



Ear to Asia podcast

Title: The Kurdish struggle for political equality in Turkey

Description: Although the Kurds form a very sizable minority in Turkey, there is little tolerance for those who stray from the dominant Turkish nationalist narrative. So how have the Kurdish people navigated Turkey's political environment in the hopes of achieving their aspirations? Kurdish affairs researcher Dr William Gourlay from Monash University and Asia Institute's Turkish politics researcher Dr Tezcan Gümüş join host Ali Moore to examine the plight of the Kurds in Turkey. An Asia Institute podcast.

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Voiceover: The Ear to Asia podcast is made available on the Jakarta Post platform under agreement between the Jakarta Post and the University of Melbourne.

Ali Moore: Hello, I'm Ali Moore. This is Ear to Asia.

Tezcan Gümüş: When a Kurdish person in Turkey really starts to emphasize their Kurdish identity or Kurdish nationalism, there is a stigma around that. And in politics, that's brought a lot of Kurdish politicians into trouble with the state.

William Gourlay: My argument is if there is true democracy, or if Kurds are able to carry out politics in Turkey as they wish, then they don't necessarily want or need an independent Kurdish state.

Ali Moore: In this episode, the Kurdish struggle for a seat at the table in Turkey. Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialists at the University of Melbourne. The Kurdish struggle for comprehensive political rights and recognition in Turkey has been long and difficult, marked by extended periods of cultural repression, violent separatism and brutal state reprisal. Yet also, punctuated by brief moments of optimism for genuine political acceptance. Turkey's Kurds share an ethnicity and language with the Kurds of neighbouring Iraq, Iran and Syria, but their history and status, as the largest minority in Turkey, a state with little tolerance for those who stray from the dominant nationalist narrative, have presented the Kurds with a unique set of challenges.

Ali Moore: So how do Kurds navigate Turkey's often hostile domestic political environment? How have their aspirations and their collective actions



transformed over the years, as the politics of Turkey itself, has evolved? Is it even fair to speak of Turkey's Kurds as being of one mind in their social and political choices? Joining us to discuss the state of Kurdish affairs in Turkey is Monash University politics and international relations expert, Dr. William Gourlay and Asia Institute Turkish politics researcher, Dr. Tezcan Gümüş. Welcome Will and welcome back Tez.

Tezcan Gümüş: Pleasure to be here. Thank you.

William Gourlay: Thank you very much.

Ali Moore: Before we step back and look at some of the recent history, can you give us a sense of how Kurds are positioned in Turkey today? Tez, a country which increasingly is heading down an authoritarian road.

Tezcan Gümüş: The Southeast, where the Kurds are the main ethnic group, what we've seen under Erdoğan's authoritarianism is, since the 2016 coup attempt, a massive sort of attack and repression against those areas which have municipalities run by pro-Kurdish parties. What we're seeing is there's a massive level of repression towards Kurds politically at this point in time in Turkey.

Ali Moore: Indeed towards, really, any group.

Tezcan Gümüş: Yes, exactly. This is part of the broader context of what's happening in Turkey. Any sort of form of critics or political opposition, Erdoğan and the government is using the full force of the judiciary and the state's powers to undermine, or repress, or silence any opposition and criticism.

Ali Moore: Will, how would you describe the position of Kurds in Turkey today? And indeed, what's day-to-day life like for Kurds in Turkey?

William Gourlay: I think Tez is correct, in that, the political repression that is happening in Turkey happens across the board. There are many groups within Turkey, be they secularly, liberal, left leaning, who are struggling, or even anyone who's opposed to the government. As to the Kurds, probably the most important issue currently, is the fact that Kurdish mayors in Southeastern cities have been removed on accusations of supporting a terrorist organisation, the PKK, which I'm sure we'll deal with in some detail. In that sense, the political avenues for Kurds have been shutoff, because a lot of these removals seem relatively arbitrary. It's quite simple for judiciary or security forces to make an accusation of terrorism, therefore justifying their removal and replacing these mayors with



trustees who are, obviously, government appointments, who then take over the running of these municipalities.

I think broader issues as well, there's considerable consternation amongst Kurds in Turkey about the events that have happened in Syria in recent months. Turkey's incursion, invasion, depending on how you want to describe it. There's enormous cross border solidarity between Kurds in all the four countries that you mentioned, Syria, Turkey, Iran and Iraq. Kurds in Turkey are particularly concerned at the fate of Kurdish people living in Syria and the apparatus that Turkey's putting into place. Then I guess, an important factor as well is that President Erdoğan has recently allied with the Nationalist Action Party, which is staunchly nationalist and that he now relies upon them for his political support to maintain his majority. As long as Erdoğan is relying on the Nationalist Party to remain in power, there's going to be very little impetus from the government to make any sort of concessions to Kurds regarding rights or the issues that we're covering today.

