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CAN ERDOĞAN SURVIVE WITHOUT THE KURDISH QUESTION?

BURAK BILGEHAN ÖZPEK

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Introduction

The Justice and Development Party's (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) steps to normalize Kurdish identity by introducing reform packages in its early years as it sought to join the European Union (EU) helped the party's leader, then Prime Minister and now President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, to win the hearts of the Kurds. Although the AKP's reforms were part of the EU accession process and were also designed to undermine the military's influence over politics, these steps indirectly ameliorated the status and conditions of Turkey's Kurdish population. For many Kurds, the AKP was more inclusive than other opposition parties because of its reformist energy. When the peace process began in January 2013, many Kurds believed that Prime Minister Erdoğan and the leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkaren Kurdistan*, PKK), Abdullah Öcalan, would reach an agreement to end the violence. The PKK had started an armed struggle against the Turkish state in 1984, including carrying out terrorist attacks on civilians, to pursue a secessionist agenda on behalf of the Kurds. In the following years, the clashes between the military and the PKK increased sharply and turned into a bloody conflict. The confrontation between the PKK and the Turkish army left no room for a political solution, which is why the launch of the peace process in 2013 was regarded as such a revolutionary step by the Kurdish public.

Nevertheless, the negotiations ultimately failed to produce a sustainable peace between the parties. This was due to the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party's (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP) decision to run in the elections on June 7, 2015 as single party instead of as independent candidates. The AKP was expecting to gain more seats in Kurdish districts with the help of the electoral system if the HDP nominated independents, and this would mean fewer HDP deputies in parliament and the continuation of the AKP's single-party government. According to Erdoğan, the Kurds had to ensure that the AKP would win the elections for the sake of the peace process. The HDP argued, by contrast, that the peace process would be successful only if the AKP viewed the HDP as a legitimate political actor and tolerated its political interests. At the end of the day, the HDP managed to cross the 10% threshold for electoral representation in parliament, winning 80 seats in the June 2015 elections. The HDP's success changed the composition of parliament and the AKP lost its majority for the first time since coming to power in 2002. Following the AKP's electoral setback, clashes between Turkish security forces and the PKK began again in the summer of 2015.

Since Erdoğan adopted a nationalist and militarist approach to reverse the results of the June 2015 elections, the Kurdish political movement has faced immense pressure. The line between the PKK and other non-violent political actors has blurred in the eyes of the elites in Ankara. The co-chairs of

the HDP, Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ, and seven other deputies were arrested in November 2016 and jailed. The government has removed 48 HDP mayors and appointed trustees to govern their municipalities instead.¹ In addition, the HDP has been demonized in the media, which is mostly funded and controlled by the government, and isolated from other opposition parties.

The similarities between Erdoğan's attitude toward the Kurdish question, which refers to the political, cultural, and economic problems of the Kurds in Turkey, after the June 2015 elections and the Turkish military's security paradigm before the AKP came to power in 2002 have led some scholars to argue that Erdoğan has surrendered to the nationalist line on the issue. To them, resorting to arms to deal with the Kurdish question indicates how Erdoğan lost his reformist energy and started to cooperate with the secularist establishment to remain in power. Other scholars, however, argue that the launch of the Kurdish peace process and Erdoğan's decision to abandon it were part of the same strategy, and both moves were aimed at consolidating his power.

This paper aims to understand the motivation behind Erdoğan's approach to the Kurdish question within the framework of the above-mentioned debate among scholars, as this has two key potential implications for the upcoming elections, set to be held in June 2023. If Erdoğan has surrendered to the establishment, he is unlikely to deviate from his current policy of criminalizing the legitimate Kurdish opposition and preventing the other opposition parties from cooperating with the HDP. If he is motivated by political pragmatism, however, he may well take steps to attract Kurdish voters and attempt to divide the opposition front. Scholars of Turkish politics are familiar with Erdoğan's pragmatism over the past two decades; he is known for his policy making style rather than his ideology. Thus, it is unrealistic to assume that Erdoğan will maintain his ideational commitment to a nationalist line if it means losing the presidential elections. He might not make a radical U-turn as he has done in the past, but that does not mean that he will insist on using nationalist language and criminalizing the opposition. He is no doubt aware that such a strategy would lead Kurdish voters to support the opposition bloc. On the eve of the elections, he might

develop a new strategy based on eliminating the differences between the government and the opposition regarding the Kurdish question. This would require Erdoğan to cooperate with ultra-nationalist figures in the opposition and Öcalan, the jailed leader of the PKK, to poison the harmony between the opposition parties and Kurdish voters.

