

A democratic republic?

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Mr Dicle, co-chair of the Democratic Society Congress, provided this briefing about Kurds in Turkey to the international conference on the EU, Turkey, the Middle East and the Kurds, which met at the European Parliament, Brussels, 7-8 December 2016.

The Democratic Society Congress [DTK] is a civil society assembly made up of parties, trade unions, foundations, associations, and elected representatives of the people in Kurdistan of Turkey. Apart from the Kurds, representatives of various ethnic and faith groups who live in Kurdistan are represented in our Congress. Its aim is to develop democracy in Kurdistan, to institutionalise it, and make a contribution to a peaceful, democratic solution to the Kurdish question.

From a total of 501 delegates, 60 per cent are popularly elected, while 40 per cent are representatives of civil society organisations and independent persons. Just like parliaments, the Congress has a working system based on commissions. Today it is facing severe repression and obstruction from the Turkish authorities.

The nation state of the Republic of Turkey was established on part of Ottoman territory following the Sykes-Picot agreement [of 1916]. The founding paradigm of this state entailed different ethnicities, first and foremost the Kurdish people, being subjected to denial of their identity, forced assimilation, and a process of eradication in the mangle of a policy of Turkification. The same policy was implemented against Alevi, Yazidi and Christian communities. The Kurdish people rose in revolt against this tyranny in various parts of Kurdistan between 1924 and 1938. These uprisings were brutally suppressed, but this did not alter the reality that the Kurdish question remained at the top of the political agenda in Turkey.

Hence, in 1984, the armed struggle under the leadership of the PKK [Kurdistan

Workers' Party] began under these objective conditions. Former Turkish President Süleyman Demirel called this latest uprising the 29th Kurdish revolt, which is an expression of the depth of this question.

Despite this reality, the Turkish state has still not abandoned its 93-year-old policy regarding the Kurdish question, which is based on denial and violence. It has been unable to change its mentality and search for a democratic solution. It has been unable to evolve from an oligarchic republic into a democratic one.

I plainly stress this truth: the Kurds believe that their problems can be resolved within the borders of the Republic of Turkey, in the framework of political dialogue and through democratic methods. They wish for their national identity to be recognised in the constitution and to benefit from the language, culture, political and other rights safeguarded by international conventions. They also desire a political status that would enable them to attain self-government, as has been realised in many democratic countries, and are waging a struggle for these goals.

In this context, we have for years proposed that an administrative-political system similar to the one that exists in Spain, with 20 to 25 autonomous regions, each with its own local parliament and government, with devolved powers, apart from foreign affairs, national defence, fiscal matters, and the judicial system, be introduced in Turkey. In this system of devolved government all ethnic and faith groups would be able to organise themselves freely. In brief, the Kurds have always been in favour of a peaceful solution to the problem, but the state has not demonstrated the necessary political will to achieve a resolution. I am one of the living witnesses to efforts that have been made by the Kurdish side to find a peaceful solution, having been involved in talks with delegations from the government since 1993 until the most recent talks in 2013-2015.

In 1993, I was an MP for Diyarbakır in the Turkish Parliament for the DEP [Democracy Party], which was closed down. Following appeals from high-ranking state officials and political parties, including the DEP, PKK leader Mr Ocalan declared a one-month unilateral ceasefire on 17 March 1993. This step created great hopes and expectations for a peaceful solution on the Kurdish side and in democratic circles.

The Turkish President at the time, Turgut Özal, sent a group of DEP MPs, including myself, and Mr Jalal Talabani, the leader of the PUK [Patriotic Union of Kurdistan], who later became President of Iraq, to Lebanon to meet Mr Ocalan to suggest he make the ceasefire indefinite. The talks went well and at a press conference which we attended, on 16 April 1993, Mr Ocalan declared that the ceasefire would last indefinitely.

However, on 17 April, before we had left Damascus to return to Turkey, we received the news that President Özal had died. The timing of his death seemed suspicious. Subsequently, political circles and the Özal family claimed that the President had been murdered by a clique within the state that opposed a political resolution to the Kurdish question. The truth of this has never been confirmed, but following his death Turkey was once again dragged into a maelstrom of bloodshed and violence. We Kurdish MPs who were part of the delegation received long prison sentences.

PKK leader Mr Ocalan declared two more unilateral ceasefires in 1995 and 1998. However, just as in 1993, the Turkish state ignored these efforts. After Mr Ocalan was captured and handed over to Turkey on 15 February 1999, in an international conspiracy, the guerrillas withdrew to South Kurdistan (Northern Iraq) for five years. Although not one single bullet was fired during that time, the state did not take advantage of the historic opportunity.

