

## **Turkey Ban Draws Kurdish Ire**

Protests in Iraq after Ankara outlaws Kurdish political party.

Turkey's ban on a pro-Kurdish political party has angered the Kurdish population of neighbouring Iraq, with demonstrators rallying in two cities and heavy criticism of Ankara from politicians and civil society.

More than 500 people, including Kurds from Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria, protested in central Suliamaniyah on December 17, blasting the court's closure of Turkey's largest pro-Kurdish party, the Democratic Society Party, DTP and calling for Kurdish solidarity across the region.

"We have come to protest the court's decision. It shows the double standard towards Kurds. Turkey should make it clear: do they want peace or war?" said 29-year-old Iraqi Kurd Djwar Ali.

Politicians from the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, PUK, and the opposition Goran (Change) Party spoke at the rally, and a message was delivered to the crowd from DTP leader Ahmed Turk. A banner written in Kurdish, Turkish and Arabic declared, "The ban on the DTP means more violence." Another read, "South, North East, West: We are all one nation with one struggle."

Hundreds of Iraqi Kurds also protested in Erbil, the capital of Iraq's semi-autonomous Kurdistan region, on December 16. In Turkey, two people were killed and seven wounded in riots that have raged in the country's east and south east since the ban was handed down last week.

"We have two messages. First we condemn the ban of the Kurdish party. Second, we want to tell Turkey to stop violating the human rights of Kurds," said Kawa Qureshi, 26, an Iranian Kurd who said he fled Iran due to political persecution. "We know that this is not the decision of government, but the decision of ultra-nationalists within Turkey."

The closure of the DTP also has many Iraqi Kurds questioning the fate of Ankara's so-called Kurdish initiative, a plan announced few months ago to expand the rights of Turkey's 20 million ethnic Kurds and end a Kurdish insurgency in the southeast of the country that has occasionally spilled into Iraqi Kurdistan.

Turkey's constitutional court in Ankara voted unanimously on December 11 to outlaw the DTP on charges of promoting ethnic separatism and maintaining links to the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party, PKK. The DTP, in a statement, denied it has "organic links" to the PKK but shied away from condemning the group's history of violent revolt.

Thirty-seven DTP leaders were also banned from politics, including two parliamentarians. The 19 remaining DTP lawmakers resigned in protest at the ban.

"The Goran movement condemns the ban and sees it as a step against democracy. This is a clear violation of the political rights of Kurds. This step tells us that the Kurdish initiative has yet to take hold in Turkish society or politics," said Dr Jaafar Ali, a Goran Party member of Kurdistan's regional parliament.

"The ban is the beginning of new violence and new tensions between the different ethnic groups in

Turkey."

The PKK, which has been labelled a terrorist group by Turkey, the United States and the European Union, has been waging a guerrilla war against Ankara for 25 years. An estimated 40,000 people have been killed in the conflict, and Turkish troops and fighter planes have often conducted operations on PKK bases in Iraqi territory.

Relations between Iraqi Kurds and Turkey became tense in the aftermath of the United States-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Turkey alleged at the time that the Kurdish government was allowing the PKK to mount military offensives into Turkey from bases in Iraqi Kurdistan's mountainous border region. In 2007, Ankara threatened military intervention should Kurdish forces attempt to occupy the oil-rich region of Kirkuk – a disputed area with a large population of Turkoman, who have historical and ethnic ties with Turkey.

The PKK's violent brand of Kurdish nationalism has won sympathy among some Iraqi Kurds, but the militants' popularity has diminished in recent years as political, economic and cultural ties with Turkey have grown. In a gesture to Ankara, the Kurdistan Regional Government, KRG, has banned all activities of the PKK and its unofficial affiliate, the Kurdistan Solution Party.

The KRG has remained calm about last week's ban on the DTP.

"We do not interfere with Turkish affairs. The ban of this party is an internal issue," KRG spokesman Dr Hadi Mahmud told IWPR. "We support peaceful solutions to the problems of the Kurds in Turkey."

However, the Kurdistan Region Presidency, KRP, led by President Masoud Barzani, expressed concern for the ongoing rapprochement between Ankara and Erbil.

"The KRP was pleased with the recent reforms and conciliatory policies introduced by [Turkey's ruling] Justice and Development Party (AKP) to engage with the Kurds and hopes that the court's decision does not derail this important process from going forward," read a KRP statement in response to the ban.

Opposition lawmaker Ali said the stance of the Kurdistan government reflected newly-strengthened relations with Turkey.

"You can see from their statements they want to keep the current balance of their relations with Ankara. This is dangerous because they are doing this at the expense of the Kurdish people and Kurdish rights," he said.

In a strongly worded statement, a group of journalists in Kurdistan condemned the court's decision, calling the ban "a chauvinist action".

"The DTP was shut down under no justification. The move is against the will of Kurds everywhere and must be protested strongly," wrote the group.

The Kurdistan Islamic Union, KIU, known for close ties with the Turkey's ruling party called for the Ankara

administration to be pragmatic and continue to pursue its plan.

"Unfortunately, this decision is a big obstacle for the encouraging and democratic Kurdish initiative of the AKP," a KIU statement read.

Kurdish political analyst Fazil Najeeb blamed the DTP for its own demise, "The ban is a result of their incorrect policies. The DTP was not a party for all Kurds in Turkey."

For Soma Khalid, a 16-year-old Iraqi Kurd who travelled two hours from the town of Penjwen to take part in the protest, the issue is about Kurdish unity.

"Turkey must stop its brutal policy against Kurds," she said. "We Kurdish people from all four countries, we have no border between us. We are all one nation."

Hemin H Lihony is an IWPR local editor in Sulaimaniyah.

**Location:** Turkey  
Syria  
Iraqi Kurdistan  
Iraq

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