

Everywhere Newroz, always freedom – a weekly news review

On Monday, at the Turkish Parliament, the presidential candidate of the main opposition alliance, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, leader of the Republican People's Party (CHP) visited the leaders of the pro-Kurdish leftist Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) for a much-anticipated discussion; and on Wednesday, the Labour and Freedom Alliance, centred on the HDP, which has been described as the potential king-maker of the forthcoming election, announced that they would not be putting up their own presidential candidate, thus encouraging speculation that Kılıçdaroğlu could achieve a decisive first round victory.

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Sarah Glynn

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Kılıçdaroğlu for president

After Monday's meeting, the CHP and HDP gave a [press conference](#). Kılıçdaroğlu, who was accompanied by leading members of his party, outlined the basic areas of their discussion – all of them fundamental social-democratic issues. He spoke of an independent judiciary and the rule of law, of greater equality and a strong social state, of rights and freedoms, of the environment, of earthquake recovery, and of minority rights, gender equality, and ending violence against women. He also stated that elected mayors should not be replaced by trustees (as has been the fate of almost all the mayors elected from the HDP), and he stressed that all problems, including the Kurdish Question, can be solved in the Parliament – the Grand National Assembly of Turkey.

Kılıçdaroğlu, who has a [record](#) of patient and determined bridge-building, focused on inclusivity and working together, calling on the media to avoid divisive language, and promising to “*end the fighting in this country*”.

In her response to Kılıçdaroğlu's statement, HDP co-chair, Pervin Buldan explained, “*The reason why we received him here today was to show that we are in favour of a democratic solution to the Kurdish question under the parliamentary umbrella of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey. That is why we wanted to receive him and his delegation in the Parliament.*”

The final decision not to stand their own presidential candidate was [announced](#) by Buldan on behalf of the Labour and Freedom Alliance two days later. She did not specifically mention supporting Kılıçdaroğlu, but the position was clear in her statement that, “*In the presidential elections, we will exercise our historical responsibility against one-man rule.*”

Kılıçdaroğlu has pledged to restore power to the parliament. Buldan also stressed the importance of their alliance winning a significant number of parliamentary seats.

There were a lot of things that were not said by both parties, but this is politics. Neither party wants to alienate voters who would not be able to

stomach more overt statements of cooperation, and they know that Erdoğan supporters will do all they can to drive wedges through the opposition.

At an election meeting yesterday, the HDP co-chairs [promised](#) more explicit support for a presidential candidate (meaning Kılıçdaroğlu) in the next few days, as well as a target of 100 MPs. (There are currently 56 MPs from the HDP, one from the related Democratic Regions Party, and four from the Workers' Party of Turkey. The highest number of HDP MPs elected to date was 80 in June 2015.)

The HDP had submitted one more request that the final hearing of the case examining the call for the party's closure be delayed until after the elections. When this was rejected, they finalised their plan to run in the general election under the banner of the [Green Left Party](#), which, as I described last week, had been made ready for such an eventuality. Ecology is a fundamental principle of Öcalan's philosophy, from which the HDP takes its inspiration, so the explicit ecological reference is appropriate. It is also an important reminder in a week when climate scientists have issued their most alarming warnings yet that for our planet to remain liveable society needs to fundamentally change its focus. We need to move away from capitalist inspired growth to an economy of well-being – from, in Öcalan's terms, capitalist modernity to democratic modernity.

Returning to the election, party and alliance candidate lists are yet to be decided, but one of those who has put their name forward is [Ferit Şenyaşar](#), who has become known for the vigil he has undertaken alongside his mother outside Urfa court. They are demanding justice for the murders of his father and two brothers at the time of the last general election in 2018. His family came under attack when İbrahim Halil Yıldız, the MP for the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), who was then electioneering, came into the Şenyaşar family shop along with his bodyguards and refused to leave. Another Şenyaşar brother is in prison for the murder of the MP's brother, who was part of the group, although video evidence shows he could not have been responsible. The Şenyaşar family members were wounded in the attack, but subsequently murdered in hospital; and there have been fundamental problems with the police investigation and court case, including the

withholding of vital CCTV footage taken in the hospital. If Ferit Şenyaşar is elected he promises he will be “the voice of everyone who has been subjected to injustice and lawlessness in this country” – which is quite a task.

