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Turkey

HDP's poetic call for "Great Humanity" and the Parliamentary elections in Turkey

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The parliamentary elections in Turkey will take place this Sunday. 54 million people can vote for a new parliament on June 7th. The electoral scene is focused on the HDP, the Peoples' Democratic Party. In this article I will try to explain how this phenomenon came into being, and what the dynamics are that made it a prominent actor in the elections.

The HDP was founded in 2012 as a direct successor to the Peoples' Democratic Congress, a union formed after the 2011 parliamentary elections by the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), various socialist parties, groups from various segments of civil society like feminist movements, LGBTQ movements, branches of trade unions, and other progressive groups such as the organization of young leftist Armenians, Nor Zartonk among others. In 2011, the last pro-Kurdish party of its kind, the BDP, made it into parliament as part of the umbrella group of independent candidates, Labour, Democracy and Freedom. This allowed them to bypass the infamous 10% electoral threshold required to get elected under Turkish law. More than half of the Bloc's candidates, 36 out of 65, were elected to the Parliament in 2011. The founding of the HDP was therefore an attempt to solidify this solidarity, and success.

Since the 1980 coup modern Turkish politics has witnessed the formation of various political parties stemming from the Kurdish movement, which were successively banned and re-formed under new names. Accordingly, there have also been solidarity initiatives from various leftist political parties, ranging from social democrats to revolutionary socialists, in their electoral struggle.

The parliamentary quest of the Kurdish movement started with People's Labour Party, HEP in 1990. 18 HEP - rooted deputies were elected to the parliament via the Kemalist, Social Democrat Peoples' Party, SHP. One of them, Leyla Zana, a 30 year old Kurdish woman activist, added a Kurdish sentence after her parliamentary vow: "I take this oath for the sisterhood of Turkish and Kurdish peoples." She was wearing a yellow, red and green head band and was booed in the parliament. After three years her parliamentary impunity was stripped, and with three other Kurdish deputies she was charged with affiliation with the PKK, spending ten years in prison.

Being aware of the political climate, the Kurdish parties worked with a back-up system. Upon realising that the HEP would be banned, the Freedom and Democracy Party (OZDEP) was founded, only to be banned in 1993. It was followed by Democracy Party (DEP), which was banned in 1994. Then Democratic Change Party (DDP) was banned in 1996, Democratic Mass Party (DKP) in 1999, People's Democratic Party (HADEP) in 2003, and Democratic Society Party (DTP) in 2009. Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), was founded in 2008, and merged with the HDP in 2014. Therefore, since the 1990s, there have been 7 political parties that were formed as a part of the organized Kurdish movement with attachment to its leader Abdullah Ocalan's line, and then were outlawed in Turkey.

The formation of the HDP and the dissolution of the BDP into it have a slightly different story though, and that explains the halo of interest around this newly formed party. Firstly, its public appearance as a political party out of the People's Democratic Congress took place in the political climate of the Gezi protests of 2013, the biggest mass protests in Turkey since the 1980 coup. The heterogeneity of the protesting groups, and ad hoc alliances at the barricades created a milieu that made oppositional alliances relevant. The conventional parliamentarist reflex of reaping the product of a mass movement at the ballot box found its setting in two consecutive elections after Gezi Protests. In March 2014 municipal elections took place, and in August 2014 the President was elected.

HDP made its first appearance in the March 2014 elections. Four well known deputies of the BDP, Ertugrul Kurkcu, Levent Tuzel, Sirri Sureyya Onder and Sebahat Tuncel resigned from BDP and joined HDP. Onder was a well-known face in the Gezi protests since they began, and became HDP's municipal candidate for Istanbul. However, Onder's

personal connection with Gezi movement could not provide HDP with more than a synthetic connection with the June 2013 Gezi movements, despite its claim. The drawback was one that still haunts the HDP in the general elections, namely the Kurdish organized movement's complicated relationship with the Gezi movement. One of the most important reasons for this was the high and one-sided expectations of some of the participants of the latter.