Has Erdoğan Surrendered to the Establishment?

The Kurdish question has been the most controversial issue facing Turkey since the inception of the republic in 1923, undermining the country's efforts at nation-building and state-making. The founding fathers of modern Turkey aimed to establish a nation-state similar to those in Europe. They attempted to create a nation based on equal citizenship and common identity under the tenets of secularism and sovereignty. Accordingly, all citizens within the borders of Turkey were identified as Turks and ethnic minorities were expected to adopt "Turkishness" as a common identity. Things did not go entirely to plan, however, and this created many complexities in the following years. The Kurdish question is regarded as the most prominent symbol of the failure of this approach by many intellectuals. They view it as the inevitable outcome of the problematic social contract signed in 1923 and explain the deficiencies of Turkish democracy by emphasizing the discontent of the Kurds. That is why they argue that Turkey has to solve its Kurdish question to become a consolidated democracy. In other words, they regard the peaceful resolution of the Kurdish problem as a precondition for democracy.

This emphasis on the Kurdish question has been closely linked to the role of the military in the political system. Before the AKP came to power, Turkish democracy was under the tutelage of the military and the judicial bodies that it backed. In line with the definition laid out by Shils, a group of elites has the right to restrict democratic competition and civil liberties for the sake of political stability, economic development, and social transformation. The elite believe that democracy might result in a corrupt, unstable, and economically backward regime in the absence of a mature political community. Therefore, the elite intervene to create the necessary social and economic conditions for democracy to prosper in the future.² This elite was embodied by the

1. "HDP left with six municipalities out of 65 it won in March 2019 elections," October 2, 2020, *Duvar*, <https://www.duvarenglish.com/politics/2020/10/02/hdp-left-with-six-municipalities-out-of-65-it-won-in-march-2019-elections>.

2. Edward Shils, 1960, "Political development in the new states," *Comparative studies in society and history*, 2(3), 265-292.



Photo above: A man flashes a V sign as members of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) take part in a protest against the detention of HDP members, in Istanbul, on September 25, 2020. Photo by YASIN AKGUL/AFP via Getty Images.

military in Turkey. With the help of the National Security Council (*Millî Güvenlik Kurulu*, MGK), the army had a monopoly on determining national security issues and dictated policies to the government. As Cizre argues, the MGK acted as a shadow cabinet because other issues, ranging from the economy to education, were easily linked to national security. This enabled army officers to have a say over issues that were supposed to be the responsibility of cabinet members.³

Since the military regarded itself as the guardian of the republic and its founding principles, it perceived the Kurdish question as a security issue that threatened the survival of the state and prevented political parties from developing alternative strategies to resolve the issue peacefully. Any political party that attempted to do so would jeopardize its survival because all parties had to develop national security policies that were compatible with the MGK's paradigm. Otherwise, they would be purged from the political system. For example, Kurdish parties,

including the People's Labor Party (*Halkın Emek Partisi*, HEP), the Freedom and Democracy Party (*Özgürlük ve Demokrasi Partisi*, ÖZDEP), the Democracy Party (*Demokrasi Partisi*, DEP), the People's Democracy Party (*Halkın Demokrasi Partisi*, HADEP), the Democratic People's Party (*Demokratik Halk Partisi*, DEHAP), and the Democratic Society Party (*Demokratik Toplum Partisi*, DTP), which were identified as threats to the nation-state character of Turkey, were all banned.

There is no doubt that the military's engagement in politics and its attitude toward the Kurdish question contravened the spirit of democracy. Nevertheless, the MGK's approach was quite consistent and predictable because the army was immune from political pressure. It positioned itself as being above the political system and did not seek to gain popular support or approval. It should be noted that the army had right to identify threats to national security and determine how to eliminate them. This meant that the army's security understanding was the main criteria for the legitimacy of political parties: Those that confirmed the MGK's policies toward the Kurdish question were regarded as legitimate, while those that viewed the

3. Ümit Cizre, 2007, "Prime Movers, Specific Features and Challenges of Security Sector Reform in a 'Guardian State': The Case of Turkey," *Geneva Center for the DCAF*, Report No: 17.

