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The HDP, the AKP and the Battle for Turkish Democracy

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Abstract
The conflict between the AKP and the HDP can, in part, be understood as a conflict over the nature of democracy in Turkey. While the AKP embodies a vision of majoritarian democracy that has descended into electoral authoritarianism, the HDP offers an alternative vision of 'radical democracy' that argues for minority rights and checks on the centralised state. It is against this backdrop that this article analyses the rise of the HDP to become the first Kurdish party to pass the ten per cent electoral threshold without allying with another party and gain representation in the Grand National Assembly. This article argues that while both parties offer competing visions of democracy, both are instrumental. That is, the parties' commitment to their democratic visions depends upon the degree to which it helps to advance their interests. In this regard, they fit a longer-term pattern in Turkish politics, which ultimately leaves Turkish democracy weak and with little reason for optimism going forward.

Introduction

As the Gezi Park protests of 2013 gained increasing momentum, demonstrating the potential vulnerability of the AKP to popular protest, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan responded in what was becoming his typical fashion. He decried the protestors as a small minority that were not representative of Turkish opinion, he blamed the opposition and an unspecified 'interest lobby' for provoking the protests, and he threatened to confront the protestors with the 50 per cent of the population (referring to his party's vote share in the most recent 2011 general election), that Erdoğan said "he was hardly able to keep them home".[1] This reveals much about his and his party's (AKP – *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* or Justice and Development Party) view of democracy. From this perspective, democracy is a process that occurs once every election cycle and mandates any party that wins a majority to act without restriction on their power. This understanding subsequently descended into an outright authoritarian concentration of power in the personal hands of Erdoğan.

Contrast this with Selahattin Demirtaş's understanding of democracy. In the run up to the June 2015 election he declared that 'our aim is to create a broader movement and to do this on the basis of Kurds and Turks living together in peace'.[2] The party of which he was co-chair, the People's Democracy Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP), a Kurdish nationalist party, ran on a pluralistic manifesto that sought to decentralize power. Half of HDP candidates were women and a large number were minorities, including Kurds, Alevis, Christians, Syriacs and Armenians. For Demirtaş and the HDP, democracy in Turkey should be rights-based and consensual, an approach which would of course significantly advance the position of Kurds within Turkish political life.

In other words, the electoral battle between the AKP and the HDP, which has taken centre stage in all Turkish elections since 2014, is not just a battle for votes but also a battle over the rightful nature of Turkish democracy. The Kurdish conflict is often reduced to a competition over the nation-state model, with the Kurds fighting since 1923 for distinct political recognition within Atatürk's Republic while the AKP represents the latest in a succession of governments that use the tools of the state to defend its territorial integrity and Turkish identity. This is a key component of the clash, but reducing it solely to these terms fails to acknowledge the full complexity of this contestation. The AKP, whilst undoubtedly accepting the state's borders, historically has its own conflict with the tutelary state and is challenging some of the founding values of Atatürk's Republic and its ideology (despite its initial claims to the contrary when the party was founded in 2001). The AKP has also been willing to concede to Kurdish political desires for cultural recognition, and Demirtaş himself once declared that no prime minister has done as much for the Kurds as Erdoğan.[3] Additionally, Kurdish nationalists claim to be seeking autonomy and recognition within the Turkish state and no longer wish to separate from it. Abdullah Öcalan declared in 2003 that the PKK was now seeking decentralisation for the Kurds within the existing borders of Turkey, a system he labels 'democratic confederalism' (Öcalan, 2011). Singing from largely the

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[1] Başbakan: Yüzde 50'yi evinde zor tutuyorum. [Prime Minister: I am hardly able to keep the 50 per cent at home]. *Hurriyet*, 4 June 2013. http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/basbakan-yuzde-50-yi-evinde-zor-tutuyorum-23429709

[2] Turkey: Fading Factionalism. *Financial Times* , 11 June 2015.

[3] Erdoğan's challenger. The man who could save Turkish democracy. *Der Spiegel*, 1 June 2015. http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/how-selahattin-demirtas-became-a-rival-to-erdogan-in-turkey-a-1036595.html.

same hymn sheet, Demirta also called for a reorganisation of the administrative structure of Turkey based on the principle of decentralisation.[4] Therefore, reducing the battle between the AKP and the HDP solely to a clash over a nation-state model overlooks the possibility for pragmatism on both sides.

Instead an overlooked reason for the vitriol of the clash between the AKP and HDP lies in the two competing visions of democracy offered by each party. For the HDP, the main shortcoming of Turkish democracy is the state's wilful neglect of Kurdish and minority rights, justified by the AKP through a majoritarian understanding of democracy that has descended into electoral authoritarianism. From the HDP's perspective, the ruling party conflates its interests with the state's interests and uses the tools of the state to suppress all minority dissent forcefully. In contrast, for the AKP a crucial factor hindering Turkey's democracy is the revolutionary politics of the HDP and anti-system violence by the PKK – with the AKP viewing them as two sides of the same coin. For the AKP, the refusal of the Kurdish movement to accept the ruling state as the legitimate site of power undermines democratic stability and weakens Turkey's internal security. That is not to say there are no commonalities in their positions. Both the HDP and the AKP are highly critical of interventions by the tutelary state over the years – the AKP because it was against Islamic actors and the HDP because it was against Kurdish actors. Yet recent developments show that the divide between them is far greater than their shared experiences and this division can be framed as a battle over the rightful meaning of Turkish democracy.

