Between Turkey´s AKP and the Gülen movement: Perspectives on the Kurdish peace process

*Pinar Tank, PRIO*

**Introduction**

Until recently, Turkey’s Justice and Development Party with its conservative Muslim roots was held up as an example for other political parties in the region with an Islamic identity seeking to consolidate political power. Over ten consecutive years in power, returning majoritarian governments is a feat in any country, and all the more so in Turkey where since the start of the multiparty system, the norm has been for weak coalition governments. This success meant that, by and large, until the start of 2013, the AKP was regarded both within and beyond the region as a model for the Arab world.

In 2005, BBC Correspondent Chris Morris referred to an AKP led Turkey as “the new Turkish model – trying to mix greater democracy and Islam together”. After over a decade in power, the AKP´s response to secular opposition in 2013 questions the desirability of the model. In fact, it may be more expedient (albeit less appealing) to replace the ‘model’ idea with that of the Turkish case as a ‘laboratory’, conducive to examining the political development of an Islamist party in power over time.

As a party with Muslim roots, AK consistently expressed its insistence on the appellation Muslim democrat or conservative democrat, in an early on effort, to reassure sceptics of its commitment to the reform agenda and not least, the separation between state and religion. This report focuses on one particular aspect of the AKP´s policies – it´s efforts at resolving the Kurdish issue, which gathered pace in 2013. Reaching the point of direct negotiations has taken time. Already after the 2011 elections, there were expectations that the AKP would undertake the long-awaited and much-promised reform of the constitution giving greater recognition to the rights of Kurds. The strength of the party´s position in government led the renowned Kurdish politician Leyla Zana to declare that Prime Minister Erdoğan was in a unique position to resolve the long-standing conflict. It was with this optimism that Kurds, and many Turks, viewed the start off the Kurdish peace process. However, optimism faded as the AKP´s internal challenges grew.

The Kurdish case is illustrative as it has wider implications for the AKP´s understanding of liberal democracy and by extension, the direction of the Turkish state. This is a timely question following a year (2013) in which Turkey has experienced the Gezi Park protests and continues to contend with mass demonstrations and violent government reprisals. At the time of writing, AKP elites are embroiled in a corruption scandal that is raising questions about the future of the party.
The AKP’s rise as a society oriented religious party:

This report steps back in time to better understand the thinking that underpins the AKP’s understanding of the state – not least, it’s boundaries. The AKP is a party that in its early days grew out of, and learned from, the Islamist movement and its “engagement politics” with the Kemalist state. The dual influences of Islamic societal movements and previous Islamic political parties were formative in choosing how to frame its own politics. This report aims to provide an analysis of how the party approaches the Kurdish question within the limitations of the state.

The AKP has had to overcome challenges to its power from established secular elites as well as the powerful Turkish military. The party has benefitted from the social learning that followed the closure of five previous political parties with an Islamist agenda. The novelty in the AKP approach was the shift from direct confrontation with the state to societal mobilization respecting the confines set by the secular state. This restrained position is presently being tested: With the self-confidence that comes from leading three majoritarian governments, an ineffectual opposition, and the weakened position of the Turkish military after 2007, the AKP no longer has a “disciplining” force – neither within or beyond the state - to counter its power.

When the AKP swept to power in 2002, it was the political expression of a new, largely provincial and pious middle class. Economic liberalization in Turkey from the 1980s onwards allowed a space for the growth of “society oriented Islamic movements”. The grassroots activities of these organisations translated into successful political mobilisation where previously, state oriented Islamic movements had failed. It was the Naksibendi order, the sufi sects and the National View (Milli Görus) party, the first openly religious political party, that were the three of the most influential drivers behind the rise of the AKP. In order to understand the AKP’s approach to the state, it is useful to briefly revisit the party’s formative influences – examining both society and state oriented Islamic movements.

The Gülen movement

The most important of the society-based movements is that of the reclusive charismatic Islamist cleric Fetullah Gülen, who has over the last decade grown as a political force in Turkey (despite living in the United States). Discussions over the influence of the Gülen movement in Turkish politics and its relations to the AKP are the central question in Turkish politics at the time of writing. From the perspective of this report, the relevant point is in understanding the extent to which the thinking of the Gülen movement informed the AKP’s approach to the state. The AKP’s thinking on state reform has consequences for the resolution of the Kurdish issue as does the present power struggle between the AKP and the Gülen movement. Both of these questions will be analysed in the final section of the report.

Although organic links to the expansive Gülen movement were key in building up a power base of supporters for the AKP early on, the Gülen movement, popularly called Cemaat (“the community”) or the Hizmet (“Service”) movement, is in essence quite a different creature from the Justice and Development party. While both are part of the conservative Islamic groupings in Turkish politics, their roots differ. The AKP has its roots in the orthodox Islamist Milli Görus (National View) movement closer to the lines of the Muslim Brotherhood; the Gülen movement is Turkish nationalist and modernist with a global outreach. Due to differing confessional loyalties, previous conservative religious parties in Turkey did not have the support of Fetullah Gülen. (Earlier Islamist parties such as the National View Party and the Welfare party [Refah] had roots in the Naksibendi order). Furthermore, earlier Islamist parties were anti-statist which was ideologically incompatible with the Gülenist view on the state.

