Turkey’s domestic turmoil and international challenges: What chance is there for a Turkish-Kurdish peace process?

Pinar Tank, PRIO

Introduction

When Turkey’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) won its third consecutive victory in 2011, it was a noteworthy achievement. With over ten consecutive years in power the AKP was held up as an example for other political parties in the region with an Islamic identity seeking to consolidate political power. However, after a decade in power, the AKP’s response to secular opposition in 2013 questions the desirability of the model.

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 policy brief focuses on one particular aspect of the AKP’s policies – it’s efforts at resolving the Kurdish issue, which gathered pace in 2013. 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 of the Kurdish peace process. However, optimism faded as the AKP’s domestic challenges, and foreign policy entanglements, grew.

The Gülen movement and the AKP

The AKP is a party that in its early days emerged from the Islamist movement and learned from 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.

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.

The most important of the society-based movements was that of the reclusive charismatic Islamist cleric Fetullah Gülen, who has over the last decade grown as a political force in Turkey. The Gülenist movement, popularly called Cemaat (“the community”) or the Hizmet (“Service”) movement, is described as a “transnational religious network of schools, finance and community services.”
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. Cemaat operates up to a third of the existing 4000 preparatory schools in Turkey – now under threat of closure.6

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 and the AKP differ fundamentally. While both are part of the conservative Islamic groupings in Turkish politics, the AKP has its roots in the orthodox Islamist Milli Görüs (National View) movement closer to the likes of the Muslim Brotherhood; the Gülen movement is Turkish nationalist and modernist with a global outreach.7

Christofer Houston’s (2001) categorisation is expedient for understanding how the Gülenists approach the Kurdish question. He divides Islamist responses into the following three categories: statist Islamist, Islamist and Kurdish Islamist.8 Of these three, the first two are particularly relevant. As adopted by Fetullah Gülen, statist Islamist approaches regard a separate Kurdish ethnicity as an anathema to their Turkish nationalist ideology. Gülenist opposition to the state consists of opposition to the anti-laïc lifestyle of secular Kemalist culture. It does not question the nature of citizenship within the state, nor the state’s legitimacy. This contrasts with the anti-statist views of earlier Islamist parties for whom the Turkish state in its republican form is illegitimate and therefore cannot prevail upon the allegiance of its Muslim subjects.

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. 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.9

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. 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 who voted for the AKP in 2002 that the latter would address the shortcomings of Turkey’s democracy.

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

In its initial period in power, the AKP adopted the globalised discourse of universal human rights, advocating for the reform of the Kemalist state. The AKP’s commitment to greater democratisation was popular both amongst liberals at home as well as internationally, strengthening the idea of “Turkey as a model” for the convivial co-existence of the secular state with a Muslim identity.

The positive developments of the AKP’s first term gave rise to hopes that the Kurdish issue would 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.

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 Iraq10. Domestically, rising nationalism from anti-EU and anti-US sentiments leading up to the election in 2007 further circumscribed the government’s room for manoeuvre. The closure of the pro-Kurdish Democratic Turkey Party did little to convince the Kurds of the government’s commitment to peace.
In 2009, the AKP made another effort and launched the widely inclusive Democratic opening (Demokratik açılım). The initiative was a project aimed at improving the standards of democracy, freedoms and the respect for human rights in Turkey. However, there were serious flaws in the process as none of the three parliamentary parties in opposition supported it and the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP) refused to support the process when they were asked to condemn the PKK.

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 limited the political space available for addressing the issue. Turkey’s fears in Syria have always centred on 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 giving Iraqi Kurdish leader Messoud Barzani support in his efforts to defeat the dominant Syrian Kurdish group, the PYD with its organic links to the PKK. Playing on Turkish fears, the Assad regime has allowed the PYD 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. This is likely to serve as further inspiration for Turkey’s own restive Kurds.

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 on votes 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. The strengthened position of the Kurds in the Middle East as a consequence of the war in Iraq and Syria only added to Turkey’s concerns for the trajectory of the Kurdish issue nationally.

Seeking to allay potential demands for greater autonomy, the AKP had promised a revision of Turkey’s 1982 constitution to address the concept of citizenship and recognition of its Kurdish citizens. Beyond the central question of removing the emphasis on Turkish ethnicity, Kurds broadly demand the removal of prohibitions on cultural and political rights and an element of administrative decentralization. The Turkish Parliament established a Commission for Constitutional Agreement intended as a consensual and inclusive process for reforming the constitution. As such, all political parties are represented within the committee whose work on the new constitution was due for completion by the end of 2012. However, fundamental disagreements among the parties represented in the commission made progress difficult.

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 pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP). Significantly, they included imprisoned PKK leader Öcalan as a key interlocutor for the first time. A few months later, Öcalan declared a ceasefire on Kurdish television during the Newroz celebrations in March, stating: “The weapons should fall silent, politics should speak.”

The AKP’s Democratic Reform packages

Despite the public declaration of a peace process, there was little movement until September 2013 when Prime Minister Erdoğan announced long awaited package of reforms in an effort to re-invigorate the stalled peace process. However, it fell short of the expectations of key actors such as the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party, the BDP.

With time narrowing towards local elections in March 2014 and in the midst of a brewing corruption scandal, yet another democratization package was submitted to parliament on 5 December 2013. Once again, 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. 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 in the beginning of December 2013.
The Kurdish issue divides Gülen and Erdoğan

Efforts to resolve the Kurdish issue have led to a disruption in the political accord between the AKP and the Gülen movement. Although the catalyst for the fallout between the two was the decision by the Erdoğan to close down the wide network of preparatory schools run by the Gülen movement, tensions had already arisen over the AKP’s handling of the Kurdish issue.

When news of direct negotiations between the government and the PKK broke in February 2012, a prosecutor viewed as affiliated with the Gülenist movement issued a summons to the Turkish Intelligence (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.

As the year came to a close, the conflict between the two forces intensified with a series of corruption charges against the government widely believed to have been instigated by sympathizers of Cemaat. Ironically, the struggle between the Gülenist movement and Erdoğan has made unlikely allies of the AKP and the Kurds. 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 recognizing 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.

Policy recommendations:

- Support the Turkish and Kurdish actors and civil society engaged in the peace process offering facilitation of dialogue meetings and seminars addressing key challenges such as constitutional reform.
- Continue the constructive dialogue with Turkey on issues regarding freedom of expression while underlining Norway’s commitment to these basic human rights;
- Make explicit the link between long-term investment in Turkey and the latter’s commitment to anti-corruption practices and democratic reform.

Endnotes

5. Yavuz, 2013:248
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.
10. Tank, P. (2009), Turkey’s military elite at a crossroad: Paths to desecuritisation, dissertation, Political Science (Dr. Philos), University of Oslo Press: Oslo.
11. For the Turkish report, see: http://www.akparti.org.tr/acilim220110.pdf
15 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 (MHP9, along with the CHP, opposes the AKP’s wish to introduce a Presidential system that would allow Erdoğan to continue in power until 2022.


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Pinar Tank is the research director on the program Dimensions of Security at PRIO, where she is also a senior researcher. Her current research focuses broadly on Turkey’s domestic and foreign policies. In the realm of foreign policy, this includes Turkey’s regional role, uses of soft power and resulting identity shifts. In the domestic arena, her research has been related to the Kurdish issue and political Islam. In addition, she maintains her interest in civil-military relations in transitional democracies.