The Tightening Vise in Turkey

written by Joe Kenehan | April 8, 2016

On March 11, 2016, a Turkish prosecutor dropped a complaint against officials for failing to take adequate security measures both before and after the bombing of a peace rally in Ankara that killed more than 100 on October 10, 2015. Two days later, suicide bombers struck in Turkey's capital city for the third time in five months. A car bomb was exploded in the downtown neighborhood of Kızılay, killing 36 and injuring many more. As with other recent attacks, the government of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) quickly suggested the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) was responsible for the attack.

The Turkish military immediately sent warplanes to bomb PKK targets in northern Iraq, while large-scale police operations were launched and curfews were imposed in cities throughout the predominantly Kurdish southeast. Shortly thereafter President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan directed his wrath against political opponents, stating the definition of "terrorist" needed to be expanded to include those who support terrorism. "Their titles as an MP, an academic, an author, a journalist do not change the fact that they are actually terrorists." "Some circles," Erdoğan continued in a reference to domestic critics as well as to Turkey's NATO allies, are at a crossroads. "They will either side with us, or with terrorists. There is no middle way."

Thus collective punishment and serious human rights violations in the southeast find their counterparts in the elimination of dissent in northern and western population centers like Ankara and Istanbul. As the repressive apparatus expands, the Kurdish rights movement has been pushed back years, perhaps decades, and the renewal of war increasingly resembles the 1980s and 1990s, when more than 40,000 were killed and millions of Kurds were forced from their homes. Many in Turkey can be forgiven for believing the state is allowing (or provoking) the escalation of violence in order to eliminate challenges to its hegemony by militarizing society, rewriting the constitution, and destroying the threat of Kurdish autonomy.

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Though negotiations for resolving the decades-long conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK stalled almost as soon as it had begun in 2013, the current large-scale violence began in 2015. In June of that year a rally of the People's Democratic Party (HDP), a pro-Kurdish leftist party, was bombed two days before a general election, likely by the Islamic State. The following month 33 youth activists were killed by ISIL suicide bombers in Suruç, a Turkish town across the border from Kobani—the city in Rojava (northern Syria) taken from ISIL by Kurdish forces in January. Many found it difficult to believe suicide bombers could have entered a city on the Syrian-Turkish border at a time of civil war in Syria without the knowledge of Turkish intelligence. The immediate appearance of the police after the bombing, together with their unusual absence in the hours before

the leftist demonstration, fueled speculation of government knowledge of the attack.

After the PKK claimed responsibility for the killing of two policemen in retaliation for Suruç, the state began what was ostensibly a dual offensive against ISIL and the PKK. However, while a number of ISIL suspects were detained, the vast majority of the state's campaigns were waged against the PKK, while curfews and police operations have become ubiquitous in the southeast.

Amnesty International reported in January that the Turkish state was engaging in collective punishment in the southeast, with approximately 200,000 people at risk. Numerous reports claimed security forces prevented ambulances from reaching areas under curfew and providing treatment to the sick. In some places people were unable to leave their homes for more than a month, and cuts to water and electrical supplies combined with difficulties accessing food and medical care have had brutal effects. In addition to denouncing police and military operations in residential areas that use heavy weaponry and snipers, AI condemned a January 13 PKK car bomb attack that killed one police officers and five civilians, including two young children.

According to a more recent report from the Human Rights Foundation of Turkey, numerous rights violations occurred in majority Kurdish areas between the summer of 2015 and March of 2016. Since August, 63 officially confirmed round-the-clock curfews in 22 districts and 7 cities have impacted a population of more than 1.6 million. The Foundation reports that at least 310 civilians have been killed since August 16, and more than 350,000 have been forced to leave their homes. Erdoğan has proudly claimed that the Turkish military has killed more than 5,000 alleged militants since July of 2015.

While access to accurate information is crucial for any understanding of what's happening in the Kurdish-majority provinces, it is difficult to obtain as journalists are often unable to reach impacted areas. Limiting the availability of information in the southeast forms one part of a larger assault on independent media. This includes most recently the prosecution of editors Can Dündar and Erdem Gül, whose *Cumhuriyet* newspaper reported in May of 2015 on the government's illegal shipment of weapons to Islamist rebels in Syria, as well the takeover of opposition media outlets.