Christofer Houston’s (2001) categorisation is expedient for understanding how the Gülenists approach to the state. He divides Islamist responses to the Kurdish question into the following three categories: statist Islamist, Islamist and Kurdish Islamist. Of these three, the first two provide an insight into the similarities between the Gülen movement and the AKP. Statist Islamist approaches as adopted by Fetullah Gülen regard a separate Kurdish ethnicity as an anathema to their Turkish nationalist ideology. Opposition is to the nature of the state rather than its very existence. As Houston states: “Statist Islamism is Islamist, then, in its moral condemnation of the values engendered by an anarchical liberal capitalism...” Its concern is in opposing the anti-laic lifestyle of secular Kemalist culture - of the elite as well as the working class radical (communist).
This contrasts with the Islamist (anti-statist views) of earlier parties for whom the Turkish state in its republican form is illegitimate and therefore cannot prevail upon the allegiance of its Muslim subjects. Thus, active opposition to the existing system is legitimate until the dawn of a new social order that conforms to Islamic law. That being said, earlier Islamist parties tempered their views on consent to the state according to whether they were in power or in opposition.

The movement’s decision to remain on the sidelines of Turkish politics, focusing instead on educational and charity works, meant that it did not openly endorse political parties. However, it did develop a relationship to the centre-right in the 1980s and 1990s. In the 1999 elections, the Gülenist movement helped Bülent Ecevit’s Democratic Left party (DSP) to victory. The DSP’s nationalism resounded with its own ideology. The financial crisis of 2000 discredited existing political parties of the centre right as well as the DSP and opened the way for the founding of the AKP. This was the first Islamist political party to which the Gülenist movement lent its support.

For the outside observer, it can be difficult to understand how a religious movement can rise to the position of power that the Gülenists presently enjoy without appreciating the extent of the networks that form the movement and the commitment of its followers. The Cemaat can briefly be described as a “transnational religious network of schools, finance and community services” whose inspiration is to be found in the writings of a Kurdish Sufi Mystic, Bediuzzaman Sa’id-i Nursi (1873 – 1960), founder of the Nur (light) movement. Its followers are of the Nurcu order and distinguish themselves from the predominantly Naksibendi persuasion of Turkish religiously conservative political parties. Nurcu ideology is based on the Risale-I Nur, a compilation of fourteen texts written between 1910 and 1950 addressing the doubts and questions surrounding the basic doctrines and principles of Islam. According to a leading scholar of the movement, M. Han Yavuz, “Nurcu’s initial goal was the internal transformation of the individual as the first step in a three-stage process, which was to be followed by the implementation of faith in everyday life before culminating in the restoration of the Sharia.”

The Risale-I Nur is renowned for its “modernity”, resulting from the analysis of Islamic sources and a reinterpretation of the texts in accordance with the time in which Said Nursi lived. It is also unique in that it includes details of Said Nursi’s life and personal reflections. The primary themes of the Risale-I Nur are “a defense of Islam against positivism and an attempt to prove that the Qur’an is compatible with modern science.” The Nurcu movements distinguished itself from other tariquats through its orientation towards texts rather than the esoteric oral tradition. While traditional tariquats were highly institutionalized, the Nurcus remained relatively loosely structured. The spread of Fetullah Gülen’s texts and sermons has been the force behind the growth of his movement.

The Turco-Islamic heritage is one of the cornerstones of the Gülen movement’s ideology. Notably, Gülenists believe that Islam as it is practised in Turkey is unique and that it is incumbent on Turks to spread their version of “Turkish Islam”. In the words of Fetullah Gülen:

“Despite the passing of 1,400 years since its writing, the Koran is a book whose voice cannot be silenced. And the Turks who have stood as its protector since the ninth century, have not yet exhausted its riches...They have understood it with such modesty, with such devotion to the truth it contains that since the age of the Prophet and his Companions, no people has so acted as its defender, so become the standard-bearer of its message. The duty and function given to this people is a blessing.”

Nostalgia for the Ottoman Empire as the example of social harmony and tolerance also forms a basis for Cemaat thinking. Thus, Turkey’s role as a “model” for the Middle East reinforced by the AKP’s neo-Ottoman discourse resonates well with Gülenists.

