



# President Erdogan's Discourse on the Kurdish Issue

Ayşe İrem Aycan Özer

Bogazici University  
Marmara University

**Abstract:** The article analyzes Turkey's changing regime of ethnicity between 2004 and 2019. Turkey is a multiethnic republic that used assimilation as the key policy in its early days to create the nation-state. The Kurds, as the most populous ethnic minority, had suffered the most. The ethnic anti-minority regime was reflected in the discourse of state officials. The ethnicity regime changed only after the Justice and Development Party came to power. The state authorities acknowledged Kurds as a distinct ethnic minority, admitted the previous human rights violations, and tried to make up for past mistakes. The article reviews the evolution of the ethnicity regime through analysis of its official discourse from initially being anti-minority and through tumultuous changes to the current inclusive one. It focuses on analyzing President Erdogan's public speeches in Diyarbakir. The main finding of the article is that when the state moved away from anti-minority policies towards the Kurds, President's discourse became more inclusive. Previous studies acknowledged the agency of the state as the determining power behind changing the regime of ethnicity. The second significant contribution of this study is that organized minority groups have an independent agency; their actions significantly contributed to changing the regime of ethnicity.

**Keywords:** nation-state, state-building, ethnic minorities, regimes of ethnicity, human rights, discourse analysis, anti-ethnic regimes, multiethnic regimes, regime change

In Turkey, since the Republican period, assimilation has been the fundamental policy towards ethnic minorities. Only with the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in government do we see a change in the state discourse, which started to acknowledge Kurds as a distinct ethnic minority from the Turks, admitted the human rights violations committed by the state, and tried to make up for past mistakes. The 'Kurdish Opening' and 'Peace Process' initiatives began in 2009. They were the cornerstones of changing policies toward Kurds in Turkey. The positive change has become

UDC: 323.2, 327

Received: November 12, 2022

Accepted: January 27, 2023

evident after 2015. How did the government's reconciliatory approach to the Kurdish issue change? What are its implications in the state discourse that can be observed in the rhetoric of the President? These questions are essential because they are politically relevant, and there is only sporadic coverage of the topic in scholarly publications. The discourse analysis of the President's speeches provides an essential insight, directly reflecting the state policies.

The article covers the period from 2004 to 2019. Following the literature review, it traces the state policies toward the Kurds since the Republic's early days. The following section explains the new ethnicity policies after AKP came to power and how changes in official discourse accompanied it. The discourse analysis focuses on the rhetoric of President Erdogan, specifically on his speeches at public meetings in Diyarbakır since 2004. As there have been no recent public meetings due to the pandemic, the article takes the 2019 meeting as the latest one.

### Literature Review

State-building and nation-building processes followed a similar trend in many multicultural societies after the end of the First World War when empires were dissolved and replaced by nation-states. Integrating different ethnic groups became a central problem for the new political elite. Historically states exercised many ways to form a nation-state, from genocide, forced population exchanges, partition, and secession to integration or assimilation (O'Leary, McGarry 1993: 4). The Nazis used the genocide of Jews and population transfers, while the USA practiced the genocide of Native Americans and the integration of Europeans. The state policies revoked the ethnic consciousness of minorities. The subsequent decades inherited problems emanating from the past. This case was no different for Kurds in the Turkish Republic. Denying their ethnic identity and the assimilation policies created severe human rights violations in Turkey.

Radical social restructuring of the state cannot produce the intended effects when it lacks the administrative capacity to transform minority groups and integrate them into the social and political system. Centralizing and assimilation policies lead to the growing ethnic consciousness since the peripheral communities see state encroachment as hostile. They form their own group identity as they see their inferiority and the disadvantages they have to endure (Brown 1994: 51). Although state policies intend to ensure national unity through homogenization, this culminates in dissensus (Brown 1994: 77). Assimilation policies create severe ethnic problems, such as defensive ethnic solidarity, ethnic separation, or rebellion (Brown 1994: 3).

In her study of Latin American countries, Hooker analyzes how states move from denial of certain groups to acceptance. The spread of rights to different racial groups was adopted in Latin America not to eliminate political threats to national stability but because elites wanted to increase their "national-democratic legitimacy during periods of transition from authoritarianism" (Hooker 2005: 299). It was achieved by making

the constitution more ethnically inclusionary and granting rights to different groups. The aim was to promote the nation's unity through references to democracy and values of participation, inclusion, and tolerance (Van Cott 2000b: 278). The decision to grant rights to different groups was motivated by the fact that such groups could prove their distinct cultural identity, differentiating them from the rest of society. Hence, in Latin America, regimes of ethnicity were shaped by the demands of such groups' cultural differences and identities (Hooker 2005: 300). D.L. Van Cott (Van Cott 2000b: 263) sees this as the states' attempt to correct the past exclusionary practices. Argentina, Brazil, Peru, and Venezuela set examples of the multicultural model by formally recognizing the indigenous people, accepting their customary law as official, giving the local languages an official status, and permitting bilingual education (Van Cott 2000a: 42).

In his study, Ş. Aktürk (Aktürk 2011: 115) investigates "persistence and change in state policies toward ethnicity." He believes states can have three kinds of ethnicity regimes, which are monoethnic, multiethnic, and anti-ethnic. Monoethnic regimes restrict citizenship to one ethnicity, which can be observed in Germany before 1999 (Aktürk 2011: 118). After 1999, in Germany, *jus soli* was introduced at birth, which relatively liberalized the regime in terms of its citizenship law (Hepburn, Zapata-Barrero 2014: 53). It did not become thoroughly liberal and inclusionary because dual citizenship was not exactly tolerated and the mandatory integration test was seen as unnecessarily complicated, making it challenging for inclusion of people from ethnically diverse backgrounds (Hepburn, Zapata-Barrero 2014: 61). Apart from monoethnic regimes, there are also anti-ethnic regimes. When a state has citizens from ethnically different backgrounds but does not legally recognize their ethnic diversity and even prevents its public expression, it is identified as an anti-ethnic regime, such as Turkey before 2004 and France (Aktürk 2011: 199). When the state is inclusive of all ethnic groups and has no limit on the expression of differences and no policy of assimilation, then the state has a multiethnic regime. The Soviet Union, Canada, India, and many Latin American countries are examples of this. Although positive changes in state policy in recognizing ethnic groups and granting them basic rights are possible, "an entire regime change is scarce in modern history" (Aktürk 2011: 123). The Bolsheviks established a multiethnic regime with affirmative action policies, so the Soviet Union was labeled an affirmative action empire (Terry 2001). Internal passports during Soviet rule included the ethnicity of the individual. Only several years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, passport ethnicity was revoked. Autonomous republics with their flags and official languages also continued to exist in the Russian Federation (Aktürk 2012:11). In the case of Nicaragua, for instance, Gordon claimed that changes in the state policy from denial to acceptance of different ethnic groups were determined by the changes in the national discourse (Gordon 1998: 121). While prior to the change in state attitude, indigenous people were seen as backward, their contribution to the contemporary national identity was later acknowledged (Gordon 1998: 122). Even the terms adopted to describe such groups were changed due to the change in state discourse (Gordon 1998: 122).