Ali Moore: Indeed. The Kurdistan Workers Party, the PKK, that cross border collaboration and certainly what Erdoğan has meant for the Kurds, I do want to look at in far more detail. But just in terms of, I suppose, day-to-day life for Kurds in Turkey, do you see Kurds at every level of society? Are they economically equal? Tez, how would you describe day-to-day life?

Tezcan Gümüş: In the Turkish constitution it's always been that citizenship is equal in terms of economic and profession, any sort of pathways, in that sense, is never differentiated between groups. Everyone has pretty much, a Turkish name. I guess you will see, in all levels of politics, if we talk about Kurdish politicians, so the AKP has always had a number of Kurdish-

Ali Moore: That's Erdoğan's party, the ruling party?

Tezcan Gümüş: Erdoğan's party. Sorry, Adalet the Kalkınma Partisi, so Development and Justice Party of Erdoğan's. You've also had Turgut Özal, who was a famous prime minister throughout the '80s and then climbed to the presidency until his untimely death in 1993, who was very proud of his Kurdish heritage and so forth. So, that you've always had this. I think the issue is that when a Kurdish person really starts to emphasise their Kurdish identity or their Kurdish nationalism, there's a stigma around that. In politics, that also has brought a lot of Kurdish politicians into trouble with the state once they start announcing or asking for more Kurdish rights and so forth. You're allowed to have the benefits of the state, or government, or the economy.



- Ali Moore: As long as you don't beat the Kurdish drum.
- Tezcan Gümüş: Exactly. I think, am I right in saying that, Will?
- William Gourlay: I think that's a very fair observation. There was a famous dictum put about by the Peoples Republican Party in the 1930s and they said Turkey is established on the basis of unity of language, culture and ideal. But the underlying premise of that was the language and the culture was Turkish. If you made an attempt to assert your Kurdishness, you were stamped out and there were several, perhaps we shouldn't go into the history in too much detail, but there were several Kurdish uprisings within 15 years of the republic being established. But Tez is right, there's no sort of formal barrier to Kurdish people moving within Turkish society more broadly, and there's not necessarily any economic discrimination. I had a very pleasant dinner in Istinye, in Istanbul, which is this very fancy neighbourhood on the-
- Tezcan Gümüş: Very, very-
- William Gourlay: On the Bosphorus with a Kurdish family. These were Kurdish journalists who'd obviously and involved in the art scene in Turkey. There was no impediment to them rising through the ranks and becoming quite wealthy and well-to-do. By the same token, the woman who I was talking to at that particular dinner, she said when she was growing up, her parents spoke a language which she didn't understand and they used to say, "We're speaking English." Only when she grew up, later she realised that they were actually speaking Kurdish. Her parents were embarrassed to reveal to their children that they were actually Kurdish and she said, "That was a light bulb moment for me." They were growing up, I mean she's, I'm not sure what age, but she would have been growing up during the '60s and '70s, so her parents at that point were seeking to deny or downplay their Kurdishness.
- Tezcan Gümüş: Ali can I also say, there is also a very obvious fact that the South East and the South of Turkey where the Kurdish majorities has always been traditionally underdeveloped economically in terms of infrastructure.
- Ali Moore: This is where it borders Syria?
- Tezcan Gümüş: Exactly. Even in 1980s under Turgut Özal's prime ministership where Turkey was living through this massive economic boom, the economic boom was more the industrial or urban centres like Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, out the West. Whereas the economic benefits didn't filter down to or filter out to Southeast Turkey.



You've always had an economic difference, massive difference between the Western and the Southeast. There's always been that, but I think it was just bad economic management, bad policy. I mean, that's not the only areas that have been economically undeveloped in Turkey. A lot of peripheral areas that have been left untouched.

Ali Moore: Will, when you talked about that story regarding the language and hiding the fact that they were speaking Kurdish, are we able to say whether most Kurds would identify as a Kurd from Turkey or a Turk of Kurdish descent and caught up in that is that other very obvious question, is can we talk about the Kurds as a monolithic group?

William Gourlay: Well, it's a good question. When I was researching in Diyarbakır, which is the main Kurdish city in the Southeast, I was talking to a group of Kurds and I said, "I'm talking to Turkish Kurds." One of them very firmly put his fist on the desk and he said, "No, we are not Turkish Kurds. We are Kurds from Turkey." For these individuals who I was speaking to, don't like to be categorised as Turkish, they see Turkish as an ethnic identity, which is separate for them, separate to their Kurdish identity. Many of that same group, they were happy to say, "Yes, we live within the Turkish political system, so we are citizens of Turkey, but we are Kurdish." They don't like being called Turkish Kurds. They say, "We are Kurds from Turkey."

Perhaps that reflects in some sense the pressure to assimilate, which has been very real with throughout Turkish history, but it also demonstrates the desire to assert their own Kurdish identity or maintain that identity despite the pressure that has been placed upon them. As to your question talking about the Kurds or whether they're all unified, the clear answer is no. It's unreasonable to expect Kurds to all be politically unified because no other people are anywhere around the world. But in fact, the Kurds have a reputation for being politically divided and there's-

Ali Moore: Do they share one language and one religion?

