

First they came for the Kurds – a weekly news review

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Wednesday's announcement that Turkey's public prosecutor had filed a case for the total banning of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) was hardly a surprise, but that does not make it any less of a blow. With this coming just hours after the pro-Kurdish leftist HDP had seen a further MP stripped of their parliamentary role to face a prison sentence, and with news of more early morning raids and detentions on Friday, the HDPs description of these attacks as "political genocide" has never seemed more appropriate. Only on Monday – it seems much longer ago – Kurdish communities everywhere were responding with mass protests to rumours on social media that imprisoned

PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan, was dead. Although these rumours have now been denied by the Turkish authorities, there can never be any certainty so long as Öcalan is forbidden communication with the outside world.

After I had written this piece – late on Friday night – it was announced that, by presidential decree, Turkey has withdrawn their signature from the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence. And early this morning there were more detentions of political activists. As Harold Wilson said, a week is a long time in politics.

This week's moves against the HDP are an escalation in a prolonged government campaign against the party that has seen thousands imprisoned, including former MPs and co-mayors, and the former party co-chairs, Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ. There is no longer any meaningful separation between the Turkish government and the judiciary, and any criticism of the government or support for minority rights can result in imprisonment.

HDP MP Ömer Faruk Gergerlioğlu, who has been given a two-and-a-half year sentence for a tweet calling for peace, became a particular target through his unrelenting work for human rights (as I have described in a recent [news review](#)). When, on Wednesday, the chair of the Turkish parliament announced that he was being stripped of his MP status, he started a sit in, along with fellow HDP MPs. He has vowed not to leave the parliament building until the courts have heard the appeal on his case, which is still pending.

While the MPs were protesting Gergerlioğlu's expulsion, news came through of media reports that the Chief Public Prosecutor of the Court of Cassation had filed a lawsuit with the Constitutional Court to ban the HDP altogether. It also calls for 687 HDP members to be prevented from taking part in political activity for five years. (It has since been pointed out that three out of the 687 are no longer alive, which might be taken as an indication of a wider disregard for the need to base charges on actual offences.)

Turkey has a long and depressing [history](#) of banning political parties, especially parties that support Kurdish rights, but every time a pro-Kurdish

party has been shut down a new party has risen, phoenix-like, from the ashes. Bans have also been used to shut down precursors of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) for “acting against the principles of the secular republic”, and in 2008 the AKP itself only narrowly escaped closure. As this history demonstrates, banning is not, on its own, an effective way of stopping a political force, though this does not mean that it is not a fundamental blow to democracy. Their own experience – as well as, no doubt, tactical considerations – had made the AKP seem reluctant to resort to an outright ban, but they appear to have responded to the insistent demands of their far-right allies in the National Movement Party (MHP).

At the same time, the oppression of politicians and rights activists has not stopped. Early Friday morning, house raids in Istanbul, Ankara, Eskişehir and Adana swept up further HDP members, including regional co-chairs and executives, and also the co-chair of the Human Rights Association, Öztürk Türkdoğan. State-run media described them all as working for the PKK, and Interior Minister, Süleyman Soylu, referred to the Human Rights Association as “that cursed association”. If anyone was fooled by President Erdoğan’s recent announcement of a Human Rights Action Plan, they should by now have been completely disabused.

One consequence of the move towards a total ban on the HDP is that this attracts much more international attention than the long and brutal war of attrition that the government is also pursuing. It should also help to draw attention to all those other attacks, particularly since it coincided with the attack on Gergerlioğlu. Condemnation of the Turkish government’s actions has been widespread, with public statements coming from international politicians and parties. There were statements from the European Union (EU), and from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe which also held an emergency debate – and the US State Department is “monitoring” events. But, in case we needed another reminder of the limits of such state action, the support statement from Germany, which has major trading relations with Turkey, couldn’t resist pandering to Erdoğan. Their “great concern” over the Turkish government’s actions was followed by the unnecessary and counterproductive comment: “We call on the HDP to clearly

distance itself from the PKK, which is listed as a terrorist organisation also in the EU”.

Recent events didn't prevent the EU from dropping plans to sanction Turkish oil executives, with EU diplomats briefing Reuters that “A report on relations with Turkey commissioned by EU leaders that was originally expected to list the disagreements over energy, human rights and migration, will now be neutral in tone”, and “A demand by a Turkish prosecutor to ban the pro-Kurdish HDP party is unlikely to revive any talk of sanctions, although it may be discussed by the EU”.

On Friday, the day after the EU's High Representative, Josep Borrell, had put his name to a statement that talked of “the EU's concerns regarding the backsliding in fundamental rights in Turkey”, Erdoğan had a video conference with European Council President, Charles Michel, and President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, where, according to the EU's press release “The EU side underlined the importance of sustained de-escalation and further strengthening confidence building to allow for a more positive EU-Turkey agenda”.

There is clearly a lot more work to be done to raise wider public awareness of what is happening, in order that governments cannot afford to be so dismissive. This is a crucial period for the Kurds, and also for democracy and political ethics, but there is none so blind as those who will not look beyond the bottom line.