H. Alptekin (Alptekin 2017: 2673) divides ethnic incorporation modes into four categories. States can adopt a civic assimilation policy in which individual-level political participation is accepted, similar to Aktürk's anti-ethnic regime. The regime is called consociationalism when there is no barrier to group-level participation. If both individual and group-level political participation is permitted, it constitutes liberal multiculturalism, which in terms of political rights is similar to Aktürk's multiethnic regime type. Lastly, it is called ethnocracy, when neither individual nor group-level political participation is allowed. Ethnocracy prevents the members of the ethnic group from forming their parties and interest groups and hinders any other kind of social participation (Alptekin 2017: 2679).

Changes in regimes of ethnicity are not unknown. In the case of Bulgaria, the Turks experienced three different regimes. Before 1984, the state used civic assimilation to incorporate Turks, but between 1984–1989, the state policy took an ethnocratic turn, aiming to repress the ethnic minority (Alptekin 2017: 2683). From 1990, the state adopted liberal multiculturalism and enabled multiethnic or non-ethnic political participation by opening the way for peaceful mobilization and allowing the group's inclusion in political life (Alptekin 2017: 2683).

S. Brake (Brake 2018: 448) identifies Israel as a state of ethnic stratification since it treats its Arab citizens as second-class citizens, and there is no civic equality. It is also characterized as an ethnonational state which recognizes Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people. Arab citizens' parliamentary representation and the discrimination they are exposed to in everyday life are limited. Passing discriminatory laws in the Knesset is not an exceptional practice. In the 1950s, the Knesset tried to limit the representation of Arab citizens in parliament. In the 1980s, when Arabs started to found their own parties, it enacted laws to restrict their representation (Brake 2018: 452). Only those who recognize Israel as a democratic and Jewish state could run in the elections. Delegitimization of Arab citizens of Israel and smearing campaigns against their representatives are a common practice that involves an attrition campaign towards the ethnic group (Brake 2018: 457).

The South African apartheid regime is another example of a change in state policies. The existing structure and state policies were so ingrained, and the government policies were so rationalized that it was hard to alter them. P. Christie (Christie 2006) mentions how an educational change occurred but also underlines the policy changes that occurred with the post-apartheid regime. It was incumbent to change the education provision in order to replace the assumption of the apartheid about racial superiority (Christie 2006: 378). F. Clercq (Clercq 1997: 127) analyzes in detail the restructuring policies of the government after 1994. With the new government in 1994, the idea was to dismantle apartheid education with 19 ethnically based departments, and then new national policies were then developed to integrate different groups (Christie 2006: 379). Hence, South Africa tried to radically change the discourse of its citizenry, which primarily involved changing the state regime.

## Methodology and Research Design

In explaining the changes in the regimes of ethnicity, the literature focuses on the state's social, cultural, and political initiatives. However, when states must deal with an armed faction of the ethnic group, they must work on the military front. As an armed faction makes up half of the ethnic group's struggle, it has to be dealt with carefully. This is why a change in the regimes of ethnicity must be analyzed on two fronts. One is the sociocultural initiatives taken by the state, both legally and politically, working for formal recognition of the fundamental rights of the ethnic community, their political participation, the right to form their political parties, etc. The other involves seeking a peaceful resolution, which requires the termination of the military struggle with the armed group claiming to secure the rights of the ethnic community. In that regard, the political inclusion of the group is undoubtedly essential, but the armed wing of the ethnic group, if there is one, has to come to terms with the idea of peace. When an armed group is part of the whole process, a state cannot be successful by only working on one front, which is the political wing of the ethnic minority. When Aktürk mentions how changes in regimes of ethnicity can occur, he is looking at one level, the state level. As he made his study before the Resolution Process, the negotiations' role in changing the regime of ethnicity was not part of his analysis. However, after 2013, this became highly relevant to the study of the topic. Therefore, the changes in the regimes of ethnicity require a two-level analysis, which requires including the group level in the equation. Hence, apart from the state, the second set of actors in this paper is the group which consists of the People's Democratic Party (HDP)<sup>1</sup> and PKK. The decisions and actions of the group and state influence each other, and whether or not the parties continue to meet the conditions required for positive change determines the path that the regime of ethnicity will follow: will it become more inclusive or exclusive?

The article starts with a historical analysis and then explains how the regime of ethnicity changed during the AKP governments. Providing a brief overview of state policies toward the Kurdish population shows the change in the regime of ethnicity. Whereas the regimes of ethnicity changed for the better with reforms on political and social fronts, the process halted with the end of the Resolution Process in the summer of 2015. The critical juncture is, therefore, the end of the Resolution Process between the state and the PKK. This sequence of events observed a change in the state discourse. Discourse analysis of President Erdogan's speeches, who has been the Prime Minister of Turkey during most of the process, shows the change in official rhetoric. The President's speeches in Diyarbakır constitute the bulk of the discourse analysis.

---

<sup>1</sup> Although other small political parties claim to represent the Kurdish minority, HDP is the most notable one active in Turkish political life under different names.

