

Politics on the Streets – Sarah Glynn's weekly news review

[12:03 pm 27/11/2021](#)



Sarah Glynn

With the Turkish economy collapsing, and growing numbers of households unable to make ends meet, opposition politicians are calling for public rallies to demand the resignation of the government and early elections. The former Co-Chair of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), Selahattin Demirtaş, sent a message, calling for joint rallies, from his prison cell, and Republican People's Party (CHP) leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, announced a first public rally scheduled for 4 December in Mersin. But many people aren't waiting for the politicians.

Protesting in authoritarian Turkey is a dangerous occupation; however, that hasn't stopped people from going out onto the streets – especially as many are becoming increasingly desperate, with little to lose.

Runaway inflation means that the prices of goods change daily, especially for staples such as bread, milk, butter and sugar. Gas and electricity are rapidly increasing in price too. A grocery shop owner told Yeni Özgür Politika that the price he gets from sales is less than how much the goods now cost to buy. Markets are emptying and shops are closing down.

In a comment almost as distant from ordinary people's lives as Marie Antoinette's instruction to "let them eat cake", an MP from the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) told people to "eat less". He even tried to make a virtue of it, observing, "We can buy two tomatoes instead of buying two kilograms. It's not that healthy to eat forced crops during the winter anyways."

President Erdoğan and his AKP are widely blamed, not just because they have been responsible for the Turkish economy for the last two decades, but also because Erdoğan's insistence on reducing interest rates has caused record-breaking falls in the value of the Turkish Lira, so pushing up the costs of imported goods and energy. In November alone the Lira has dropped in value by almost a third.

While many people are reluctant to raise any criticism, for fear of being denounced as "terrorists", repression could not prevent street protests breaking out across the country, calling for the government to resign. Predictably, these were met with police resistance, and Bianet reports 57 people taken into custody in Istanbul, and 13 in Çanakkale.

The police are also investigating 271 social media accounts that discussed the collapse of the Turkish Lira. They claim that these had "incited the public into hatred and hostility by manipulating the fluctuations that occurred in the foreign exchange rates." And that they had shared "disinformation" and "manipulative" messages, and had "called people to the streets for physical violence."

Despite heavy police control, Turkey's streets have been busy with other protests too. Thursday, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, was marked by marches in many countries. Turkey has a poor and worsening record of violence against women, not helped by Erdoğan's decision to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention – the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence. Bianet has calculated that, so far in 2021, at least 285 women have been killed by men and a further 193 have died suspiciously. Of the known murders, "172 women were killed by their husbands, boyfriends, ex-boyfriends or ex-husbands" and "at least 52 women were killed by their family members such as elder brothers, fathers, sons and son-in-laws". (International comparison is difficult as everywhere measures statistics differently. In the same period in the UK, at least 127 women were killed by men – including where a man is the principal suspect – which would be the equivalent of 159 deaths in a population the size of Turkey. Women and members of the LGBTI+ community who came onto the streets to march in Istanbul were blocked by police barricades and attacked with teargas and rubber bullets.

The day before this march, an investigation had been launched against a group of women in İzmir who protested against the Taliban in August. At the end of their demonstration, they symbolically removed the black veils they had been wearing. Now they are being investigated for inciting the public to hatred of Muslims and Islam.

On Tuesday, international legal experts submitted their opinion in the trial of 46 people who were detained when police attacked the 700th gathering of the Saturday Mothers in 2018. Mothers of the disappeared have held weekly protests in Istanbul's Galatasaray Square since 1995, except for periods when severe policing made this impossible. The experts argued that "the state cannot restrict Article 11 free assembly or expression rights in order to silence, discourage or punish participants for their individual or collective (critical) views which they are seeking to express peacefully in a public form."

Turkish doctors have also been exercising their right to protest. Weeks of action have culminated in a march that has taken in different parts of the country and that finishes in Ankara today. They are protesting the collapse of the health service – which was already severely hit by marketisation before the added stress of the pandemic – and the huge pressure being put on all medical workers.

The protests by students and academics against Erdoğan's interference in the universities – and specifically his appointment of the new rector to Istanbul's Boğaziçi University – have continued into their 47th week. On Thursday, 52 students appeared before the Istanbul court. Security guards who were there as plaintiffs refused to press charges, but the case continued anyway.

