Martin van Bruinessen,
'Turkey and the Kurds in the early 1990s:
Guerrilla, Counter-insurgency, and Emerging Civil Society'

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Turkey and the Kurds in the early 1990s:

Guerrilla, Counter-insurgency, and Emerging Civil Society[1]

Introduction: Newroz

Newroz, the old Iranian new year's day, celebrated on the 21st of March, is a major holiday for all Iranian peoples — Persians, Kurds, Tajiks, Pashtuns — and for many of their neighbours. The Kurds have adopted it as their national holiday. The onset of spring, marking the conquest of light over darkness, has for them become a symbol of liberation from oppression. In Iran and Iraq, Newroz is recognised as a national holiday, but in the Republic of Turkey it was long banned, like all other expressions of Kurdish culture. Under international agreements (notably its participation in the CSCE), however, Turkey is obliged to grant a certain degree of freedom to 'minority cultures' within its borders, and the late President Özal, eager to clear away barriers preventing Turkey's entry into the European Community, forced his administration to carry out a number of reforms. In 1991, the central government finally relaxed the legislation concerning the suppression of Kurdish culture, and in 1992 Newroz could for the first time be publicly celebrated. In the Kurdish-inhabited parts of Turkey, large crowds thronged the streets, singing and dancing around the bonfires that are traditionally part of Newroz celebrations, brandishing flags in the Kurdish colours, and delighting in being able to express their Kurdishness. In several towns the celebrations took on the form of political demonstrations.

The Turkish security forces did not join in the general happiness. Engaged in a bloody counterinsurgency campaign against the guerrilla fighters of the Kurdish separatist PKK, and not always capable of distinguishing between the PKK and the Kurdish population at large, they were not charmed by the liberalisation decreed by the central government. The Newroz celebrations may have appeared to them as pro-PKK demonstrations — there were people carrying PKK banners, and many Kurdish youngsters no doubt shouted pro-PKK slogans. Perhaps also elements in the security forces intended to sabotage the process of liberalisation in matters of Kurdish culture. Be that as it may, in the towns of Cizre, Sirnak and Nusaybin, where Kurdish nationalist sentiment is known to be high, the celebrations ended in bloodbaths as security troops fired at the merry-making crowds. The toll of this Kurdish New Year's day was,

[1] [The following text, written in early 1996, consists of the historical chapters added to the report of a *Newroz* mission carried out in March 1993 by a group of observers sent to Turkey by Pax Christi. I was not myself a member of this mission, although I visited the region several times in the period concerned. The full report was published by the Netherlands Kurdistan Society in Amsterdam in 1996.]

according to Kurdish members of parliament who visited the affected towns to investigate the events, well over hundred dead and hundreds wounded.

As Turkey and the Kurds were preparing for the second officially allowed Newroz celebration in March 1993, Kurdish human rights activists requested the presence of foreign observers, with the dual aim of monitoring what would happen this time and acting as a disincentive to trigger-happy security personnel.

Historical Background

The Kurds, Turkey and the PKK

About half of the total Kurdish population live in Turkey. Estimates of their numbers vary widely, but a figure of 10 to 12 million, or almost 20 per cent of Turkey's population, will not be wide off the mark. Since the first Kurdish rebellions against Turkey's republican regime in the early 1920s, the government has attempted to forestall Kurdish separatism by a policy of forced assimilation. This policy has had some success, to the extent that many people of Kurdish descent started thinking of themselves as Turks rather than Kurds (and that even many committed Kurdish nationalists nowadays speak only a very poor Kurdish). The political and economic liberalisation of the 1950s and 1960s, however, led to the emergence of a new, modest Kurdish movement, formulating demands of cultural rights and economic development for the very backward Kurdish-inhabited east of Turkey. Initially supported by the Turkish left but deserted by it when it met with severe repression, the Kurdish movement radicalised in the 1970s and became more separatist. By 1980, the year of the latest military coup d'état, there were a dozen different clandestine Kurdish organisations, most of which demanded self-determination and made efforts to revivify Kurdish culture through language courses, Kurdish publications or cultural events. Several of these organisations also became involved in the violent clashes between radical left- and right-wing organisations that characterised life in the big cities during the late seventies.

The most radical and violent of these organisations was the PKK (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, Workers' Party of Kurdistan). It was born as a splinter from a left-wing Turkish students' organisation in Ankara in 1974 and transformed itself into a guerrilla organisation recruiting especially among the lower strata in the Kurdish countryside. It declared Kurdistan a colony of the Turkish ruling classes, who were assisted by Kurdish collaborators, and it called for an armed liberation struggle against the colonisers and their Kurdish cronies. The 'collaborators' it meant were those Kurdish tribal chieftains and other traditional authorities who had accepted positions in the Turkish political system — and especially, of course, those who opposed the Kurdish movement. The PKK in 1979 carried out its first attack on one of the 'collaborators', leading to a protracted armed conflict much like a traditional blood feud between 'collaborator' tribes and 'patriotic' tribes. Elsewhere it became involved in similar conflicts with rival Kurdish organisations.

The military take-over of September 1980 was followed by a well-orchestrated campaign to destroy the Kurdish movement and renewed efforts to assimilate the Kurds. Hundreds of thousands of activists of the left, of the fascist and religious right and of the Kurdish movement were arrested or fled abroad; almost 50,000 were brought to trial. The largest mass trials were those against the PKK, and these ended in the largest number of death sentences (a total of 129). Many PKK activists also were shot dead

when resisting arrest. In spite of this, the PKK was the only Kurdish organisation that was not completely destroyed. Regrouping themselves, bands of PKK activists continued roaming the countryside, and for years the Turkish press kept mentioning armed clashes with these groups - which then constituted virtually the only form of armed resistance to military rule. The PKK had so far enjoyed little popularity among the Kurdish population at large, but due to these defiant acts of resistance it began gaining a grudging admiration.

The PKK leadership meanwhile had set up quarters in Lebanon, and due to Palestinian and Syrian support acquired military training facilities in the Beka'a valley. The Syrian regime had obvious reasons for putting some pressure on its northern neighbour, for Turkey's ambitious Southeast Anatolia Project threatened to divert so much water from the Euphrates that Syria could be turned into a desert almost overnight. The degree of Syrian support for the PKK has somewhat fluctuated since, depending on the political and diplomatic relations with Turkey, but it has never stopped. In an apparent attempt to insure itself against dependence on a single sponsor, the PKK also established camps in northern Iraq (where, due to the Iraq-Iran war, central government control of territory was less than complete) and allegedly in north-west Iran as well. In 1983, the Turkish army carried out its first major military operation inside Iraq against these bases. More were to follow, but none of them was to succeed in expelling the PKK from the region, let alone destroying it.

In August 1984, the PKK announced the beginning of a guerrilla war for the 'liberation' of Kurdistan. Guerrilla units attacked police posts and military buildings in the towns of Eruh and Semdinli, not far from the Iraqi border. These attacks caused little real damage, but the psychological impact was great. They had taken the military by surprise, and the PKK was to do this repeatedly in the following years. The scale of the guerrilla operations also was to show a steady increase, from minor hit-and-run raids by small bands operating from bases across the Iraqi or Syrian border to sustained activities deeper inland by guerrilla units numbering hundreds.

The PKK acted on the assumption that most Kurds would remain aloof from the struggle for national rights unless ordinary life was made intolerable due to repression by the (Turkish) state. Its strategy has been to provoke such repression, in order to force the population of the region to take sides, either with the state or with the movement. It has been dramatically successful, which was due largely to the brutality with which the Turkish security forces have operated in the region. Unable or unwilling to distinguish between PKK partisans and ordinary villagers, the military and special forces, hunting for guerrilla fighters, made life in many Kurdish mountain villages miserable. It was from such villages that the PKK recruited many of its new fighters.