Cemaat emphasizes the importance of hizmet – the altruistic services of the organization. The Gülenists endorse the development of a dynamic capitalist economy which will strengthen a “golden generation” raised in Gülenist thinking who will in turn be able to negotiate the tensions of modern secular living, capitalist economics, and strong personal faith. The Gülenist school network is the foundation stone of the organisation and in Turkey includes thousands of select secondary schools, colleges and student dormitories as well as private universities (among them Fatih University in Istanbul.) Cemaat operates up to a third of the existing 4000 preparatory
schools in Turkey – now under threat of closure.” These schools have also provided a recruiting ground for future Gülenists. The outreach of the Gülen movement is such that it is both a “religious group, political action pact...and civil society organization.”

When the Gülen movement decided to place its support behind the AKP, not only did it provide a support base for the party, but it also illustrated a framework for the party’s relations to the state that was non-confrontational. As noted above, Gülenists have not traditionally been an oppositional movement against the state. Berna Turam, author of one of the most comprehensive sociological studies of the organization, writes that the movement, with its “affinities to the state...mobilized (sic) to make more space for the faithful individual within the boundaries of the secular Republic.” Thus the emphasis has been on the right of individuals to practice their faith privately, not on challenging the Kemalist state through the insistence on state led religion. As a consequence, the methodology of the movement has focused not on overturning the state from above but working from below to allow for greater expressions of ‘cultural Islam’. Among the core beliefs of the Gülen movement is that religion is the key to good citizenship and that one can be “a democrat and in favour of civil society out of religious convictions”.

This being said, expressions of private worship are interpreted by strict Kemalists as a challenge to the secular state and there has always been a competing, less benevolent, view of the Gülen movement. This is now gathering strength as a result of the latter’s increasing involvement in Turkish politics. Critics argue that while the Gülen movement may be nationalist in its support of a strong state, its respect for the secular nature of the state is dubious. Critical scholars and former followers insist that taqiya, religiously allowed dissimulation, is behind the avowed commitment to the Kemalist state. An early example of this is a 1999 televised footage of sermons Fetullah Gülen delivered to his followers and broadcast on ATV national television on 19 June 1999. In the sermons, Gülen outlines the methods whereby the movement may achieve its eventual objective of overturning the secular republic:

“You must move in the arteries of the system without anyone noticing your existence until you reach all the power centers...until the conditions are ripe, they (the followers) must continue like this....You must wait until such time as you have gotten all the state power, until you have brought to your side all the power of the constitutional institutions in Turkey.”

Given the sheer size of the movement, its presence within Turkey’s formal institutions, and its resulting political power, concerns about the movement’s political aims have been proven to be all too real. The Gülen movement’s shadow has particularly been cast over the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer trials, which through the detention of countless military officers, among others, closed the chapter on the role of the Turkish Armed Forces in political life. At the time, it was Gülenist sympathisers in the judiciary who assisted the AKP in consolidating its hold on power.

A further criticism has been the movement’s lack of transparency. This is best illustrated through the absence of an internally inclusive and open hierarchy. Gülen serves as an absolute leader of a hierarchical order that is composed of a select number of elder brothers (abiler) at the top, gradually increasing in number towards the bottom. Following a strict ranking order, each rank is given information relevant to their activities but discouraged from questioning or requesting more information from higher ranks. Even scholars sympathetic to Cemaat (affiliated with Gülen funded Fatih university), point out that the “organizational structure of the movement is seen as hierarchical and somewhat non-democratic”, adding that this is “somewhat unexpected given the community’s liberal attitudes and tolerance of differences”. However, the refusal to make the link between internal and external workings of the movement, and question its transparency, results in a one-dimensional view of the movement by Western commentators.

In short, an important criticism is the movement’s refusal to engage directly in the democratic process while wielding political power over the system. This, in turn, feeds into the fears of its critics. Fetullah Gülen has on several occasions (most recently in June 2012) been invited back to Turkey but has declined to return for health reasons. His return to Turkey would mean that some of the mystique associated with being a reclusive imam in the far reaches of the Pennsylvania woods would disappear. Gülen’s return would place him under the scrutiny of the Turkish press and he would be subject to greater accountability over the movement’s political aims.

At the beginning of the AKP’s time in office, Gülen’s and Erdoğan’s aims coincided, creating a co-existence in which the power of one reinforced the other. But by the AKP’s third term in office, the two former allies parted ways. The possibility that Erdoğan will remain in power either through revisions to the constitution or to the AKP’s political guidelines makes the confrontation
between the two significant for political developments in Turkey. The Kurdish issue has both been a catalyst of the rupture and risks being a victim of its consequences. Implications for the Kurdish issue will be addressed in the final sections of the report.

Taking on the secular state: Lessons learned

An equally formative influence has been the experiences of conservative parties preceding the AKP – a political history shaped by Islamist parties disciplined by the Kemalist state. Since the 1970s, parties with what was perceived to be an Islamist agenda have faced closure by the state. With each closure, an element of social learning ensued on the part of both Islamist actors and the state. Vague, often arbitrary boundaries, allowed the state to exercise its control. There then followed an ensuing testing of these boundaries - as parties were shut down and reopened in new incarnations. These included the National Order Party (banned 1971), the Welfare Party (banned 1998), and the Virtue Party (banned 2001). The National Salvation Party was closed after the 1980 coup. As for the AKP, they have faced two closure cases, once in 2002 and again in 2008, both unsuccessful.

