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Turkey

Turkish government attempts to own the Kurds

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It is an old reflex of Turkey's state tradition to collectively imprison political figures who express the desires of the Kurdish people. Collective arrests started in 1959 with the imprisonment of forty-nine Kurdish intellectuals and turned into collective executions in the 1990s. Now – during the tenure of the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP - Justice and Development Party) of Prime Minister Erdoğan – they have taken the form of sensational mass detentions through the so-called KCK operations under which almost 8000 people have been arrested since 2009.

Such detentions were once concentrated in the east but now the ring has expanded west of the Euphrates River to include academics and writers from the west of Turkey. It appears that the recent arrests of Professor Bülent Ersanlı and the publisher Ragıp Zarakolu will create a stir marked by considerable anger and energy within the intellectual community, which has long been targeted by a campaign of intimidation. It is not just that “the skullcap has fallen”, as the Turkish saying goes, but rather, it is completely gone, revealing baldness for all to see.

What is clear is that the AKP, which has long been strutting on the political scene as both victim and “revolutionary,” has adopted the ideals of the Turkish state with voracious appetite and great enthusiasm.

The former governor of Ankara, Nevzat Tandoğan, famously said “If communism is to come, it is us who will bring it.” Now the AKP says, “If the Kurdish problem is to be solved, it is us who will solve it,” refusing to recognise any interlocutor except itself. Prisons are overflowing with those refusing to become the Kurds of the AKP.

There is not even the slightest indication of any connection whatsoever between “terrorism” and those arrested as part of the KCK operations, initiated under the pretext of wiping out the PKK's urban branch.

The asymmetrical war being waged against civilians by the government labels all advocates of peace as “the enemy.” Since the electoral success of the Block Candidates supported by the BDP [Peace and Democracy Party, which supports the rights of Kurdish citizens in Turkey], the AKP, using “terrorism” as an excuse, intensified its repression on a daily basis. Its target is all non-governmental structures that draw their strength from the autonomous power of the Kurds.

The latest arrests are a sign that the well-worn cliché, “Let them lay down their weapons, come down from the mountains, and do their politics on the plains” [...], often repeated by so-called moderate statesmen, has completely rotted away. [...]

Democracy in Turkey 2011 can be summarised in this way – support for a party took part in elections, and what's more, is represented in parliament – can render you the target of a “struggle against terrorism, being waged with utmost determination.” Your legal party might continue to exist, but engaging in politics through this party is not legitimate.

This is so because on the basis of an indictment whose conceptualisation of “crime” may encompass your musical tastes or your private conversations, you might be declared a terrorist and arrested on the basis of evidence that even your lawyer cannot access. You might also be put imprisoned on the grounds that if you are not, you could potentially tamper with the top-secret evidence of your crimes.

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The aim of all this is not just to make the Kurds “the best organised opposition force in Turkey” bow to AKP authoritarianism, but also by means of such black propaganda to target everyone who strives for a dignified peace.

The AKP government, by means of these KCK operations that it wages with great zeal, aims to erase from memory and political imaginary the Kurdish people as a political subject. Erdoğan once summarised the situation with the philosophical suggestion that “if you do not think about it, there is no Kurdish problem,” — a statement that would turn even Descartes blue with envy.

It is now clear that this is not just a matter of weapons. To use one of his favourite expressions, the KCK operations have laid bare in a “clear and obvious way” the falsity of Tayyip Erdoğan’s statement “pronounced only a month ago” that “we fight terrorism and we negotiate with political will. This is how we operate.”

In the political horizon of the AKP bigwigs, their “Kurdish siblings” are nothing more than a body of folkloric figures living under their wing, an “indigenous population” to be approached only with the “white man’s burden” or with the “civilising” arrogance of the coloniser.

Each and every step which transgresses the boundaries of this horizon will become the foe of a war waged by the state “in the mountains, on the plains, and in cities” through its military, police, law and order mechanisms, and whenever needed, along with its “sensitive citizens.”

