

## SOLIDARITY WITH KURDISTAN, 2.9.15

**Speakers - Murat Gulem - Peoples Democratic Party (HDP) (Scottish Section) and Pete Cannell (Stop the War Coalition) with apologies from Sarah Collins (Kurdish Solidarity delegation to Diyarbakir).**

**Chair:** Pat Smith

**Murat** has lived in the UK since 2001. He had to leave Turkey because he refused to do military service, which is compulsory. He left when he was 25 and is now 39 and is not able to return to Turkey.

Kurdistan was part of the Ottoman Empire. With the break-up of the Empire after the First World War, most of Kurdistan became divided between Turkey, Iraq and Syria, with a further section in the Persian Empire (now Iran).

The Turkish government denies that the Kurds exist. The Kurds were forbidden to speak their own language. In all four countries where the Kurds live, the governments made them speak the state language - Turkish, Arabic or Persian. During the Iran-Iraq War Kurds in Halabja (Iraqi Kurdistan) were massacred by the Iraqi government in 1988. This was reported in the British but not the Turkish press.

Abdullah Ocalan founded the Kurdish Workers Party (KPP) in 1978 to fight for cultural and political rights for Kurds. When the Turkish military took power in 1980 they targeted the Kurds. The PKK initiated an armed struggle in 1984. This struggle put Kurdistan on the political agenda, but the Turkish state wrote this off as terrorism.

In the 1990s the Turkish government verbally conceded that Kurds should receive some right. However, the Turkish military insisted that any party, in order to gain parliamentary seats, should have 10% support in Turkey as a whole. They also declared Kurdish based parties illegal, so they had to change their names frequently.

In 1991 several Kurdish MPs were elected to the Turkish parliament. Despite supposed Parliamentary immunity, Leyla Zana was arrested for wearing Kurdish colours and speaking a few words of Kurdish, then jailed for 13 years. Other Kurdish MPs tried to stay in parliament but were also arrested. After this, there was a further succession of Kurdish parties, with different leaders, each made illegal in turn. The PKK renewed its armed struggle. In 1998, the Turkish authorities captured Ocalan.

In 2002, the Islamist Justice and Development Party, led by Recep Tayyip Erdogan, won the Turkish elections. They made some inroads in Kurdistan by promoting a pan-Islamic, rather than a pan-Turkish politics. However, this led to no improvement in the situation for Kurds. In the 2007 election Kurds stood along with other Independents who won 26 (out of 550) seats in the Turkish parliament. In 2011, Independents won 35 seats.

There were still no substantial improvements for the people of Kurdistan. Ocalan suggested from his prison cell that Kurds should join with wider democratic forces in Turkey to field

candidates as the Peoples Democratic Party (HDP) for the June 2015 election. The agreed platform recognised the 1915 Armenian genocide (which the Turkish government denies), and women's and LGBT rights. The HDP has 50:50 male/female representation at all levels. The PKK had also declared a ceasefire, hoping that there would be a new democratic opening. In the election the dominant AKP failed to win an overall majority, whilst the HDP won 80 seats.

Erdogan had hoped to use an AKP majority to install himself at the head of a presidential republic. He now felt threatened and worked hard to create the situation to force through another election. The Kurds became his main target. The AKP government had been giving tacit support to ISIS forces and their attempt to overthrow the Assad government in Syria. When US pressure called for action against ISIS, the Turkish government undertook some token actions against them but massively stepped up their real action against the Kurds.

When ISIS attacked Kobane in Syrian Kurdistan, the official Iraqi Kurdistan government, led by the corrupt Kurdish politician Masoud Barzani, gave no help. This was left to the PKK. The Turkish government put many obstacles in the way of PKK fighters trying to join the struggle in Syria, whilst allowing ISIS fighters to travel over the border unimpeded. Erdogan even claimed in Gaziantep that Kobane was about to fall. This was a breaking point for Kurds who had voted for the AKP.

On July 20th a suicide bomber killed 36 people and injured a further 104 in Suruc, on the Turkish side of the border near Kobane. Although this was undertaken by ISIS, the Turkish government arrested far more Kurds in their subsequent operations. On October 10th a bomb was detonated in Ankara, at a Labour, Peace and Democracy rally. 102 people were killed and a further 400 people were injured. Although, most likely undertaken by ISIS, the lack of any Turkish security at the event, and the anti-opposition hysteria promoted by the government led many to question Erdogan's role in this.

The Turkish government also imposed 11 day curfews in some Kurdish towns. The army killing anyone who broke this, even if they were only going out for food. This included an 8 year old boy and 85 year old man, who were called terrorists.

The main purpose behind the Turkish government's offensive was to break away the HDP's wider non-Kurdish support through accusations of terrorism, as the PKK tried to defend themselves from army attacks; to intimidate other parties before a re-run election; and to win over the Far Right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP).

The new election was held on November 1st and the AKP succeeded in winning an absolute majority. The Far Right MHP lost 5% of its vote and 39 of its seats as its vote went over to the AKP. The HDP lost 2.5% of its vote and 21 of its seats, particularly in the non-Kurdish areas. However, the HDP was not eliminated from the Turkish parliament, and despite the Erdogan victory, the situation remains unstable, although it is difficult to forecast the future.

(waiting for electronic version of contribution from Pete Cannell)

## **Discussion**

**Pat** said that she had been very impressed by the HDP's commitment to 50:50 at all levels of the organisation.

**Xara** asked if after the Suruc and Ankara bombings whether people were getting used to constant death, and also what had been the HDP's attitude to the Taksim Gezi Park protests in Istanbul in 2013.

**Murat** replied that there had been 3 days of grief after the Ankara bombing, although the state TV channels accepted the government ban on reporting. He compared the lack of a Turkish government sympathetic response to the French government and international response over the Charlie Hebdo killings.

Murat said that at Gezi Park it had been a HDP MP who had first blocked the bulldozers coming to knock down the trees. Subsequent attacks on the HDP for lack of involvement were misplaced, because the HDP wanted to ensure that the protests were not seen as being organised by Kurds, but were a joint protest by Turkish and Kurdish democrats.

**Eric** said that one thing that could be done was to look into where people's pension funds were invested, and see if they were connected to Turkey.

? asked about the viability of the AKP's economic policy?

**Murat** said that there has been a bubble of development, which will burst. Saudi Arabia had put a lot of money into Turkey. The AKP government had also imposed an Earthquake Tax, which they have been able to manipulate for their own purposes.

? asked what the relationship was between the PKK and the HDP and what are the Kurds' current political demands?

**Murat** said that the HDP was an independent political organisation, it had non-Kurdish support including the Armenian MPs, as well as support from Turks who recognised its role in supporting women's and LGBT rights. The PKK is a Kurdish guerilla organisation with its own agenda.

The Kurds want democratic autonomy. However, even when the HDP raised the issue of increasing the powers of local councils they were taken to court by the Turkish government.

Kobane in Syria has its own democratic council. They have won their autonomy in the civil war in Syria.

Iran, like Turkey is ruthless against the Kurds.

Barzani, in Iraqi Kurdistan, is mainly concerned with lining his own pockets. His nephew is the fifth richest man in the world. Barzani has worked with the Turkish, Iraqi and Iranian governments in the past. He sees the PKK as a threat to his capitalist interests. There is no real opposition to Barzani in his local parliament. He has refused to attend the Kurdish National Congress.

**Steve Kaczynski**, who had spent over 5 months in a Turkish prison this year gave a brief account of his experiences. A fuller version of this can be at:-

<http://republicancommunist.org/blog/2015/10/06/my-imprisonment-in-turkey-steve-kaczynski/>