

# Post-Erdoğan dreams – a weekly news review

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Turkey's next elections need not be held before June 2023, but you don't have to be a seasoned Turkey pundit to see that they are already dominating the political scene. And there is more than a whiff of possible change in Ankara's polluted air. President Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) built their support on the back of economic boom. Now the Turkish economy is in crisis, and a lethal mix of high inflation and high unemployment is hitting Turkish households. Erdoğan's unorthodox insistence on cutting interest rates has added fuel to the fire, leaving the Turkish Lira in 'free fall' and reaching unprecedented lows.

Speaking to his MPs on Wednesday, Erdoğan acknowledged the possibility of electoral defeat, even as he dressed this up in a call for electoral support in order to avoid the chaos that he claimed would follow an opposition win.

But the speech that has opened up a window of hope, was made by the Republican People's Party (CHP) leader in a video message posted on Twitter on Saturday. Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu announced that it was time to "take responsibility for the mistakes made in the past" and to heal the "deep wounds", including those caused by the party that he leads. And so, he was going on a "journey of reconciliation" and would begin by meeting "the societies, individuals and representatives of different lifestyles that we have hurt and frightened in the past."

Speaking to his party MPs on Tuesday, he listed some of the groups with which a CHP-led government should make amends, reaching out both to Kurds imprisoned in Diyarbakir, and Muslim students banned from wearing headscarves. His list went back in time to the 1942 wealth tax on Christians and Jews, and it included atrocities committed under the AKP government, such as the Roboski massacre of 2011. His clear message: I don't want palaces and convoys (so beloved by Erdoğan ) but to leave a legacy of a better country.

This is election rhetoric, and the CHP – the party of Mustafa Kemal, the founder of modern Turkey – is rooted in ethnic nationalism. But, despite its hard-line elements, the CHP is also a broad church. It has recently made other encouraging moves, such as voting against the extension of the mandate allowing Turkish troops to enter Syria and Iraq, and Kılıçdaroğlu's statement that the Kurdish Question can be resolved with the help of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP). Crucially, Kılıçdaroğlu's latest words have the potential to take on a momentum of their own.

Political scientist, Cuma Çiçek, told Bianet that the statements opened space for discussion about a different kind of society after Erdoğan, offering a positive alternative to people tired of social polarisation, and that, although they would not be accepted by all CHP members, "As long as these discussions are expanded by the public, they will move forward". In the same article, Güneş Daşlı, who works on transitional justice, warned, "Accountability and the rule of law can only be achieved by confronting [the] deep state. For Kılıçdaroğlu, I think the hardest test will be here... The main way to do this is

with the victims' movements and civil society, which are already very strong in Turkey".

The jailed co-chair of the HDP, Selahattin Demirtaş, has taken up the opportunity held out by Kılıçdaroğlu's speech, as he did with Kılıçdaroğlu's statement on the Kurdish Question. Writing in Politikyo, he clearly spelled out, "Regardless of any political tactical calculations, alliance and election discussions, I attach great importance to this statement of Mr. Kılıçdaroğlu in terms of the social reconciliation and internal peace of our country, and I support it wholeheartedly." He stressed that what is important is not blame and punishment, but the assurance that mistakes and suffering will not be repeated; and he made clear that sincere apology is a sign of courage not of weakness, and that all politicians must apply self-criticism.

Demirtaş also stressed the importance of social unity, and confessed, "We should have succeeded in embracing the whole of society by transcending identity politics". This may sound odd from a leader of a party that campaigns for the right to express Kurdish identity and culture, but the HDP is committed to defend the freedoms of all ethnic and social groups.

All Turkey's opposition parties share a vital belief in the need to restore democracy and to bring to an end the autocratic powers bestowed on the president in 2017. Fundamental to this is the separation of government and judiciary. In practice, a judicial system may never be able to attain complete independence, but every move away from that ideal is a move towards totalitarianism. In Turkey, the destruction of Judicial independence has gone much further than in the 1990s, when extrajudicial state violence led to thousands of deaths and disappearances as the government attempted to eradicate Kurdish society.