Both the pro-statist influence of the Gülen movement and the experiences of earlier Islamist parties resulted in the AKPs cautious approach to the Kemalist state. In its early days, the AKP opted for building consensus and a pragmatic approach to politics. They favoured cooperation rather than direct confrontation, working at the grassroots level to increase their support base. Not least, the party embraced the human rights and reform agenda in pursuing EU membership for Turkey.

This, in turn, raised hopes that the party presented a real attempt at reforming Turkey’s democracy. However, neither the ideology of the Gülen movement, nor earlier incarnations of Islamist parties held a liberal understanding of democracy. Despite this, hopes were high among liberals that the AKP would adopt a reform agenda when they voted the AKP into power in 2002.

The AKP’s reform agenda: The impact of regional upheavals

In its initial period in power, the AKP offered a promise of reform, making EU membership its first priority. Rather than confronting the state, however, the AKP adopted the globalised discourse of universal human rights, advocating for the reform of the Kemalist state. This had the added benefit of deflecting the concerns of the former secular elite (and Western partners) that the AKP would pursue an Islamist agenda.

The discourse was well received among liberals anticipating that Erdoğan would fulfil his promises of reforming Turkey into a consolidated liberal democracy. The promise of EU membership, embraced by the new government, was the incentive needed to begin the process and not least, take on the old Kemalist guard. The first period in power was spent under the watchful eye of the military and a nervous secular establishment concerned about the AKP’s “hidden agenda”. Both were reassured by the AKP’s pursuit of EU membership as a primary foreign policy goal. The AKP’s commitment to the process of greater democratisation was also popular internationally, strengthening the idea of “Turkey as a model” for the convivial co-existence of the secular state with a Muslim identity.

The reform and democracy agenda that the AKP adopted in its first term, gave rise to hopes that the Kurdish issue would, after over twenty years of sporadic, half-hearted attempts, finally receive sustained attention, leading to the path of resolution. The ceasefire that followed the capture of PKK leader Öcalan in 1999 lasted until 2004 making conciliatory steps by the Turkish state politically possible. In a historic speech at a rally in Diyarbakir in 2005, Prime Minister Erdoğan declared, “the Kurdish problem is my problem.” Furthermore, he held the Turkish state responsible for mismanaging its relations to the Kurds, stating that Kurdish grievances could only
be resolved through greater democracy, not repression. The first period of the AKP’s rule was a reflection of this new approach with significant improvements in Kurdish rights from 2002-2004. This included the right to publish and broadcast in Kurdish as well as opening up for private language courses in Kurdish.

However, the regional context complicated the AKP’s efforts. Once the Iraq war began in 2003, the window of opportunity for the government to address the Kurdish issue politically gradually diminished in line with the strengthening of the Kurdish position in Northern Iraq. This was particularly the case as the Kurds sought to include Kirkuk in the semi-autonomous region in the North and the PKK resumed its activities in Turkey from bases in Northern Iraq. Meanwhile rising nationalism from anti-EU and anti-US sentiments leading up to the election in 2007 further circumscribed the government’s room for manoeuvre. Parallel to the worsening security situation, a clampdown began in the political arena against the pro-Kurdish Democratic Turkey Party, the first pro-Kurdish party in Parliament since 1991. As with its predecessors, it too was shut down in 2008 - making it the fifth such closure since 1993. The DTP was replaced by the BDP – the present interlocutors of the government – who entered Parliament in 2011 with 36 independent deputies.

In 2009, President Abdullah Gül declared: “The Kurdish issue is Turkey’s number one issue”. Reinforcing Gül’s words with actions, the AKP launched the widely inclusive Democratic initiative process (Demokratik açılım süreci). The initiative was a project aimed at improving the standards of democracy, freedoms and the respect for human rights in Turkey. Although the democratic initiative process also addressed the grievances of other groups (including among others Armenians, Alevi and the Greek Orthodox), plans specifically aimed at resolving the Kurdish issue received the greatest attention, once again raising hopes that the government was serious about finding a political settlement. However, there were serious flaws in the process. None of the three parliamentary parties in opposition supported the Kurdish Opening and did their utmost to raise nationalist sentiments against the process. The Kemalist Republican People’s Party (CHP) accused the AKP of “separatism, cowing to the goals of the terrorist PKK, violating the constitution, causing fratricide and/or ethnic polarization between Kurds and Turks, being an agent of foreign states, and even betraying the country.” The far right Nationalist Action Party (MHP) outright accused the AKP of treason. Even support from the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP) was not forthcoming as the DTP refused the AKP government’s demand to condemn the PKK. Among the gravest errors was the unforeseen consequences arising from AKP’s amnesty for former PKK members. Militants were allowed to return to Turkey from Northern Iraq in October 2009 whereupon local Kurds gave them a hero’s welcome. This had the effect of inflaming Turkish public opinion. The banning of the DTP by the Constitutional Court in 2009 for its ties with the PKK effectively spelled the end of the Kurdish Opening.

