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The New Kurdish Right

An emerging style of right-wing politics among Turkey's Kurds defines itself in opposition to both the Turkish state and the PKK's left-liberation mythos. It could upend the country's politics



Müjge Küçükkeleş
Müjge Küçükkeleş is a doctoral candidate at the University of Kent working on neoliberal governance regimes in the Middle East, with a particular focus on Iraqi Kurdistan



Selim Koru
Selim Koru is an analyst at the Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey

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People celebrating Newroz festivities on March 21, 2021 in Diyarbakir, Turkey/Burak Kara/Getty Images

In Turkey, the most recent flashpoint between the Erdoğan government and the opposition has been Boğaziçi University in Istanbul, one of the country's most prestigious universities. The government appointed a rector over the wishes of the staff and students, who have been staging a protest for the past few months. The People's Democratic Party, or HDP, the country's most progressive and pro-Kurdish party, is also the strongest supporter of the protesters.

Some Kurds think that it shouldn't be. Sıdkı Zilan, a lawyer and public commentator, tweeted:

> "Kurds and Kurdish youth, stay away from this fight; the university isn't yours, nor is the rector your father, the state isn't yours, nor is the government. ... Sweat for Kurdish education, for the liberty of our people; and besides there is a political struggle and manipulation in this; you aren't the ones who are going to rise to government."

This line of thinking became so pronounced on social media that leftist adherents of the Kurdish movement felt the need to respond. Sabiha Temizkan, a journalist who also happens to be the daughter of imprisoned HDP MP Leyla Guven, tweeted: "Some say that Kurds shouldn't support Boğaziçi, that they [opposition Turks] remained silent when the mayoralties of the Kurds were ousted and replaced with government trustees. Here we go again with these comments. We're not defending any particular people's rights, we are defending what is right. Don't dredge up divisions here too."

Boğaziçi is only the latest such issue – the Kurds of the HDP tradition increasingly have to explain themselves when involved in non-Kurdish problems. When the HDP MPs protested the construction of a highly polluting gold mine in northwestern Turkey, many Kurds berated them for having lost focus. Where, after all, had their Turkish allies been when the dams and other construction projects wrecked the historical and natural beauties of the Kurdistan region? This reflects a broader trend in Turkey's Kurdish politics, one that pulls the spectrum of Kurdish politics rightwards.

To understand the significance of this development, one must first appreciate how dominant left-wing politics is among Turkey's Kurds. During the Cold War, the Kurds identified with the Marxist tradition. Considering that they were the country's largest ethnic minority, living in some of its poorest parts, and being denied their rights by a government that was a NATO ally, this made sense.

The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) was founded in the late 1970s and began fighting the Turkish state for an independent Kurdistan. Within Turkey, it quickly dominated all other Kurdish groups, setting the tone for Kurdish politics in the country for decades to come. The first legal political parties emerged in the 1990s, when adherents of the PKK's tradition began to be elected to municipalities in the southeastern region of Turkey, as well as the national assembly in Ankara. Kurdish politicians would assume office, only to be banned and jailed, a pattern that continues to this day. In 1999, the state captured the PKK's leader, Abdullah Ocalan, triggering a shift in the PKK's approach from its orthodox Marxist stance into a more progressive-communitarian model. Throughout the 2000s, its politics evolved from being about secession from Turkey to achieving regional autonomy or "democratic autonomy" within it.

Meanwhile, the Kurdish right, made up of tribal leaders, religious clerics, and other conservatives, traditionally lent their support to Turkish center-right parties. This support was rooted in the threat that the PKK posed to the landowning classes of the Kurdish regions. In the 1990s, the Kurdish right shifted its support to Turkish Islamist parties. Here, they could see themselves as fellow subjects of the Islamic "Ummah" and challenge the Kemalist state's secular and nationalistic impositions.

