

Erdoğan mocks peace hopes by choosing the path of autocracy and war – last week in Kurdish news

Turkey has opened up a path to peace, but chosen to follow a very different route. The government is refusing to make the changes needed for the PKK to enact Öcalan's call to dissolve. This destructive intransigence is being compounded by continued military violence in Syria, and now by an existential assault on the remnants of Turkish Democracy through the detention of Erdoğan's main political rival. Peace and Democracy are intertwined, and both are being asphyxiated.

[11:29 am 22/03/2025](#)

A A



Not long ago, I – like many others – described Turkey as at a crossroads. President Erdoğan has now made clear which direction he has chosen, and it is not the direction of peace and democracy. Emboldened by an international political climate where politicians are unashamed to treat the world as a game of Risk and no longer feel the need to hide their lust for power, and where insincerity in political agreements has become normalised, he has committed himself to a path of military violence and political authoritarianism.

Turkey began the week by bombing a village outside Kobanê, killing a family of ten, including eight children. By Wednesday, the Turkish state had detained the man considered to be Erdoğan's greatest rival for the presidency, Ekrem İmamoğlu, the Mayor of Istanbul.

Erdoğan's commitment to the path of violence is not just clear from his actions, it is also evident in what he has not done. The Turkish Government has done nothing that can convince people that the recent opening of new talks with Abdullah Öcalan constitutes a sincere move towards peace.

Later, I will look at the – potentially pivotal – action against İmamoğlu and his Republican People's Party (CHP), and the massive reaction that this has provoked. But first, I want to concentrate on what has happened to the hopes and concerns raised by Abdullah Öcalan's call, on 27 February, for the PKK's armed struggle to be replaced by a focus on peace and democracy.

Peace needs more than words

The Kurdish Question remains key to Turkey's future – and intimately linked to questions of democracy; however, the government's approach to this question seems contradictory and confusing.

It may be that we are witnessing the outward effects of internal government disagreements about where these talks could lead, or it may be that this opening was always envisaged as some sort of distraction and trap – a way of tying the Kurdish Freedom Movement in knots, and of casting the blame on them for not completing a peace process, while ensuring that completion was not possible.

The PKK has been ready for serious peace negotiations for decades, and it seemed as though the Turkish Government had recognised that this would be in their interests too.

Militarily, the current situation has reached a stalemate. Murat Karayılan, from the PKK's Executive Council, [told](#) Sterk TV on Monday: "There has been a war for 41 years and the parties have not been able to destroy each other. Neither we have been able to remove state forces from Kurdistan, nor have they been able to liquidate us as an organisation and take our positions from us. In other words, the result is a stalemate, and they must accept this."

The Turkish government does not like receiving their soldiers in body bags with little to show for their loss, and their endless war is draining the country's economy. They also have reason to be wary that the shifting power dynamics in the region are generating new support for the Kurds as a bastion against Islamist groups. They can understand, too, that war-weary Kurds, if given the opportunity, would choose peace rather than an uncertain future at the mercy of regional power games. In addition, Erdoğan has been losing popularity, and needs to do something that will bring back support.

However, the government also seem to believe that they can achieve "peace" through continuing their violence and oppression. They show no signs of considering any changes that would allow fighters to become civilians, or allow the people of Turkey (from any background) to be able to pursue their rights and aims through democratic means. Öcalan's call was for peace and democracy. Democracy in Turkey is under major attack, and, so far, the only peace being offered to the PKK is the peace of the grave.

When the PKK responded promptly and positively to Öcalan's call for their dissolution, they made it clear that this would require legal and constitutional guarantees, and that they would first have to have a congress where they could talk directly with Öcalan. The PKK called a ceasefire, and there was a general recognition that the ball was now in the government's court. But the Turkish state only intensified their attacks on the PKK.

On 13 March, Cemil Bayik, co-chair of the Kurdistan Communities Union, the umbrella body that includes the PKK, [reminded](#) viewers on Sterk TV:

“Everyone knows that it is not possible for the congress to convene under these conditions and it is dangerous. If the conditions are met, the congress will convene and make those decisions. The movement has already openly declared this.”

The only [response](#) from Devlet Bahçeli, who has been spearheading the new engagement with Öcalan, was to insist that the congress proceed immediately and without conditions. (Bahçeli is leader of the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and Erdoğan’s principal ally.)

In his Sterk TV [interview](#) on Monday, Karayılan explained that the situation is not as simple as Bahçeli likes to suggest. There are many PKK fighters who are yet to be convinced of the need to lay down their arms, and the only person who will be able to convince them is Öcalan, who “must have the opportunity to actively participate in this process” – to “be free”, and to “act freely”. Karayılan concluded the interview by pointing out that the PKK are ready for peace, but, if the state does not accept this, they are also ready for war.

On Tuesday, Turkey’s Justice Minister declared that there was [no possibility](#) of Öcalan ever getting parole. He claimed that the right to be considered for parole, known as the Right to Hope, is not a concept in Turkey’s legislation. This is not legally correct as the European Convention on Human Rights, which Turkey is signed up to, overrides state law.

On Wednesday, Duran Kalkan, also from the PKK’s Executive Committee, [underlined](#) the government’s lack of meaningful action in an interview with Medya Haber, adding specific accusations of government deceit. “The information we received was that there would be changes in the conditions in İmralı within the week of Leader Apo’s call. Steps would be taken to ensure that Leader Apo could live and work freely. Twenty days have passed, and no one in İmralı has any information!”