The condition of the Turkish judicial system was discussed by the European Parliament's Subcommittee on Human Rights, on Monday. Among others, the committee heard from Professor Johan Vande Lanotte of the Turkey Tribunal, which carried out its own hearing into Turkey's judicial abuses in September and is trying to get these taken up by the European Court of Human Rights. He talked about a 'prevailing culture of impunity' since the 1980s that has

'reached unprecedented levels in recent years'. Luca Perilli, who acted as an independent expert for the EU in Turkey up until 2015 and is also involved with the Tribunal, observed that the reforms that were begun after Turkey was given EU candidate status in December 1999 went into rapid reverse with the violent repression of the Gezi protests in 2013, and that this decline escalated following the aborted coup of July 2016.

Every day seems to bring more revelations about the ongoing abuse of Turkey's political prisoners. A major source of concern is the mistreatment of prisoners who are sick, including the continued imprisonment of people who are gravely ill. Bataray Saman Rehşan, from the Turkish Human Rights Association, told the EU Subcommittee that 604 prisoners were gravely ill and over 1,600 were sick.

There is a large number of sick prisoners because living conditions are bad and medical treatment grossly inadequate. On Tuesday, relatives of sick prisoners began a 'justice watch' vigil in the offices of the Diyarbakir Bar Association. They have stated, "Despite medical reports, the detainees are neither treated nor released. Doctors who take the Hippocratic oath refuse to release prisoners even though they cannot remain in prison. We looked to lawyers to make our voices heard and for them to provide legal assistance to us. We will keep our actions going until we get results."

The HDP has drawn attention to judicial malpractice in the Kobanê Case trial, which seeks life imprisonment without parole for 108 people, including the HDP's former co-chairs and all members of the party's 2014 Central Executive Board. They state that these "unlawful developments... undermine the possibility of a fair trial". As well as the dismissal of the judge, which I wrote about last week, the defence lawyers are protesting the unprecedented and unsustainable speed with which the case is being pursued, seemingly at the insistence of National Movement Party (MHP) leader, Devlet Bahçeli.

Meanwhile, on Wednesday, the HDP's İzmir MPs held a press conference at which they listed fundamental and unexplained gaps in the investigation into the murder of Deniz Poyraz at the party's İzmir office in June. The facts uncovered, combined with the neglect and spoliation of evidence, point to an

organised conspiracy with official complicity, and the MPs observed that if the murderer had been put in charge of the investigation, he could not have done a better job of protecting himself.

The ultimate model for this denial of justice and of basic human rights is İmralı island prison, where Abdullah Öcalan and three other political prisoners are held in isolation on life sentences without parole. This type of sentence, which categorically denies hope, is deemed a form of torture, and, seven years ago, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the İmralı sentences were in breach of the European Convention on Human Rights. Turkey's refusal to act on the court's decision will be brought to the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers at the end of this month. This is the committee that can take action to support the court's decisions, but in all those seven years, they have not yet looked at this case. The same committee session will discuss the implementation of infringement proceedings against Turkey if the businessman-philanthropist, Osman Kavala, has still not been released as instructed by the European Court almost two years ago.

While members of both the Council of Europe and the European Parliament have shown understanding and empathy, the institutions themselves, and the constituent national governments, continue to be reluctant to act. Of course, any action has to perform a difficult balancing act. European institutions only maintain leverage so long as Turkey continues to be a member of the Council of Europe and a candidate for EU membership. They don't want to push Turkey away completely, but Turkey also values its European links. There is an element of bluff here, and neither party holds all the cards. Sergey Lagodinsky, chair of the EU-Turkey Delegation, told the EU Human Rights Subcommittee that the EU has missed opportunities for effective pressure again and again.

There is certainly scope for making improved trade links and any further arms deals contingent on genuine improvements in human rights (including an end to foreign aggression); but this is not happening. Two days after the EU Rapporteur on Turkey, Nacho Sánchez Amor, talked to the Human Rights Subcommittee about the need for a targeted approach, Erdoğan announced at

a joint press conference with the Spanish Prime Minister – the leader of Amor's own party – that Turkey had agreed to buy an aircraft carrier from Spain and was also discussing purchase of a submarine.

Turkey's attempt to claim oil reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean has prompted a stronger EU response, but only slightly – their sanctions regime was extended last week, but currently effects just two people. And, although Greece has shown themselves ready to fight to defend their access to oil, when it comes to refugees, they appear to have no problem in extraditing them back to their Turkish enemy. On Wednesday, Greece handed over a former HDP mayor and a businessman, who were both remanded in custody by the Adiyaman Chief Public Prosecutor's Office.

