion hint at the possibility of a wider opposition.

In this interview, translated by Mike Corr, Félix Boggio Ewanjé-Epée and Stella Magliani-Belkacem speak with Emre Ongün about the history of the Kurdish movement, its relationship to the Left, and how, together, they should counter Turkey's rising authoritarianism.

---

## **Félix Boggio Ewanjé-Epée and Stella Magliani-Belkacem - Historically, what has been Turkey's policy in regards to the Kurdish national question?**

Ere Ongün - In its development, Turkey exhibited two main characteristics that were already at work before the end of the Ottoman Empire. On the one hand, it was on the capitalist periphery, the potential prey of imperialist powers — a role epitomized by the final period of the Ottoman Empire.

On the other hand, it contained the legacy of a Turkish nationalism, already in place before the end of the empire, and with it the project of submitting non-Turkish populations to its rule.

Many nationalisms developed towards the end of the empire — such as Arabic and Kurdish nationalism — but Turkish nationalism was dominant. Even in this early period, however, Kurdish nationalism grew in response, especially amongst elites in Istanbul.

World War I was a disaster for the Union and Progress government (known colloquially as the Young Turks); it led to the dismantling of the empire to the benefit of Western imperialist powers that created a new geographic division with an autonomous Kurdish state.

The Turkish national movement that emerged against the Western powers, with Mustafa Kemal at its head, needed allies. It found international support in the newly formed Soviet Union, and promised the Kurds a Turkish-Kurdish, Muslim-based federation.

This promise was not kept; instead, the republican regime resumed the core policies of Turkish nationalism at the end of the Ottoman Empire. In the process of the War of Independence, the promise of an anti-imperialist alliance between the Turkish and Kurdish peoples was little more than parenthetical. Kemalist Turkey was constructed with a colonial logic regarding Kurdistan.

### **How has this conflict developed into the situation today?**

This colonial logic has characteristics that have escalated over time. The first is the existence of a territorial continuity between the Kurdish and Turkish populations. The second is the consequence of formally granting the same rights to both peoples under a system with competitive elections.

The third is the upheaval that crosses the border areas during imperialist interventions (like the two interventions under the command of the United States in Iraq), the crushing of the Syrian revolution, and the emergence of ISIS amid the chaos.

The fourth is that the majority of Kurds in Turkey now live outside of Kurdistan (around four million in Istanbul and a million in Izmir).

The responses of the Turkish leadership have oscillated between two poles. The first is a repressive approach in certain territories combined with a narrowing of civil liberties in all of Turkey — invalidating electoral competition and even revoking bourgeois democracy.

This approach can lead to a virtual disappearance of civil liberties and electoral rights — as happened after the coup d'état of 1980 — and relies on the systemic racism enforced by local tribes. The second is a “liberal” approach that envisions the recognition of a Kurdish identity without questioning the existence of the Turkish state in its current borders, let alone the capitalist order itself.

Generally, the first approach has been the rule and the second, the exception.

This approach was refined in a particularly brutal way by Mahmut Esat Bozkurt — architect of the judicial system of the Turkish Republic, justice minister from 1924 to 1930, and deputy from the War of Independence until his death in 1943.

Bozkurt declared in 1930, “The lords of this land are the Turks. Those who do not have purely Turkish blood have only a single right in the Turkish homeland: the right to be servants of the Turks, to be their slaves.”

Under Bozkurt, the name of Kurdistan, used during the Ottoman era, was banned. From 1925 onward the names of most places were changed to Turkish. Speaking Kurdish was prohibited in 1932.

In addition to multiple local revolts, three large Kurdish insurgencies erupted between 1925 and 1938. The first was led by religious leader Sheikh Said in 1925.

Of course, the determining factor in these events was not the opposition between religious reactionaries and pro-Western modernism, but that between the Kurdish people and their colonial oppressors. Said's revolt, followed by the revolt at Mount Ararat in 1930 and at Dersim in 1937-38, was suppressed with extreme violence and deportation.

Even after the transition to a multi-party system in 1945, certain tribes and feudal lords continued to restrict expressions of the Kurdish identity and reinforce the colonial approach to government. The Kurdish opposition was extremely weakened.

An important attempt at liberal government took place in the early 1990s when the president of the republic, Turgut Özal, the champion of market liberalism and anti-unionism, sought to negotiate with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The progress of the talks resulted in a cease-fire declaration by the PKK in March 1993.

