

Diyarbakır as exemplar of the Kurdish condition – a weekly news review

This week, the news from Diyarbakır serves as an illustration of the wider Kurdish condition. Here we find threats facing Kurdish co-mayors, the anger of those no longer getting perks from the government trustee system, state impunity in the deeply flawed trial of three police officers for the murder of Human Rights lawyer Tahir Elçi, the whipping up of religious hatred - and also many organisations of resistance. Other news this week includes the latest protests against the imprisonment of the co-mayor of Hakkâri, and his replacement by a trustee, and the changing dynamics between the AKP, the CHP, and the MHP.

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Diyarbakır, or Amed to use its Kurdish name, is regarded as the capital of Bakur: North – or Turkish – Kurdistan. This week's news from Diyarbakır serves as an illustration of the wider Kurdish condition, and this week's review will focus on the city.

Co-mayors

While protests are still growing against the removal of the DEM Party mayor of Hakkâri (Colemêrg) – of which more later – speculation is increasing over which DEM Party mayor might be next in line to be [replaced](#) by a government appointed trustee, and fingers have pointed at Diyarbakır.

Last Sunday, while thousands of people faced police barricades on Diyarbakır's streets as they [protested](#) events in Hakkâri, the pro-government Yeni Şafak newspaper published an article attacking the city's co-mayors. Entitled "Qandil has appointed a trustee to Diyarbakır", it presented the mayorship as a [puppet administration](#) controlled by the PKK. The PKK are based in Qandil, and connections to the PKK are the reason always given for removing a pro-Kurdish mayor.

In an attempt to pre-empt the expected attack, the municipality has filed criminal complaints against the paper and the journalist, accusing them of "publicly disseminating misleading information" and related crimes. The complaint specifically states their "serious suspicions that the unfounded accusations were made in a conscious and organised manner to create a basis for the appointment of a trustee."

For now, the recently elected co-mayors of Diyarbakır are still in place, but this week saw the [detention](#) and subsequent arrest of six former mayors and deputy mayors of Ergani, in Diyarbakır Province. All have been accused, of course, of "membership in a terrorist organisation". During the interrogations they were asked questions such as, "What does YPG mean to you?", "Where is Kurdistan, which region does it represent?", and "What does the Halabja Massacre mean to you?" They were also asked their purpose in establishing a women's council, with the implication that this [showed](#) adherence to the ideology of Abdullah Öcalan.

In addition, the co-mayor of Kayapınar Municipality, also in Diyarbakır Province, has been [banned](#) from travelling abroad despite there being no investigation against her. When she went to the airport to visit family in Switzerland, her passport was confiscated.

Fighting for lost privileges

Before the recent election, Diyarbakır had been under the control of government trustees for eight years. One of the things that the new administration has done in their first two months in office is get rid of people who the trustees had put on the municipal pay roll, but who were not actually doing any work for the municipality. Some of those who have lost their unearned income have been carrying out noisy protests, cursing and insulting the co-mayors in front of pro-government media.

Prominent among these cursing protestors is Ayşegül Biçer, who stood as a candidate for the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) in last year's general [election](#). Biçer was also prominent among the women who – encouraged and protected by the AKP – have camped out in front of the provincial office of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP, now the DEM Party) accusing the party of kidnapping their children and sending them to join the PKK. These are unevidenced charges that the HDP/DEM Party rigorously denies.

Impunity in Tahir Elçi murder case

This week, Diyarbakır witnessed the acquittal of three police officers who had been charged with causing death by culpable negligence with respect to the shooting of Tahir Elçi in 2015. Amnesty International has described the verdict as “a huge blow to [justice](#)”.

Elçi was a valued human rights lawyer, and president of the Diyarbakır Bar Association. He died from a shot to the head in front of Diyarbakır's Four-pillared Minaret while giving a speech calling for an end to the violent conflict between the PKK and the state that was then taking place in the city. The shooting happened when police opened fire on two young PKK fighters who

were [escaping](#) after fatally shooting two policemen in an adjacent street. Immediately afterwards, Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu promised a full investigation, describing the shooting as a political assassination. However, evidence was not collected, and the police were not questioned as suspects, and, a few days later, Davutoğlu put all blame on the PKK.