On the increasingly rare occasions when the Turkish courts do find against the government, their decisions may not be implemented. As the University Faculty Members Association protested in a written statement on Monday, academics who signed a petition against the military attacks carried out on the Kurdish cities of Nusaybin, Cizre, and Diyarbakir in the winter of 2015-16 have still not been reinstated in their jobs, despite a Constitutional Court ruling of July 2019 acquitting them of all charges.

Wednesday witnessed another act of defiance by a Kurdish shopkeeper. Less than a month after Cemil Taşkesen of Siirt was detained for telling the leader of the Good Party (İYİ) that they were in Kurdistan, Hacı Tunç, was visited in his shop in Van by the chair of the Party of Change in Turkey. Tunç told his visitor: "The more languages, the more happiness. Eastern culture is different. Let us not forget about the East. A friend of ours in Siirt said, 'This is Kurdistan.' Two-thousand years ago, this was Kurdistan. It will still be Kurdistan. Let us not disagree. It is God who created us. Allah also knows Kurdish, Turkish, Arabic and English." Like Taşkesen, Tunç was detained and has been accused of "making propaganda for a terrorist organisation".

Meanwhile, the state has been accelerating and intensifying its attacks on the HDP. Sixteen new summaries of proceedings have been submitted to Parliament seeking the lifting of parliamentary immunity from a further

thirteen MPs so that they can be tried and imprisoned. State interference in the Kobanê trial (noted in last week's news review) is designed to condemn leading party members to life imprisonment as speedily as possible. This would include Selahattin Demirtaş, which would allow Turkey to nominally comply with the European Court of Human Rights ruling for his release, while still keeping him behind bars.

Early morning raids on Friday took HDP members into custody in Istanbul and Kocaeli, and seventeen people into custody in Adana for posts on social media. Other political activists were detained on Thursday in Amed and Urfa.

On Friday, an Istanbul court decided to continue the detention of businessman-philanthropist, Osman Kavala, in defiance of another European Court of Human Rights ruling. The Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers had said that if he isn't released before next week's meeting, they will discuss setting in motion the lengthy process that could eventually lead to Turkey's expulsion. Now they will need to act.

Last week managed to produce one piece of good news for Turkey's political prisoners, with the promised resumption of contact visits – suspended as part of Covid regulations – at the beginning of December. However, we also learnt that 66 political prisoners who have completed their thirty-year sentences and complied with conditions for release on parole are still being kept behind bars, where they are being made to go through further assessments of their behaviour.

A telling, if less serious, example of Turkish dirty politics was provided by the curious incident of the dog in the tram. Boji became an internet star when he was photographed travelling alone around Istanbul on the city's public transport system, and had become an unofficial municipal mascot. Now it looks as though AKP opponents of the city's CHP mayor have tried to win political points by planting dog shit on a tram seat and blaming it on Boji.

We also got a further reminder, thanks to the xenophobic Mayor of Bolu, that prejudice and discrimination are not limited to the government. On Monday,

Bolu Municipal Council voted for the mayor's proposals to charge foreign nationals ten times the standard charge for water, and a hundred thousand Lira fee for a wedding. Support came from Bolu's CHP and their İYİ allies, allowing the AKP to appear in the unlikely role of defender of rights, as the Interior Ministry launched an official investigation.

The arrival of refugees and migrants exposes xenophobia and hypocrisy everywhere. This week, the situation of the migrants at the Polish border was debated at the European Parliament, and it was shocking to see how, for many speakers, those thousands of desperate people translated into an opportunity for self-congratulatory rhetoric about Europe standing firm against Belarus' "hybrid war".

On Wednesday, at least 27 migrants drowned trying to reach the UK in the biggest recorded loss of life in the Channel. Although details are still unclear, most of these people, like most of the refugees in Belarus, are believed to have come from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).

