

It's the economy – a weekly news review

[10:47 am 08/01/2022](#)



Sarah Glynn

News from Turkey continues to be dominated by economic crisis and unsustainable inflation, which has left millions of households well below the poverty line, turned voters against the government, and triggered veiled threats from President Erdoğan of a violent response to opposition protests. In fact, extreme economic rigours are affecting all four parts of Kurdistan. In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, the economic struggle for survival has fuelled protests and emigration. Even Iranian repression has not been able to stop protests and strikes across the country, and the regime deliberately deprives the Kurdish regions of economic opportunities as a form of control. In North and East Syria, economic difficulties have been blamed for facilitating ISIS recruitment.

The economy does not develop in a vacuum. It has political causes as well as political consequences.

Erdoğan must be only too aware that his Justice and Development Party (AKP) owes its own rise to power, two decades ago, to anger at the 2001-2 economic crash. His subsequent popularity was powered by a world-wide economic boom and by foreign investment, attracted by the availability of low-cost labour close to Europe, which enabled a substantial and widespread growth in living standards. But with the world economic crash in 2008, Turkey became increasingly reliant on foreign credit. This enabled growth to continue for a few more years, but ensured ultimate economic collapse in 2018. Investors fled from political and economic instability, but large foreign debts remained. Like other neoliberal governments, Turkey protected the wealthy and let the costs fall on the least well off.

Turkey's economic miracle had collapsed in the face of capitalist crisis and elite self-preservation. High inflation, high unemployment, and high levels of both government and personal debt were all major sources of concern before the added economic pressures brought on by the pandemic.

Most recently, the value of the Turkish Lira has been put into a tailspin by Erdoğan's insistence on cutting interest rates. The Turkish economy depends on imported raw materials and imported oil and gas. As sales of Turkish currency brought down exchange rates, this translated into rapidly rising inflation.

However, if Erdoğan had increased interest rates, as classical economics demanded and as he did in 2019, this too would have had recessionary consequences. The only route out of the trap would involve a very different – more socialist – approach to the economy, which regarded it as a tool for the whole of society.

Instead, Erdoğan and the Turkish government are attempting to divert criticism onto their usual scapegoats, distract Turkish citizens through (illusory) military victories, and crack down hard on any sign of resistance.

On Tuesday, in a televised speech, Erdoğan told his party faithful that any attempt by the opposition to “take to the streets” would meet with the same response as the attempted “coup” of 2016: “Supposedly they’ll take to the streets without any shame. Wherever you take to, this nation will teach you a lesson just like it gave a lesson to those who took to the streets on July 15.”

Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, leader of the mainstream opposition People’s Republican Party (CHP), responded on Twitter by accusing Erdoğan of officially starting to call for civil war. He also stated that CHP members would not be going onto the streets to protest but would wait patiently for the election. But what happens if that election never comes, and why, when elections are badly needed, would they not support street protests? Erdoğan’s threat caused little more than a ripple in the international media.

This presidential intimidation followed Monday’s release from detention of the man who attempted an armed attack on an Istanbul office of the Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP). HDP MP, Züleyha Güllum, has commented: “Releasing a person who came to commit a massacre means saying, ‘Go on with your action.’ This government and its judiciary instructed by it are responsible for the attacks that may target our party from this point on.”

Monday also saw files submitted to the Speaker of the Parliamentary Assembly in the first stage of the process for lifting parliamentary immunity from 28 deputies so they can be tried in Turkey’s politicised courts. The deputies include Pervin Buldan, HDP co-chair, and 22 other members of the HDP.

Also this week, Abdullah Zeydan, former HDP deputy and long-time cell-mate of the party’s former co-chair, Selahattin Demirtaş, was released from prison, but not before spending more than five years behind bars. His sentence was overturned by the Supreme Court in May.

The CHP mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem İmamoğlu, is in the government’s crosshairs too. İmamoğlu ousted the AKP in the 2019 municipal elections, and is being touted as a possible presidential candidate who would win against

Erdoğan. Last week, the Interior Ministry opened an investigation into the municipality, with claims that 557 municipal employees may have ties to proscribed organisations. Devlet Bahçeli, chair of the AKP's even further right coalition partner, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), told his party, "If the allegations are proven... the mayor of the İstanbul Metropolitan Municipality cannot and should not occupy his office even for a second". The mayor responded that any responsibility would actually lie with the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Justice, as "we don't hire people without a letter of clearance." It looks as though a large number of probably innocent municipal workers will be sacrificed in this fight.