This raises a number of key questions which this article seeks to address: what are the HDP's and the AKP's understandings of democracy? What is the wider context in which these understandings emerged? How has each party challenged the other's understanding and framing of Turkish democracy? This article argues that while both parties offer competing visions of democracy, both are instrumental That is, the parties' commitment to their democratic visions depends upon the degree to which it helps to advance their interests. In this regard, they fit a longer-term pattern in Turkish democracy.

The Limited and Limiting Paradigm of Turkish Democracy

Past struggles over how democracy was institutionalised matter when explaining outcomes today (Capoccia and Ziblatt, 2010). As an archetypal hybrid regime that was never fully consolidated, struggles over the nature of Turkish democracy are still ongoing (Turan, 2016). What the history of Turkish democracy tells us is that embracing a majoritarian vision of democracy that slides into authoritarianism is nothing new. Similarly pursuing a democratic agenda only to the extent to which it promotes the interests of the party is a common and recurring theme throughout the history of the modern Republic. Tracing these patterns in full detail from the 1960s to the present era is beyond the scope of this article and has already been undertaken elsewhere (for example, Ahmad, 1977; Heper, 1985; Özbudun, 1995). However, what is important to note is that the AKP's and HDP's clash over different visions of democracy occurs in a long-term framework which incentivises and constrains the parties today.

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[4] Türkiye'nin güney sınırları resmen Kürdistan olacak [Turkey's southern borders will officially be Kurdistan]. *Taraf*, 10 April 2012, http://www.taraf.com.tr/nese-duzel/makale-selahattin-demirtas-turkiye-nin-siniri-kurdistan.htm, last accessed 26.04.2012.

A strategic commitment to democracy has been a hallmark of Turkish democracy. This is not to say that strategic commitments to democracy (as opposed to a normative, attitudinal commitment or 'positive democratic consolidation' to use Pridham's (1995) phrase) prevent democracy from bedding down. After all, initially strategic commitments can evolve into consolidation in cases where the context and institutions incentivise actors to make binding commitments to democracy), even when faced with adverse structural conditions (see Alexander, 2002; Przeworski, 1998, or for this specific argument in the Muslim world see Salame, 1995). However, historically, incentives for elite-led consolidation have never clearly existed in Turkey. What is more, they certainly do not exist for the AKP today (David, 2016), albeit they are stronger for the HDP in that democratic rights would most likely improve the position of the Kurds, but only if their particular understanding of a pluralist democracy is institutionalised.

The dominant framework of Turkish democracy that emerged with the beginning of multi-party democracy, and which has been perpetuated until today, is one that does not lend itself to plural democracy. As Çınar and Sayın (2014, 367) demonstrate, Turkish democracy operates within a historical paradigm that 'reinforces an anti-pluralist attitude' and 'routinizes a zero-sum perception of politics in which only one party wins'. Turkish democracy has historically been a tutelary one, with the armed forces often over-riding the decisions of elected representatives in the name of protecting the national interest, which it defines as distinct from the interests of voters. In this process, the state identified minorities that could potentially threaten the established order, labelled them as 'others', and attempted to restrict their political rights (unless they jettisoned their minority identity and entered the public realm as Turks). This included Islamists, Kurds, Alevis, Armenians, and Christians. In order to combat this narrative, a series of centre-right parties, beginning with the Democrat Party (DP) in the 1960s sought to use elections as a tool to achieve the 'concentration of all powers in the hands of elected governments so as to establish supremacy over the non-elected and non-accountable civilian and military bureaucracy' (ibid, 370).

As such, the history of Turkish democracy can in part be characterised by a tutelary elite versus a more populist (usually centre-right) elite, both vying for control of the state and justifying this on the basis of national interest or majority support respectively. The victims of this were liberalism and pluralism, which were of little concern to either side in their quest for control over the state. This played out in the four major coups as well as the proscription of numerous leftist, Islamist and Kurdish parties (for a detailed overview of how these events can be understood within this framing, see Öktem, 2011). Even when seemingly liberal measures were introduced, such as the clauses in the 1961 constitution that specified clear divisions of power or the 1982 constitution that checked the power of the prime minister, with hindsight these can be seen as policies implemented by one side to restrict opposing forces and shore up their own power.[5]

It was within this historical context that both the AKP and the HDP have pursued their particular visions of democracy, both as a challenge to the state and to advance their own interests. The AKP, representing the latest incarnation of the populist centre-right tradition, embraced the idea of a majoritarian democracy and used this to justify gaining control of the state and neutralising the threat of intervention from the tutelary elites. The centralisation of power initially in the party's hands, later primarily in Erdo an's

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[5] In contrast, Öztürk and Gözaydın (2017) see these as genuine achievements of democracy even whilst acknowledging the longer troubled history of Turkish democracy.

