

The politics of hate – a weekly news review

Turkish ethnic nationalism has been a core belief of the Turkish Republic throughout its century-old existence. It has increasingly been defined against a Kurdish “other” that refuses to deny Kurdishness and assimilate into a monolithic Turkish identity. Since Erdoğan ended peace talks with the PKK and, following the 2015 election, was forced to rely on the support of the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), he has increasingly used populist politics of prejudice and hatred to build and energise his support. As election day approaches the populist rhetoric from Erdogan and from leading figures in his People’s Alliance has descended to a new level.

[7:08 am 17/11/2023](#)



SARAH GLYNN

On Tuesday, in Istanbul's busy Kadıköy, a young Turk [started to taunt a young Kurd](#) who was known for his street singing. Cihan Aymaz sang mainly in Kurdish. He was an active supporter of the pro-Kurdish leftist Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) and was facing charges for a song in which he criticised President Erdoğan. The Turkish man demanded that Aymaz sing a popular Turkish nationalist song, "Ölürüm Türkiye'm" ("I Would Die for You, Turkey"). When Aymaz refused, his interlocutor took out a knife and fatally stabbed him. This racist killing is the product of a political culture where populist ethnic nationalism is encouraged from the top, together with hatred for everyone who does not fit the nationalist, Islamic conservatism espoused by the government. Two young men who took part in a protest that was organised against the killing were subsequently followed by the police. They were taken to the police station and [subjected to hours of torture](#), and they have been charged with resisting arrest.

Turkish ethnic nationalism has been a core belief of the Turkish Republic throughout its century-old existence. It has increasingly been defined against a Kurdish "other" that refuses to deny Kurdishness and assimilate into a monolithic Turkish identity. As Medya News [observed](#), this is far from the first time that someone has tried to force a Kurdish singer to sing that song, and it is not even the first time that someone has been murdered for refusing to sing it.

A tragic killing of this kind had become almost inevitable. Since Erdoğan ended peace talks with the PKK and, following the 2015 election, was forced to rely on the support of the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), he has increasingly used populist politics of prejudice and hatred to build and energise his support. As election day approaches the populist rhetoric from Erdogan and from leading figures in his People's Alliance has descended to a new level. At Aymaz's funeral, the spokesperson for the HDP-dominated Labour and Freedom Alliance [made clear](#) that they "denounce this hatred which costs us the lives of such young people and which is a reflection of the hate policies pursued by the government."

Another group that has increasingly been used by Erdoğan as a focus for populist anger is the LGBT+ community. LGBT+ rights are presented as a perversion that is against religion, and as a threat to the family. Erdoğan and his People's Alliance portray themselves as the family's defenders. On Wednesday, Erdoğan [denounced](#) the opposition Nation Alliance at a rally in his hometown of Rize with the words, "The family is sacred. Ask yourself, why perverted factions like the LGBT urge their supporters to vote for [the opposition]. Kemal [Kılıçdaroğlu] is pro-LGBT. İYİ Party is also. All of the others, they are all pro-LGBT." (The İYİ Party is the main ally of Kılıçdaroğlu's Republican People's Party (CHP)) On Thursday, Erdoğan [stated](#) via Twitter that the LGBT movement is "the strongest current threatening the future of Western nations." As many have pointed out, this exploitation of homophobic prejudice is a deliberate political tactic by a man who, before the 2002 election, had defended the need for legally protected gay rights.

Twice last weekend, Turkey's third biggest city of Izmir became a sea of red flags – on Saturday for the election rally of President Erdoğan and his People's Alliance, and on Sunday for Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, his rival for the presidency, accompanied by the leaders of the other five parties that make up the Nation Alliance. Despite photographic tricks by Erdoğan's supporters it was clear that the opposition rally was much larger, but that doesn't tell us much, as Izmir is an opposition stronghold. Much more instructive is the nature of the rallies themselves. Erdoğan [spoke for forty minutes](#), in a clear demonstration that his health scare, which took him off the campaign trail for four days, has become last week's news. The crowd was segregated by gender, and Erdoğan attacked Kılıçdaroğlu for meeting with the HDP, which he described as an extension of a terrorist organisation – conveniently forgetting his own government's attempts to negotiate with the PKK itself between 2013 and 2015. In contrast to Erdoğan's politics of hate, Kılıçdaroğlu talked about [peace and brotherhood](#), and, together with the other leaders and their wives, formed a heart symbol with his hands.

While Erdoğan focusses on activating his socially conservative and religious support base, the diversity of the parties that make up the Nation Alliance, and

that prevents them from agreeing on more than a minimum programme for democracy, also allows them to appeal to a much wider constituency.

Kılıçdaroğlu for president

The hope generated by Kılıçdaroğlu's presidential campaign is encapsulated in the tweets put out by Selahattin Demirtaş, the imprisoned former co-chair of the HDP, which are addressed to the young voters whose choice will be crucial in these close elections. The Labour and Freedom Alliance, dominated by the HDP, is supporting Kılıçdaroğlu's presidential challenge, and, on Wednesday, Demirtaş [shared a picture](#) of Kılıçdaroğlu with the description "The 13th President of Turkey, Mr. Kılıçdaroğlu, May God open your way. I sincerely believe that you will end the segregation, ensure social peace, and bring peace and prosperity to Turkey."