In the two following years, there was a marked slowdown in the AKP’s reform efforts domestically. The outbreak of the Syrian civil war in early 2011 further circumscribed the political space available for addressing the issue. The relationship to Syria had improved as part of Foreign Minister Ahmed Davutoğlu’s “zero-problems with neighbours” policy. Plans were in place for a free trade zone with Syria and as the bonds between the two states deepened, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs even aspired to a peace-building role - facilitating between Syria and Israel. Thus, when Prime Minister Erdoğan’s “back-door diplomacy” failed to convince Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to pull back from the brink in 2011, it was interpreted as a personal defeat as much as a diplomatic failure. It also set the stage for Turkey’s active engagement in the Syria conflict against the regime through its support of oppositional Sunni Arab groups. Furthermore, Turkey lent its support – both diplomatic and defensive - to the Syrian National Council and as a result, bore the costs of the conflict on Turkish soil.

Turkey’s fears in Syria have always been centred around the Kurdish issue. As the Syrian conflict has developed into a proxy war, Turkey has had a hand in attempting to play kingmaker among the Kurds. Iraqi Kurdish leader Messoud Barzani has had the support of the Erdoğan government in his efforts to unite Turkey’s “preferred Kurds” in Syria. Turkey fears that the dominant Syrian Kurdish PYD, in effect a brother organisation of the PKK, will be strengthened as a result of the war. Therefore, Turkish support for Barzani’s PUK against the PYD in northeastern Syria is an attempt to prevent the strengthening of the PKK. Playing on Turkish fears, the Assad regime has allowed Kurds in the northeast to take control of several towns and cities making them the de facto regional government. Among other steps, the PYD at the end of 2013 announced plans for the creation of a Parliament of 82 members covering three districts across a region with valuable energy resources. This is likely to serve as further inspiration for Turkey’s own restive Kurds.
Developments on the Kurdish issue are summarized briefly in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period in power</th>
<th>Status of democratization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Democratic initiative (2005)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 2007 - 2011     | • Kurdish opening (2009) ends in disappointment  
|                 | • Reform slows down.     |
| 2011 - present  | • Criticism of judiciary (Er- genekon and KCK process)  
|                 | • Freedom of expression/assembly circumscribed  
|                 | • New Kurdish peace initiative (2012-2013) |

Kurdish voters and the AKP

The reform momentum outlined in the table above has translated to Kurdish votes at elections. Reform efforts during the AKP’s first term (2002 – 2007) were sufficient to secure greater Kurdish voters in the subsequent 2007 general elections in which the party doubled its vote from 27% to 54% (of votes counted from eastern and southeastern cities that traditionally voted for pro-Kurdish parties). Reasons for this included the government’s efforts at increased cultural autonomy for the Kurds, improved infrastructure and the sentiment of Muslim fraternity.

Many Kurds saw the 2011 election as particularly important. As a result of the AKPs internal rules, it will be the last term in office for Erdoğan as Prime Minister. The only means for Erdoğan to remain at the helm of power would be a revision to the Turkish constitution, taking Turkey from a parliamentary system to a presidential one. So, while many Turks in opposition to the AKP feared that the party would win the election in 2011 with the required majority to change the constitution, many Kurds regarded the possibility to draft a new constitution as an opportunity to finally secure greater democratic rights and freedoms. However, these hopes did not translate into votes – undoubtedly a consequence of the lack of reform momentum since 2007. Instead it was the in the pro-Kurdish BDP that increased its share of the vote by 70% in the 2011 elections, making the Southeast one of the poorest performing regions for the AKP. This was a lesson for the AKP: With a local election in March 2014, a possible Presidential referendum in August of the same year and a national election due in June 2015, capturing the Kurdish vote will be crucial.

The AKP and the Kurdish impasse: A frozen peace process

Leading a strong majoritarian government after the 2011 elections and with an eye on the Presidency in 2014, Prime Minister Erdoğan recognised the political capital to be gained from the Kurdish issue. Furthermore, the lack of a solution by 2011 was beginning to have a political cost as casualties soared - the highest recorded in a decade. In part this was due to the disappointments of the past. But equally, the tougher Kurdish position rested on the promise of a future in which they envisaged a new position for themselves in the Middle East. As one analyst noted, Kurds were now “important shapers of the Middle East, rather than its victims.” For the AKP, this only added to their concerns for the trajectory of the Kurdish issue in Turkey. Inspired by the autonomy of Kurds in Iraq and Syria, the discourse of Kurdish leaders shifted from the cultural recognition of their identity within the bounds of the Turkish nation state to greater claims for autonomy as illustrated by the following statement by a leading PKK commander, Duran Kalkan:
“The aim is not just to inflict damage on the opponent but also to bring about democratic autonomy, build a democratic self-government for the Kurdish people”.