hands, became the hallmark of its time in power. Initially, it saw the Kurdish movement as a potential ally given Kurds' historically hostile relationship with the tutelary state. However, as circumstances changed and HDP support was no longer needed or was seen as a threat to its control, the AKP followed a similar pattern to its predecessors and used the state to suppress, marginalise and criminalise Kurdish nationalism, whether violent or not, and decry it as a threat to Turkey's democracy. Yet there is nothing inherently anti-democratic in nationalist groups that challenge the state. If the status quo in a polity is an authoritarian one, then radicals may be radical democrats demanding its complete overhaul in a revolutionary fashion (Schwedler, 2011). Even the use of violence would not necessarily make such actors inherently anti-democratic but more 'ademocratic' (Hart, 2003). Often such groups are not pursuing an authoritarian or fascistic state and instead declare themselves to be fighting to establish a more democratic order. This is certainly how the HDP understands its challenger role within the Turkish democratic paradigm, but that does not imply its approach is not also somewhat strategic and pursued on condition it advances their interests.

The Evolution of the AKP's Vision of Democracy

The AKP's commitment to democracy in Turkey is strategic and has changed during its time in power, increasing or declining according to the extent to which this path best serves their interests. The key characteristic of its time in power is a series of reversals in which the democratic credentials of the party, as well as institutional checks and balances, steadily weakened (Ba er and Öztürk, 2017; Esen and Gümü çü, 2016). The history of Turkish democracy meant there was a large degree of mistrust by the AKP towards the existing system and it incentivised the party to eliminate such checks on their power (Akkoyunlu and Öktem, 2016). From the AKP's perspective, provided it had a clear mandate, any reforms that prevented the tutelary state from intervening and that bolstered the AKP's ability to enact its legislative agenda, were synonymous with enhancing Turkish democracy, even if these reforms were illiberal in nature.

After initially embarking upon a series of seemingly democratic reforms, today the party has a decidedly weak commitment to liberal rights. Furthermore, its majoritarian electoral understanding of democracy has become autocratic through ever increasing concentrations of power within the hands of Erdo an in a form of electoral authoritarianism. In government, the AKP has viewed a clear electoral mandate as the *sine qua non* of their powerbase and used it as a platform from which to implement policies that eroded many aspects of democracy. The AKP's changing vision of democracy, which provides the context against which the HDP offered an alternative vision that challenged that of the AKP and laid the foundations for the clash of ideas, can be analysed in three phases.

Phase 1 (2002-2007): Ambivalent Democrats

This phase was about the AKP using its electoral mandate to create a strong executive that could dominate parliament and then using this position of power to reform the system in their vision. The AKP built electoral support for its agenda through appealing to pious and conservative voters who previously felt marginalised from political life, through controlling the public sphere for debate, and initially through a strong programme of economic growth (Hale and Özbudun, 2010). Offering an alternative to

the previous decade of fragile coalition politics and receiving support from voters dissatisfied with the governing coalition, the party secured 34.2 per cent of the vote, translating into 365 of the 550 seats in the parliament thanks to the ten percent threshold.

These initial years showed some commitment by the AKP to democratic consolidation, meaning, in general terms, the strengthening of democracy to make it unlikely to breakdown (Schedler, 2001, 66), albeit this did not involve entrenching liberal values and rights (Turam, 2012). From the AKP's perspective its policies were equivalent to entrenching democracy – reining in the power of the guardian state to intervene protected the electorally endorsed AKP. Many of these reforms took place with a view to enhance Turkey's EU candidacy. Yet this too was about the AKP pursuing a democratic agenda for instrumental gains, most notably using the EU mandate to expand freedom of religion which would appeal to its conservative voters and to weaken domestic secular forces (Saatçio lu, 2010). Later, when the prospect of EU membership faded, the desire to pursue democratic consolidation also faded given it no longer served as strong a purpose for the party (Aydın-Düzgit and Keyman, 2013).

Major reforms included curtailing the power of the armed forces. Unable to challenge the position of the military outright for fear of provoking a backlash, the party passed laws that weakened military's veto power. Through an EU harmonisation package in 2003, it increased civilian membership of the National Security Council and downgraded the Council's 'binding' decisions to 'recommendations'. The AKP railed against human rights abuses by the police and military and removed any possibility of imposing the death penalty even in conditions including war and near war conditions. Even highly divisive issues were addressed, including pursuing a peace deal with Cyprus, lifting the state of emergency in the southeast of Turkey, and extending some (ultimately limited) cultural rights to Kurds around language and broadcasting.

However, alongside democratic reforms sat other initiatives that were undemocratic in nature, as well as signs of increasing state intervention in the private sphere. Dissent and criticism of the government was suppressed through media regulation, such as revising the penal code in 2004 to allow the criminal prosecution of journalists for discussing any subject deemed controversial by state authorities and, passing (2005) and widely utilising a series of defamation laws against public criticism of the government and governing institutions such as the infamous Article 301. Other new laws facilitated the blocking of websites and the identification of Internet users, and allowed the Radio and Television Supreme council to forbid coverage of certain issues altogether. The AKP also punished dissenting media conglomerates by hindering their wider business interests and by imposing tax bills and fines (Ye il, 2014). It also began to establish government sponsored civil society organisations, squeezing out pre-existing civil society organisations (Doyle, 2017).