The state, on the other hand, also attempted to mobilise villagers to fight against the PKK. A new law in 1985 saw to the creation of the 'village guard' system. 'Village

guards' (*korucu*) received arms and attractive payment, in exchange for which they were expected to hunt down any PKK partisans coming near their villages (and later, to take part in anti-PKK operations further away as well). They received a bounty for each killed guerrilla, and soon there were reports that for the sake of bounty or private revenge many people were killed who had no relation to the PKK but were posthumously declared guerrillas. The village guards system reinforced the old tribal structures that had been gradually loosening during the preceding half century, and brought back some of the worst features of traditional Kurdish society. The authorities preferred tribesmen as *korucu*, and kept them as units under their tribal chieftain or some other local strongman. Moreover amnesty was offered to criminals who joined the village guard system; the effect was that former bandits henceforth could with impunity harass their neighbours in the name of the struggle against the PKK.

This made the village guards almost ideal targets for the PKK: here were 'collaborators' who were generally despised and who exemplified the working of 'colonialism'. The PKK struck at them were it hurt them most: in their families. The prospect of being killed may not deter a tribesman, but his inability to protect his womenfolk causes loss of honour, which is extremely hard to bear. Repeatedly PKK units carried out raids against the houses of village guards and killed women and children - acts of brutal terrorism by international standards but a well-established method in the tradition of tribal warfare. Village guards meted out equal or worse brutality to villages considered as pro-PKK.

The state of emergency, the 'super-governor' and his extraordinary powers

In most of Turkey, martial law (declared after the 1980 coup) had been lifted by 1984. In the four Kurdish-inhabited provinces of Siirt, Mardin, Diyarbakir and Hakkari, however, it continued until mid-1987, when it was replaced by a state of emergency. A state of emergency, furthermore, was in force in four other south-eastern provinces, Elazig, Tunceli, Bingöl and Van. The state of emergency was described by the Turkish press as a 'civilian' form of martial law; although the highest authority is no longer the provincial military commander but a civilian governor, most of the restrictive measures taken under military rule remain in effect. The military courts were replaced with State Security Courts that have extraordinary judicial powers and that try all political cases.

In order to co-ordinate operations against the PKK and Kurdish-related issues in general, the government created in 1987 the new office of a co-ordinating governor of the region under the state of emergency, whose powers override those of the provincial governors. This 'super-governor', as he is usually called for short, is responsible to the Minister of the Interior, who formulates the general policy, but has wide-ranging powers to give this policy concrete form and implement it as he deems fit. The para-military

'village guards' operate under his authority. In security matters, he works closely together with the commander of the military security forces in the area. While elsewhere in the country a gradual political liberalisation was perceptible, this development did not extend into the Southeast, where every Kurdish citizen continued to be regarded as a potential enemy of the state. The repressive powers of the 'super-governor' were even extended in 1990, further curtailing basic human rights.

On 10 April 1990 the council of ministers enacted decree 413 that gave the 'super-governor' extraordinary powers to:

— censor the press by banning, confiscating and heavily fining publications that 'by misrepresenting the (government's) activities, or by printing incorrect news or analyses, seriously disturb public order in the region, cause anxiety among its inhabitants, or obstruct the security forces in the performance of their jobs';

— shut down printing plants in or outside the region that print such publications;

— exile internally persons whose activities are harmful to public order;

— control or prohibit all trade union activities such as strikes and referendums, and prevent actions such as slowdowns, occupations, and boycotts;

— transfer without prior notice state employees considered as harmful or ineffective;

— evacuate villagers for security reasons.

No legal appeal is possible against these measures.[2] It should be noted that the governor's power of censorship concerns not only the region under the state of emergency but the entire country!

After objections by the parliamentary opposition that the decree was unconstitutional on formal grounds, the government on 10 May 1990 issued the revised decrees 424 and 425, whose contents are substantially the same as those of decree 413, except that they further expand the 'super-governor's powers to exile persons (*Cumhuriyet*, 11-5-1990).

2 The text of the decree was published in *Cumhuriyet*, 11-4-1990; there is an English summary in Helsinki Watch's *Destroying Ethnic Identity: The Kurds of Turkey. An Update* (September 1990). The eleven provinces affected by the decree are, besides Siirt, Mardin, Diyarbakir, Hakkari, Bingöl, Elazig, Tunceli and Van, that were mentioned above, the contiguous provinces of Muş, Bitlis and Adıyaman. In mid-1990, two districts where there had been much guerrilla activity were made into separate provinces: Batman (previously part of Diyarbakır) and Şırnak (previously in Siirt), raising the total number to thirteen provinces.

The Turkish government justified these decrees with reference to a 'threat to its national security in Southeast Anatolia'. During 1989, it declared to the Council of Europe, 136 civilians and 153 members of the security forces had been killed by 'terrorists', and in the first seven months of 1990 alone 125 civilians and 96 members of the security forces. The government also complained of a 'campaign of harmful misinformation of the public'. It is true that the guerrilla, in spite of massive military counter-insurgency measures, kept growing in scope and that the number of victims on both sides kept rising. Although most of the press was fiercely hostile to the PKK, press reports on military abuse of civilians have contributed to the disaffection of the people of the Southeast. Moreover, several newspapers had recently published interviews with the leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, in his Lebanese headquarters, resulting in an improvement of his public image.

From guerrilla vanguard to mass movement?

The extensive powers given to the 'super governor' by the new decrees probably were in the first place a response to an apparent change in the PKK's strategy. During the first five years that it had carried on a guerrilla struggle it had, in spite of its methods, acquired a considerable goodwill and sympathy among Kurds in the towns. The numbers of active supporters may still have been limited, but many had come to sympathise with it - not least because of the brutal and offensive behaviour of the army, special forces and village guards. By early 1990, the PKK gave several signals that it intended to follow the example of the Palestinians and move on from guerrilla war and occasional terror to diplomacy on the one hand and urban popular rebellion on the other.

In March 1990, a large popular uprising took place in the towns of Nusaybin and Cizre. It soon was dubbed the 'Kurdish *intifadah*'. The rising was triggered by a relatively minor incident, the funeral of a young PKK activist, who had been killed by the army. He belonged to a prominent family of Nusaybin, and five to thousand people took part in the funeral, while all shops in town were closed, a traditional expression of protest. When special army units tried to disperse the cortege, people resisted and shouted slogans against the army. The troops shot at the crowd, killing one and wounding many more; around five hundred people were arrested. In protest, all shops in Nusaybin remained closed for three days. The uprising then spread to the neighbouring town of Cizre, where the shops were also closed down and there were several large demonstrations, throwing stones and challenging the security forces with Kurdish slogans. Here too, the troops fired into the crowd, killing five. The protest actions spread to several other towns, including Diyarbakır, where the shops were also closed down in solidarity with Nusaybin and Cizre.

Reports on this uprising had a great impact on public opinion in Turkey and to some extent abroad as well. The events convincingly refuted the official view that the army was only up against foreign-supported bandits who terrorised the local population. The mayor of Nusaybin was quoted as saying that in his town everybody sympathised with the PKK. The press coverage of the events represented a major psychological victory for the PKK, which seemed to be shedding its terrorist image. Most likely this was the 'campaign of harmful misinformation' to which the authorities referred.

The Kurdish political party HEP and the Human Rights Association

Around the same time, i.e. in March 1990, the first attempt was made to establish a legal Kurdish party, the HEP (People's Labour Party). Although the initiative appears not to have come from the PKK, it soon threw its weight behind the HEP. The founders of this party were eight former deputies of the Social Democrat Populist Party (SHP), who had been expelled from SHP after they had attended a Kurdish conference in Paris in October 1989. Almost all parties that were represented in Turkey's parliament had some Kurdish deputies, but these usually refrained from expressing themselves as Kurds; at best they attempted to dispense patronage to their local constituencies. The HEP was a radically different party; even though initially it could not openly call itself a Kurdish party or be very outspoken on the Kurdish question, its implicit platform was based on Kurdish nationalism.

The founding members were reinforced by Kurdish lawyers and human rights activists, who enjoyed strong popular support in the Kurdish towns because of their courageous work. That their foray into politics was not without risk was shown by the case of Vedat Aydin, a lawyer and human rights activist in Diyarbakir who became the HEP's provincial chairman. In July 1991 he was taken from his home by police officers but he never returned. The police denied that he was arrested, and a few days later his dead body was found on a garbage heap far out of town. His funeral turned into a mass demonstration of support for the HEP — and then into a bloodbath as security forces started firing into the mass of demonstrators.