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With the first Justice and Development Party (AKP) governments of the 2000s, the Kurdish right folded neatly below Turkish Islamism, making up a silent component of the Erdoğan electoral base. Though this gave them access to immense resources, it meant the loss of the critical edge they acquired in the 1990s. There was always an awkwardness between Kurdish conservative leaders and the AK Party bosses. Sitting in on such a meeting in the early 2010s, one of the writers witnessed firsthand how Kurdish AK Party MPs asked for a Kurdish language elective, reassuring a Turkish AK Party leader that "nobody is going to pick it anyways" and that "everybody back home wants their kids to learn Turkish and go to the big universities." Fear of the left had driven the Kurdish right into near-total obscurity. It was willing to negate Kurdish identity in order to earn the state's protection.

Meanwhile, the Kurdish left was surging ahead. In the early 2010s, two major events defined its politics. First, the AK Party engaged in a peace process with the PKK, and second, the HDP was formed as the latest reincarnation of the Kurdish movement. It is difficult to know for sure, but roughly half of Turkey's Kurds came to vote for the HDP, while the other, more conservative half voted for the AK Party government. More than any of its predecessors, the HDP has become *Türkiyeli*, meaning "of Turkey" rather than "Turkish." It came to represent the fusion of progressive politics and the Kurdish cause; a new identity allowed the Kurdish movement to grow into the third-largest party in parliament in 2015. It also made the HDP the major obstacle to the nationalist vision of the Erdoğan government.

Since 2015, the government has abandoned the peace process and launched a relentless war on the PKK across multiple fronts. Turkey's southeastern provinces suffered prolonged, urban warfare in which the Turkish military flattened entire sections of cities. The war soon expanded into the northern parts of Syria, where the PKK's offshoots had secured territory against the Islamic State group, and into Iraq, where the PKK has long had bases. The aim, as reiterated constantly in Turkish media, has been to make sure that the Kurds did not have any independent, contiguous territory that could develop into a state.

Within Turkey, the government stripped HDP parliamentarians of their immunity, jailed their leaders and elected mayors, and heavily suppressed their grassroots political activity. The HDP's charismatic leader, Selahattin Demirtas, has been in prison since November 2016 and can only send the occasional letter and tweet to his millions of followers. Despite these suppressive tactics, the HDP won dozens of mayoral seats in the 2019 regional elections; the government simply seized all but a handful. Meanwhile, the mainstream media has branded the HDP as terrorists and any opposition party approaching it as collaborators. All this, in the government's parlance, has "made the country tight" for the HDP. While defiant in their resistance, this campaign has still led to a feeling of crushing defeat among Turkey's Kurds.

It is amid this crisis in Kurdish politics that there is an emerging style of right-wing discourse. No longer content to be a silent partner of the governing Turkish right-wing coalition, the new Kurdish right defines itself in opposition to both the Turkish state and the PKK's left-liberation mythos. Unlike the traditional Kurdish right, this new trend is not interested in Ankara-based politics. It is a cultural discourse that seeks to spin further away from Ankara and develop in an autonomous fashion. It aims to empower Kurdish national consciousness and heal its recently wounded self-esteem. It is made up of Islamists disillusioned with the AK Party, pan-Kurdish nationalists, as well as religiously conservative liberals, but its influence ranges beyond these circles, well into HDP territory.

For Kurds exhausted from universalist ideologies, this is a call to turn inwards. Like other forms of nationalism, there is a yearning for authenticity, an emphasis on traditional values, ethnicity, nation, religion, and the importance of the state as a source of strength. Unlike most other nationalisms, however, it does not, at this point, indulge in aggressive fantasies.

In this narrative, statelessness is the source of all Kurdish problems, and a Kurdish state is the beginning of all their solutions. The Turks, it points out, have a state and the military, educational, and other institutions that follow from it. The Kurds, on the other hand, are relegated to live within that structure and must rely on the goodwill of another nation to attain individual rights. Popular references to a "brotherhood" between Turks and Kurds, or their common identity as Muslims, only mask Kurds' inherent inferiority. Justice and equality, according to this view, cannot exist between Turks and Kurds because they are not on an equal political footing. Only through Kurdish statehood can this equality be achieved and a healthy relationship between the two can become possible. This is not a quest for Kurdish statehood as much as a quest for equality through the idea of the state.

