

Analysis

September 30, 2010

Summary: Calls by pro-Kurdish political groups for greater autonomy reflect their increasingly defiant stance. Turkey's ruling AKP and Prime Minister Erdoğan face difficult choices ahead of next year's elections, either engaging the Kurds or bowing to nationalist pressure against pro-Kurdish groups. Although nationalist groups have criticized the AKP for supposedly capitulating to terrorists, the recent referendum suggests waning support for a hard line approach. At the same time, the AKP's refusal to lean too far forward means that the best thing Erdoğan can do is keep engaging Kurdish leaders.

Can the AKP's Kurdish Gamble Pay Off?

by Amberin Zaman

On September 20, millions of Turkish children returned to school for the start of the academic year. Not so in Hakkari, a remote and determinedly rebellious province in Turkey's predominantly Kurdish southeast. Children boycotted classes under orders from the country's largest pro-Kurdish party, the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), which is closely allied with rebels of the outlawed separatist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Aimed at protesting existing bans on Kurdish language education in state-run schools, the move is part of a broader effort by the Kurdish group to push for what it calls "democratic autonomy" or self-governance in the Kurdish majority provinces.

The school boycott was not uniformly observed. But it reflects the increasingly defiant stance of the BDP, which earlier appealed to its constituents to shun the September 12 referendum on a raft of far-reaching constitutional reforms. The BDP declared that the package, approved by some 58 percent of Turkish voters, contained "nothing for the Kurds."

Egged on by the PKK, the Kurds are flexing their muscles as never before. Millions of Kurdish voters stayed at

home. In Hakkari, only 9 percent showed up at the ballot box. It was the lowest turnout in the country.

Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), led by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, faces tough choices ahead of nationwide parliamentary elections in June 2011. Erdoğan can either engage with the Kurds and press ahead with reforms or bow to nationalist pressure and intensify the army's 26-year-long battle against the PKK.

Nationalism on the Wane?

Both options carry risks. Devlet Bahçeli, the hawkish leader of the far-right Nationalist Action Party (MHP), has labeled the AKP's previous efforts to woo the Kurds as "capitulating to terrorists." Bahçeli played heavily on this theme throughout a pre-referendum campaign aimed at discrediting the constitutional amendments. His case might have been served by a sharp escalation in PKK attacks over the summer months that left scores of Turkish soldiers dead.

In the event, voters in the MHP's traditional strongholds approved the referendum in droves. Most embarrassingly

G | M | F OFFICES

WASHINGTON, DC • BERLIN • PARIS • BRUSSELS

BELGRADE • ANKARA • BUCHAREST



of all they did so in Bahçeli's native Osmaniye province. This surprise outcome suggests that an increasing number of Turks are open to the idea of accommodating the Kurds, and that come the elections, the MHP may even fail to win the minimum 10 percent of the national vote needed to win seats in the parliament.

Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) faces tough choices ahead of nationwide parliamentary elections in 2011.

The shift in the public mood is perhaps best illustrated by the indifference displayed to the government's recent admission that assorted Turkish officials have at various junctures held talks with the PKK's imprisoned leader, Abdullah Öcalan, ostensibly to secure a deal for the militants to lay down their arms. The last such attempt, last October, came to naught when a group of PKK militants returned to Turkey from Iraq via the Habur gate. It was a goodwill gesture and more were to follow. But when the militants proceeded to tour the southeast delivering "victory" speeches in their guerrilla garb, there ensued a public outcry. A PKK attack on a convoy of Turkish soldiers in the northeastern province of Tokat last December delivered the coup de grace. The government was forced to put its much touted "Kurdish opening" on ice.

Yet public debate of the Kurdish issue has continued. After more than a quarter of a century of conflict, most Turks agree that the rebels cannot be defeated by force. Over the past months, assorted politicians, commentators, and other public figures have lent support to the idea of striking a deal with Öcalan. Turkey's hawkish generals have not uttered a peep. More crucially perhaps the pro-secular main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) has changed tack. Its new leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, recently declared that if talking to Öcalan would help end the bloodshed, then "why not?" Indeed, after decades of neglect, there are hopeful signs that the CHP is seeking to win back the Kurds as well.

Good Kurds, Bad Kurds

Erdoğan says the government will never talk to Öcalan. But security officials, notably successive directors of Turkey's National Intelligence agency MIT, continue to do so. And on September 24 BDP leader Selahattin Demirtaş was granted a long-awaited audience with top AKP officials, including hawkish Deputy Prime Minister Cemil Çiçek and Justice Minister Sadullah Ergin. The talks reportedly focused on details of a new constitution Erdoğan has promised to deliver if the AKP is re-elected to single rule next year. The Kurds insist that any new constitution should alter the wording of article 166, which deems all Turkish citizens to be "Turks." They also want the threshold for entry into parliament (designed to keep the Kurds out) to be lowered and the bans on Kurdish language education to be eased.