William Gourlay: No.

Tezcan Gümüş: No. Majority of the Kurds adhere to Sunni Islam, but there is also a minority, which is Alevi, which is very loosely under the umbrella of Shia Islam.

William Gourlay: There are actually several Kurdish languages and I'm no expert on the linguistic side of it, some of which are actually mutually not intelligible. But the two main



dialects are Kurmanji, which is spoken in Southeast Turkey and Northern Iraq and Syria. And then Sorani which is spoken in the East of Iraq and in Iran. To my knowledge, there's certainly clear overlaps, but they're not mutually intelligible, but they're both related to Persian. In that sense, the Kurds see themselves as an Indo European people and in that sense they're distantly related to other European peoples.

Ali Moore: A question that I described at the beginning of this, the Kurds is the largest minority in Turkey. What proportion of the population are they?

Tezcan Gümüş: Definitely, it's a contested statistic depending on what your ideology is. Some people have said 10% and some people have gone up and said above 20%. I guess what I've read is, the safe sort of parameter is between 15 to 17%, you're looking at that.

Ali Moore: That 15 to 17%, Will, when you talk about cross border collaboration, to what extent do Turkey's Kurds share ethnicity and I suppose ideals with other Kurds who are in Iraq and Iran and Syria?

William Gourlay: There is a very clear sense of Kurdish kinship and I think a large degree of that amounts to the political pressures that they've come under in each country. When you see your ethnic kin being oppressed, it forges a bond. I've met many people who say they particularly felt the strong bonds with the Iraqi Kurds when they were being oppressed by Saddam Hussein in the late 1990s or through the 1990s and 1980s in fact. There's a strong bond between Kurds in Syria and Turkey. Some of that is to do with political groupings and shared affiliations. There's a word that's generally used, I think mostly by Iraqi Kurds rather than Turkish Kurds, but the word is *Kurdayetî*, which translated is Kurdishness. There's this shared sense across all the four countries that they share this identity, but that doesn't necessarily mean that they're politically aligned. In fact, within each country there are different Kurdish political organisations, often at loggerheads with each other within the country.

Ali Moore: Tell us about that proverb about roosters.

William Gourlay: There's a proverb that said, a Kurdish proverb that says, when there are too many roosters, the village wakes up late. The implication being there's been so many political 'leaders', leaders in inverted commerce, throughout the years, Kurds don't know which person to listen to and who is their true leader. They've never been able to sort of mobilise in a concerted sense and create their own state, which might've been an opportunity at the end of the First World War.



There's this common thread amongst Kurds that we're divided and if only we were united, we'd be stronger.

Ali Moore: Let's look at that question of political representation in Turkey for the Kurds, Tez.

Tezcan Gümüş: Yes. The first real formal efforts started in the mid to late '80s with the left-leaning Social Democratic People's Party. I'll refer to them in their Turkish acronym as SHP. This was the first political party, mainstream political party that brought the Kurdish issue to the fore, to the agenda and really had a lot of Kurdish MPs within its party ranks.

Ali Moore: They were successful within the mainstream political system of Turkey?

Tezcan Gümüş: Yes, because they end up getting into coalition in the late '80s and '90s and the party's run by Erdal İnönü, whose dad, İsmet İnönü, was the second president of Turkey. Within this period, there's a breaking off and there's internal sort of tensions between the Kurdish group and the major party. They ended up sort of leaving to create the first pro-Kurdish rights party, which is the People's Labour Party, which is Halkın Emek Partisi so HEP. Then in '91 they entered the election, '91 election under the SHP, the Social Democratic People's Party as candidates, and 21 out of their 27 candidates came into parliament in this way, so they make up actually quarter of the SHP's parliamentary representation. This is the actual first time we see the formal arrival of pro-Kurdish rights parliamentarians from another party, but of course for political pragmatism, they are-

Ali Moore: They work together.

Tezcan Gümüş: They work together. This is where we see the founding establishment of these parties. But it's a very troubled history from that point on because-

Ali Moore: Because indeed the '90s were a very dark period, weren't they?

Tezcan Gümüş: Extremely dark period and this is '91, a handful of these Kurdish politicians, when they were taking their parliamentary oath, made the oath in Kurdish and so forth. This was actually taken as an affront and a hostile act by the establishment and their state prosecutors enacted investigations into them. This investigation ended up taking off the ground in '93, '94, which the centre-right parties in a coalition voted to lift these Kurdish politicians' or parliamentarians' immunity, and they were thrown in jail looking to receive sentences of 15 years



for undermining the unity of the state or acting on behalf of terrorist propaganda and so forth.