Kılıçdaroğlu has promised that if elected he will open the door of Demirtaş's prison cell, in line with the ruling of the European Court of Human Rights; and, in October 2021, his CHP made history by [voting against](#) the extension of Turkish troop deployment in Iraq and Syria, with Kılıçdaroğlu asking "Why should there be war when there can be peace?" Kılıçdaroğlu's quiet tenacious diplomacy – and the prospect of potential electoral success – is holding the alliance together, but this comes at the price of a tactical reticence towards giving more support to the HDP as it faces increasing government attack. And condemnation of the PKK is still de rigueur. İYİ Party leader, Meral Akşener, has [declared](#) "God damn whoever cooperates with the PKK". She has not only invited Erdoğan to join her in cursing the PKK, but has also again insisted that, despite the HDP's potential king-maker role in the formation of a new government, they would not be offered a cabinet seat. However, as [Demirtaş put it](#), "We may not wake up to heaven on the morning of May 15, but we can close the doors of hell."

TİP and the Green Left

The Labour and Freedom Alliance has not been without its own tensions. The alliance is dominated by the HDP, which is standing for election under the name of the Green Left to avoid being disqualified if the HDP is closed down.

Other small left parties are also standing under the Green Left list, but the Turkish Workers' Party (TİP) insisted on standing separately, despite arguments that this internal competition could cost the alliance seats. A week ago, there was [outrage](#) when a secret recording showed a TİP deputy, who had himself been elected in 2018 as a member of the HDP and had then defected, disparaging the HDP as Kurdish fascists and a party where, if you removed Selahattin Demirtaş, nothing would be left. Demirtaş stepped in quickly to diffuse the situation, commenting on Twitter, "No matter what anybody says, let's concentrate on our work without ever diverting our attention. We have promised our people a victory, let's first realise that." And he shared a video from 2015 in which he described his total commitment to the HDP and what it stands for, noting, "if you take Selahattin out of the HDP, there will not be much of him left."

Government interference

The main concerns of all the opposition parties revolve around the risk of underhand government interference in campaigning and in the election process, and the risk that, in the event of an opposition victory, Erdoğan refuses to accept defeat.

The [CHP claims](#) to have received information that government officials are making deals to hack opposition websites and are preparing to release deep fake audio recordings via the dark web aimed at destroying Kılıçdaroğlu's credibility.

Meanwhile, the justice system, which has become largely a tool of government, is being openly used to round up and detain supporters of the Green Left, including electoral candidates. There are so many detentions it is hard to keep track of what is happening. Mezopotamya News Agency [reports](#) that since the election date was formally declared on 10 March at least 364 people have been detained, of whom 116 have been arrested. Just in the last week, they report that on Saturday eighteen people were detained in fifteen provinces, five of who were subsequently arrested. On Sunday, 23 people were detained in Istanbul and Eskişehir, and that seven of these were subsequently arrested, including the third candidate on the Green

Left election list for Eskişehir, the co-chair of the Socialist Party of the Oppressed, and a news editor. On Tuesday, at least 32 people were detained in Istanbul. On Wednesday, there were house raids in various cities and districts and an unknown number of detentions. On Thursday, fourteen young members of the Green Left who were campaigning in Adana were beaten and detained, and six more people who had been previously detained were arrested, including a lawyer and an HDP district co-chair. And on Friday, another previously detained lawyer was arrested and there were more house raids and detentions in the Istanbul area. (This list doesn't include the detentions of May Day demonstrators who defied the ban on demonstrating in Istanbul's Taksim Square.)

Several of those detained and arrested are journalists, and in the [Press Freedom Index](#) issued by Reporters Without Borders to coincide with Press Freedom Day on Wednesday, Turkey had dropped to 165th place out of 180 countries. A free press is, of course, an essential component of democracy.

[New charges](#) have also been made against former MP and human rights lawyer, Aysel Tuğluk. Tuğluk was let out of prison last October, when, after a long campaign, the authorities finally acknowledged that her worsening dementia had left her unable to look after herself. She is one of the defendants in the Kobanê Case, where her dementia made her unable to comprehend simple questions put to her, and now she is set to face new hearings.

The continued detention of seriously ill political prisoners has been a source of much worry and protest – as have prison conditions that promote ill health in the first place. The political nature of the decisions to keep these prisoners locked up has been further thrown into focus by [the pardon granted by Erdoğan to Mehmet Emin Alpsöy](#) on the grounds that he is too old to remain in prison. Alpsöy was serving a life sentence without parole for torture and murder committed when he was head of the military wing of Hizbullah, the Kurdish Islamo-fascist group that, with government support, was responsible for the disappearance and deaths of thousands of Kurds, leftists and government critics in southeast Turkey in the 1990s. His release was

requested by Hüda Par, the political descendent of Hizbullah, who just happen to have joined Erdoğan's People's Alliance.