Erdoğan's hostility to university professors was triggered by a petition created by Academics for Peace and signed by more than a thousand scholars called "We Will not be a Party to this Crime." The petition condemned curfews which left large populations without food and basic services for extended periods of time, emphasizing the operations violated the Turkish constitution as well as international law. Signers demanded an end to state-led massacres and deportations, called for independent national and international observers to make reports on human rights violations in the region, and demanded a negotiated political settlement to the Kurdish movement.

The government, with the aid of pro-regime university administrators, responded by purging large numbers of signatories from the academy; investigations have been launched into 158 academics. On March 15 Muzaffer Kaya, Kıvanç Ersoy, and Esra Mungan were arrested on charges of "propagandizing for terror" after publicly reading the declaration, suggesting the extent to which the state will deploy the vague signifier "terror" to muzzle any criticism.

Most threatening to the AKP however is the HDP, which stands as the major obstacle to ruling-party desires to change the government system. A crucial success of the HDP prior to the ongoing crackdown was its ability to link the Kurdish movement with other left and liberal organizations in western Turkey in the aftermath of the Gezi uprisings in 2013. Hence Erdoğan's "with us or against us" rhetoric seeks to divide anti-government forces, and the strategy of characterizing HDP as the political wing of the PKK appears to be working. While HDP support in the west is almost certainly plummeting (despite the party's consistent condemnation of acts of violence), it is possible the party

will simply be shut down, as has occurred frequently to pro-Kurdish parties in the past. This will likely be achieved through the removal of parliamentary immunity of HDP members accused of "provoking the people" and "being a member of an armed organization."

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Since its abandonment of Marxist-Leninism—which included, among other things, the elimination of any challenge to its dominant position in the Kurdish movement—and an attendant shift to a strategy of Democratic Autonomy (or Democratic Confederalism) in the twenty-first century, the PKK has become something of a cause célèbre among much of the international left. PKK founder Abdullah Öcalan, inspired by Murray Bookchin and other theorists of radical democracy, articulated a vision of an anti-state movement based on democratic, ecological, and gender-liberationist ideas in the early 2000s. Utilizing a system of democratic councils that in some cases originates at the street level and has a 40 percent quota for women, the movement seeks to create non-state democratic structures through communal organization.

Criticisms of Öcalan's theory and the policies of the Democratic Union Party (PYD)—the Kurdish party that controls large sections of Rojava and that constitutes a main source of contention between Turkey and the U.S.—have recently emerged, however. Alex de Jong has examined the essentialisms of Öcalan's representations of Kurdishness and women, for example, noting the theory's trans-historical and self-orientalizing characterization of a "Kurdish mentality" and the equation of women with nature, nonviolence, and empathy. De Jong also sees the economic proposals of the PYD for Rojava as basically social democratic, putting into question the supposedly anti-capitalist orientation of the party.

In addition, questions have arisen over the revolutionary claims of the PYD in Syria. According to Robin Yassin-Kassab, the "current tendency to romanticise the PYD also ignores the rapidly expanding gap between the party's rhetoric and the reality on the ground," as dissent is repressed and many view the PYD as collaborating with the Syrian regime. Elsewhere Yassin-Kassab points out that while the PYD has initiated positive changes in Kurdish majority areas, in a number of Arab majority regions the party has abandoned Democratic Confederalism in order to create a territorially contiguous area—in other words a state.

However problematic radical democratic theory (and Öcalan's version of it) and the practices of the PYD may be, the regime in Turkey appears set on destroying a radical social movement that has made important inroads in a traditionally conservative, patriarchal society. Democratic autonomy may be another casualty of the war, as government plans to expropriate affected areas portends wholesale reconstruction and gentrification of towns and regions.

Though analysts disagree over the probability of the PKK's involvement in recent Ankara attacks that were claimed by the militant Freedom Fighters of Kurdistan (TAK), the killing of civilians in the center of the capital city contributes to a mainstream view of the Kurdish movement as separatist and terrorist. At the same time, many Kurdish youth, who have grown up with family members' stories of disappearances and torture at the hands of authorities, see the PKK as defending their communities and dream of becoming guerilla fighters themselves.

It is difficult to predict what will happen in the coming weeks and months, but at present there is little reason for hope. For the left the current conjuncture is a dramatic reversal from the optimism of a year ago, when it appeared broad opposition to the AKP regime could potentially coalesce around a radical alternative. Though resistance in Turkey is not dead, for the moment it seems violence and authoritarian repression, rather than liberation, are on the immediate agenda.