Turkey's abuse of anti-terrorism laws reached a new audience on Wednesday with the arrest of Omer Souleyman, a world renowned Syrian Arab singer from Tel Tamer, who also sings in Kurdish. Souleyman came to Turkey in 2011 to escape the war in Syria. He was released yesterday, but the arrest was hardly good publicity for Turkey. Was it meant as a warning to others who might sing in Kurdish, or was there some personal animus involved?

Attempts to hold Turkey to account may be more rhetoric than reality, but when it comes to Iran, international interaction is almost entirely focussed on the Iran Nuclear Deal. Iran shows little interest in demonstrating adherence to universal human rights, and the rest of the world generally shows little interest in what goes on within Iran's borders. Nevertheless, human rights organisations continue to record a terrifying progression of cases of violent oppression. Last Saturday, Hengaw Human Rights Organisation reported a "new wave of mass detentions of Kurdish civilians in Iran", noting that "at least 27 Kurdish civilians were detained across [Iran's] Kurdistan province in the past three days" No reasons were given, and the security forces used violence, and insulted both the prisoners and their families. Four more Kurdish civilians were detained on Sunday. Political prisoners in Iran's jails can disappear or be tortured to death, and the country makes frequent use of the death penalty.

It was only two years ago that mass protests across Iran were put down with extreme violence that left hundreds dead, and wounded thousands more. The EU did manage to instigate some sanctions against perpetrators in this extreme case, but, overall, there has been little done to hold the authorities to account. To counter this, a People's Tribunal was held last weekend in London, which took evidence from people affected. This is a form of action invented by Bertrand Russell and Jean-Paul Sartre, and is used for "raising awareness and advocacy for victims of mass atrocities, who have been denied justice by the international accountability mechanisms." The Tribunal will publish their judgement early next year.

In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, the crushing of human rights is one of the reasons that people are attempting to escape to Europe, and are finding themselves stranded on the Polish/Belarusian border: this and the endemic corruption, which together destroy their hopes of a better future. (This week, the speaker of the Kurdistan Regional Parliament admitted that although the region received \$900 million a month in oil revenue, only \$350 million reached the finance ministry and the rest was unaccounted for.

I looked at the horrors besetting this migration last week. Since then, Belarus has moved thousands of migrants into warehouse-type accommodation, but is still co-ordinating attempted breakthroughs of the border fence into Poland. Some would-be migrants have been flown back to Iraq, where they must face all their former problems, now with both hope and savings extinguished; however, others are determined that despite the nightmare on the border, return is a worse option.

Meanwhile, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) is desperately trying to spin a narrative to account for people fleeing the region. Prime Minister Masrour Barzani has tried to present the migrants as simply conned by human smugglers. When GAV TV, owned by his cousin, Kurdistan president Nechirvan Barzani, published a story critical of the KRG, the Prime Minister was not pleased, and the television station was closed down.

Another source of embarrassment emerged in a comment made in the Turkish parliament by Turkey's Defence Minister. Hulusi Akar, who visited the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in January and was photographed with KRG executives in front of the flags of Turkey and Kurdistan, declared that there is no geographical region called Kurdistan in Turkey or outside of Turkey. This ought to serve as a reminder to the KRG that their Turkish allies are not only hostile to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), but to all forms of Kurdish autonomy.

Under the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, attempts are being made to build a different sort of justice system appropriate to the region's radical democratic structure, but the biggest threats here are from outside. Although a major Turkish invasion appears to be currently off the table, their war of attrition continues relentlessly, especially through the diversion of Syria's share of river water, as well as constant low-level attacks. Amberin Zaman has written a powerful reminder in Al-Monitor. And there seems to be no end to the brutalities inflicted on original residents who are still living in the territories occupied by Turkey.

For the people of North and East Syria, too, the outcome of the next Turkish election, and the nature of any post-Erdoğan government, are vitally important. But, significant change will not come easily. Even as we dare begin to hope, we cannot forget that the CHP have always been a nationalist party, and that their electoral partners in the Good Party (İYİ) are a breakaway from the far-right MHP.