

# Which side are you on? – a weekly news review

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Many people have been sharing a photograph of the smiling and universally-loved Deniz Poyraz, who was killed in last week's brutal attack on the HDP's İzmir office, alongside the grim image of her gun-toting murderer. The journalist, Can Dündar, added the caption 'Make your choice, Turkey'. While that choice might seem obvious in this case, a century of anti-Kurdish ethno-nationalism is not easily brushed aside.

When it comes to politics, we cannot forget that the other opposition parties, apart from the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), all have a history of attacking the Kurds. The Republican People's Party (CHP) may describe itself as socialist, but it claims the mantle of Turkey's ethno-nationalist founder,

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. It has often been afraid to show friendship towards the HDP for fear of being deemed unpatriotic, and has dutifully cheered on Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's invasions of Syria.

On Monday, the final speech in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe debate on the prosecution of politicians, called attention to Deniz Poyraz's assassination. After explaining that the Turkish government responds to those who challenge the government's views by accusing them of being terrorists, the speaker turned the tables on the government, arguing that politicians who 'use hate speech to consolidate their power' and 'provoke potential assassins to brutally murder innocent people, should be prosecuted'. It was a strong speech, and all the stronger for being made, not by a representative of the HDP, but of the CHP. Ahmet Ünal Çeviköz linked the two parties when he explained that 'the political authorities who belong to the parties of the governing alliance try to identify the HDP, and also my party, the Republican People's Party, as collaborators with terrorist organisations.' On Tuesday's demonstration in Strasbourg's Place Kleber for Deniz Poyraz and the HDP, we welcomed a solidarity speech by another CHP representative.

In contrast to the respectful responses to the İzmir attack given by many opposition politicians, the official statement from the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) was minimal, and Erdoğan himself didn't make any reference or comment for two days. Meanwhile, Devlet Bahçeli, whose Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) is in alliance with the AKP and provides crucial support to Erdoğan's government, let loose his distinctive venom, alleging (without bothering with evidence) that the murdered woman was a 'recruiter for the PKK', and suggesting that the whole incident was a put up job by the PKK. CHP deputy, Sezgin Tanrikulu, commented, "Trying to legitimize this murder over the identity of Deniz Poyraz after such a massacre attempt is very dangerous and it will pave the way for other killings and massacres."

It is Bahçeli who is the main driver behind the case to close the HDP, though Erdoğan is equally determined to use the judicial system, which he now dominates, to ensure that the party cannot function. The CHP leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, has stated that his party does not support this. He noted at a

party meeting the day after the revised indictment for closure was submitted to the Constitutional Court, “We disapprove of any action aimed at closing a party. We disagree with any action aimed at preventing parties from participating in the elections.” And he made clear, “If you see political parties as enemies and instruct the Supreme Court of Appeals to shut them down, there is no democracy there. Democracy should be for all parties.”

Kılıçdaroğlu has also sent messages of solidarity to the HDP when its members were detained, and has called for the government to respect the decision of the European Court of Human Rights and release former HDP co-chair, Selahattin Demirtaş.

However, all support given to the HDP is made with a wary eye on its possible political ramifications. Although they now oppose lifting parliamentary immunity for MPs (recognising that the judiciary is completely subservient to Erdoğan) the CHP voted for the 2016 constitutional amendment that allowed the immunity of HDP MPs to be lifted en masse. And, although tactical voting, campaigned for by the HDP, was key to the CHP’s victories in the 2019 mayoral elections in Istanbul, Ankara and other cities, they made no public acknowledgement of the HDP’s role. In 2018, the CHP eschewed possibilities of allying with the HDP, and, instead, has an electoral alliance with the right-wing nationalist İYİ Party, whose leader is a former member of the MHP. The AKP will, of course, exploit any differences between the partners in this alliance.

Özer Sencar, of Metropoll polling company, has been discussing how an HDP ban could impact voting. There are still around 25% of Kurds who vote for the AKP, and he claims this would drop significantly. If the HDP were able to re-emerge under a new name, then they would be expected to gain votes – like what has happened in the past. If all routes for doing this were closed, then Sencar claims that the AKP would not benefit from former HDP voters, who would mainly vote for the CHP or not vote at all. Of course these predictions would depend on the CHP maintaining a principled stance against closure. However, some 60% of İYİ Party voters support closure of the HDP – a point that won’t be lost on the AKP-MHP alliance.

Meanwhile, any politician still unsure which side they are on needs to look at the continuing round-ups of opposition politicians and activists; and also at the disturbing details coming out about the fatal attack in İzmir. Comparisons have been suggested with the assassination of the Armenian campaigning journalist, Hrant Dink in 2007. It took many years to prove the role of the state authorities in his death, and, although this year saw life sentences for police and security officers, much still remains hidden.

Some of the concerns about “the attitude taken by the security forces and the judiciary during this incident” were laid out by the CHP’s Sezgin Tanrıku in a speech to the Turkish Parliament on Tuesday:

“Look, I mean, there is an intelligence that watches us 24/7, there is the security, there is a tent set up in front of the political party. Everyone is under surveillance, everyone is tracked. A suspect who entered and left that building several times, acted suspiciously and enrolled in a course was not followed or kept under surveillance.

