ARTICLE

Can the Kurdish Left Contribute to Turkey's Democratization?

ÖDÜL CELEP*

ABSTRACT *The current peace process regarding Turkey's Kurdish question could pave the way for the normalization of politics and democratization in Turkey if the existing opportunities are not missed. The major actors that represent the Kurdish left in Turkey, the PKK and the HDP (formerly BDP), are all equally significant parts of the peace process. The HDP in particular has the potential to turn into a constructive actor for Turkey's democratization in the near future. This article argues that the Kurdish left of the democratic, parliamentary stage, lately the HDP, could contribute to Turkey's democratization if it can fulfill the libertarian left policy space in Turkish politics, which has long been abandoned by all existing political parties.*

Introduction

The ongoing peace process between the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AK Party) government and the Kurdish left, represented by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, PKK) and the Democratic Party of the Peoples (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP), the neo-successor of the former Peace and Democracy Party (*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi*, BDP), is an extraordinary achievement. After over thirty years of armed clashes between Turkey's civilian governments/military forces and the PKK's paramilitary groups, both sides have agreed to end the fighting and permanently establish peace. Despite the recent corruption charges against the AK Party government and the AKP-Gülen split within the conservative right, the peace process retains the commitment of its major actors: the AKP, BDP-HDP and PKK. The conflict between the AK Party government and Fethullah Gülen's group (Cemaat) has far from undermined the dedication to peacemaking. The purpose of this article is to shed light on the politics and rhetoric of the Kurdish left with legal, parliamentary status,

* Işık University, İstanbul

Insight Turkey
Vol. 16 / No. 3 / 2014, pp. 165-180

Since the transition from the ashes of the multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire to a modern Turkish nation-state in 1923, the Kurdish question has been an 'existential' issue for Turkey

namely the BDP-HDP political line, and explain how it can contribute to Turkey's democratization from an objective perspective.

Though the AK Party and the BDP-HDP line come from anti-establishment roots, the two political traditions do not have much in common. The AK Party defines itself as a 'conservative democratic' movement. Although 'conservative democracy' sounds like a novel term, it is hardly a new concept in Turkish politics. The term marks a reinterpretation of an existing political tradition in Turkey's long-standing center-right and a break away from the old-fashioned religious populism of the former Islamist right.[1] For instance, while the former Islamist right perceived the EU as a Christian club, the AK Party embraced the Republican project of integration with the West and Turkey's EU membership process.[2] Furthermore, the AK Party amalgamated the pro-Islamist and pro-Western foreign policy schools by embracing the idea that Turkey belongs to both Islamic and European civilizations and could represent the Islamic civilization within the EU.[3]

In contrast, the BDP-HDP line represents a progressive, left-wing party tradition. An observer party member of the Socialist International, the former BDP was a secular party with no defense of traditional morality, religious principles or family values. Nevertheless, the Kurdish left-wing parties have been regarded as regional/ethnic movements due to the fact that their priority has been the rights and liberties of Kurdish people in Turkey. On the one hand, the Kurdish left party tradition started out as a regional movement and concentrated in the Kurdish-populated east and southeast regions of Turkey. On the other hand, it has recently embraced a wider spectrum of issues including equal citizenship, democratization, freedom of expression, social justice, gender equality, ecology and labor rights. Furthermore, the BDP-HDP is the only parliamentary actor to have actively defended LGBT rights in Turkey.

The BDP recently founded a new group, the Democratic Party of the Peoples (HDP), for the long run purpose of creating an all-inclusive, umbrella party that would not give the image of a Kurdish regionalist party or 'a party of Kurds.' The BDP and the HDP ran separately in the March 2014 local elections in the East and West respectively. After the local elections, the BDP dissolved itself and joined the HDP, while a group decided to maintain the old party by changing its official title to Democratic Regions Party (*Demokratik Bölgeler Partisi*, DBP) as a regional cadre party for the long-run purpose of 'democratic autonomy' of Turkey's Kurdish-populated regions. The HDP is expected to be-

come a party of Turkey while the DBP is not planned to contest local or general elections. In the first presidential elections of Turkey, The HDP nominated its co-president Demirtaş, who raised the party's traditional 6-7 percent in Turkey to over 9 percent, which was a breakthrough in the electoral history of the Kurdish left-wing party tradition.

Although the BDP-HDP line shows signs of evolving into parties of Turkey today, the Kurdish left movement did start out as an ethnic/regional actor. In the broader context, the party family known as 'ethnic/regional' constitutes the most ideologically disperse group of political parties in democratic systems.[4] Social scientists have debated whether ethnic/regional parties play a constructive or negative role in democratic systems and democratization.[5] This article puts forward the idea that the Kurdish left possesses the potential to play a positive role in Turkey's democratization process. The extent to which today's HDP can contribute to democratization in Turkey depends on whether it remains a regional actor in the Kurdish-populated East and Southeast or goes further to embrace larger social strata and plays a broader progressive role in Turkey.

