

# *Civil society, human rights and the Kurdish question*

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## Introduction

The Kurdish question is in its very essence a human rights question, right to language, education, names, culture, history, literature, research etc.. That's why civil society concerned with Kurdish issues is automatically linked to human rights.

Since the 1980 coup and the complete ban of Kurdish, the arrest of thousand of Kurdish activists, the assassination of many of them, the tense and militarily devastating 1990s for the civilian population, a lot has changed. "There is very little that is worse for democracy and human rights than civil war. ... the end of the civil war ought to be greeted with relief by anyone whose goal is the protection of human rights since its continuation would surely have resulted in far more brutality on both sides."<sup>1</sup>

Since the 1990s there are numerous associations concerned with human rights, because the violations of the most basic human rights were omnipresent and affected all layers of society, from peasants to owners of holding, from lawyers to internally displaced people, from the gated communities in Diyarbakir's Dicle Kent to the gecekondu in Sur.

Since especially 2001 Turkey has changed a lot, many taboos were lifted. A relative free press and an ever more active civil society started discussing sensitive issues more courageously giving alternative voices a platform. A government more receptive to new influences realized some positive changes such as a new penal code (2005), the abolition of the death penalty and in total 7 EU reform packages.

The Kurdish question remains the most serious domestic issue with the most far reaching consequences for Turkish democracy. A question of negative and positive peace, EU standards, human and minority rights. The change of laws and of mentalities has started, formerly unthinkable things such as a Kurdish TV channel were introduced. However, to become a country accepting its pluralist society still a lot needs to be changed on the legal and mentality levels, where civil society plays an important role. There are several new initiatives focused on the Kurdish issue bringing together Turks and Kurds of different political and social backgrounds starting also a dialogue with a more responsive government. However, these changes are not welcomed by all, there is also a wave of anti-Kurdish NGOs organizing especially since 2005 as a reaction to the democratization process. It is more needed than a change of laws, a mentality change among large parts of Turkish society has to take place too, otherwise the implementation of certain legal changes will face enormous opposition.

## Civil Society in Turkey - Developments since the 1980s

For Turkey's civil society the clocks were turned to zero with the military coup of 12 September 1980. The following two years after the coup saw the ban of almost all organization and political parties with the imprisonment of many activists. Existing democratic intermediary structures were destroyed. Thousands of activists were arrested, torture was systematic, many were in prison for years, others managed to escape abroad. However, the coup

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Adam Kocher, The Decline of the PKK and the Viability of a One-State Solution in Turkey, in "Democracy and Human Rights in Multicultural Societies", [http://books.google.com/books?id=8esOa2pVao0C&pg=PA29&lpg=PA29&dq=Turkey+civil+society+human+rights+Kurdish+question&source=bl&ots=t\\_QPArZLWo&sig=cfvFc5C3rVnG8WuSoUufN6J1TVs&hl=de&ei=I3YRSvSVGYinsAaH4PDyBw&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=3#PPR1,M1](http://books.google.com/books?id=8esOa2pVao0C&pg=PA29&lpg=PA29&dq=Turkey+civil+society+human+rights+Kurdish+question&source=bl&ots=t_QPArZLWo&sig=cfvFc5C3rVnG8WuSoUufN6J1TVs&hl=de&ei=I3YRSvSVGYinsAaH4PDyBw&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=3#PPR1,M1).

in the long run also had positive effects for the re-emerging civil society, as Binnaz Toprak argued in 1996:

„Paradoxically the coup which set out to destroy the institutions of civil society helped to strengthen the commitment to civilian politics, consensus-building, civil rights and issue-oriented associational activity” (Toprak 1996: 95).

Similar to Toprak’s optimism, every movement flourishing in civil society has been perceived as a further step towards democratization. The scholarship in the 1990s celebrated the emergence of civil society without looking at how this new sphere could fulfill its role in the consolidation of democracy. The normative aspects of civil society were not questioned.

Three major events were essential in the development of civil society organizations, their growth and perception in the public.

## HABITAT II

The first of these was the Habitat Forum in 1996, an international meeting in Turkey that mobilized hundreds of Turkish NGOs and other key stakeholders, paving the way for Turkey’s participation in the global movement of civil society while also increasing awareness of the role of NGOs in addressing mandates around social justice and sustainable development. Since many international organizations participated, Turkish NGOs could start important contacts also to donors abroad.<sup>2</sup>

## Earthquake in August 1999

A few years later in 1999, a devastating earthquake in the Marmara region created widespread destruction, leading to the death of over 20.000 people. In response to this catastrophic disaster, NGOs mobilized thousands of volunteers and donations to help affected populations. During this time, the general public witnessed the crucial role of NGOs in meeting the urgent needs of citizens; far beyond the capacity of the government. : “the 1999 earthquake caused a shock within the civil society ... provoking a boost in civil society participation in governance. As a result, numerous associations have appeared, steadily claiming their right to be involved in the management of local affairs.”<sup>3</sup> Besides this domestic influence, it also helped improve the bilateral relations with Greece.<sup>4</sup>

## EU process – Copenhagen Criteria

Following the EU decision in December 1999 to accept Turkey as an official candidate, significant reforms- many of which directly affected civil society in terms of rights and freedoms- were undertaken between 2001-2004. These reforms were critical for enabling space for civil society in Turkey (granting freedom of association, assembly), which had been under

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<sup>2</sup> See for a detailed program, [http://portal.unesco.org/shs/en/files/6037/10922123931note\\_dg\\_humaniser.pdf/note\\_dg\\_humaniser.pdf](http://portal.unesco.org/shs/en/files/6037/10922123931note_dg_humaniser.pdf/note_dg_humaniser.pdf), article in English in TDN about Habitat and the participation of NGOs, Don Cofman, Habitat II conference sits down to business, Turkish Daily News <http://www.hri.org/news/turkey/trkn/1996/96-06-03.trkn.html#01> .