- Ali Moore: Those two pro-Kurdish parties, what has happened to them? Have they morphed into other parties today?
- Tezcan Gümüş: There's a long list of party closures and new parties, reincarnation so were given different names, but take the mantle of this Kurdish rights, seeking Kurdish rights and so forth.
- Ali Moore: Will, where does the Kurdistan Workers Party, the PKK, fit into all of this?
- William Gourlay: The Kurdistan Workers Party arose in the late 1970s. The 1970s was a particularly tumultuous time in politics within Turkey. There was a great deal of violence between left and right and also an increase in Kurdish nationalist thought or a sense of Kurdish identity because it had been long suppressed through the first decades or the first four or five decades of the Republic. The PKK arose and it was led by Abdullah Öcalan and then undertook a military campaign, which is often described as a terrorist campaign. Their initial goal was to free Kurdistan and all its four parts of what they termed colonialists control, being the modern States.
- Ali Moore: When you say four parts, you mean Iraq, Iran, Syria, Turkey?
- William Gourlay: Yes. I mean, that was the initial goal, but it undertook its first military operations in Turkey and particularly targeted the Turkish military. Thereafter, the Turkish military responded with counter terrorism measures and it became, I guess you could say, that a low intensity civil war sort of developed in the South Eastern corner of Turkey. This was largely conducted in the mountains in the countryside. The PKK undoubtedly carried out some atrocities, there can be no denying that. There was targeting of civilians, targeting of unarmed combatants, targeting of the Turkish military, so for that reason, the Turkish army said this is a terrorist organisation.
- Ali Moore: And it still is today, that's how it's labelled?
- William Gourlay: Absolutely by, the Turkish government, indeed and indeed, many governments actually recognise that the PKK is a terrorist organisation, including the Australian, the EU, US.
- Ali Moore: Does it have any support in Turkey from Kurds?



William Gourlay: It has considerable support. It's interesting, I remember talking to Kurds here in Melbourne in the 1990s and they said, "We admire the PKK and Abdullah Öcalan the leader," because Öcalan particularly was the first person who stood up and said proudly, "I am a Kurd." They said that engendered or developed a sense of pride in their own Kurdishness, and I think that's still largely true. I mean, it's still classified as a terrorist organisation, but there is considerable support amongst the Kurds, probably not only in Turkey for the organisation. We don't want to get into the debate of terrorist versus freedom fighter, but I think you'd be hard pressed to find any Kurd who would say, yes, it's a terrorist organisation. They see it as a military organisation that is fighting for their rights.

Obviously, Turks are diametrically opposed to that sort of categorization, but that's the way many Kurds see it. In fact, when I was in Diyarbakır, I noticed there's pro PKK graffiti on the walls. One place I saw PKK halktır, which means the PKK is the people, so it's an indication many Kurds still support the PKK as defending their rights. At the same time, many Kurds in Turkey support the HDP, the People's Democracy Party, which is the main pro-Kurdish party in parliament at the moment. It's important to point out that they're pro Kurdish, they're not able to actually say they're-

Ali Moore: Representative of-

William Gourlay: Representative of the Kurds. But there's an argument that goes, well, because the Kurds never had any clear free political avenue offered to them within Turkey, that's why the PKK developed support and appreciation from Kurds within Turkey.

Tezcan Gümüş: I'm just following on from what Will said, the state's very strong arm tactics and the 'securitization' of the Kurdish issue, I guess I'd use quotation marks, has also at the same time fostered a lot of sympathy in the South East for the PKK as well. The Turkish has not helped in that sense in trying to stop any sort of grass root support. Its activities and the militarization of the issue, to combat the Kurdish issue of the Kurdish nationalist issue or the PKK has actually fostered more sympathy.

William Gourlay: I'd add to that, a recently published book by Ezgi Başaran who's a Turkish journalist of Turkish ethnicity, examining the war, but she actually spent some time in PKK camps in Northern Iraq and she said the people that she spoke to her joined the PKK, she said every single one of them had a story of repression by Turkish authorities or security apparatus or someone who was murdered or



someone who was abducted or their village was destroyed. It goes exactly to Tez's point, that repressive measures that the Turkish state put in place rather than quelling the problem to some degree has exacerbated the problem.

Tezcan Gümüş: There's a recent study by a Deniz Çifçi, who was a Turkish academic. I'm talking about, in his book the Kurds and the politics of Turkey, he did a study of the Kurds in major cities and he said that even though the young generation between 16 to 25, who linguistically can't speak any Kurdish dialect or have never really visited the Southeast where their grandparents or their parents are from, there's a level of radicalization or Kurdish nationalism arising given that the current very pro nationalistic and anti Kurdish policies or the AKP government under Erdoğan. It's actually having the reverse effect. They're actually hugging the Kurdish identity more and more because of what they're saying the government is doing towards their kin in the Southeast as well.

William Gourlay: It's Simmel's rule. Simmel was a German sociologist and he said the degree of internal solidarity depends on the degree of external pressure. The more pressure you put on people to say, "No, you can't be this or you must do that." The more they-

Ali Moore: Rebel.

William Gourlay: [crosstalk] to each other.

Tezcan Gümüş: Yes.

William Gourlay: Yes. They react back.

Tezcan Gümüş: Push back. Yes.