This state of total war that we are currently facing should not simply be considered a new or local version of McCarthyism. As is well known, McCarthyism is the name of the Communist witch-hunt carried out in the United States from the late 1940s through the 1950s. During this period thousands of people, most of them public employees, union cadres, or intellectuals, were prosecuted as suspected Soviet spies or alleged agents of anti-American activities, and were convicted and discredited on the basis of unfounded grounds.

Thanks to the active role he played in this campaign, the rabid anti-communist and nationalist demagogue Joseph McCarthy, then a senator of Wisconsin, attained the honour of having these and similar operations “that is, operations lacking any sound basis or credible evidence” be named after him.

But now let us get back to our essential point. The waves of this operation, which have followed one another in rapid succession, are not just a campaign of slander whereby petty politicians try to intimidate a real or imagined opposition by whipping up nationalist hysteria with the aim of consolidating their own position. What we have here is the systematic targeting of nearly all political and social organisation that express the demands of Kurds within the democratic domain. As we have already stated, it is clear that the AKP is trying to condemn all expressions and manifestations of the Kurdish question except its own, attempting to render the Kurdish question without a counter-part.

Beyond McCarthyism, such a situation can only be described as “politicide.” Politicide is the name given to the annihilation or elimination of the political, cultural, intellectual, etc. leadership or potential leadership of an oppressed community, people or group.

The KCK operations can be interpreted as the elimination or the pacification “without the deployment of “murderous cleansing” methods or elimination by clearly violent means” of the extensive cadre of Kurds capable of providing leadership in the political, social, moral, and cultural fields. They want to silence those who are able to present and politicise the Kurdish question in terms different from those dictated by “government wisdom.” In other words, the situation in which we find ourselves is not just latter day McCarthyism, but an act of annihilation, an operation of politicide.

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Politicide can also be defined as the attempt to destroy and to eliminate a specific (often oppositional) way of comprehending, giving meaning to, and doing politics. It is exactly in this sense that the AKP government is not only targeting groups of people who express political concerns about the Kurdish question, but is attempting to dismantle almost all forms of Kurdish politicisation, as well as the political field constituted by the demands of the Kurdish people.

The AKP government expels from the political domain all forms “except its own” of understanding, giving meaning to, and hence politicising aspects of the Kurdish question by totally identifying them with “terrorism.”

In other words, the matter does not only consist of a “witch-hunt,” of political hysteria, or of the conscious or unconscious, extreme or fanatical reaction of some politicians faced with existing problems.

What we have here is a much wider strategy: a plan to “solve” the Kurdish question without the Kurds “or to use a better term, to “sort it out.” Consequently, comparisons with witch-hunts or with McCarthyism are neither sufficient, nor explanatory. As Albert Camus put it, “giving the wrong name to events means increasing unhappiness in the world.”

On the one hand, the AKP government is seeking to silence the Kurdish people by depriving them of a political, intellectual, and moral leadership, while striving on the other hand to absolutely monopolise the ways in which the Kurdish question is understood and politicised. An attempt is being made through the KCK operation to turn the Kurds into a pariah people devoid of a political personality and dependent on the favours of state officials.

We should keep in mind as an example the gradual but systematic politicide to which Israel is subjecting the Palestinian people, with the aim of eroding their political and social existence.

The unbridled nationalist language developed by AKP politicians, especially on the campaign trail, is supported by calls for “revenge” at the top levels of the state. The profile of “those of Kurdish origin” created by adding to such calls a sprinkle of individual rights and culture “and at times a little religion to cement the deal” does not include a people engaged in autonomous politics and its legitimate representatives.

According to this mentality, Kurds can at most be a collection of victims dependent on the loving hand of a paternal state who “spanks and loves” at the same time “but not a political entity.

Their actual and potential political subjectivity must be annihilated. The result of this state of affairs has been 4,197 detentions, which have led to 1,595 cases of imprisonment in only the last six months. This ongoing operation, an act of politicide, is a sign of an impending doom that will swallow up not just the Kurds, but all of us, if we cannot stop it.

This article was originally published in Turkish on Sosyalist Demokrasi için YEN?YOL. It was translated into English by Adnan Tonguç and Amy Spangler.

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