<sup>3</sup> OECD Territorial Reviews: Istanbul, Turkey, 2008, p. 229, [http://books.google.com/books?id=VFoy6a85794C&pg=PA229&lpg=PA229&dq=1999+earthquake+Istanbul+civil+society&source=bl&ots=D-eQaOPLFq&sig=S8k0Mv58cmZzkeDfv1UIR8-E8OE&hl=de&ei=PE8ZStOwMsSa\\_AbWvengDA&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=3#PPA229,M1](http://books.google.com/books?id=VFoy6a85794C&pg=PA229&lpg=PA229&dq=1999+earthquake+Istanbul+civil+society&source=bl&ots=D-eQaOPLFq&sig=S8k0Mv58cmZzkeDfv1UIR8-E8OE&hl=de&ei=PE8ZStOwMsSa_AbWvengDA&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=3#PPA229,M1).

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Kinzer, Earthquakes Help Warm Greek-Turkish Relations, New York Times, September 13, 1999 <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/09/13/world/earthquakes-help-warm-greek-turkish-relations.html?n=Top%2FNews%2FScience%2FTopics%2Fbirds>.

significant restriction for a period of approximately 20 years. Subsequent reforms included new provisions in key laws at the central and local level to promote dialogue on strategy and policy issues such as human rights and social policy. As a backdrop to these specific events, a number of other factors have affected social and economic life and ultimately, the role of civil society—among them the peaks and troughs of Turkey’s burgeoning market economy and government de-centralization, which has led to less public spending for key services. Not unlike other developing countries and emerging democracies, these factors galvanized a new set of mandates for the role of CSOs in Turkey’s plight for sustainable development and democratization.

Table: NGOs in Turkey from 1983 to 2009

Year	Number of NGOs
1983	“0”
1980s	Slow growth, 1986 founding of IHD
1990s	Huge growth up to 65,000 by the end of the 1990s
2000 – 2007	Saturation, 77,500 by the end of 2007
2009	81,713 (on 23 May 2009) <sup>5</sup>

This means roughly one association per 870 people around (total population ca. 71 million). The total number of members in these associations inclusive of repeated memberships in different organizations is around 8.6 million. This means that about 12 percent of the total population participates in the civil society segment through organized activities sponsored by these associations. These figures are far lower than the figures in Western countries. For instance, Denmark, with a population of 5.5 million, the total number of members in associations is 18 million.

## Human Rights NGOs

The human rights NGOs are the most “prominent“ part of civil society, even if by quantity they constitute a rather small section of Turkey’s associations.<sup>6</sup> The first human rights association to be founded in Turkey after the 1980 coup was the Human Rights Association (İnsan Hakları Derneği ”IHD”) on 17 July 1986, by 98 persons. The attempt to set up an association was initiated by relatives of prisoners, which led after about one year of preparation 98 people including intellectuals, writers, journalists, doctors, lawyers, architects and engineers to officially fund the IHD. Today, the IHD has 29 branches, 3 representative offices and over 10,000 members and activists.<sup>7</sup>

This means a decline in membership of roughly 10,000 from the mid-1990s and is an indicator how human rights problems have evolved in Turkey. Most members in the 1990s were involved with imprisoned and tortured people. With torture getting less and as a topic more general aspects of human rights standards important and immediate urgent campaigns less important, there is a shift of members to be seen. The IHD has always been closely linked to the Kurdish issue, political left and secular. A big portion of the members are Kurds.

The second big human rights association concerning membership is Mazlumder, The Organisation of Human Rights and Solidarity for Oppressed People, founded by 54 people on

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.dernekler.gov.tr/\\_Dernekler/Web/Gozlem.aspx?sayfaNo=1](http://www.dernekler.gov.tr/_Dernekler/Web/Gozlem.aspx?sayfaNo=1)

<sup>6</sup> Most registered NGOs are concerned with mosque building or religious activities (around 15,000), followed by sport NGOs (ca. 14,000) and aid NGOs (ca. 13,000), see: [http://www.dernekler.gov.tr/\\_Dernekler/Web/Gozlem2.aspx?sayfaNo=74](http://www.dernekler.gov.tr/_Dernekler/Web/Gozlem2.aspx?sayfaNo=74).

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.ihd.org.tr/english/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=141&Itemid=48](http://www.ihd.org.tr/english/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=141&Itemid=48).

24 January 1991 in Ankara.<sup>8</sup> Whereas the number one item of the IHD were topics around the Kurdish issue (missed persons, torture, prison situation), Mazlumder's most prominent topic throughout the 1990s was the headscarf issue. In the 1990s there was little cooperation between IHD and Mazlumder. Mazlumder is politically close to the governing party, some former Mazlumder activists are in high positions in the AKP<sup>9</sup>. The branches differ quite a lot on their political stance from Islamist to liberal-conservative. The Kocaeli branch is known for their Islamist stance in press releases etc., former president Ayhan Bilgen is a known liberal and is a founding member of the Peace Assembly and was an independent candidate for the 2007 general elections.<sup>10</sup>

Two more academic and internationally oriented NGOs on the human rights sector are the Helsinki Citizen's Assembly and Amnesty International. The Helsinki Citizen's Assembly<sup>11</sup> has many publications on human rights issues and regular summer schools on different human rights issues, but little work specifically on the Kurdish issue. Amnesty International<sup>12</sup> against the usual AI policy works in Turkey also on Turkey. It is comprised of a rather small circle of persons with lobbying and advocating activities.