The research design employed in this article considers the specific historical and political conditions of the Kurdish community and Turkey. Extending this research design beyond this case requires considering whether the ethnic group has a political and military wing. If the ethnic minority lacks channels of violent or peaceful communication, the unit of analysis will exclusively be the state. States may not always be dealing with an armed faction when they attempt to change their regime of ethnicity.

### **Regimes of Ethnicity toward Kurds in Turkey**

The founders of the Turkish Republic intended to create a nation-state with a homogenous society (Yavuz 1997: 64). Many identity groups, left from the multicultural Ottoman Empire, formed a heterogeneous character of Turkish society. The state's secular ideology was expected to eradicate religious elements from the public sphere and replace Islam with humanism (Yavuz 1997: 65). The ethnic and religious minority groups tried to be assimilated. The state faced a formidable challenge in assimilating various groups and establishing its ideology as the hegemonic one to be internalized by every single group. This state agenda, however, faced the most significant challenge from the most populous minority group, the Kurds. The Kurds constitute a large population that is concentrated in Eastern Turkey. However, their ethnic and linguistic attributes also differed from the Turks (Cagaptay 2006: 19). The state adopted “a repressive policy towards Kurdish identity: the public use of Kurdish and the teaching of Kurdish were prohibited”. Although the state was unsuccessful in its attempt, it became a point of contention for Kurds. The secularizing agenda of the state was also a cause of disappointment for the Kurds (Bozarslan 2008: 334). When Mustafa Kemal, the founder of the Republic, launched his radical secularization program and substituted Turkish nationalism for Islam as the primary source of political legitimacy and collective identity, the order of the day became the assimilation of the Kurds (Cagaptay 2006: 20-24). The denial to grant fundamental human rights to the Kurdish population and the suppression of their political, linguistic, and cultural rights created a severe ethnic problem for decades.

The Republican era adopted an exclusive Turkish nationalism. State exclusion and state interference in the daily lives of the Kurdish population led to its radicalization (Aslan 2014: 114-115). Kurds were considered easily assimilable elements to Turkish identity (Cagaptay 2006: 22). It produced solid Kurdish nationalism, which took the form of several successive armed uprisings in the early Republican period. These were harshly suppressed, the state forcefully evacuated Kurdish villages, and Kurdish people were arbitrarily put in prison, contributing even more to a radicalized Kurdish nationalism (O'Neil 2007: 76). The policies were consistently exclusionary during the one-party regime of the Republican People's Party (RPP); with the multi-party era, the state

---

<sup>2</sup> Zürcher E.J. 1994. *Turkey: A Modern History*. London: IB Tauris. P. 170.



was pushed to soften its policies. When the DP came to power, a significant change in state policies followed, and intrusion into the South Eastern territories was reduced:

“This period also brought the integration of the traditional Kurdish power centers into political parties and the parliament. The abandonment of the makeover project and the state's withdrawal from regulating Kurdish daily life led to a period of relative quiet among the Kurdish masses until the military coup of 1980” (Aslan 2014: 114-115).

The state's traditional approach toward the Kurds was resumed after the coup. Ever since the nation-state was established, the government's stance and policies toward the Kurdish community have not radically changed. The denial of the Kurds' existence and intolerance of their demands continued to be the central policy (Yıldız 2012: 152). The brutalities they faced mobilized some Kurds to construct a militant identity that led to the formation of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) during the peak of repressiveness and authoritarianism in the 1980s. Thus, the state's policies marginalized Kurds and caused “serious human rights abuses, violent conduct and killings, and leading to an ongoing conflict between the state and the PKK” (Yıldız 2012: 152).

It was unthinkable for Kurdish political parties to exist in Turkish politics for a long time. Any party with a Kurdish nationalist constituency was either shut down immediately after they appeared on the Turkish political scene or shortly afterward, with accusations of violating the constitution. Hence, the state left very little room for Kurds to participate in politics, and they were active under the roof of other political parties without challenging the hegemonic ideology of the state. Those who did challenge it, like the Workers' Party of Turkey, were informed that the Kurdish issue was closed because it advocated separatism (O'Neil 2007: 77).

The liberal constitution of 1961 allowed publications in Kurdish; however, such materials were frequently banned, and their writers were also accused of separatism, especially when they touched on the Kurdish issue (O'Neil 2007: 76). Assimilation of Kurdish children was facilitated with a law that was passed in 1961, to establish boarding schools where they were forced to communicate in Turkish (McDowall 2000: 404). Later, in 1967, the cultural rights given in 1961 were taken back with a law prohibiting importing and distributing Kurdish publications (McDowall 2000: 404).

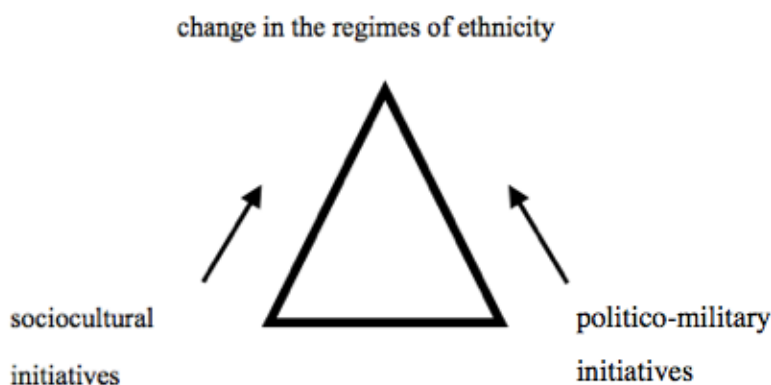
In 1979, the Kurdish politician Şerafettin Elçi said: “Kurds exist in Turkey, and I am a Kurd.” After the coup on September 12, 1980, he was sentenced for this statement to 39 months in prison and banned from politics for ten years. Some authors, regardless of whether they were Kurdish or Turkish, were put in prison for writing books about the Kurds<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> See (Straw 2013: 27), where David Straw mentions Ismail Besikci, a Turk of ethnic descent who was imprisoned for writing *International Colony Kurdistan*. P. 27.

