

Yale FOX INTERNATIONAL FELLOWSHIP

RETHINKING KURDISH QUESTION IN TURKEY: WHY DEMOCRATIC
INSTITUTIONS MATTER IN THE PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE?

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Background: Turkey's Kurdish Question

The Kurdish Question is one of the main social and political controversies in Turkey, and it has been at the center of democratization and peaceful coexistence debates throughout the history of Republic. The Kurds are spread across four countries of the Middle East: Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Turkey and constitute the largest ethnic minority in Turkey, with a population of over 15 million. The Turkish state has identified Kurdish secession as the leading threat to its national unity and pursued an assimilation and repression policy that even denied Kurdish ethnic identity and language.¹ Since the 1980s, the Question has turned to an ongoing armed conflict between the state and the armed Kurdish group PKK (Kurdish Workers' Party). The armed conflict exacerbated the Kurdish Question by deepening poverty, increasing forced migration, and the securitization of the Kurdish issue. Thus, whenever "democratization and social justice" comes up in the Turkish agenda, the Kurdish Question stands as the top of the list.

Moreover, regional and international policies affect the Question. The changing dynamics in the Middle East as a result of ongoing war in Syria makes Kurds as one of the crucial actor in the region. However, the Turkish state has a fear of Kurdish independence outside its borders because it might provoke a similar aspiration among Turkey's Kurds. Thus, in this context, Turkey urgently needs to ensure "peaceful coexistence" with its Kurdish citizens to preserve its national unity and to strengthen its power in the international system.

Since Kurdish Question has multidimensional consequences that reveals in political, economic and social realms, it necessitates a multilayered solution agenda. Measures must be taken to ensure the political representation of Kurds in Turkey, the recognition of their ethnic identity as well as the improvement of economic equality. However, the most critical and urgent solution is reconsolidating democracy in Turkey by re-establishing democratic institutions. Without basic institutions of democracy, any measure would not lead a permanent and powerful solution agenda.

Why Institutions Matter: A Prospective Solution for "Peaceful Coexistence"

In the first decade of Justice and Development Party Rule (2002-2012), Turkey seemed to enter a democratization process by engaging with the European Union and conducting negotiations with Kurds under the policy agenda called the Solution Process. However, the democratization process quickly reversed course; a repressive policy towards Kurds has increased, creating a severe conflict which threatens the civil people in the Southeast region of Turkey. Government's changing policy on the Kurdish issue has combined with the substantial restrictions of political representation and the destruction of democratic institutions of the country. Under such circumstances, Turkey does not meet the requirements of a representative democracy, which deepens the problems surrounding the Kurdish Question.

¹ Aykan Erdemir and Merve Tahiroğlu "Why is Turkey so disjointed over the Iraqi Kurds?"; https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/democracy-post/wp/2017/09/21/why-is-turkey-so-disjointed-over-the-iraqi-kurds/?utm_term=.cef5222533c5

Although the Kurdish Question of Turkey is a multi-layered problem includes political, economic and spatial exclusion, I will argue that without rehabilitating democratic institutions, the other segments of the problem cannot be solved and will be deepened.

It is urgently necessary to reconsolidate democracy by reestablishing the six main political institutions of a representative democracy – as outlined by Robert Dahl.² Ensuring the first five criteria will meet the requirements for the last one: inclusive citizenship.

- 1) *Elected officials*: In a modern democracy, citizens have control over the government via elected representatives. In the case of Kurds, the representation of a pro-Kurdish party is hard mainly because of the 10% election threshold in Turkey. The HDP (People's Democratic Party) became the first Kurdish party that entered the parliament by surpassing the 10 percent threshold. However, a constitutional amendment signed in June 2016 facilitated the removal of lawmakers' parliamentary immunity. Thus; 12 HDP deputies including the party's two co-chairs were arrested. What's more, the elected co-mayors of HDP and DBP (Democratic Regions Party) - the ally of HDP- including the co-mayors of the most significant Kurdish city, Diyarbakır were arrested and trustees were appointed in most of the Kurdish municipalities. Thus, in the current situation, the political representation of Kurds is very limited, which exacerbates the "exclusion" process and violates the sense of belonging to the Turkish Republic.³
- 2) *Free, fair and frequent elections*: Turkey's electoral institutions have also been violated in the last decade. A concerning report by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) reveals that the most recent election, the constitutional referendum in 2017, was conducted on an "uneven playing field." The report reveals that HDP faced strong obstructions and the counting in the Southeast was questionable and unfair.
- 3) *Freedom of expression*: Dahl argues that "citizens have a right to express themselves without danger of severe punishment on political matters broadly defined, including criticism of officials, the government, the regime, the socioeconomic order, and the prevailing ideology." In the case of opponents in Turkey, specifically, pro-Kurds, the freedom of expression has been vigorously oppressed, especially since the coup attempt of July 2016. Although freedom of speech is constitutionally guaranteed, in recent decade lots of intellectuals, journalists, politicians have been jailed by accusing with insulting to the state leaders or charging with terrorism. Most of the academics who signed a petition calling for an end to the

² Robert Dahl, *On Democracy*, Yale University Press: New Haven & London, 1998.

³ Freedom House, *Freedom in the World Report 2017*, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2017/turkey>

military action against Kurdish populated regions and 11,000 teachers suspected of pro-PKK activities were dismissed.⁴

- 4) *Access to alternative sources of information:* In 2017, Freedom House categorized Turkey as non-free regarding freedom of press. According to the Freedom House, journalists working in the country's Kurdish region faced substantial obstacles to their reporting, such as threats, physical violence and criminal investigations and residents experienced multiple episodes of interrupted internet service or social media access. Lots of pro-Kurdish TV channel and journal were closed and banned.
- 5) *Associational Autonomy:* The right to form an association or organization is also limited in Turkey. First, the state of emergency granted power to authorities to ban or restrict the meetings, gatherings, and rallies. Lots of association and NGOs which have relations with Kurdish movement also closed for the link with terrorism.
- 6) *Inclusive Citizenship:* Inclusive citizenship includes the above 5 criteria to create "equal" citizenship. Thus, I argue that Turkey must re-consolidate its democratic institutions to offer inclusive citizenship to Kurdish minority.

Turkey urgently must solve its Kurdish Question to preserve its national unity and ensure peaceful coexistence within its borders. When the present exclusion of the Kurdish population and their lack of political representation are considered, the Question can easily turn to a secession by combining with the regional aspiration movements. Any attempts to solving the Kurdish Question will have a high impact on internal and foreign policies of the state. The democratization process, including policies that ensure Kurds' basic rights, will also alleviate tensions between Turkey and the EU.

Thus, Turkey needs to consolidate its democratic institutions to ensure inclusive citizenship, justice and legitimacy of the state among its citizens as well as empowering its position in the international arena.

⁴ Freedom House, Freedom of the Press Report 2017, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2017/turkey>