Within this narrative, the HDP is increasingly seen as a culture of self-denial. Its voter base is overwhelmingly Kurdish, but it refuses to style itself as the representative of Turkey's Kurds. Its leftist and universalist vision claims to have transcended the need for a separate state for the Kurds and seeks democratic, rule-bound governance in Turkey for all *halklar*, meaning peoples, carefully avoiding the term *millet*, or nation. It always has male and female co-leaders for executive positions (party chairpersons, mayors, etc.), and the last two male co-chairmen have been non-Kurds.

The narrative of the young Kurdish right is a reaction to this. Why, they ask, should the Kurds have to bear the brunt of Turkey's democratic struggle? Why should the HDP's Kurdish members languish in jail while its Turkish members walk free? When Turkish peasants attack Kurdish seasonal workers in Sakarya province, why do Turkish leftists feel pressure to call it class conflict rather than racism? They counter by insisting on the development of Kurdish identity against all odds. Self-affirmation messages on Kurdishness are popular, and personal development advice on getting a good job, being an entrepreneur, educating oneself, learning Kurdish (due to decades of repression, most young Kurds in Turkey are not fluent in it), and being worldly, are frequent themes in its circles.

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While much of the PKK's culture venerates martyrdom as the highest sacrifice, the right makes a more worldly proposition. It is careful not to belittle the PKK's armed struggle, but it raises a symbolic and somewhat cryptic objection to the loss of Kurdish life. The right thereby cleaves the newly formed Kurdish middle class – increasingly more important within the HDP – away from the left's radical politics. A man in his 30s, who lives in Diyarbakır and has been active in HDP politics in the past, says, "You can't expect a people to sacrifice all the time. This generation does not want to wage war. It wants nice things for itself." Another, younger man in Diyarbakır, says: "I'm tired of constant talk of death. If we are going to die, we should die for Kurdistan. I don't want to die so that Turkey can democratize." The "we" here refers to the collective life of Kurds, the value of which has gone up by virtue of attaining middle-class comforts, of having something to lose.

These sentiments echo a recent study by Rawest Research company, which points to a process of "deradicalization" among Turkey's Kurdish youth, meaning that they don't want to be part of an armed struggle. This process, the study finds, goes hand-in-hand with a tendency to consolidate Kurdish cultural identity. When Istanbul's opposition-held municipality opened a Kurdish language course, for example, it filled up within hours.

Some of the most prominent voices of this narrative are on social media. Young men assume priestly roles above parties and ideological labels, devoting their lives to the mission of enlightening their flock of young Kurds, clearing their heads and minds of revolutionary ideologies and universalist themes. Perhaps the most famous one is İbrahim Halil Baran, an Erbil-based commentator, the leader of PAKURD, a tiny political party registered in Turkey, and a prominent podcast host. His statement, "If my mother tongue is shaking the foundations of your state, it probably means that you built your state on my land," has made the rounds on social media, at times being attributed to as influential a historical figure as Ape Musa (Musa Anter), a revered Kurdish writer who was killed by the Turkish Gendarmerie's former intelligence and special operations branch in 1992. Baran ended up saying that he was tired of reclaiming his pithy statements from historical figures, tweeting, "I give my words to Ape Musa as a gift."

Baran types his statement into the echo chamber of social media, and it comes out as a mythical, authentically powerful phrase from the depths of the Kurdish

political struggle, through forces beyond his control. Talk of the "brotherhood of peoples," as the HDP would have it, falls flat.

The Kurdish right is more interested in changing the HDP than challenging it at the ballot box. It seeks to take a step back from the immediacy of political struggle for democracy in Turkey and turn inward. This means turning away from the flashpoints of democratic struggle in Turkey, such as press freedom, university independence, and environmental preservation and turning toward the Kurdistani space.

More than any other issue, the HDP's soft underbelly is the promotion of the Kurdish language. Though the party supports Kurdish language education in schools, it has not been its priority. More recent generations of urban Kurds often speak no Kurdish, which has sparked a fear among Kurdish intellectuals that the Kurdish language is dying in the face of greater Turkish assimilation. This has led to an explosion of campaigns relating to Kurdish literature and language education, as well as a myriad of Kurdish websites, podcasts, and magazines aimed at reviving Kurdish culture and history. The Kurdish Language Movement (HEZKURD), a Diyarbakır-based NGO, is among many that openly criticize the HDP, saying it can "assemble hundreds of thousands of people in public squares for May Day" but is deaf to growing Kurdish demands for language rights. Struggling to respond to the criticism, the HDP finally launched a parliamentary commission to advance Kurdish language education and mandated Kurdish lessons for its senior members.

