

Assessment, before and after the attempted coup of 15 July 2016

As tension mounts in Kurdish politics

Ali Bayramoğlu

Foreword

This assessment of recent events in Turkey was prepared for the Democratic Progress Institute (DPI) by prominent writer, columnist and Member of Turkey's wise persons commission, Ali Bayramoğlu.¹ It presents the author's view on the current situation on the ground in Turkey, discussing in particular the consequences of the attempted military coup of 15 July 2016. This paper follows assessments previously provided by other diverse voices in Turkey,² and forms part of an ongoing evaluation by DPI of the situation on the ground, which takes into account different views and perspectives. It contributes to DPI's ongoing evaluation of the situation in Turkey with regard to the Kurdish resolution process, and is one of a number of assessments on this topic, undertaken by experts both in the region and internationally.

Through its activities and research, DPI aims to contribute to the establishment of structured public dialogue in this area, providing opportunities to all stakeholders in the conflict and its resolution to draw on comparative studies, to take part in inclusive forums, and to contribute to ongoing collaboration between all actors concerned. Further assessments of this kind will

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² See previous assessments by Ali Bayramoğlu: Bayramoğlu, Ali, 'The Latest Situation on the Kurdish Front', September 2016, Democratic Progress Institute: <http://www.democraticprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Ali-Bayramoglu-assesment.pdf>, Bayramoğlu, Ali, 'The Process of Resolution: From Politics to Arms', October 2015, Democratic Progress Institute: <http://www.democraticprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Ali-Bayramoglu-Assesment-in-3-languages-Nov-2015.pdf>, Bayramoğlu, Ali, 'The Process of Resolution from the Kobani incidents to the June elections', April 2015, Democratic Progress Institute: <http://www.democraticprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Ali-Bayramoglu-Feb-Assessment-3-languages1.pdf> and Bayramoğlu, Ali, 'New Political Equilibrium and the Kurdish Question', September 2014, Democratic Progress Institute: <http://www.democraticprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/NewPoliticalEquilibriumTheKurdishQuestion-3-languages.pdf>

continue to be provided by the Institute, with the aim of creating a space for the sharing of different perspectives, thus broadening bases for constructive dialogue in relation to the Kurdish Question in Turkey.



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Preface: To and fro between peace and war

If the Kurdish question, with its causes and outcomes, is one of the most critical and fundamental of Turkey's problems, the efforts to resolve this problem between 2013 and 2015 were one of the most significant and determining political instruments of Turkish social and political life.

The resolution of such an entrenched conflict as the Kurdish issue will progress by means of historical processes and achieve an outcome, as demonstrated by many examples. It is to be expected that these processes will have their ups and downs, and that periods of conflict and talks will succeed each other, or even be intertwined.

For Turkey, the period of 2013-2015 was important and carried hopes of peace. The conflict that resumed in July 2015 ended the process of resolution and represents a serious period of deterioration.

To address these two antitheses together is a realistic approach that will indicate that each one constitutes the different phases of a great historical process.

In that case the fundamental question is whether or not the dynamics of the period of deterioration and the definition of the current stage contain clues to a renewed period of peace or efforts towards a solution.

I. Situation: The phase of conflict

The most important factor in the interruption of the peace process and the resumption of hostilities was the repercussions of developments in the Middle East that affected Turkey.³

The perception by the Turkish system that Kurdish advances in Syria pose an existential threat to Turkey, and the 'diagnosis' that the Kurdish movement's concrete hopes for the future concern Turkey retains its importance and currency.