One of the migrants who was repatriated from Belarus after failing to get into Poland has claimed, in a video shared by Kurdistan Watch, that his return was not voluntary, and that this is also the case for the majority of those who have come back to Kurdistan. Anyone wondering why people would take such risks to leave the region need look no further than the ongoing student protests, and the response from regional authorities. The protests, which began on Sunday at the University of Sulaymaniyah and have spread to other towns and cities, are calling for the restoration of the student living allowance, which was cut in 2014. But, as one student told Rudaw, that was just the initial spark: "We are demanding better services. We are demanding the removal of political influence from university affairs. We are demanding a better education system". Like previous protestors in the region, the students are demanding hope and the possibility of a future.

On Tuesday, peacefully demonstrating students were met by security forces with tear gas, rubber bullets and water cannon. Students have also accused the security forces of firing live bullets; and they claim that the offices of the

Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the party that controls Sulaymaniyah, were deliberately set alight in an attempt to frame the protestors. The crackdown in Sulaymaniyah only encouraged more protestors to come out in support elsewhere. There has also been a huge security presence in the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) controlled areas, especially in Erbil and Duhok.

On Wednesday, the Kurdistan Regional Government announced that some funds would be made available to improve conditions for the students, but no details were given. At the same time, as if to prove their distance from the lives of those they are meant to represent, a central concern of the region's parliamentarians was a video that purported to show cars driving over a KRI flag torn down by the protestors – but which proved to be an old video of a flag ripped off in high winds in 2020.

On Thursday, Christian Peacemaker Teams in Iraq stated, “According to CPT sources, in the last three days at least 91 student demonstrators from Sulaimani and Erbil have been arrested. Their family members do not know where they are being held or in what condition. During yesterday’s protests in Sulaymaniyah four journalists... were arrested by an unknown security force.”

Amnesty International has commented, “We are disheartened but not shocked. The violent dispersal of students in Kurdistan Region’s Sulaymaniyah city is only the latest attack by Kurdistan’s security forces on freedom of expression & assembly.” At least, this time, unlike last December, none of the protestors have been killed.

Those looking for a more humane response from the PUK, which has historically been more in tune with the wider population, faced a double shock this week. The dynastic struggle for control of the party spilled its first blood with the murder of a colonel who was close to the side-lined co-leader, Lahor Talabani, along with two of his bodyguards.

Further violence in Iraq can be expected. This week, Iranian aligned militias put out a call for volunteers who would be prepared to fight US troops should they remain in the country after the end of the year.

Protest is dangerous in Kurdistan and Turkey, but even more risky in Iran. However, desperate circumstances and the lack of other political routes have ensured that here, too, protestors are taking to the streets. As I write, protests for water in Isfahan are being met with lethal force.

In Syria, a central aim of Turkey's unceasing attacks is to ferment dissatisfaction with the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria and encourage protest and unrest. The insecurity produces fertile territory for the resurgence of ISIS, and ISIS fighters can find safe haven in the areas under Turkish occupation. On Monday, Rojava Information Centre tweeted, "In the past 2 weeks, a doctor, 2 civilians, 2 Asayish members, & 2 SDF soldiers were killed in 6 different attacks. ISIS sleeper cells are likely behind most of these attacks."

Another source of pressure – and hence instability – is the hard-pressed economy; and some of that pressure can be attributed to US sanctions, which impact on the whole of Syria. These have just been eased a small amount, but only for non-governmental organisations.

The US-led 'Global Coalition' has also reiterated its determination to help stabilise North and East Syria and has promised support for health, education, and basic services.

US commitment strengthens the Autonomous Authority's hand in its negotiations with Russia, and, following a meeting in Moscow this week at the invitation of Russia's Foreign Ministry, the delegation from North and East Syria struck a positive note. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss Syrian Democratic Council involvement in resolving the Syrian crisis. They also looked at prevention of further Turkish invasion and the need for humanitarian support.

There is so little reporting of this part of the world that it is doubly frustrating when reporters misrepresent what is happening. Last week, the Guardian appears to have been taken in by a fake document that claimed to show that the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) had released two ISIS prisoners for

money. The SDF have published a careful explanation of the errors that would have proved it to be a forgery.

Today, the 43rd anniversary of the foundation of the PKK, Kurds around the world will be trying to get more positive coverage of their freedom movement – and not least in Berlin, where people will be taking to the streets to call for lifting the ban on the PKK to “pave the way for a democratic solution to the Kurdish problem and the development of democracy in Turkey.”