It was only after the Bar Association had commissioned an independent analysis by London-based Forensic Architecture, who reconstructed what happened from available camera footage and witness statements, that the state [felt](#) compelled to bring the policemen to trial. Forensic Architecture showed that the bullet was very likely fired by one of the three policemen and could not have come from the PKK men. The state also charged the surviving PKK militant, but he is currently a fugitive and his case was not included in the recent trial.

The policemen were tried for culpable negligence, not purposeful murder, however, it would have been quite possible for one to have fired deliberately at Elçi, and there is reason to believe that the state would have been happy to see Elçi dead. A month earlier he had been detained for propagandising terrorism, after stating on CNN that the PKK is an armed political movement with political demands and a significant support base in wider society, and is not a terrorist organisation. He had reported receiving numerous death threats. In a country with a history of extrajudicial killings of human rights activists, a full investigation is especially necessary.

The current chair of Diyarbakır Bar Association has stated that “From the first day of the Tahir Elçi file, we did not see any intention to shed light on the incident”. He criticised both the criminal investigation and the trial process, where all their requests were denied. For example, the court [refused](#) to chase up CCTV recordings from surrounding businesses, simply accepting the police statement that all were not working.

Even before the acquittal decision was formally announced, hundreds of lawyers walked from the court to protest at the spot where Elçi had been [killed](#), publicly promising to pursue their search for justice all the way to the European Court of Human Rights if necessary.

Concern about the trial is widespread. The day before the final ruling, the UN's Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders tweeted, "I've been closely following the trial into the murder of Tahir Elçi in #Türkiye & disappointed at denial of requests for new inspection of the crime scene & further witness [hearings](#)." During the hearing, the Republican People's Party (CHP) Diyarbakır Deputy, Sezgin Tanrıkulu, was [removed](#) from the court by the police. DEM Party Diyarbakır Deputy, Cengiz Çandar, told parliament "The trial is not a trial; the decision, not a decision."

Religious hatred

Last Sunday provided another reminder of the divisions and hatreds that have been whipped up within Turkey. A dance event organised in a Diyarbakır park was violently attacked by a group chanting Allahu-Akbar. DEM Party MP, Adalat Kaya, condemned the attack in a Tweet that referred to fascist groups who dream of Hizbollah – the reactionary Kurdish Islamists who were responsible for the killings of many Kurds and leftists in the 1990s. However, MPs from Hûda-Par, which evolved out of Hizbollah, accused the dancers of "perversion and disrespecting religious values", with one [calling](#) for legal action against these "assimilation projects".

Organising resistance

Rights and freedoms are always under attack, but those attacks are not left unanswered. Diyarbakır's many social organisations are constantly planning resistance and challenging government oppression.

Last Saturday, the Free Women's Movement hosted feminist activists and [recently-released](#) women political prisoners.

Another Diyarbakır meeting brought together survivors and relatives of the victims of two ISIS bomb attacks from 2015. One attack hit a gathering in Suruç, where young activists were preparing to go and help with reconstruction in Kobanê, the other hit a big peace march near Ankara railway station. In both cases, the Turkish authorities were blamed for letting

the [attacks](#) happen. The survivors and relatives have found mutual support, and work together towards the peace that the victims dreamed of.

Also this week, the municipality held street-stall discussions on their five-year strategic plan for the city, and [carried](#) out online surveys.

And, in the cultural field, Ma Music Days emphasised the importance of the Kurdish bardic tradition of [Dengbêj](#), while their final concert of Kurdish music was dedicated to resistance against the government takeover of [Hakkâri](#).

Hakkâri

Moving away from Diyarbakır, we find protests against the imprisonment and replacement of the mayor of Hakkâri taking place in many cities. On Thursday, tens of thousands of people took to the streets in Hakkâri [itself](#). Buses brought demonstrators from other towns and cities, and a democracy march, begun on Monday, made its way through surrounding villages, [calling](#) on people to join the Hakkâri protest.

Separately, parts of Hakkâri province have been closed for a [military operation](#), with villagers unable to take their animals to pasture.

Tatvan

The co-mayor of Tatvan, Mümin Erol, who is also in the government's sights, has been talking to Artı Gerçek about the corruption that he and his colleagues have uncovered that was carried out by the government trustee who was in control of Tatvan before the election. When Erol had to testify after being charged with "insulting the president", he filed a criminal complaint about this corruption, and [challenged](#) the prosecutor to act on it as quickly as they had acted against him. He claims that numerous fraudulent transactions had been carried out on paper with nothing to show for the money spent; that the municipality of 87,000 people has been left with a debt of 1.3 billion Turkish Lira; and that the trustee had sold property worth around 1.5 billion TL, again

with nothing to show for the sales. He estimates that around 3 billion TL – the equivalent of 86 million Euros – is unaccounted for.