The pressure on the HDP does not only come from the youthful right. For the past couple of years, many left-wing Kurdish intellectuals have also criticized the party. Basing themselves on postcolonial thinkers such as Franz Fanon and Achille Mbembe, they argue that the Kurdish struggle has not yet reached the stage at which it can engage with universal ideas like democratic autonomy. Talk of coexistence with Turks, they've argued, only serves to mask and perpetuate Kurdistan's colonial status within Turkish hegemony. This is a different milieu from the above – they are people who identify more strongly with the HDP's roots and take ownership of the party. What both the Kurdish left and the right agree on is that their politics needs to be more sensitive toward Kurdish identity and be less Ankara-centric.

For the growing and youthful Kurdish right, the HDP is a relic of the naïve past.

Their approach to the HDP, however, reveals their differences. For the growing and youthful Kurdish right, the HDP is a relic of the naïve past, when Kurds thought that the Turks could share sovereignty. For the left, the HDP is a premature manifestation of their aspirations, from a future when the Kurdish political struggle has matured enough to strive for the universal.

If the HDP survives government repression (a big if), the change in Kurdish politics will eventually be reflected in its structure and direction. This change could also force the Turkish left to mature into a new organizational structure. Ahmet Şık, a prominent Turkish leftist who was elected on the HDP ticket, quit the party due to internal disputes between those who emphasize its leftist aspects and those who emphasize its pro-Kurdish ones. In an interview, the now independent MP said that Turkey needs "a party that would be between the CHP (the Republican People's Party, the main opposition against the AK Party) and the HDP," meaning a party that would appeal to progressive Turks and have a healthy relationship with the HDP, which in turn would be free to be more Kurdish in character.

The idea generated a great deal of buzz in opposition circles but has yet to yield anything of substance. For the time being, Turkey's progressives are still hitching their wagon to the Kurdish movement. However, the movement may not be willing to take them any further.

Meanwhile, there are attempts to establish right-wing Kurdish parties, but these are highly unlikely to be granted official status. At a meeting of the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), its leader, Reşit Akıcı, explained why new right-wing parties are needed: "Voters said that they were conservative but didn't have a party they could vote for. We founded this party to give those voters a third alternative, to give them an alternative independent of the AKP and HDP. Our goal is federation, the Kurdistan Federation." The Turkish KDP has been the last in a line of parties launched in association with the Kurdistan Democratic Party in northern Iraq. Like its predecessors, it is a very small outfit without significant public support.

The Islamist-Kurdish Human and Freedom Party (abbreviated PIA for its Kurdish *Partiyâ Insan û Azadî*) is another organization that caters to the emerging Kurdish right. It advocates for Kurdish cultural rights and believes in a "voluntary togetherness" with Turks, meaning that Kurds would reserve the right to autonomy, federation, and independence. It, too, is a small outfit, seeking to grow from a civil society organization into a political actor. The KDP reportedly filed its papers with the Ministry of Interior in February 2020, while the PIA filed three years ago. Neither has received a response, and if they do, it is highly unlikely to be a positive one.

Most Kurds won't give up the HDP brand for these alternatives anytime soon. If such Kurdistani parties were to be established and grow, they might divert some votes from the HDP, but more likely, they would get votes from the AK Party, which gets the conservative Kurdish vote. This is probably why the government is not granting permission even to the smallest of such actors. If Kurdish votes are to leave Erdoğan's AK Party, he may think they should go to conservative Turkish opposition parties rather than Kurdish ones. Otherwise, a separate sphere of Kurdish politics with its left- and right-wing parties would form, creating further channels in which the cultural separation of Kurds and Turks can advance.

The AK Party has long argued that it was the representative of Turkey's "real Kurds," while those in the PKK's tradition were godless subversives, poisoning the minds of impressionable citizens. It may be more difficult for it to sustain this narrative as the new Kurdish right comes into its own.

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