Are the Kurds the Next Kingmakers in Turkey?

by Burak Bekdil

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Between 1994 and 2015, the Kurdish vote in Turkey rose from 4.1% to 13.1%. A greying Turkey is facing a baby boom in Kurdistan: the Kurdish fertility rate, at 3.41, is a demographic weapon against the Turkish fertility rate of 2.09. These numbers suggest that Kurds could be the kingmakers in Turkey’s presidential election in 2023.

The recipe for the spread of political Islam, as founded by ideologues like Hasan Banna and Sayyid Qutb, is well-known: win Muslim hearts and minds by establishing and spreading religious, welfare, and educational institutions and facilities. The object is to create a classless, populist network that will ultimately legitimize political Islam at the ballot box. You cannot defeat the enemy by guns and artillery, but you can do it with headcount.

Turkey was no exception to the principle of Islamist ascendency via demographics. For decades, Turkey’s secular, better-educated modern families (which Recep Tayyip Erdoğan would later call the “white Turks”) sufficed with one or two children in the family while pious, less educated, lower- and middle-class Muslims Turks were the baby boomers. In November 2002, the “white Turks” had to face that they were no longer the majority in their country. The “black Turks” had come to power.

But now, 18 years later, the “black Turks” have become the new “white Turks.” Ignoring their leader’s campaigns imploring them to produce “at least three children in every Turkish family,” they are now facing the same demographic threat with which they once captured power: a greying Turkey versus a baby boom in Kurdistan.

Kurdish votes in Turkey came under the institutional umbrella of a political party for the first time in 1994. The pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democracy Party (HADEP) won 1.1 million votes (4.1% of the national vote) in parliamentary
elections in 1995 and 1.4 million votes (4.8% of the vote) in 1999. HADEP failed to win parliamentary representation as it failed to pass the 10% national threshold.

In 2002, HADEP’s successor, the Democratic People’s Party (DEHAP), won 6.2% of the vote in the elections that brought Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) to power with 34% of the national vote. In 2007 the Kurds changed tack and entered the race with independent candidates instead of a party that would surely fail to pass the 10% threshold. Independent Kurds won 5% of the vote and 20 seats in the Turkish parliament. The threshold was no longer meaningful to stop Kurdish representation in parliament. In 2011, Kurdish independents won 6.6% of the national vote and 35 parliament seats.

On June 7, 2015, the Kurds, this time under the corporate umbrella of a new political party, the People’s Democracy Party (HDP), won 13.1% of the vote and 80 seats. The “Kurdish miracle” deprived the ruling AKP of its parliamentary majority for the first time since it came to power in 2002. Most recently, in municipal elections in 2019, the Kurdish vote cost AKP its crown jewel. Ekrem İmamoğlu, an opposition candidate, defeated AKP’s Binali Yıldırım by a margin of 800,000 votes.

As the Islamists lost Turkey’s biggest city for the first time in a quarter century, Erdoğan had cause had to lament his motto, “He who wins Istanbul wins Turkey.” Millions of Kurdish voters in Istanbul had become kingmakers.

There is more data to augment Erdogan’s concerns about the 2023 elections and beyond. In a May 2015 presentation, A. Banu Ergöçmen of Hacettepe University’s Institute of Population Studies in Ankara highlighted the Kurds’ demographic advantage over Turks. She found the total fertility rate in eastern and southeastern Kurdish-speaking Turkey was 3.41 versus an average of 2.09 in the non-eastern, Turkish-speaking areas.

In 2018, the number of healthy births in Turkey dropped by 3.6% to 1.248 million from 1.295 million in 2017. The total fertility rate fell to 1.99 from 2.07—a particularly worrying figure, as it is below the replacement rate of 2.1. According to official statistics, in 2018 the highest fertility rates in Turkey were in Urfa (4.13), Şırnak (3.6), Ağrı (3.26), and Mus (3.23). All four provinces are predominantly Kurdish. In contrast, the lowest fertility rates were in overwhelmingly Turkish provinces: Gümüşhane (1.3), Kütahya, Zonguldak, and Edirne (1.43).

In 2018, three Turkish academics, Olgu Aydınlı, Pınar Aslantas Baskan, and Ertuğrul Murat Ö zgür, found that:
There is a positive relation between the rate of illiterate women and the total fertility rate. In other words, as the rate of illiteracy increases, there is also an increase in the total fertility rate. This feature prevails in Turkey’s Eastern and Southeastern regions. The fact that the literacy rate is very low for women clearly shows that there is gender discrimination in these regions. The negative relationship between fertility and education level shows that as the education level increases, there is a decrease in the total fertility rate. Women living in urban areas are more educated than the ones living in rural areas in Turkey. This situation results in a decrease in the fertility levels of women living in urban areas. On the other hand, as the proportion of women with Kurdish origin increases, total fertility rate increases.

HDP’s charismatic leader, Selahattin Demirtas, has been in prison on terror charges since November 2016. A total of 11 HDP lawmakers and 84 mayors have been removed from their jobs. And Erdoğan keeps showing the Kurds a big stick rather than an olive branch. “Judicial proceedings against HDP will be very tense,” he threatened on Feb. 26. “New files may arrive anytime, because everything they do constitutes a crime.”

Erdoğan faces difficult choices. To win the presidential race in 2023, he will need his nationalist ally’s staunch support. That support will come only if he maintains his hawkish posture against the Kurds and Kurdish politics. And that will come at a cost: more and more Kurdish voters, increasingly urban and well-educated, do not see a future in Erdoğan’s Turkey.

Burak Bekdil is an Ankara-based columnist. He regularly writes for the Gatestone Institute and Defense News and is a fellow at the Middle East Forum. He is also a founder of the Ankara-based think tank Sigma.