The Political History of Turkey's Kurdish Left

The 'Kurdish left' (*Kürt solu*) is a novel term. Neither the BDP-HDP nor the PKK refers to itself as the 'Kurdish left.' The term is used in the context of this article with not an ethnic but political connotation. Although the current Kurdish party tradition started out as a relatively strict ethnic/regional movement, it later showed a willingness to diversify its base with non-Kurdish progressive groups such as independent socialists, ecologists, urban feminists and non-Kurdish minorities. Today's Kurdish left is an outcome of Turkey's long-standing Kurdish issue and its socio-political evolution as well as the Turkey's democratization history. It took quite a long time after the proclamation of the new Turkish state in 1923 for the Kurdish awareness to develop itself into a political movement and subsequently a political party.

Since the transition from the ashes of the multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire to a modern Turkish nation-state in 1923, the Kurdish question has been an 'existential' issue for Turkey.[6] The radical transformation from the Ottoman state to a new Turkish nation-state broke some institutional traditions that connected the Turkish cultural 'center' with the 'periphery' that included the Kurds.[7] The Turkification and secularization processes of the early Republican years led to the emergence of resistance movements as early as 1925 with Sheikh Said Rebellion and other social unrests during the 1930s. These events did not mean anything more than rebellion, tribal resistance, backwardness, banditry and reactionarism (*gericilik*) to the early Republican elites. All Kurdish uprisings

Selahattin Demirtaş, chairman of HDP (Peoples' Democratic Party) and candidate in Turkey's presidential elections, speaks in Mersin meeting.

AA / Anıl Bağrık

were silenced through violent suppression by the state-led security forces. For decades to come, the identity or 'Kurdishness' of the Kurdish question in Turkey was largely overlooked by the political establishment.[8]

The emergence of Kurdish political awareness at the party level can be traced back to the rise of radical left-wing parties after the 1960 coup and the subsequent 1961 Constitution, which created a libertarian environment for the formation of new political actors in Turkey. In fact, the very first party that voiced the 'Kurdish reality' in Turkey was not a Kurdish party. The first party to raise the existence of Kurds and an independent Kurdish identity at the national stage was the electorally weak yet politically loud Workers' Party of Turkey (*Türkiye İşçi Partisi*, TİP). Founded in 1961 by a dozen labor union leaders, the TİP was the first electorally relevant party to openly embrace socialism. The TİP defended a socialist economic system as opposed to a free market system, 'democracy and freedoms' rather than restrictions on individual liberties and legal-political censorship, as well as an independent foreign policy instead of unconditionally friendly relations with the US and NATO in the Cold War context. The TİP also advocated Turkey's independence by abrogating all Turkey-US and Turkey-NATO treaties.[9]

The TİP organized 'Meetings of the East' (*Doğu Mitingleri*) in a number of Kurdish-populated provinces in the East and Southeast, including Diyarbakır, Şanlıurfa, Tunceli (Dersim) and Batman, in 1967. During the early 1960s, the TİP's program contained sensitive language about Turkey's 'Eastern' (Kurdish) problem. Although the party denied regionalism and territorial separatism on all accounts, the TİP's program mentioned that the eastern and southeastern provinces of Turkey were "hardship areas" (*mahrumiyet bölgeleri*), particularly with respect to economic and cultural conditions. Furthermore, it was asserted that people who spoke Kurdish and Arabic and those from the Alevi denomination were discriminated against in Turkey.[10] The TİP further reinforced its stance on the Kurdish identity in a resolution adopted during the fourth party congress in October 1970. The TİP resolution declared that the "natural and requisite revolutionary duty" of the party included support for the struggle of

The emergence of Kurdish political awareness at the party level can be traced back to the rise of radical left-wing parties after the 1960 coup and the subsequent 1961 Constitution

the Kurdish people, their constitutional citizenship rights and the realization of all other democratic desires and hopes.[11] After the 1971 military memorandum, the Constitutional Court (*Anayasa Mahkemesi*) shut down the party on the account of violating the principle of the state's integrity and indivisibility of its territory. The TİP was re-established with the same title in 1975, but as a far more electorally marginal and orthodox Communist movement.

Although the 1980 coup and the subsequent military junta regime (1980-83) banned all existing political movements, the major target was the left, which was subject to political repression throughout the 1980s. The vacuum left by the TİP party tradition in Turkey was only filled a decade later by a variety of fringe radical left-wing parties together with a novel but definitely non-fringe Kurdish left-wing party tradition, which remained on the political stage for much longer. Fringe left-wing parties included the left-libertarian Party of Freedom and Solidarity (Özgürlük ve Dayanışma Partisi, ÖDP) and Equality and Democracy Party (*Eşitlik ve Demokrasi Partisi*, EDP), the relatively authoritarian Communist Party of Turkey (*Türkiye Komünist Partisi*, TKP), the socialist pro-Kurdish Party of Labor (*Emeğin Partisi*, EMEP), and many others. Among the radical left, the most visible and only politically relevant party tradition proved to be the Kurdish left, starting with the People's Labor Party (*Halkın Emek Partisi*, HEP) in the early 1990s until today's HDP (see Table 1).

