

Turkey: the AKP government takes another approach to resolving the Kurdish issue

Marek Matusiak, Turcja: Kolejne podejście rządu AKP do rozwiązania kwestii kurdyjskiej

Starting from October 2012 the Turkish government, run by the Justice and Development Party (AKP), has through the mediation of its special services begun overt talks with Abdullah Öcalan, the historical leader of the separatist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), who has been imprisoned since 1999. The so-called Imralı process (named after the island in the Sea of Marmara where Öcalan is imprisoned) represents another attempt by the AKP government to find a political solution to the armed conflict between the Turkish state and Kurdish guerrillas, which has been waged since the 1980s, principally in south-east Turkey. Despite promising beginnings, the last attempt in 2009 ended in failure, and in 2011-2012, there was an outbreak of violence on a scale not seen since the 1990s, due in large part to changes in Turkey's immediate neighbourhood, especially the war in Syria.

Both sides – the government and Öcalan – seem to be determined to bring the negotiations to a conclusion this time. Signs of this include Öcalan's calls for the guerrillas to cease fire and start withdrawing from Turkish territory. However, there are questions as to whether Öcalan has sufficient influence on the PKK field commanders who are based in northern Iraq; how the majority of the Turkish public might react to any concessions to the Kurdish national movement; and finally what the reaction of Turkey's neighbours might be, as periodic support of the PKK has been a reliable tool for them to influence Ankara. Undoubtedly a permanent resolution to the Kurdish problem will require not just a temporary agreement, but also complex legal and political changes, leading to a review of one of the fundamental principles of the Turkish state – the Republic as a centralised mono-ethnic state. The next test for the talks will be the upcoming holiday of Nowruz (the Iranian New Year, 21 March) which is usually an opportunity for the Kurdish national movement to hold demonstrations and clash with the police.

The likely schedule of the peace process

Details of the peace process being negotiated are as yet unknown, but they would probably involve several stages, in order for the partners to check each other's credibility and build up mutual trust. A symbolic first step was taken on 13 March, with the PKK's release of eight imprisoned Turkish officials and soldiers. According to unofficial information, the next steps would include a ceasefire and the gradual withdrawal of PKK fighters (who number several

thousand) from Turkish territory into the mountains of northern Iraq which represent the movement's base. Subsequently, negotiations would take place on disarming the PKK, and the legal return of some of the combatants and their families to Turkey. Due to concerns regarding the reaction of the Turkish majority, less is known about possible government concessions to the Kurdish minority, which according to various estimates numbers about 15-20% of Turkey's population. However, these could include the release from prison of Kurdish nationalist activists, including several members of parliament and several hundred representatives of local authorities; changes to the Criminal Code; changes to the Electoral Code (especially the abolition of the 10-percent electoral threshold); and finally an extension of the powers of local authorities and educational reform. It is also likely that certain symbolic changes would be made, e.g. removing from the planned new constitution wording like 'Everyone bound to the Turkish state through the bond of citizenship is a Turk', as well as references to 'the Turkish nation' and replacement thereof by ethnically neutral state-citizen categories. A particularly sensitive issue is the Kurdish party's call for Abdullah Öcalan to be transferred to house arrest, which Turkish public opinion will not welcome with any enthusiasm. It is difficult to determine which of these changes, and to what extent, the government will eventually decide to implement. Clearly, however, implementing even some of them would mean a significant change in the identity of the state.

The AKP's policy on the Kurdish question

Due to the conservative-religious roots of the AKP, which has governed Turkey alone since 2002, it has since the beginning been set on revising a number of the Republic's fundamental principles, mainly those of the orthodoxy of secularism and the political role of the army as guardians of the legacy of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. The AKP also differs from other political forces in Turkey in its approach to the Kurdish minority. The government of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has made a series of unprecedented gestures towards the Kurds, including the creation of a Kurdish-language television channel, and allowing elective classes in Kurdish in schools and universities, as well as the use of the language in the courtroom. Above all, since the announcement of a 'democratic opening' towards the Kurds in 2005, informal talks have been held with PKK leaders on resolving the conflict, with the channels of communication being sustained even during severe military clashes.

However, also in the case of the AKP, finding a long-term solution to the Kurdish issue – which is a sensitive matter, loaded with huge negative symbolic and emotional baggage – has at times moved into the background due to short-term political calculations. In 2009, the government pulled out of negotiations with the PKK and resorted to harsh anti-Kurdish rhetoric, for fear of being accused of subservience to the terrorists and the consequent public reaction. Even now, one of the most important impulses pushing the AKP government to negotiate with Öcalan – albeit not the only one – is Prime Minister Erdoğan's attempts to effect a change to a presidential system of government, and to win this office for himself after the 2014 elections; support for this move will be needed in parliament from the Peace and Democracy Party (which is *de facto* the Kurdish party), in order to draft a new constitution.

Conditions and prospects

The problem of Kurdish separatism is the most serious challenge facing Ankara. The conflict with the PKK is not only weakening the state internally (over 30 years, there have been over 30,000 casualties and financial losses of more than US\$300 billion, as the International Crisis Group estimates) and in the wider region (the conflict makes Turkey particularly vulnerable to changes in the region's political situation, giving external actors an instrument to influence Turkey's internal situation); but it is also weakening the attractiveness of the 'Turkish model', in which the US and the EU also see a potential pattern for reconciling Islam with a secular democratic state of law, including for the Arab states after the 'Arab Spring'. On the other hand, a breakthrough – which reaching an agreement with Öcalan and successfully concluding the peace process would be – would not only ensure internal stability for the country and strengthen its position in the region, but would also raise Turkey up to the position of a state which has proved capable of solving its deep internal problems by political means. And this – considering the background of each of Turkey's border regions, the Middle East, the South Caucasus, and the Balkans – would be a sensation, and strengthen Ankara's justifications for playing the role of regional leader.

However, the peace process is subject to many risks. After 30 years of bloody armed struggle, which has struck at both the Kurdish (repression against the civilian Kurdish population, especially in the 1980s and 1990s) and Turkish populations (terrorist attacks, and the deaths of thousands of soldiers and police officers), as well as several unsuccessful attempts to solve the problem politically, trust between the partners is limited and – as was demonstrated in 2009 – it takes very little to derail the talks. In addition, there is not much evidence that after being imprisoned for 14 years Abdullah Öcalan still has the necessary clout to bring the PKK field commanders to a ceasefire. The reaction from Turkish society to any 'concessions to terrorists' is also unpredictable. Finally, both inside the country and in the wider region, there are plenty of forces which would prefer to see the negotiations fail; these are most likely behind the provocations aimed at bringing about a rupture in the talks, one example of which was the brutal murder of three Kurdish activists by unknown assailants in Paris in January.

Map

Approximate area traditionally densely inhabited by Kurds, and the political situation in 2012