Ali Moore: You're listening to Ear to Asia from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. I'm Ali Moore and I'm joined by Dr. Tezcan Gümüş of Asia Institute, and Dr. William Gourlay of Monash University. We're talking about the Kurds of Turkey and their long and rocky struggle for political recognition. We've talked extensively about the PKK, but just in terms of very recent history Tez, what has President Erdoğan meant for the Kurds? Because initially they were real efforts towards some sort of peace process, wasn't there?

Tezcan Gümüş: We have to also take a broader view as well in terms of looking at Erdoğan and his AKP government's initiatives early on in terms of democratisation. Between their first period, when they got elected from 2002 to 2007 it was seen as the



golden years of Turkish democracy, where the AKP really made a strong effort to democratise the system or liberalise the system. Within that you see a loosening up on use of Kurdish language so that government allowed and set up a state broadcaster in Kurdish language, so 24 hour news broadcast and so forth. You saw a much more loosening up of Kurds being able to speak their language through formal institutions as the state broadcast and so forth.

Then in mid 2000s we see, I guess the Kurdish peace initiative where it was pretty much bilateral, where we see it between the governments and intelligence agency and I guess representatives of the PKK and then the HDP parliamentarians got involved. But it was, I guess bilateral and there was no third party mediator, like an international mediator. This was done behind closed doors, there was no transparency. What was being said and what was being offered, it was not an inclusive dialogue with broader Kurdish community and Turkish community in that sense. We see between 2012, 2014, two, three years of relative peace where the PKK came to a ceasefire and so forth. That's when the issue in Syria and Northern Syria where the Kurdish majority reside really start impacting that or what the Kurds might have seen much more sort of hostile reaction towards the PYD, which is the-

William Gourlay: Democratic Unity Party.

Tezcan Gümüş: Yes. Thank you Will.

William Gourlay: In Syria.

Tezcan Gümüş: Yeah. And seeing the Turkish government being hostile towards them in their fight against ISIS and not supporting them, but being much more sympathetic towards ISIS was, I guess, what was the thought, really kicked off a lot of, I guess, hostility between both sides in Turkey where we saw a very quick crumbling of the peace process and back to full sort of, I guess, combat or war between the two sides.

Ali Moore: At the same time wasn't the 2015 election a game changer?

Tezcan Gümüş: Ah, yes. What we see in 2015 of June, the first election of 2015, we see HDP, so the Kurdish or the pro Kurdish rights party, become third largest party in parliament with just over 13% of the vote.

Ali Moore: And that meant Erdoğan lost his majority.



- Tezcan Gümüş: Yes, Erdoğan actually lost his majority, but there was inability to form a coalition. I guess Erdoğan didn't want to form a coalition with another party.
- Ali Moore: Can I just interrupt because Will you were there, weren't you for these elections?
- William Gourlay: I was there in June 2015 that's correct, in Diyarbakır. I'd actually been warned by people in Istanbul not to go to Diyarbakır during the election. I was a bit of, again, Simmel's rule.
- Ali Moore: Why?
- William Gourlay: They told me I shouldn't go, so I'm going. Because they were concerned that there's a threshold in Turkish politics, if a party doesn't get 10% of the vote, it wins no seats across the country. This was the first time that a Kurdish party had actually run in its own right, in an attempt to pass the threshold. This was the idea of Selahattin Demirtaş, who is the then leader of the HDP.
- Tezcan Gümüş: Who previously, the way to get around that, sorry Will, was as independence. You can-
- Ali Moore: If you were an independent you don't need that?
- Tezcan Gümüş: You don't need that. What the Kurdish HDP or beforehand and previous other parties would do was enter their candidates as independents and then once they got in-
- Ali Moore: They'd work together.
- Tezcan Gümüş: Yeah. They worked together in parliament. Sorry, Will.
- William Gourlay: That's all right. But I would suggest that the people suggesting that I don't go there were demonstrating some sort of prejudice against Kurds being unruly and wild and unable to control.
- Ali Moore: They were saying that if they lost the election-
- William Gourlay: If they lose, it's going to be-
- Ali Moore: It would be a disaster.