The campaign for autonomy and the ditch politics launched by the Kurdish movement in the southeast of Turkey in the summer of 2015 stemmed in a way from the wish to transfer the canton model from Syria to Turkey. This move exacerbated the existing concerns of the state. To the risks posed to the official policy and view by the PYD-PKK control of northern Syria were added another: an open battle for dominance and control of urban areas within Turkey (for the first time as a phase of conflict). I dealt with this in detail in a recent evaluation.⁴

The general situation in May 2016 was that the state had removed, in relative terms, the PKK from areas it had controlled through force of arms. But a heavy price had been paid. It is necessary to say that the state had faced up to the devastation that this would entail and was able to carry it out, paying this heavy price. While the phase of war caused human, political and economic devastation, both the organisation and the state raised the bar: the organisation as regards its strategy based on a claim for de facto political dominance, and the state as regards human rights violations.

³ See Bayramoglu, Ali, 'The Process of Resolution: from Politics to Arms', October 2015, Democratic Progress Institute: <http://www.democraticprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Ali-Bayramoglu-Assesment-in-3-langauges-Nov-2015.pdf>

⁴ See Bayramoglu, Ali, 'The Latest Situation on the Kurdish Front, Autumn 2015-2016', September 2016, Democratic Progress Institute: <http://www.democraticprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Ali-Bayramoglu-assessment.pdf>

While this phase has ended, the conflict, naturally, has not, with the PKK carrying out attacks in urban areas, bombings and assassinations, while the state continues its operations and raids. In this respect both the conflict which began in July 2015 and the fundamental policies of the parties present a continuity which lasts until today. However, a significant development in the political life of the country, the attempted military coup of 15 July, had a considerable effect on the balance of forces and policies pertaining to the Kurdish question. This attempted coup indicated one of the most serious state crises ever experienced by the country, becoming the pretext for the proclamation of a state of emergency and consolidating the security-accented political climate.

In this context it will be useful to address this continuity in two stages: firstly the general situation prior to 15 July 2016, and, secondly, the developments in the Kurdish issue after 15 July and the political significance of these developments.

II. Before 15 July: state, politics and the organisation

AKP.

When the policies of the AKP are examined, what is prominent is a security policy aiming for complete control based on an anxious state of mind and a perception of threat. It may be said that during this phase three dimensions of these policies stand out.

The first of these is the military dimension. The state, first in the Southeast, and then in Syria, launched efforts to break the power of the organisation, reduce its legitimacy and repulse it, taking risks and using crude methods without regard for human rights violations. The internal security operations that began in July 2015 and continued until the spring of 2016 were the product of this strategy.

Secondly, there is the security-based policy dimension. The security-accented discourse and view gradually encircled the entire political arena, reducing the space for Kurdish representation, the Kurdish movement and its demands. The main thrust of this strategy was to sever the bonds between the Kurdish movement and its demands and society, and to criminalise Kurdish politics and political attitudes to the Kurdish question in the public-political arena. Objections and opposition to the security policy, the besieging of towns and human rights violations in 2015/16 met with indignant reaction from the government, which responded with administrative and judicial messages and moves. Authoritarian reactions and measures taken in response to objections raised regarding the lifting of the immunity of HDP MPs, the debate around the appointment of trustees to run municipalities and the closure of TV stations played a determining role.

In these conditions one of the most striking developments was the tendency of the three parties in the Turkish parliament apart from the HDP to constitute a ruling bloc as regards the Kurdish question. Addressing the conflict in the Southeast solely in a terror and revolt dimension, adopting a joint stance as regards lifting of parliamentary immunity, in this way repressing Kurdish representation, and unconditional support for AKP policies in northern Syria due to concerns over division of the country are serious indications of the existence of this ruling bloc.

A third dimension relates to the social arena. It is necessary to consider this as having two parts.

The first part is the rise of nationalism in the country. To a great extent this rise is due to the Kurdish question in general and, in particular, the conflict and environment of violence which began in July 2015. Hence, the General Election of November 2015 was the first indication of this. The significance of this election stems from the fact that it pointed to a strong return to the past after the June election 5 months earlier that for the first time since 2002 did not give the AKP an outright majority. In November the AKP won back around 9 per cent of the vote which it had lost, testifying to an upsurge in conservative social feeling. Studies of the electoral map demonstrated strong links between the process of resolution and the 9 per cent vote loss.