In October 1991 there were general elections in Turkey. The HEP, which had been established so recently that it had not yet had occasion to convene its first congress, was for this reason not allowed to take part under its own name. The SHP, which only a year before had expelled the deputies who were to found the HEP but was eager to gain Kurdish votes, then proposed the HEP to reunite for the sake of the elections. In this way, 22 candidates of HEP background were voted into parliament on the SHP ticket. When they were sworn in, two of them, Leyla Zana and Hatip Dicle, added brief phrases to the oath — Zana adding in Kurdish that she took this oath in the name of Kurdish-Turkish brotherhood, Dicle that he only took the oath because the Constitution obliged

him to. This aroused a storm of protest from Turkish nationalist deputies and caused Zana and Dicle to be expelled from the SHP. Not much later, another 14 members resigned from the SHP, resulting in a 16-strong HEP parliamentary group. The public prosecutor started proceedings to have the HEP banned for separatism.

Several of the elected HEP politicians, as said, had backgrounds as human rights activists. They had been active in the Human Rights Associations (IHD), which mushroomed in Turkey since the first was established in 1986. By 1990, branches of the Human Rights Association existed in 38 of Turkey's 73 provinces. Those in Diyarbakir and Siirt were among the most active, besides the larger Istanbul and Ankara branches. The Associations provided legal aid and monitored human rights violations. Those in the Kurdish provinces soon became victims of repeated human rights violations themselves. Vedat Aydın, mentioned above, was the first among them to actually be murdered; attempts at the life of several others have since been made.

Carrot and stick: Turgut Özal's 1991 liberalisation measures

In February 1991, the government of Prime Minister Turgut Özal made a surprise announcement of liberalisation vis-à-vis Kurdish culture. The law that had banned the use of Kurdish and other minority languages was lifted, as were the articles of the Penal Code banning communist and anti-secularist propaganda. Many political prisoners were released early as another sign of good will. The abolished laws and articles, however, were replaced by a new, comprehensive anti-terrorism law, that turned all activities that could be constructed as vaguely separatist or supportive of the PKK into crimes to be sentenced by military courts instead of civilian penal courts.

This was part of the balancing act of Prime Minister Özal, who on the one hand was permanently under pressure from the hard-line military but on the other hand knew that liberalisation was a condition for Turkey's acceptance as a full member of the western world. After Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuweit in August 1990 he had at once supported the American-initiated economic blockade of Iraq - at a great cost to Turkey - seeing the opportunity to make Turkey a major player in the wider region. He was the first Turkish politician to recognise that the Kurdish problem could not be reduced to a question of banditry and terrorism that could be solved militarily, but that a political solution was needed. His aim in allowing Kurdish-language publications and further concessions in the cultural sphere probably was to woo the majority of the Kurds away from the PKK and its radical separatist program. Massive investments in the infrastructure of the region (the famous Southeast Anatolia Project) were to bring economic growth to the Kurds, and he hinted that a certain amount of decentralisation was a possible option for the future. For those Kurds not charmed by these concessions, there was the anti-terror law.

The initial effect was dramatic. A spate of new publications appeared, several of them in Kurdish. The mainstream press and television (and especially the new private commercial channels) suddenly opened themselves to a surprisingly free debate on the Kurdish question. But all this happened in the west of the country; in Kurdistan itself the climate was different. Publications freely for sale in Istanbul often were banned by the authorities in Diyarbakır and simply possessing them could be sufficient reason for arrest. Writers and publisher soon discovered that although Kurdish was no longer formally banned, publishing something in it could be construed to be a 'terrorist' act under the anti-terror law.

Early elections in late 1991 resulted in a defeat for Özal, who had to yield his position as the Prime Minister to Süleyman Demirel, an experienced political hack but no match for the military, and entirely lacking in vision. Özal however succeeded in moving on to the presidency and thus retaining some power though not over day-to-day politics.

Large-scale military-civilian clashes: Newroz 1992 and the destruction of Şırnak

As western Turkey experienced an unprecedented liberal atmosphere, the confrontations in Kurdistan became ever grimmer. Together with the Kurdish language, Kurdish New Year also profited from the liberalisation. The government declared that, this year for the first time, Newroz could be celebrated, on condition that it not be turned into a separatist demonstration. (Incidentally, the government never acknowledged that Newroz was a *Kurdish* holiday; the Ministry of Culture in fact attempted to turn it into a Pan-Turk festival of alleged Central Asian origins.)

In the towns of Cizre, Şırnak and Nusaybin, all near the Syrian and Iraqi borders, the Newroz celebrations were occasions for large street demonstrations in which young people shouted pro-PKK slogans. Military and special forces opened fire on the demonstrators killing at least dozens. Violence and counter-violence continued for several days. The government initially claimed that there had been heavily armed 'terrorists' among the demonstrators and that the PKK had issued numerous arms to the urban population. An investigating delegation of the Social Democrat Populist Party (SHP, the coalition partner of Demirel's True Path Party) that later visited these towns concluded however that the security troops, provoked not by armed violence but by slogans and banners and stone-throwing children, had used excessive violence. The total number of civilians dead was around a hundred.[3]

3 *Gözlem, inceleme, makale, rapor ve basım açıkmalarıyla 1992 Newroz olayları* ('The events of Newroz 1992: comments, investigations, essays, reports and press statements', Ankara: IHD, 1992)

Less than a half year later the town of Şırnak, where the PKK was known to enjoy much popular support, was largely destroyed in 48 hours of heavy gunfire, leaving 20,000 people homeless. The government claimed that the town had been attacked by PKK guerrillas who had worked all the destruction, but local people pointed out that official buildings were miraculously spared while most civilian houses were destroyed, some of them set alight by soldiers who first poured out gasoline. Later it was admitted that the army had used excessive violence, but a prior PKK raid was given as the excuse. No proof for such a raid could be adduced (no arms found, no guerrillas caught dead or alive), however, and even the Turkish press refused to believe the official account. The security troops had clearly turned from hunting down difficult-to-locate guerrillas to frontal attack on their suspected civilian sympathisers.

The people of Şırnak were not the only ones forced to leave their homes. Increasingly the security forces forced villagers out of their villages in order to deny the PKK potential shelter. The super-governor's power to 'evacuate villagers for security reasons', granted to him by the 1991 decrees, was used more and more frequently. Often a village would be given the choice between becoming 'village guards', i.e., being forced to fight the PKK, or leaving their homes. Evacuated villages were commonly burnt down to prevent the people returning. The wave of forced evacuations first and especially hit villages in the Cizre-Şırnak region, and in the province of Hakkari further east. Then it gradually spread to other regions where there was PKK guerrilla activity or through which guerrillas had to pass in order to reach targets further inland. By the end of 1992, the pro-Kurdish weekly *Yeni Ülke* published a list of 360 names of villages and hamlets which it claimed had been forcibly evacuated since 1990.[4]

Towards Newroz 1993

In this context, many in Kurdistan thought that the next Newroz, to be celebrated on the 21st March 1993, would be a critical occasion where it would become clear whether the announced liberalisation would go on or that the military would confront the civilian population ever more violently. There was a real danger for a serious escalation, but hopes that a road towards a peaceful solution could be found had not yet dissipated.

