

Turkey : Kurdish parties

Wednesday 25 April 2007, by [Yigal Schleifer](#)

Source : Eurasianet.org

With parliamentary elections approaching later this year, Turkey's main pro-Kurdish political party is finding itself at a crossroads, beset by increasing pressure from both within and without.

In recent weeks, the Democratic Society Party (DTP) has endured a crackdown, with dozens of its top leaders arrested or jailed and several of its offices raided by the police. An Ankara court in February sentenced party co-chairs Aysel Tugluk and Ahmet Turk to 1 1/2 years in prison after DTP workers distributed political pamphlets in the Kurdish language, violating Turkish law. Soon after, Turk was sentenced by another court to an additional six months for "praising" Abdullah Ocalan, the jailed leader of the guerrilla Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), by referring to him in a speech as "sayin Ocalan," the equivalent of "Mr. Ocalan" in Turkish. Tugluk and Turk are free pending an appeal.

Local DTP have also been caught up in the crackdown. For example, Metin Tekce, the DTP mayor of the city of Hakkari in Turkey's predominantly Kurdish southeast, was sentenced by a court on March 19 to seven years in jail after he said in a press conference that the PKK was not a terrorist group and that he was proud to be Kurdish. *"The state is giving us a lot of trouble. They are coming after us systematically,"* says Osman Keser, the DTP mayor of Yakapinar, a municipal district of Adana, a large city near Turkey's Mediterranean coast.

"Anything we say now gets us in trouble," adds the mayor, who is among 56 other DTP mayors currently facing charges for having written an open letter in support of Roj TV, a Kurdish-language satellite network broadcasting out of Denmark. The Turkish government is trying to shut the channel down.

Although not currently in parliament, the DTP remains a powerful force in Turkish politics, particularly in the southeast region, where the party enjoys strong popular support and holds most of the mayoral offices. In recent years, as part of its on-going European Union membership drive, Turkey has relaxed many of its previously stringent laws governing Kurdish political life. But observers believe that the country's hard-line military and judiciary, which have not been supportive of many of the government's EU-related reforms, still see the DTP as a threat.

"The crackdown is a process of intimidation and judicial harassment of the party," says Reyhan Yalcindag, vice president of the Human Rights Association, a Turkish watchdog group. *"As human rights defenders, we are very concerned."*

Meanwhile, the party is facing a growing internal debate about how to best approach the upcoming parliamentary elections in November. The DTP is built on the remains of several outlawed pro-Kurdish political parties, which have not had representation in the Turkish parliament since the early 1990's. Despite their traditionally strong showing in the southeast, the Kurdish parties have been stymied by Turkey's high election threshold - the highest in Europe - that requires that a party receive at least 10 percent of the national vote to gain representation. In Turkey's last election, in 2002, DTP's predecessor received 6 percent of the vote, sweeping most of the voting districts in the southeast.

Turkey introduced the threshold as a way of keeping small parties out of parliament, which often led to the country being governed by fractious and unstable coalitions. But Kurdish politicians claim that the high threshold - the European average is closer to 5 percent - is meant specifically to keep a Kurdish

political party out of parliament. For example, during the 2002 election, DTP's predecessor, the Democratic People's Party (DEHAP), won 56 percent of votes in the southeastern Diyarbakir Region, which meant it would have gained seven of the 10 seats reserved for area. But since only the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Republican People's Party (CHP) passed the national threshold, the AKP got 8 of the seats with only 16 percent of the local vote, and the CHP got two with 6 percent. (A January ruling by the Strasbourg-based European Court of Human Rights, while noting that the threshold law results in unfair representation, concluded the law did not deprive voters of their rights).

Recent polls have shown the DTP winning just over 5 percent of the vote in the upcoming election, which would mean that it again would be shut out of parliament. This led to discussions within the party about running a campaign made up of independent candidates, who are not subject to the threshold law.

Analysts believe the party could place between 15 and 20 candidates in parliament if it followed that strategy. But for now it appears that the DTP's more dogmatic, PKK-affiliated wing has put the brakes on the plan. The chief concern is that the party might lose control over any independents who might get elected. "My feeling is that the real challenge in Kurdish politics within Turkey today is to find a sensible, moderate group of elites that are willing to play the democratic game, which is to deliver services - either material or immaterial - to their constituency, in return for votes," says Ali Carkoglu, a political scientist at Istanbul's Sabanci University and an expert on Turkish elections.

"So far, they are not allowed to do that, mostly because of pressure from the PKK, although some of that pressure is also coming from the security forces in the country [that] see a risk in having some representation of Kurds in the parliament," Carkoglu added.

Enhancing the DTP's challenges is the fact that the ruling party, the liberal Islamist AKP, has been making inroads in the southeast. The region is one of Turkey's more conservative areas, both socially and religiously, and the AKP has been able to present itself as a viable option to the Kurdish parties. Several of the party's parliamentarians are Kurdish, most notably the minister of interior, Abdulkadir Aksu, which has helped the party make the claim that Kurds are part of the political system.

But critics say that the Kurds currently in parliament are little more than window dressing, unable to promote Kurdish interests once they get to Ankara. *"The Kurds want to have a party that will bring their needs to the national agenda,"* says Dilek Kurban, a researcher with the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation, an Istanbul-based think tank. *"The current system allows those who get very few votes to go to Ankara and 'represent' the Kurds, and that only widens the gulf between Ankara and the Kurds."*

Adds Kurban: *"It has a cost for Turkey's democratization and pluralism and it serves to alienate a large segment of the population."*

Editor's Note: *Yigal Schleifer is a freelance journalist based in Istanbul.*