More detentions

On Wednesday, seven people were detained in house raids in [Van](#), and the Batman Provincial Director of the DEM Party was beaten and detained in Batman Courthouse, where he had gone to support a detained citizen. He was not shown any detention order and lawyers who [recorded](#) the incident were threatened.

On Thursday, Turkey's Ministry of the Interior announced that they had [detained](#) 58 people under terrorism legislation in 16 Provinces.

Rejecting Erdoğan's school curriculum

The struggle continues against the imposition of the new, conservative, Islam-based school [curriculum](#), with protests taking place in 81 provinces on Tuesday. An application has been made to the Council of State for the curriculum to be [cancelled](#).

AKP-CHP dialogue

Since the March local elections gave the CHP a new political weight, there has been an attempt at dialogue between Turkey's two largest parties, in what the CHP calls "normalisation" and the AKP increasingly refers to as "easing". The CHP claims that dialogue is important for social peace and for ending social polarisation. CHP leader, Özgür Özel, visited Erdoğan on 2 May, and 11 June saw Özel's return [visit](#).

In this second meeting, Özel seems to have focussed on the economy and the cost-of-living crisis. Erdoğan is concerned to get support for constitutional change, but Özel insists that they won't discuss this until the government complies with the existing constitution. Although Özel brought up the removal

of mayors and their replacement with trustees, there seems to be no sign of Erdoğan moving on this.

However, the main subject of political debate and speculation has been the changing dynamics between the parties, and especially the reaction of Erdoğan's far-right alliance partner, Devlet Bahçeli, leader of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). Bahçeli is not happy about these dialogues, fearing that a better working relationship with the CHP would make the AKP less dependent on his MHP. And he is especially concerned that Özel has been pushing for a proper investigation into the murder of Sinan Ateş, the former leader of the MHP's paramilitary wing, the Grey Wolves. There is speculation that such an investigation could open a can of worms for the MHP.

From a Kurdish, or simply a human rights, perspective, closer links between the AKP and CHP could be either positive or negative. If this broke the influence of the MHP, it would be welcome, but if this was achieved through a shared nationalism that excluded the Kurds and other minorities, or by defanging the CHP as an oppositional force, it would be a big step backwards for Turkey.

The next meeting of the two leaders will be in Cyprus on 20 July, where they will celebrate 50 years since the Turkish invasion and occupation of the north of the island: not a promising moment for those hoping for more progressive politics.

Turkey and Europe

It is not a good time for progressive politics more generally, especially after the shock – even if not surprise – of the European elections. With so much to worry about at home, European nations may be even less engaged with events in Kurdistan than they were before. Not that they have ever let qualms about Kurdish rights stand in the way of international trade or other profitable relations.

This week, Turkey's President Erdoğan has been visiting Spanish Prime Minister, Pedro Sánchez. At their press conference he was [asked](#) by

journalists, “How can Spanish companies trust in the legal security of Turkey when its government refuses to comply with the resolutions of the European Court of Human Rights that demand the release of former pro-Kurdish HDP party leader Selahattin Demirtaş and philanthropist Osman Kavala?”

A clearly annoyed Erdogan responded by claiming that all was according to law. He accused Demirtaş of causing the deaths of more than 100 children and of supporting acts of terrorism, and he accused the journalist of “defending terrorists”. The DEM Party has pointed out that even Turkey’s politicised court, which gave Demirtaş a 42-year prison sentence, rejected the claim that he was responsible for the deaths that took place when security forces and counter-protesters attacked the HDP demonstrations in support of Kobanê. <https://mezopotamyaajansi.net/tum-haberler/content/view/244856> The prosecutors had tried to blame Demirtaş and the other HDP leaders for the deaths of 38 people, but the magnitude of his purported crime seems to grow every time Erdoğan makes his accusations. Demirtaş was an MP for Diyarbakır from 2007-2011, and previously chair of Diyarbakır Human Rights Association.

The journalist’s reality check, which contrasted with a positive emphasis on mutual support for the Palestinians, didn’t prevent the two leaders from signing multiple memoranda of understanding on economic and scientific cooperation, and from committing to [boosting](#) trade between their two countries.

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