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Kurds

Kurds are the largest ethnic and linguistic minority in Turkey. The estimated numbers claimed by various sources range from 10 to 23 per cent of the population. According to the 1965 national census, those who declared Kurdish as their mother tongue or second language constituted around 7.5 per cent of the population. However, for reasons indicated above, it is possible that this figure was under-inclusive at the time. Kurds speak Kurdish, which is divided into Kurmanci, Zaza and other dialects. The majority are Sunni Muslims, while a significant number are Alevis. Historically concentrated in eastern and south-eastern region of the country, where they constitute the overwhelming majority, large numbers have immigrated to urban areas in western Turkey.

Kurdish tribes enjoyed virtual autonomy until the last years of the Ottoman Empire.

Fearful of the Armenian threat during the First World War, they cooperated in Turkey's genocide of one million Armenians, only to find themselves the target of forcible assimilation in the 1920s and 1930s.

From the late 1950s, Kurdish immigration was initially voluntary and economic. But repeated Kurdish rebellions were suppressed with ruthlessness, bordering on genocide. All Kurdish expression was outlawed.

A few Kurds began to call for recognition in the 1960s, and a growing number identified with the Turkish left in the 1970s. In 1984 Kurdish nationalism found violent expression in the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party), which embarked on a guerrilla war against the state.

In tandem with this, the PKK also succeeded in mobilizing much of the Kurdish civilian population. The struggle has been partly a class one. Kurdish identity was infused with a sense of economic as well as political deprivation. The PKK deliberately targeted certain members of the Kurdish landlord class as accomplices with the system of oppression (though some landlords identified with the PKK, often for reasons of local rivalry). The PKK also targeted perceived agents of the Turkish state such as school-teachers.

With the outbreak of armed conflict in 1984 between the Turkish army and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, PKK), more than 1 million Kurds were forcibly evicted from rural and urban areas in eastern and south-eastern Turkey. The displaced settled in urban centres in the region as well as towns in western and southern Turkey, and many fled to Europe.

By 1996 the state only retained control of south-east Turkey through the forced evacuation of over 3,000 Kurdish villages, consequently causing the destitution of 3 million people, with widespread and routine arrests and arbitrary torture common.

The Kurdish struggle for cultural and political rights is complicated by social and religious factors. Many rural Kurds are primarily motivated by clan or tribal loyalty, with long-standing local conflicts reflected in support for rival political parties at national level. Inter-tribal politics can determine whether

support will be given to the PKK or government forces. Loyalties are also determined by religious sentiment. Possibly up to 25 per cent of Kurds in the southeast are still primarily motivated by religious affiliation. Many still accept tarikat guidance (voluntary Islamic social welfare organisations that provide guidance and aid for Muslims. They have ancient mystic and traditional roots in Turkey,) when it comes to voting. This has benefited religious parties and parties of the right. The southeast remains underdeveloped compared with the western half of the country.

The use of minority languages in people's names was prohibited until recent years, which was particularly detrimental for Muslim minorities. In July 2003, a reform of the law removed the restriction on parents' freedom to name their children with names 'deemed offensive to the national culture', but kept the requirement that names should 'comply with moral values,' and no be offensive to the public. In September 2003, the law was restricted to names containing the letters q, w and x, which are common in Kurdish. Thus, Kurds are still precluded by law from giving their children Kurdish names that include these letters.

As a large, unrecognized minority, Kurds continue to face systematic marginalization. Around 30,000 people have been killed in fighting between the Turkish military and the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) since 1984, and over one million people remain displaced in heavily Kurdish south-eastern Turkey. The government continues to conflate any effort to promote Kurdish rights with support for 'PKK terrorists'. When in January 2007 the city council of the old-town section of the multi-ethnic south-eastern city of Diyarbakir agreed to provide municipal services in Kurdish, Armenian, Arabic, Assyriac and English in addition to Turkish, the Ankara-appointed governor of the region removed the council, the old-town mayor, as well as the popular Kurdish mayor of the city. In February, the president and 12 members of a pro-Kurdish party received 6-12 month sentences for holding their party congress in the Kurdish language. In July, prosecutors introduced charges against the two mayors and 17 council members on charges of 'abuse of office', and they may be jailed for up to three years if convicted. On the basis of vague 2006 anti-terror law, another Kurdish leader was convicted and sentenced in August for a speech he gave in March. Ahead of elections in 2007, government officials harassed one pro-Kurdish party's leaders through arrests, searches, seizures and prosecutions. Government harassment also targeted Kurdish media outlets.

In January 2010, a 15-year-old Kurdish girl was jailed for eight years for throwing stones at police during a protest. The following month, the editor of the newspaper 'Independence Homeland' was sentenced to 21 years for publishing material that was sympathetic to the PKK.

Clashes between the PKK and security forces diminished in the latter part of 2010. Following the PKK's declaration of a ceasefire in August 2010, they have announced that they will continue to observe this until the general election in June 2011. The armed conflict is ongoing, however 152 Kurdish politicians and civil society activists (104 of whom are in prison) face charges of belonging to the Kurdish Communities Union (KCK), which is alleged to be the urban branch of the PKK. The trial is ongoing. The suspects' request to defend themselves in Kurdish has been rejected by the Court.

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