The current Kurdish left-wing party tradition dates back to the early 1990s with the formation of the HEP, the first electorally relevant Kurdish left-wing party in Turkey's recent political history. It emerged as a splinter group of ten representatives from the center-left Social Democratic Populist Party (*Sosyaldemokrat Halkçı Parti*, SHP). Founded officially on June 7, 1990, the HEP's primary demands included the extension of Kurds' linguistic, expression and publication rights, allowing education in the Kurdish language, ending the state of emergency law (*Olağanüstü Hal*, OHAL) and village guard (*köy koruculuğu*) system[12] in the east and southeast regions, as well as labor rights such as the right to strike with collective bargaining. The HEP contested the 1991 parliamentary elections under the SHP's ticket and received 22 out of 450 seats in the Turkish Grand National Assembly (*Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi*, TBMM).

The controversy of the Kurdish left party tradition is rooted in its refusal to disassociate itself from the PKK and refer to it as a 'terrorist organization,' which is a serious defection from the official state discourse. The HEP's formation and parliamentary entry led to a highly controversial polarization between the party and nearly all other right-wing conservative and nationalist parties. Some HEP deputies switched to Kurdish language during their oath-taking in November 1991 and later displayed symbols associated with the PKK. These actions triggered a legal process that ended with the closure of the HEP by the Constitutional Court on the grounds of cultivating social differences for the purpose of destroying the inseparable unity between the Turkish state and its people, and becoming a center of illegal activity for the PKK.[13]

The current Kurdish left-wing party tradition dates back to the early 1990s with the formation of the HEP, the first electorally relevant pro-Kurdish left-wing party in Turkey's recent political history

Table 1 presents the entire series of left-wing pro-Kurdish parties founded and later banned by the Constitutional Court. During the legal process of the HEP's closure, the same political group founded the Freedom and Democracy Party (Özgürlük ve Demokrasi Partisi, ÖZDEP), but the Supreme Court of Appeals Prosecutor's office (*Yargıtay Cumhuriyet Başsavcılığı*) began a parallel closure lawsuit against the ÖZDEP on similar accusations. After the ÖZDEP's closure in 1993, the same political group founded the Freedom and Equality Party (Özgürlük ve Eşitlik Partisi, ÖZEP) in order to merge with the newly founded Democracy Party (*Demokrasi Partisi*, DEP). The DEP cadres were divided into moderate and radical factions, with the latter maintaining more control over the party's political discourse. With almost no sensitivity to mainstream public opinion in Turkey, the DEP's actions proved to be even more radical and controversial than its predecessor, the HEP.[14] Eventually, the DEP was also shut down by the Constitutional Court on similar accounts.

The next primary successor of the Kurdish left party tradition was the People's Democracy Party (*Halkın Demokrasi Partisi*, HADEP), which was founded in June 1994. The HADEP was one of the relatively long-lived but still eventually banned parties of the Kurdish left-wing party tradition. The HADEP did not participate in the 1994 municipal elections as a show of protest against the political establishment and electoral laws in Turkey, which its members found disproportionately unfair. The HADEP was later succeeded by the Democratic People's Party (*Demokratik Halk Partisi*, DEHAP), then the Democratic Society Party (*Demokratik Toplum Partisi*, DTP) which was shut down in 2009, and Peace and Democracy Party, the BDP. Most recently, the BDP decided to dissolve itself and join the HDP. (see Table 1).

Table 1: Kurdish Left-wing Parties in Turkey

Abbr.	Party Title (Turkish)	Party Title (English)
HEP	Halkın Emek Partisi	People's Labor Party
ÖZEP	Özgürlük ve Eşitlik Partisi	Freedom and Equality Party
ÖZDEP	Özgürlük ve Demokrasi Partisi	Freedom and Democracy Party
DEP	Demokrasi Partisi	Democracy Party
HADEP	Halkın Emek Partisi	People's Democracy Party
DEHAP	Demokratik Halk Partisi	Democratic People's Party
DTP	Demokratik Toplum Partisi	Democratic Society Party
BDP	Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi	Peace and Democracy Party

Abbr.	Date opened	Date closed
HEP	June 7, 1990	July 14, 1993
ÖZEP	June 25, 1992	Dissolved itself to merge HEP
ÖZDEP	October 19, 1992	November 23, 1993
DEP	June 21, 1991	June 16, 1994
HADEP	May 11, 1994	March 13, 2003
DEHAP	October 24, 1997	November 19, 2005 (dissolved itself)
DTP	November 9, 2005	December 11, 2009
BDP	May 2, 2008	April 22, 2014 (dissolved to join HDP)

The Kurdish Left's Opposition and Rhetoric Towards the AKP's Conservative Democracy