Seeking to allay potential demands for greater autonomy, the AKP had promised a revision of Turkey’s constitution to address the understanding of citizenship and recognition to its Kurdish citizens. By and large, legal and political obstacles that are the remnants of the 1982 constitution written under military rule have frustrated Kurdish aspirations. Not only is Turkey’s present constitution one that reflects the time in which it was written - under a military government - but for the Kurds, the most relevant point is that it defines citizenship exclusively through membership in the “Turkish nation.” The argument is that a more inclusive understanding of citizenship would go far in supporting their legitimate demands for recognition. Beyond the central question of removing the emphasis on Turkish ethnicity, Kurds broadly focus on the removal of prohibitions on cultural and political rights and an element of administrative decentralization.44 The latter is problematic as it raises the specter of autonomy.

Nonetheless, the expectation was that the AKP, after winning the 2011 elections, would initiate the long-awaited process of constitutional reform particularly since the resolution to the Kurdish issue and a new constitution were deemed the most significant issues before the AKP following the election.45 The Turkish Parliament established a committee for the writing of the constitution in October 2011 (but it only began its work in May 2012).46

Termed the Commission for Constitutional Agreement, it is intended as a consensual and inclusive process for reforming the constitution. As such, all political parties are represented within the committee with three deputies each. The work on the new constitution was intended to have been completed by the end of 2012 but at that point, only 103 articles were completed, with agreement forthcoming on less than thirty-one of these. The commission requested an extension of their mandate (spurred on by Erdoğan threatening that the AKP would single handily engage in drafting the new constitution). The commission’s new deadline was set for April 2013 but there is little to suggest that this date will be met due to fundamental disagreements among the parties represented in the commission.47 On Kurdish demands for revisions to the constitution, both the secular Kemalist Republican People’s Party (CHP) and the right wing Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) are against a redefining of nationhood and citizenship formally recognising the plurality of ethnicities.

Nevertheless, with steps initiated to revise the Turkish constitution in 2011, the government announced peace talks in October 2012. These were launched in early 2013 with the cooperation of the BDP. Significantly, they included imprisoned PKK leader Öcalan as a key interlocutor for the first time.48 A few month’s later, Öcalan declared a ceasefire on Kurdish television during the Newroz celebrations in March, stating: “The weapons should fall silent, politics should speak.”49

The AKP’s Democratic Reform packages

Despite the public declaration of a peace process, there was little movement in the spring of 2013. On 30 September 2013, Prime Minister Erdoğan announced long awaited package of reforms to a mixed reception in an effort to re-invigorate the stalled peace process. However, despite the fact that the bulk of the 18-point reform package was related to the Kurdish issue, it fell short of the expectations of key actors such as the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party, the BDP.50 The Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), an umbrella organization of Kurdish people’s assemblies representing Kurds both in Turkey and in the region (through a confederal system) were equally unimpressed by the government’s efforts. Their response to the reform package was that the AKP must recognize the Kurds as a separate nation – a demand that could only be met through constitutional reform.

The perceived inadequacy of the AKP’s response to Kurdish demands came at a cost and in September 2013, Kurdish rebels announced that they would suspend their retreat from Turkey as a result of the AKP’s failure to deliver on reforms. An even more ominous warning came from PKK leader Cemil Bayik, airing the possibility of “reverting to armed struggle” and a threat of civil war.51 However, the pro-Kurdish party BDP (Peace and Democracy Party) leader Selahattin
Demirtas reassuringly stated that, in his opinion, the PKK would not break the ceasefire until the completion of local elections in March, after which the future of the process would have to be re-evaluated.\textsuperscript{52}

With time narrowing towards local elections in March 2014 and in the midst of a brewing corruption scandal, yet another democratisation package was submitted to parliament on 5 December 2013. Included in it was the right to education in Kurdish in private schools, the use of Kurdish in election campaigns and the removal of a ban on the use of the letters Q, W and X - specific to Kurdish spelling and by extension, politically symbolic. However, more important Kurdish demands, including the release of Kurdish prisoners and political activists, the lifting of restrictions on Kurdish-language education also in public schools and a reduction in the 10% election threshold necessary to gain a seat in the Turkish Parliament, were not met.\textsuperscript{53} Most importantly, the December package did not sufficiently address the difficult issue of constitutional reform.