In addition, revolutionary leftist movements of Turkey had gone through various alliances after the coup and lately, since 2007, supported various blocs, lead by the organized Kurdish movement, for independent candidates, and results have caused internal strife and splits among others. Digging a tunnel to the parliament, as the saying went through the campaigns, did not bring a new dynamic to the revolutionary struggle and the connection between the selected independent candidates and the grassroots movements could not be founded. Parliamentarism led to the formation of personality cults, sometimes used as a tactic by some segments of political left to provide visibility for campaigns. As a result, HDP got 4.8 per cent of the votes in Istanbul where Onder was a candidate. It is hard to say that his candidacy broadened the base of the party, which was formed by the organized Kurdish movement. At previous elections, its predecessor, DTP, had 4.7 per cent of the votes. Therefore, this first appearance of HDP was not a breakout. However, a clear demonstration of the will to establish the HDP as a party that goes beyond its Kurdish and pro-Kurdish base became visible with the decision of the BDP to leave western cities to the HDP and run in elections in Kurdish majority regions of the east.

The second appearance of the HDP came with the Presidential election in August 2014. This time was different from its first appearance, which had been mostly based on Onder's personality, the taken for granted "united front" dynamic of the Gezi movement and a politics of being against the AKP and its opponent, the Kemalist social democrats, CHP. This time Selahattin Demirtas, the co-spokesperson of HDP, came with a "new life declaration" as the presidential candidate of the HDP. The declaration began with greetings in 15 languages spoken in Turkey and introduced "radical democracy," as the alternative to the current system.

According to the declaration, the new life would grow on the same the side as the oppressed, and those discriminated against on the basis of their ethnicity, religion, class and gender. It envisioned a system that was based on decentralization and forming peoples' assemblies for democratic, participatory governance. The leading role in this new life was given to women. Abolishing the religious affairs directorate that was based on the promotion of Sunni Islam, strengthening social welfare rights of workers, fighting against homophobia and transphobia were among many non-conventional axes of political intervention that were drafted. In accordance with the current stance of the Kurdish movement, the declaration defined the solution of the Kurdish issue as a part of the total democratization process of Turkey. This new life declaration would form the basis of the "great humanity" document prepared for the parliamentary elections of 2015.

This second appearance of the HDP was a success. Demirtas got 9.76 per cent of the total votes (3.9 million), increasing the HDP and BDP's combined votes (2.9 million) in the local elections that took place five months before.

The Presidential elections gave visibility to the HDP and its co-spokesperson Demirtas. When the party declared that this time it will not use the backdoor to the parliament by organizing a left-wing libertarian bloc that would support "independent candidates" to by-pass the ten percent threshold, and instead participate in the elections as the HDP, it was considered to be a risky maneuver. However, the last few months proved otherwise. Basing its campaign not only on the illegitimacy of the ten percent threshold, but also on its election manifesto, titled "great humanity," this time the HDP worked on communicating the alternatives to the oppressive, ten-year old AKP rule, and went beyond the call for solidarity with the unrepresented Kurdish constituency.

The 28-page call to great humanity starts with the statement that the absolute power of the state and capital destroys society and nature, and that it does not recognize our existence, identities, desires and necessities. The election manifesto states that empowering the society means empowering the oppressed segments of the society, it means

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secure work conditions for workers, rights to preserve and use our mother tongues, supporting women in their fight against male dominance, freeing the youth from anxiety for the future, ending poverty, ending the state's imposition of forced identities and acknowledging that nature is not a resource but life itself.

The manifesto argues for a new democratic constitution that would replace the 1980 Coup constitution and argues clearly against the concentration of power, as would be created by the presidency system that Erdogan is fighting for. The new constitution would guarantee a number of fundamental rights, such as the right to peace, the right to truth, the right to organize, strike and be covered by collective agreements, social security, a basic income, the right to respectful accommodation and transport, disability rights, the right to clean water and sufficient food, conscientious objection, cultural identity rights, the right to use mother tongues, the right to education, the right to a fair and just trial, rights of children, rights of elderly people, animal rights, freedom of expression and organization, and religious freedom.

