

Turkey's Kurds could sway tight referendum vote

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With pollsters predicting a very close outcome to Turkey's April 16th referendum, the country's large Kurdish minority could hold the key to whether charismatic but divisive President Recep Tayyip Erdogan succeeds in his bid to change the constitution and endow his office with sweeping executive powers.

A survey of five polling organisations all showed Erdogan's "yes" campaign and opposition "no" support lying neck and neck, Bloomberg News reported. But, the pollsters said, the number of respondents undecided or unwilling to state their preference still made up between 14% and 18% of the electorate, easily enough to swing the referendum either way.

The same could be said for Turkey Kurds, who make up about 18% of the electorate.

■ The tight security environment could suppress the "no" vote in Turkey's south-east.

While a majority of Kurdish voters have historically backed secular Kurdish nationalist parties, Erdogan's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has consistently come a strong second in Turkey's mainly Kurdish south-east, where the party's message of brotherhood in Islam appeals to conservative Kurds.

"Regarding the Kurds, we can bet the house that they will not support these amendments, but the pressure and intimidation factors are so unbearable, we are not sure whether they would report to the ballot box,

or sullenly remain home," wrote Murat Ucer and Atilla Yesilada, analysts for consultancy firm Global Source Partners.

Since the breakdown of a ceasefire in July 2015, at least 2,623 people have been killed in clashes between Turkish security forces and the separatist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), according to an International Crisis Group (ICG) tally from open-source material last updated on March 20th.

That number includes 391 civilians, 893 members of the security forces and 1,120 PKK militants. The ICG said it could not determine whether 219 people killed were civilians or militants.

The figures conform to those collated by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), which said some 2,000 people had been killed in clashes between July 2015 and December 2016.

The OHCHR said in a report published this month that between 355,000 and 500,000 people, mainly Kurds, had also become internally displaced.

The most serious bout of fighting flared up in December 2015 when the PKK's urban youth wing dug trenches, erected barricades and declared autonomy in a number of towns in south-east Turkey, notably Cizre, near the Syrian and Iraqi borders, and the historic Sur neighbourhood of Diyarbakir, the biggest city in the region.

Turkish security forces besieged the areas with thousands of troops. The OHCHR said "satellite images indicate that the damage caused by security operations in densely populated urban centres is commensurate with the use of heavy weapons and possibly air-dropped munitions".

The UN agency said it had "documented numerous cases of excessive use of force; killings; enforced



Kurds' veto. Supporters of pro-Kurdish opposition Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) hold "No" placards in different languages during a rally in Diyarbakir.

(Reuters)

disappearances; torture; destruction of housing and cultural heritage; incitement to hatred; prevention of access to emergency medical care, food, water and livelihoods; violence against women; and severe curtailment of the right to freedom of opinion and expression as well as political participation".

Up to 189 men, women and children were trapped in basements in Cizre by the fighting and shelling by security forces in January and February 2016, the OHCHR said. The bodies of an unknown number of them were destroyed by fire started by the shelling and the demolition of the location after the incident, the agency said.

"On February 25th, my family was summoned by the public prosecutor. We were given three small charred pieces of what he claimed

was my beloved sister's body," the OHCHR report quoted one man as saying.

"I am particularly concerned by reports that no credible investigation has been conducted into hundreds of alleged unlawful killings, including women and children," OHCHR head Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein said in a statement.

"It appears that not a single suspect was apprehended and not a single individual was prosecuted," he said.

Turkey's Foreign Ministry said the report was unacceptable and based on biased information.

Thirteen pro-Kurdish members of parliament from the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) have meanwhile been jailed on terrorism charges.

"It's deeply damaging to Turkey's democracy that the government is

locking up the leaders and MPs of an opposition party that received 5 million votes in the last election," said Hugh Williamson, Europe and Central Asia director at Human Rights Watch. "The fact that the curbs come during a vital national debate about the country's future is doubly disturbing."

Nevertheless, tens of thousands turned out for Kurdish new year – or Newroz – festivities in Diyarbakir on March 21st. It was at a huge Newroz celebration in the city in 2013 where a message from jailed PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan was read out announcing the ceasefire. Deaths in the conflict were cut to just over 100 in the two years it lasted.

This year, thousands waved red, green and yellow flags emblazoned with one word – Na – Kurdish for "no".

Turkey's relations with NATO in jeopardy

Viewpoint



Yavuz Baydar

The gap between Turkey and its allies within NATO has reached alarming levels, threatening a rupture with far-reaching consequences.