The AK Party government took several legal reforms to acknowledge the Kurdish identity and culture in Turkey. In the summer of 2009, the AK Party government initiated a process called 'democratic opening' for the purpose of normalizing and desecuritizing the Kurdish issue and providing a resolution through democratic and civilian means. Despite skepticism about the sincerity of the AK Party government, the spirit of peace deal with the Kurdish left has been maintained. Although the term 'democratic opening' is no longer a salient agenda item, as of late there has been a debate on the 'democratization package' within the larger picture of the 'peace process.' Erdoğan recently announced this package, which includes new legislation to make it easier for small parties to receive treasury funds, new membership and assembly rights, the legalization of political propaganda in languages other than Turkish (i.e., Kurdish), strengthening of legislation to protect against hate crimes and respect for the individual sphere, as well as the legalization of education in the Kurdish language in private schools.[15] Accordingly, the most recent democratization package in March 2014 indeed legalized the use of Kurdish for political campaigns and as education language in private schools, lifted bans on the use of former Kurdish names for formerly 'Turkified' settlement places, and declined the minimum national vote share requirement for political parties to receive treasury funds from seven to three percent, which made it possible for the BDP to benefit from treasury funds.[16]

During its first term and in accordance with EU harmonization reforms, the AK Party government adopted a series of reforms that involved the extension of cultural and language rights to Turkey's Kurds.[17] During the AK Party's second term, the state television institution, TRT, started to broadcast a public channel, TRT-Şeş, which broadcast in the Kurdish dialects of Kurmancî, Soranî and Zazakî for the first time in Turkey's Republican history. Printing in the Kurdish language and Kurdish literature was a priority of the AK Party government's ministry of culture.

Despite all these developments, many Kurds still believe that the reforms must continue with socioeconomic improvement, furthering of democratic rights and the recognition of the Kurdish identity.[18] Some of the democratic achievements on the cultural front were overshadowed by mass detentions of members of the Group of Communities in Kurdistan (*Koma Civakên Kurdistan*, KCK), an organization founded by the PKK. Selahattin Demirtaş, the former BDP co-president, declared that the democratization package was "nothing novel" but a reformulation of what has already been achieved through political struggles on the streets.[19] Demirtaş criticized the weakness of the democratization package on the Alevi's culture and identity, particularly its silence on Cemevis, the gathering and holy places of the Alevi-Bektashi culture in Turkey.[20] Emphasizing the density of low-income people and poverty conditions among the Kurdish population, Demirtaş denounced the limited provision of Kurdish education in private schools for the wealthy strata only.

Demirtaş also criticized the AK Party for failing to eliminate the 10 percent national electoral threshold, which has restricted the electoral opportunities of Kurdish left parties since its formulation after the 1980 coup. Indeed, the national vote share of the Kurdish left since the early 1990s has been around 5-6 percent, which is significant but still below the national threshold. In order to bypass the threshold, the Kurdish left devised an electoral strategy of running with independent candidates, to whom the national threshold rules do not apply, in the 2007 and 2011 elections. The Kurdish left contested the 2007 elections with a list of independent candidates entitled "Candidates of One Thousand Hopes" (*Bin Umut Adayları*) under the umbrella of the DTP and another group of fringe radical left-wing parties. The Kurdish left pursued a similar electoral strategy with "Labor Democracy and Freedom Bloc" (*Emek, Demokrasi ve Özgürlük Bloku*) candidates in 2011, this time under the BDP's umbrella and a variety of fringe left-wing movements.[21]

Although the Kurdish question has been the primary axis of the AK Party-BDP political conflict, the divergence between the two parties on this question reflects the differences in their broader vision on human rights, democracy, multiculturalism, personal freedoms and identity issues. The BDP has developed a largely progressive political discourse in its criticism of the AK Party, reflecting the lan-

guage of the libertarian left in European democracies. It is this left-libertarian soul of politics that Turkey lacks in its party system. The essence of the Kurdish left's contribution to Turkey's democratization therefore lies in its left-libertarian elements, such as gender equality, freedom of expression, decentralization of power, the environment and grassroots democracy.

In the summer of 2009, the AK Party government initiated a process called 'democratic opening' for the purpose of normalizing and desecuritizing the Kurdish issue

One major weapon that the former BDP used against the AK Party was its fairly intelligent and articulate progressive political discourse. Furthermore, today's BDP is the most internally democratic party in the TBMM. Contrary to the other charismatic male led parties, the BDP was the only party with two 'co-presidents' (*eşbaşkan*) of different genders, Selahattin Demirtaş and Gültan Kışanak. The new HDP has implemented the same policy with Sebahat Tuncel and Ertuğrul Kürkçü as the first co-presidents, and today with Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ, a woman. The BDP was also the only party that applied a gender quota to recruit more women. Among the existing parliamentary parties, the BDP-HDP line has had the highest seat share of women deputies in Turkey's national legislature.

During the 2011 parliamentary election season, the motto of the Kurdish left centered on the theme of 'Democratic Republic' (*Demokratik Cumhuriyet*), whereby Turks and Kurds would constitute the "two founding communities."[22] The party increased its parliamentary seats decisively from 22 with the DTP in 2007 to 36 with the BDP in 2011, a major electoral achievement. Recently, the BDP voiced its demand for the decentralization of Turkey's administrative system with a redistribution of administrative powers to local governments and municipalities. The BDP also called for 'democratic autonomy' (*demokratik özerklik*) on the grounds that people in the East and Southeast should be able to govern themselves in internal domestic affairs. The BDP elite generally put forth the idea that democratic autonomy is a project to bind the people of Turkey together, rather than undermining its territorial integrity. Although the project has not yet been open to a democratic discussion in the country, the concept reflects a demand for self-determination in internal affairs and domestic policy, while being connected to the center (Ankara) on foreign affairs. Gültan Kışanak, the newly elected mayor of Diyarbakır, recently expressed their municipal administration's request to receive a share from the petroleum and other energy sources produced in the region as a part of their democratic autonomy project.[23]