A number of the HDP's arguments were considered to be un-pragmatic for a political party that aims to broaden its base and pass the ten percent threshold. These included clear cut positions on historically taboo issues like the Armenian genocide, abolition of obligatory religious (Sunni) classes at schools and the directorate of religious affairs, and acknowledgement of the legacy of the Kurdish struggle and the movement's leader, Ocalan. But in fact, this became a point of strength for HDP. The clearer their positions were declared, the more trustworthy the HDP became. In a political climate where the trend is concentration of power in few hands and impunity of the leader from any criticism, the co-spokesperson of HDP, Demirtas emerged as a figure who answered all questions with clarity and sincerity. He clearly rejected the assumption that the HDP would support or form a coalition with Erdogan's AKP after the elections, and stated unequivocally that what happened in 1915 was a genocide. He also acknowledged the role of Ocalan in the making of HDP's political line. Having been a human rights lawyer and activist for many years, and coming from the legacy of the Kurdish movement, the 41-year old politician represented a new face in the Turkish politics, where successful politicians were associated with patriarchal authority figures. Demirtas was not embraced as a father or an elder brother, or the future omnipotent leader of the country; he made it clear that the HDP was not there to create new leaders, but to empower grassroots democracy. It did not claim to be a socialist or revolutionary party, but a party of the broader left, a snowplow that would open the way for socialists and activists from other political tendencies.

Revolutionary socialists who did not endorse the HDP's political line totally nevertheless organized their own pro-HDP campaigns inside and out of Turkey. In Turkey, two main campaigns, 10'dan Sonra (after 10), which refers to the 10 percent threshold and +1, which builds its campaign on being an extra vote to HDP, testifies to the aura that the HDP has created for itself. Critical of parliamentarism, these initiatives not only campaign for strategic votes to the HDP to help end the one party rule of the AKP, but also helped disseminating HDP's message for the "great humanity." Progressive groups outside Turkey, such as the federation of democratic workers' association, DIDF, have openly declared solidarity with the HDP for the elections as well.

Mathematical calculations about the election point to the importance of voting for the HDP to weaken the AKP. One of the videos of the 10'dan sonra campaign shows that if the AKP gets 44 per cent, CHP 25, and the nationalist party MHP 16, AKP will have 333 deputies. However, if HDP passes the 10 percent threshold, the AKP will be the most effected, with a loss in their number of deputies. In the latter scenario, the HDP gets 60 - 70 deputies, while AKP loses around 50. If the HDP gets more, and AKP gets around 40-41 per cent of the votes, the AKP will not be able to form the government by itself and will have to go for a coalition.

Whatever the results turn out to be, this is an election that has inserted hope, and proved that despite former frictions in attempts to form "united fronts", collective working practice is still possible for the broad left in Turkey. It is also impressive that a guerrilla force (PKK), with 40 years of armed struggle behind it, has paved way to the formation of a self-critical, modest, inclusive and cheerful political party. Supporting the HDP in this elections does not necessarily mean endorsing its legacy and political line totally, but supporting their bid to stop the AKP's will to concentrate power

in its hands, which would sever the conditions for social and political movements to spring up and exist.

Moreover, issues raised in the "great humanity" manifesto, if put on the agenda and discussed in and out of the parliament, will provide stimulus for progressive, revolutionary change. The fact that this political phenomenon came into being with the initiative of the Kurdish movement, with its years of organising, sturdy social movement and guerrilla force in Turkey, should not be seen as an obstacle but the icing on the cake.

The title of election manifesto, which is a direct reference to Nazim Hikmet's poem named "Great humanity", breaks the clouds of disenchantment lingering on Turkish society for a period, which predates AKP's rule. Nazim ends the poem like this:

The great humanity has no shade on his soil

no lamp on his road

no glass on his window

but the great humanity has hope

you can't live without hope.