- William Gourlay: A bun fight. As it turns out, I went back to my hotel room after the polls closed and after some time and I was on Twitter, it was my only sort of form of keeping up with news. After some time there were bangs and whistles outside and I was thinking... Oh, and I'd previously spoken to a Kurdish shop owner and I said, "What's going to happen in the election?" And he said, "Ya savař ya barıř." It'll either be peace or war. And so I'm thinking, is this savař, is this war or is it barıř? It turns out it was firecrackers and they'll probably wear some firearms, but whistles and bass drums and I went outside and Diyarbakır went off.
- Ali Moore: Because the HDP did incredibly well in the 2015 elections.
- William Gourlay: It did incredibly well, and it got 13% of the vote as tested and leapt into parliament.
- Ali Moore: There was then this five month hiatus because Erdoğan could not put together a coalition and there was another vote. But what happened in that five months?
- Tezcan Gümüř: In that five months there was this massive explosion of violence in terms of ISIS attacks and PKK attacks in urban cities. So there was a massive level of insecurity felt by the country and society. It was like, "Oh my God, we don't have a government at the moment and everything in society is falling apart. There's terrorist attacks going off with ISIS, PKK and so forth." This level of insecurity, it seemed to work in Erdoğan's favour because-
- Ali Moore: But what was the motivation of the PKK? I mean they'd just done incredibly well, not the PKK, but obviously the Kurd sympathetic party, the HDP. What was the motivation for those attacks in that five months period?
- Tezcan Gümüř: I think there's a level of thinking that the PKK was also sort of unhappy to see the HDP rise in the ranks and overpass it as being the number one representative of the Kurdish voice in Turkey in the political process. They were always happy to reengage in violence as the Turkish side was as well, to react and say, "Well, it's not working, let's go back to violence." There is that level of thinking that the PKK just wasn't happy with the HDP and Selahattin Demirtař is a rising star and through his charisma and his appeal to be the leading voice. There is that sense that this is why they were happy to sort of engage in the violence very, very quickly.
- Ali Moore: Do you think that that sense is a fair representation?



- Tezcan Gümüş: Although I'm not a PKK sort of researcher, I would definitely think there's some level of rationality in that as well, definitely. To be outshone because for decades they've seen themselves as being-
- Ali Moore: The core.
- Tezcan Gümüş: The core. Yes.
- Ali Moore: I guess-
- Tezcan Gümüş: To carry the mantle.
- Ali Moore: Will, at the same time as Tez just said, it allowed Erdoğan to play that terrorists, we need stability, we need a strong government card, so it was in their interests, I guess, to allow this instability.
- William Gourlay: I might put in an alternative school of thought. I think there're elements of truth in what Tez is saying. There's certainly competition between the HDP and the PKK, but others say that there was an ISIS bombing in Suruç, which is just on the Turkey Southern border, just North of Kobani, which is a city many listeners will be familiar with, which was besieged by ISIS in 2014 and that's when the Kurdish YPG, not wanting to use too many acronyms, forces began their fight back against ISIS and won US support. There were these groups of Kurds from Turkey who were going through Suruç and planning to help in the rebuilding of Kobani and then there was a bombing carried out by ISIS operatives, and I think there was 32 or 35 people.
- Tezcan Gümüş: And they're all young, predominantly they were all youth activists in their twenties or late teens.
- William Gourlay: And they probably weren't all Kurdish there would-
- Tezcan Gümüş: No.
- William Gourlay: There would have been less leaning-
- Tezcan Gümüş: Of course, yeah.
- William Gourlay: We need to help our Kurdish brothers. There're allegations that Turkish security forces turned a blind eye to ISIS because they thought, "Oh, well, here's Kurdish activist, we'll let them blow them up." The PKK then reacted to that and killed



several Turkish policeman and some say, "Well, that was the trigger." The Turkish army said, "Right, we're not going to stand for this." Given the context of the government losing its majority, the pro-Kurdish party on the ascendant and there's a school of thought within Turkey that, some of those very valid points that Tez made earlier, some of the initiatives that Erdoğan put in place with regard to the Kurds, which were definitely positive reforms and reviewing the issue as a political issue rather than a security issue.

William Gourlay: Some Kurds alleged that all he was doing was trying curry favour with Kurds. He just wanted to win the Kurdish vote so he could get his super majority and become president. Then some say, well, when the Kurds actually went, "Well, no, we don't actually support you and we're going to follow the HDP," there was a bit of Erdoğan throwing his hands in the air and saying, "If you're not going to support me, I'm going to stamp on you." And that with government encouragement, the conflict re-escalated-

Tezcan Gümüş: Very quickly.

William Gourlay: Very quickly. I have to say the PKK carried out a strategic absolute blunder by taking the conflict for the first time ever into cities. Previously, the conflict had been carried out in villages, mountains, et cetera, but they went into cities like Diyarbakır, Sirnak, Cizre, et cetera.

Tezcan Gümüş: There was also that big bombing in the middle of Ankara at the bus stop where it killed 25, 26 people by a certain wing of the TAK.

Ali Moore: The end result of this, Tez, was that Erdoğan got his majority back?

Tezcan Gümüş: Of course, let's look at the voting patterns of Kurds. Predominantly, they've always voted for conservative religious parties. Throughout the '90s Refah Partisi is a Welfare Party, which Erdoğan comes from, a traditional Islamist party was the main vote getter of the Kurds. Now with Erdoğan, there's this contest between his party, AKP and the HDP for the votes of the Kurds, because a lot of Kurds, what's said is that they're much more traditional and conservative and pious, so a party like the AKP appeals to them. When he realised that he was losing to the HDP, especially in the South East, which are valuable states' parliamentary numbers for him, it sort of suited him to crush or weaken the HDP enough where they'd have to stop acting as a strong opposition force.

Ali Moore: Well, indeed today what is the situation with the HDP, particularly as you said earlier, after the attempted coup against Erdoğan in 2016, that crackdown



certainly extended to the Kurds as it did to anyone who looked like they were an opposing force, but what's the role of the HDP today? Do they still have parliamentary members?