Only after the 1990s the word "Kurd" was started to be used openly. During his term, Prime Minister Ozal suggested a federal system to be discussed as a solution to the Kurdish issue, but this did not happen (Straw 2013: 138). Ozal abolished the ban on the Kurdish language, but immediately after his death, publication in Kurdish and circulation of such materials was prohibited again. In 1993, then-Prime Minister Demirel said: "We acknowledge the Kurdish reality"<sup>4</sup> but this was all. There were no attempts to recognize Kurds as a distinct ethnic community and grant them rights. With the AKP in government, the state, for the first time, did not see the Kurdish issue solely as a security problem but as something to be dealt with on sociocultural, economic, legal, and political fronts. The following section will examine the period of AKP and the changes that took place in terms of regimes of ethnicity.

### The Change during the AKP

Regimes of ethnicity can change for better or worse. While a state can work to increase the inclusiveness of an ethnic group by moving on to a more multiethnic regime type, affirmative actions and rights granted can also be suspended or withdrawn. When this happens, social and political improvements can take a downturn. In Turkey, regimes of ethnicity started to change in two respects during the AKP. One involved the sociocultural changes undertaken by the state, and the other involved abandoning military means (See Figure 1). So while we look at how Kurdish rights were improved under AKP rule, we should not disregard how things were settled on the PKK-Turkish state front. The negotiations with the PKK and reforms for recognizing the basic rights of Kurds enabled the change in the ethnic regime. While improvements on both fronts were promising, especially after 2015, political and social reforms stopped, and military measures resumed. Thus, the AKP period witnessed an improvement in the situation, but it was followed by a period of deterioration.



*Figure 1. Changes in the regime of ethnicity before 2015.*

<sup>4</sup> "Kürt realitesini tanıyoruz." This in-text translation and all other translations are by the article's author.



Kurds expressing themselves in their mother language has always been seen as a problem. Granting linguistic rights was essential to their recognition as a distinct ethnic community. In 2004, TRT 3 started morning broadcasts in Kurdish and several other minority languages (Sessiz Devrim... 2014: 117). This was a minor improvement attempt, followed by the establishment of a state TV channel exclusively broadcasting in Kurdish: TRT Kurdi (also known as TRT Şeş). Besides acknowledging the importance of the Kurdish language, the channel also employed Kurdish speakers on state television. It was also significant because the state attempted to provide Kurdish citizens access to information through a state TV station. During the 2012-2013 academic year, minority languages were offered elective courses entitled "Living Languages and Dialects" in secondary schools (Sessiz Devrim... 2014: 120). The first Kurdish studies institute was opened at Mardin Artuklu University at the Department of Kurdish language and culture (Sessiz Devrim... 2014: 117). Subsequently, eight universities launched programs for the Kurdish language and its different dialects.

The state began to abandon its assimilationist, homogenizing, and a scornful attitude toward the Kurds. In 1983, the law on Population Registration banned parents from giving their children Kurdish names.<sup>5</sup> In 2003, the law was changed to let people name their children as they wished. With the promulgation of the Law on Establishment and Broadcasting Services of Radio and Television in 2009, 14 TV and radio stations were initially permitted to broadcast in Kurdish<sup>6</sup>. In 2013, the national oath was annulled, which was a significant move. It was seen as another tool of the assimilationist state and as being derogatory to minority groups, as it stated that the Turks had a higher value than other ethnic groups. In 1960 and specifically after 1983, 280 village names were changed, and around 28,000 locations were renamed (Tunçel 2000: 12). After 2013, many village and neighborhood names were reinstated, which had cultural and historical significance in locals' memories.

Again, in 1983, the state had forbidden expressing opinions in any language other than the state's official language (O'Neil 2007: 77). Political propaganda was prohibited in languages and dialects other than Turkish. Only in 2010 did minorities gain the right to conduct propaganda in other languages. This led citizens to exercise their political rights freely and politicians to conduct successful political activities by addressing the voters in the language they understood. Besides propaganda rights, Turkish history is tainted with party closures. In 2009, DTP (Democratic Society Party, which Kurds founded) was shut down. The 2010 constitutional change altered the law regarding party closures: "The closure of political parties or deprivation of political parties of

<sup>5</sup> See *Nüfus Kanunu*. 2021. URL: [https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/tutanaklar/KANUNLAR\\_KARARLAR/kanuntbmmc055/kanuntbmmc055/kanuntbmmc05501587.pdf](https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/tutanaklar/KANUNLAR_KARARLAR/kanuntbmmc055/kanuntbmmc055/kanuntbmmc05501587.pdf) (accessed 26.03.2023)

<sup>6</sup> For detailed information see: *Türk Vatandaşlarının Günlük Yaşamlarında Geleneksel Olarak Kullandıkları Farklı Dil ve Lehçelerde Yayın Yapan Yayın Kuruluşlarının Listesi (Yayında Olanlar)*. 2021. RTÜK. <https://www.rtuk.gov.tr/yayin-izni-verilen-kuruluslar/5165/5046/yayin-izni-verilen-kuruluslar.html> (accessed 26.02.2023).

state aid may be decided by a vote of two-thirds of the members attending the meeting.” Previously, this required three-fifths of the members, so the constitutional change meant that party closures became more complicated. However, the most significant attempt of the government to solve the human rights problem was the Kurdish Opening, on the one hand, and the Peace (Resolution) Process, on the other.

In mid-2009, talks began between the Turkish Intelligence Agency (MIT) and the PKK. In August 2009, Prime Minister Erdogan met with Ahmet Turk, an influential Kurdish politician, to discuss the Kurdish Opening. The West had long criticized Turkey for violating Kurdish rights, and the process was welcomed by the West when it became public. In November 2009, Erdogan said: “National unity and brotherhood project is our aim. We will reach it with the democratic opening process.”<sup>7</sup> After that, the process of ameliorating conditions was pursued. The government announced a human rights package in line with the Kurdish Opening. Prisoners were given the right to speak to visitors in languages other than Turkish, amending a fixed major human rights violation that had continued since the 1980s (Sessiz Devrim... 2021: 118). It was as late as 2009 when this right was given, but it was still an improvement. In 2011, then-Prime Minister Erdogan apologized for the Dersim massacre (1937) on behalf of the state, where Kurds suffered significant atrocities. In his speech in parliament, he showed four documents that shed light on what had happened in Dersim and how Kurds' killing and forced migration were undertaken as a state policy<sup>8</sup>.

