

## **People's Democracy Party (HDP): A Breath of Fresh Air for the Turkish Opposition?**

Duygu Atlas

The Gezi Park protests this past summer demonstrated the extent of popular dissatisfaction with the ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) and its unilateral mode of governance. Paradoxically, the street protests also illustrated the lack of a viable political alternative to the AKP. Turkey's leading opposition parties - the Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP) and the Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, MHP) - have failed to present a credible alternative to the AKP, which has won overwhelming electoral victories in each of the last three general elections. The People's Democracy Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi, HDP), endorsed by none other than the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi, BDP), has stepped forward and is now attempting to fill the void in the Turkish opposition. The BDP has decided to run under the HDP banner in western Turkey in the upcoming local elections as part of its strategy to extend its electoral base into areas that are not limited to the Kurdishdominated east and southeast. As Turkey readies itself for a busy election schedule with local and general elections on the horizon –in March 2014 and June 2015, respectively –the question that is repeatedly voiced is whether the HDP, with its leftist outlook and close association with the Kurdish political movement, can be a viable alternative to those disenchanted by both the AKP's conservatism and Turkey's main opposition parties.

Although the HDP held its first extraordinary congress in October 2013, its roots lie in the pre-2011 general elections period, which was marked by the BDP's efforts to find a way of bypassing the ten percent electoral threshold. At that time, the BDP had formed the Labor, Democracy and Freedom Bloc (Emek, Demokrasi ve Özgürlük Bloğu) and eventually succeeded in sending 36 representatives to the Turkish Parliament as independents. Following the elections, the Bloc continued its activities as the People's Democratic Congress

(Halkların Demokrasi Kongresi, HDK; also known as Kongre Girişimi). The HDK was established at the behest of imprisoned Kurdish leader, Abdullah Öcalan, as part of his plans to transform the Kurdish political movement into a 'party of Turkey' in order to become a legitimate political actor by shedding its ethnic-based politics. As such, the HDK attempted to incorporate the Kurdish question into the general politics of Turkey and bring together a variety of political organizations under one banner. The HDK includes a variety of minority groups, including Alevis, Armenians, Circassians, Laz, Arabs and Assyrians, as well as feminists, socialists, far-leftist parties, environmental movements, communities for the disabled, and lesbian and gay communities (LTGB). From the very beginning, the HDK has acted as a platform for the political unification of these underrepresented groups and eventually founded the People's Democracy Party (HDP).

The HDP's diverse membership is a clear indication of the plurality that the party claims to represent. If plurality is one central aspect of the party, the emphasis placed on the disadvantaged and oppressed groups, a reflection of its leftist orientation, is another. Four members of the BDP, who transferred their membership to the newly formed HDP, are known for their left-wing positions. For instance, the HDP's co-chair, Ertuğrul Kürkçü, was the president of the socialist Turkey's Revolutionary Youth Federation (DEV-GENÇ) during the 1970s. Women also play a central role in the party administration in the same fashion as its sister party, BDP. This reflects Kurdish women's high level of political activism. The HDP has adopted a co-chairmanship leadership system, which is shared by prominent Kurdish politician Sebahat Tuncel and Ertuğrul Kürkçü. The party has also allocated a ten percent quota for LTGB individuals.

Despite the HDP's diverse appeal, there are a number of obstacles that may stand in the way of its ability to broaden its constituency and challenge the AKP in the coming election cycle. First, it will be difficult to get around the fact that the party is the brainchild of PKK leader Öcalan. His role in the party may be too unpalatable to Turkish liberal voters, whom the party aims to reach. Second is the leftist/socialist tone of the HDP. Leftist parties in Turkey have long been virtually irrelevant in Turkish domestic politics. They have never fully recovered from the state of inertia that followed the Turkish Left's peak during the 1960s and the 1970s. An overemphasis on its leftist underpinnings may prove detrimental to the HDP, as the Turkish public traditionally tends to vote for center-right parties.

Although the HDP aims to unite the Kurdish and Turkish left, the historical resentment of these groups towards one another may also reduce the prospects of the HDP's future success. Nevertheless, it may be worth remembering that the Kurdish nationalist movement had emerged out of Turkish leftist organizations during the 1960s. Modeled after the world youth movements during that period,

these organizations became an important venue for Kurdish political participation. The Turkish Workers Party (Türkiye İşçi Partisi), founded in 1961, whose Marxist message of equality resonated well with the Kurds, quickly became their first choice. The party's inactiveness on the Kurdish issue, however, soon led the Kurds to form their own parties and organizations. The first was the Kurdistan Democratic Party in Turkey (Türkiye Kürdistan Demokrat Partisi, TKDP), which was founded in 1965. The Turkish Left distanced itself from the Kurdish nationalist movement, often remaining ambivalent towards the Kurdish issue. Therefore, there may be those on both sides who are unwilling to be lumped together in the same group. Lastly, it should also be noted that despite having been generally well received by the Kurds, the HDP has caused some divisions within the BDP. For the conservative and Islamist elements within the party, the HDP represents too strong of an integration with the "marginal" Left, and therefore runs the risk of alienating itself from its Kurdish constituency.

Notwithstanding its shortcomings, the HDP may still be able to produce electoral gains, for two reasons. The first is the Gezi Park factor. Although the protests have lost steam and the protestors have thus far failed to become a credible political force that challenge the AKP government, the source of popular dissatisfaction which generated the protests in the first place, and the concomitant need for a competitive opposition party remains an issue. Sırrı Süreyya Önder, who became a highly popular figure during the Gezi Park protests in a manner that transcended ideological affiliation, has been discussed as its potential leader, and is now part of the HDP. His name is mentioned as the HDP's candidate for the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, a point especially worrisome for the main opposition party, the CHP. The latter hopes to snatch the Istanbul municipality from the incumbent AKP with its strong candidate for the position, Mustafa Sarıgül, who enjoys significant popularity in the city. It is feared in opposition circles that two potent opposition candidacies will ultimately play into the hands of the AKP by splitting the vote and thus guaranteeing another AKP victory in Istanbul. A second factor that may draw voters to the HDP is its discourse that articulates the demands for individual and collective rights, rather than simply relying on the force of nationalist sentiments, as in the case of the MHP, or feeding off of secularist fears, as in the case of the CHP.

The HDP's first test is just a few months away, and its success will ultimately depend on its ability to convince a wide range of ideologically split Turkish and Kurdish voters that its message and policies offer a real alternative to the AKP. Despite the hurdles it faces, the HDP has already injected some new life into the heretofore feeble Turkish opposition.

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