More than anything, it involves the apparent and growing disagreement between Ankara and some Western capitals about the nature of the *coup* attempt in Turkey last July. A Der Spiegel interview with Bruno Kahl, the head of the German intelligence service, added fuel to the fire. It followed the spat between Turkey and Germany over the ban on Turkish politicians conducting rallies on German soil.

Kahl was asked whether he believed Fethullah Gulen, a Turkish cleric in Pennsylvania, was behind the *coup*. "Turkey has tried to convince us on a number of different levels," he said, "but they haven't yet been successful."

"The *coup* attempt wasn't staged by the state," he went on. "Even before July 15th, the government had launched a large wave of purges. That is why elements within the military thought they should quickly launch a *coup*, before they, too, were purged, but it was too late and they were purged as well..."

"The consequences of the *putsch* that we have seen would have happened anyway, if perhaps not as deep and radical. The *coup* was likely just a

welcome pretext."

Karl also asked: "Will the country remain a partner in the security alliance?"

Almost simultaneously others across the Atlantic were making similar remarks. US Representative Devin Nunes, R-California and chairman of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, questioned the files presented by the Turkish government to the US Department of Justice alleging that Gulen was the mastermind behind the *putsch*.

Interviewed on Fox TV, Nunes said: "I find it hard to believe... I saw no evidence (in there) about Gulen's involvement in the *coup*." "Turkey as a NATO partner has been for long a strong ally of ours but [the Turks] are becoming more and more worrisome in terms of being a reliable ally," Nunes added.

Such statements, more public and louder than ever, shatter the mood in Ankara. While some pro-Erdogan pundits were developing conspiracy theories, top sources of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) were accusing the intelligence structures of being used or infiltrated by Gulenists. Turkish Defence Minister Fikri Isik accused Kahl of "being ignorant of the facts", questioning whether German Intelligence was behind the *coup*. "Where are you (Germany) in all this?" Isik asked.

The gap seemed wider with warnings from the European Commission. EU Commissioner for Enlargement Johannes Hahn said in a newspaper interview that the prospect of Turkey joining the European Union

becomes increasingly "unrealistic". Hahn indicated that after Turkey's April 16th referendum on presidential powers, Turkish membership negotiations could be shelved altogether – a notion that has been circulated even more loudly by the European Parliament.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan seems not to object. Constantly talking about reinstating the death penalty should his side win the referendum vote does not endear him to the European Union. Nor did his saying: "Everything, including the refugee agreement, will be put on the table. It's all over."

There is a tacit understanding that Turkish-EU relations are on life support, doomed to fail. However, it is clear that the NATO dimension is seen as far more crucial in defining Turkey's future role, even its existence, in the military alliance.

A sign of crack was seen when Süddeutsche Zeitung reported that the German government had since early 2016 rejected Turkish requests on arms sales – light weapons and ammunition – 11 times on the basis that they could be used on the civilian population, meaning Kurds and political opponents.

There have been reports that four high-ranking Turkish officers and the military attaché in Oslo have been granted asylum in Norway. More than 150 Turkish Army members defected to Germany and Belgium. Officers from one NATO member seeking asylum and their claims being treated as legitimate in another is unprecedented, underlining the historically important dimension of the

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stand-off. Sources within the AKP say Germany could use the defectors and a *couple* top-level prosecutors and diplomats also seeking refugee status in clandestine activities against Turkey.

A long series of trials related to the *coup* attempt under way adds to the puzzle. What the suspects, especially those at the top of the command chain, tell the courts might confirm suspicions or raise new ones about who was behind the *coup*.

A majority of them deny any affiliation or cooperation with Gulen and his followers, maintaining that they are Kemalists, staunchly loyal to the principles of Turkey's founder.

A witness statement by Zekai Aksakall, commander of special operations forces, stirred even more suspicion. "A state of alarm within our army leads automatically to a top-level order on the entire staff not to leave their bases and barracks," he said, "but this basic rule, always applied, was not implemented July 15th when the reports have been received. If that was done, the *coup* would be totally exposed from the first moment."

On March 22nd, the *chargé d'affaires* of the German embassy was summoned to the Turkish Foreign Ministry to be told its intelligence services' statements were unacceptable. This rift adds to the elements that threaten Turkey's role and trustworthiness in NATO and intelligence structures and in the coalition combating jihadists in Syria and Iraq.

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