“And during the incident, even though the incident was happening, the arrival of other security forces was awaited for 15-20 minutes. It was as if the ground had been prepared for this massacre to be carried out.

“We know how he was caught right after the incident. Look, the security forces who inflict all types of violence on the opposition on the street embraced this murderer with a great kindness and compassion, asking him, ‘What is your name, brother?’ This has escaped no one’s notice.

“As for the attitude of the judiciary... He was held in detention for only 20 hours. I am against long periods of detention, but there is a person who committed a murder. What are the forces behind him, what are his relations? Even his house was searched after he was arrested.

“Is it how they treat an ordinary citizen of ours or a dissident? Look, Boğaziçi University students were held in detention for 4-5 days. You cannot get information from a suspect after you send him or her to jail. Why was he detained for 20 hours? Why were all his relations not inquired?”

Tanrikulu also warned from the parliamentary rostrum, "Stop making antagonizing, polarizing, dividing, separating, grudging and targeting remarks against the Kurds".

It is not only in Turkey that politicians need to decide which side they are on. In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Turkey is continuing its invasion of the mountain areas where the PKK have their bases, and the PKK guerrillas are putting up a heroic defence. A crucial part of Turkey's strategy is to persuade the Kurdistan Democratic Party, which dominates the Kurdistan Regional Government, to support them against the PKK, and so to bring about an intra-Kurdish fight from which the Turkish state would be the only winner. The KDP is heavily dependent on Turkey politically and economically, and their peshmerga have been helping the Turkish army for a long time, although they have generally avoided direct conflict with the PKK.

Growing numbers of people in the region are increasingly concerned about what is happening: about Turkey's destruction of the village life in the mountain areas and their devastation of the natural environment, and also about the prospect of 'fratricidal' war.

The co-chairs of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the KDP's main rival, repeated to the US ambassadors to Iraq and to the Kurdistan Region on Tuesday that the PUK "will not participate in the fratricide. The crisis must be resolved through dialogue."

Earlier, a member of the Iraqi Federal Parliament for the Gorran Movement had claimed that if the PKK were not defending the mountains, the Turkish state would still attack the area, which would become a centre of terrorism like Afghanistan's Tora Bora.

The Brussels-based Kurdistan National Congress (KNK) has long been busy carrying out diplomacy for peace in the region, but there appears to be little positive action from the politicians on the ground to make this a reality, or even to try and bring the issue onto the international political agenda.

International politicians also need to ask themselves which side they are on – not just in their speech but through the impact of their actions.

Last time, I wrote about an international peace delegation to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, whose delegates were stopped by authorities in Düsseldorf, Doha and Hewlêr (Erbil). This week, some of those who were allowed through were detained and questioned in Frankfurt on their way back, in what appears to be cooperation between German and Turkish police.

Also this week, a German Kurdish woman, Gönül Örs, was sentenced to ten years in prison by a Turkish court on the basis of information supplied by the German federal police. Her crime consisted of taking part in a short occupation of a pleasure steamer in Cologne in 2012, to draw attention to Kurds on hunger strike in support of Abdullah Öcalan.

Back in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, the current balance of forces is very much a product of US interference, which, in deference to Turkey, gives no quarter to the PKK. The US, UK, Germany, France, and the Netherlands are all active in the region, working with the Kurdistan Regional Government to reorganise their Peshmerga fighters and attempt to combine the units loyal to the KDP and units loyal to the PUK in a single force. Despite this engagement, representatives from these countries have made no obvious intervention to promote peace in the region. Instead, they parrot the KDP's talking points that put all blame on the PKK.

Last week, I commented on the lack of substantial action to constrain Turkey's human rights abuses in the reports from the NATO summit. This time, it was the EU's turn to disappoint. On Tuesday, the Advocacy Director of Human Rights Watch wrote, "European Union officials have a chance to send a clear message when they meet for an EU summit this week: the deplorable human rights situation in Turkey should have consequences for the country's relationship with the EU... It was inappropriate for EU leaders to offer the weak suggestion that "dialogue" on rights is "part of the EU-Turkey relationship."

They should make respect for rights a prerequisite for talks on new trade ties." On Thursday, the EU summit recommitted to human rights "dialogue", and

continued working towards a new customs union and arranging new funding for refugees in Turkey, without insisting on any prior action. We all need to ask our representatives, which side are you on?

Postscript: I want to end with a small piece of good news – or, at least, not-so-bad-in-the-circumstances news. The Spanish Government has announced pardons for nine imprisoned Catalan politicians, following widespread campaigning and a highly-critical report by the Council of Europe. (The report also covered Turkey – see my third paragraph – where it was even more critical and where the situation for the HDP just gets worse.) The pardons are only a first step, and need to be seen as a spur to further action and not as mission accomplished, but they have a double importance for all campaigners. They show that campaigns can make a difference. Also, just as every unopposed oppression emboldens oppressors everywhere, so every successful opposition, makes oppression that little bit harder to get away with.