

Öcalan's Impasse: What's next for the Kurdish Movement in Turkey?

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The peace process between the PKK and the Turkish state has imposed neutrality on the Kurdish political movement that for the past decade had invested in the opposition. Presumably, the Kurdish movement recognizes that President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan won't accommodate its demands for Turkish-Kurdish equality. Yet the Kurds are nonetheless compelled to rely on Erdoğan's goodwill. The founder of the PKK Abdullah Öcalan is at an impasse. To have any chance of achieving his professed objective -- a democratic, bi-national republic of Turkey -- Öcalan will need to forge an alliance with Turkish progressives who distrust and shun him, and the agreement between him and Erdoğan has only made this harder.

BACKGROUND: On August 10, the Turkish parliament with a vast majority passed a bill providing limited amnesty for demobilized militants of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). While 468 lawmakers voted yes, only 88 voted no. 54 of those who rejected the bill hailed from the main opposition New Party -- a majority of the party group -- and 29 from the nationalist opposition Good Party.

After waging an insurgency against the Turkish state since 1984, the PKK announced it was formally dissolving last year, following an order from its imprisoned founder Abdullah Öcalan. Öcalan, who won't be included in the amnesty, praised the bill as heralding a process of democratization that is "as significant as the founding of the (Turkish) republic." Meanwhile, the speaker of the Turkish parliament Numan Kurtulmuş proclaimed the end of Turkey's longtime Kurdish issue and claimed that the "liquidation of the terrorist organization" and the amnesty bill presage unity and solidarity in Turkey. Others though were less cheerful.

There's widespread suspicion in opposition circles that Öcalan, as part of the deal, has secretly agreed to endorse the reelection of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, an allegation that the representatives of the Kurdish political movement in Turkey have denied. And while the amnesty deal predictably drew the ire of die-hard Turkish nationalists, it has also brought to the surface the Turkish nationalism that

animates much of the Turkish left, with the leader of the center-left New Party Özgür Özel, who voted yes to the bill, failing to sway the majority of his own party group.

Historically, reconciling leftist class politics and Turkish and Kurdish nationalisms has proved impossible, even though the Kurdish movement was initially part of the broader left in Turkey in the 1960s. But Turkish Marxists demanded that their Kurdish allies prioritize the class struggle and postpone the realization of their ethnic aspirations until the advent of socialism. Öcalan broke ranks with them and in 1978 launched an exclusively Kurdish revolutionary struggle for an independent and socialist Kurdistan, but he abandoned orthodox Marxism-Leninism after his imprisonment in 1999. In a message to the International Conference for Peace and Democratic Society in Istanbul last December, Öcalan called for “reclaiming socialism through peace and building a democratic society,” arguing that “actual existing socialism” has been a failure because it was “nothing but a reproduction of statist mentality.” Instead, “today the time has come to advance toward democratic emancipation on the basis of democratic society socialism,” Öcalan opined.

Yet it’s questionable that the specter of “democratic society socialism” stands any realistic chance of mobilizing wider support. It’s not only that leftist ideals enjoy scant appeal in Turkish society. Öcalan is hardly taken seriously at all by Turkish progressives – the left-wing Kurdish movement’s prospective allies -- who are convinced that Öcalan has now become an Erdoğan ally. Duran Kalkan, a member of the PKK leadership, lamented that the left and other democrats haven’t done enough to break the hold of “chauvinistic nationalism” and to mobilize societal support for peace. At best though, Öcalan’s motives and objectives are difficult to divine, and some statements attributed to him seemingly contradict his avowed objective of building grass-roots democracy. They intimate instead that the Kurdish leader privileges a top-down approach and seeks to forge an alliance with the repressive Turkish state.

Öcalan has on several occasions during the past decades hailed the accord in the 16th century between the Ottoman sultanate and Kurdish tribal leaders that

secured Kurdish autonomy and helped tip the geopolitical balance in favor of the Ottomans and against Persia. Recent comments by him in the same vein have reinforced the perception that he has in mind a similar, mutually beneficial accord with the Turkish state today. Öcalan has also reportedly professed that the Kurdish movement will become “a pillar of the state, just like the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) is.”