The following month, Turgut Özal died of a suspected heart attack a few weeks after the death of his two collaborators in the negotiations — General Eşref Bitlis and the ex-minister of finance Adnan Kahveci. The negotiations Özal envisioned were never carried out, and after his death the army launched "Plan Fortress," a counter-guerrilla strategy.

The colonial question poisoned the heart of the state apparatus and collided brutally with these attempts at liberal reform.

During the mid-90s, the conflict between the PKK and the Turkish state intensified. The Turkish state's security institutions became more powerful, which contributed to the exodus of the rural Kurdish population to cities in western Turkey. This conflict symbolically came to an end with the capture of Öcalan in 1999.

### **What's the backdrop to today's negotiations?**

For a big part of the population, the Justice and Development Party, which came to power in 2002, represented political stability, economic growth (the fragility of which is beginning to reveal itself), the domestication of the army, and the first steps towards a new hope of liberal reform on the Kurdish question.

By taking this approach, the AKP was gambling against the gains made by the Kurdish movement in the municipalities. But this was bound to fail. In Diyarbakir, the Kurdish list led by Osman Baydemir beat the AKP list with 59 percent in 2004 and 64 percent in 2009. Not a single bastion of the Kurdish movement would fall to the AKP.

This constituted a major failure for the AKP, which had in the meantime succeeded at eliminating or merging with the nuclei of opposition within the state. Therefore, clashes and repression continued even while the doors of negotiation remained open.

By the end of 2012, President Erdoğan announced the start of new negotiations with the PKK, the latest liberal attempt to do so. The process of negotiation reached its final phase with the Agreement of Dolmabahçe, ten points presented in common by the HDP deputy Sirri Süreyya Önder and the

minister of the interior.

After this, the state engaged its repressive strategy anew with great brutality — the accord was swept aside by Erdoğan, who went so far as to deny its existence. For their part, the local Kurdish communities adopted the slogan “Democratic Autonomy” and began to put it into effect.

In many localities, the population, and in particular the youth, began to dig trenches to protect their neighborhoods, a measure that the state regarded a terrorist provocation.

We know that a campaign of terror has been escalating since the pro-Kurdish HDP won a significant percentage of the vote in the June 2015 elections, preventing the AKP from obtaining an absolute majority in Parliament.

On that point, it’s important to remember that most Kurds in Turkey now live outside of Kurdistan. This signifies that territorial exceptionalism is not sufficient anymore for the struggle against the Kurds.

The AKP regime can’t break the resistance of Kurds across the country simply by mobilizing just the armed forces. Now they also must unleash fascist groups under state protection, especially in the big western cities.

In this way, the regime’s suppression of the Kurds erodes the democratic rights of everyone, in all corners of the country.

### **What is the historical political project of the PKK?**

At its founding in 1978, the PKK was a fairly traditional organization for the 1970s — a Marxist-Leninist party of national liberation emerging from the radical left, with its model being a prolonged people’s war. The PKK aimed at the creation of an independent Kurdistan in which it would be possible to bring about a socialist revolution.

But despite its formation as a specifically Kurdish party, the PKK would come to empower the radical left in Turkey.

Abdullah Öcalan and the other PKK founders were poor rural youth, radicalized during their studies. Moreover, the PKK’s name, “Kurdistan Workers Party,” is a tribute to its origins. This explains why it has always had a certain number of Turkish members from the radical left, including some in leadership positions, who consider the liberation of Kurdistan a precondition for revolution in Turkey.

Aside from the Marxist-Leninist inspiration mentioned previously, a fundamental element of PKK discourse is a form of emancipatory violence — a 1985 brochure indicates “revolutionary violence must play this role [to create a new society] and it will take, we say, the form of revolutionary revenge.” But the PKK does not follow Mao’s commandment that “the Party commands the guns”; instead, the party and the guerrillas are one entity.

Entry into the party is therefore considered a total break with mainstream political methods. Even today, the PKK and the Democratic Union Party (PYD), its sister-party in Rojava, regularly reaffirm the fight for “all of humanity,” a discourse all the more easily taken up in the fight against ISIS as it echoes Western concerns.

Since his arrest in 1999, Öcalan’s politics have evolved towards a form of anti-statism — a return to the libertarian values of original Kurdish society, which would be achieved by the realization of the

democratic republic, local democratic self-government, and democratic confederalism.