These human rights NGOs also form the Human Rights Joint Platform (IHOP)<sup>13</sup> IHOP president from January to May 2009 was HYD member Ümit Firat, a well-known Kurdish intellectual, the work of IHOP is as broad as of its members and not specific to the Kurdish cause.

## Kurdish NGOs

The birth date of pro-Kurdish civil activities was the "Trial of the 49" in 1959, when 49 Kurdish intellectuals like Musa Anter, Sait Kirmizitoprak, Serafettin Elci and Naci Kutluay were sentenced for several instances connected to Kurdish issues such as the publication of a poem in Kurdish by Musa Anter.<sup>14</sup> Later these persons took important positions in parties and associations.

In the 1950s and 1960s the mobilization happened mostly around Turkish leftist organizations. The formation of the *Devrimci Doğu Kültür Ocakları* (Eastern Revolutionary Cultural Hearths) in May 1969 stands as the first important legal step of the Kurdish mobilization in the history of Turkey.<sup>15</sup>

Today as Kurdish NGOs we can understand NGOs active in South-East Turkey and NGOs in the rest of the country dealing with issues important to Kurds (forced migration, village guards, imprisonment conditions of PKK members, Kurdish broadcastin and publishing etc.). This

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.mazlumder.org/ing/sayfa.asp?sayfaID=1>.

<sup>9</sup> AKP Diyarbakir MP Ihsan Arslan was also the Mazlumder president in Diyarbakir, <http://www.biyografi.net/kisiyrinti.asp?kisiid=4095>.

<sup>10</sup> See, *Radikal*, "Konya'da Milli Görüşçüler çekişiyor", 8 July 2007, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=226312>.

<sup>11</sup> Homepage: [www.hyd.org.tr/](http://www.hyd.org.tr/).

<sup>12</sup> Homepage, [www.amnesty-turkiye.org/](http://www.amnesty-turkiye.org/).

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.ihop.org.tr/english/>

<sup>14</sup> See for the different reasons of the arrests and background of the trial: Aydın Bolkan, Taksim'de sallandırılım birkaçını...!, *Radikal*, 5 October 2007, [http://www.radikal.com.tr/ek\\_haber.php?ek=ktp&haberno=6817](http://www.radikal.com.tr/ek_haber.php?ek=ktp&haberno=6817).

<sup>15</sup> ESI interview with İbrahim Güclü in Diyarbakir in March 2009.

means a quite big number of NGOs working on human rights, women's rights, development projects, educational and aid NGOs active in the Kurdish provinces. 4,27 percent of NGOs are based in the South East and 4 percent in Eastern Turkey.<sup>16</sup> Also trade unions and business associations frequently voice besides economic demands also political and cultural claims and therefore can be in this specific case be included to civil society organizations.

Through legal restrictions NGOs with "Kurdish" in the title are not allowed to be founded, there are however meanwhile some exceptions where the respective Turkish authorities accepted such a title, one example being Kürt-Kav in Istanbul.

In 1991 preparations began for the foundation of KÜRT-KAV. On 26 May 1991 a delegation of twenty persons was formed to hold meetings and talks in several provinces throughout the country. of Diyarbakir, Ankara, Izmir, Van, Adiyaman, Urfa, Mardin, Bitlis, Agri, Elazig, Siirt, Mus. Finally the preamble and the bylaws of the Kurdish Foundation for Culture and Research (KÜRT-KAV) were passed on 10 May 1992. KÜRT-KAV was established by 98 Kurdish intellectuals representing a broad spectrum of political views and convictions. In order to be registered, KÜRT-KAV had to go to court and carry out several appeals to higher courts on account of the foundation's bylaws. On 12 October 1995 the Beyoglu District Court registered KÜRT-KAV (File No. 1995/149 E and 1995/546 K). On 16 January 1996 the Eighteenth Chamber of the Supreme Court in Ankara unanimously confirmed the decision of the Beyoglu/Istanbul District Court (Annex 1: Verdict of the Supreme Court in the Turkish original; File No. 1995/12914, Verdict No. 1996/193). After four years of patient but determined legal proceedings, KÜRT-KAV became the first Kurdish institution in the history of the Republic of Turkey to be officially recognized by the courts.<sup>17</sup>

Kurdish NGO organization was not only difficult concerning the name, for most of the 1990s peaceful Kurdish demands were equaled with terrorism:

„Those Kurds who attempt to raise the issue peacefully or seek state recognition of their identity are portrayed as traitors, separatists, or terrorists. When all Kurdish political activism is automatically identified with the PKK, terrorism, and separatism, dialogue within society becomes impossible.“<sup>18</sup>

## **The AKP, PM Erdogan and Kurdish NGOs**

The AKP has managed to become Turkey's only nationwide successful party with a broad spectrum of different voter groups. The biggest and most often mentioned are conservative Turks in Central Anatolia or the shanty towns of the big cities who practice Islam, support a secular order, but e.g. want the right for women to study at universities with a headscarf. The smallest supporter group are liberals, intellectuals, students, mainly in Western big cities, who voted for the AKP because its program was the least nationalist and the most pro-EU and pro-democratization of the parties with a chance to get more than 10 percent of the votes needed to be represented in parliament.

