

Turkey: Twelve dead and hundreds injured in Kurdish protests

Justus Leicht
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During the past week, violent protests and demonstrations have taken place in the predominantly Kurdish southeast of Turkey, particularly in the regional metropolis of Diyarbakir. On Monday, 12 demonstrators were shot dead by security forces, including three children. More than 300 people were injured, including over 100 policemen. Several hundred Kurds were arrested, and in Diyarbakir and other southeastern cities, the Turkish army intervened with armoured vehicles.

The protests erupted following the funeral last Tuesday of 14 members of the Kurdish nationalist guerrilla organisation, the PKK (Kurdish Workers Party). The victims had been killed in the course of a large-scale offensive by the Turkish army after the traditional Kurdish Newroz festival. Kurdish nationalists accused the army of using chemical weapons.

After the funeral, thousands of demonstrators set police cars on fire and broke windows. On the following days attacks were repeatedly launched against government buildings, the party offices of the fascist MHP (Grey Wolves), and the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP), as well as banks, private businesses and vehicles. The police initially responded with tear gas, but is alleged then to have shot into the crowd. One day later, army tanks rolled into the city.

According to Osman Baydemir, the mayor of Diyarbakir and a member of the legal Kurdish-nationalist DTP (Democratic Turkey Party), more than 100 persons were treated in hospitals last Wednesday with gunshot wounds. “We have enough martyrs,” Baydemir said in an attempt to calm down the agitated crowd. He criticised the lack of any peaceful solution of the Kurdish question. On Thursday, he faced legal action because he had referred to the “courage” of those protesting and had spoken of “martyrs.” At the same time, the disturbances spread to other cities in southeast Turkey.

On Thursday, the protests escalated at the funerals of

demonstrators, at which an estimated 100,000 participated. Once again, protesters were killed. Children threw stones and incendiaries against tanks and policemen who responded by shooting back. Three children—aged three, seven and nine years—were killed by police bullets. Nevertheless, government and the media praised the “moderation” of the security forces.

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan of the moderate Islamic AKP had been violently criticised by Turkish nationalists one year ago because he acknowledged the existence of a “Kurdish problem,” which he said should be solved with increased democracy and pluralism. Erdogan has now reacted to criticism with a sharp lurch to the right. He praised the security forces, condemned the words used by Baydemir and even justified the shooting of children.

Erdogan warned parents against leaving their children on the streets during demonstrations. “If you cry tomorrow, it will be in vain,” Anadolu News Agency quoted him as saying. “The security forces will intervene against the pawns of terrorism, no matter if they are children or women. Everybody should realise that.”

In Istanbul, an obscure group naming itself the Kurdistan Liberation Hawks (TAK) carried out a bomb attack. A poor street vendor was killed and several persons injured. The TAK, whose links to the PKK remain unclear, pointed to the force used by the state in the southeast to justify this act of terrorism against innocent civilians. Three people were killed in Istanbul late Sunday after being struck by a bus that had been attacked by a group of men throwing Molotov cocktails. The three, including two elderly women, died when the driver of a bus in Istanbul’s Bagcilar district reversed his vehicle after fire bombs were thrown through the windows by a group of unidentified assailants. According to press reports, following the attack a group gathered chanting slogans in support of the PKK.

The Turkish press has uniformly held the PKK responsible for the protests. While this is possible, it neither justifies the brutality of the security forces nor explains why those protesting enjoy such broad popular support. In fact, the social situation for large masses of Kurdish workers and poor farmers in southeast Turkey has not improved in recent years. The “free market” economic reforms introduced by the Erdogan government at the behest of the European Union and IMF have resulted in some economic growth, but this in turn has done little to relieve poverty amongst the Kurdish peasant community.

There has also been little improvement for the Kurdish community with regard to cultural rights. Kurdish private television began its first transmissions just last week. A Kurdish language programme is restricted to just one hour a day and must either be translated or accompanied by Turkish subtitles. This represents no competition to Roj TV, a satellite transmitter from Denmark, which is alleged to have called for the recent protests and has links to the PKK. The Turkish government has reacted by calling upon Denmark to close down Roj TV.

The real forces predominating in the Turkish establishment when it comes to the Kurdish question were revealed recently in connection with the Semdinli affair. Last year, Turkish soldiers were implicated in a bomb attack in the southeast Anatolian city of Semdinli, and the local public prosecutor, Ferhat Sarikaya, subsequently requested the indictment of several high-ranking officers.

At the time of the Newroz festival, the Turkish general staff then officially refused to agree to allow proceedings against the head of Turkish ground forces, Yasar Büyükanit, claiming that the public prosecutor had “exceeded his powers.” The proceedings were “without any basis” and “deliberately” introduced to damage the reputation of the Turkish armed forces. According to Turkish law, it is now no longer possible to try Büyükanit.

Last week, it also became clear that no action would be taken against the other accused officers. Instead, a preliminary investigation against public prosecutor Sarikaya is to be undertaken. The head of the police intelligence department, Sabri Uzun, who had testified over the Semdinli incident to a parliamentary committee of inquiry, was relieved of his post. When asked why, prior to the Semdinli attack, his department had not received information about the rising number of bomb attacks in the region, Uzun answered curtly, “If the thief is already in the house, then locks are no good.”

The American government immediately issued a

statement condemning the PKK for terrorism and backing the hard line taken by the Turkish government and military against Kurdish demonstrators. “The United States condemns the bombings by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) that killed four people in Istanbul over the weekend. The United States also regrets the loss of life as a result of violent protests by PKK sympathisers in southeast Turkey and in Istanbul. Turkey is a valued ally and close friend of the United States, and we stand together in our quest for regional stability and democratic reform. The United States calls on all parties to exercise restraint. We reiterate our strong condemnation of all terrorist groups, including the PKK. It is important to condemn this violence and stand against terrorists and their supporters.”

For its part, the PKK is evidently seeking to use the protests to strengthen its negotiating position for an agreement with the Turkish state and is calling upon the European Union to intervene.

In a statement last Tuesday, the party declared: “Although the Kurdish people have made clear at every opportunity their readiness for a democratic and peaceful solution and have suffered many casualties during past years the Turkish state has repeatedly maintained its provocative stance.” The PKK calls upon “the European Union, and in particular the federal government of Germany, to categorically condemn the violence used by Turkey against the Kurds and propose concrete solutions.... [W]e call upon the European Union to recognise their historical responsibility and open the way to dialogue on a solution of the Kurdish question, as it has done in the cases of Ireland and the Basque country.”



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