



# The Riddle Over Representation of Kurds in Turkey's Politics

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While there have been numerous failed attempts to resolve the Kurdish issue in Turkey in the past, the Syrian conflict has added new dimensions and complexities to an already challenging matter. The political undertakings occasionally dubbed as “democratic openings” or “resolution processes” have ultimately faltered due to a multitude of political and social dynamics. But the chief causes of these failures are firmly rooted in the lack of long-term strategic planning, short-term political calculations, competing and conflicting agendas of various political players overseeing such initiatives to end decades-old Kurdish conflict.

Recent remarks by the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) chairman Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu prompted a new debate about who should be the major interlocutor representing Kurds in Turkey to resolve the question of the century in the region. Kılıçdaroğlu stated that: “We can see the HDP as a legal body. We can resolve it [the Kurdish issue] with a legal body if it is to be resolved.” Denying the existence of the Kurdish issue, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan joined the debate and claimed that his ruling AKP government has “already solved this issue.”

Although the debate over who should be the legitimate interlocutor drags on indefinitely, taking on the Kurdish issue has become more complicated than ever before due partly to the conflict and Turkey's military activism in Syria. For decades, the Kurdish issue has dominated the political landscape; however, its scope has never been more internationalized than it is today. I was directly involved in the Kurdish resolution processes in 2009 and in the early 2010s, and based on my firsthand observation, it could be reasonably argued that the AKP leadership viewed the entire process from narrowly defined political calculations. AKP's attempts to resolve the issue were in part motivated by their desire to weather the election period with a pause in fighting with or attacks from the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)- the group is listed as a terrorist organization by Turkey and the United States. By doing so, AKP wanted to use it for political propaganda and buy out Kurdish votes.



The former co-chair of the People's Democratic Party (HDP), Selahattin Demirtaş, sided with Kılıçdaroğlu and issued a statement from prison. "The HDP ... is a political actor of its own will and it is—of course—an interlocutor." The current HDP leadership also reaffirms Demirtaş's position. Main opposition party leader Kılıçdaroğlu's remarks are significant for several reasons. First, he started a discussion that the Kurdish issue has yet to be resolved and that the main interlocutor for the Kurds should be the HDP, which faces a closure case at the Turkey's Constitutional Court. Second, his initiative could have consequences for the AKP in the next general elections. For the first time in years, AKP could lose its monopoly regarding the debates over the resolution of the Kurdish issue. Since 2007, the AKP has been the pioneer and dominant political actor, but for the first time in years, the AKP could lose its leading role. President Erdogan's continued denial of the existence of the Kurdish issue and AKP's alliance with the ultranationalist MHP could drive Kurds further away from his party.

Third, what makes the CHP chairman's recent public statement remarkable is the fact that it was CHP, the oldest party of the republican era, that was reluctant to recognize Kurds' cultural, linguistic, and other rights while favoring a military solution to the conflict for a long time. Now the party went through a sea change. Needless to say, this hinges on CHP's will to retain its position that the HDP is a legitimate actor as the main interlocutor to facilitate any dialogue around the Kurdish issue. This could ensure HDP's and Kurds' de facto support in the next general elections in 2023 or an early election in 2022, as it happened in the 2019 municipal elections where CHP's mayoral candidates were endorsed by the Kurdish voters in metropolitan cities like Istanbul.

Fourth, Kılıçdaroğlu's remarks renewed the discussion about who should be the leading representative for the Kurds. Since the 2015 general elections, there have been clear divisions between then-HDP co-chair Demirtaş and jailed PKK leader Öcalan regarding how they see Erdogan and his leadership. AKP's main strategy had been to instrumentalize and revitalize Öcalan, in particular, during the resolution processes and election periods. Despite Öcalan's unrivaled position in the PKK and his popularity among the Kurds, Demirtaş has emerged since 2015 as the young and energetic leader who could unite Kurds and get support from not only the Kurdish voters but also secular leftists and liberals in Turkey. His famous speech, "we will not make you the President," leading up to the June 2015 parliamentary elections, and his vow that "there has never been a deal between us and the Justice and Development Party (AKP), and there will never be..." have signified his position vis-à-vis HDP-AKP relations. These public statements also magnified the split between Demirtaş and Öcalan who often loomed large over the HDP as an influential figure with a say over the electoral strategies or plans of the Kurdish party. The latter has considered Erdogan as an ally and his ticket for his release from prison. Erdogan and his government presented Öcalan as the only interlocutor for the Kurdish issue. The current debate could weaken the alliance of convenience between Erdogan and Öcalan as he may see the recent debate around the Kurdish conflict as detrimental to his image.

Finally, Kılıçdaroğlu's move received support from CHP's electoral ally IYI Party in the Nation's Alliance, which could further strengthen the Alliance's position despite AKP's attempts to create divisions between the two parties.

Despite being in prison, Demirtaş is an influential political actor who could inspire the Kurdish youth in Turkey and around the region. If any future initiative to resolve the intractable Kurdish question is to survive, the Grand National Assembly of Turkey should be the platform where the process will be transparent and the HDP will be an interlocutor for the Kurds.

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