

War of Declarations in Turkey: “Non-national” Academics vs. the Nationalist Erdogan

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News

In the beginning of 2016 more than a thousand academics in Turkey and abroad have signed a declaration about the violence in South Eastern Turkey. The Declaration started a heated debate not only on the Kurdish question, but also about the freedom of speech.

Summary

The Declaration entitled “We will not be a Party to this Crime” signed by “Academics for Peace” has blamed the violence in the Turkish Kurdistan solely on the state. This was criticized both by the main opposition party CHP and a number of intellectuals, who support Kurdish rights but condemn using violence to achieve political aims. However, President Erdogan intervened in the debate with harsh accusations against the signatories and called on the judicial system and the university administrations to take actions against the signatories. The result of this intervention was the shifting of focus from the content of the Declaration to freedom of speech. This article analyzes the debate and points to a number of fundamental flaws in the Turkish debate culture.

Key Words

Turkey, PKK, Erdogan

About the Author

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Analysis:

In the beginning of this year 1,126 academics in Turkey and 355 of their colleagues from abroad signed a declaration entitled “We will not be a Party to this Crime”. “Academics for Peace”, as the signatories called themselves, put forward three noteworthy points. First of all, they have accused the Turkish state of committing a “deliberate and planned massacre” against the people of South Eastern Turkey, especially the Kurds, and that this crime was in “serious violation of Turkey’s own laws and international law” (Kural 2016). Secondly, they demanded independent national and, more importantly, international observers “be given access to the region and that they be allowed to monitor and report on the incidents”. Thirdly, they called for negotiations and a road map which includes “the demands of the Kurdish political movement”.

By all appearances the declaration got a chilly reception from the general public. CHP (The Republican People’s Party), the biggest opposition party generally described as “social-democratic”, did not support this declaration (*Milliyet* 2016). The party spokesman, Haluk Koc, criticized it for taking a one-sided position by not mentioning the PKK’s militant policies and violent actions. He said: “The solution of this problem doesn’t involve only one side, and the state naturally will do everything to fight terrorism”. The alleged one-sidedness of the declaration was taken up and elaborated by many other commentators in the ensuing debate.

The “liberal democrats”

The Declaration created a heated debate and brought to the fore deep-seated and structural problems of the Turkish political culture. Among the plethora of views and debates, two aspects can be seen as the most important: The first one was a fruitful debate between some of the signatories and a number of academics and intellectuals, who can be designated as “liberal democrats” (Berktaş 2016a; Uslu 2016a; Coskun 2016a, b; Özalınlı 2016a). The second aspect was President Erdogan’s harsh accusations directed against the signatories which blatantly attacked their right to express their views (Weaver 2016).

The “liberal democrats” echoed CHP’s critique of the Declaration for being biased. In line with their general position of supporting Kurdish rights, including establishing an autonomous Kurdish area within the territorial integrity of Turkey, but opposing in principle resorting to violence to get opinions across or to achieve political aims, they underlined that the Declaration does not mention PKK’s violence against both the authorities and the Kurds in the areas it has declared to be “self-autonomous”.

The critique by the “liberal democrats” can be summarized as follows: It was not the state, but the PKK, which started the ongoing civil war in July 2015 by occupying central neighborhoods in a number of towns with armed groups and surrounding them with ditches and barricades and declaring them “self-autonomous areas”. It is legitimate for the state to try to reestablish law and order in these areas by arresting armed

insurgents and cleaning up the ditches and barricades. One can criticize, goes on the critique, certain concrete actions of the security force for being careless about civilian lives and causing civilian losses in their war against the armed guerillas, but depicting their operations as a “massacre against the local population” is wrong and unjust. According to the “liberal democrats”, what lies behind the Declaration is the idea popular on the Turkish left that whatever a political group claiming to represent an oppressed people does to achieve political goals is correct and must be supported. This being so, whatever the state does is always completely wrong and unjust, and therefore must be opposed. Moreover, the critics point out that there is in the ideological universe of the Turkish Left the “fetishism of revolutionary violence and armed struggle” (Berktaş 2016a). On top of all this comes the intense hostility of the socialist opposition against President Erdogan and the AKP.

The car bomb in Cinar

Only three days after the declaration was presented in a press conference, the PKK presented inadvertently a bloody illustration of the fundamental fault of the Declaration, that is, the lack of a critique of the violence committed by the PKK. It exploded a car bomb in front of the police headquarters in the Kurdish town of Cinar, killing one police officer and five civilians and wounding at least 39. Among the casualties were a mother and her five-month-old baby and a father and his two small children. Three days later HPG, the armed wing of the PKK, took responsibility for the blast and said they were “sorry for the civilian losses” and “expressed its condolences” (BBC Turkish 2016; *Evrensel* 2016).

The fact that the PKK shortly after the declaration caused the death of a number of civilians called into question the main point in the Declaration that the state is solely responsible for the bloodshed in the Turkish Kurdistan. Probably therefore, more than 100 of the signatories the day after the car bomb in Cinar came up with a second declaration apparently to distance themselves from the attack.