Another would be candidate is [Dicle Anter](#), son of the murdered writer, Musa Anter, whose case was dropped last September after the expiry of the 30-year statute of limitations. Dicle Anter told Bianet that, if elected, he would work to establish a truth commission for unsolved murders: *“Unidentified murders are the black box of Turkey. When they are brought to light, Turkey will have a very different future. When light sheds on the black boxes, we can take great steps in the fields of justice, peace, and freedom.”*

On the subject of the election, it is now known that of the people displaced by the earthquake, fewer than [350,000](#) have registered to vote where they are now staying, which means that a much larger number of people will have to make the trip to their original province if they want to be able to vote.

Newroz of hope and oppression

Newroz, the new year festival of the spring equinox has been transformed by the Kurdish Freedom Movement into a salutation to Kurdish culture and a festival of resistance against oppression. It is celebrated wherever there are Kurds, and this year in Turkey there were large public gatherings in 23 Turkish cities under the banner of *“Everywhere Newroz, always freedom”*. These were run by the HDP and related organisations, and speeches prepared the crowd for their role in throwing out the AKP government and ending President Erdoğan’s one-man-rule. So, for example, veteran HDP politician, Ahmet Türk [exhorted](#) the people of Amed (Diyarbakir), *“Let us unite to end the despotism of Turkish fascism and the reign of the current rulers. It is up to us to pave the way to peace and achieve our ideal of a democratic nation.”* And HDP co-chair, Mithat Sancar, spoke of a “wind of change”.

For the present, though, people are far from free, and the Amed speakers were separated from their audience by a five-metre-high chain-link fence and a phalanx of helmeted policemen. Defiant Kurdish youths climbed the fence,

well above the policemen's reach. Hundreds of celebrating people were detained by the police – over 300 in Amed, including [57 minors](#). over [200 in Istanbul](#), and others elsewhere.

In Iran, some families held their celebrations at the graves of family members murdered by the state. In Saqqez, the Newroz fire was [lit by Jina Amina's father](#) in the Aichi cemetery where she is buried, and mosque speakers [amplified](#) revolutionary anthems. Newroz celebrations became another focus for protest against the government, and in several cities, state security forces fired on the protestors. Hengaw Organization for Human Rights [reported](#) that over forty people were injured. There were also [widespread protests](#) the week before on the eve of Charshama Suri, the last Wednesday of the old year, which met with the expected brutal government response including shooting and kidnapping.

In Jinderes, in Turkish-occupied Afrîn, four men were killed by members of Ahrar al-Sharqiya, the faction of the Turkey-backed “Syrian National Army” (SNA) that executed Hevrîn Xelef, the leader of the Future Syria Party in 2019. It seems that they beat up a young man for lighting a Newroz fire, calling him an infidel, and when his father and uncles came to his aid, they beat them too, and then shot all four men dead. As [North Press Agency](#) put it, “The violence is shocking, though hardly out of the ordinary [for the region]”. The killings generated mass protests and became an excuse for Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) to take over control of Jinderes, with some protesters and family members of the murdered men inviting them to take charge. They regard HTS as a more disciplined alternative to the SNA, but these things are only relative. HTS, has been trying to present a respectable face to the world, but the group is a breakaway from Al Qaeda. They have been steadily consolidating their position with at least the tacit support of Turkey, with whom they have a mutually dependent relationship.

Meanwhile, Turkey's general crackdown against all opposition, and especially the Kurds, continues undiminished. In Erciş, where the elected mayor has been ousted and replaced by a government-appointed trustee, the Kurdish population has been given a reminder of how long-established Kurdish hatred

is. A street has been [named](#) after one of the perpetrators of the 1930 Zilan massacre, in which the Turkish state responded to a rebellion by attempting to wipe the Kurds from the area with the mass killing of up to 15,000 civilians. To bring the hatred up to date, a [fourteen-year-old boy](#) in Lice was taken by the police, tortured, and left bound up by a deserted riverbank. The police officers tried to force him to say he was Kurdish. He now risks losing an eye. The clampdown includes increasing restrictions on the freedom of speech. Next week, German public broadcaster, Deutsche Welle, will [close down](#) their Turkish bureau after being refused permission to continue to operate in Turkey. Some of the few remaining independent broadcasters have been given fines, and a platform that monitors internet censorship has itself been [blocked](#). All of which sets alarm bells ringing over the conduct of the elections.