<sup>16</sup> [http://www.dernekler.gov.tr/\\_Dernekler/Web/Gozlem.aspx?sayfaNo=2407](http://www.dernekler.gov.tr/_Dernekler/Web/Gozlem.aspx?sayfaNo=2407)

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.cogsci.ed.ac.uk/~siamakr/Kurdish/KURDICA/1998/FEB/KKavLetter.html> and interview with founding member Fehmi Isik in February 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Turkey's Kurdish Question, Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, Carnegie Corporation of New York, Henri J. Barkey and Graham E. Fuller 1998, <http://wwics.si.edu/subsites/ccpdc/pubs/kur/kurfr.htm>, S. 118f.



This odd couple was joined by the Kurds especially in South East Anatolia where Kurds represent the majority in 13 provinces. The Kurds were by and large appealed by the same reasons as the other two groups.

Kaya points to the fact that many influential Kurds have been active in the Milli Görüş movement, where many of the AKP founders politically come from: “The election of the AKP in 2002 also had significant impact on the region and on the Kurdish movement. In the Milli Görüş or National Outlook Movement, from which the AKP stems, Kurds have occupied important positions.”<sup>19</sup>

With this personnel and program the AKP became the only noteworthy rival of the Kurdish DTP (Democratic Society Party) in the Southeast. In 2002 the AKP won 26 percent in the Southeastern provinces. In August 2005 Prime Minister Erdoğan made a historic statement in Diyarbakır, being the first Turkish Prime Minister to admit that the state had made mistakes in the past in its relation with the Kurds: “The Kurdish problem is everyone’s problem and mine in particular.”<sup>20</sup>

This paid out at the national elections in July 2007. The AKP succeeded to win 52 percent of the votes, 5 percent more than their national average, whereas the DTP, which decided to run with independent candidates, ended up with 25 percent. In Diyarbakır itself, the symbolic Kurdish capital, the AKP raised their share of the vote from 16 to 41 percent. Together AKP and DTP there reached almost 90 percent, the other parties hardly exist. Commenting on this result, Prime Minister Erdoğan said that the Kurds are best represented by the AKP and not by the DTP, Erdoğan spoke of 75 Kurdish AKP MPs,<sup>21</sup> whereas the DTP won 20 parliamentary mandates.

However, there were also doubts about Erdoğan’s sincere commitment to also cultural, let alone political adjustments in the Southeast. These were fueled by two meetings of Erdoğan with NGOs from the Southeast. First there was a quarrel when Erdoğan visited Diyarbakır after a bomb attack on 3 January 2008. During a discussion, Erdoğan asked Sezgin Tanrıkulu, president of the Diyarbakır Bar Association, what he would do about the region if he were prime minister. Tanrıkulu said “I would allow mother tongue education and Kurdology faculties at universities.” Erdoğan’s answer was, “if tomorrow the Circassian and the Laz want the same, what should happen then? Everybody will demand something. How will we then be able to establish togetherness?”<sup>22</sup> Tanrıkulu voiced his disappointment: “Prime Minister Erdoğan is resistant concerning the Kurdish issue.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> M.K. Kaya, “Kurdish Problem forces Erdoğan to shift to the right”, *Silkroad Studies*, November 21, 2008, <http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/inside/turkey/2008/081121B.html> (accessed December 27, 2008).

<sup>20</sup> *Qantara*, “Two Steps Forward, One Step Back”, November 19, 2007. [http://www.qantara.de/webcom/show\\_article.php/\\_c-476/\\_nr-881/\\_p-1/i.html?PHPSESSID=5](http://www.qantara.de/webcom/show_article.php/_c-476/_nr-881/_p-1/i.html?PHPSESSID=5) (accessed December 29, 2008).

<sup>21</sup> Nazif Ilfazoğlu and Mesut Hasan Benli, “Kürtlerin temsilcisi AKP mi DTP mi?” [Is the representative of the Kurds the AKP or the DTP?] *Radikal*, November 8, 2007; <http://www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=238214> (accessed December 27, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> Siz başbakan olsaydınız ne yapardınız? (What would you do if you were prime minister?), *Zaman*, <http://www.zaman.com.tr/haber.do?haberno=633864>, 06 January 2008

<sup>23</sup> Tanrıkulu: Erdoğan Kürt sorununa kapalı, Baykal yok sayıyor [Erdoğan is closed to the Kurdish problem, Baykal ignores it], <http://www.aktuelbakis.com/news/5944.html>, 7 January 2008.

The second dispute on the same topic was witnessed when Erdoğan met with 17 NGOs<sup>24</sup> from Southeastern Turkey on 8 April 2008 in Ankara. The NGOs presented a report suggesting 20 concrete steps for the solution of the Kurdish problem. The emphasis was clearly on economic measures such as tax reliefs, low interest rates and infrastructure investments in an international airport, better roads and increased trade with neighbouring countries. Infact because of the emphasis on the economy, the Human Rights Association had refrained from joining the group. But in the report, there were also three points of cultural/political nature: the opening of Kurdish Studies faculties at universities and the use of Kurdish in local administration as well as in schools as elective course.<sup>25</sup> The teaching of Kurdish as a mother tongue again caused a big argument between Erdoğan and Tanrikulu. Erdoğan harshly responded to the demand for Kurdish in school education: “The right to receiving an education in one's mother tongue is for minorities only.”<sup>26</sup> Tanrikulu and Erdoğan went so far to exchanging personal attacks and the discussion ended with Tanrikulu angrily walking out of the room.<sup>27</sup>

For the whole political system, the closure case against the AKP was the single most important political event in 2008. After the close decision not to close the party by one vote in late July 2008, there were signs the AKP would turn more nationalist to avoid further confrontations with the Kemalist establishment.