Systematic analyses of party ideology and rhetoric often require a comprehensive examination of political parties' written manifestos that are publicized before general elections.[24] In these documents, parties extensively map out their

Many Kurds still believe that the reforms must continue with socioeconomic improvement, furthering of democratic rights and the recognition of the Kurdish identity

policies to public. These documents present a wide spectrum of electoral promises and include a variety of public policy statements. A comprehensive analysis of the election manifesto of the Kurdish left with DTP in 2007 and the BDP in 2011 reveal a holistic language of democracy and a call for decentralization of power. Compared to the other parliamentary actors, the Kurdish left focuses primarily on the essential issues of the state/political establishment, the regime itself, and the peaceful coexistence of diversity with an emphasis on the Kurdish identity.

The secular spirit of the Kurdish left provides the opportunity to put forth arguments compatible with universal norms of democracy. The emphasis on the Kurdish identity is balanced by sound language that is distant from both ethno-nationalism and religious fundamentalism. The written documents of the Kurdish left carry no verbal reference to holy or symbolic concepts of Islam, institutionalized religion or the religious right. The concept 'Kurds' is constructed on the grounds of civic/equal citizenship, peoplehood and historically socially disadvantaged status rather than ethnic bonds or any reference to a Kurdish 'superiority.' The DTP-BDP party tradition conceptualizes Kurds as an oppressed, disadvantaged people in Turkey, together with several minorities in similar conditions (i.e., Arabs, Circassians, Syriacs).[25]

The 2007 manifesto emphasizes a few existential themes such as transparency, political participation, dialogue, peace, civilian politics and social justice; and denounces discrimination, 'othering' (ötekileştirme), essentialism (özcülük), cultural racism and traditional moralism. In order to establish 'full democracy,' the 2007 manifesto calls for the decentralization of power, the recognition of Kurdish actors in the peace process, a new libertarian constitution based on the rule of law and equality, political amnesty, inquiry into murders by unknown assailants, regional development plans based on positive discrimination and multi-lingual public service. The manifesto presents a radical approach to democracy with the words "either full democracy or none" (*ya gerçek demokrasi ya hiç*).[26] The BDP's 2011 manifesto calls for a constitution that promotes gender liberation, respects for the environment, and does not impose any particular ideology on its citizens. The document mentions intra-party democratization, gender quotas in party politics, the elimination of the 10 percent national electoral threshold and empowering parties' women and youth branches. The BDP also calls for education and public service provisions in mother tongue (*anadilde eğitim*) together with the official language Turkish.[27] In foreign policy, it calls for Turkey's withdrawal from NATO, the closure of all foreign military bases in Turkey, and disarmament in both re-

gional and global terms,[28] which reflects the foreign policy understanding of the radical left of the 1970s in Turkey.

In a more recent party document (e-bulletin), it is stated that ambiguous concepts, such as 'morality' and 'public order,' are not to be used to restrict basic freedoms and rights in the new constitution. The text also reveals a social democratic, even socialist, philosophy owing to its demand for free healthcare, education and housing for everyone, as well as its defense of labor rights such as collective bargaining and solidarity strikes. In addition, there is a call to the abolishment of the Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*) in favor of a more decentralized structure of religious communities with more autonomy. The BDP e-bulletin also demands the abolishment of compulsory religion/Islamic education at schools and recognition of the right to conscientious objection (*vicdani red hakkı*). It also presents opposition to climate change, the destruction of nature and habitats, and calls for protection against the threat posed by all chemical, biological and nuclear weapons.[29]

In harmony with its adherence to equal citizenship, the Kurdish left has prioritized the issue of gender equality in its platforms. The BDP openly opposes all types of patriarchal policies and traditional practices that disadvantage women in society. For instance, Selma Irmak, the HDP Şırnak representative, recently released a column in the BDP-leaning daily newspaper, Özgür Gündem (Free Agenda), in support of Fatma Salman Kotan, the AKP's female deputy from the province of Ağrı who was subjected to violence by her husband. Arguing that violence against women is an issue above political parties and ideologies, Irmak showed unconditional support for Kotan and emphasized on women's universal solidarity. Irmak criticized both the AKP government and Prime Minister Erdoğan for pursuing a hypocritical policy on women's issues.[30]

The Kurdish left has been the most vocal parliamentary actor on the rights of sexual minorities in Turkey. Sebahat Tuncel from the Kurdish left became the first deputy to bring the problems faced by the LGBT community in Turkey to the TBMM. In her written question to PM Erdoğan in 2010, Tuncel raised the issue of LGBT rights within the broader context of patriarchy, traditional moralism, homophobia and heterosexism in Turkey.[31] Around that time, Aliye Kavaf, the AKP minister responsible for family and women's rights, referred to homosexuality as "a biological disease to be cured."[32] Referring to Kavaf's anti-gay statement, Tuncel raised the fact that homosexuality is no longer considered deviant behavior by international institutions (i.e., World Health Organization) as well as respected psychologist and psychiatric associations in Turkey and the US.