Highlighting Öcalan’s centrality to any future peace, Kalkan stated, “Not a single person with a gun in his hand will lay down his weapon unless he sees Leader Apo’s physical freedom.”

Bahçeli’s response was to [propose](#) a time and place for the PKK congress, but without any indication of how this could be realised.

Newroz

In the same written statement, Bahçeli welcomed (a clearly de-Kurdified) Newroz – or Nevruz, which he described as “a symbol of our national existence, our national identity, and our deeply rooted national unity,” and he also attempted to present the CHP as the new enemies of the state, who were creating “chaos”, “disrupting a terror-free Turkey, encouraging unrest, [and] provoking the troops into the streets”. The attempt to cut the Kurdish links with Newroz echoes state practices in the 1990s and was reinforced by Erdoğan’s [proposal](#), the following day, that the festival be declared a national holiday of “spring and brotherhood”.

This year's massive – and very Kurdish – Newroz celebrations have been left free of the usual harassment and detentions, despite their focus on Öcalan's leadership and freedom. Öcalan and the PKK have turned this traditional spring festival into a powerful focus of Kurdish resistance, but it seems that this year the Turkish government decided that the best way to counter the symbolism of that resistance was not to stand in the way – as if to say forget all the evidence of your eyes and history, you do not need Kurdish politics, you are safe with us. (Similarly, the Iranian authorities seem also to have decided, in most cases, that clamping down on Newroz celebrations was not politically expedient, and the Kurds of Iran created some [vast celebrations](#), with Kurdish clothes and many women with uncovered hair.)

In line with Bahçeli's message, Turkey's enabling of Newroz was also an attempt to prevent the Kurds from linking their oppression to the ongoing oppression against the CHP and Turkish democracy. It may have helped avoid pouring further oil on a political atmosphere that is already burning with anti-government anger, but Kurdish politicians and activists will not be stopped from standing firmly with the CHP in support of democracy.

Erdoğan's vendetta against İmamoğlu

After the detention of İmamoğlu, the question occupying many people's minds is whether, in carrying out a blatant attack on his main opponent, Erdoğan has miscalculated and set in motion forces that could lead to his own downfall. İmamoğlu has been in Erdoğan's sights for some time and had already been the target of several legal cases. The threat of a political ban, after conviction for describing election officials as "fools", scuppered his chances of being chosen as the CHP's presidential candidate for the 2023 election. This time, İmamoğlu was – and still is – expected to be selected unopposed as his party's next presidential candidate at a ballot on Sunday: a situation that Erdoğan seems determined to prevent.

The day before his detention, İmamoğlu's İstanbul University diploma was [revoked](#) on the grounds that his transfer to the university in 1990 was not valid. His lawyer argued that the board that made the decision had "no more authority over a diploma than the university's cafeteria does," but absence of a degree would make him ineligible to stand for president.

İmamoğlu was [detained](#) early Wednesday morning in a police operation that also rounded up over a hundred others. He has been accused of corruption and, separately, of aiding the PKK "terrorist organisation". The "terrorism" charge is based on the electoral agreement made between the CHP and the pro-Kurdish DEM Party in selected municipalities in last year's local elections.

After all that had gone before, few people who are not Erdoğan loyalists will see this as anything other than a political attack, and the CHP immediately [labelled](#) it "a coup attempt against our next president". It is a massive attack on democracy.

Despite Erdoğan's attempts to portray the government as a friend of the Kurds, the terrorism charge is also yet further proof of the government's refusal to countenance any form of Kurdish politics: an electoral agreement with a political party would not normally be instrumentalised as an accusation of terrorism.

Yesterday, CHP leader, Özgür Özel, [announced](#) that if his party had not taken precautionary moves, they believe that the state would have followed their direct attacks on İmamoğlu by appointing a trustee to take temporary control of the whole party.

Protesting to save democracy

Despite a four-day ban on demonstrations in İstanbul, restrictions on social media, and the closing of roads and subways, İmamoğlu's detention has been met by large, angry, and growing protests. The crowds are calling for Erdoğan to resign.

Inevitably, comparisons are being made with the Gezi Park protests of 2013. Since that time, Erdoğan has consolidated his control over the state and built up the forces of oppression; however, on this occasion, the now most popular political party is calling protestors onto the streets, huge economic problems have produced a population with little to lose, and the protest call, against an existential threat to what is left of Turkish democracy, is being taken up by many different groups – from university students to farmers in conservative Konya. Erdoğan's self-imposed crisis is further damaging the economy, and the government has had to spend billions of dollars to prevent the Turkish Lira going into freefall.

Historically, the CHP has been no friend of the Kurds, though relations have improved recently. The DEM Party also has little reason to respect İmamoğlu personally – the mayor had little time for Kurdish concerns despite benefitting from Kurdish votes. But the issue at stake goes beyond person and party. They want to prevent Erdoğan turning Turkey into a full-blown autocracy. With clear reference to the discussions around Öcalan's call, which seem to belong to an alternative universe, [the DEM Party statement](#) describes what has been happening as “also an attack aimed at breaking the hopes of the people of Turkey for peace and democracy.”

*Sarah Glynn is a writer and activist and permanent columnist for [Medya News](#) – check her [website](#) and follow her on [Twitter](#) or [bluesky](#)