

THE AKP GOVERNMENT'S KURDISH PREDICAMENT

*Tozun Bahcheli,
Professor and Chair, Department of Political Science
King's University College at the University of Western Ontario
and Sid Noel,
Senior Fellow of King's University College
Professor Emeritus of Political Science
Co-director, Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict Research Group
The University of Western Ontario*

Ever since the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) ended a year-long ceasefire on 1 June 2010, Turkey has been gripped with violence and fear. Scores of Turkish soldiers and Kurdish fighters have been killed, renewing anxieties among Turks and Kurds alike regarding the prospect of a peaceful end to the long-running Kurdish issue. According to some Turkish columnists, and the Economist, an increasing number of Turks are now willing to accept Kurdish separation. However, this fanciful idea has no chance of becoming state policy and merely reflects the widespread frustration felt in the country. No less frustrated is the governing Justice and Development Party (Adalet and Kalkinma Partisi-AKP) of prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan whose 'Kurdish initiative' has stalled and may be destined to fail.

Ironically, the AKP government has done more than previous governments in Ankara to advance Kurdish rights. In doing so it raised expectations that it could succeed where past governments had failed in resolving the Kurdish issue. As a new and untainted party, and with the benefit of a majority government, the AKP moved swiftly upon coming to office in 2002 to enact a number of democratizing reforms: these removed several restrictions that had curbed Kurdish cultural and political freedoms. Much to the relief of Kurds, it also lifted the state of emergency (OHAL) in the country's south-east. Moreover, it held out the promise of achieving even greater reforms, thereby making a real difference in the lives of Turkey's Kurdish citizens. Erdogan struck a positive chord among Kurds when he declared 'More democracy, not more repression, is the answer to Kurds'. Such gestures, together with enhanced freedoms and improved economic conditions in the Kurdish region enabled the AKP to win a majority of seats in the Kurdish region in the parliamentary elections of July 2007. Having elected 75 members in predominantly Kurdish constituencies, Erdogan could boast that the 'AKP is *the* party of Kurds'.

During its first term in office, the AKP's democratizing measures were generally well-received by Kurds who saw them as a sign that the Turkish state was at last beginning to right past wrongs in its dealings with them. But there was also considerable skepticism and, when the application of new legislative provisions fell short of what Kurds had expected (or hoped for), it predictably sparked widespread complaint. However, that was only part of the problem. From the viewpoint of Kurdish nationalists, the AKP response appeared piecemeal and half-hearted, and more importantly, fell short of their

perennial demands for cultural recognition and some form of territorial self-government. These demands were supported by virtually all shades of opinion among Kurds. But every Turkish government had found them enormously problematical, however defined, and in practice impossible to meet. The AKP government was no exception. It had continued to build on the policies of its predecessor in removing restrictions on Kurdish cultural expression, but, like its predecessor, it had declined requests for state-funded Kurdish education. Even more politically sensitive and difficult to meet was the demand for autonomy for the Kurdish region – a demand that had been omitted by the PKK for a few years after its leader Abdullah Ocalan was captured in 1999 only to re-emerge later in various formulations. But, as the leaders of the AKP well knew, even if they were inclined to experiment with decentralization (and there is nothing to suggest that they were), any hint of receptivity on their part to altering Turkey's unitary state structure would risk unleashing a fierce national debate and put them into conflict with Turkish nationalists and the Kemalist establishment. This was not a risk they were willing to take.

While the AKP received praise from Western capitals for its democratizing reforms, its domestic opponents have given it no comfort. The principal opposition parties bitterly contested its reform agenda, accusing the government of making concessions to PKK terrorism. At the same time, the AKP faced the considerable threat posed by the Kemalist establishment as embodied by the senior ranks of the military. The latter have traditionally identified Islamic fundamentalism and Kurdish separatism as two of the greatest dangers facing Turkey and have not hesitated to throw their weight against proposed measures that they regard as threatening. No sooner had the AKP assumed office than some high-ranking generals began a conspiracy to overthrow it, supposedly on the grounds that it threatened Turkey's secular order. With no support from the Chief of Staff, the conspirators were unable to carry out their plans. The AKP averted yet another threat when it was spared from closure by a single vote when the justices of the Constitutional Court delivered a seven to six verdict against banning the party on the grounds that it engaged in anti-secular activities.

Others threats and distractions, including a renewal of fighting by the PKK, compounded the AKP's problems, and help explain why its reform agenda ground to a virtual halt by 2005. While the government felt justified in deferring further reforms to a later date, this was understandably disappointing to the Kurds. Not surprisingly, the AKP lost ground to the Kurdish DTP (Demokratik Toplum Partisi) in the local elections held in March 2009. Later developments, such as the Constitutional Court's closure of the DTP on grounds of fomenting separatism, and the banning of respected Kurdish politicians from participating in elected office, further alienated Kurds. The PKK has skillfully capitalized on Kurdish estrangement, and together with the Kurdish DBP (Demokrasi ve Baris Partisi) that succeeded the DTP, served notice that nothing less than satisfying the perennial demands of the Kurds would be acceptable. It has also called on the government to accept the PKK and the DBP as negotiating partners to resolve the Kurdish issue. If the AKP were to accede to this demand it would provoke widespread condemnation for

negotiating with 'terrorists' which is why it has rejected such a politically risky course.

The AKP's much-vaunted 'Kurdish initiative' (first announced in 2009 and later dubbed the 'democratic initiative') has thus far offered only reforms that are in the same mold as those previously adopted: that is, their aim is to expand Kurdish cultural rights. But such reforms are considered woefully inadequate by most Kurds. As the AKP prepares to campaign in a national referendum for a more liberal constitution, to be held on 12 September 2010, and in new parliamentary elections a year later, it faces an unenviable challenge: namely to broaden its Kurdish base by convincing moderate Kurdish nationalists that its agenda is a work in progress, will be continued in the future, and is in the long-term interest of Kurds. That may be a tall order, considering that the traditional Kurdish nationalist demands have been for constitutional recognition as a distinct ethnic group, full control over their culture, and the right to be represented by their own political parties, on a par with Turkish parties. But if the AKP can somehow manage to bridge this divide between itself and the Kurdish nationalists, and by so doing bring Kurds into Turkey's cultural and political life as equal citizens, then Erdogan's boast that his is *the* party of the Kurds will be truly justified.