Kurdish question as a political issue and suggested political solutions were deemed illegitimate and excluded from the political system. That is why politics was very competitive among the political parties confirming the MGK's national security paradigm before the AKP. No single party was allowed to consolidate its power and eliminate its rivals in an autocratic way, as the AKP has done since 2002.

The military's control over the MGK ended as a result of the democratization reforms carried out by the AKP government in its early years, in line with its effort to join the EU. After this, the AKP, as the civilian government, gained a monopoly on determining national security policy and this has led to a congruence between party and state in the absence of fundamental democratic institutions, such as an independent judiciary, a constitution that guarantees citizens' basic rights, and free media. The new MGK, which is dominated by the civilian members of the cabinet, has turned into an instrument in the hands of Erdoğan to criminalize the opposition using the language of national security. Moreover, Erdoğan has arbitrarily changed Turkey's national security priorities to suit his political needs. This explains how he could advocate both striking a deal with the PKK and fighting against it as a national security requirement in the same year without facing any legal sanction.

When Erdoğan made a U-turn on the Kurdish question after the June 2015 elections and adopted a nationalist and militarist discourse, the leader of the Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP), Devlet Bahçeli, who is regarded as the champion of national security, saw an opportunity to pursue closer ties with the government. After the AKP lost its parliamentary majority largely thanks to the rise of the pro-Kurdish HDP, Erdoğan cultivated an alliance with the ultra-nationalist MHP. This alliance would help him to centralize power. The MHP, for its part, saw cooperation with the AKP as an opportunity to resume a heavy-handed military approach to the Kurdish question. Furthermore, Bahçeli advocated Turkey's transition to a presidential system on the basis of national security and declared his party's support for amending the constitution. Unlike HDP Co-chair Demirtaş, who did not allow Erdoğan to exploit the peace process to smooth the transition to a presidential system, Bahçeli has paved the way for Erdoğan to build a personal regime. Surprisingly, Bahçeli did not bargain with Erdoğan to gain seats in the cabinet or share power. Instead, he insistently argued that the very survival of Turkey depended on the transition to a presidential

system. In doing so, he has positioned himself as above the political fray, much as the MGK did before the AKP, acting like a higher authority that has made political sacrifices for the sake of national security. Bahçeli has been an indispensable component of Erdoğan's national security machine and has repeatedly justified his autocratic methods in the fight against the PKK, the HDP, and the Gülenists⁴ in the name of nationalism and safeguarding the state against "domestic and foreign enemies."

The coalition behind Erdoğan looks like a national security alliance, including nationalist elements of the bureaucracy and politics. In reality, it actually comprises a group of politicians, businessmen, journalists, bureaucrats, and mafia leaders who exploit national security concerns for personal gain. Beginning in the spring of 2021, a series of Youtube video confessions by mafia boss Sedat Peker have revealed how the national security discourse is used to intimidate the opposition and hide illegal business activities, including drug trafficking, bribery, and extortion, by politicians, bureaucrats, journalists, and organized crime figures.⁵ That is to say, there is a substantial difference between the traditional security paradigm backed by the military before the AKP came to power in 2002 and Erdoğan's national security state after the June 2015 national elections. The military undemocratically securitized the Kurdish question and restricted the space for policy-making by political parties. However, this was not to compete with them. The military was not a political player aspiring to attract votes or gain popularity. The primary driver of its Kurdish policy was to preserve the unitary nature of the Turkish state, making the generals' Kurdish policy predictable and straightforward. Erdoğan's Kurdish policy, by contrast, has changed depending on his domestic strategy to consolidate his rule. He views national security priorities through the prism of his domestic political concerns and uses the national security discourse to intimidate his rivals and silence civil society. This makes him the master of national security, not a prisoner of it.

4. The followers of the U.S.-based Islamic cult leader Fethullah Gülen.

5. Suzan Fraser, "Turkish mafia boss dishes dirt, becomes YouTube phenomenon," June 7, 2021, *AP News*, <https://apnews.com/article/sedat-peker-turkey-crime-boss-youtube-6868c1563a1152712bd2b2191445da95>.