Beginning in 1991 the PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan, had made efforts to show Turkish public opinion that he was not the dangerous and uncompromising terrorist as which the pro-government press depicted him. In a series of interviews with Turkish journalists he indicated that he no longer strove for separation from Turkey but was

4 *Yeni Ülke*, 20-12-1992. The evacuations were concentrated in the provinces of Hakkari and Şırnak (which includes Cizre), in each of which around a hundred settlements were at least partly evacuated. The other evacuations listed were in Van (26), Siirt (60), Bitlis (28), Mardin (4), Batman (19), and Diyarbakır (17).

willing to talk about compromise solutions, and he repeatedly made offers of a cease-fire and a negotiated settlement. The government never reacted to these proposals (which would have amounted to an implicit recognition of the PKK). Then, weeks before Newroz 1993, Öcalan declared a unilateral cease-fire, announcing that his guerrillas would refrain from all offensive activities, evade contact with security forces, and only in self-defence and as a last resort would take recourse to their arms. He called upon the urban population to celebrate Newroz quietly and avoid provocations. Öcalan added that, if the government were to respond positively — for instance by making further cultural concessions to the Kurds, such as allowing Kurdish-language radio and television broadcasts — the cease-fire could be extended indefinitely. He also retracted from his initial demand of direct negotiations between the government and the PKK, suggesting that other individuals could talk to the government on behalf of the Kurds.

This unilateral cease-fire, which soon appeared to actually work, raised great hopes among the vast majority of Turkey's Kurds. Would a transition from guerrilla war to politics be possible?

Developments since Newroz 1993

The almost three years that have passed since Newroz 1993 have not witnessed any hopeful developments. In retrospect it has become clear that the death of president Özal in April 1993 marks an important change in Turkey's political climate, although the decline in human rights standards had already set in under Özal. The Özal years,[5] however, had also been a period of rapid change and significant liberalisation, in politics and culture as well as in economics, steered by Özal's vision of Turkey's future. There had, on the one hand, been severe repression of the Kurds — the village guard system was instituted under Özal, and forced evacuations of Kurdish villages were begun while he still was the prime minister — but Özal had also lifted both the ban on publishing in Kurdish and the taboo on mentioning the Kurds. Under his successors — Süleyman Demirel succeeded him as the president and Mrs. Tansu Çiller, of Demirel's True Path Party, took Demirel's place as the prime minister — the balance between repressive and liberal measures was soon lost. Mrs. Çiller soon ran out of carrots, and she completely surrendered control of the stick to the general staff.

5 Turgut Özal was made prime minister by the military after the September 1980 coup, but the Özal years proper may be said to begin when his Motherland Party won a landslide victory, against the explicit wishes of the military, in the first elections after the coup, in November 1983. He remained prime minister until after his party's defeat in the March 1989 municipal elections. In November 1989 he had himself elected to the presidency, replacing General Kenan Evren. He remained in office until his death of a heart attack on April 17, 1993.

In the first weeks that she was in office, Mrs. Çiller repeatedly spoke of the 'Basque model' in connection with the Kurdish problem, suggesting she contemplated a *political* solution and was willing to talk about autonomy. This attitude did not last long, however. Mrs. Çiller came under the influence of the hard-liners in the military and developed close ties with the right-wing ultra-nationalist leader Alpaslan Türkes. She came to vehemently oppose all concessions to the Kurds, insisting that the Kurdish insurrection had to be put down at all cost. Apart from rather a number of insignificant cosmetic changes in legislation, made in 1995 to please the European parliament, there were no Özal-type liberal moves to balance the physical oppression in eastern Turkey. Under Mrs. Çiller there has been a steady increase in various types of human rights violations, notably extra-judicial executions, forced evacuations and destruction of villages, and the imprisonment of writers for the expression of their opinions. She personally took the initiative to lift the parliamentary immunity of deputies of the pro-Kurdish party DEP and ordered their arrest.

The cease-fire and its aftermath

To discuss the effects, or lack thereof, of the unilateral cease-fire declared by the PKK, we have to go back in time to March 1993. The cease-fire definitely had an impact on public opinion, and it was widely discussed in the press. There never was a clear response on the part of the government, although there initially were a few hopeful signs. President Özal, prime minister Süleyman Demirel and army chief Dogan Güres met in late March to discuss ways of bringing the Kurdish guerrillas down from the mountains. The proposals discussed included, according to the Turkish press, a partial amnesty for those who surrendered, lifting the state of emergency in the Kurdish provinces, administrative decentralisation, and heavy capital investment in the region to generate economic growth. None of these, however, were to be implemented as policies, probably because the three men never reached agreement. Each followed his own course.

On April 3, Özal received Iraqi Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani, who did not attempt to hide that he intended to act as a go-between for PKK leader Öcalan. Talabani later publicly urged Öcalan to extend the period of cease-fire, and organised a joint press conference in Damascus with Öcalan, HEP chairman Ahmet Türk and Turkish Kurdistan Socialist Party leader Kemal Burkay (March 15). Burkay, one of the most moderate Kurdish leaders, had been a long-time critic of the PKK, and the joint press conference appeared to signal the de-radicalisation of the PKK. The Kurdish leaders called for an end to the military operations in Kurdistan, broadcasting in Kurdish, and the gradual transformation of Turkey into a federal republic. More modestly, they added that they were waiting for just any positive response to the unilateral cease-fire, and Öcalan added

that the government would not have to negotiate directly with him and his party but that others could represent the Kurds.

Inside Turkey, several prominent journalists, reflecting liberal public opinion, called upon the government to use this opportunity and make confidence-building gestures towards the Kurds, such as granting them further cultural rights, taking HEP parliamentarians seriously as a spokespersons for Kurdish interests, abolishing the village guard system, and dissolving the 'special teams' (*özel tim*), the most oppressive and most hated of the security forces. Demirel's response, however, was a publicly rejection of the Kurds' least political demand, the right of broadcasting in Kurdish. Apart from repeating his promise to lift the state of emergency (which never happened), he and his ministers made no conciliating gestures that could facilitate the Kurds the transition from guerrilla to political struggle.

The military meanwhile, who had always seen victory just around the corner, perceived the cease-fire as an indication that the PKK was with its back against the wall and were determined to inflict it a decisive final blow. Whereas Newroz had passed relatively quietly, by early April a massive military operation took place in the district of Kulp, north of Diyarbakir. The airforce bombed hamlets and mountain forests where guerrillas were suspected to be hiding; gendarmerie forces raided the villages and so much abused the civilian population that these fled in large numbers to the city of Diyarbakir.[6] Elsewhere too, the army intensified its hunt for Kurdish guerrilla fighters. The latter, where possible, avoided contact.

Nevertheless, the cease-fire held, and when the initial one-month period was over the PKK, still hoping for Özal to respond, extended it by another month. President Özal's death on April 17 dissipated hopes that a peaceful solution to the Kurdish question might be in sight, although Öcalan at once declared that it would not influence the cease-fire. (Later, Öcalan repeatedly stated his conviction that Özal had been killed or, more precisely, that his death following a heart attack was due to deliberate neglect, presumably by military opposed to the peace process). On May 25, the National Security Council[7] declared what it named a partial amnesty, a call for unconditional surrender with a promise of reduced sentences for those guerrilla fighters who surrendered.

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6 The Turkish armed forces consist of four sections: airforce, navy, land forces and gendarmerie. The gendarmerie, which is generally considered as the least professional and most brutal of them, is charged with police and internal security functions in the countryside and therefore carries out most of the operations against the PKK.

7 The National Security Council, instituted in its present form by the generals who carried out the 1980 coup d'état to retain the armys ultimate control over politics, is the most powerful organ of the state, which can supersede government decisions. Its members are the five army chiefs (the chief of the general staff and the land forces, navy, airforce and gendarmerie commanders), the president, the prime minister and the ministers of defence, foreign affairs, and the interior.

The same day, a bloody attack took place that ended the cease-fire. PKK units near Bingöl ambushed buses in which unarmed Turkish soldiers were travelling. They killed 33 soldiers and 2 civilians and kidnapped some twenty other persons. This event gave rise to speculations that there was a split in the ranks of the PKK and that the central committee no longer controlled its fighters in the field, or that it was not PKK guerrillas who had carried out the attack. Even today, the precise circumstances of the event remain unclear. PKK spokesmen initially claimed responsibility for the attack, but the PKK's press organs suggest that the central leadership was only informed after the event and was much annoyed by it.[8] In his first reaction, Öcalan called the event an act of 'retaliation', but he also announced his intention to continue the cease-fire. But then, two weeks later, he publicly declared the cease-fire over because there had not been a serious response and after the death of Özal there was nobody left in Ankara to talk to.