However, this second declaration was even more problematic than the first one, which at least did not mention PKK’s violence at all and in effect ignored it completely. A closer look at the argumentation of the second declaration will show two fundamental flaws of Turkish political debate culture, which can be observed both on the Left and the Right of the political spectrum: Referring to a former victimhood to legitimize current policies and the differentiation between just and unjust violence and terrorism in the context of Turkey’s political system.

The first flaw can be seen in the way the authors of the declaration try to explain the recent upsurge of violence in Turkish Kurdistan: “The ditches and the barricades are not the reason for today’s chaos. They are the results of the promises given and broken to the Kurds since 1919, the disappointment, created by the sudden stop in the negotiations and the historical oppressive policies, which the state has applied towards the Kurds for decades” (*Radikal* 2016). If one follows this logic it can be proposed that it is not possible to criticize the current policies of a political party which claims to represent a

historically victimized group. The political party in question or its apologists can always refer to the group’s past victimhood to legitimize its current policies. History has eminent examples of former victims becoming perpetrators.

The second flaw, the differentiation between just and unjust violence and terrorism, can be seen in their critique of the car bomb in Cinar: “The PKK must not harm civilians by gliding into blunt and unfocused terror, while fighting against the state’s policy of the destruction of the Kurds” (ibid.). This differentiation is problematic, since it constructs two sub-categories of terror, that is, terror which either harms or does not harm civilians. The concrete example of the car bomb in Cinar questions this differentiation, since one of the dead was a police officer and the other 5 people were civilians. If you blow up a police station in the middle of a residential area, you have to reckon that you will have a certain amount of “collateral damage”.

President Erdogan intervenes

In the media there were rumors that groups of academics with differing views would come with their own declarations concerning the violence and bloodshed in the Turkish Kurdistan. However, President Erdogan intervened with such harsh accusations against the signatories of the first declaration that the focus of the debate changed immediately. He fired off angry tirades against what he called “these so-called academics who poison the minds of their students”, accusing them of “treason” and being “fifth column of foreign powers”. He claimed they were sympathizing with the terrorists, and that they aimed at undermining Turkey’s national security (Weaver 2016). Besides thus attacking the freedom of speech, he also intervened in the institutional independence of the courts and the universities with ominous appeals to the judiciary and the High Board of Education (YÖK) to “take affair against these so-called academics”. A number of prosecutors launched investigations against the signatories on the grounds that they were making “terrorist propaganda”, “inciting people to hatred, violence and breaking the law” and “insulting Turkish institutions and the Turkish Republic”.

Thus, Erdogan managed to change the topic of an imminent academic debate on who is responsible for the bloody events in the Kurdish cities to a discussion on the limits of freedom of speech, effectively destroying the free space for academics who would present alternative views. Many academics, who were critical of the first declaration for being one-sided and who wanted to present their own interpretation of the recent developments, were effectively silenced. No alternative declarations on the solution of the Kurdish issue came out. The result was a third declaration signed by 610 academics and a fourth from the Helsinki Citizens Assembly. The vast majority of the 610 signatories of the third declaration were people who had not signed the initial declaration. In both of these last declarations no political views are stated on the situation in the Kurdish cities. There is only a principled defense of freedom of speech.

All of the above mentioned “liberal democrats”, most of whom are themselves academics, supported these two last declarations stressing that one does not have to agree with people to defend their right to express their views freely as long as they do

not openly and directly call for violence (Berktaş 2016b; Coskun 2016b; Özalınli 2016b; Kenar 2016; Uslu 2016b, c; Calıslar 2016a, b). Despite the fact that the declaration of the 611 academics did not state any political positions concerning the Kurdish issue or the violence in the Kurdish cities, the pro-government newspaper Sabah still ran the headline: “Support from 611 academics to the academics supporting the PKK”! (*Sabah* 2016).

The low quality of the Turkish political culture

It would be difficult to claim that the main intention of the first two declarations was to harm the prospects of peace between the state and the PKK. To all appearances, the signatories seem to have forgotten that if any peace is to be achieved in Turkey, this can only happen if the defenders of a peaceful settlement in both the AKP and the PKK become stronger. However, the result of the ensuing verbal war was exactly the opposite: The hawks in both camps were strengthened. Erdogan, by his aggressive nationalist rhetoric, aimed to galvanize his conservative grass-roots behind himself by pointing at the “unjust” accusations of the Declaration. Those AKP members and leaders, who were defending a softer line, were side-lined. A similar development took place in the PKK, since the Declaration could be interpreted by the hawkish wing as an academic endorsement of their militant line. In the end, the internal opposition in both parties, who demanded a speedy ceasefire, got weaker and the continuation of the war became more acceptable for both sides (Mahcupyan 2016).

Many observers of Turkish politics point to the circumstance that the country lacks a “real” opposition, which defends democracy against all of its adversaries regardless of political persuasion. They also claim that President Erdogan and the AKP will stay in power as long as the quality of the opposition is “mediocre”. The Declaration and the ensuing war of words are good illustrations of the relatively low quality of the Turkish political culture.

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