On 3 November Erdoğan visited the eastern province of Hakkari to deliver a speech at a congress of the local AKP branch. In Hakkari, where the mayor is from the DTP which received almost 60 percent in the 2004 municipal elections<sup>28</sup>, DTP supporters held street protests and closed stores objecting to Erdoğan's presence. In his speech he used a phrase which belongs to the vocabulary of the nationalist MHP: “We have said, ‘One nation, one flag, one motherland and one state.’ Those who oppose this should leave.”<sup>29</sup> Erdoğan received support from pro-state intellectuals for his stance against the protesters but was harshly criticized by liberal intellectuals. Ahmet Altan commented Erdoğan's speech on 5 November 2008: “Now he presents himself perfectly statist, nationalist, chauvinist, giving credit to violence and almost praising those ‘getting out the pump-rifle’ against protesters saying in a puzzling manner that there is “an end to patience”.<sup>30</sup>

Erdogan's statement was followed by a series of nationalist comments by AKP politicians. On 10 November defence minister Vecdi Gönül said in Brussels that “If there were still Greeks in the Aegean and Armenians in many places in Turkey today, would it be the same nation-state?”<sup>31</sup> On 12 November 2008 the AKP MP Abdülkadir Akgül said in parliament during the

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<sup>24</sup> Organizations represented in the delegation include the Diyarbakır Chamber of Trade and Industry, the Diyarbakır Trade Exchange, the Diyarbakır Bar Association, the Diyarbakır Industrialists and Businessmen's Association (DİSİAD), the Southeastern and Eastern Anatolia Businessmen's Association (GÜNSİAD), the Association of Human Rights and Solidarity for Oppressed Peoples (MAZLUM-DER), women's organization KAMER and the Turkish Doctors' Union (TTB).

<sup>25</sup> For the whole 20 points see: Haber Diyarbakır, [http://www.haberdiyarbakir.com/news\\_detail.php?id=9252](http://www.haberdiyarbakir.com/news_detail.php?id=9252), 8 April 2008.

<sup>26</sup> Only non-Muslims are considered minorities by the Turkish state.

<sup>27</sup> Tanrikulu relativized the dispute later and told ESI during a visit in March 2009 that Erdoğan and himself were stubborn and that these problems can be overcome.

<sup>28</sup> The DTP candidates ran on the list of the SHP then, <http://www.yerelsecim.com/Details.asp?ID=30>.

<sup>29</sup> Ayşe Karabat, “Erdoğan's comment rattles Kurds in Diyarbakır”, *Today's Zaman*, November 4, 2008, <http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/detaylar.do?load=detay&link=157780&bolum=103> (accessed December 23, 2008).

<sup>30</sup> Ahmet Altan, “Erdoğan 2008”, *Taraf*, November 5, 2008, <http://www.taraf.com.tr/makale/2535.htm> (accessed December 28, 2008).

<sup>31</sup> Karabat, Ayşe, “Academics: Gönül is right, Turkey would not be the same without population exchange”, *Sunday's Zaman*, November 16, 2008,



debate of the 2009 budget referring to a DTP demonstration in Istanbul: “I think that justice in this country is applied too equal in this country. I enjoy shooting those who commit crimes against my state or nation.”<sup>32</sup>

The AKP’s strategy seemed to have been to win among ethnic Turks in the West and among Kurds opposed to the Kurdish-identity discourse of the DTP. In such an atmosphere the introduction of a 24-hour channel in Kurdish, TRT 6, was by Kurds more seen as an election investment than a genuine step to broaden cultural rights. DTP Batman mayoral candidate Necdet Atalay said:

“For years, Kurdish was recorded in police records as an 'unidentified language.' They used to tell us that Kurds do not exist. Now they are going to tell us that there is no such thing as Kurds in Kurdish.”<sup>33</sup>

The introduction of TRT-6 is certainly a big step towards the Kurds and a sign of how the language policy of the state has changed. However, what is needed to complete this step concerning broadcasting is to allow private radio and TV stations to broadcast in Kurdish and not only state television and to introduce the legal basis for broadcasting in other languages than Turkish. *Bianet* titled when the trial broadcasts started on 26 December 2008: “Broadcasting in Kurdish Allowed To The State, But Banned To The Kurds”. And on 15 January 2009 Sezgin Tanrikulu called the current situation that “this language can still not be used in other fundamental areas of societal life or that the obstacles continue a paradox.”<sup>34</sup>

There is still no legal basis for TRT 6 to broadcast a 24 hour program in Kurdish. So far according to the regulations of the Supreme Council of the Radio and Television (RTÜK), TV channels can broadcast in local languages only four hours a day and they need to have subtitles in Turkish, which TRT 6 doesn’t have either.<sup>35</sup> As long as the constitutional and legal guarantee is not established, the channel can easily again be removed by the ruling party. And as long as it is only possible to speak Kurdish on TRT 6 and not in private channels, Kurds regard the channel as another means of an assimilation policy.<sup>36</sup>

If the government really wants to change something beyond economic development and infrastructural improvement, it has to act independently from the military and proceed despite its opposition. As the party program and the draft of the civil constitution indicate, the AKP knows what should be done in the cultural and political field.