Voting has already started for Turkish citizens abroad, who can cast their vote at their local Turkish consulate. Representatives from different parties watch over the ballot boxes to ensure they are not tampered with. Pre-stamped ballot papers have been [discovered](#) in both Australia and the Netherlands. Aggressive Turkish nationalism does not stop at the Turkish border, and the location of the boxes gives scope for government officials or visiting members of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) to hassle Kurdish voters and representatives of the Green Left. If the Kurds respond to the jaunts thrown at them, they are accused of being the aggressors. In London, officials [ejected](#) a Kurdish boy of fifteen who had accompanied his father and was wearing Kurdish dress. The officials claimed this was a guerrilla inform. The French police intervened with tear gas in Marseille; and in [Strasbourg](#), three Kurds who reacted to Turkish nationalists attacking them and making the sign of the fascist grey wolves were themselves detained by the police. This racist power play, as well as a general wariness about mistreatment at the consulates, may serve to put a few people off voting, but there is strong motivation to do everything possible to bring an end to Erdoğan's slide into fascism, and turnout has been strong.

In Turkey itself, foreign observers will help monitor the election process, but Danish MP Soren Sondergaard, who was chosen to be an election observer on behalf of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has been denied permission to monitor by Turkey on the grounds that he has previously visited the Syrian Democratic Forces. Sondergaard [told Danish Television](#) that monitors need to represent different points of view and that "A country can't pick and choose the parliamentarians that are serving as observers".

Long-running fears that Erdoğan [would not accept](#) a vote against him as legitimate have been reinforced by Interior Minister, Süleyman Soylu's, attempt last week to portray the elections as a "political coup attempt by the West"; and by Erdoğan's own statement on Monday that "My nation will not surrender

this country to the one who becomes president with the support of Qandil". Qandil is the area in Iraq where the PKK command is based. Erdoğan refuses to distinguish between the PKK and the HDP, which is supporting Kılıçdaroğlu for president.

Yazidis

The politics of hate have also made a shocking return in Şengal in Iraq against the survivors of the Yazidi Genocide that was carried out by ISIS in 2014. Last week, the Iraqi government attempted to bring back some Muslim former residents to the area, but when Yazidis recognised people who had helped ISIS murder and enslave their family and neighbours, they protested. In response to the protest, Yazidis were accused of destroying a mosque, and images of the mosque "destroyed" by Yazidi "devil worshippers" and "atheists" whizzed round social media. Imams and Islamist politicians led the online attack, which garnered numerous racist comments and generated discussions about attacking Yazidis and justifications of the ISIS attack. Yazidi leaders [protested](#) that no mosque had been damaged and that the image was an old picture of Diyala mosque after destruction by ISIS in 2014. They [explained](#) that their religion requires peaceful coexistence and that they pray for other religions before praying for themselves. A group of Muslim and Yazidi religious scholars made a joint statement condemning this hate speech but stopping the flow of hate is not so easy.

Iraq, Iran and Syria

In Iraqi Kurdistan tensions between and within political parties continue to fester. There is still no agreement on holding the postponed election, and no agreement to allow oil exports to flow again. The break in oil exports has already cost the region over a billion dollars in lost revenue.

In Iran, the 32nd Friday [mass protest](#) in the Baluchi city of Zahedan reminds as that the Iran resistance is not over. Twenty Baluchi prisoners were [executed](#) by the Iranian government this week. Their charges were not connected to the protests, but the extreme severity of their punishment may be. The "Alliance for Freedom and Democracy", introduced to the public at

a [seminar](#) in Georgetown University in February, has now fallen apart. No reason has been given but it is [presumed](#) that others were not happy with the way Reza Pahlavi, the son of the former Shah, put himself centre stage.

In Syria, Turkey has killed Abu Husin al-Quraishi, the man believed to be the latest leader of ISIS. Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) spokesperson, Farad Shami, [described](#) the assassination as “the end of a mission of an ISIS member that had long been protected by Turkish intelligence in occupied Afrin.”

It has been [claimed](#) that the SDF’s Commander in Chief, Mazloun Abdi, recently travelled to the United Arab Emirates to try and secure help in negotiating a settlement with Syrian President Assad. As Amberin Zaman explains in Al-Monitor, “The UAE has taken a lead role in building bridges between the Assad regime and fellow Arab states”, and thus also building its own influence and competitive advantage. The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria has long been attempting to negotiate with the Syrian government, while insisting on keeping their self-administration and keeping their forces in their own region.

Resistance

I will end with a story that epitomises the Kurdish determination to resist against all the odds. [Halise Aksoy](#) was detained a week ago in the pre-election clampdown. Also detained were her daughter, her son in law, and her four-year-old granddaughter – who was held for a day before being handed over to relatives. Her son had died in 2017 fighting for the PKK, and she had been sent his bones in a box three years after his death. He wasn’t even allowed a proper burial service.

Aksoy and her daughter are still in prison, and Aksoy is determined to make good use of her time there. She explains, “I was lacking in awareness, I will read books in prison and become more trouble for them.”

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