On the other hand, road controls were reduced with a notice sent to governorates, preventing random checks on citizens. The process was tumultuous. Although cultural rights were given, the process could not ultimately end without solving the problem of the PKK. The second round of the process was more about solving the issues on the military front without resorting to hard power.

To integrate the Kurdish organization's armed members into political life, the Peace Process with the PKK was started. The undersecretary of the Turkish Intelligence Agency, Hakan Fidan, met Abdullah Ocalan in December 2012. This process envisioned that PKK members would withdraw from Turkish territory, the state would make democratization reforms, and integrate the organization into social and political life. On the societal front, the Wise People's Delegation<sup>9</sup> was formed to spread the process to society and make it accepted by the public. Actors, writers, academicians, and activists were part of the delegation, which aimed to include the public in the process. However, it failed to impact society (Köse 2017: 20) profoundly. Additionally, opposition parties were sidelined, which politically crippled the process. Moreover, many civil society organizations, minor political parties, and some leading opinion leaders complained that they were not a part of the process (Köse 2017: 21).

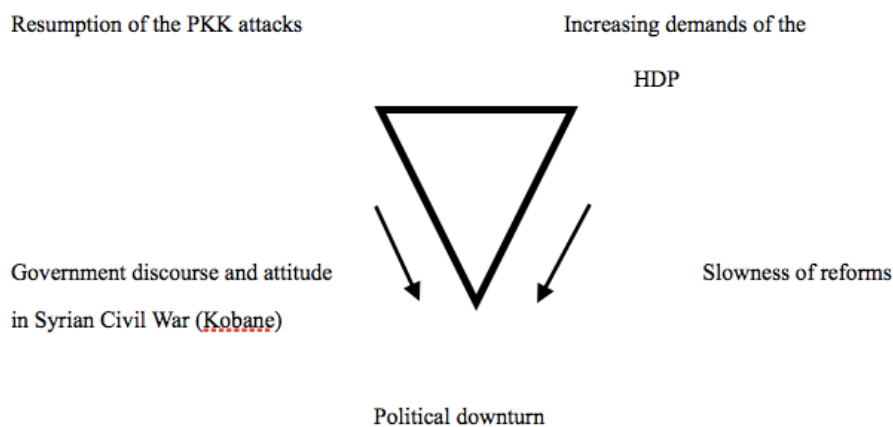
<sup>7</sup> “Milli birlik ve kardeşlik projemiz bir hedeftir. Demokratik açılım süreciyle bu hedefe ulaşacağız”.

<sup>8</sup> Erdoğan Dersim İçin Özür Diledi – Haberler. 2011. *Milliyet*. <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/erdogan-dersim-icin-ozur-diledi-siyaset-1466430/> (accessed 26.02.2023).

<sup>9</sup> Akil İnsanlar Heyeti

Society, in general, was mobilized and optimistic about the results of the negotiations. It was expected that there would be an end to the decades-long internal fight which had cost many lives on both sides. There was real momentum during the Peace Process. Although the process started with good intentions, the PKK never left Turkey. Only around 15% of the armed group left the country in 2–3 months, preventing subsequent steps from being pursued. The PKK, however, claimed that the government was slow in implementing reforms, which made it reluctant to leave Turkish territory (Köse 2017: 20). On December 27, 2015, the HDP leaders supported the demands of the Democratic Society Congress (DTK) for democratic autonomy and self-government. However, making concessions on the indivisible and unitary character of the Turkish Republic was not acceptable to the government. The Peace Process caused HDP and other informal networks of Kurds to consolidate their legal position in Turkish politics. The AKP expected the process to chalk up points for itself and increase its support base.

On the contrary, it caused the AKP to lose its Kurdish constituents to the HDP. Moreover, the opposition initially saw the process as giving in to the terrorist organization. The AKP lost its nationalist supporters to the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) in the June 2015 elections<sup>10</sup>. On the way to the next election, seeing the repercussions of the process, the AKP slowed down the Peace Process. It also became apparent that the PKK had accumulated more arms during the Resolution when it was supposed to be disarming. When two police officers were killed in Şanlıurfa Ceylanpınar, the peace process ended around two months after the elections<sup>11</sup>. During the Syrian Civil War, especially in Kobane, the government policies were unwelcome by the Kurdish population and were regarded as “Kurdish hostility” on the HDP front. After all these developments, a political downturn ensued (Figure 2).



**Figure 2: Changes in the regime of ethnicity since 2015**

<sup>10</sup> 7 Haziran Sandık ve Seçmen Analizi. 2015. KONDA. URL: [https://konda.com.tr/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/KONDA\\_7HaziranSand%C4%B1kveSe%C3%A7menAnaliziRaporu.pdf](https://konda.com.tr/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/KONDA_7HaziranSand%C4%B1kveSe%C3%A7menAnaliziRaporu.pdf) (accessed 26.02.2023).

<sup>11</sup> The PKK did not own the attack, but the official sources show the PKK as the attacker.

The AKP's social, cultural, political, and military initiatives have brought positive changes in Turkey's regime of ethnicity. The most notable attempt of the government to solve the humanitarian crisis of the Kurdish ethnic minority was the Peace Process. However, even during this process, there were issues that the government never addressed, such as education in the mother language or an alternative regime system that would grant more autonomy to Kurds. However, the process witnessed many improvements, especially when the treatment of Kurds in previous periods was considered. However, the summer of 2015 was a critical juncture when the process was turned upside down. Some media outlets that supported the Kurdish cause were closed. The government also appointed trustees to replace elected mayors in Southeastern cities. The two co-leaders and eight other MPs of the HDP (People's Democratic Party) were arrested. Although the policies of the government and changes in the regimes of ethnicity before and after the summer of 2015 are apparent, how do we observe this change in the discourse of President Erdogan?