Phase 2 (2007-2013): Eliminating Checks on Executive Power

Having created a powerful executive, the AKP became more robust in reining in the potential of the army and courts to block the will of the executive. Again, this was justified on the basis of protecting the democratically expressed will of the people at the ballot box. The military may have been publicly accepting the AKP's electoral rise, but

rumours and threats of a coup dominated the early years of AKP rule.[6] Indeed, Arma an Kulo lu, a retired general, publicly stated in 2003 that his former colleagues would not easily relinquish their guardian role any time soon.[7] Prior to the 2007 general election, the Turkish Armed Forces sent the AKP an official warning about its perceived Islamism. The army along with the opposition and high judiciary also tried to prevent the appointment of Abdullah Gül as president after parliament had voted for him, with his wife's headscarf being a particular cause of concern.

However, after the AKP won the 2007 general election with an increased majority, it strengthened its position further. In 2007, public prosecutors claimed that key military officials, law-makers and journalists were part of a secularist plot (named *Ergenekon*) to overthrow the government and a major court case was prepared. Although few charges were proved, the trials and allegations discredited the armed forces and damaged their reputation, limiting their role in public life. The AKP also passed two-dozen constitutional changes via referendum in 2010 that restricted the independence of the senior judiciary. In 2014, the justice minister was given power to directly appoint members to the disciplinary board for judges and prosecutors and within six months more than 3,000 sitting judges were removed. Decisions around the dissolution of political parties passed from the constitutional court to the legislature (Özbudun, 2015).

A crucial factor which made the curtailment of these institutions possible without provoking a backlash was the Gülen movement. The movement's educational programmes had empowered a newly emerging middle class and helped them to secure opportunities within the bureaucracy, the armed forces, and other public bodies (Hendrick, 2013). This large body of pious Muslims then helped the AKP to penetrate state institutions and ensured a significant degree of support at a time when the AKP was trying to take these institutions under greater control. Additionally, Gülenist-influenced press helped to promote the AKP's position within the population.

Phase 3 (2013-present day): From Illiberal Majoritarianism to Electoral Authoritarianism

The party was now in a position of enhanced power, having reined in the tutelary forces and gained control of much of the state itself. All this was done under the rubric of a majoritarian vision of democracy. However, in this final phase, the AKP was confronted with threats to its power from popular protests, from the Gülen movement and Kurdish nationalists. The result was that the AKP pushed its reforms of the earlier phases to their logical conclusion of electoral authoritarianism. Dissent and critics of their policy programme were framed in a zero-sum mentality. The party conflated itself with the state and so critics of the party were seen as critics of the state and, therefore, the AKP was at liberty to use the full powers of the state to punish and control dissent.

The first threat came from the Gezi Park Protests of 2013, which expanded from an environmental protest in central Istanbul to most major urban centres around the country and became a site of general dissatisfaction from a range of groups, including

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[6] *Nokta*, a Turkish political news and analysis journal, currently closed, revealed coup plans in 2003-2004. Yetvart Danzikyan, "Ergenekon'da yeni hamle: Darbe tehdidi gerçekten bertaraf edildi mi? [A new move in Ergenekon: Has the coup threat really been averted?]. *Birikim*, 7 July 2008, http://www.birikimdergisi.com/guncel-yazilar/661/ergenekon-da-yeni-hamle-darbe-tehdidi-gercekten-bertaraf-edildi-mi#.WYW_3fn4-Hs.

[7] Not quite at ease. *Economist,* 27 November 2004.

liberals, socialists, Kurds, secularists, LGBTQ groups, women's rights groups amongst others. The other threat came more from within the Islamist movement when relations between Gülenists and the AKP collapsed amidst both sides accusing the other of seeking to consolidate power. In December 2013, Gülenists initiated a wide-ranging investigation into Erdoğan's inner circle, which led to the resignations of several ministers and the arrest of many individuals. Erdoğan labelled the investigation a judicial coup by a parallel authority, declared the Gülenists a national security threat, fired thousands of officers and members of the judiciary, and closed several media outlets (Lowen, 2014). This clash escalated further when on 15 July 2016, a coup was attempted that had the heavy involvement of the Gülen network. This differed from earlier coups in that it did not involve a majority of the high command in the military and it faced popular resistance (Öktem, 2016). Around 250 people were killed resisting the coup, individuals that the AKP labelled 'martyrs to democracy'.

The final threat stemmed from Kurdish nationalism. Although the AKP initially sought to reach out to Kurdish groups and pursue a 'democratic opening', this policy proved unsustainable for both sides. Secret talks between the PKK and the state had been held between 2008 and 2011, known as the Oslo Talks. Official talks started again in 2012 between the government and the imprisoned leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan.[8] However, these collapsed amidst a lack of willingness by the government to extend the concessions the Kurds aspired for and a lack of willingness by the Kurdish leadership to support initiatives that might threaten its position within the community, all further complicated by the war in neighbouring Syria. Following the collapse of the talks, levels of Kurdish violence have risen significantly. At the same time, support for Kurdish parties has increased, with the HDP crossing the national threshold in the last three general elections.