Bafel Talabani and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

In a more positive development, the crowd at the Amed Newroz [receive a video](#) message from Bafel Talabani, leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), one of the two dominant parties in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. In the video, Talabani called for Kurdish unity, and called on “our neighbouring countries to release our politicians and leaders and to permit doctors, lawyers, and families to visit them”. This has been widely understood as a reference to Öcalan.

The more cynical amongst us might point out that Talabani could begin by creating unity within his own party, after a brutal ousting of his cousin from joint leadership. The PUK also falls well short of the democratic standards advocated by the HDP, and their support is at a low ebb. Nevertheless, this positioning is important and part of a pattern, and it creates a welcome change from that of the region’s most dominant party, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which is politically close to Turkey.

The difference in perspective of the two parties was demonstrated by their responses to a [helicopter crash](#) over the region ten days ago in which nine members of the Syrian Democratic Forces’ counter-terrorism team lost their lives. The SDF stated that the soldiers were on their way to Sulaymaniyah,

which is controlled by the PUK, and there is speculation that these were PUK helicopters. PUK peshmerga went to Syria to attend the soldiers' funerals. The first reaction of the KDP was to claim that the dead soldiers were from the PKK, which they regard as a terrorist organisation.

The "bleak" social and political situation in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq is summed up in an [article](#) in Foreign Policy by Winthrop Rodgers. He describes how a "self-interested political leadership" presides over a corrupt regime that abuses basic rights and freedoms and leaves the majority of its citizens in such dire straits that some ten thousand people attempt to emigrate each year, often taking appalling risks. Looking at the KDP and PUK, which have dominated the region through their patronage networks, and whose bitter rivalry led, in the 1990s to civil war, he notes that their working relationship "has become increasingly dysfunctional since the last regional elections in 2018", with the KDP seeking to become the "undisputed power". Elections due to be held last October have been put on hold as there is no agreement over the electoral law. Rodgers argues that "the West must use its considerable leverage and capabilities to hold Iraqi Kurdish leaders accountable for corruption and human rights abuses rather than reinforcing them through unyielding military and political support". While we might rather be wary of all attempts to impose change from outside, the call for Western powers to stop enabling corruption and oppression is vital.

Iraq itself provides lessons for those tempted to force regime change. The hardships of post-war Iraq fertilised the growth of ISIS. Now Iraq's government has become increasingly [close to Iran with](#) whom they have just agreed to boost border security.

In addition, Iraq is too weak to prevent Turkish incursions deep into Iraqi territory, or to force Turkey to allow them the share of Tigris water they are due. As a response to Iraq's acute water shortage, Turkey has just agreed to [raise the water level](#) for one month, but only one month. Both Iran and Turkey want to pressure Iraq to attack the Kurdish rebel groups established on Iraqi soil.

Öcalan at Newroz

Today it is exactly two years since Öcalan was able to speak with anyone outside his prison walls, but his presence dominated Newroz celebrations everywhere. Even in the Turkish cities where his image could not be used, calls for his freedom were made from Newroz stages, and crowds of people risked arrest by joining chants of “Bijî serok apo!”- long live leader Apo. Apo, Öcalan’s nickname, means uncle in Kurdish.

After [calling on the Amed crowds to](#) “pave the way to peace and achieve our ideal of a democratic nation.” Ahmet Türk continued, “Indispensable for this goal is the freedom of Abdullah Öcalan. For he is not only the leader of the Kurdish people, but the architect of a peace plan that we want to implement”.

With millions of Kurds respecting him as their leader, Öcalan holds the key to a successful peace agreement. His public commitment to making peace was read out at the Amed Newroz ten years ago. In that [letter](#) from his prison cell, he wrote *“The period of armed struggle is ending, and the door is opening to democratic politics.”* In 2015, Erdoğan slammed that door shut again, but the election is bringing hopes that it might be reopened.

Sarah Glynn is a writer and activist – check her [website](#) and follow her on [Twitter](#).