Legal Kurdish politics: HEP, DEP and HADEP

It is not surprising that the government has strictly refused to negotiate, directly or indirectly, with the PKK. But it has also refused to take the legal Kurdish parties seriously and has consistently attempted to get rid of them, thereby depriving itself of a channel of communication to an important part of the Kurdish population. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, the first legal Kurdish party (which had to refrain from references to Kurds in its name in order to be legal), the HEP, was established in 1990 by former members of the Social Democrat Populist Party. This party, and later its successors DEP and HADEP, suffered much harassment by the authorities as well as a wave of assassinations by officially unidentified perpetrators.

The HEP was not just a PKK front, as government spokespersons often claimed. It represented a broad political spectrum of Turkey's Kurds and it enjoyed a high degree of legitimacy with them. Rather than attempting to better integrate the Kurds into Turkey's political life by tolerating this party, however, the authorities harassed it and its members with court trials for 'separatism'. The public prosecutor of the Ankara State Security Court, Nusret Demiral,[9] who saw it as his chief mission in life to fight against

8 In an article published in the pro-Kurdish daily *Özgür Ülke* of 24-12-1994, the well-informed Turkish journalist Ismet Imset claims that the army had identified the PKK's 'weak spots', i.e. guerrilla units that had been opposed to declaring a cease-fire. Intensive counterinsurgency operations were carried out in precisely the districts where such PKK units were known to be. A few days prior to the Bingöl incident there had been such an intensive operation in that district, in which more than ten guerrillas were killed.

9 The State Security Courts replaced the military courts when martial law was lifted. They try offences that are considered as security-related; this includes offences under the anti-terror law. The prosecutor of the Ankara court gained national renown for his extremist views. It was the same Demiral who in 1994 indicted the Kurdish parliamentarians and demanded death sentences for them. In the December

communism and Kurdish nationalism, prepared numerous trials against individual HEP members; legal proceedings against the party itself were instituted at the Constitutional Court. On July 13 the court reached the verdict that the party had to be dissolved.

Having foreseen this, HEP politicians as early as May 7 had established a new party, the DEP (Democracy Party). Briefly before it was banned, HEP convened an extraordinary congress, where it formally evicted its 16 deputies from the party for indisciplinary action, thus reducing their accountability for the party's policies. These deputies then joined the DEP. This (perfectly legal) manoeuvre enabled them to remain in parliament and gave the DEP its parliamentary representation.[10]

These Kurdish deputies remained isolated in parliament; most of their colleagues avoided ordinary contacts. Being a small party, they did not have much speaking time, and whenever one of them took the floor, most of the other deputies ostentatiously left. When the HEP was banned, there were not even signs of disquiet from the other parties, let alone expressions of solidarity. Most shockingly, there were hardly expressions of sympathy when the DEP deputy for Mardin province, Mehmet Sincar, was assassinated on the 4th of September 1993.

> The circumstances of Sincar's assassination and the response of the authorities could hardly have been more symbolic of the decline of democracy and human rights in Turkey and of the unwillingness of most of the political elite to accommodate the Kurds. His murderer's bullets hit him in Batman, while he was leading a DEP fact-finding mission to investigate the wave of unsolved political killings that had until that date taken the lives of 53 members and local leaders of the HEP and DEP (see the following section). Police had escorted him from Diyarbakir to Batman but then for unclear reasons lifted their protection, allowing the assassin to do his work. Together with Sincar, a member of the board of the local DEP branch, Metin Özdemir, was killed, and the deputy for Batman, Nizamettin Toguç, was wounded. It was the first time that a member of Turkey's parliament was assassinated in the streets. Nevertheless there was no state burial or other official ceremony for Sincar, and no serious efforts were made to investigate the murder, which technically remains unsolved.[11]

1995 elections he showed his true colours as a candidate for the extremist right-wing Nationalist Action Party (MHP) of Alpaslan Türkeş.

10 The Constitutional Court abrogated parliamentary membership of only one of the HEP politicians, former chairman Fehmi Işıklar. The decision surprised many, for Işıklar had not defected from the SHP when his colleagues did so and established a HEP group in parliament.

11 Mehmet Sincar's companions in fact mentioned the name of a person whom they suspected of involvement in the murder, but he was never arrested. No significant witnesses were even heard.

The authorities did not even allow Sincar's political friends to organise a funeral for him in Ankara (where the police had flown his body). Contrary to custom, they refused to release the body; it was kept in a morgue in Ankara and from there taken by officials directly to Sincar's birthplace Kızıltepe (near Mardin), where he was buried in the presence of no more than 8 people. Apart from the DEP deputies, only four other members of parliament, all belonging to the SHP, went to offer their condolences to Sincar's family. Leyla Zana, the DEP's sole woman parliamentarian, became the target of yet another attack when she paid a condolence visit to the Sincar family in Kızıltepe. In spite of a massive show of force by the police that day, a bomb exploded in the house where Zana stayed. (She got away unharmed herself but four other women in the house were wounded.)

The lack of sympathy shown the DEP by other parliamentarians reached almost absurd levels. When the DEP asked the presidency of the National Assembly to grant Mehmet Sincar's widow a state pension, this request was turned down on the grounds that Sincar "had not been killed in the course of his normal duties as a member of parliament."

Declaring that in Turkey legal possibilities for them were exhausted, the now 17 DEP deputies sought recourse with the European Conference on Security and Co-operation (ECSC). They accused Turkey of not respecting its obligations in the ECSC framework of safeguarding the rights of minorities, citing especially the systematic destruction of Kurdish villages, the series of assassinations of Kurdish personalities by 'unknown perpetrators', and the government's handling of the Mehmet Sincar case. This complaint caused an immediate and fierce reaction among Turkish politicians and in the nationalist press; the DEP deputies were accused of high treason and seriously harming Turkey's international standing. All subsequent activities in Europe in solidarity with the DEP tended to be proof of the party's betrayal of Turkey's interests. In November, the prosecutor of the Ankara State Security Court, Nusret Demiral, announced that he had started criminal investigations of these deputies' activities abroad, and in December the attorney-general initiated proceedings to have the DEP also banned.

On the 27th of March 1994 local elections were held in Turkey. In the months preceding the elections, attacks on DEP party centres and armed assaults on its candidates further intensified. Various DEP offices were bombed and candidates assassinated. On February 18 a heavy bomb exploded in the party's Ankara headquarters, killing one and wounding 20 people. By the end of February, the party decided not to take part in the elections

because of the serious lack of security for both its candidates and its electorate.[12] This meant that once again the real electoral strength of the party was not to be tested.

The pressure on the DEP did not decrease after it had withdrawn from the race. Prime minister Çiller repeatedly accused the DEP deputies of being in league with, and acting on orders from, the PKK. On March 2, a special session of parliament voted to lift the immunity of 5 DEP deputies and two independents (one of whom was Kurdish, one an Islamist).[13] The initiative for this unprecedented measure came from Mrs. Çiller, and indirectly probably from the military, with which she always appeared to be in complete agreement. It was, however, supported by a vast majority in parliament, which clearly showed that they considered the DEP politicians as traitors. Only a few SHP deputies came to the defence of their colleagues. That same day, State Security Court prosecutor Demiral issued a warrant for these deputies' arrest. Thus it happened that the six Kurdish deputies (and the one Islamist) were taken from parliament and at once detained, to await trial on charges for which the law prescribed the death penalty.

In the elections later that month, the turnout in the Kurdish provinces, especially in such cities as Diyarbakir, was very low. Out of just below 170,000 registered voters in Diyarbakir, only 103,000 actually voted, and 22,500 of them threw invalid votes, presumably deliberately. In other words, there were less than 50 percent valid votes. Thus the Islamic *Refah* (Welfare) Party became the winner, although it only received 30,000 votes, corresponding with 17.5 percent of the registered voters.[14] The Refah Party made the most impressive showing throughout in these elections — which caused much concern in Europe and lowered the priority of human rights in Turkey, and especially of the Kurdish question, on the agenda of most European politicians. Few appeared to be aware of the fact that the Refah Party, as the only serious outsider taking part in the elections, owed many votes to DEP supporters, who were unwilling to vote for any of the establishment parties.

