

The Political Consequences of Turkey's Earthquake

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Articles & Testimony

Turkey's latest earthquake could be the beginning of the end for the PKK's appeal among Kurds in the southeast, to the benefit of other players.

In 1999, two massive earthquakes struck Western Turkey just outside of Istanbul, killing thousands of people. The quakes shook not only the Anatolian tectonic plate but also the Turks' confidence in their much-respected secular elites who, soon after the quakes, were voted out of power for failing to respond in time to the devastating tremors.

Just as the 1999 quakes were a test of competency for the country's secular elites, the October 23 quake in Turkey's predominantly Kurdish east will serve as a test for the self-proclaimed leaders of the Kurdish nationalist movement, which ranges from the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a socialist outfit, to religious orders (*tariqats*) and faith-based NGOs.

As Turkey's Kurdish nationalist movement enters a new phase, buoyed by demands for political recognition for the Kurds, the group that performs best in delivering aid to the Kurdish quake survivors will likely emerge as the leader of Turkey's Kurdish nationalist movement. By the same token, groups that fall behind in delivering relief will lose their prestige, as well as the support of the Kurdish population.

In 1999, the Turkish authorities were woefully late in responding to the crisis; it took the country's Prime Minister three days to visit quake-destroyed towns. Even when aid came, it was disorganized. The NGOs seemed to do a better job providing relief to survivors than the government's coalition of secular parties.

This was the beginning of the end for Turkey's traditional secular elites.

In the following days, the Turks' erstwhile and steadfast confidence in their governing elites unraveled. Proven inept by their massive failure to respond to the quake, the country's secular political parties simply withered away. Following a devastating economic crisis in 2000-2001, the Turks voted out these traditional elites, replacing them with the Justice and Development Party (AKP) that has since ruled the country.

And now a similar, if dualistic, challenge awaits the aspiring leaders of Turkey's Kurdish community. For a long time now, there has been competition for leadership among the Kurds of southeast Turkey. In this regard, there have been two main camps. First is the PKK. A well-oiled propaganda and fighting machine with a leftist and socialist appeal, the PKK has made inroads among the population, especially in the far-away, southeastern parts of Turkey.

Lately though, faith-based NGOs, as well as religious orders, have challenged the PKK's relatively strong appeal with politically attractive messages alluring to the area's conservative Kurds. They have also provided the services to the poor that are missing from the PKK's violence-prone tool box.

This is why the PKK might now end up with the short end of the stick. Even though the PKK has its own network, it lags well behind that which the faith-based NGOs and *tariqats* have built in recent years. The latter know how to deliver services, and the PKK does not. This suggests that not the PKK but the faith-based NGOs and *tariqats* will emerge as the first groups to reach the quake's victims.

What is more, given that it is an illegal organization, the PKK will be prevented from working out in the open to deliver aid to survivors.

In the eyes of common Kurds in eastern Turkey, the PKK now faces the risk of falling behind the faith-based NGOs and the religious orders, for it will likely be outperformed by them in delivering assistance to the local, earthquake-stricken population.

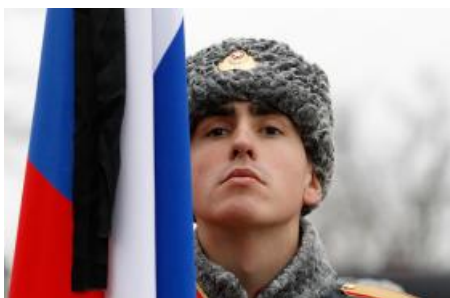
The Turkish state will also be tested in the post-tremor era. The Kurdish survivors' faith in Turkey's ability to meet their needs and aspirations will be put on trial depending on how fast Ankara responds to deliver aid to the quake victims and, more importantly, whether Ankara provides long-term relief to the survivors.

This is indeed a test for Ankara, and also for the aspiring leadership of Turkey's Kurdish community. Even more, the Kurdish earthquake could be the beginning of the end for the PKK's appeal among the Kurds in southeastern Turkey, to the benefit of other players.

Soner Cagaptay is director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute. ❖

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