Hence, the months between the two elections saw widespread conflict, with declarations of

autonomy with arms, internal security operations and bomb attacks in urban areas. The main reason the AKP recovered in November the votes it had lost in June was the atmosphere of violence and the government's declaration that it had ended the process of resolution.

A second development in the social arena, along with the AKP announcing the end of the process of resolution, was its efforts to find, or, rather, manufacture, new political interlocutors for the Kurdish issue. Meetings have been held with prominent conservative opinion leaders and efforts have been made to promote religious groups. It would not be erroneous to define this initiative as a return to the old form of politics, utilising religion, an alternative arena, to leave the PKK out of the picture. Hence, it is apparent that the aim of this initiative is to produce political structures representing narrow interests as an alternative to the PKK, rather than making the Kurdish social and political arena more pluralistic. Although it is not possible for such initiatives to bring about the results wanted by the government, there is always the risk that they will lead to new tensions in the Kurdish arena and to the formation of state-supported groups.

The organisation.

When the period prior to 15 July is examined from the point of view of the organisation, it may be summarised as its attempt to transfer the canton model from Syria and the consequences of that. There is no doubt that this strategy was based on conflict, and may be summed up in the following way: in the initial phase to obstruct the functioning of the state mechanism, and in the second phase to establish a writ to replace it, making this possible through armed actions and popular uprisings to set up control of an area.

Undoubtedly this strategy is closely related to the importance for the Kurdish movement of its gains in Rojava. We surmise that the legitimacy won by the PYD since 2013 through its cooperation with the international coalition in its fight against ISIS, and the control it has

established in an area from the Iraqi border to Afrin, is of crucial importance for the Kurdish movement. For the organisation, this importance has split the centre of the Kurdish issue into two parts of equal significance, one in Turkey, the other in Syria, while combining Syria and Turkey into one as regards its claims.

The organisation's actions in the Southeast post-July 2015 are linked to the above. From looking at the outcome, it is apparent that the organisation has been unable to obtain the broad mass support it was seeking and that its de facto attempts at autonomy have not achieved the desired result. As stated above, the state crushed this upsurge which it saw as an attempted uprising, paying the price as regards human rights, democracy and its image. It is said the organisation suffered losses in the thousands.

III. The political climate and the Kurdish question post-15 July

The attempted coup of 15 July was a development that will leave a long lasting mark on the political and social life of Turkey, first and foremost the Kurdish question. There have been 3 serious political consequences of the attempted coup.

The first of these is a major continuing crisis of state. This may be defined as risk and collapse engendered by the Gulen movement's followers in the armed forces, police forces, judiciary and educational establishment. The armed forces are a clear example, with half of 356 generals being sacked on the grounds of being a putschist or follower of Gulen and a large proportion of the personnel seen as crypto-Gulenist, which has led to a collapse and a need for reconstruction. In the judiciary, too, around 40 per cent of judges and prosecutors have been sacked on the same grounds, while more than 40,000 teachers have been dismissed.

The second of these is the judicial crisis. In the first place, the purge of Gulen supporters, or those alleged to be Gulen supporters, from within the state, business community and the press

has been on a scale that strains legal limits. The fact that these persons tended to act in a covert manner has led to the authorities acting on suspicion as much as evidence, resulting in injustices and the creation of many victims. The purge being implemented, involving the executive, legislature and judiciary, by means of arbitrary and insufficient actions, has had a negative effect on the legal system.

The third effect relates to the way in which the state of emergency declared after the attempted coup is being used. The government is utilising the possibilities offered by the state of emergency to scrap fundamental rights and freedoms in order to implement its public order-based Kurdish policy. The Kurdish political movement is also suffering, and this purge of the opposition and the AKP's hegemony over the state illustrates an arbitrariness in administrative and judicial matters, based on its intentions, that is the main tenor of the regime.