Today, this formula is absolutely central to the entire Kurdish movement in Turkey. In Öcalan's thinking, questions of class are in the background, while questions of identity and democratic freedoms are up front.

Öcalan's word remains the ultimate point of reference for the PKK and its popular base, despite his imprisonment and his means of communication being limited to messages transmitted by his lawyers. Öcalan's declarations are often confused in every sense of the term: difficult to understand, and mixing concepts that are supposed to be very different.

In his imprisonment, far removed from the movement, Öcalan has become a sort of prophet whose declarations are open to interpretation.

### **What do you mean when you refer to the “Kurdish liberation movement”?**

I use the phrase “Kurdish liberation movement” because we cannot stop with the PKK.

First of all, the PKK is an organization whose influence in Kurdistan extends beyond the boundaries of the Turkish state. This was evident in the PKK's 2007 founding of the Group of Communities of Kurdistan (KCK), which includes the sister parties of the PKK in Iraqi, Iranian, and Syrian territory — both their military branches and some civil-society organizations.

The KCK replaced the Peoples of Kurdistan (KKK), which had been founded two years earlier. The KCK is led by an assembly called the Kongra-Gel — the Congress of Peoples of Kurdistan — which has a president and designates an executive council headed by one man and one woman. However, the sister parties are of unequal importance — the PKK determines the course of the KCK.

Another well-known member party is the PYD, which leads Kurdistan in the territory of the Syrian state. The other members are the Party of Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK) in Iran, and the Party of the Democratic Solution (PCDK).

With the exception of the PCDK, each of these parties has separate military branches for men and women. In addition, PKK soldiers are allowed to fight for other KCK military branches.

Outside the framework of the KCK, a range of organizations gravitate to the PKK. The PKK is the primary force behind the movement, but it doesn't encompass the entire movement. Many organizations have ties to the PKK, but are also largely autonomous — that is to say, most of them are not simply acronyms used to cover for the PKK.

The capacity for organization and mobilization in the Kurdish diaspora is extremely important. Everyone who has attended a Kurdish mobilization in Europe can attest to this fact.

A large number of young people have grown up outside the Kurdish regions of their country, but have still been socialized in and trained by the movement. These structures can be generalist — Kurdish cultural centers or “Houses of the Kurdish People”— or specific — women's organizations or the Kurdish Red Crescent, for example.

### **Within this ecosystem, what is the status of the HDP?**

The HDP is an electoral vehicle and a political standard-bearer in all of Turkey, advocating sustained political unity between the Kurdish movement and sectors of the political and social left in Turkey.

This means that the status of the HDP cannot be understood only in relation to the Kurdish liberation movement orbiting the PKK. The HDP has its own separate existence.

The HDP is the party of the Democratic Peoples' Congress (HDK), a political framework that brings together parties and political groups as well as associations and unions. Equally represented within the HDK are minority ethnic associations (Armenian, Pomak), feminists, ecology organizations, several Turkish LGBTQ organizations, and some unions of modest size.

Decisions are made through "assemblies" open to all individuals. The HDP came together as the result of a process that began with the parliamentary elections of 2011. The main component is the Kurdish movement, but there are also numerous other factions of the Turkish radical left.

To be a member of the HDP, it is necessary to be a member of the HDK, but not all HDK members belong to the HDP. In addition, the HDP's support is not limited to the member organizations of the HDK.

There are four other categories of people who support the HDP: left democrats and representatives of the left wing of different professions; a Kurdish right wing that split from the PKK and represents the "conservative Kurd" sensibility, disappointed by the authoritarian-nationalist drift of the AKP; defectors from the parliamentary party of the center-left; and finally, certain sectors of democratic anti-nationalist Islamists.

The Kurdish/democratic question — and more precisely the refusal of the AKP to move towards a recognition of cultural and territorial autonomy for the Kurds — encourages the coexistence of Marxist and conservative Kurdish currents.

It is important to note that the organization in North Kurdistan is distinct from the HDK. There, it is the Kurdish party, the Party of Democratic Regions (DBP), whose members lead city councils. The DBP is nominally a member of the HDK, but the HDK does not have a presence in North Kurdistan.

This is to the benefit of the Congress of Democratic Society (DTK), which proclaimed the democratic autonomy of the Kurdish people in Turkey in 2011, and in December 2015 supported the self-administration of Kurds.