### Changing Discourse

Even though using the word Kurd had been a faux pas since the early Republican era, some things changed in Turkey in such a way as to make the use of the word "Kurd" acceptable. People in Turkey got used to hearing such references from the President, but even the President was not that comfortable using it when he made his first appearance as the leader of the AKP. In this section of the paper, I reviewed the President's speeches in Diyarbakır<sup>12</sup> to examine the change in his rhetoric. I hypothesize that when the resolution process halted, the discourse of President Erdogan took a more neutral stance toward the Kurds. At the same time, it was more inclusive before the breakdown of the process. There is no point in arguing that the change in the state ideology and discourse is a big step in changing what is good or bad, legitimate or illegitimate in state and society.

The changing discourse toward the Kurdish issue at the highest state level played a critical role in normalizing the word "Kurd." Hearing the phrases "brothers," "Kurdish brothers," "fellow citizens," or "Kurds" from President Erdogan's mouth does not strike us anymore or catch us by surprise. However, when he first addressed the public in Diyarbakır in 2004, he used the word "friends" and "brothers" (5 times) without any reference to Kurdish ethnicity. He presented himself as "the brother of the people of Diyarbakır, who knows what suffering and waiting for justice is"<sup>13</sup>. Moving to 2007, Erdogan again refrained from using the word Kurd but instead appealed to the audience in Diyarbakır as either "brothers" (13 times) or "Brothers from Diyarbakır" (twice). In a public meeting in February 2009, he said "Kurd" once and "brothers" 21 times. The

<sup>12</sup> The Kurdish population mainly lives in a city in Eastern Turkey.

<sup>13</sup> "Çile nedir bilen, adaleti beklemenin ne demek olduğunu bilen, bir kardeşiniz olarak"

summer of 2009 was when the Peace Process began, and after this Erdogan's references to "Kurds" and "brothers" started to increase incrementally. In 2011, he also started using the phrase "Kurdish brothers" (8 times), and his use of the word "Kurd" peaked (32 times). He criticized earlier state policies by saying: "I know very closely how the status quo made my Kurdish brothers suffer. I know the costs you and I paid because of assimilation, ignorance, and denial. I know well the tears of a mother who went to Diyarbakır Prison but could not talk to her son in her own language"<sup>14</sup>. He also stated how his party made it its duty to solve the Kurdish issue but was blocked by the opposition: "For 8.5 years, they have stood like an unsurpassable wall against the struggle we faced to solve the Kurdish issue in Ankara"<sup>15</sup>.

In 2013, he preferred to call people in Diyarbakır "brothers" in general (45 times). He even hosted Barzani in Diyarbakır and said: "I sincerely greet my precious brothers in Northern Iraq Kurdistan Region in your person"<sup>16</sup>. He delivered an inclusionary message: "Just as they cannot separate Turk from Kurd, they cannot separate Kurd from Kurd, and Turk from Turk at the same time"<sup>17</sup>. As opposed to treating the Kurds as second-class citizens in Turkey, Erdogan stated: "Just like on April 23, 1920, Turk, Kurd, Arab, and everybody else are the first-class citizens of this country"<sup>18</sup>. In 2014, the trend was like 2013. President Erdogan mentioned what has been done during the AKP in terms of Kurds' rights: "Turkey is returning to the essence and origin of its spirit. We removed the pressure on the identities. We removed the pressure on cultures, on the keyboards; we removed the pressure on tongues"<sup>19</sup>. In 2015, a couple of months before the breakdown of the peace process, the President gave another speech in Diyarbakır. He reacted to the Kurdish political party's claim to be the only representative of the Kurdish people. From 2015, there was a relative increase in his references in Diyarbakır to "Kurds" and "Kurdish brothers," but there is a drop in his use of the word "brothers." In 2018, he mentioned "Kurdish brothers" 12 times in his speech. Although the peace process had ended, Erdogan reiterated that the rights that were given would never be taken back. He said: "Every Kurdish brother has the right that every Turkish brother has"<sup>20</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> "Statükonun benim Kürt kardeşlerime neler yaşattığını ben çok iyi biliyorum. Asimilasyonun inkar ve red politikalarının sizlere, bizlere ödettiği bedeli ben çok iyi biliyorum. Diyarbakır cezaevinde oğlunu görmeye giden ama oğluyla kendi dilinde konuşamayan ananın içine akıttığı gözyaşını ben çok iyi biliyorum."

<sup>15</sup> "8,5 yıl boyunca Ankara'da Kürt meselesinin çözümü için verdiğimiz mücadelenin önünde aşılmaz bir duvar gibi durdular."

<sup>16</sup> "Sizin şahsınızda Kuzey Irak Kürdistan Bölgesini, oradaki değerli kardeşlerimi muhabbetle selamlıyorum..."

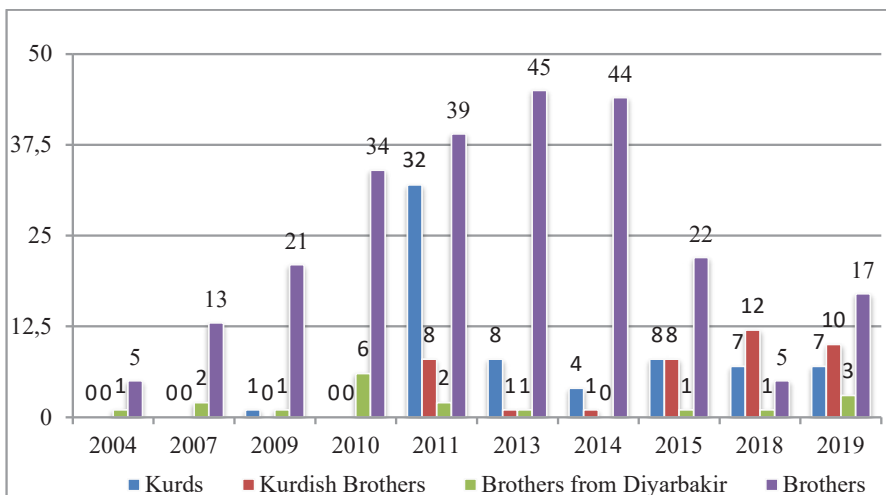
<sup>17</sup> "Nasıl ki Türk'ü Kürt'ten ayıramazlarsa, Kürdü Kürt'ten, Türk'ü de Türk'ten ayıramazlar."