This great upsurge is a nationalist, authoritarian, statist one that embraces political dynamics. The ruling bloc we mentioned above has gained momentum after 15 July. The period prior to 15 July, when the Kurdish question in Turkey became intertwined with the Middle East and Syria, and the anxiety caused by the Kurdish advance in these regions, combined with a historic sensitivity over borders, prepared the ground for the formation of a historic ruling bloc comprising the AKP, MHP and CHP. After 15 July, the Gulen threat created an AKP-MHP alliance under the umbrella of this bloc. Nationalist sentiments and state-centred political perceptions are emerging within the framework of new alliances.

Hence, this alliance is dragging Turkey rapidly towards an executive presidential system.

If Erdoğan's inclinations are taken into consideration, the executive presidential system represents a unique model of administration. This model alludes to a transition from a system where there is separation of powers to one in which there is a de facto unity of powers. It is necessary to define his aim as that of a leadership system. In this system the executive is directly represented by the leader and the leader dominates the legislature by means of the majority party and the judiciary has close relations with the government. Another characteristic of such a

system is a reduction in the number of institutional layers between the leader and the public and the construction of a new form of plebiscitary democracy.

The advance by the AKP-MHP alliance towards an executive presidential system will have significant consequences, not only for the democratic structure of the country, but also for the Kurdish question. For the MHP's constitutional sensitivities, which the AKP has said it will take into consideration, consist of the following three conditions:

- The abandonment of all decentralising formulas, such as autonomy or separate regions, or the granting of further powers to local government, as regards the Kurdish question
- The protection of provisions in the existing constitution that define citizenship in terms of 'Turkishness'
- No change in matters such as mother tongue, mother tongue education and the flag or similar national symbols

The common denominator of these three pre-conditions is a closing of the door on all political paths in the Kurdish question, such as peace, political resolution or negotiations between the sides.

It may be said that besides the importance attached by Erdoğan to the executive presidency, his adopting a similar stance to the MHP in relation to the Kurdish issue has opened the way to this alliance.

Considering the fact that the Kurdish policy is based on a public order rationale, it will be no surprise if, particularly in state-society relations, the nationalist, statist and authoritarian upsurge continues to rise.

Although it commenced shortly before 15 July, the change of verbal style in Turkey's Middle Eastern politics that gained momentum after 15 July has followed an important course, both as regards a state-centred political perception and nationalism, and from the point of view of the

Kurdish question.

In 2016 Turkey's quest for military actions in the region has increased exponentially and, following the crisis with Russia that pushed Turkey into a passive position, Ankara has made moves that make one think there has been a change in paradigm in its Middle Eastern policies, going into Syria in order to prevent the formation of a Kurdish corridor and engaging in military operations in order to reduce the PYD's influence in international alliances. In addition to being a deterrent force, it has also activated a de facto show of force policy. Most recently, it has adopted a tone including the issuing of threats in order to be a balancing force in Mosul in response to Shia expansionism, which should be added to this critical transition. This change of paradigm may be defined in the words of Tayyip Erdoğan: "when a problem emerges within or without the country, as a preventative and threatening military intervention" Hence, when the Euphrates Shield operation began in August 2016, ostensibly against ISIS, PYD targets were hit by the Turkish army. This was the first time Turkey had opened the door to such interventions.

Besides the authoritarian climate, the state-centred political perception and the developing nationalist bloc is a new and important element that has grown at a point where internal and external dynamics intersect and encircle the Kurdish question.

IV. Kurdish policy

The urban conflict launched by the PKK in July 2015, the proclamations of autonomy and ditch clashes, were the PKK's battle for dominance of the Southeast. This was perceived by the state as an existential threat and, as is known, was met by extensive security measures.

This reaction increased step by step in 2016, going beyond conjunctural measures and beginning to influence the main discourse of the government and political dynamics. The system began to regress, starting with the Kurdish question, but affecting all freedoms, or, in other words, a

narrowing began to appear in the political, democratic and judicial arenas.