The AKP's response to these combined threats has been to further conflate its interests with those of the state, to portray the threats as existential threats to the nation, and to then use state powers to tackle the challenge and further entrench its position. After the coup, the AKP declared a state of emergency which concentrated all power in the hands of Erdoğan – a state which was extended seven times. Additionally, the AKP embarked upon a shockingly widespread purge of all levels of society, impacting the armed forces, the judiciary, universities, the bureaucracy and public bodies, and the media, as well as general critics of the government.[9] In response to the electoral threat from the Kurds, the AKP extended this purge to Kurdish activists and elected officials, even stripping HDP members of their parliamentary immunity and detaining many, including both its co-leaders. The AKP also sought to maintain its electoral dominance by positing radical Kurdish nationalism as a security risk and building an alliance with the right-wing nationalist MHP (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi* – Nationalist Movement Party), which added nationalistic tones to their electoral strategy.

Yet by far the most significant institutional development in this phase was that Erdoğan used this opportunity to transform the regime from a parliamentary system to an executive presidency. After the coup, the AKP held a referendum in April 2017 with the support of the leader of the MHP, Devlet Bahçeli. The referendum took place under a state of emergency, in conditions far from 'free and fair', and was passed by 51.4% to

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[8] See Çiçek (2018) for a detailed account of the talks between the PKK and the Turkish state since 1990s until today.

[9] The exact numbers impacted by the purge are changing all the time but this website claims to keep an up to date record: https://turkeypurge.com/. Last accessed 11 July 2018.

48.6% (OSCE, 2017). Erdo an was duly elected president in the first elections in June 2018. The AKP's refashioning of Turkey's democracy and its quest to gain untethered control of the state was largely complete.

HDP's Vision of Democracy

It was within this context that the HDP's vision of democracy emerged and, in part, crystallised in opposition to this dominant version. It was one that was more liberal in the sense of putting rights at its core and challenging the increasing concentration of power under the AKP. However, the HDP's understanding of democracy is also strategic – not as ruthlessly so as the AKP's, but strategic nonetheless. This is evident from the way that it pitches itself. Its quest to promote democratic minority rights and decentralisation throughout Turkey is also clearly about advancing the Kurdish agenda, which may well take priority over a wider democracy agenda if a competing situation between these two features arose. Additionally, its ambivalent relationship with the PKK and its inability to condemn the military violence carried out by the PKK highlights the limits of its democratic commitment.

The party has showed pragmatism in pursuing its democratic agenda. For example, it was initially reluctant to support the Gezi Park protests for fear of upsetting the AKP during the peace process. The HDP initially explored an alliance with the AKP and considered supporting Erdo an's push for an executive presidential system in return for movement in the peace process, but later abandoned its support for this plan. This is not to deny the possibility that a normative commitment to liberal rights underpins the HDP's commitment to democracy, but it is to say that we must not ignore the fact that the party's positioning is pragmatic and fluid, varying according to its interests. Finally, of course, seeing them as the great hope for Turkish democracy neglects their uncomfortable and ambivalent relationship with the PKK.

The Origins of HDP and Radical Democracy

The HDP is the outcome of an attempt to unify Kurdish nationalist forces with the Turkish left. In so doing, it sought to give the Peace and Democracy Party (*Barı ve Demokrasi Partisi*, BDP – HDP's predecessor) a territorial rather than ethnic (*Türkiyeli*) identity. In promoting this new branding, the Kurdish political movement found it necessary and useful to close a gap that opened up in the 1970s between Kurdish politics and leftist movements. Both groups were part of the same leftist movement until 1978 when Öcalan and his followers decided to leave and form their own movement, the PKK, with a primary focus on the Kurds. After the military coup in 1980, and the partial normalisation of politics in Turkey, in 1990 the Kurdish movement, under the PKK's influence, formed its first political party, the People's Labour Party (*Halkın Emek Partisi*). This party was closed by the Constitutional Court but subsequently replaced with new incarnations under different names, with the HDP founded in 2012 being the current representative of this tradition.

The HDP stands on a platform of 'radical democracy' – originally a socialist idea that referred to the rejection of existing democratic models in favour of more pluralistic and direct democracy (Mouffe and Laclau, 2001). This notion, adopted by imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, appealed to Kurdish nationalists as it goes beyond simply

increasing the democratic rights of the people and it implies a revolutionary transformation of the system to increase the power and oversight of the people over the state (Küpeli, 2014). According to the HDP, Turkey needs 'real democracy to be able to build a new life where the whole of society is guaranteed the circumstances that each of its elements needs for its existence and life'.[10] It sought to challenge the long-standing 'one-nation mentality' that it saw as dominating Turkey and to promote a more multi-identity and multi-cultural vision. The logical extension of its 'real democracy' is to reform laws and policies perceived as discriminating against Kurds (and other social groups) and the southeast of Turkey.

