

How Turkey began its deadly slide towards civil war*

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Protests in Istanbul after the Attack of Suruç, 26 July 2015. Photo/Birgün

The speed with which Turkey has become engulfed in violence since the Suruç massacre on July 20 2015 is causing mass anxiety in all sections of society.

While public discussion has largely focused on questions of whose fault it is and why the country has suddenly descended into violence, one thing everyone agrees is that the country is passing through an extraordinary period in its history. While the current crisis has much deeper roots, the developments of the past year provide us sufficient clues about why the spiral of violence is likely to continue.

Since Turkey held its first direct presidential election on August 10 2014, the largely ceremonial presidency has become the focus of an intense debate, with the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) still pushing to get more executive power for the president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

The opposition parties won enough votes to deny the AKP the parliamentary majority and mandate it needs to introduce an executive presidential regime. But they have been unable to form an alliance to safeguard the country's parliamentary democracy and secure badly needed democratisation reforms.

With that failure they have handed the initiative back to Erdoğan, who has called fresh elections for November 1 2015 in hopes that the AKP will regain its majority in the parliament.

In contrast to the June election, the November polls will be held amid deep uncertainty and escalating violence. It's by no means certain whether the election can even be held in such a febrile atmosphere, or if it can genuinely reflect the will of the population.

New wave of violence

It's hard to overstate how seriously the situation has deteriorated. The summer of 2015 witnessed the death of the Turkish-Kurdish ceasefire that all parties worked hard to maintain for two and a half years, and the spiral of violence continues to widen.

On 6 August 2015 and 8 August 2015, roadside bombs planted by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Hakkari and Iğdır provinces killed nearly 30 soldiers and police officers. Together with other similar attacks, so far more than 110 security personnel have died.

It is more difficult to verify how many PKK guerrillas have been killed by the Turkish army's operations and air strikes, which have been pummeling both south-eastern Turkey and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. State authorities say there have been more than 800 PKK casualties, but

the PKK has given much lower figures.

Meanwhile, the state's often indiscriminate repression against civilians in Kurdish majority areas has not received due attention. The Turkish government has long sought to clamp down on these areas by creating "special security zones" - under military control - the number of which has been rapidly increasing. The army's heavy-handed response to the youth who dug ditches and built checkpoints in various districts has resulted in many civilian deaths.

That has been particularly true in Cizre, where more than 20 civilians were killed by the army and special police forces during the 8 days the town remained under curfew and cut off from the outside world. The mayor of the town, Leyla Imret, who received the support of the 83% of the electorate, was removed from her position by the Interior Ministry on September 11 2015.

The end of the peace narrative

The ever-harsher measures against the PKK and the commitment to securing its demise have been sold to the wider population through the pro-government media. The funeral ceremonies of security personnel killed in the violence have been turned into public spectacles.

Turkey's president and prime minister have continually stated the need to continue the operations against the PKK, and at the same time have popularised the idea that the pro-Kurdish opposition party (HDP) is also a culprit.

The current environment is a far cry from the optimism and hope that the HDP's spectacular success in the June elections generated. In the government's pronouncements, the HDP is bundled together with the PKK and blamed for the Turkish casualties.



The burnt HDP headoffice in Ankara, 9 September 2015, Photo/HDP

Pro-government and nationalist mobs have attacked and looted HDP offices across the country. Several offices of the party, including its headquarters in Ankara, were set on fire. Such attacks are likely to continue during the election campaign; their overall objective is to marginalise the HDP and keep it under the 10% election threshold in order to guarantee an AKP majority in the parliament.

Several Kurdish businesses were also targeted by mob attacks. A young Kurdish man was knifed to death by Turkish nationalists in Istanbul after being overheard speaking in Kurdish.

Unpredictable consequences

The AKP has backing from the army and the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) in its attempts to defeat the PKK militarily, while at the same time intensifying its efforts to suppress the broader pro-Kurdish movement. However, both the scale and spread of violence may yet be far more than anything Turkey has seen in the past decade.

Whether the election dynamics will change in the AKP's favour is not absolutely certain. Its nationalist rhetoric is certain to garner parliamentary votes from the MHP, but whether it will be enough to secure a big majority needed to introduce the presidential regime is highly unlikely.

What is more, the AKP's resort to a more aggressive Turkish nationalism will push Kurdish voters

even further away from the political mainstream. As the mob attacks indicate, communal violence against the Kurds threatens to reach a shockingly high level, and will soon start doing irreparable damage to Turkish-Kurdish relations.

Throughout recent weeks, the HDP has been calling for the resumption of the stalled peace process. The PKK indicated that it is willing to end its violence if the government ends its military operations, but the government shows no sign it will compromise or soften its attitude.

In previous such stand-offs, the PKK took measures to de-escalate the conflict. But such moves were initiated by PKK's imprisoned leader Abdullah Öcalan, who has been barred from receiving any visitors since April 2015.

With no such intervention on the horizon, it's difficult to see how a breakthrough can be achieved — and if there's no breakthrough soon, Turkey's slide towards civil conflict will only quicken.

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