Before 15 July, in particular, the immunity of HDP MPs was removed. Sanctions (investigations, suspension, arrest) were implemented against academics who signed an “academics’ declaration” harshly criticising the state’s human rights violations in the Southeast. Organisations such as IMC TV found they were unable to broadcast. All these measures indicated a narrowing of Kurdish representation and of its democratic domain, and of democracy. This situation was accentuated by harsh judicial steps and powers such as EMASYA⁵ being granted to the military, by a reduction in the legal responsibilities of the security forces and by certain powers of prosecutors and judges being made available to officials.

Following the attempted coup of 15 July the degree of this authoritarian policy was increased manifestly. The AKP began to utilise the measures provided by the state of emergency, declared as a precaution against putschists after the coup, against Kurdish political visibility in the name of the struggle against terror.

Using Decrees with the Force of Law, all publications, internet sites, associations and foundations that were in contact with the Kurdish issue and the Kurdish movement were closed down. Intellectuals such as Asli Erdoğan and Necmiye Alpay, who were deemed to represent the Kurdish issue, were imprisoned. 24 DBP elected mayors were removed from their posts and were replaced by sub-governors as trustees. When members of one of Turkey’s most important opposition newspaper’s (Cumhuriyet) editorial board were arrested one of the charges against them was support for the PKK under the guise of criticism of the government.

Finally, the mayor of the largest Kurdish city in the country, Diyarbakır, Gültan Kışanak, and her co-mayor Fırat Anlı, who were elected in 2014 with 55 per cent of the vote, were arrested and remanded in custody accused of membership of a terrorist organisation. A state official was

⁵ A protocol allowing the military to take power if it felt domestic security was at risk. The protocol was signed between the government and the General Staff on July 7, 1997, and allowed the Turkish Armed Forces, or TSK, to exert power in the interest of upholding domestic security and in natural disasters, even if the relevant governor’s offices made no such request. The protocol annulled in 2010.

appointed as trustee in their place.

This was followed by the arrest of 10 MPs of the HDP, the third largest party in the Turkish parliament.

With these steps following 15 July a harsh phase began in which the words and actions of those deemed to be linked to the Kurdish movement were banned and punished.

Efforts to eject the legal and legitimate political representatives of the Kurdish movement, such as the HDP and DBP, portray the most recent policies of the AKP and its alliance with the MHP. The intention is to confine the Kurdish political arena to state supervision, entirely close the doors on political dialogue and resolution of the Kurdish question and to portray the Kurdish issue as an external threat.

V. Conclusion: The future

What may be said regarding the future?

1. In the vicious circle of conflict and politics we are, from the point of view of the state, right in the middle of a new phase of conflict. As for a transition from this point to a political phase, at least at this juncture, it would appear possible by means of the state achieving the conditions it wants, rather than through the “imposition of violence”, to which society and politics is more undaunted and prepared.
2. The attempted coup of 15 July strengthened the state’s dominant authoritarian tendency towards Kurdish politics, or was at least a pretext for its consolidation. The attempted coup created extraordinary conditions, in which from the point of view of the Kurdish issue the political and democratic arena was systematically restricted, with the country being virtually returned to the conditions prevailing in 1994 when the DEP MPs were arrested.

3. The attempted coup reduced the possibility of a return to the process of resolution by facilitating the AKP-MHP alliance, or has at least extended the period in this regard.
4. Although it is difficult to give a time frame for when there will be a return to politics, there is a risk that the next 18 months to 2 years will be troubled. If a likely constitutional referendum and a transition to an executive presidential system is added to the existing conditions, then this risk hardens further.
5. The Syria factor and the rapid changes there have had a negative effect on the process of resolution. For the Turkish state as much as for the organisation, this issue and the balance of forces in the region will have to be taken into account during the next process of resolution or it will be affected by these factors. This situation underlines the growing importance of international actors and the balance of forces.
6. The consequences of the election of Trump as US President will play a significant role in the region and the Kurdish question in the coming period, in particular in this direction.