Tezcan Gümüş: Of course, yes. In 2016 after the attempted coup in July, there was a state of emergency which gave Erdoğan as president, power of decree to sort of pump through legislation and run the country in that sense around policy and laws and make policy on the run. Under the moniker of fighting terrorism in the state of emergency, the HDP and its parliamentarians were targeted specifically. There was 154 parliamentarians who had outstanding investigations, but because of parliamentary immunity they weren't able to be investigated. 154 of them were removed of their immunity, and 55 were from the HDP, but the only people that were targeted were the 55 from the HDP immediately. What we see is immediate incarceration of Selahattin Demirtaş and-

Ali Moore: He was the co-founder?

Tezcan Gümüş: Yes, a co-leader and Figen Yüksekdağ who was his co-leader and they were immediately thrown in jail under terrorism charges and also nine members, 11 in total and they're still, I think most of them are in jail including Demirtaş.

Ali Moore: So it significantly weakened-

Tezcan Gümüş: Yes.

Ali Moore: As a party?

Tezcan Gümüş: What you saw at the same time was there was a law passed in August 2016 under president decree, which is article 45 and 57 of the law, which also allows the government to effectively remove mayors the government accused of supporting terrorism, however unsubstantiated. We see an immediate attack on the Southeast areas, which were held by HDP and HDP's regional arm.

Ali Moore: Erdoğan has removed a number of those democratically elected-

Tezcan Gümüş: Exactly.

Ali Moore: Mayors?



- Tezcan Gümüş: Immediately and it was a purge of 85 out of 103 municipalities in the Southeast held by the HDP. This is a massive attack overnight under state of emergency laws, so we see a very direct attack at weakening the HDP from 2016 onwards.
- Ali Moore: Will, what is it that Erdoğan is worried about? What's the threat from the Kurds?
- William Gourlay: I don't know that it's necessarily a threat from the Kurds, but I think he needs to retain power through any means. I'm no expert on this, but there's a school of thought that he has been extremely corrupt and while serving, he enriched himself and his family and he's grown and if he ever loses power, he will be prosecuted for that so he needs to retain power through any means possible. As I said before, he was attempting to court the Kurdish vote to maintain his power. The other significant minority block, I guess you would call it, within the Turkish electorate is the nationalist vote, so the hard line Turks who say, some of whom probably to this day, still say, "No, there's no such thing as a Kurd and if we acknowledge any Kurdishness, it's the rupture of the country," et cetera, et cetera.
- Some argue that he's switched his focus from the Kurds to the nationalists. Like, "Well, I need the nationalist folk to maintain a majority." In that sense, it's quite simple to make these accusations of terrorism because broadly speaking, the Turkish nationalists take that as a given and agree and say, "Yes, we need to ally with Erdoğan because he's the one who's fighting against these terrorists or the separatists." So, all these sort of words, which were very common in the 1990s.
- Ali Moore: You just used the word separatists, is there an appetite for separatism among Kurds in Turkey?
- William Gourlay: I would say there is some, but I think it is minor. In fact, there was a study undertaken by Dogu Ergil, who's a professor of politics in Ankara in 1995, I was living in Izmir at the time. He was the first one who actually surveyed Kurds. There was always resistance to surveying Kurds prior to that because a lot of people denied there were actually any Kurds.
- Tezcan Gümüş: To give you the context of the '90s and how bad it was in terms of rights, I think Dogu Ergil was investigated for terrorist propaganda for making the report.
- William Gourlay: Yes, exactly right.
- Tezcan Gümüş: Just to show-



- Ali Moore: Merely for making the report?
- Tezcan Gümüş: Yes. Even though an academic making a very academic study, so just to give you context of the '90s, how brutal it was in terms of rights.
- William Gourlay: He and his research team went into three Kurdish majority provinces, Diyarbakır, Van and Batman, I think was the third one, and they surveyed, I think it was around 12,000 Kurds. They asked them a range of questions, but many of them related to the PKK and political processes, and they found that while the majority of the Kurds they interviewed or surveyed supported the PKK, they saw it as a political vehicle. In his report he even uses a train analogy. He said, "The PKK is a train and the final station might be separatism, but there're other stations along the way. That might be political representation. It might be a reversal of oppression by the state or an acknowledgement." They see the PKK as a vehicle for their political ambitions, not necessarily separatism. [crosstalk] Even then and that was when the PKK struggle was at its peak, there was only a very small minority of Kurds. It was something like 11 or 12% who said, "Yes, we need separatism."
- Ali Moore: I was going to say though, that the ecstatic nature of the response to the election victory in 2015 that you witnessed Will, that would seem to underline wouldn't it? That separatism is not high on the agenda, that playing within the mainstream Turkish political system is higher.
- William Gourlay: Exactly. That's how I would put it. There was a rally that I went to prior to the election, enormous mass of people walking through Diyarbakır and as they went, they were chanting "Önce barajı, sonra Saray'ı" meaning, first we will pass the threshold, the 10% threshold, then we'll take the palace or we'll have a president. That indicates to me that, it's not necessarily a storming of the palace, it's like politics is freeing up and one day there could be a Kurdish president. My argument in fact is the main theme of my book, which will come out in July is, if there is true democracy or if Kurds are able to carry out politics as they wish, then they don't necessarily want or need an independent Kurdish State.
- Ali Moore: Will, sorry, the name of your book for those who are interested in reading.
- William Gourlay: The Kurds in Erdoğan's Turkey.
- Ali Moore: The Kurds in Erdoğan's Turkey. Tez, do you agree with that assessment?