During this period the European Union and the United States should have been encouraging Turkey to seek a peaceful solution to the Kurdish question. Unfortunately, at the beginning of 2002, the PKK was included, first by the US and then by the EU, on their 'lists of terrorist organisations'. This encouraged Turkey to return once again to its belligerent policy *vis-à-vis* the Kurdish question. The Kurds saw this unfortunate decision as a historic injustice that did not serve a peaceful and political solution to the problem.

In our opinion the correct position for the EU to take is that of a recent decision of a Brussels court, that the conflict in Turkey with Kurdish guerrillas is a 'war', that according to the Geneva Convention the PKK should be accepted as a party to conflict, and thus to remove the PKK from its list of terrorist organisations. I believe that such a realistic approach would make a great contribution to a peaceful and political solution and would be an important step on the path of democracy and peace.

Mr Ocalan has been in prison on İmralı Island for nearly 18 years and is accepted as the *de facto* 'main negotiator' by the state. After he made a proposal that was agreed by the AKP [Justice and Development Party] government, talks were carried on from the beginning of 2013 until 5 April 2015. I was a member of the İmralı delegation as the co-chair of the Democratic Society Congress (DTK) for the last 7 months of this period. During this time, I went to Qendil in South Kurdistan on many occasions in order to inform PKK administrators of the talks going on at the roundtable on İmralı island. Written records of these talks were shared both with the state delegation and with Mr Ocalan.

As a result of all these efforts a road map consisting of ten articles was drawn up, called the 'Dolmabahçe Accord', which in our opinion is a historic document. The aim of this road map was to achieve a breakthrough for a democratic republic in Turkey. In accordance with this, representatives of interested parties were to attend talks that would last for several months, reaching agreement on each article, and after the necessary legal and constitutional steps had been agreed it was to be signed by all parties. For instance, representatives of the Alevi community were to put forward their own demands and after agreement had been reached were to add their signatures. Similar talks were to have been held with the Kurds, minorities, women, workers, etc. A 'Monitoring Council' consisting of seven or eight persons agreed by the parties was to have witnessed the proceedings and to have helped resolve difficulties. All these discussions at İmralı were to have been published in the media and agreement reached countrywide. Of course, all these documents were to have given direction to the new democratic constitution that was to have been drafted in Turkey. Ultimately, Turkey was to have become a democratic republic.

At the conclusion of these negotiations, Mr Ocalan was to have made an appeal to the PKK to hold a congress that would reach a decision to end the armed struggle that has been continuing since 1984. PKK administrators had even begun preparations for this. However, the expected did not happen, as President Erdoğan knocked over the negotiating table at İmralı on 5 April 2015, ending the process.

President Erdoğan, along with ISIS [Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant], declared war on the Kurdish people all over the Middle East. Towns and cities in Kurdistan were destroyed by tanks and artillery. The HDP [Peoples' Democratic Party] co-chairs, several Kurdish MPs and elected mayors were arrested, and municipalities run by the DBP [Democratic Regions Party] were handed over to government appointed trustees. Turkey has been transformed into a prison, with journalists, intellectuals and politicians arrested and tens of thousands of public servants sacked. All these fascist measures are part and parcel of this war.

It is clear that Erdoğan is taking steps to institutionalise a dark dictatorship in Turkey, under the guise of an executive presidential system. He wants to liquidate the last glimmer of democracy and eliminate hopes of peace. Just like Hitler, he is bellowing for war in the country and abroad. If I have to spell it out, I can say: if Erdoğan cannot be stopped, he wants to put an end to peace, not only in Turkey, but also in the Middle East and the whole world.

I wish to say to all those mediating, peace-loving friends who are trying to contribute to a just, lasting and honourable peace for the Kurdish question: in the same way that it is important during negotiations for the guns to fall silent and for ideas to be heard, of equal importance is safeguarding the health and security of Mr Ocalan, and ensuring his complete freedom in the shortest time possible. These steps should be taken decisively in order that the path to peace and democracy is transformed from a dream into reality.

Finally, I would like to say that we in Turkey and in Kurdistan who are in favour of peace and the fraternity of peoples, and everyone who supports democracy, will be together and resist, and we will most certainly win. Our hopes are steadfast and we are resolute and determined.

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There follows a dossier of elected representatives of the People's Democratic Party (HDP) who have been arrested in Turkey in recent months. The dossier is dated 12 January 2017, since when arrests have continued. On Saturday 28 January, when British Prime Minister Theresa May became the first western political leader to visit President Erdogan since the July coup, three more HDP Members of the Turkish Parliament were unlawfully detained. They are Istanbul MP Hüda Kaya, Diyarbakır MP Altan Tan and Adana MP Meral Daniş Beştaş. The next day, HDP Spokesperson and Kars MP Ayhan Bilgen was detained. A referendum to extend President Erdogan's considerable powers is scheduled for April 2017. In this context, political repression of the HDP and other groups is likely to intensify.