Across both the HDP and HDK, the most well-known figure nationally and internationally is Selahattin "Selo" Demirtaş. Demirtaş is a Kurdish lawyer who heads the local branch of the Association of the Rights of Man of Diyarbakir. Though the ultimate political reference for any movement associated with the PKK is Öcalan, "Selo" has his own political existence.

### **What is the HDP's ideology?**

The political orientation of the HDP can be characterized as reformism applied to Turkish conditions with a strong anti-oppression and pro-peace focus. Thus, although the HDP is a member of the Socialist International, its program is clearly to the left of European social democracy. The party also participates in the meetings of the European Left Party.

The HDP defines its economic program as "an economy of life, assured" — making reference to the importance of insurance and social security, but also the rights of workers, the rights of women and other oppressed groups, equality for all religious beliefs through a pluralist public service of religions, the rights of the environment, and the rights of animals.

The HDP states that its main goal is to develop workers' control over economic relations where they currently have no decision-making power, but its program does not make clear exactly how this will

be done.

Of course, a simple program cannot cover the whole political orientation of an organization. The means of organizing is not clear, but this is mainly due to the weakness of trade unionism in Turkey and the contradictions inherent to mobilizing a working class whose members are mostly just beginning to think in terms of class struggle.

But the HDP's reformism does open the doors to more radical measures, a fact that is not questioned by the conservative Kurdish wing or the central leadership of the party.

Selahattin Demirtaş often frames the struggle in these terms. There has even been an evolution towards the left in his speech since the presidential campaign — he did not hesitate to affirm in February 2015, “It is an error of the Kemalist parties to focus so much on the Islamic identity of the AKP. And it is a mistake to propose an opposition from that quarter. It must rather be an opposition from the left, based on labor, with an anticapitalist theory, not an anti-Islamist thesis.”

His leftward evolution was articulated in a particularly virulent interview he took part in with some of his ex-deputies. He called them “disguised Erdoğanists,” adding,

*“On one side there is the right, neoliberal, Turco-Islamist structure, which takes the Caliphate as its fundamental principle. The founder of this structure wants to be President of Turkey, but we have proved that there is an ideological positioning opposed to his presidential project. We have proposed a system on the side of the Left, of the working class, of liberty for the Kurdish people, of liberty of beliefs, of the liberty of women.”*

### **How are the HDP and the PKK related?**

The link between the HDP and the PKK is a sensitive question, and one that is difficult to analyze. However, it is possible to establish three facts.

First, for the social and militant base of the Kurdish liberation movement, the prestige of the guerrilla is immense, and Abdullah Öcalan is still the ultimate reference.

Second, the HDP is not simply the political wing of the PKK. We have already discussed the HDP's composition, but beyond that, the leadership of the HDP, including its Kurdish members, can voice criticisms of PKK initiatives, including armed action.

The most recent example to date was in January 2016, when Demirtaş condemned the Çınar Security Directorate in Kurdistan for causing the death of a police officer and five civilians (including two children), calling for those responsible to apologize.

The military wing of the PKK claimed responsibility for the attack, but contented itself with expressing “sadness” for the civilian deaths without giving an apology.

Conversely, the PKK can and does criticize the HDP. Despite this, the HDP does not stand equidistant between the PKK and the Turkish regime. For the HDP, the Turkish regime is an enemy to be negotiated with, while disputes with the PKK are arguments within the family.

Third, though the HDP is not the political wing of the PKK and is in many ways autonomous, it is also true that the ideology of the PKK is shared by sectors that have an influence in the life of the HDP.

For example, Mustafa Karasu, a member of the central committee of the PKK, wrote an article on the best distribution of functions amongst the HDK, the DTK, and the HDP. Thus the analysis and

recommendations coming from a leading PKK member often influence the life of the HDP/HDK.

### **What is the position of the Turkish left in regards to the Kurdish question?**

There exist different conceptions of what constitutes “the Left” in Turkey. On the one hand, there is the Republican People’s Party (CHP), which is considered to be “left” by much of the population. In reality, it is a statist nationalist party — even though today that state is identified with the AKP, its political opponent.

The Turkish statist tradition includes a social component, in the broad sense of improving infrastructure and raising educational levels, which is why the CHP is often perceived (even among militants) as an heir to social democracy.

However, it vacillates between accommodating its Kurdish members and eliminating them, and never voices more than a passive criticism against the authoritarian regime. This is all to say that the CHP cannot face up to the challenges of the situation.

