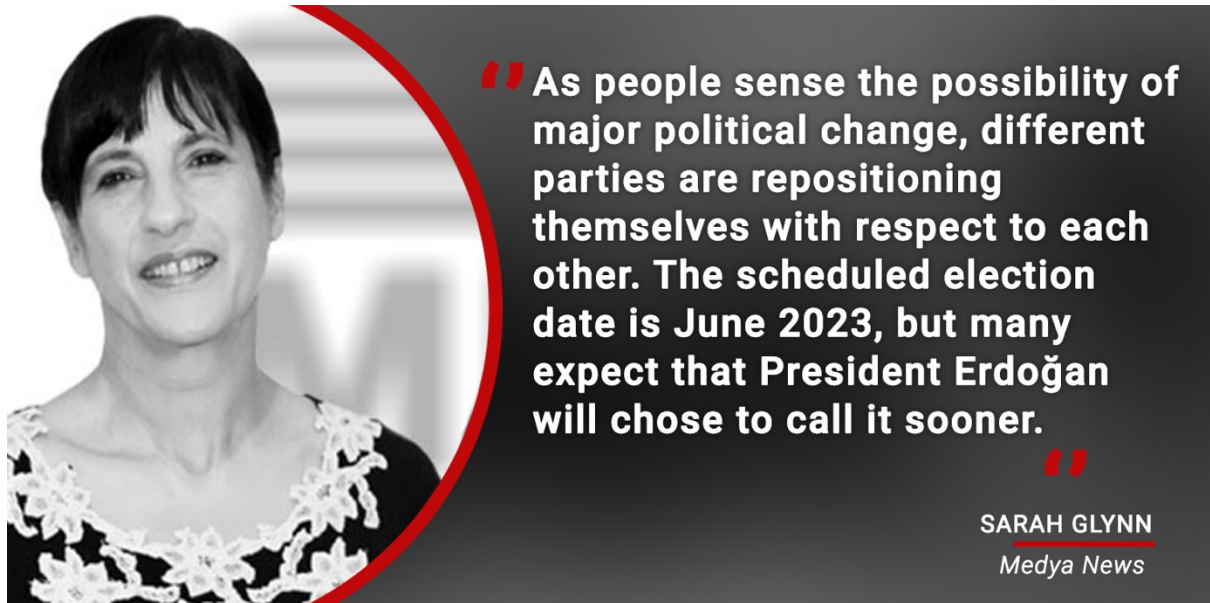


Political manoeuvres – a weekly news review

[10:42 am 02/10/2021](#)



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Turkish politics is never restful, but as people sense the possibility of major political change, the run up to the next election is being filled by a bustle of activity, with different parties repositioning themselves with respect to each other. The scheduled election date is June 2023, but many expect that President Erdoğan will chose to call it sooner, as his support is continuing to fall.

On Monday, the pro-Kurdish, leftist, Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) formally launched their call for opposition parties to come together in a broad-based democratic alliance. While the underlying ideas had already been publicised in an article by the party's imprisoned former co-chair, Selahattin Demirtaş, two weeks ago, we now have a much clearer picture of the party's vision of a minimum programme around which democratic forces could coalesce.

The HDP sees the election as an opportunity for Turkey to find a new democratic path, and they see themselves as having a key role in making this happen. They are clear that they are not looking to be part of other election alliances – a reference to the opposition Nation Alliance dominated by the People's Republican Party (CHP) and the Good Party (İYİ) – but they have set out their stall as the first step in a vital process of negotiation and consensus building.

Of course, they are not acting in a vacuum. The Nation Alliance, along with two other small parties that are close to it, has also been discussing how to return to a parliamentary system and ensure judicial independence, and they are working on their own declaration.

The HDP's minimum programme cannot fully incorporate their more progressive ideas, but they are able to take an overall look at what is needed to address Turkey's growing authoritarianism and bring about a sea change in Turkish society. While their basic points about democracy and judicial independence are common to all those who want to see a turn towards democracy, the document still clearly reflects the HDP's perspective and key concerns, including women's rights, respect for different cultures, respect for nature, an economy focussed on fairness, a peaceful foreign policy, the reversal of the wrongs carried out under political repression, and a democratic and peaceful solution to the Kurdish Question.