It was within this context that the HDP were able to find some common ground with the AKP in its fight against the tutelary state. With both Kurds and Islamists having a history of suppression at the hands of the military-bureaucratic apparatus of the traditional state, Kurdish political elites were happy with any developments that restrained and curtailed the military's and bureaucracy's ability to intervene in the political sphere. This combined with the AKP's initial pursuit of EU membership, opened the possibility for cooperation between the two parties. The HDP initially considered supporting the AKP's push for an executive presidential system and it remained cautious in criticising the majoritarianism of the AKP in the hope of gaining concessions that never came in the peace initiative. HDP MPs declared that their party is not against American style presidential system[11] and Öcalan said that 'We could support Mr Erdogan's presidency. We can enter into an alliance with the AKP based on this', albeit with clear conditions attached.[12] The HDP took part in a Conciliation Commission between 2011 and 2013 along with the other three major parties (AKP, CHP and MHP) to discuss constitutional reform, with each of the parties given equal voting rights and veto power over decisions. The Commission could only agree on technical articles and not on more substantial reforms, leading to its eventual demise. Following the collapse of the Conciliation Commission in 2013, the redrawing of the constitution was conducted with little input from other parties in Parliament or from civil society. The way the process was handled and their exclusion from the process frustrated the HDP.[13] In other words, potential Kurdish support for the AKP's presidential system was conditional on this being as part of a wider package of reforms linked to the faltering peace initiative. Therefore, after initial prevarication, the HDP came out in support of the Gezi Protests and refused to support Erdo an's referendum to bring in a presidential system.

For refusing to support Erdogan's referendum on the presidential system the HDP paid a high price in terms of how the AKP responded. However, it did help to distinguish its position from the AKP. Today the HDP defines itself as a party that criticises the AKP's 'authoritarian and hard (*katı*) centralised political and administrative structures' and 'anti-democratic laws imposed under the guise of law'.[14]

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[10] HDP general elections manifesto, June 2015

[11] HDP'li Fırat: ABD tipi başkanlığa karşı değiliz [HDP MP Fırat: We are not against American style presidential system], BBC Türkçe, 4 November 2015.
https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2015/11/151104_hdp_baskanlik_sistemi2.

[12] İşte İmralı görüşmesinin tutanaklarının tam metni! [Here is the minutes of the İmralı meeting!], T24, 28 February 2013. http://t24.com.tr/haber/iste-imralidaki-gorusmenin-tutanaklari,224711.

[13] Selahattin Demirtaş'tan başkanlık sistemi açıklaması [Selahattin Demirtaş's statement on the presidential system], CNN Türk, 5 November 2015. https://www.cnnturk.com/turkiye/selahattin-demirtastan-baskanlik-sistemi-aciklamasi.

[14] HDP general elections manifesto, June 2015.

The Electoral Strategy of HDP

From its outset, the HDP was an elections-focused party. For many radical parties, being election-focused enforces a degree of moderation as parties are forced to work through the existing system (Whiting, 2018). However, interestingly the HDP managed to retain a high degree of radicalism relative to other parties competing in the system while still performing well in elections. It did this by appealing to three sets of potential voters in addition to its core: conservative voters of ethnic Kurdish descent who previously supported the AKP, voters of Kurdish descent who had emigrated to urban centres around the country, and liberal-secular non-Kurdish voters who had grown tired of the AKP (Grigoriadis, 2016). To appeal to these wide ranging groups, the party embraced a new strategy that came to be known as "*Türkiyelile me*" in the 2014 local and presidential elections and the 2015 general elections. This built on an earlier argument by Abdullah Öcalan that Kurdish political movements should seek to appeal to the whole of Turkey and avoid being reduced solely to the Kurdish issue. For example, during the 2014 presidential elections, the HDP leader Demirta 's campaign was based around an appeal to the frustrations of workers, environmentalists, women, LGBTQ groups, youth, and the Kurdish community.[15]

The new strategy brought HDP significant electoral success. Not only did HDP's vote share increase, but it did so by attracting votes from parts of the country outside the Kurdish-populated southeast. In the 2014 presidential election, Demirta competed and gained the 9.8 per cent of the vote, doubling the votes for the pro-Kurdish party outside the south eastern provinces. This was seen as an indicator of the possibility of HDP passing the 10 per cent national electoral threshold to enter parliament. Therefore in the June 2015 general elections, the HDP decided to enter as a party rather than through independent candidates, as HDP's predecessors had done in a bid to circumvent the threshold. This risk paid off, making it the first Kurdish political party to pass the electoral threshold (winning 13.1 per cent of the vote share and 80 parliamentary seats), and as a result the AKP failed to achieve parliamentary majority to form a single-party government for the first time since 2002.