As for the Turkish socialist left, it is extremely fragmented, and it would be tedious to review all the positions of all the organizations and groups. In the early student mobilizations of the 1960s, the Turkish left leaned heavily on the theme of anti-imperialism, which led to the idea that a second war of independence would be completed by a socialist revolution against imperialism and its local capitalist allies.

The observable power of this model left a deep impression on student youth of the Turkish left. The problem was that such an approach put aside, or at least underestimated, the colonial character of the Turkish state and the oppression of the Kurds that resulted.

The Turkish left was open to the Kurds, whose militants took their place in its ranks. But it was plagued by ideological contradictions that prevented it from fully confronting Kurdish oppression.

Today, there are three main positions in the Turkish left with regards to the Kurdish question. First, some organizations — including many member groups of the HDP — want to form an alliance with the Kurdish national movement.

Second, some organizations want to negotiate with the Kurdish movement without forming a common organization. Significant sectors of the radical left take this approach, and are opposed to the Turkish state and its abuses, while remaining critical of the PKK.

Finally, some socialist organizations see the Kurdish movement as a competitor, if not an adversary, and hide their chauvinism with a sectarian workerist discourse.

Of course the positions are not always so clear-cut. Today, the civil-war strategy adopted by the Turkish government makes it more necessary than ever for the entire Turkish left to come together to defeat the government’s offensive. It is in every sense a matter of life and death.

### **The Turkish left seems primarily grouped around the Kurdish question and the question of peace. Why is that?**

The Kurdish question and the colonial logic of the Turkish state are key issues. A good part of the Turkish left has come to understand that it’s vital to come to grips with these questions. If the civil war of the state and its allies against the PKK develops further, the Left will struggle to exist for another generation.



Another important reason is the decline of the number and power of struggles on an economic basis. The 1980 coup resulted in the destruction of most organized labor and its reconstruction has made little progress since then.

This cut off the transmission of a militant workers' culture — and not to mention class consciousness — and the division of the working class on a Kurdish/Turkish basis has been reinforced by this evolution.

This long decline in organization can be seen in recent labor struggles.

A major event in 2015 was the big wildcat strike in the Bursa region after the signing of an unfavorable collective agreement by the Union Türk Metal, an agreement which was in fact most favorable to the bosses.

The strike that followed was more of a mass unplanned reaction, a consequence of privatization in the food-processing sector, but these workers are a strategic sector for the development of the Turkish economy.

The strike was massive. There were some twelve thousand strikers in the city — which is a majority of the workforce. Otherwise, the strike would have been impossible in the Turkish context.

In spite of threats from the state and management (including Renault), the workers' basic demands were met: not only would there be equal pay raises for all workers and no layoffs, but workers would have the right to choose their representatives instead of the "sellout" union — although the bosses have reneged on their agreements since.

Surprised and confronted by a mass movement in a country where they have a good deal of investment, the leaders of the multinational companies such as Renault, Hyundai, and Ford could make some concessions, this time.

This victory was a remarkable first step, but revealed a lack of organizing power. The horizon of the workers was limited to the plant. There were no common demonstrations joining workers on strike in Bursa, who guarded the doors of their factories, closed to delegations of militants of the radical left who were considered with suspicion if not hostility.

There was not even a common demonstration by the factories on strike, nor a coordinating body for these factories, which are located relatively close together. The workers fought, organized, and won throughout the plant.

In fact, as they did not have to confront it, the workers did not confront the question of unions as such. This indicates that the issue, and the broader horizon beyond the factory, was not considered.

The strikes demonstrated to these workers the power of collective action, of their unity in action at this scale. This is a considerable achievement. However, in the short term, this victory is not accompanied by a significant evolution of these sectors towards the construction of an organized and combative workers movement. This constitutes an obvious difficulty for the Left.

### **What was the impact of the 2013 Gezi mobilizations and how did they relate to the Kurdish issue?**

The principal character of the Gezi movement was a democratization of sectors already hostile to the AKP. Especially among the youth, this democratization has led to a greater awareness of the Kurdish question and the desire to vote for the HDP, especially in 2015.

Today, the brief cycle opened by Gezi is closed and the waves of blood have drowned what could have developed. But one can say that the great importance given to the democratic question, and therefore the Kurdish question, also fed this mass social movement.