<sup>18</sup> "Tıpkı 23 Nisan 1920'de olduğu gibi, TÜRK de, KÜRT de, ARAP da, diğerleri de, bu ülkenin hep birlikte birinci sınıf vatandaşlarıdır."

<sup>19</sup> "Türkiye'yi özüne, aslına, kuruluş ruhuna döndürüyoruz. Kimlikler üzerindeki baskıyı biz kaldırdık. Kültürler üzerindeki baskıyı biz kaldırdık. Klavyeler üzerindeki, diller üzerindeki baskıyı biz kaldırdık."

<sup>20</sup> "Her Kürt kardeşim her hangi bir Türk kardeşim hangi haklara sahipse, onlara sahiptir."

There were no references to Kurds and Kurdish brothers in President Erdoğan's speeches in Diyarbakır before the 2009 Peace Process. In 2009, his address to the audience in Diyarbakır took a different turn in a very positive and inclusive way. His use of the phrases “brothers,” “Kurdish brothers,” and “Kurds” increased noticeably until 2014. The references to “Kurds” and “Kurdish brothers” increased from 2014 to 2015, although the reference to “brothers” halved. The general references have stayed almost the same since 2015, and the general trend can be seen in Chart 1 below. As Diyarbakır is only the name of the city, I was expecting to see more use of “brothers from Diyarbakır” instead of “brothers” and “Kurdish brothers” once the Peace Process came to an end. However, this was not the case. Since then, although the President has appealed to his audience by using “brothers” less, he claims that the Kurdish issue is his problem. He adamantly claims to protect the rights that were given to the Kurdish population during the AKP governments.



**Chart 1. President Erdoğan's References to Kurds in Diyarbakır**

The policies towards the Kurds' ethnic recognition went along, intending to end the decades-long PKK terror. Hence, when the PKK rearmed itself and called off the cease-fire, further rights for the Kurdish ethnic community stopped being the government's agenda. Although the rights given were not taken away, new freedoms and openings are still out of the question. Since the trust between two actors, the state and the PKK, has been deeply shaken, a new peace process is unlikely to begin. This distressing scenario means that we should not expect any more rights will be granted, especially in the political field, as during the breakdown of the process, the HDP became closely associated with the PKK.



## Conclusion

For the first time in Turkish history, the AKP government undertook radical changes in the regime of ethnicity, particularly towards Kurds. State officials accepted that the Kurdish issue was not a problem to be solved by military means. Hence, the government handled the Kurdish issue based on democratization and respect for human rights. The government undertook significant and visible political, cultural, and social improvements. While the AKP knew that security measures could not solve this problem of democracy and human rights, it also knew it could not be solved solely by granting the Kurdish constituency the rights they had craved and deserved for so long. The military aspect of the Kurdish issue, due to the very existence of the PKK, made it incumbent for the government to solve the problems on the military front through negotiations. In that vein, the reconciliation between the state and the PKK contributed to a great extent to the changing state policies.

The limitation of this research is the number of speeches that could be covered. Further research could be done by including more speeches of the President in various places in Turkey. Examining his speeches in Istanbul, where there is a sizeable Kurdish population, might also tell us something about the President's general discourse. However, this paper also contributed to the literature on regimes of ethnicity by incorporating group-level actions in the analysis. Especially since the 2012 Resolution Process, it has been essential to consider the Kurdish movement's military wing.

This article shows that a change in the state discourse accompanies the changes in the regimes of ethnicity in Turkey. When the state moved away from anti-ethnic policies towards the Kurds, President Erdogan's discourse became more inclusive, using "brother" more often in his speeches. The positive and inclusive references peaked in 2011. After the breakdown of the Peace Process, keeping 2011 as an exceptional case, the President continued to use the phrases "Kurds" and "Kurdish brothers" more than he did before 2015. However, his use of "brothers" substantially decreased after 2015. It is unlikely that there will be a change in the rights given to the Kurdish people. However, it is also improbable that there will be more positive changes, new openings, and another round of resolution processes since the breakdown of the Peace Process.

### **About the author:**

**Ayşe İrem Aycan Özer** – PhD Candidate, Bogazici University, Research Assistant, Marmara University. Boğaziçi University 34342 Bebek/Istanbul, Turkey. E-mail: [aycanayseirem@gmail.com](mailto:aycanayseirem@gmail.com)

### **Conflict of interests:**

The author declares the absence of conflict of interests.

УДК: 323.2, 327

Поступила в редакцию: 12.11.2022

Принята к публикации: 27.01.2023

# Дискурс президента Р. Эрдогана по курдскому вопросу

Айше Ирем Айжан Озаш

[DOI 10.24833/2071-8160-2023-1-88-201-218](https://doi.org/10.24833/2071-8160-2023-1-88-201-218)

Университет Богазичи

Университет Мармара

**Резюме:** В статье рассматривается эволюция отношения к этническим меньшинствам в политической жизни Турции в период с 2004 по 2019 г. Турция, объединяющая множество этнических групп, на этапе создания национального государства опиралась на политику ассимиляции. В наибольшей степени такая политика наносила удар по курдам, самому многочисленному этническому меньшинству страны. Курс, направленный на ассимиляцию этнических меньшинств, нашёл отражение и в политическом дискурсе того периода. Отношение к этничности и соответствующий политический курс стали меняться только после прихода к власти Партии справедливости и развития. Власть признала курдов отдельным этническим меньшинством, а также имевшие место в прошлом нарушения прав человека. Для выявления логики эволюции отношения к этничности во внутренней политике Турции исследование опирается на дискурс-анализ – анализ официального дискурса в ходе бурных политических изменений от первоначально «антименьшинского» к нынешнему «инклюзивному». Основное внимание уделяется анализу публичных выступлений президента страны Реджепа Тайипа Эрдогана, в том числе в Диярбакире. Когда государство отказалось от политики, направленной против прав этнических меньшинств, в том числе по отношению к курдам, дискурс президента стал более инклюзивным. Как и в некоторых ранних исследованиях, в статье признаётся ключевая роль государства в качестве определяющей силы, стоящей за изменением политического отношения к этничности. Кроме этого, в статье продемонстрирована акторность организованных групп этнических меньшинств, поскольку их политическая активность в значительной мере способствовали изменению отношения к этничности в Турции.