The wider political context of the Kurdish peace talks enabled HDP's electoral success. The democratic opening initiative allowed the Kurdish issue to be relatively normalised and discussed in the public domain without fear of persecution or heavy judgement in western parts of Turkey. This political atmosphere was aided by the ceasefire between the PKK and the Turkish army and the talks between Öcalan and the Turkish government (which the HDP were facilitating) provided some degree of legitimacy to the HDP to join the political competition at a national level in order to enter the parliament (Cavanaugh and Hughes, 2015). Of course, these openings were later to be undone by the AKP after concerns over its electoral stake and wider regional dynamics stemming from the Syrian civil war (Çiçek, 2018; Kaya and Whiting, 2016).

The HDP's success was also the outcome of key contingent factors. Frustrations with the AKP's rule among the electorate living in western Turkey and in large cities, combined with the ineffectiveness of the CHP opposition, aided their cause. The Gezi protests provided a constituency that the HDP eventually chose to court. Dovetailing with this was frustration among some moderate and liberal voters towards restrictions on

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[15] Işte Selahattin Demirta 'in seçim sloganı [Here is Selahattin Demirta ' election slogan]. CNN Türk, 15 July, 2014. https://www.cnnturk.com/haber/turkiye/iste-selahattin-Demirta in-secim-slogani.

political discussion combined with state infringements into the private sphere and the imposition of a particular form of Islam. Policies on women's rights and gender equality, LGBTQ rights, the environment, and criticisms of the AKP's concentration of power, all suddenly chimed. Demirta 's declaration to Erdo an that "we shall not make you president" ["*seni ba kan yaptırmayaca ız*"] was a defining moment in the June 2015 elections. It had become clear to voters who would not necessarily vote for a Kurdish party but whose reservations about the AKP were stronger, that if the HDP passed the 10 per cent nationwide electoral threshold, it would jeopardise the AKP's overall majority position in the parliament.

The HDP and the PKK

Yet amidst the HDP's self-espoused radical democracy and positioning itself as the best hope for the future of rights in Turkey, lies its uncomfortable relationship with the PKK. Indeed Erdo an identifying this as a way to turn voters against the HDP and to justify a heavily securitized clamp-down on Kurdish politics, has constantly emphasized the links between the two groups. Erdo an labelled Demirta a 'terrorist' and declared that Demirta had 'encouraged my Kurdish brothers to spill onto the streets and thus caused 53 of my Kurdish brothers to be killed by other Kurds. That is only one of his crimes'.[16] Binali Yıldırım, prime minister of Turkey from 2016-2018, accused the HDP of diverting state money for local municipalities towards funding terrorism.[17] Alongside this, the AKP constantly linked the HDP to the PKK, reducing the HDP to a terrorist organisation and using the state to respond accordingly. Of course, the HDP denies any links with the PKK and asserts that it does not condone violence. Demirta declared in response to accusations that the PKK was guiding the HDP's strategy during the peace initiatives that 'throughout my political career, I have never received any instructions from a member or an executive of the PKK. I would not have accepted it even if I received such an instruction'.[18]

The reality is somewhat more ambiguous than either side portrays. It would be going too far to claim that the HDP is merely the political front for the PKK and it appears to be a more autonomous organisation that this. Levels of cross and dual membership and the coordination of tactical platforms falls somewhat short of what was seen between Sinn Féin and the IRA, for example (albeit that is not to deny any coordination or membership overlaps). However, there can be little doubt of strong ideological links between the two groups and high levels of sympathy. Indeed, the HDP's core policy of decentralisation originates with Öcalan's notion of 'democratic confederalism' as a solution for the conflict whilst still retaining Turkey's existing borders. Additionally, HDP parliamentarians have carried coffins at PKK fighters' funerals; when being escorted from parliament some HDP members chanted in Kurmanji 'Long Live Apo' (a reference to Öcalan); many HDP representatives have given speeches espousing the same interpretation of the conflict as the PKK and condoning PKK attacks; and, HDP

[16] Jailed HDP co-Chair Slams Erdo an over Terrorist Claims. *Hurriyet Daily News*, 10 July 2017. http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/jailed-hdp-co-chair-demirtas-slams-erdogan-over-terrorist-claims-115318.

[17] Turkish PM: Opposition HDP Funding 'Terror'. *Al Jazeera*, 6 November 2016. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/11/turkish-pm-opposition-hdp-funding-terror-161106125444256.html.

[18] Demirta Testimony Sheds Light on Turkeys Recent History. *Ahval* 13 April 2018. https://ahvalnews.com/selahattin-demirtas/demirtass-testimony-sheds-light-turkeys-recent-history.

leaders gave open support for the PKK-affiliated PYD's (Democratic Union Party) struggle in northern Syria. While the PKK also denies any firm organisational links, it encourages its supporters to vote and rally behind the HDP.[19]

Clearly the HDP's vision of democracy is distinct from the AKP's and in many respects it has been defined directly in opposition to it. Whilst it is more consensus and rights based, the strategic nature of the HDP's democratic vision should not be dismissed either. The party continues to have an ambivalent relationship with the PKK, which limits its credibility to be seen as the best democratic hope for the future of Turkey, a relationship that has been exploited by the AKP. There are different factions within the HDP with different perceptions towards the PKK and its ideology. Several HDP members consider the PKK as an inherent component of the Kurdish political movement. PKK leaders have emphasised the role of their struggle over decades in bringing the Kurdish political movement and the HDP to its current position. Therefore, the HDP leadership is in a difficult position; it cannot simply ignore the PKK and its role in the Kurdish political movement, but nor can it accept the PKK's role, even if it wanted to, due to articles in the penal code regarding terrorism and supporting terrorism.