There has been an evolution of the Kurdish political movement in Turkey.

Kurdish civilian political leaders extended a hand towards the Turkish left with the bloc in 2011 and the explicit policy of “Turkey-ization” of the leadership of the HDP. “Turkey-ization” signifies the will of the HDP to become not a party of the Kurds or of North Kurdistan, but of all of Turkey.

This has been particularly clear in the flags they fly at mass meetings — half HDP and half Turkish. In the congress of January 2016, in his speech, Selahattin Demirtaş repeated, “Turkey is our common country.”

After their 2014 defeat in many local elections, the HDP was able to capitalize on the legacy of the Gezi mobilizations in the presidential campaign of Selahattin Demirtaş in the presidential elections of August 2014.

The position of the HDP became clearer when Selahattin Demirtaş hammered home to Erdogan, “We won’t let you become president,” lifting any doubts about his position and contributing to the polarization that surrounds the HDP and the central questions it poses.

### **What is the importance of Rojava from the point of view of a clash between the Turkish state and the PKK?**

This is a central question. In reality, one cannot comprehend the place of the PYD and Rojava in Syria without considering the dynamics underway in Turkey, and one cannot understand Turkish dynamics without considering the question of Rojava.

The KCK, and therefore the PKK, wants to make Rojava a bastion of support. And Erdoğan for his part declared: “We must prevent it [a proto-Kurdish State in the Rojava] by any means.” The words “by any means” were not exaggerated.

Erdoğan has committed Turkey to a civil war in Syria against President Bashar al-Assad. To be clear, Assad’s regime is as counterrevolutionary as that of Erdoğan.

But it would be a great political blindness to believe that Erdoğan could contribute to a democratic regime in Syria. Recall that in May 2011, when he began to turn against Assad, Erdoğan indicated that he had been a “good friend.” It would have been difficult to say otherwise, as the Syrian and Turkish governments had worked closely together.

Erdoğan’s position was an opportunistic one, hoping to extend the influence of capitalism in Syria post-Assad. That’s why the Turkish intervention in Syria supports the various rebel forces that combine their anti-Assad position with deep hostility towards the three Kurdish cantons that constitute Rojava, whose autonomy was unilaterally declared by the PYD. ISIS also benefits from the complicity of the Turkish regime.

Ideally the Syrian revolution would have joined forces with the Kurds of Syria. But the “export” of Turkish conflicts to Syria has made this impossible — and now the two conflicts feed each other.

During his recent visit to Turkey, US vice president Joe Biden reiterated that the “PKK is a terrorist organization.” He did not use the same qualification for the PYD. The United States notoriously contributes to arming the PYD troops, who are organically linked to the PKK via the KCK.

**In the June 2015 elections, the AKP lost its parliamentary majority and the HDP had real success despite attacks on supporters in the run-up to the election.**

But the coalition government that should have resulted was never established and snap elections were called for November 2015. What happened between June and November last year?

I think the AKP was as surprised as everyone else was by the success of the HDP in June 2015. This success is relative in the sense that it was only 13 percent of the popular vote, but this was an absolutely unprecedented result in Turkey.

Yet in November 2015 the AKP, to everyone's surprise, won 49.4 percent, which was a reversal of June's results. This was not predicted by any polls.

The HDP declined to 11 percent (which would have been considered a fairly good result in June) but the largest decline was from the ultra-nationalist MHP (from 16 percent to 12 percent, with a shift towards the AKP).

This is what happened during those five months.

After the June election, the AKP refused any discussion of a coalition, so that the basis for an accord with the ultra-nationalist MHP could exist. They also triggered a wave of deadly persecution in Kurdistan using the state apparatus, mobilized Turco-Sunni fascist groups to sack the offices of the HDP, and used pro-ISIS groups as a weapon, leaving them to organize suicide bombings against Kurdish activists and to terrorize the country.

Finally, the AKP took advantage of these attacks, formally condemning them, and arresting people in waves. At the same time, they energetically reorganized the AKP campaign, to take advantage of the situation and the paralysis imposed on the HDP.

If Western governments had not pretended to accept the explanations of Erdoğan, all of this would not have been so easy. Thus, when French president François Hollande congratulates Erdoğan for his commitment to the fight against ISIS after the attack against Suroç, it can't signify anything other than permission to kill as long as a minimal distance is maintained. The attack in Ankara came some weeks after.

