

Welat Zeydanlıoğlu

Turkey's Kurdish language policy

Abstract: This article examines the Turkish state's assimilationist policy towards the Kurds and the Kurdish language in Turkey. It studies how the Turkish nationalist elites, the Kemalists, have throughout the 20th century systematically suppressed the Kurdish language as part of their aim to construct a homogenous nation-state of Turkish speakers. It shows that this linguicidal policy was strongly informed by the traumatic collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the consequent Kemalist emphasis on complete ethno-linguistic homogeneity as criteria for being "Turkish", "Western" and "civilised". The article discusses the various "Turkification" strategies of the authorities, such as banning the Kurdish language, the denial of the existence of the Kurds, changing the names of towns and villages, the forced re-settlement of Kurds and the assimilation of Kurdish children. It critically analyses the recent developments in Turkey's Kurdish language policy and the reform efforts of the current government as part of the country's EU candidacy. The article reflects however, that whilst looking good on paper, these reforms have had little impact in reality and Kurdish speakers in Turkey are still systematically denied their basic human and linguistic rights.

Keywords: Turkey; Kurds; Kurdish question; Kemalism; linguicide

Welat Zeydanlıoğlu: The University of Uppsala. E-mail: welatzeydan@hotmail.com

1 Language and the making of the Turkish nation

As the Ottoman Empire gradually fragmented and what remained of it was transformed into the Republic of Turkey following the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923,¹ the Turkish nationalist cadres that established this new state inherited a population diverse in terms of ethnicity, language and religion. Although some homogenisation had been achieved following the Armenian genocide (1915–1917) (Akçam 2004; Bloxham 2005a; Dadrian 2004), which largely ended the Armenian presence in Anatolia, and the exchange of more than two million people between Greece and Turkey (1923) (Aktar 2000: 17–66), Turkey continued to remain a

1 For the Treaty of Lausanne see: <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/lausanne-peace-treaty.en.mfa>.

heterogenous country. This composition naturally continued to reflect the heterogeneity of the Ottoman Empire, which, like other empires, had contained a multitude of different ethnic, linguistic and religious groups within its once large territories. This was well represented in the official language of the Empire, Ottoman Turkish (*Osmanlıca*), which was a version of Turkish with extensive borrowings from Arabic and Persian as well as other languages. The Turkish state that was built on the remaining lands of the Empire came to be strongly dominated by a nationalist ideology that emphasised the unity, secularity and the indivisibility of the Republic and the Turkish nation, aiming for the complete homogenisation of the society. The Kemalists, named after Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (meaning the “father of the Turks”), the founder of the country, intended to create a western and secular nation-state for the Turks and thereby leave behind their “Oriental” Ottoman past. As such, the inherited ethno-religiously diverse society, out of which a new nation was to be moulded, constituted an anachronism for the Kemalists. As Ümit Cizre has pointed out, “the national community, from the inauguration of the Republic, had to be constructed out of an embarrassing diversity of a demographic reality which was a legacy of the Ottoman mosaic. The confusing range of ethnic, linguistic, and sectarian attachments produced insecurities and anxieties over the question of the constituents of an identity in an inarticulate and uncertain social world” (Cizre 2001: 229).

Atatürk himself was convinced that the weakness and ultimate demise of the Ottoman Empire was due to its multicultural nature and the Ottoman acceptance of this diversity had made it vulnerable to foreign manipulation and the search for independence by minority groups such as Kurds and Armenians (Muller 1996: 175). According to Atatürk, Turks could only reach “the contemporary level of civilisation” by becoming a secular and homogenous nation-state of Turkish speakers. The nationalist military officers, who formed the nucleus of the Kemalist elite, were strongly influenced by the discourse of the enlightenment as well as rising fascist and nationalist currents in Europe. Traumatized by the humiliating experience of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, they were certain that strong nations were the only legitimate means of organising a state. A nation could only consist of a secular society that shared the same ideal, language, territory and culture. Ziya Gökalp, who laid the theoretical foundations of Turkish nationalism, claimed at the time, “today in Europe only those states which are based on a single-language group are believed to have a future” (Gökalp 1981 [1918]: 81). Similar views were in circulation as expressed by earlier nationalist pioneers, who were aware of the powerful role played by language in the construction of a national identity (Aydıngün and Aydıngün 2004). As early as 1878, the famous Ottoman nationalist poet Namık Kemal argued, “while it is a necessity that we try to annihilate all the languages of our country except

Turkish, should we instead issue the Albanians, the Laz and the Kurds an alphabet to be used as a weapon of division? Language may perhaps be a firmer barrier than religion in preventing the transformation of a people" (Arai 1994: 18; my translation).