Erdoğan's Dance with the Kurdish Question

During its early years, the AKP not only competed with other political parties but also challenged the national security regime backed by military. When the AKP initiated peace talks with the PKK in 2013, this was regarded as a revolutionary step by domestic and international academic, intellectual, and political circles. To them, this was a deviation from the traditional understanding of national security in Turkey, which regarded the Kurdish question as a security issue rather than a political problem. The AKP became the first government in the history of the republic to suggest that the Kurdish question could be solved through political means instead of military measures. The traditional security paradigm even targeted peaceful activities and civil society actors and organizations that rejected violence. In other words, in the eyes of the Turkish security elite, non-violent advocates of the Kurdish case were indistinguishable from terrorist groups. That is why recognizing the PKK's leader as a legitimate counterpart in the peace process was a revolutionary step and pointed to a deviation from the traditional line.

Nevertheless, the return to armed conflict after the June 2015 elections showed how fragile the process was and how peace was instrumentalized for political gains. During the peace process, the AKP asked the HDP not to run in the elections as single party and Erdoğan contended that, "If we want the presidential system, then we have to give 400 lawmakers. If we want the resolution process to continue, we have to give 400 lawmakers so that a strong party can come to power to realize it." Erdoğan's message to the Kurds was quite clear. He asked the HDP to nominate independent candidates and not to run an aggressive campaign so that the AKP could amend the constitution to transition to a presidential system with the support of 400 MPs. In other words, he conditioned the continuation of the peace process on the Kurds' approval for the presidential system.⁶

Such an instrumentalization of policy is not unique to Erdoğan. The elites in Ankara have exploited the Kurdish question to gain an upper hand against their rivals in the political arena throughout the country's history, starting from the early

years of the republic. For example, the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP), led by Mustafa Kemal Pasha, banned the rival Progressive Republican Party, led by Kazım Karabekir, a hero of the Liberation War, and suspended the publication of newspapers in Istanbul after the Sheikh Said rebellion erupted in Kurdish villages in 1925. This paved the way for the establishment of single party rule in Turkey. Similarly, Nihat Erim, the prime minister of the cabinet of technocrats formed and backed by the military in 1971 after the "coup by memorandum," advocated the military's intervention, saying that Kurdish secessionists were cooperating with extreme right-wing and extreme left-wing groups before the military forced the elected government to resign. Cizre argues that the securitization of the Kurdish question helped the military to shadow civilian governments after the rise of PKK terrorism in the 1980s. In her eyes, the military prevented political parties from developing creative solutions to the Kurdish question and restricted their policy-making room for security reasons.⁷

However, such an instrumentalization strategy was not a political tactic and it was fully compatible with the founding principles of the republic until Erdoğan reversed this. Thus, the state's policy toward the Kurds did not fluctuate under the military's mandate. By contrast, the AKP initially dealt with the Kurdish question through a discourse based on peace and democracy, helping it to eliminate its domestic rivals in the name of such values. For example, those involved in the 2013 Gezi Park protests were labeled as privileged, secular white Turks who were unhappy with the peace talks between the government and the Kurds ongoing at the time. Similarly, the AKP elite defined the graft probe conducted by Gülenist prosecutors in December 2013 as an effort to sabotage the peace process.⁸ Erdoğan labelled critics of the peace process bloodthirsty vampires and left no room for public debate.⁹

Erdoğan's pragmatism was revealed when his party lost its majority in parliament in the June 2015 elections. During the

7. Ümit Cizre, 2009, "The emergence of the government's perspective on the Kurdish issue," *Insight Turkey*, 1-12.

8. In December 2013, pro-Gülen police chiefs and public prosecutors started to investigate how ministers in the AKP cabinet were bribed by an Iranian businessman in return for helping to break sanctions on Iran. According to the indictment, the Turkish banking system was used to organize illegal flows of money. The AKP government, however, deemed the investigation as an attempt to subvert the government by members of the Gülenist cult.

9. "Erdoğan: Gençlerin Kanından Beslenen Vampirler Rahatsız Oldu [Vampires sucking the blood of the Youth are Disturbed]," March 27, 2014, *Yeni Akit*, <https://www.yeniakit.com.tr/haber/erdogan-genclerin-kanindan-beslenen-vampirler-rahatsiz-oldu-14080.html>.