Thus the Erdoğan regime's terrorization of society managed to reverse the results seen in June.

The campaign of the HDP, completely focused on peace, repeated less joyously and more defensively than in June, failed to stand up to this wave of terrorization.

**Are we witnessing a new rise of authoritarianism? What is the answer of the HDP and the PKK to this situation?**

We are undoubtedly witnessing the rise of a new authoritarianism. The repression and the violence of the state have worsened since the November elections. The Turkish Foundation of the Rights of Man reported that 198 civilians, including 39 children, have been killed between August 16, 2015 and January 21, 2016 during 58 sieges of varied duration.

New massacres have occurred since that report, including an attack that killed sixty people in Cizre, an event that was reported as an anti-terrorism success against the PKK and celebrated by all those who are pro-AKP.

We are at the start of a civil war between the Turkish state and its allies against the PKK. The PKK is

backed by the active revolt of a Kurdish youth insurgency, radicalized in different localities of Northern Kurdistan. There are questions about whether the PKK has triggered the Serhildan, meaning insurrection or uprising. This is a term with a role comparable to “intifada” among the Palestinians.

It seems to me that in reality this revolt is not the result of a decision made by the PKK. It developed from the base, and members of the PKK have joined in the insurgent areas, including the district of Diyarbakir.

The revolt is only logical. For many, they are the children of those who were persecuted in the 1990s, and they see nothing ahead in terms of improvement. The peace process is dead. The electoral process was unable to block the AKP in June 2015, except for a few days.

In fact, even speaking in favor of peace can trigger persecution. In such a context it is assumed that all those who make statements of the type “the children are dying, civilians are dying, we need peace” support the PKK.

For instance, around two thousand academics were persecuted for signing a petition against the crimes of the AKP. A certain number have already been fired from their university positions.

I must note here that, of course, international solidarity with these academics by their colleagues is crucial. This solidarity cannot be confined to a discourse on the rights of academics, ignoring the specific reasons for their oppression. The increased suppression of academic freedoms and freedom of speech are byproducts of the war and the persecution of the Kurds by the Turkish state.

Aside from these cases there has not been an antiwar mobilization in the west of the country, and the silence is dramatic. The HDP continues to defend a pro-peace line, while the bloodshed continues to increase.

This position becomes more difficult to maintain with each passing day. I am not convinced that it continues to resonate with the youth of Kurdistan who face the abuses of the state.

The PKK has been active, but in reality, until now, there has not been a major response. Internally decided deadlines will determine when the PKK moves to a counteroffensive. When that happens, there will be a civil war in the full sense of the term, and the overwhelming responsibility will be that of the Turkish regime.

It is not precisely clear where the Turkish state is going and what its prospects are. The next stage may be the destruction of Kurdish towns on the Syrian border (such as Cizre or Nusaybin), inhabitants fleeing from large-scale massacres, military occupation of Kurdistan districts; in sum, seeking to bring the PKK to its knees with a counter-guerrilla strategy.

This would be the continuation of the schema that prevailed during the 1990s, now with the added issue of Rojava at stake. The legal framework to suppress the HDP’s leaders is well-developed, and many mayors of the DBP have already been dismissed or put in detention.

If the current trend is not stopped, it will be even worse than the nightmare of the nineties. To come back to a point I raised at the beginning: the majority of Kurds live outside Kurdistan. Kurds living outside of Kurdistan will be repressed by fascist groups as in the pogroms of early September 2015, but the groups will be more established and the attacks more systematic. If the current situation continues, the Erdoğan regime may mutate towards a sort of Turkish-Sunni fascism using pro-ISIS groups as the ultimate truncheon.

If it comes to this, Erdoğan knows the countries of the European Union will be restrained by their racist policy of “Fortress Europe.” The Turkish regime can always activate the threat of allowing millions of Syrian refugees who have fled their country into Europe.

This is the principal — and very effective — pressure Erdoğan can use now that the Turkish economy has seen the warning signs.

In summary, a position of political solidarity is not complete until it includes solidarity with the Kurds against the Turkish regime, solidarity with the Syrian revolution against Assad, and solidarity with the Syrian refugees.

---

**P.S.**

\* Jacobin. 5.24.16:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/05/turkey-erdogan-pkk-hdp-ocalan-suruc-rojava-syria/>

\* Emre Öngün is a Turkish leftist and analyst, as well as a member of the Front de gauche and Ensemble! in France.