The CHP can also be a source of oppression, and not just in the past. I have written before about the xenophobic discriminatory laws passed by the CHP mayor and municipal council in Bolu. These have now been found illegal and a court has blocked their implementation, but the CHP did not prevent their introduction and they have not disciplined the man who thought them up nor the party councillors who supported him.

There is only space to record a few of this week's many reminders of Turkey's authoritarian justice system.

Lawyers from across the world have written in support of 22 members of the Progressive Lawyers' Association who have been on trial for seven years, and in two cases remanded in custody for five years. Their letter states that "it is clear from the material facts of which you have been accused that it is because of the exercise of your profession that you are the subject of criminal proceedings... Under no circumstances can the fact that you have represented and ensured the respect of the fundamental rights of persons accused of terrorism be the basis for your accusations."

Lawyers of political prisoner, Garibe Gezer, who died in Kandıra Prison, announced that the state prosecutor is refusing to follow up on her accusations of systematic torture, despite a huge quantity of evidence, and that a crucial video recording was missing from the file they were given. They will appeal the prosecutor's decision, and they also expressed concerns about

the possible fate of other prisoners subjected to prolonged periods of isolation.

On Wednesday, Ferhat Çelik, managing editor of Mezopotamya News Agency, was detained in custody in the latest incident in a long history of judicial harassment; and on Friday, journalist Rojhat Doğru was sentenced in absentia to life in prison.

The Turkish government's economic woes have ensured that they have been especially assiduous in attempting to divert people's anger onto the "enemy within" in the form of the Kurds. The HDP has compiled a list of some of last year's attacks against the Kurdish language and those who use it. It includes the sentencing of a 41-year-old man for chanting slogans on the right to education in Kurdish when he was 20, and a prison's insistence that anyone phoning detainees must know Turkish.

In parts of South East Turkey, the government's fight against the Kurds is effectively a civil war. 308 areas in the Bitlis region have been declared "Temporary Special Security Areas" for a year to allow for large-scale military operations. Firat News Agency reminds us that "Kurdish cities are literally encircled by special security zones in which entry is prohibited", and that this robs local agriculturalists of their only source of income.

The need for positive news of Turkish victory to counter the negative impacts of economic hardship gives an added incentive for Turkish military aggression. Rousing news was supposed to come from Turkey's large-scale assault on the mountains of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, but determined resistance from the PKK has been denying them the victory they were seeking. A lack of independent reports makes it difficult to write about what is happening, but it is notable that Turkey has not been able to make the propaganda it was hoping for. Although Turkey has spread their military network, constructing roads and military installations, and looting timber, the PKK is claiming that their guerrillas have forced the Turkish army to retreat from bases in the Zap mountains.

The Turkish need for military success ensures that they are not too concerned about how this is achieved. The Morning Star has followed up accounts of repeated use of chemical weapons, and writes that they have “visited the affected areas and met with dozens of villagers who presented with burns and breathing difficulties after Turkish artillery fire.” They also note that “Medics reported that they had been threatened and forced by Kurdistan Democratic Party forces to alter reports saying they had treated patients for the effects of chemical weapons attacks.”

Turkey, of course, denies using chemical weapons; and strategic, political, and economic self-interests ensure that other countries turn a blind eye to what is happening. No government wants to demand the independent investigation that could make these attacks impossible to ignore. In the absence of government action, protestors gathered at December’s annual conference of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in The Hague. Some fifty protestors entered the building and staged a sit in, but were violently detained by Dutch police, leaving four needing hospital treatment. 44 people were arrested and will face trial on 23 February, of whom four Kurds are being held in detention. The response of the authorities makes no acknowledgement of the serious issues the protestors were raising, and suggests racial bias in its singling out of Kurdish protestors for different treatment. Solidarity action in support of the protestors has included a march, yesterday, in The Hague.