The cadres of the far-right MHP are entrenched in the state security apparatus and the leader of the MHP Devlet Bahçeli has been the main driver of the reconciliation process with the PKK. Counter-intuitively, the far right nationalist leader – who as deputy prime minister a quarter century ago insisted that Öcalan be executed -- and the Kurdish rebel leader have formed an unlikely political partnership. On October 10, Bahçeli reiterated his call that Öcalan be endowed with official status and appointed “coordinator” of the repatriation of process of the demobilized PKK militants.

IMPLICATIONS: The fact that the founder of the PKK consented to disarm and dissolve the PKK without any prior agreement with Turkey has remained a source of speculation and has driven uncertainty about the current political process. When peace talks were held between 2013 and 2015, Öcalan refused to tell the PKK to lay down its weapons without a formal agreement with Turkey, saying “really, how do you drop armed struggle without an agreement? All over the world, in these sorts of conflicts, weapons are the last thing that gets dropped.”

Why, a decade later, has Öcalan seemed to abandon this condition? Öcalan always knew that without the threat of war there was little reason for Turkey to pay attention to the Kurdish cause. Ultimately, though, he was compelled to reverse course because the PKK had hit an impasse. The armed struggle had been faltering for years and could not match superior Turkish military technology.

Nonetheless, Öcalan is adamant that the dissolution of the PKK and the end of the armed struggle don’t amount to any capitulation. In a message to the Peace and Democratic Integration conference in London on September 29, Öcalan insisted that the Kurdish movement hasn’t surrendered and enumerated the core Kurdish demands: constitutional guarantees for the Kurdish language, culture and identity,

local self-rule and the creation of conditions that will enable the participants in the armed struggle to assume responsibilities in democratic politics.

Reasonably, Öcalan recognizes that the regime of Erdoğan, which has cracked down on the Turkish main opposition and still keeps Kurdish politicians incarcerated, will not devolve power to the Kurds or countenance activism, however peaceful, for Kurdish rights and democratic reforms. But ultimately that may not matter to Öcalan who has developed an alternative strategy that seeks to operate outside of repressive state institutions. The rebel leader has earlier argued that the Kurds needed to grab power locally, create democratic institutions from the bottom up. Presumably, Öcalan views the militants who will now return home following the amnesty bill as the avant-garde of this people's emancipation.

On the face of it, this strategy of democratic emancipation from below can't be squared with what looks like an ambition to forge an alliance with the repressive Turkish state. But endeavoring to become a "pillar of the state" doesn't necessarily imply that Kurdish democratic demands will be surrendered and that the Kurdish political movement will join the alliance that upholds the Erdoğan regime, as the Turkish opposition assumes it already has. It makes more sense to view Öcalan's words about becoming a pillar of the state in light of his objective to reinvent Turkey as a state that belongs to the Kurds as much as to the Turks. Yet this still leaves the question of how the aspirations of the Kurdish political movement will be advanced unresolved.

CONCLUSION: For the past decade, the Kurdish political movement in Turkey invested in the opposition, boosting the fortunes of the once presidential hopeful Ekrem İmamoğlu, who was elected mayor of Istanbul in 2019 and reelected in 2024 with crucial Kurdish support. The support of the Kurds also helped the main opposition party carry the local elections nationwide in 2024. That alliance now belongs to the past. The peace process between the Turkish state and the PKK has imposed neutrality on a Kurdish leadership that can ill afford to antagonize Erdoğan.

Presumably, the Kurdish movement recognizes that Erdoğan won't accommodate its demands for Turkish-Kurdish equality. Yet the Kurds are nonetheless compelled

to rely on Erdoğan's goodwill. The opposition has no realistic chance of bringing down his regime and has moreover demonstrated its hostility toward the Kurds, voting against the amnesty bill for the PKK militants.

Öcalan is at an impasse. To have any chance of achieving his professed objective -- a democratic, bi-national republic of Turkey -- he will need to forge an alliance with Turkish progressives who distrust and shun him, and the agreement between him and Erdoğan has only made this harder.

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