The frustration over the lack of momentum over the peace process and the AKP’s meagre offerings resulted in the outbreak of violence once again in the beginning of December 2013 resulting in the deaths of two demonstrators. Demonstrations were held in several cities including Istanbul, Yuksevoka, Diyarbakir, Dogubeyazit and Hakkari. Police responded to Kurdish protesters throwing rocks and Molotov cocktails with tear gas, water cannons and rubber bullets. With the risk of yet another failed process on the horizon, PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, denounced the killings labelling them “a great provocation against the peace process”.\textsuperscript{54}

While the AKP rose to power on the promise of redressing the weaknesses of Turkey’s democracy and through this, improving relations between the state and its Kurdish citizens, at best, it is offering what Israeli sociologist Smooha (1989) terms an “ethnic democracy”.\textsuperscript{55} This is described briefly as a democracy that contains “the non-democratic institutionalization of the dominance of one ethnic group”.\textsuperscript{56} (To this could be added one religious group, Turkey’s Sunni majority). It is a democracy that only succeeds in meeting the procedural minimum definition of democracy (civil and political rights for all permanent residents interested in them).

Briefly, Smooha’s model includes, among other criteria, the following relevant features:

- Ethnic nationalism installs a single core ethnic nation in the state.
- The state separates membership in the single core ethnic nation from citizenship. The state allows non-core groups to conduct parliamentary and extra-parliamentary struggle for change.
- The state perceives non-core groups as a threat.
- The state imposes some control on non-core groups.

While Kurdish expectations are for the revision of the constitution to reflect a multination state with equal political recognition for all its citizens, the AKP vision of an ethnic democracy identifies one core group as more equal than others and continues to see non-core groups as a threat.

The Kurdish issue divides Gülen and Erdoğan

Efforts to resolve the Kurdish issue have disrupted the political accord between the AKP and the Gülen movement. Despite the support given by Cemaat to the AKP in its rise to power, the end of 2013 saw the contours of a struggle between the two strongest forces in Turkish politics. The catalyst for the fallout between the two earlier allies was the decision by the Erdoğan to close down the wide network of preparatory schools run by the Gülen movement. These have been a key source of income for the organisation but more importantly, have also created allegiances to the movement among its students. The Gülenists, for their part were moved into action by the AKP’s third consecutive victory in 2011 and the possibility of a further concentration of power in Erdoğan’s hands through a revision of the constitution. While the decision to close down the schools may have been the final straw that split the alliance between the two, tensions had already arisen over other the AKP’s handling of the Kurdish issue.

On 8 January 2012, shortly after the announcement of the peace process, Fetullah Gülen generically declared his support saying: “There is benefit in peace”.\textsuperscript{57} Despite this supportive statement, the movement was critical of the process chosen by the government. The AKP’s decision to begin the peace process with the PKK diverged from the Gülenist view of the problem by recognising the PKK’s status as a negotiating part. The Gülen movement has consistently sought to “dilute
and contain radical and exclusivist manifestations of both ethnic Kurdish and Turkish nationalism through shared ties to Islamic faith and culture” – a reflection of its ethno-nationalist outlook. While insisting that Gülenists are for a dialogue-based solution, Today’s Zaman, one of the major news outlets owned by the movement criticised the government’s efforts at building a dialogue with “the terrorist PKK”. In an opinion editorial columnist Ali H. Aslan clarifies: “The Gülen movement has always supported multi-track approaches to the Kurdish question, which include not only security-oriented but also social, economic and political elements for a solution. Their brand of nationalism is much closer to patriotism than ethnic nationalism. Plus, adherence to Islam usually softens ethnic conflicts.”

The first indications of a break between the two came in 2012 after it was publically revealed that secret talks with representatives of the PKK had been held intermittently over the past four years. Exploratory meetings began in 2006 but it was only at the end of 2008 that the two delegations held a series of direct high level negotiations in Oslo facilitated by a third guarantor power, presumed to be the UK. The Turkish delegation was headed by the head of Turkey’s intelligence service- first Emre Taner, and from 2010 Hakan Fidan - assisted by a deputy under secretary, Afet Gunes. On the PKK side of the table were Zubeyir Aydar, Musrafa Karasu, a military leader and former member of the PKK presidential council, and Sabri Ok, a high-ranking member of the PKK.

Zubeir Aydar, chair of the KCK parliament exiled in Brussels, describes the process as one in which a memorandum was prepared after extensive consultation with Kurdish representatives. This memorandum was subsequently submitted to PKK leader Öcalan and formed the basis for his “Road map to peace”. According to Aydar, the Turkish government also had parallel negotiations with Öcalan. Of the several points that Öcalan takes up in his “Road map”, the most important concern the issue of recognition and legitimate rights for Kurds, the inviolability of the borders of Turkey but also Kurdish democratic autonomy. These demands are all to be written into the constitution.

When news of the negotiations broke in February 2012, a prosecutor viewed as affiliated with the Gülenist movement issued a summons to the MIT chief Hakan Fidan in which he was effectively accused of collaborating with the PKK. Given that Erdoğan had sent Fidan to the secret negotiations in Oslo, the attempt was seen by Erdoğan as an effort to weaken him. In response, the AKP began a sweep of the police and the judiciary in an effort to remove Gülen sympathizers.