**Ключевые слова:** национальное государство, государственное строительство, национальные меньшинства, этничность, права человека, дискурс-анализ, антиэтнические режимы, полиэтнические режимы, смена режима

## Об авторе:

**Айше Ирем Айжан Озаш** – соискатель, Университет Богазичи; научный сотрудник, Университет Мармара. Бебек, 34342, Бешикташ, Стамбул, Турция. Университет Богазичи, 34342 Бебек, Стамбул Турция. E-mail: aycanayseirem@gmail.com

## Конфликт интересов:

Автор заявляет об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

## References:

- Aktürk Ş. 2011. Regimes of Ethnicity: Comparative Analysis of Germany, the Soviet Union/Post-Soviet Russia, and Turkey. *World Politics*. 63(1). P. 115–164. DOI: 10.1017/S0043887110000304
- Aktürk Ş. 2012. *Regimes of Ethnicity and Nationhood in Germany, Russia, and Turkey*. Cambridge University Press.
- Alptekin H. 2017. A Theory of Ethnic Violence: Ethnic Incorporation and Ethno-Political Mobilization in Bulgaria and Cyprus. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. 40(15). P. 2672–90. DOI: 10.1080/01419870.2016.1266008.
- Aslan S. 2014. *Nation-Building in Turkey and Morocco: Governing Kurdish and Berber Dis-sent*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Bozarslan H. 2008. Kurds and the Turkish State. *The Cambridge History of Turkey*. DOI: 10.1017/CHOL9780521620963.013.
- Brake S. 2018. Representation and De-Legitimation in Semi-Democratic Regimes: The Case of the Arab Citizens in Israel. *Sociology and Anthropology*. 6(5). P. 447–58. DOI: 10.13189/sa.2018.060501.
- Brown D. 1994. *The State and Ethnic Politics in Southeast Asia*. Routledge.
- Cagaptay S. 2006. *Islam, Secularism and Nationalism in Modern Turkey: Who is a Turk?* Routledge.
- Christie P. 2006. Changing Regimes: Governmentality and Education Policy in Post-Apartheid South Africa. *International Journal of Educational Development*. 26(4). P. 373–81. DOI: 10.1016/j.ijedudev.2005.09.006.
- Clercq F. 1997. Policy Intervention and Power Shifts: An Evaluation of South Africa's Education Restructuring Policies. *Journal of Education Policy*. 12(3). P. 127–146.
- Falk R., Tilley V. 2017. Israeli Practices towards the Palestinian People and the Question of Apartheid. *Palestine and the Israeli Occupation*. 1(1). URL: [https://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/ps\\_pubs/9](https://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/ps_pubs/9) (accessed 26.02.2023)
- Gordon E.T. 1998. *Disparate Diasporas-Identity and Politics in an African-Nicaraguan Community*. University of Texas Press.
- Hepburn E., Zapata-Barrar R. 2014. *The Politics of Immigration in Multi-Level States: Governance and Political Parties*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Heper M. 2007. *The State and Kurds in Turkey: The Question of Assimilation*. Springer.
- Hooker J. 2005. Indigenous Inclusion/Black Exclusion: Race, Ethnicity and Multicultural Citizenship in Latin America. *Journal of Latin American Studies*. 37(2). P. 285–310.
- Köse S.C. 2012. Müzakereci Demokrasi Kuramı ve Toplumsal ve Politik Dönüşümün İmkanları: Kürt Açılımı Üzerine Bir İnceleme. *Spectrum: Journal of Global Studies*. 4(2). P. 89–116.
- Köse T. 2017. Çözüm Sürecinin Yükseliş ve Düşüşü. *Türkiye Ortadoğu Çalışmaları Dergisi*. 4(1). P. 13–40. DOI: 10.26513/tocd.315152.
- Kymlicka W. 2007. Multicultural Odysseys. *Ethnopolitics*. 6(4). P. 585–97. DOI: 10.1080/17449050701659789.
- Lijphart A. 1969. Consociational Democracy. *World Politics*. 21(2). P. 207–225. DOI: 10.2307/2009820
- Mattes R. 2012. The 'Born Frees': The Prospects for Generational Change in Post-Apartheid South Africa. *Australian Journal of Political Science*. 47(1). P. 133–53. DOI: 10.1080/10361146.2011.643166.

- McDowall D. 2000. *A Modern History of the Kurds*. 3rd edition. IB Tauris.
- O'Leary B., John M. 1993. *The Politics of Ethnic Conflict Regulation: Case Studies of Protracted Ethnic Conflicts*. New York: Routledge.
- O'Neil M.L. 2007. Linguistic Human Rights and the Rights of Kurds. Arat and Folk (ed.) *Human Rights in Turkey*. University of Pennsylvania Press. P. 72–86.
- Sessiz Devrim Türkiye'nin Demokratik Değişim ve Dönüşüm Envanteri. 2021. İçişleri Bakanlığı. <https://docplayer.biz.tr/12660195-sessiz-devrim-turkiye-nin-demokratik-degisim-ve-donusum-envanteri.html> (accessed 26.02.2023).
- Straw D. 2013. *Human Rights Violation in Turkey: Rethinking Sociological Perspectives*. Springer. DOI: 10.1057/9781137317155.
- Terry M. 2001. *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939*. Cornell University Press.
- Tunçel H. 2000. Türkiye'de İsmi Değiştirilen Köyler. *Fırat Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*. 10(2). P. 23–34.
- Van Cott D.L. 2000a. Latin America: Constitutional Reform and Ethnic Right | Parliamentary Affairs. Oxford Academic. *Parliamentary Affairs*. 53(1). P. 41–54.
- Van Cott D.L. 2000b. *The friendly liquidation of the past: the politics of diversity in Latin America*. University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Yavuz MH 1997. Political Islam and the Welfare (Refah) Party in Turkey. *Comparative Politics*. 30(1). DOI: 10.2307/422193.
- Yildiz K. 2012. Turkey's Kurdish conflict: pathways to progress. *Insight Turkey*. 14(4). P. 151–174.