6. Burak Bilgehan Özpek, 2019, "The State's Changing Role Regarding the Kurdish Question of Turkey: From Consistent Tutelage to Volatile Securitization," *Alternatives*, 44(1), 35-49, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0304375419854599>.



Photo above: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (R) meets Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) leader Devlet Bahçeli (L) at the Turkish Grand National Assembly in Ankara on November 19, 2019. Photo by Murat Kula/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images.

peace process, critics of his policy were labeled as enemies of democracy, while after the election he began to call critics of his militaristic strategy enemies of the state. This change in approach follows a consistent pattern, which is the needs dictated by Erdoğan's political survival. That is to say, he seems to have no ideational commitment to either peace and democracy or war and national security.

Possibilities and Limitations

Erdoğan's pragmatism vis-à-vis the Kurdish question was on full display on the eve of the 2019 Istanbul municipal elections. Osman Öcalan, the brother of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, appeared on the state-run TV channel TRT Şeş, which broadcasts in Kurdish. He called on Kurdish voters not to vote for opposition mayoral candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu and to instead boycott the elections.¹⁰ An academic from Munzur University, Ali Kemal Özcan, was subsequently allowed to visit

Abdullah Öcalan and received a letter from him. Özcan shared the letter, which called on HDP voters to remain neutral in the elections, with members of the press.¹¹ Even MHP leader Bahçeli endorsed the letter and advised HDP voters to listen to Öcalan instead of HDP Co-chair Demirtaş, who supported the opposition candidate İmamoğlu.

This attempt points to an obvious friction between Öcalan and Demirtaş in the Kurdish movement. The PKK's terrorist attacks and declaration of self-rule in southeastern Turkey after the end of the peace process in June 2015 triggered a resumption of conflict after the June 2015 elections. The PKK's strategy undermined the HDP's political legitimacy and narrowed its policy-making room. The clashes ended up putting more power in the hands of Erdoğan and the PKK. Erdoğan could initiate a rally around the flag and attract nationalist voters in the November 1, 2015 snap elections, while the PKK consolidated its monopoly over the Kurdish question. Equating the Kurdish question with PKK terrorism helped the AKP government to win

10. Pinar Tremblay, "All is fair to sustain Erdogan's reign," July 9, 2019, *Al-Monitor*, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2019/07/turkey-why-did-state-television-interview-a-wanted-man.html>.

11. Amberin Zaman, "Kurdish academic who met with jailed PKK leader speaks out," September 20, 2019, *Al-Monitor*, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2019/09/ocalan-turkey-pkk-kurdish-peace-process-ozcan.html>.

the snap elections, regain its majority in parliament, suppress civilian actors, undermine the HDP's legitimacy, and weaken the opposition front by isolating the HDP from other opposition parties. Such an equation confirms that the PKK is the only representative of the Kurdish question.

The government prefers to proceed with Öcalan as an interlocutor in the peace process because he has a pragmatic personality and his imprisonment makes him more likely to negotiate on Erdoğan's terms. He can ignore Erdoğan's autocracy, absence of rule of law, and human rights violations as long as he is recognized as the representative of the Kurds and gets some degree of autonomy. Demirtaş, by contrast, aims to transform the HDP from an ethnic party into a populist-left one that attracts all the minority groups and deprived elements within Turkish society, such as Alevis, Armenians, the LGBT community, students, and the working class. His opposition to Erdoğan's centralization of power played a key role in the party's ability to expand its base to non-Kurdish, pro-democracy segments of society and thus its historic victory in the June 2015 elections. By defining the Kurdish question as a problem of a democratic system, Demirtaş challenged the liberal argument that the Kurdish problem has to be resolved for Turkey to be a full-fledged democracy. Instead, Demirtaş views Turkey's democratization as a pre-condition for the resolution of the Kurdish question. That is why he strives for more democracy before negotiating for Kurdish cultural and political rights.