The end of the ceasefire and resumption of the conflict between the PKK and Turkish military forces has exacerbated the dilemma for the HDP's leadership. At the same time, HDP lost credibility as a pro-democracy party due to its attempts at de facto local governance led by PKK militants in parts of the southeast. This led to questions about the HDP's real intentions in the promotion of radical democracy; political rivals began to question whether their radical democracy agenda was for the sake of democracy or simply a strategy to create the context for increased Kurdish rule in the southeast at the expense of non-Kurdish citizens.[20] Indeed, it has been reported that some of the Democratic Regions Party (DBP)[21] mayors carried out exclusionary policies in the provision of services and alienated non-Kurdish residents in their towns.[22]

A key factor that led to such questioning was the ambivalent position adopted by some of the party's mayors. Claims were made that they: facilitated digging trenches during the conflict between the PKK and Turkish security forces in the southeast in 2015, attended funerals of PKK members and allowed the declaration of autonomous rule in some districts and towns.[23] Another important factor is the processes in which candidates for local elections were chosen. Having a family member who had fought and died as a PKK militant and sacrificed himself/herself for the cause was considered in the selection of the candidates.[24]

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[19] Murat Karayılan, co-leader of the PKK, called on Kurds to vote for the HDP in the 2018 general election. Terörist başı Karayılan HDP'ye oy istedi [Terrorist leader Karayilan called to vote for the HDP]. *Hürriyet,* 20 June 2018. http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/terorist-basi-karayilan-hdpye-oy-istedi-40872980.

[20] Interviews with representatives of the local branches of political parties (including MHP, AKP, HDP and CHP) in the Van province, 2015-2017

[21] DBP is HDP's sister party, active in areas where large Kurdish populations live. DBP is mainly active in local elections.

[22] International Crisis Group. (2017). Managing Turkey's PKK Conflict: The Case of Nusaybin. Report No: 243, 2 May.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Interviews with representatives of the local branches of political parties (including MHP, AKP, HDP and CHP) in the Van province, 2015-2017.

Conclusion

The conflict between the AKP in power and Kurdish nationalism is often reduced to a conflict over territory, competing nationalisms or regional security. While undoubtedly all these dimensions are significant, what has been overlooked to date is how this conflict also represents a clash over the legitimate nature and direction of democracy in Turkey. From this perspective, the conflict becomes all the more embedded and salient because it represents a clash between the AKP's vision of a majoritarian democracy that concentrates unchecked power in the hands of its leader, Erdoğan, and which has descended into electoral authoritarianism, and the HDP's vision of a rights-based democracy that seeks to challenge the established ruling order in a fundamental way. Yet this dichotomy should not be taken to imply the HDP are automatically normative liberal democratic actors (although this should not be dismissed either). Both parties approach democracy strategically. HDP's initially fluid position on the question of presidential system and its ambivalent relationship with the violent strands of the Kurdish movement, such as the PKK raises questions about HDP's claim to be a non-territorial party of Turkey and its claim to uphold pluralistic democracy.

For the AKP, the people should express their preferences once every electoral cycle, which then empowers a ruling party to govern according to its preferences free of checks and oversight. Its democratic vision is essentially about empowering a party to rule, not checking or inhibiting their exercise of power. It is possible to trace how in the Turkish context of weak pre-existing institutions, a history of suppression of Islamist actors, threats to depose them from power, and a sense of paternalism and desire for power, the AKP took this understanding to its extreme and used it to justify their descent into electoral authoritarianism.

The HDP meanwhile see democracy as revolving around minorities and securing their rights and recognition, as well as checking the power of the centre ideally through decentralization. Yet this commitment to widespread rights and replacing the pursuit of separatism with a call for decentralization is a relatively new development. It appears to be adopted at least as much to advance their vote share and forward the Kurdish issue by proxy as it is based on any overriding commitment to equality.

All this raises the question of how we should appraise the role of the HDP's political participation and its consequences for Turkey's democracy. The biggest consequence of the HDP's successful touting of their vision of democracy was to unleash a backlash from the AKP in an effort to shore up its electoral power. The rise of the PYD rule in Syria and the PYD's commitment to Öcalan's democratic confederalism, a model and ideology both the PKK and HDP adheres, threatened the AKP (Kaya and Lowe 2016). Securing an electoral majority is fundamental to the thinking of the AKP and central to its political thinking and power. Therefore, the HDP's success had the effect of increasing polarisation at the elite level. Given the long-standing tendency in Turkish politics for ruling parties to conflate their interests with those of the state, this has enabled the AKP to label the Kurdish issue a security threat and adopt a militant response accordingly. In other words, it is largely business as usual and the AKP, after exploring the possibility of a Kurdish opening, have now followed the same pattern of arrest, detention and suppression that many of their predecessors in power pursued against Kurdish nationalism.

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