FREE SPEECH ISN'T THE ONLY CASUALTY OF ERDOGAN'S REPRESSION

Posted on April 16, 2016 by Keghart



Category: Opinions

Selahattin Demirtas, The New York Times, 13 April 2016

DIYARBAKIR, Turkey — When Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, recently paid a visit to Washington, he gave Americans a taste of the kinds of policies he employs at home. His guards reportedly roughed up reporters outside a think tank while an LED-lit van that said "Truth + Peace = Erdogan" drove around the United States capital.

Many American policy makers are horrified by Mr. Erdogan's efforts to kill off what is left of free speech in Turkey. Even President Obama admitted that he was "troubled" by the direction of the country, a NATO ally.

Selahattin Demirtas, The New York Times, 13 April 2016

DIYARBAKIR, Turkey — When Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, recently paid a visit to Washington, he gave Americans a taste of the kinds of policies he employs at home. His guards reportedly roughed up reporters outside a think tank while an LED-lit van that said "Truth + Peace = Erdogan" drove around the United States capital.

Many American policy makers are horrified by Mr. Erdogan's efforts to kill off what is left of free speech in Turkey. Even President Obama admitted that he was "troubled" by the direction of the country, a NATO ally.

While the American public is right to be concerned about Mr. Erdogan's efforts to stifle free speech and imprison journalists, as a Kurd I am saddened that the criticism ends there. There has been hardly any real mention of the government's abuses in the fight against the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or P.K.K., the deportations of civilians, the destruction of Kurdish towns and the imprisonment of Kurdish politicians in Turkey.

Both Europe and the United States have turned a blind eye to the human rights violations in Turkey's Kurdish towns over the past year. Europeans did so because they were desperate to strike a deal with Mr. Erdogan to get Turkey to contain Syrian refugees. Washington, for its part, feels that Turkey is indispensable in the fight against the Islamic State.

But let me tell you what this pragmatic approach is hiding: Ever since peace talks between the Turkish government and the P.K.K. broke down last summer, the country has been in havoc.

Last August, Kurdish youth groups close to the P.K.K. began an insurgency in some Kurdish towns. The government responded first with tear gas and plastic bullets, later with 24-hour curfews that lasted for weeks and finally with tanks and artillery. Photos from some of the besieged towns look like early pictures from the Syrian civil war. More than 300,000 people had to evacuate their homes. The death toll is over 1,000, hundreds of whom are civilians, according to the Turkish Human Rights Foundation. Large parts of the Kurdish towns of Cizre, Silopi and the historic Sur are now heaps of

rubble.

While the government and the P.K.K. have different views on why peace talks collapsed, there is no doubt about what motivates Mr. Erdogan's continuing military campaign. He is stoking nationalist sentiment with an eye to a possible referendum this summer that would expand his constitutional powers.

Perhaps a little background is necessary here: Kurdish people living in Turkey have been waging a struggle for greater freedoms for decades. Generations have perished in prisons and torture chambers as Turkey has gone through successive military coups. When I was growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, we were not allowed to speak Kurdish, speak about speaking Kurdish or even sing in Kurdish. I became a human rights lawyer in part because my older brother went to jail for trying to do grass-roots activism — just organizing peaceful demonstrations under a political party was enough to get him labeled a terrorist.

We have come a long way in terms of Kurdish cultural rights, but Turkey is still far behind the rest of the world in basic democratic freedoms. True, the peace talks with the imprisoned Kurdish leader Abdullah Ocalan over the past few years did bring us a much-needed cease-fire and a breathing space to celebrate our political views. But since then, the negotiations have fallen apart and the Turkish government has sought to reverse those gains. The Turkish government is meanwhile trying to expand its draconian antiterrorism laws to censor speech and other political activities.

Mr. Erdogan became even more intransigent about the peace process after my party, the Peoples' Democratic Party, or H.D.P., which advocates for Kurdish rights, cleared for the first time a 10 percent threshold in parliamentary elections in June 2015 and gained entry to the Parliament. This has impeded the president's ability to change the Constitution to expand his powers.

Since last summer, hundreds of our party members have been arrested and dozens of our elected mayors have been dismissed or detained. Meanwhile, Turkey has been shelling Syrian Kurds who are fighting the Islamic State across the border in Syria.

Mr. Erdogan is targeting our party precisely because we stand in the way of the authoritarian order he is trying to establish. The H.D.P. is a progressive coalition of Turks, Kurds, socialists, democratic Islamists, liberals and minorities dedicated to democratic reforms, gender equality, diversity and Kurdish rights. We ran on a party list that included people from Turkey's many ethnic groups, including Kurds, Turks, Armenians, Assyrians and Yazidis — from all walks of life. I am a co-chairman of the party because every possible political unit, from municipal governments to local chapters, is led by a one man-one woman partnership. Our party was founded to provide common ground for all of the people of Turkey who want to see more democracy.

All of this is anathema to the despotic, male-dominated nationalism fueled by Mr. Erdogan.

In Washington, Mr. Erdogan presented himself as "fighting terrorism" and complained that the United

States hasn't supported his campaign against the Kurds in Syria and Turkey. Someone should tell him that he is actually turning into a source of instability for the Middle East. By ending the peace process with the P.K.K., by creating a repressive security state, by shelving the rule of law and by cracking down on free speech, he is drowning what is left of Turkey's democracy — making this country more susceptible to radicalism and internal conflict than ever.

Selahattin Demirtas is a co-chairman of the Peoples' Democratic Party.