The obvious friction between Öcalan and Demirtaş provides both possibilities and limitations for Erdoğan. He could negotiate with Öcalan behind closed doors, divide the Kurdish movement, and prevent some Kurdish voters from supporting the opposition candidate in the 2023 general elections. Some Kurds, especially those living in southeastern Turkey, might boycott the elections if Öcalan were to once again call for them to do so. But it is not possible for Öcalan to attract all Kurdish voters. Kurds living in major cities are experiencing harsher economic conditions than those in rural areas, and the young Kurdish generations are more secular and liberal than the previous ones. These Kurdish circles could be attracted by the political line of Demirtaş and lend support to the opposition candidate in the upcoming elections. In this scenario, Erdoğan would likely be able to divide the Kurdish vote and undermine the opposition front.

However, this friction has also limitations. Given the current economic situation, Öcalan's possible call to boycott the elections might have limited influence because Kurds are the segment of society hardest hit by the economic crisis. Furthermore, Erdoğan's coalition includes nationalist and militarist hardliners such as MHP leader Bahçeli, Minister of Interior Süleyman Soylu, ultra-nationalist Patriotic Party (*Vatan Partisi*, VP) leader Doğu Perinçek, and some well-known remnants from the deep state. Thus, Öcalan's call would not offer cause for optimism on either economic or political grounds and would merely serve as a test of loyalty to his leadership among the Kurds.

Nevertheless, Demirtaş might also lose credit in the eye of Kurdish voters if the Supreme Court decides to close the HDP and the other opposition parties remain silent. Although he is in jail, Demirtaş is still able to influence the political environment through his letters and articles. In these pieces, he strongly points out the need for a united opposition front and calls on Kurdish voters to remain in solidarity with the other opposition parties against Erdoğan. The blank check given by Demirtaş to other opposition parties might backfire if the parties, and especially the staunchly nationalist Good Party (*İyi Parti*, İYİ), endorse the Supreme Court's decision. Under this scenario, Erdoğan would need to rely on three political segments: pro-Öcalan ethnic Kurdish nationalists, ultra-nationalists led by Ümit Özdağ's Victory Party (*Zafer Partisi*, ZP), and ultra-Kemalists led by Muharrem İnce's Homeland Party (*Memleket Partisi*, MP). Ultra-nationalists and ultra-Kemalists are expected to support the Supreme Court's decision to close the HDP and accuse the opposition parties of betraying nationalist and Kemalist voters if they do the opposite. Such criticisms from marginal but effective parties might lead the CHP and İYİ to refrain from showing solidarity with the HDP, and this inaction could prepare the ground for Öcalan to call for a boycott.

Given the turmoil within the HDP and Erdoğan's potential strategic calculations, opposition parties are likely to maintain a moderate distance from the HDP. This makes sense as the credit they provide could be manipulated by pro-Öcalan figures in the HDP to increase Öcalan's bargaining power against Erdoğan, enabling the PKK leader to convert the opposition parties' support into more gains from Erdoğan. This has happened before: In the run-up to the 2019 local elections, the AKP government knocked on Öcalan's door given the HDP's

support for the opposition candidate, prompting Öcalan to write a letter calling on Kurdish voters not to back him. This means that the more cooperation there is between the HDP and other opposition parties, the more the AKP government needs Öcalan.

Moving forward, the other opposition parties should maintain a moderate, measured distance from the HDP and avoid using similar language to the government, which regards all Kurdish politicians, rights advocates, and intellectuals as extensions of the PKK. If they adopt the same approach as the government, they might lose Demirtaş's support altogether, which could influence many HDP voters. For the opposition parties to avert any potential pragmatic moves by Erdoğan in the run-up to the elections, they need to emphasize the distinction between Demirtaş and Öcalan, avoid using nationalist rhetoric, and criticize Demirtaş's imprisonment on the basis of the principle of the independence of the judiciary. Such a strategy could preserve the strength and unity of the opposition bloc and open a new chapter for efforts to address the Kurdish question in the post-Erdoğan era.

Burak Bilgehan Özpek is Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science and International Relations at the TOBB University of Economics and Technology in Ankara. His main research interests include the de facto states, civil conflicts, contemporary politics of the Middle East and Turkish foreign policy. He has published articles in academic journals such as Journal of International Relations and Development, International Journal, Iran and the Caucasus, Turkish Studies, Israel Affairs and Global Governance. He is the author of a book entitled "Peace Process Between Turkey and the Kurds: Anatomy of a Failure" published by Routledge in 2017. Özpek is also one of the founders of Daktilo1984 Movement in Turkey.