Although Erdoğan remains opposed to Kurdish language instruction in government schools, he hinted during a recent news conference that he might be open to the idea of a more inclusive definition of Turkish citizenship.

The meeting with the BDP suggests that the government's new strategy is to publicly engage the Kurds' elected leaders and to get the PKK to extend the unilateral ceasefire it declared on August 13 until the June parliamentary elections. At the same time, it is piling pressure on Öcalan to order his men to withdraw from Turkey to Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq, where the PKK leadership is based. The government appears to be suggesting that should voters give the AKP a third term of single rule, it would then revive an amnesty plan allowing PKK rebels untainted by violence to return home and rewrite the constitution in ways that would take at least some of the Kurds' demands into account.

A September 16 attack on a minibus in Hakkari almost derailed the talks between the government and the BDP. Speaking through his lawyers, Öcalan suggested that rogue PKK elements acting in cahoots with Turkish security officials from the so-called "deep state" were behind the explosion that claimed nine lives. The aim was to provoke the kind of public outcry that would force the AKP to cancel the meeting. The "deep state," a shadowy alliance of rogue security officials and like-minded bureaucrats who are bitterly opposed to the AKP (and the EU-driven reforms that are eroding their influence), has been blamed for a



Analysis

string of similar provocations. Although the “deep state” has been considerably weakened thanks to the ongoing Ergenekon trial, it is by no means dead.

After more than a quarter of a century of conflict, most Turks agree that the rebels cannot be defeated by force.

It's undoubtedly helpful that Ocalan has publicly admitted that there are saboteurs within the PKK. This may, in turn, rally nationalist Kurdish opinion behind the moderates led by a top PKK commander, Murat Karayilan, who is widely believed to be more amenable to a deal. Yet it is highly unlikely that either Ocalan or Karayilan can persuade a critical mass of fighters to lay down their weapons without the AKP delivering some substantial concessions in return. And should the army continue to attack the rebels unprovoked, the entire process could blow up in the AKP's hands. Erdoğan may well have persuaded the top army command to hold its fire. But the “deep state” will almost certainly continue to seek to reignite the violence because this remains their sole means of undermining the government in the run up to the elections. No wonder the government is so eager for Ocalan to persuade his Turkey-based fighters to retreat to northern Iraq.

Keep Talking

Given these risks, what are the AKP's options in the highly critical period before the elections? Clearly the government doesn't have the time to draft a new constitution, let alone build consensus around it. And Erdoğan must not raise expectations that he cannot fulfill, otherwise another Habur-type fiasco may occur. But the AKP can make some symbolic gestures such as allowing villages in the southeast to reclaim their original Kurdish names and stepping up investment in the southeast. Suspending construction of a controversial dam, which is poised to submerge the Kurds' most treasured historical site, Hasankeyf (never mind that it reached its zenith under the Turkic Artukids), would also

create immeasurable goodwill. But above all, the AKP must keep talking to the BDP. A meeting between Erdoğan and BDP leader Demirtas would send a strong signal that the government is sincere in its efforts to build bridges with the Kurds. Just as importantly, Erdoğan must reach out to CHP leader Kılıçdaroğlu and win his support for solving the Kurdish problem. This will be difficult because Kılıçdaroğlu has yet to consolidate his own position within the CHP. Additionally, matters will be further complicated by the elections. The AKP remains the BDP's biggest rival in the southeast. The challenge for both groups is to set aside their differences and join forces against their common enemies in the deep state.

Amberin Zaman, Correspondent, *The Economist*

Amberin Zaman is the Turkey correspondent for *The Economist* and also writes a column twice a week for the mass circulation Turkish daily *Haberturk*.

About GMF

The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) is a non-partisan American public policy and grantmaking institution dedicated to promoting better understanding and cooperation between North America and Europe on transatlantic and global issues. GMF does this by supporting individuals and institutions working in the transatlantic sphere, by convening leaders and members of the policy and business communities, by contributing research and analysis on transatlantic topics, and by providing exchange opportunities to foster renewed commitment to the transatlantic relationship. In addition, GMF supports a number of initiatives to strengthen democracies. Founded in 1972 through a gift from Germany as a permanent memorial to Marshall Plan assistance, GMF maintains a strong presence on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition to its headquarters in Washington, DC, GMF has six offices in Europe: Berlin, Paris, Brussels, Belgrade, Ankara, and Bucharest. GMF also has smaller representations in Bratislava, Turin, and Stockholm.

About the On Turkey Series

GMF's On Turkey is an ongoing series of analysis briefs about Turkey's current political situation and its future. GMF provides regular analysis briefs by leading Turkish, European, and American writers and intellectuals, with a focus on dispatches from on-the-ground Turkish observers. To access the latest briefs, please visit our web site at www.gmfus.org/turkey or subscribe to our mailing list at <http://database.gmfus.org/reaction>.