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12 A long list of violent assaults on party leaders and party buildings between July 1993 and February 1994, which includes dozens of murders and bombings, is given in: A. Osman Ölmez, *Türkiye siyasetinde DEP depremi* ('DEP, an earthquake in Turkey's politics'). Ankara: Doruk, 1995, pp. 358-63. The text of the statement in which the party council announced why it withdrew from the elections is to be found in the same book, pp. 354-7.

13 These were DEP deputies Hatip Dicle (Diyarbakır deputy and party chairman), Ahmet Türk (Mardin), Leyla Zana (Diyarbakır), Sırrı Sakık (Muş), Orhan Dogan (Şırnak), independent Kurdish deputy Mahmut Alınak (Şırnak) and the independent Islamist deputy Hasan Mezarcı (Istanbul). Alinak had been a DEP member but had resigned from the party before procedures against it had started. The case of Mezarcı had no relationship with the Kurdish question; he was accused of insulting Atatürk.

14 Calculated from the official election results as reprinted in Ölmez, *DEP depremi*, p. 421. It should be noted, moreover, that the *registered* voters in Diyarbakır did not include all persons of voting age. Many people had recently settled in Diyarbakır to escape from the war raging in the countryside, and they were not generally registered as voters here.

Meanwhile the trial against the DEP before the Constitutional Court continued, and on June 16, 1994 the party was banned. Party leaders had decided not to leave this party in time (as they had done with the HEP) but to defend it to the very end. This implied that the DEP deputies who still were present in parliament would have to give up their seats, and thereby loose their immunities, as soon as the party was banned. Rather than also facing a trial for separatist activities and the risk of the death penalty, a group decided to leave for Western Europe before the 16th of June.[15] Two others, Sedat Yurtdaş and Selim Sadak, declared that they preferred to share the fate of their colleagues who already were in prison waiting for their trials. Prosecutor Demiral ordered their arrests too.

Demiral brought charges against the eight detained Kurdish deputies under article 125 of the Turkish Penal Code, for which there is only one sanction, the death penalty. Each of them was accused of contacts with the PKK or of praising the PKK's guerrilla fighters. The trial invited great international attention but this hardly helped the DEP deputies. In December 1994 the court gave its verdict; the choice between death penalty and acquittal was avoided by applying another law than article 125. Five of the deputies were sentenced to 15 years imprisonment, one to seven and a half years, the other two to three and a half years and a high fine each. President Demirel declined using his privilege of pardoning them.

Even before the ban of the DEP, another pro-Kurdish party was established to succeed it, the HADEP (People's Democracy Party, founded in May 1994). The HADEP appears to represent a somewhat narrower political spectrum than its predecessors, for former HEP politician Ibrahim Aksoy (who represented one particular wing within the HEP) soon was to establish another legal pro-Kurdish party, the DDP (Party for Democracy and Change), and there were attempts to establish yet another, moderate, pro-Kurdish party. These other parties remained marginal, however. The HADEP was subjected to the same harassment's as its predecessors. It became the first of the pro-Kurdish parties to actually test its electoral strength, in the December 1995 parliamentary elections. With only 4.8 percent of the total vote, it remained far below the threshold of 10 percent, but in several of the south-eastern provinces it became, in spite of numerous official and unofficial hindrances, the largest party.

15 The deputies Mahmut Kılınç, Remzi Kartal, Zübeyir Aydar, Ali Yigit and Nizamettin Toguç and honorary chairman Yaşar Kaya left for Brussels, where they set up the European representation of the party. Deputy Naif Güneş, who had earlier gone to Germany, joined them there. Three other deputies had in fact left the party before procedures were started against it or had not formally joined it after their 'expulsion' from the HEP, and could therefore hold on to their seats as independent deputies.

Political assassinations by 'unknown perpetrators'

In the four years that the HEP and DEP existed, no less than 64 of their leaders and members were killed.[16] The police authorities never found their murderers, and in many cases these in fact appear to have acted with connivance or worse of the police or intelligence services. The first of these victims was the Diyarbakir lawyer Vedat Aydın, who in July 1991 had been taken from his home by men whom he recognised as policemen and whose body was found a few days later on a garbage heap. In the case of the assassination of DEP deputy Mehmet Sincar, the police have refused to act on eyewitness accounts that identified the alleged murderer; DEP sources accuse the police of direct involvement and claim that not a single serious witness has been heard by the police.[17]

In many of the other cases too, there are indications that appear to implicate the police in the killings. Many of the killings appear to have been carried out by death squads acting on instructions or in co-operation with the police or the intelligence body of the gendarmerie, JITEM. The latter service was only established in the late 1980s but soon became notorious for its cloak-and-dagger operations and for its involvement in the heroin trade. Ironically, the first commander of JITEM, Ahmet Cem Ersever, was himself killed by unknown assailants in November 1993 after he had fallen out with his erstwhile comrades-in-arms and had gone public with criticism of the conduct of the war.[18]

DEP members were only one of the categories of persons targeted by the death squads that have been active in eastern Turkey during the past few years. In 1991, a total of 31 persons were killed by 'unknown perpetrators', in 1992 not less than 360.[19] The peak year was 1993, when according to the Human Rights Association (IHD) of Turkey, 510 persons fell victim to such assassinations. Not all of the victims were Kurds, but a considerable number were.[20] Besides DEP members, other locally

16 Their names are listed in Ölmez, *DEP depremi*, pp. 465-6.

17 The authorities state, however, that 12 arrests were made in connection with this murder. Sincar's widow has accused the police forces of responsibility for the murder and brought the case before the European Human Rights Commission.

18 Ersever approached journalists when he feared being assassinated, apparently in the hope that public exposure would save his skin. The interviews he gave yield tantalising glimpses of the world of counter-insurgery and its links with ordinary crime. See Soner Yalçın, *Binbaşı Ersever'in itirafları* ('Major Ersever's confessions', Istanbul: Kaynak, 1994) and Ismet Imset's articles in *Turkish Daily News* of November 6, 10 and 18, 1993.

19 Figures for 1991 and 1992 compiled by the Human Rights Foundation of Turkey.

20 Cumulative figures on human rights violations in 1993 released by the Human Rights Association (IHD). The figures quoted here do not include victims of assaults by guerrilla units or security forces, and they also exclude disappearances, extra-judicial executions and deaths under torture.

influential persons of Kurdish nationalist persuasions and human rights activists were prime targets. And so were journalists and distributors of the pro-Kurdish press. In 1992, 9 journalists and correspondents, and 4 distributors, of the pro-Kurdish press alone were assassinated;[21] in 1993, according to IHD figures, a total of 6 journalists and 8 distributors.[22]

In Diyarbakir and Batman, numerous people were allegedly killed by members of the militant Muslim *Hizbullah* movement, a section of which became embroiled in a sort of blood feud with the PKK. The *Hizbullah* ('army of God'), most of whose members are also Kurdish, was originally firmly opposed to the existing political order, though for other reasons than the PKK. The section that came to clashes with the PKK, however, appears to have offered its co-operation to counter-insurgency operatives in the police and/or gendarmerie force. Turbaned, bearded and in baggy trousers (the conservative Muslim outfit), and armed with sticks and butcher's knives, they frequently attacked meetings of young Kurdish nationalists and raided cafes and other gathering places. Many persons in these towns were assassinated with the butcher's knives, which were almost as a signature; nevertheless *Hizbullah* members were rarely arrested, even those whom witnesses said they had recognised in broad daylight. Public opinion became convinced that these *Hizbullah* killers acted with connivance or even on instructions from the cloak-and-dagger departments of the counter-insurgency forces, popularly known in Turkey as '*Kontragerilla*'. For this reason the pro-Kurdish and leftist press re-baptised them as '*Hizb-i Kontra*', a name that soon became popular. According to reports in the leftist press, at least some *Hizbullah* members got firearm practice at a police shooting range in Diyarbakir.[23]

The assassinations became a grave national political issue when a number of prominent (non-Kurdish) secularist journalists and politicians were assassinated by 'unknown perpetrators', believed to be Muslim fundamentalists. In response to the assassination of well-known journalist Ugur Mumcu in January 1993, parliament appointed a commission to investigate the entire phenomenon of these unsolved murders. It took the commission 20 months to complete its investigations, but its report was never officially released. Although it cautiously avoids drawing controversial conclusions, the conservative members of the commission believed that the report would be too damaging to the prestige of the state and therefore stopped its publication. Much later,

21 Serdar Çelik, *Teure Wahrheit: Der Bericht von Özgür Gündem 1993*. Köln: GNN Verlag, 1994, pp. 37-9.

22 "Human Rights Violations in 1993", summary statistics published by IHD in January 1994; Helsinki Watch, "Turkey: censorship by assassination continues" (New York, February 1994).