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<http://www.sundayszaman.com/sunday/detaylar.do?load=detay&link=158865> (accessed December 25, 2008).

<sup>32</sup> *Nethaber*, “AKP’li Akgül, ‘Devlete karşı suç işleyeni VURMAKTAN hoşlanacak’mış’ [AKP’s Akgül seems to enjoy shooting those who commit crimes against the state], November 13, 2008, <http://www.nethaber.com/Politika/80508/AKPLi-Akgul-Devlete-karsi-suc-isleyeni-VURMAKTAN> (accessed December 26, 2008).

<sup>33</sup> Kerim Balci / Ayse Karabat, “Most Kurds welcome Kurdish channel run by state-owned TRT”, *Today's Zaman*, December 27, 2008, <http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/detaylar.do?load=detay&link=162452> (accessed March 20, 2009).

<sup>34</sup> Sezgin Tanrikulu, “TRT 6 ve Kürtçeyi kullanma hakkı” [TRT 6 and the right to use Kurdish], *Radikal*, January 15, 2009 <http://www.radikal.com.tr/Radikal.aspx?aType=RadikalHaberDetay&ArticleID=917002&Date=15.01.2009&CategoryID=99> (accessed March 16, 2009).

<sup>35</sup> See *Bianet*, “Broadcasting in Kurdish Allowed To The State, But Banned To The Kurds”, December 26, 2008, <http://bianet.org/bianet/kategori/english/111621/broadcasting-in-kurdish-allowed-to-the-state-but-banned-to-the-kurds> (accessed March 18, 2009).

<sup>36</sup> Discussions with citizens in Diyarbakir on 29 and 30 March 2009.

It is definitely not easy to be courageous concerning the Kurdish issue. Cultural and political rights will not only be opposed by the military, nationalists and Kemalists, but also by the PKK whose support grows in proportion to the state's repressiveness. Sahin Alpay commented on this phenomenon with the following words: "Moves towards enhanced integration of the Kurdish minority in Turkey have greatly upset the PKK."<sup>37</sup>

### **The 29 March 2009 regional elections and the Kurdish question**

The evaluation in the press after the elections concerning the nation-wide result was relatively clear. The AKP received with 40.1 percent at the mayoral elections and 38.8 percent in the city councils significantly less than in the 2007 national elections (46.6 percent) and considerably less than in the latest regional elections in 2004 (41.7 percent), but finished still by far as the biggest party. The CHP could win nation-wide more than two percent as compared to 2007 and got 23.1 percent, followed by the MHP having 16.1 percent compared to 14.3 percent in 2007. The nation-wide results reflect also a kind of referendum on the AKP policies since July 2007 under the effects of the global economic crisis, which brought already an end to constant record-high growth of the past 5 years and increased unemployment.

However, in the Southeast the elections carried an additional factor of who will be the major actor in the Kurdish cities. And there the result is not as clear-cut as the Diyarbakır result suggests. In Diyarbakır Osman Baydemir (DTP) crushed Kutbettin Arzu (AKP) by 65 percent against 31 percent, in the city council the difference is still between 59 percent to 31 percent, but for the whole region this is not guideline.

Although the DTP could win back Van and Siirt from the AKP, the latter carrying the added nuance that Erdogan's wife is from Siirt and Erdogan was elected after the 2002 elections from Siirt to parliament and Iğdir from the MHP, but it could manage to win neither Mardin, Bitlis, Mus, Şanlıurfa nor Agri in the wider region. The overall result for the 9 regions of the Southeast Anatolia<sup>38</sup> shows that even there the AKP is still with 38.34 percent a little bit stronger than the DTP with 37.4 percent in the municipal councils.<sup>39</sup> And the share of the vote for the AKP is a lot more even in the region ranging from a low of 27.2 percent in Mardin to a high of 49.2 in Adıyaman, whereas the DTP did not participate in Kilis, got only 5 percent in Gaziantep and had a high in Şırnak with 60.75 percent.

### **New Developments since 2005**

#### **Abant Platform**

The Abant Platform<sup>40</sup> is an networking and communication platform of the Journalists and Writers Foundation, which has been organizing seminars and conferences about different issues. Most of these conferences take place near Bolu (the ressort's name is Abant). This foundation is part of the Fethullah Gülen movement, to which the newspaper Zaman, Today's Zaman, the

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<sup>37</sup> Şahin Alpay, Turkey's Kurdish problem and the PKK, 5 November 2007, <http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/yazarDetay.do?haberno=126283>.

<sup>38</sup> The provinces are: Adıyaman, Batman, Diyarbakır, Gaziantep, Kilis, Mardin, Şanlıurfa, Siirt and Şırnak

<sup>39</sup> Own calculations taken from the election results in the provinces.

<sup>40</sup> Homepage Abant Platform, <http://www.gyv.org.tr/default.asp?clid=041401>.

Fatih University and many other institutions and associations belong in a rather loose network. Fethullah Gülen's interpretation of Islam stresses Turkish culture and language. This made it for many years difficult to attract Kurds, who are by and large in the Southeast religious and conservative, but had problems with the stress on Turkishness.