One unique aspect of the Kurdish left should be emphasized. Although the Kurdish left movement has secular left-wing origins, the BDP's pluralism accommodates religious-conservative figures as well. For instance, Altan Tan, the current

HDP representative for the province of Diyarbakır, defines himself a follower of Sharia (Şeriat), Islamic moral code and law.[33] In his recent book, Tan criticizes 'secularist' (*laikçi*) Kurdish intellectuals who claim Kurds' true religion is not Islam but Zoroastrianism (*Zerdüştlük*). In his criticism of the Kurdish secular intelligentsia, Tan contextualizes Islam as the true historical faith of the Kurdish people and demands respect for the faithful from Kurdish secularists.[34] Nevertheless, Tan's opinions on Islam do not represent the majority of the Kurdish left.

The Kurdish left has not perceived the concept of 'religion' in abstract, faith-based and theological terms, but rather in the broader and concrete framework of earthly cultural rights. İsmail Beşikçi, a well-known progressive and pro-Kurdish intellectual, raises the argument that all people of the Middle East have used the religion of Islam for their national interests, including Arabs, Persians and Turks.[35] In fact, the BDP is broadly neutral on faith issues: neither anti-clerical nor religion-driven. Its non-reactive attitude towards religion is also a rational strategy as the electoral base of the Kurdish left is mostly Kurds, who are predominantly Sunni Muslims belonging to the Shafi school, with some from the Alevi denomination. Sunni Muslim Kurds are generally known to be observing, pious people and appealing to them requires a certain level of connection with Islam.

The Kurdish left has never acquired 'coalition potential' for a variety of reasons including its controversial relations with the PKK. Nevertheless, when the political establishment showed signs of accommodation in legal and parliamentary terms, it behaved responsively. With the 2007 and 2011 general elections, the Kurdish left won enough parliamentary seats to become an effective political actor. Despite its lack of government experience, the BDP has shown signs of intra-parliamentary cooperation in a variety of TBMM group work since 2007. This includes commissions in which the DTP-BDP participated, such as the justice commission, the constitutional consensus commission and the gender equal-opportunity commission.

Conclusion

Turkey's democracy and party system have always been volatile and open to rapid and abrupt changes. It is fair to say that watching Turkish politics is like watching a suspenseful movie. Although the system has rather centralized and top-down decision-making structures, the political party culture is quite dynamic. There is an observable trend in Turkey's electoral politics: the majority of voters have been casting their ballot for conservative, right-wing political parties. With the formation and subsequent rise to power of the AK Party in 2002, as well as its continued electoral strength in the following parliamentary elections in 2007 and 2011, Turkey has come quite close to a predominant party

system with one dominant party and three opposition parties. The role played by the BDP-HDP line and the response of the AK Party and other parties are important in the context of resolving Turkey's long-standing Kurdish question.

In 2013-14, there were unpredictable developments in Turkish politics, such as the Gezi Park protests and the subsequent debates on Erdoğan's authoritarianism; Erdoğan's meeting with Masoud Barzani[36] in Diyarbakır along with famous Kurdish singers Şivan Perwer and İbrahim Tatlıses in November 2013; the major split within the conservative right, namely between the AK Party and the Gülen Movement; and the popular election of Erdoğan as Turkey's 12th President after Abdullah Gül's term ended in August 2014. Some of these developments uncovered the bitterness between the Kurdish left and the AK Party government. For instance, during the Gezi Park protests, the Kurds experienced a dilemma of their own, stuck among the pro-peace AK Party, the Gezi activists, which included some segments of the anti-Erdoğan secular and radical left, and other Gezi protesters who opposed to everything about the peace process (i.e., neo-nationalists).[37] The BDP did not support the Gezi protests as a political party, but individual BDP members participated in the demonstrations. The BDP gave a mixed reaction to the Erdoğan-Barzani meeting in Diyarbakır, with some elements endorsing the meeting, while others criticized both Erdoğan and Barzani for undermining and ignoring the BDP and the PKK as peace actors.

The BDP has developed a largely progressive political discourse in its criticism of the AK Party, reflecting the language of the libertarian left in European democracies

Despite the political turmoil, however, both the AK Party and the actors of the Kurdish left (BDP-HDP, PKK and Öcalan) have demonstrated a commitment to maintaining the soul of the peace process. Although the PKK unilaterally halted its withdrawal from Turkish territory due to the AK Party government's failure to fulfill its promises for democratization and the resolution of the Kurdish question, the ceasefire was maintained.[38] Furthermore, Öcalan refrained from blindly supporting the allegedly Cemaat-backed corruption charges against the AK Party government and called those charges "a coup attempt targeting the government." Backing the AK Party against those charges, Öcalan openly vowed not to "add fuel to the fire."[39] It is possible that the understanding of Kurdish and Turkish identities are evolving from a zero-sum relationship, where the two are defined as 'oppositional,' to a positive-sum relationship, in which the two are seen 'complementary.'[40]