The HDP is 'ready to talk to and negotiate with all social parties and political actors who are in favour of implementing [these] principles' and is 'ready for joint struggle and administration.' If the party is still permitted to function, they could be in the position of king makers following the election. The outcome of the ongoing court cases against the HDP will be determined by the government and not the judges, but even if Erdoğan decides that the only way to beat the HDP is to ban them, he can't get rid of the momentum for change they have generated, and their six million voters will be looking for other avenues to achieve this. Whenever a pro-Kurdish party has been banned – and this would be the sixth such banning – a new party has been formed, ready to take its place; but whatever happens, other opposition parties cannot afford to ignore the HDP and their voters.

The CHP's Deputy Chairman, Muharrem Erkek, told Cumhuriyet, when asked about the HDP's document, that he welcomed the coming together of all opposition parties around the "reinforced parliamentary system", and he also supported the strengthening of local government. For now, though, the İYİ seems determined to keep its distance and not sully its conservative nationalist credentials, claiming that 'the HDP administration knows very well that the İYİ Party will not come together with them under any circumstances.'

The situation could be very different by the time the election is held. On the current trajectory, the opposition parties might be able to form a government even without the HDP, but in his desperation to stay in power it is impossible to know what Erdoğan might do. While he will hope for a game-changing success in his military adventures, he could also attempt to encourage sufficient chaos at home to justify a new emergency regime.

One change Erdoğan has already promised is revision to electoral rules, which he will use to try and maximise his vote. The only new rule being publicly discussed so far is a lowering of the election threshold to accommodate the National Movement Party (MHP), which supports the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government and has been losing popularity along with it. While welcoming the loss of support for these virulent far-right nationalists, it is chilling to have to acknowledge that a contributory reason for this is that they have been overtaken in anti-refugee rhetoric by the parties of the opposition alliance – by the İYİ, which began as a breakaway from the MHP and has been the main beneficiary of the falling support for the government, but also by the CHP. (This is an area where the gulf between the other parties and the HDP seems unbridgeable, and there is no mention of refugee policy in the HDP's minimum democratic programme. The HDP believes in humanitarian support for refugees and argues that the focus should be on not creating conditions that people have to flee from.)

This has been a week for political talking and – since most of these talks have been held in private – of media speculation. The previous week, Erdoğan had returned from the UN General Assembly in New York – where he had not been granted a face-to-face meeting with President Biden – complaining, 'The point

we have reached in our relations with the United States is not good. (...) I cannot say things have gotten off to a good start with Biden.' This Wednesday he met with President Putin in Sochi, and although he has attempted to present this meeting in a much more positive light, the consensus among commentators is that this, too, left him disappointed. They talked for less than three hours, despite everything needing to be translated, and there was no joint press statement afterwards.

In so clearly attempting to play the US and Russia off against each other, Erdoğan can only come across as an unreliable partner to either. His negotiating power internationally is also seriously undercut by loss of power at home and the clear implication that he could be on his way to becoming a former president.

Fehim Tastekin, in al-Monitor, pointed out the weakness of Erdoğan's position, starting with the observation that 'Erdoğan provided leverage to Putin by admitting that the Turkey-US ties are at their lowest point'. Erdoğan also antagonised Russia with drone sales to Ukraine and a public pledge not to recognise Russian annexation of Crimea; and Russia is no longer so dependent on a Turkish gas pipeline.

On the plane home, Erdoğan told journalists that Russia had promised cooperation with Turkey's defence and nuclear power industries, which would chime with Putin's economic imperialism, and he also mentioned a 'road map' for Syria's future. However, on the ground in Syria, tensions between the two countries have been heating up, and we are left to guess how this was discussed. Russia's friends in Damascus have made it clear that they want to see Turkey gone from the country, and Russia has been putting increasing pressure on Idlib, which is still controlled by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) despite Turkey's agreement to clear the area of all radical groups.