Although Gülen’s positions on the peace process were reported in the domestic media, the movement’s differences with the AKP (and not least, the implications of their fall-out) did not receive wide international attention until 2013. During the Gezi Park protests, Gülenists were openly critical of Erdoğan’s authoritarian response to the protests. But it was only in December 2013 that the struggle between the two came to a fore with the arrest of several ministers’ sons charged with corruption. A judiciary sympathetic to the movement was widely believed to have instigated these cases. The timing, only three months prior to local elections, called for drastic measures and Prime Minister Erdoğan responded by ridding himself of the ministers concerned and reshuffling the cabinet. Erdoğan also “reshuffled” the police force, relegating hundreds of senior police officers, including Istanbul’s police chief, to passive positions for what the government termed “abuses of office”. As the year came to a close, the showdown between the two forces showed no sign of abating. However, the struggle between the Gülenist movement and Erdoğan had made unlikely allies of the AKP and the Kurds. In March 2014, at the Newroz celebrations, Öcalan’s message to the Kurds was to continue along the peaceful path to resolution. Despite claims of splits among the Kurds, the chairman of the KCK, Cemil Bayik, reiterated this message. Afraid that a change in government would bring in a more nationalist party, Kurdish representatives have chosen to adopt the “conspiracy” discourse of the AKP over the corruption allegations, thus becoming a part of Turkey’s polarised politics.

A weakening of the AKP’s position in government would be, in effect, a blow to an already tenuous peace process. In particular, Kurdish hopes of a revision to the constitution expanding the boundaries of citizenship and recognising the pluralist nature of Turkish society is unlikely under any other political party. However, given the events of 2013, the likelihood of the AKP forging a radical revision to the constitution that would strengthen Turkey as a liberal democracy seems equally improbable.
Endnotes


3 This report follows that of 2012 which examined the Kurdish issue from a regional perspective.


8 He also notes that these distinct “discursive packages” sometimes overlap and the boundaries between them are not absolute. Houston, C. (2001) Islam, Kurds and the Turkish Nation State, Berg: Oxford, pp.147-171.

9 Ibid, p. 149.


11 Cornell (2013), op. cit.

12 Yavuz, 2013:248


15 There are around ten major Nurcu communities in Turkey and cover a range from pan-Islamists to Kurdish groups who regard Said Nursi as an religious Kurdish nationalist. The largest and most influential group are the Gülenists (Ibid, p. 158).

16 Houston (2001), op. cit, p. 150.

17 Cornell (2013), op. cit.

18 Yavuz: op. cit., p. 90.

19 This is despite the fact that Fetullah Gülen himself spent 7 months in a Turkish prison following his arrest by the military in 1971 for illegally disseminating religious propaganda. Upon his release, he emigrated to the United States ostensibly for health reasons. He remains in Pennsylvania.

20 Turam, 2007: 19.


22 In the Netherlands in 2008, the findings of the renowned Turkey scholar, Eric Jan Zürcher, together with five former Gülen followers, resulted in a cross party call for a investigation into the organisations affiliated with the movement and a cut of several million euros of governmental funding towards such organisations (Sharon-Krespin, 2009:3).

23 Excerpt from a televised sermon quoted in Sharon-Krespin, R. (2009) “Fetullah Gülen´s Grand Ambition: Turkey´s Islamist Danger” Middle East Quarterly, Winter, pp. 55-66. As the title indicates, this is a critical, but well documented, view of the Gülen movement. Jenkins (2008: op.cit, p. 165) also refers to this broadcast stating that the tapes “appear to show Gülen instructing his followers to infiltrate critical parts of the apparatus of state, bide their time, avoid confronta-
tion, and present a moderate image until they were strong enough to implement their agenda.” Rumours around the same time of a judicial inquiry expedited Gülen’s departure for the US in 1999.


30 Ibid.

31 Tank, P. (2009), Turkey’s military elite at a crossroad: Paths to desecuritisation, dissertation, Political Science (Dr. Philos), University of Oslo Press: Oslo.


34 For the Turkish report, see: http://www.akparti.org.tr/acilim220110.pdf


36 The Democratic Society Party metamorphised into the present Peace and Democracy party (BDP) following the 2009 ban by the Constitutional Court.

37 Some of the discussion from this section on the Kurdish opening is elaborated in “The AKP’s Foreign Policy Challenges after the Arab Spring”, Policy Report 3: 2012, Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages (IKOS), University of Oslo, February 2012.


47 The key disagreement is in the need for the process itself with the main opposition party, the Republican People’s Party (CHP) opposed to a new constitution. The right wing Nationalist Action Party (MHP), along with the CHP, opposes the AKP’s wish to introduce a Presidential system that would allow Erdoğan to continue in power until 2022.


54 Ibid, Ahram online.


60 Ibid.


63 Erdoğan also removed Turkey’s EU minister Egeman Bagis, also under investigation for corruption (though not charged).