Therefore there were little activities of the Abant platform to discuss the Kurdish question until July 2008, when a first meeting happened in Bolu with the participation of 160 journalists and scholars from different backgrounds, besides media close to Gülen there were many liberal journalists and academics. Altan Tan read the declaration of the platform, "The Kurdish issue is the issue of democratization in Turkey. Kurds cannot solve their problems just by focusing the on Kurdish issue."<sup>41</sup> This was the warm-up for a second meeting concerning the Kurdish question. The 18<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Platform took place in the Northern Iraqi town of Arbil in mid February 2009 entitled "Searching for Peace and a Future Together".<sup>42</sup> The meeting was held in cooperation with Salahaddin University and the Mukriyani Institute. In the two-day discussions, it was strongly emphasized that mutual relations and the freshly established dialogue process should be maintained and expanded. In the final declaration 14 items were presented of which the first 4 read:

1. Developing relations between Turkey and the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq will bring peace and stability not only to both parties, but also to the entire region. This development will be to the benefit of Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen, Assyrians, Syriacs, Keldanis, Armenians and all Middle Eastern peoples in Iraq.
2. History, geography and culture have made the Turkish and Kurdish peoples sister peoples. It is our responsibility to reinforce these ties of brotherhood.
3. All sorts of policies based on ethno-nationalism are rejected.
4. Iraq's border with Turkey is a gateway to Europe for Iraq. Turkey's border with Iraq is a door to history and civilization for Turkey. These doors must be kept fully open.<sup>43</sup>

One participant of the Abant meeting in Erbil was Kurdish intellectual Altan Tan who presented in Taraf newspaper on 13 March 2008 a comprehensive plan, including a different interpretation of citizenship in the constitution, education in languages other than Turkish, Kurdology faculties at universities, private TV and radio stations in Kurdish, a social rehabilitation program for internally displaced people and village guards, and a limited political amnesty. For Tan the biggest obstacle to these steps not being implemented is "politicians lacking courage."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> <http://www.gyv.org.tr/bpi.asp?caid=445&cid=2366>

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.gyv.org.tr/bpi.asp?caid=456&cid=2806>

<sup>43</sup> <http://www.gyv.org.tr/bpi.asp?caid=456&cid=2806>, 17 February 2009.

<sup>44</sup> 10 Maddelik Çözüm Planı [A 10 article solution plan], interview by Neşe Düzel with Altan Tan, Taraf Newspaper, 13 March 2008, [http://www.haberpanorama.com/news\\_detail.php?id=592](http://www.haberpanorama.com/news_detail.php?id=592).

## **Türkiye Barış Meclisi – Turkey Peace Assembly<sup>45</sup>**

Another rather new initiative directly linked to the Kurdish question is the so-called Peace Assembly, which was founded on 1 September 2007 after a series of conferences named “Turkey is seeking its peace” was conducted in several cities around Turkey.<sup>46</sup> The final and biggest of these conferences was held in January 2007 in Ankara.<sup>47</sup> The initiative announced in a written statement the goal of the assembly: “a peaceful and democratic solution of the Kurdish issue via rejecting all kinds of violence and discrimination.” The assembly brings together different academics, activists, journalists and politicians who have been involved with the Kurdish issue for many years. The scope of participants is large and the ideological range not limited to the left, there are many conservative and religious representatives. At the inaugural meeting on 1 September 2007 the Peace Assembly brought up several suggestions divided into political, economic and cultural:

### Political suggestions by the TBM (375 delegates)

- Kurdish question not to be seen as a terror problem
- The armed struggle should be ended by both sides
- Nationalism and enmity should be ended, to create a peaceful atmosphere, which enables a democratic solution
- The 10 % threshold to be abolished
- New civil code to create a new political identity
- An association should be founded for the families of killed persons of both sides
- The integration of women into political and social life should be
- A program for Political amnesty
- The assassination of unknown murderers should be investigated
- The village guard system should be abolished
- Factors that lead to the migration from east to the West should be analyzed and reduced

### Economic suggestions

- the economic discrepancies between the eastern and Western provinces and the high degree of poverty in Eastern Turkey should be reduced by different development projects.
- Education should be strengthened and new jobs created

### Social and cultural suggestions

- the existence of different ethnic groups shall be recognized both historically and societally
- the official use of the Kurdish language in public should be legalized
- research about the Kurdish language should be promoted

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<sup>45</sup> Homepage, <http://www.turkiyebarismeclisi.org>.

<sup>46</sup> İrfan Aktan, “Türkiye’nin artık Barış Meclisi var” (Turkey now has a Peace Assembly), *bianet*, 3 September 2007).

<sup>47</sup> Book: Türkiye Barış Meclisi, published all the speeches and discussions.

## New racist, anti-Kurdish NGOs

Besides these initiatives focusing on solving the Kurdish question, increasing cooperation between Turks and Kurds, lobbying for legal changes giving Kurds equal rights concerning education and broadcasting, there is also a phenomenon of racist anti-Kurdish websites since 2005, which partly belong to newly founded associations.

