

Not a Bigger Slice, but a Bigger Pie

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Articles & Testimony

How can Turkey resolve its Kurdish problem? The "democratic opening process" recently launched by the Justice and Development Party, or AKP, government suggests granting the Kurds collective, ethnicity-based group rights as the way forward.

This approach presents a problem since it challenges the very notion of a Turk -- someone defined by historic Turkish identity rather than ethnicity. It also holds the risk of increasing the political distance between the Kurds and the rest of the country's population. The right approach to solving Turkey's Kurdish problem is not granting collective rights to the Kurds, but rather increasing the individual rights of all citizens, regardless of ethnicity.

Unbeknownst to most outsiders, Turkey is an amalgam of various Muslim ethnic groups, including Kurds as well as Bosniacs, Albanians, Circassians, Georgians, Greek-speaking Muslims and ethnic Turks, among others.

The Turkish amalgam is a non-ethnic, historic entity that is a product of the country's Ottoman past. For 500 years, the Ottoman Empire treated its entire Muslim population as members of the same political grouping, the Muslim "millet," imprinting its Muslim population with an indelible collective political identity. In the twentieth century, the members of the former Muslim millet in Turkey came to see themselves as Turks, regardless of their ethnic background.

Despite a violent challenge by the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, in the name of Kurdish nationalism, the historic Turkish amalgam has stayed put: Kurds continue to intermarry with Turks and all other Muslim groups in large numbers, and they continue to live in ethnically mixed neighborhoods and cities. A 2009 poll by SETA and Pollmark, an Istanbul-based think tank and polling firm, respectively, provides plenty of evidence documenting close social proximity between Kurds and non-Kurds in Turkey: For example, 67 percent of Kurds polled said they have close non-Kurdish relatives.

Granting group rights to the Kurds would challenge such social proximity as well as the popularly held notion of a Turk. If the Kurds were given collective group rights, it would single them out as a privileged group, compared to other Muslim ethnic groups. That perception would create resentment across the larger Turkish society toward exclusive Kurdish rights and eat away at the foundations of the Turkish amalgam. Public resentment against the idea of giving exclusive, collective rights to the Kurds is, in fact, already rising.

Instead of granting collective group rights to the Kurds, Turkey should approach the issue from the perspective of individual rights and increase the cultural and political rights of all its citizens, Kurds and non-Kurds alike.

The reform process should target not just the Kurds, but also all of Turkey's citizens. Take, for instance, broadcasting rights. The government's granting of collective Kurdish group rights is said to include the facilitating of broadcasting in Kurdish by private TV networks. (State-owned TV networks already broadcast in Kurdish.) Such a step would appear to be granting exclusive rights to one ethnic group in Turkey. Instead, the government should consider a new broadcast law that allows individual citizens to broadcast in any language they wish, without specific mention of any language.

Such an attitude should shape the tenor of any other reform items the AKP might undertake regarding citizens' rights: increase the rights and liberties of all citizens, while simultaneously ensuring that all citizens maintain equal rights.

In order for Turkey to resolve the Kurdish problem, it must not only make the Kurds happy, but also keep the entire country content regarding the reforms. The most effective way of doing this would be by de-collectivizing Ankara's attitude to reforms on the Kurdish issue.

Addressing the Kurdish issue through collective measures would indeed be a slippery slope. Assigning exclusive, ethnicity-based group rights to the Kurds would further strengthen and solidify their Kurdish identity, increasing the distance between the Kurds and rest of the country's population. That, in return, would feed into mutually exclusive and even hostile sentiments, defeating the purpose of the current "democratic opening process" that is supposed to alleviate political tensions in the country. Granting collective rights to the Kurds would also stir resentment among the non-Kurdish parts of the Turkish population, doing more harm than good in terms of keeping the country's social harmony in place.

For the AKP, the right way to deal with the Kurdish issue would be to increase the rights of all Turkish citizens, regardless of ethnicity and religion, hence de-collectivizing the Kurdish issue while keeping the Turkish identity as the historic amalgam that it is. Such an approach would also help make Turkey a more liberal country. Now that would be the dream come true of a European Turkey, one in which everyone would be welcome and equal.

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