

Mass politics – a weekly news review

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It was grand theatre, a rare chance to celebrate, and – of course – an opportunity for genuine devotion; but the pope’s visit to Iraq was also intensely political. He is a man of great influence, respected way beyond the Catholic church, and the cameras of the world were pointed at him. What he did, but also what he didn’t do, mattered.

Iraq is the cradle of the Abrahamic religions, and – often in the name of these religions – it has been torn apart. Pope Francis saw himself as a “pilgrim of peace” calling for forgiveness, reconciliation, and interfaith respect.

The meeting between the white-robed pope and the black-robed Ayatollah Sistani was as carefully choreographed politically as it was visually, and although Sistani does not represent all shades of Shiism in Iraq, the links made were clearly important, and appreciated by both Christians and Muslims.

Inevitably, perhaps, a papal visit also provides an opportunity for political leaders to enjoy some reflected glory. In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq the Barzanis clearly enjoyed the spotlight and the distraction from criticism of their corrupt leadership. They will also have enjoyed the praise given to the region's treatment of its Christian minorities. No doubt, this is one of the better places in the Middle East to be a Christian, but, as Sylvain Mercadier explains in the New Arab, the Kurdistan Regional Government has effectively quashed the autonomy of Assyrian areas, and the Barzanis' Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) has manipulated the quota system to ensure that politicians elected are KDP members rather than genuinely representative of minority communities.

Also, as Ercan Sezgin has pointed out, although the pope met with representatives of the Yazidi community, he did not visit the Yazidi holy city of Sinjar (Sengal), the site of the most notorious and brutal religious-inspired attack of Iraq's blood-soaked recent past. This is doubly disappointing in the light of the ongoing threat to the Yazidis, which was renewed by the Iraqi government the day after the pope left the country.

Last October, an agreement was signed that put the future of Sinjar in the hands of the Iraqi Federal Government and the KDP. It was coordinated by the United Nations, and supported by the United States and Turkey. Missing from all this was the voice of the Yazidi people themselves. Since being abandoned in the face of ISIS attacks by the two powers now planning to control their future, the Yazidis have built up their own autonomous organisations, including their own defence forces. They are determined not to disband them as this "agreement" demands. They point out that the Iraqi constitution is written to accommodate autonomous regions, which the Kurdish region exemplifies.

So far the Iraqi government has held back from forcing the issue, and the Yazidis' desperate diplomacy has yielded promises of concessions, but on Tuesday all that seemed to have been forgotten as Bagdad issued a 48-hour ultimatum for the Yazidis to put their Asayish (public security forces) under Iraqi government control. The autonomous council called on the Yazidi people to demonstrate against this, stating: "The promises made to us have not been kept. We emphasise once again that we do not want war, but peace. We are in favour of solving all problems through dialogue. At the same time, we inform that no attack on us will remain unanswered".

On Thursday, the Iraqi military cordoned off the city, but they didn't stop the thousands of protestors who converged there from surrounding villages; and after the protest Yazidi leaders met for further discussions in the Iraqi military headquarters. Their demand for decentralisation in line with the Iraqi constitution has been taken back to Bagdad.

An aspect of his visit that the pope could not have anticipated is the (un)diplomatic furore caused by one of the designs for celebratory postage stamps, which were commissioned by the Kurdistan Regional Government – KRG's – Ministry of Communication and Transportation. The image shows the pope's head superimposed on a map of Kurdistan – that is Kurdistan as the whole geographical region where Kurds predominate, not just the part controlled by the KRG. The Turkish government, which has its own penchant for waving maps with borders where they would like them to be rather than where they currently are, fired off one of their threatening letters. Iran also expressed censure, and the KRG hastened to reassure everyone that none of the stamp designs had yet been given official approval. The spat was taken up by social media, where a trending Turkish tweet commented "Those who dream of Kurdistan will end up in Kabristan" (Turkish for graveyard), while Kurds enjoyed Turkey's discomfort. How the stamp design managed to get so close to production is not recounted. No one could seriously believe that the KRG has plans, as distinct from distant dreams, of controlling any areas beyond the Iraqi border, but this is probably not the most tactically considered way to promote a peaceful solution to the 'Kurdish Question'.

The Turkish government is very quick to police images that it doesn't like wherever in the world they might be. Earlier this month, a billboard campaign appeared in New York's Times Square with the message "STOP ERDOĞAN", highlighting femicide in Turkey and the women and children held as political prisoners. Complaints poured in from the Turkish American National Steering Committee (TASC), headed by President Erdoğan's cousin, and the media agency withdrew the advertisements. TASC then sent their own vans round the area with flashing LED messages. These labelled supporters of Erdoğan's erstwhile ally, Fethullah Gülen (who they accused of being behind the original advertising campaign) as criminals, and labelled US-supported Syrian Kurdish organisations, alongside the PKK, as terrorists.