Erdoğan's suppression of the HDP can be partly understood as a barefaced power-grab. Recent polls have shown that, in a straight electoral fight, the AKP would not be expected to hold onto power, even with the support of their allies in the MHP. So, they have decided to eliminate part of the opposition – the third biggest party in the parliament – and swing the odds back in their favour. They have also cultivated a crude popular support through a divide and rule rhetoric that blames all problems on the Kurdish enemies within. Their attacks on the Kurds, and on their political opponents more generally, are designed to stifle resistance through the use of fear, and to create an image of strength. But they go beyond even this. The violence, the racism, and the misogyny feed

on their own propaganda to create an unstoppable logic that delights in cruelty and vengeance for its own sake. Ethnic nationalism is built into Turkey's constitution, and Kurds are never forgiven for refusing to be Turks. More recently and specifically, the HDP has not been forgiven for depriving the AKP of a majority in the June 2015 general elections, and, through their promotion of tactical voting, ensuring that the AKP lost control of Istanbul and other major cities in the local elections of 2019. The AKP government's violent trajectory has only been reinforced by their reliance on the support of the MHP.

The Turkish government claims that, in attacking the HDP, they are actually attacking their number one enemy, the PKK. However, one consequence of their determination to block hopes of a constitutional solution to the Kurdish Question, will be to encourage Kurds who had previously looked for recognition through the HDP to join the guerrilla forces. No doubt, there are some bellicose politicians, especially within the MHP, who would be happy to encourage new opportunities to let loose the army on the Kurdish regions, but a return to the 1990s would be a frightening prospect for most people.

For its part, the PKK has long been pushing for a peaceful solution, but since Erdoğan pulled the rug from under the peace talks in 2015, there has been no one to negotiate with. Indeed, the way the talks ended suggests that there never was serious commitment from the government side. However, hopes for a peaceful future remain centred on Abdullah Öcalan, who is recognised as their leader by millions of Kurds. This recognition, and his potential to negotiate a peaceful future, have led to comparisons with Nelson Mandela. Öcalan's ideas have also inspired ground-breaking developments in radical democracy and women's rights in Rojava.

For twenty-two years, Öcalan has been held in almost total isolation on the prison island of Imrali, in contravention of Turkish as well as international law. He has not had a visit from his lawyers since 7 August 2019, and he has had no contact with the outside world since a phone call with his family – the only phone call he has been allowed in all that time – which took place in April last year in response to concerns over the pandemic. The most recent lawyers' visits were only allowed after a long mass hunger strike, and political

prisoners are now on hunger strike again (this is day 114) in an attempt to force an end to his isolation.

When rumours started circulating on social media on Monday that Öcalan had died in prison, Kurds across the world came onto the streets to demand that Turkey open the gates and allow access. It was some time before the official statement that he was still alive, and there is still no independent assessment of his condition. His lawyers and family keep up their repeated demands to see him, and calls have gone out to the Committee for the Prevention of Torture, based in Strasbourg, asking them to make a visit. In the treatment of Öcalan himself, which is classified as torture according to international human rights law and convention, and in the unnecessary uncertainty and anxiety imposed on the millions who support him, which is in itself a form of torture, the Turkish government seems to be driven by a mixture of rule-through-fear and of pure vindictiveness. When it comes to the Kurds, they would put salt in every wound and then grind it with their heels.

Gratuitous – even genocidal – violence underlies two anniversaries that were commemorated this week. On Tuesday, we remembered Saddam Hussein's chemical attack on Halabja, 33 years ago, which killed up to 5,000 civilians and injured thousands more. This was part of a comprehensive campaign of extermination against the Iraqi Kurds, carried out between 1987 and 1989, in which many tens of thousands were executed or disappeared, thousands of villages were wiped off the map, and hundreds of thousands faced forced displacement.

On Thursday, we looked back on three years of occupation of Afrîn. As part of the Autonomous Administration of Northern Syria, this had been a haven of peace and democracy, where over 40% of important positions were held by women. It was also over 90% Kurdish. Since 18 March 2018, it has been occupied by Turkey and under the sway of Islamist militias acting as Turkish mercenaries. The greater part of the original population – an estimated 300,000 people – escaped what they knew would be a brutal occupation, though many are still being targeted by military attacks carried out by Turkey's mercenaries on the refugee areas. In their place are some 400,000 new settlers – mainly families of Islamist fighters. Those original inhabitants who

remain, lead a persecuted existence. Now the population is less than a quarter Kurdish, and every attempt is being made to eliminate all signs of Kurdish culture. Children are educated in Turkish, and places are given Turkish names. Women are afraid to leave their homes. The long list of atrocities committed by the occupiers includes murder, rape, torture, detention, kidnapping, extortion, looting and theft. Even trees and archaeological sites are not safe from the destruction and pillage, and many of the documented brutalities are similar to those carried out by ISIS, especially towards women.

This Sunday is Newroz, the Kurdish celebration of spring and the new year that has become a focus for the expression of Kurdish culture and identity. Kurds see it as no accident that Erdoğan has chosen to clamp down harder on them just when they are looking forward to a window of joy, especially a joy focussed on Kurdishness. But Newroz is a festival of resistance, of ordinary people rising up against oppression. Writing for the Mesopotamia News Agency, lawyer and leading HDP member Doğan Erbaş recalled Öcalan's messages for peace read out at the massive Newroz celebrations of 2013, 2014 and 2015, during the peace negotiations, and he puts out a "call to the peoples of Turkey": "Everything that's going on shows that the government doesn't want peace nor preparing for a solution process. However, we will call to the people of Turkey for a solution process this Newroz again. Mr Öcalan does not have any agenda other than a common and democratic life in Turkey".