The central historical figure of Turkish racism is Nihal Atsız, who published his attitudes already in the 1940s: The Turkish nation has been knowing the Kurds for 200 years as traitorous and impertinent and treated them respectively.”<sup>48</sup> Many of newly founded associations refer to Atsız, who builds his theory on the race ideology of the German national socialists. The particularity of the new associations is that their racism is not exclusively but to a large part directed towards Kurds as Kivanc Esen summarizes in December 2007: “In the 2000 years an until now unknown new racism appeared in Turkey. The reason to exist of this racism is almost exclusively attributed to hostility towards Kurds.”<sup>49</sup>

The best known publication of this new movement is the journal “Türk Solu” (Turkish Left). The internet presence is full of anti-Kurdish propaganda. The homepage has a Turkey map where an animation spreads from Diyarbakir to the rest of Turkey, above it is written “There is no Kurdish problem, there is a Kurdish invasion.” Below there is a standing rubric called “Where Kurds exists, there are problems.” There Turkish-Kurdish friendship is described as PKK propaganda, which serves to develop a unique Kurdish identity. The journal became known in the summer 2005 through a call not to buy from Kurdish shops.<sup>50</sup>

The so far most comprehensible study of the movement was done by Kivanc Esen in December 2007 in the monthly Birikim<sup>51</sup>. Esen analysed three different groups, “Türkçü Toplumcu Budun Derneği (TTBD), Türk Intikam Birliği Teşkilatı/Türkiye Atatürkçüler Birliği Teşkilatı and Turkish Nazi-groups.

The Türkçü Toplumcu Budun Derneği (Association of the Turkish Collectivist Nation) was founded by Cenk Tozkoparan in 2000 in Izmir and is according to Esen “within the new racist groups the most active formation.”<sup>52</sup> The action which became most widely known was a campaign in Izmir about “control of Kurdish population growth”. The association “modern lawyers” sued the TTBD, a verdict is still pending.<sup>53</sup> On 3 November 2007 they published on their website several texts targeting Kurds: “The right not to want to live together with Kurds.”

The founding date of the Turkish Revenge Union (TIB) is not clear, at least though since 2005 the group has been active through about 15 different internet sites. They also refer frequently to Nihal Atsız, the main enemies of the Turks are the Kurds, in a blinking box on the homepage one can read “for a Turkey without Kurds.” In the text below the box there is a list of ethnic groups identified as enemies of the Turks and interestingly there are also Germans, Portuguese,

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<sup>48</sup> Especially in 1941 in a letter to his son, Atsız targeted Kurds and Armenians, several examples on the Internetsite: [www.nihalatsiz.org](http://www.nihalatsiz.org).

<sup>49</sup> Kivanc Esen, 2000’li yıllar Türkiye’si yeni ırkçılığına dair bir analiz denemesi (Der Versuch einer Analyse des neuen Rassismus’ in der Türkei der 2000er Jahre), Birikim, Dezember 2007, S. 59.

<sup>50</sup> Internet site Türk Solu: [www.turksolu.org](http://www.turksolu.org).

<sup>51</sup> Internet site: <http://www.birikimdergisi.com/birikim/default.aspx> (visited on 25 May 2008).

<sup>52</sup> Kivanc Esen, 2000’li yıllar Türkiye’si yeni ırkçılığına dair bir analiz denemesi (The trial of an analysis of new racism in the 2000 years in Turkey), Birikim December 2007, p. 53.

<sup>53</sup> İsmail Saymaz, Buduncular 1.5 yıl sonra mahkemede (After 1,5 years the Buduncus are facing trial), Radikal, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=243950>, 9 January 2008.

Japanese and Chinese as exterior enemies mentioned. Also sympathizers of Fethullah Gülen and Islamists are attacked.<sup>54</sup>

Less influential are groups with clear reference to National Socialism such Türk Nazileri or Nasyonal Sosyalist Türk Hareketi (Nasatuha). The Türk Nazileri were founded in 2004 and pursue a biological racism who only accept Anatolian, Cypriot and Balkan turks as Turks, Central Asian Turkic people are not regarded as Turks, because they are too mixed with Asiatic peoples. They published a 5-item plan to “fight the Kurdish danger”:

- 1) No jobs or houses for Kurds in Western Turkey
- 2) Don't buy for Kurdish shops
- 3) Don't marry kurds
- 4) No broadcasting which have Kurds or people from the East as protagonists
- 5) Don't use Kurdish cultural products and don't listen to Kurdish music.<sup>55</sup>

As an indicator for the atmosphere also the internet platform Facebook can be used. When searching for “Kürt” there are numerous groups with unmistakably titles, “the best Kurd is a dead Kurd”, “Kurdish fascism”, “Kurdish invasion” etc..

All these associations<sup>56</sup> are part of a new racist movement sharing the enemy Kurd and wanting to liberate Turkey fro ist inner enemeis. Those can be seen as a direct product of the democratization process who broadened rights to non-Turks. The fear of extreme nationalist and racist parts of the population articulates itself in these associations, some of the publications even reach out to broader circles, especially in some Western cities at the Sea such as Izmir or Mersin.

## Conclusion

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<sup>54</sup> Internetseite [www.turkintikambirligiteskilati.tr.cx](http://www.turkintikambirligiteskilati.tr.cx) (visited on 2 June 2008).

<sup>55</sup> Internetseite: <http://turknaziler.blogcu.com/>.

<sup>56</sup> Further sites of similar content are: <http://www.ibneyiz.biz/> („We are gay“), where the PKK is the main target but also Kurdish and foreign politicians who deal critically with Turkey). [www.kod68s.tr.cx](http://www.kod68s.tr.cx) (collection of journal titles of the association Türkiye Atatürkcüler Birliği Teskilati); [www.orkun.com.tr](http://www.orkun.com.tr) (collection of far-right journals); [www.turan.tc](http://www.turan.tc); racist site about Turkishness. Publishes the journal bozkurt (Grey Wolf); [www.nihalatsiz.org](http://www.nihalatsiz.org) site in honour of Turkish racist Nihal Atsız (consulted in May 2009).



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