It is true that the BDP-HDP's politics is controversial and problematic at times. Despite some of the legitimate criticisms, such as the PKK's excessive oversight

over the BDP, the BDP's overly regional focus and its under-institutionalization due to legal restrictions on the movement,[41] the Kurdish left has shown signs of becoming a party of Turkey by embracing issues other than the Kurdish rights. For instance, the BDP contested and won seats with socialists like Ertuğrul Kürkçü from Mersin, as well as the first-ever Syriac deputy of Turkey, Erol Dora, from Mardin. The BDP's decision to nominate an environmentalist like Şahbal Şenyurt Arınlı from the province of Muğla in the 2011 elections also demonstrated its willingness to go beyond the Kurdish issue and becoming a party of Turkey. The newborn HDP is likely one of the final stages of the Kurdish left's path from local to universal.

The Kurdish left has the opportunity to become a more mainstream actor in Turkish politics if the current dedication to the peace process is maintained and the Kurdish question is normalized

As political conditions developed and party closures occurred less frequently during the 2000s, the Kurdish left became a more 'normalized' actor in Turkey's party politics. The BDP-HDP line currently refers to Öcalan as the leader of the Kurdish people and demands that his prison conditions be rehabilitated. In fact, Öcalan's personality constitutes an even more significant appeal to the Kurdish left than the PKK as an organization. Under these circumstances, there is no point in expecting the BDP-HDP to disconnect itself from either the PKK or Öcalan. On the contrary, a complete democratization process requires making peace with the Kurdish left altogether, including all of its extensions and representatives. Recently, the new PM Ahmet Davutoğlu, Erdoğan's successor, expressed his commitment to maintaining the Kurdish peace (resolution) process in his new, slightly revised Ak Party government together with new promises in the future including a new civilian constitution.[42]

Nevertheless, the normalization of the Kurdish left requires a more widespread adoption of the peace process by the other two major parties in parliament, the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP) and the Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP). With the AKP government's increasing authoritarianism in all domains of social and political life in Turkey (i.e., the press, social media, the internet and civil society) together with corruption scandals, mass relocations of the police and legal bureaucracy, and complaints about judicial degeneration, the normalization of politics has become essential for Turkey. The BDP has been recently criticized for toning down its sharp language against the AK Party government and remaining silent on its authoritarianism.[43] If the CHP and the MHP can take successful steps towards embracing the peace process, the Kurdish left could become a more normalized actor and less dependent on the AK Party, which will likely contribute to the normalization of the Kurdish issue in Turkey.

The Kurdish left has the opportunity to become a more mainstream actor in Turkish politics if the current dedication to the peace process is maintained and the Kurdish question is normalized. The three major parties – AK Party, CHP and MHP – cannot produce libertarian left-wing policies for various reasons. In its current political shape, the Kurdish left fills an important vacuum in Turkish politics: the left-libertarian policy space. The BDP-HDP line brings much from the European libertarian-socialist and green-ecologist traditions to the politics of Turkey. If the Kurdish left becomes a regular component of the state establishment, it can truly contribute not only to the resolution of the Kurdish question but also Turkey's democratization.

Endnotes

1. Zeyneb Çağlıyan-İçener, "The Justice and Development Party's Conception of 'Conservative Democracy': Invention or Reinterpretation?," *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (2009), pp. 595-612.

2. Fulya Atacan, "Explaining Religious Politics at the Crossroad: AKP-SP," *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2005), pp. 187-199.

3. Tarık Oğuzlu and Mustafa Kibaroğlu, "Is the Westernization Process Losing Pace in Turkey: Who's to Blame?," *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (2009), pp. 577-593.

4. Alan Ware, *Political Parties and Party Systems*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 40.

5. Donald Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

6. Philip Robins, "The Overlord State: Turkish Policy and the Kurdish Issue," *International Affairs*, Vol. 69, No. 4 (1993), p. 659.

7. In the case of Turkey's political culture, the 'center' represents the highly Kemalist, secular, pro-Western and mostly urban Turkish social strata, while the 'periphery' includes a variety of other's, including the religious, rural and traditional strata as well as the Kurds and the Alevis. See Şerif Mardin, "Center-periphery Relations: A Key to Turkish Politics?" *Daedalus*, Vol. 102, No. 1 (1973), pp. 169-190; Ersin Kalaycıoğlu, *Turkish Dynamics*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

8. Mesut Yeğen, "The Kurdish Question in Turkish State Discourse," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (1999), p. 555.

9. Erkan Doğan, "Parliamentary Experience of the Turkish Labor Party: 1965–1969," *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (2010), p. 320.

10. Barış Ünlü, *Mehmet Ali Aybar as a Political Thinker* [*Bir Siyasal Düşünür Olarak Mehmet Ali Aybar*]. (Istanbul: İletişim, 2002), p. 190.

11. Erkan Doğan, p. 316.

12. Village guards are state-hired paramilitary forces originally set up and funded in the mid-1980s under Turgut Özal's Motherland Party (*Anavatan Partisi*, ANAP) government. They acted as local militias in villages to protect against attacks by PKK insurgents and guerrillas. The Kurdish left heavily criticized this policy on the account that the state was using and provoking brothers against brothers.