Last week, Turkey’s direct intervention in Iraq included the detention of two young villagers as they tended their horses. The Turkish military accused the men of crossing into their ‘military exclusion zone’ and took them over the border into Turkey, where they were held for four days, stripped to their underclothes in freezing temperatures.

None of this would be possible without the cooperation of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which dominates the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and uses its close relations with Turkey to support its own regional power struggles. Besides helping Turkey’s military, the KDP has signed

economic agreements that have made its leaders extremely wealthy, but put the region's economy at the mercy of the Turkish government.

Endemic corruption ensures that economic benefits are limited to a small elite around the KDP and the rival Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK): an elite whose position is protected by authoritarian crackdowns on the consequent protests. Authoritarianism in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq has been a frequent source of concern. This week, alarm was raised by a video released by the Suleimani security forces showing suspects accused of riot and arson being paraded in orange jumpsuits, reminiscent of Guantanamo prisoners, and making filmed confessions. A researcher at Human Rights Watch told Rudaw news, "It is shocking that the KRG would display footage like this as it flies in the face of the presumption of innocence and the need for the judicial process to be independent and respected by authorities and the public." And he noted that "Their appearance in a mass confession video in orange jumpsuits calls into question whether they consented, or even could have, to confessing on screen."

Economic hardship, exacerbated by corruption and the suppression of dissent, has driven thousands of Iraqi Kurds to attempt to emigrate to the European Union. Routes to the Belarusian border have now been shut down, but there are still migrants hiding in the frozen forests and swamps of Poland's border region, trying to get through to safety. Their only possible source of help is local people. Médecins Sans Frontières have announced that they have had to withdraw their team as the Polish authorities have repeatedly prevented access.

It is not only Turkey that carries out political attacks in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. On New Year's Day, the tortured body of a Kurdish political activist from Iran was found in his home in Hewlêr (Erbil). Ahmad Bigham was an asylum seeker who had spent time in prison in Iran and had also fought against ISIS in Kobanê. The finger clearly points to the Iranian security forces, who have also been accused of other recent assassinations in the region.

It is difficult to see into the highly controlled regime that Bighan had fled from, but the execution of Heydar Ghorbani gives an insight into the unyielding

brutality of the Islamic Republic. Ghorbani, a political prisoner, was executed secretly on 19 December. Since his killing, four people have been detained for attending his funeral service, and another has been arrested for sharing his image on social media.

Every month, human rights organisations record the deaths and injuries of Kurdish mountain porters – Kolbars – who smuggle heavy loads across the border. As they traverse dangerous mountain tracks, still dotted with unexploded mines, these men are targeted by Iran's border guards; but they risk their lives because the deliberate underdevelopment of the Kurdish provinces gives them no other options.

Turkey also looks for victory news from its attacks on the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria; however, since the US and Russia denied them the opportunity to carry out another major invasion, they have had to content themselves with low level attacks and targeted assassinations. The Syrian Defence Forces (SDF) have revealed that last year, despite the ceasefire agreements, Turkey's ground offensives, bombardments, and drone attacks led to the death of 89 civilians. Driving away local inhabitants suits Turkey's policies of ethnic cleansing. IDP (Internally Displaced Persons) camps are crowded with those who have been forced to flee border areas, but the Autonomous Administration has received no help from international agencies.

Meanwhile, ISIS has been able to prey on the instability in the region in order to build its own destructive economy, luring people to work for them with promises of money, financed with protection payments from oil contractors in Deir ez-Zor.

While the Autonomous Administration is fully aware that the future of the region depends on the population feeling both physically and economically secure, they are not getting the support they need from international leaders, who only know how to make war, not how to build peace.

European hypocrisy will be called out again in Paris this afternoon, Friday 7 January. I have already talked about the international self-serving indulgence

of Turkey with respect to accusations over their use of chemical weapons. The same blind eye is shown to all Turkey's attacks against the Kurds, even when these take place in Europe. Last February, the former intelligence chief of the Turkish military general command referred, approvingly, on CNN Türk, to the Turkish state's role in the murders, nine years ago, of three leading Kurdish activists in Paris. Even after this, the French authorities have not made any charges. Kurds everywhere are demanding justice.