23 See for instance the report in left-wing weekly *Gerçek*, 14 May 1994, pp. 6-10, allegedly based on confessions of a former Hizbullah member.

the commission's draft report was published by a small leftist party.[24] In spite of its cautious formulations, the commission obliquely accused state organs of involvement in many of the 'unknown perpetrator' murders.

In several cases it could be established that the 'unknown perpetrators' of a murder were in fact village guards (*korucu*), who were confident that they could kill with impunity. In one case where the village guards were apprehended after a killing, they in fact claimed to have acted on instructions from the gendarmerie. In the case of the *Hizbullah*, the commission also strongly suggested that there was at least connivance, if not more direct involvement, of police forces in their murders. "Whereas the PKK, which has established its urban committees, is not capable of carrying out any actions in the city by day, the so-called Hizbullah activists, on the other hand, freely carry out (violent) actions in broad daylight without being arrested. This causes (the local people) to suspect the state of being involved, and the PKK successfully fans these suspicions."[25]

The commission identified yet another type of assassin allegedly acting on police or gendarmerie instructions, the 'confessant' (*itirafçı*). The term 'confessant' refers to former Kurdish or leftist activists who have made a full confession and who, in exchange for a reduction of their sentence, co-operate with the police authorities. One of these 'confessants', Alattin Kanat, who is mentioned by name in the commission's report, appears to have carried out several assassinations while he officially was in prison. The report only mentions that this man in fact was a few times allowed to leave prison, but the respected newspaper *Cumhuriyet* reported actual assassinations carried out by him during such brief 'vacations'. His death sentence was thus commuted to life imprisonment, and hence further reduced to only a few years. The commission, without adding a comment of its own, noted the widespread belief among the population of south-eastern Turkey that many of the unsolved murders were committed by such 'confessants'.[26] After DEP deputy Mehmet Sincar was murdered, his companions reported that they had seen Alattin Kanat with the police that day, and that they were convinced that he was involved in the murder.[27]

Since 1993, the frequency of assassinations by 'unknown perpetrators' gradually declined. Whereas the Human Rights Association gave a total number of 510 for 1993, the comparable figures for 1994 and 1995 were 423 and 99, respectively. This decline

24 *T.B.B.M. faili meçhul cinayetler araştırma komisyonu raporu [taslak]* ('Draft report of the parliamentary commission to investigate murders by unknown perpetrators', Istanbul: Birleşik Sosyalist Parti, July 1995.

25 *T.B.M.M. faili meçhul cinayetler araştırma komisyonu raporu*, p. 79.

26 *T.B.M.M. faili meçhul cinayetler araştırma komisyonu raporu*, p. 98.

27 Ölmez, *DEP depremi*, pp. 286-7, 292.

does not reflect, however, a general improvement in the human rights situation and in public security in south-eastern Turkey. Much of it is due to a gradual relaxation of the conflict between the *Hizbullah* and PKK sympathisers. Another reason of the decline no doubt is that there are fewer candidates for assassination left. In this respect the assassinations of 1992 and 1993 have been quite successful: There are fewer human rights activists left in the region, and they operate much more cautiously now. There are practically no journalists reporting from the region — they have been under threat from both sides in the war[28] — and the pro-Kurdish press practically has no distribution in the region anymore. Popular support for the PKK, voiced very openly in towns like Diyarbakir in 1993, has become much muted now.

Village evacuations

As mentioned in an earlier chapter, the considerable powers of the 'super-governor' were in April 1990 extended to include, *inter alia*, the power to 'evacuate villagers for security reasons.' These powers have been used very extensively — although it is not at all clear who makes the real decisions about village evacuations and destructions. It is true that they started in the region under the authority of the 'super-governor', i.e. the provinces in which the state of emergency is in force, but by now hundreds of villages in other provinces have also been evacuated, most recently even as far west as Sivas.

Forced evacuations of villages had been reported before. In the 1920s and 1930s deportations were one of the means by which the government strove to assimilate the Kurds to Turkish culture; many of those deported, incidentally, were later allowed to return to their regions of origin. During the 1980s, several isolated cases of forced evacuations from villages were mentioned in the press, all apparently directly related with counter-insurgency measures. After 1990, however, deportations, often combined with destruction of the deserted villages, became more systematic. A pro-Kurdish source lists the names of 350 settlements that were at least partly evacuated and/or destroyed in the years 1990-92. More than half of these were in the two frontier provinces (bordering on Iraq) of Hakkari and Şırnak, another 85 in the adjoining provinces of Van and Siirt.[29]

28 In October 1993 the PKK informed journalists that, because of their overall pro-state attitudes and their lack of solidarity with the much-harassed pro-Kurdish newspaper *Özgür Gündem*, they were no longer allowed to work in the region and had to close down their newspapers' offices there. They took this warning seriously enough and left. See: Yılmaz Odabaşı, *Güneydoğu'da gazeteci olmak* ("Being a journalist in the southeast"), Istanbul: Kaynak, 1994, pp. 159-77. Odabaşı, who worked in Diyarbakır for several leftist papers, also reports extensively on the pressure on journalists from the side of the authorities, the secret police and the *Hizbullah*.

29 *Yeni Ülke*, 20-12-1992. The other evacuated villages were in Bitlis (north of Siirt) and the triangle Batman-Diyarbakır-Mardin further west. Some of the settlements listed were proper villages, others probably small hamlets (*mezra*) that have no independent administrative status.

In the following years, evacuations spread further inland as well as to the Northeast, reflecting the fact that guerrilla activity took place in an ever larger area.

For obvious reasons there are no really reliable statistics on these evacuations. The pro-Kurdish press has over the years regularly printed lists of affected villages, interviews with evacuees and occasionally with former soldiers; the human rights associations have compiled their own lists on the basis of information from local sources. These lists are the best data readily available but they are not very satisfactory. Villages and hamlets are lumped together; because different hamlets belonging to the same village may have been evacuated on different dates, because in some villages evacuees returned to their village until they were evicted again, and because often the first time only a part of the village is evacuated and the rest on a later occasion, there are double counts. On the other hand, there are undoubtedly other cases that have remained unnoticed. Nevertheless, the government has not contested the *numbers* of affected villages as given by the Human Rights Associations of Turkey (IHD), it has only given other explanations of the evacuations. Not long after the IHD had published the figure of 874 villages and hamlets partially or completely evacuated in 1983, the Minister of the Interior confirmed to parliament that so far 871 villages and hamlets, i.e. practically the same number, had been evacuated in whole or in part. Unlike the IHD, however, he pointed to PKK violence and the economic situation as the causes.[30]

There are indications, however, that the evacuation of isolated Kurdish mountain villages is carried out as a deliberate and systematic government policy — although its implementation may vary according to the whims of military commanders and even 'village guards'. In the autumn of 1993 a letter that President Özal had written to Prime Minister Demirel two months before his death appeared in the press.[31] In this document he outlined his vision for a solution of the Kurdish question. Massive capital outlays to stimulate the regional economy were one aspect of his project, another the systematic resettlement, in stages, of the entire population of the mountain districts in other parts of the country. It is true that the Çiller government has deviated considerably from Özal's policies — but mostly in following a harder line vis-à-vis the Kurds. The step-by-step evacuation of mountain villages was carried through energetically. By the end of 1994, the Minister of the Interior informed parliament that during his period in office, i.e. in 1992-94, a total of 2,215 villages and hamlets had been evacuated. As for the evicted inhabitants, the government had provided alternative housing to 2,424 families.[32] In

30 See the report *Forced evictions and destruction of villages in Dersim (Tunceli) and the western part of Bingöl, Turkish Kurdistan, September - November 1994* (Amsterdam: Netherlands Kurdistan Society, 1995), p. 7.