This was not a great moment for American freedom of speech, however last week also saw an important legal ruling by the US government.

They rejected Turkey's claim that Turkish security officers who inflicted violence against protestors when Erdoğan came to Washington in 2017 were protected by the Foreign Sovereign Immunities Act.

Meanwhile in Turkey, pro-Erdoğan municipal governments (including those taken over by government-appointed trustees) have responded to the New York campaign by putting up billboards reading "love Erdoğan" – including in the officially-unrecognised language of Kurdish. Last week I compared Turkey to Orwell's 1984. Now big brother Erdoğan is watching you from the historic walls of Amed (Diyarbakir).

More ruffled feathers were caused by a tweet from the mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem İmamoğlu, who sent Women's Day greetings to two women party leaders and all female politicians. In most countries this would be unremarkable, but this is Turkey, and one of those women was Pervin Buldan. She is co-chair of the pro-Kurdish leftist Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), which is under major attack from the government. The other woman was Meral Akşener, leader of the right-wing nationalist İYİ (Good Party), and leading İYİ members were quick to express their displeasure at the juxtaposition of names. İmamoğlu, who is from the Republican People's Party (CHP), owes his position to the HDP's tactical backing in the mayoral

elections, where they called on their supporters to vote for the CHP and against the candidate from Erdoğan's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP); however, the Kemalist CHP has, historically, been no friend of the Kurds, and has been afraid to show opposition to the AKP's aggressive nationalism. This tweet was therefore a welcome signal, especially coming alongside the CHP's opposition to the removal of parliamentary immunity from MPs.

A much more wholehearted demonstration of unity took place on Istanbul's streets at the annual Feminist Night March. Women were joined by other oppressed groups – notably LGBTI activists who the CHP still cannot bring itself to support against government-sponsored homophobia for fear of alienating socially-conservative voters. Eylül Deniz Yaşar reported for Medya News that the demonstration united women of different ethnicities and sexual orientations, with LGBTI and Trans campaigners marching alongside white scarved Kurdish mothers, Kurdish activists, and many young women protesting against an increasingly misogynist society. And she noted that “the Kurdish slogan ‘Jin, Jiyan, Azadi’ (‘Women, Life, Freedom’) was continuously chanted by not just Kurdish women but a vast majority of those present”.

The march was blocked from entering Taksim Square, and faced police harassment. That night, at least twelve women organisers were detained in home raids for “insulting the president”, and two of these have reported that they were subjected to a strip search. Sadly, this has become the expected pattern for demonstrations in Turkey. If this oppression is to be successfully resisted, opposition unity will have to both broaden and deepen – as it did at the time of the Gezi Park protests nearly eight years ago.

Every day brings an additional reason for opposing Erdoğan's government. This week we were again reminded of the ecological and social impacts of Turkey's dam building projects, which have reduced the flow of the Tigris and the Euphrates and threaten the sustainability of downstream agriculture in Syria and Iraq. The Vice-President of Al-Raqqa Civil Council, Hassan Mustafa, has observed, “After Turkey failed politically and militarily, it weaponized water”. And he has raised the possibility of taking Turkey to the International Court if other countries can't intervene and persuade them to honour the

international agreements that they have signed up to. Of the 500 cubic metres a second allocated from the Euphrates, only around 200 cubic metres have been flowing.

As we have seen many times, getting Turkey to observe its international agreements is no easy task. This week, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe met to discuss implementation of judgements from the European Court of Human Rights, including the Court's decision that Turkey should immediately release Selahattin Demirtaş, the imprisoned former co-chair of the HDP. A strong statement from Amnesty International's European Director, Nils Muižnieks, pointed out that they could call for Turkey to appear again in front of the European Court for infringing the court's ruling (a procedure that has been used only once before) and they could also review the millions of Euros that Turkey receives from the Council of Europe – money which is supposed to be used to strengthen democratic structures. However, in the world of international law wheels turn slowly. The official report of the ministers' meeting records that, "given the urgency of the individual measures required in the present case, [the committee] decided to resume its examination of the individual measures at its 1406th meeting (June 2021)... in the event that the applicant has not been released by then".

In a separate development, the Council of Europe's Human Rights Commissioner has written to the Turkish government to raise concerns over the new law that severely restricts action by NGOs, which came into force at the end of last year. Observing that "some of its aspects threaten the very existence of human rights NGOs", she called on Turkey to refrain from further implementation until they have received a review of the law from the Council's Venice Commission, which is expected in June. The reply from Interior Minister Süleyman Soyulu is the usual bluster, complete with the unsubstantiated allegation that almost everyone apprehended in the recent student protests "had connections with terrorist organizations".

Such barefaced defiance of basic human rights will not respond to diplomatic words. Even a pope would struggle to make much impact here. The only thing that will change Turkey is a united mass movement.