13. Dicle Koğacıoğlu, "Progress, Unity, and Democracy: Dissolving Political Parties in Turkey," *Law & Society Review*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (2004), pp. 443-444.

14. Aylin Güney, "The People's Democracy Party," *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2002), p. 125.

15. 'PM Erdoğan Announced the Democratization Package', *Radikal*, 30.09.2013.

16. "Democratization Package Passes in the TBMM", *Al Jazeera Turk*, 02.03.2014; "Turkish Parliament Adopts 'Democracy Package,' Goes to Recess", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 02.03.2014.

17. Ziya Öniş and Şuhnaz Yılmaz, "Between Europeanization and Euro-Asianism: Foreign Policy Activism in Turkey During the AKP Era," *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2009), p. 8.

18. See Ertan Efegil, "Analysis of the AKP Government's Policy Toward the Kurdish Issue," *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (2011), p. 36.

19. İMÇ TV (08.10.2013).

20. Even though Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*) does not formally recognize Cemevis as holy temples or places of worshipping, the Alevi-Bektashi organizations often demand cemevis to be recognized as distinct places of worshipping (i.e., equivalents of mosques).

21. Independent candidates from other parties in the pre-election coalition of the Kurdish left include Şerafettin Halis, the former chair of Participatory Democracy Party (*Katılımcı Demokrasi Partisi*, KADEP), and Levent Tüzel, the former chair of the Party of Labor (*Emek Partisi*, EMEP) in 2011, as well as Ufuk Uras, the former chair of left-libertarian Freedom and Solidarity Party (Özgürlük ve Dayanışma Partisi, ÖDP), in 2007.

22. See Tarık Oğuzlu and Mustafa Kibaroğlu, p. 587.

23. "Kışanak: We Want a Share From Petroleum" [Kışanak: Petrolden Pay İstiyoruz], *Al Jazeera Turk*, 12.04.2014.

24. See Andrea Volkens, Judith Bara, Ian Budge, Michael D. McDonald and Hans-Dieter Klingemann (eds). *Mapping Policy Preferences from Texts: Statistical Solutions for Manifesto Analysts*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

25. *Candidates of One Thousand Hopes*, *2007 Election Manifesto*.

26. Ibid.

27. Levent Gönenç, "The Issue of Constitution in Parties' Election Manifestos" [Siyasi Partilerin Seçim Bildirgelerinde Anayasa Konusu], *Politika Notu*, TEPAV, May 2011, N201140, p.5.

28. *BDP 2011 Election Manifesto.*

29. Peace and Democracy Party International E-Bulletin (08.07.2012), pp. 5-6.

30. Selma Irmak, "Violence on Women Escalated up to the Assembly" [Kadına Şiddet Meclis'e Kadar Yükseldi], Özgür Gündem, 15.12.2012.

31. Sebahat Tuncel's written question text in the TBMM. 25.03.2010. No: 355, File no: 13475.

32. Minister Kavaf: "Homosexuality a Disease" [Bakan Kavaf: "Eşcinsellik bir hastalık"], *CNN Türk*, 07.03.2010.

33. "BDP's Tan: We need a Middle East like union of states" [BDP'li Tan: Eyaletler birliği gibi bir Ortadoğu lazım], *Radikal*, 22.04.2013.

34. Altan Tan, *Kurds in the Changing Middle East* [*Değişen Ortadoğu'da Kürtler*]. (Istanbul: Çıra, 2011), pp. 111-134.

35. İsmail Beşikçi, *Thoughts on the Kurdish Intellectual* [*Kürt Aydını Üzerine Düşünceler*]. (Istanbul: İBV, 2013). p. 30.

36. The head of the autonomous Kurdish government in northern Iraq.

37. Immanuel Wallerstein, 2013, "Turkey: Dilemma of the Kurds", in Bülent Gökay and Ilia Xypolia (eds.), *Reflections on Taksim – Gezi Park Protests in Turkey*, Keele European Research Centre.

38. "The PKK Halted Withdrawing" [*PKK* Çekilmeyi Durdurdu], *BBC News in Turkish*, 09.09.2013.

39. "Jailed PKK Leader Vows Not to 'Add Fuel to the Fire'", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 16.01.2014.

40. See Murat Somer, "Turkey's Kurdish Conflict: Changing Context, and Domestic and Regional Implications," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (2004), pp. 235-253.

41. See Ruşen Çakır, "The Peace and Democracy Party," *SETA Policy Brief*, Vol. 52 (2011), pp. 22-23.

42. "Davutoğlu: Diyarbakır Prison Atrocities Will Not be Experienced Again" [Davutoğlu: Diyarbakır Cezaevi Zulümleri Bir Daha Yaşanmayacak], *Radikal*, 05.09.2014.

43. For instance, the HDP mayor candidate Sırrı Süreyya Önder was criticized for bashing the CHP and its Istanbul candidate Mustafa Sarıgül but remaining silent on both the AK Party and its Istanbul candidate Kadir Topbaş. Murat Yetkin, "İşte Çalışıyor ya Muhalefet", *Radikal*, 06.02.2014.