Tezcan Gümüş: Yeah, of course. I agree with that, definitely and I just wanted to touch upon what Will said at the end that the state has always seen Kurdish nationalism or aspirations for more Kurdish rights as an existential threat. I think it really goes back to the history and the creation of the Turkish Republic and the fear that has always carried on until today. Hence, why it's always predominantly been approached in a very securitized manner.

Ali Moore: Will, what do you think the Kurds can pin their hopes on for a brighter future in Turkey? And you certainly indicate at the very beginning of this conversation, that's not under Erdoğan.

William Gourlay: I don't know that anyone other than AKP loyalists have a bright future in Turkey while Erdoğan remains in place. That's whether you're a leftist or you're fighting for equal rights for gays or women or whatever it might be, while Erdoğan's in place, he's going to pull any trick he can to stay in place for the reasons I explained. Again, I'm not an expert on his business dealings, but there's a considerable weight of evidence. He's going to use whatever ruse he can to remain in power, that means playing to the nationalist base because they're a kind of soft target. It's pretty easy to say terrorist, separatists and segments within the Turkish electorate will rally to his cause. By the same token, he's losing popularity and perhaps he's ratcheting up or going to ratchet up his rhetoric and including his foreign policy adventures, which are getting more unwieldy as the days pass. But the economy is tanking and that was another part of Erdoğan's popularity.

In the early years, the economy was booming and as the economy tanks, the AKP, Erdoğan's party is losing popularity and other politicians are winning support. The most important example of that I think is Ekrem İmamoğlu, who recently won the mayoralty in Istanbul and he's enormously popular. There were shenanigans from Erdogan determining that there was subterfuge in the first election. So we need to have a rerun. And so, they had the rerun and lo and behold, Imamoglu increased his majority. So, I think it shows that there's an appetite for change within the Turkish populace. And I think Imamoglu also is a very inclusive politician and he's actually made gestures to the Kurds and he's travelled to Diyarbakir and he understands that the hard line approaches, which Erdogan is now pursuing are counterproductive.

Tezcan Gümüş: And what we can't deny is the HDP's massive influence on political culture in Turkey. Given that the way they do politics, especially Selahattin Demirtaş is a very charismatic leader and appeal to a very broad spectrum of people in Turkey.



- Ali Moore: So, even though they've been significantly weakened, they are still a real presence?
- Tezcan Gümüş: Exactly. So, what's been shown is the way that Imamoglu, all look Ekram Imamoglu was able to win, especially with this larger margin, second time around, second vote around, was that HDP actually got behind him, was basically said, they didn't put up a candidate to not split the vote and Selahattin Demirtaş made a call to his voters to vote for Ekram Imamoglu as the mayor. So, what we're seeing in Turkey in the last couple of years, and I'm sort of myself and another colleague at Melbourne University doing is looking at how the opposition in the face of Erdogan's growing authoritarianism is informally and formally aligning themselves to be able to fight off Erdogan.
- Ali Moore: And that is an entirely new podcast, but for the Kurds is that their best hope?
- Tezcan Gümüş: There're massive differences within the Turkish opposition groups, identity wise and so forth and political ideology. But they need to realise that they need to come to an agreement and some sort of alliance to be able to overthrow or fight off Erdogan's system. And I think that is HDP's and Turkey's oppositions main hope. And with that you will hopefully get better rights for Kurds and other people in Turkey as well.
- Ali Moore: Well, I look forward very much to having you both back in the studio to talk about Turkish politics more broadly, but thank you so much for your insights today.
- William Gourlay: Thanks very much Ali.
- Tezcan Gümüş: Thank you Ali. It's been fantastic.
- Ali Moore: Our guests have been politics and international relations expert, Dr. William Gourlay from Monash university and Turkish politics researcher Dr Tezcan Gumus of Asia Institute, the university of Melbourne. Ear to Asia is brought to you by Asia Institute. You can find more information about this and all our other episodes at the Asia Institute website. Be sure to keep up with every episode of Ear to Asia by following us on the Apple podcast app, Stitcher, Spotify, or SoundCloud. If you like the show, please rate and review it on Apple podcasts. Every positive review helps new listeners find the show and of course let your friends know about us on social media. This episode was recorded on the 21st of February 2020. Producers were Eric van Bommel and Kelvin Param of



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