In the run up to the Sochi meeting, Turkey deployed more troops to Idlib, while Russia carried out attacks on Turkey's mercenaries in occupied Afrîn, and on Idlib, which is also under attack from the Syrian government. There have been recent suggestions that Turkey's military is not altogether happy with Turkey's Syria policy, leading several generals to seek to resign from their posts.

Representatives from the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) have also been visiting Russia and the US. Two weeks ago, a delegation went to Moscow at the invitation of the Russian Foreign Ministry. The Autonomous Administration is also involved in a balancing act, but in its case, the prize is survival. The US military presence affords them the protection they need to keep pursuing their autonomous path, but they have to consider what will happen when the Americans leave. Russia wants to use the threat of Turkish attacks to force North and East Syria back under Syrian government control with the minimum of concessions to regional autonomy.

This week, a delegation from the Autonomous Administration met with representatives from the US State Department in Washington, where, according to the statement put out by the Syrian Democratic Council, "The US Department of State confirmed (...) the continuation of the partnership between the international coalition forces led by the United States of America and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) until the final elimination of terrorism and also, it confirmed the support for stability in the region." This confirmation is important, but US support is not open ended and so far has not included support for formal recognition of the Autonomous Administration. And the Turkey-backed Syrian National Coalition also had high level meetings in Washington this week.

Meanwhile, a cross-party group of US Senators has written to urge Biden not to allow Turkey to get away with attacking democracy, and, specifically, with the threatened closure of the HDP.

A week ago, a rather more surprising political meeting took place in Hewlêr/Erbil, in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, which has resulted in a further rattling of Iraq's fragile stability. Sponsored by a US-based Zionist organisation, this was a conference to discuss normalising relations with Israel; however, in Iraq the promotion of Zionism is illegal, and is also a red rag to powerful pro-Iranian groups.

The New York Times reports that, 'Participants are now facing arrest warrants, death threats and the loss of jobs. A standoff has ensued between Iraqi security officials who want to seize those involved and the Kurdish authorities,

who are refusing to turn over the wanted Iraqis who are their guests – despite the threat of attack by Iranian-backed militias.’

Problems between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which dominates the KRG, and other Kurdish groups are a frequent subject of this column, as they continue to plague Kurdish politics. This week, after 112 days in which he was held by the KDP without charges and in poor health due to the conditions of his detention, and just before he was due to meet with representatives of the International Red Cross, the Hewlêr Representative for the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, was deported from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. And, as I was writing on Friday evening, news came through of threats by the KDP to move their forces into the Yazidi region of Şengal (Sinjar), where local people are claiming their right to maintain their hard won autonomous status.

This week’s column has focused on talk rather than fighting, but military attacks go on without ceasing. In Syria, Turkey and their mercenaries continue to shell Kurdish villages, and a meeting of the Water Forum declared Turkey’s restriction of the flow in the Euphrates River to be the ‘greatest form of aggression’. In south-east Turkey, military operations make huge areas deliberately unliveable. And an article by Firat News Agency describes the situation in Cilemêrg (Hakkari), which is surrounded by checkpoints and where Kurdish gatherings have been banned since 2016.

In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, anger is growing at the lack of international reaction to the regular reports of Turkish use of chemical weapons against the PKK guerrillas. The defence against Turkey’s invasion and growing occupation is hard and bitter. Guerrillas in Avaşîn have sent out a message: ‘Many of our comrades who took part in this resistance fought up to the end and fell as martyrs. (...) We will not allow the enemy to easily set foot in these blood-drenched lands. We promise to fight to the bitter end.’

We are approaching the anniversary of the date (9 October 1998) when Abdullah Öcalan was forced to leave Syria and begin the journey that would end in his capture and incarceration. Calls for Öcalan’s freedom – or at the

very least an end to his isolation – have gained an added urgency as there has been no contact at all with him since a cut-short five-minute phone call with his brother in March.

Today, activists are gathering in Strasbourg to remind the Council of Europe that Turkey has not responded to the demands made by its Committee for the Prevention of Torture to end this isolation, which contravenes international standards of human rights. Protestors can also point out that the deadline, set by the Council of Europe, for Turkey to comply with the ruling of the European Court of Human Rights and release the HDP's former co-chair came and went on Thursday, and Demirtaş is still in prison.

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