31 *Hürriyet*, 12-11-1993. The authenticity of this political testament of Özal has not, as far as I am aware, been contested.

32 Minister Nahit Menteşe's answers to questions by members of parliament, quoted in daily *Özgür Ülke*, 10-12-1994.

other words, the government had given some support to one family per evacuated village!

The stories told by evacuees are all very similar.[33] Villages suspected of sympathising with and giving cover to the PKK were the first to be evacuated and destroyed. Soldiers, special teams or 'village guards' came to the village and told the villagers that they had to leave within a certain time or else face reprisals ranging from loss of property to death. Outlying hamlets were destroyed and all foodstocks and even crops burned, so that they would not be of use to the guerrillas. Attempts to receive indemnity usually failed. In many cases a village was given the choice between becoming 'village guards' (which meant taking active part in military operations against the PKK) or evacuation. Quite possibly a large number of these paramilitary guards have only signed up in order not to lose their land and property.

Evacuations, followed by destruction of the deserted houses, were carried out more systematically than before during massive operations in the province of Tunceli during the autumn of 1994 and most of 1995.[34] This was a region in which the PKK was relatively late in gaining a popular following, no doubt in part because it was culturally very different from the Kurdish districts properly speaking. The population of Dersim are Alevis, followers of a syncretic religion very different from the Sunni Islam to which most Kurds adhere. The authorities hoped keep the Kurdish Alevis detached from the Kurdish movement by emphasising that they had more in common with Turkish Alevis than with Sunni Kurds. The PKK was doing the reverse and attempted to convince the Alevis that the origins of their religion were Kurdish. The military operations in Tunceli were the ultimate consequence of the struggle between government and PKK for the identity of the (Kurdish) Alevis.

It was an almost inevitable consequence that this struggle would spread to other Alevi-inhabited areas. In 1995 a series of similar village evacuations took place in the largely Turkish province of Sivas. The population of this province is mixed Sunni and Alevi, but the Alevis live mostly in mountain villages. It was these mountain villages, some of them Kurdish-speaking, others Turkish, that were subjected to much harassment and ultimately evacuated. At night soldiers dressed as guerrillas would come

33 Interviews with evacuees in Diyarbakır in April 1993, Adana in May 1994 and various places in western Turkey in August 1995; and the following reports: *IHD Şube ve temsilciliklerinin Olaganüstü Hal bölge raporu 1991* ('Report on the region under emergency rule by the IHD branches and representations', Istanbul, 1992), pp. 73-82; *Yakılan köylerden bir kesit* ('A cross section of the burnt-down villages', Ankara: Insan Hakları Dernegi, 1994); International Association for Human Rights in Kurdistan, *Annual Report 1993* (Bremen, 1994), pp. 53-54; Human Rights Watch - Helsinki "Forced displacement of ethnic Kurds from south-eastern Turkey" (New York, 1994); Amnesty International, "Turkey: a policy of denial" (London, 1995).

34 This wave of forced evacuations has been better documented than others. See the SNK report *Forced evictions and destruction of villages in Dersim (Tunceli) and the western part of Bingöl*.

and force people to give them food, claiming to be PKK militants; they would return the next day and punish the villagers for giving aid to the PKK. Incidents like these, which appear to have been taking place for some time, gave rise to 'spontaneous' migration which was not at once noticed and suddenly came to public attention in early 1996.[35]

Forced evacuations and 'spontaneous' migration because the guerrilla war made normal life impossible in many districts resulted in enormous numbers of internally displaced persons. The US State Department's report on human rights in Turkey in 1995 gives an estimate of 2 million displaced people. Many of them live with relatives in the now highly overcrowded cities of southeast Turkey; numerous others live in squalid neighbourhoods of the large cities of south and west Turkey. Unemployment rates among them are extremely high, housing conditions are abominable, many children do not go to school. The migrants complain of negative discrimination by employers, police and other government services.

On several occasions during the past two years, government officials have spoken of plans to resettle the displaced villagers in new 'centre villages' in their province of origin. The government has in fact made efforts to find European subsidies for such resettlement projects. Like the systematic evacuation and destruction of villages in 'security zones', these projected 'centre villages' are again strongly reminiscent of Iraq's Kurdish policies of the 1980s. The experience of the Iraqi Kurds — where, as it was only discovered years later, this policy culminated in a genuine genocide[36] — should be enough to raise serious doubts about the 'centre villages'. The 'collective villages' where Iraq dumped its displaced Kurds did not allow of any economic activities; the people became completely dependent on the benevolence of the government. Similarly it is not well conceivable how displaced villagers could make their living and maintain their way of life in high-security 'centre villages' far away from their plots of agricultural land.

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35 A number of such cases were reported in the Turkish mainstream press in January and February 1996. Local people claimed that up to eighty villages in Sivas had recently been evacuated under military pressure. A detailed list of the villages is given in the pro-Kurdish daily *Özgür Politika*, 23-1-1996; see also the reports in the weekly edition of respected mainstream newspaper *Cumhuriyet*, 9-2-1996 and 16-2-1996.

36 In 1988, between 50,000 and 100,000 Kurds were systematically killed. See Human Rights Watch / Middle East, *Iraq's crime of genocide: the Anfal campaign against the Kurds* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

'Thought offences': punishment of writers and journalists

The Çiller years represented a noticeable step back for the freedom of expression. In the field of publishing too, Özal's mix of liberalism and repression was replaced by undiluted repression. Many hundreds of publications were banned, numerous writers and journalists were sentenced to prison terms for writing undesirable — but in hardly any case subversive — things. Mehdi Zana, a former mayor of Diyarbakir and the husband of imprisoned DEP parliamentarian Leyla Zana, was arrested in May 1994 and sentenced to four years imprisonment for a testimony he gave before the Human Rights sub-commission of the European parliament in December 1992. World famous novelist Yaşar Kemal, whom no one can suspect of separatist sympathies, was sentenced to a jail term for an article he published in the German weekly *Der Spiegel*. Sociologist Ismail Beşikçi, the first Turkish academic to speak openly about the Kurds and a prolific polemical author, was given a whole series of prison sentences adding up to over a hundred years.

Criticism from abroad put some pressure on the government to make at least some semblance of reform in order for Turkey to be admitted to the European Customs Union (which the Çiller government considered as highly desirable). Neither in the government nor in parliament was there, however, a majority to be found that favoured liberalisation. In October 1995 finally a few relatively insignificant legal changes were made, including the modification of article 8 of the anti-terror law, under which most writers had been prosecuted. Cases that had been tried already were reviewed, and as a result dozens of writers were released. This proved to be enough to satisfy the European parliament, which in December 1995 agreed to Turkey's membership of the customs union. It did little to improve the situation, however, for not only can this article 8 still be used to send writers to jail for expressing even non-subversive opinions but there are several other articles under which they can be prosecuted. In March 1996, Yaşar Kemal was again sentenced to 20 months imprisonment, and the appearances are that hundreds of writers and intellectuals will soon follow.

The state of emergency

In spite of repeated promises to the contrary, the state of emergency is still in force in most of the Kurdish provinces. An entire generation has by now grown up there which has not known life under normal conditions. Martial law was declared in the most important Kurdish provinces in 1978 or 1979, and it remained in effect until 1987, when it was replaced by the state of emergency. Ordinary economic life is disrupted but a war economy flourishes and has given rise to powerful vested interests that wish no change. This lasting abnormal state cannot but have its destructive effects on social life and on the individual personality. It is also likely to further exacerbate the differences existing

between the Kurdish provinces and western Turkey and thereby strengthen the population's feeling of being different — thus producing precisely the effect it was intended to prevent.