As this example shows, the policy of "Turkification" (*türkleştirmek*) pre-dates the founding of the Republic of Turkey and has its foundations in the late 19th and early 20th centuries when it was developed by nationalist intellectuals, in particular those active in the Committee of Union and Progress, (*İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti*), who argued for example that Kurds had no separate language or history, and could therefore not be considered a genuine nation. Sociological and anthropological research was commissioned in order to justify the Turkification of Anatolia in general and the Kurds in particular (Dündar 2001; Üngör 2008). This strategy clearly had the vital role of guaranteeing the dominance and hegemony of the Turks over other ethnicities, such as Kurds, and to deny them the legitimacy to establish their own separate states as outlined in the Treaty of Sèvres (1920).² Such strategies continued and were further systematised by the Kemalists, most of whom had been active in the Committee of Union and Progress. Following the establishment of the Republic, the Kurdish language, identity and the geographical area of Kurdistan were gradually denied and the official argument developed that there were no Kurds in Turkey, only those who had forgotten their "Turkishness". The denial of the existence of Kurds and simultaneously clamping down on the Kurdish language and culture shaped the core of the Turkish state's Kurdish policy, which continued unabated throughout the 20th century.

The Kemalist nation-building project was implemented in an authoritarian and top-down manner by the nationalist state elites, who perceived themselves as the representatives of progress and modernity. The largely rural, poor and illiterate masses ravaged by years of warfare and displacement could hardly be trusted to modernise themselves and had to be modernised "in spite of themselves". From the 1920s onwards, through the state and its apparatuses, the "enlightened" ruling elites emphasised notions of nationalism, civilisation, science, modern education, rationality and secularism and devoted themselves to replacing the "old" with the "new". In this sense, one can argue that, although Turkey was never formally colonised and that in fact a war of liberation was fought against Western invading powers (1920–1922), the Kemalist elites were functioning within a clear Orientalist and Euro-centric discourse and were the key agents

² For the Treaty of Sèvres see:
http://www.pollitecon.com/html/treaties/Treaty_Of_Sevres_1.htm.

in the reproduction and deployment of an ethno-colonial vision within Turkey. As such one can refer to a Turkish version of the “White Man’s Burden” that aimed to “civilise” and culturally and linguistically colonise a purportedly “backward” and “Oriental” society by internally eradicating the retrograde influence of Islam and primordial identities (for a detailed analysis see Zeydanlıoğlu [2007]; [2008]). In Turkey, this “self-Orientalisation” (Dirlik 1997: 111) articulated itself in the attempt to launch a full-scale “civilisational shift”, a modernising revolution against the “old order”, which was to be carried out in all aspects of life through far-reaching radical reforms in areas ranging from politics, education, and law to attire, music, literature, architecture, the arts etc.

Naturally, as in most other nationalisms, language was at the heart of the Kemalist nation-building project. Modern Turkish as the national *lingua franca* shared by all the citizens was crucial in the dissemination of Kemalism as the official ideology and in overcoming ethnic, religious and linguistic peculiarities of the Ottoman past deemed to be lethal obstacles to the creation of a new nation. In this way, the pluralism associated with the Ottoman Empire was cast as an anachronism, as a remaining component of “Oriental civilisation”. The ground was thus laid for the dramatic and forced Latinisation of the Turkish language as well as its use as the defining attribute of modern Turkish national identity. Accordingly, the Kemalist language reforms aimed to guarantee the “purification” of the Turkish mind from “backwardness” and “religiosity” and bring forward the true Turkish identity and impose Turkish as the dominant language in all areas of life. The purification of Turkish also meant its westernisation, and the “scientific” study and transformation of Turkish was to mirror this process. As Geoffrey Lewis has pointed out, the aim of this radical reformation was to “break Turkey’s ties with the Islamic east and to facilitate communication domestically as well as with the Western world” (Lewis 1999: 27). The most important reform in terms of language was the Language Revolution (*Dil Devrimi*) of 1928, which introduced the Latin alphabet replacing the hitherto used Arabic letters. According to Yunus Nadi, a prominent member of the Kemalist intelligentsia and the founder of the Kemalist party-state newspaper *Cumhuriyet* [Republic], the aim of the alphabet reform was “to unite Turkey with Europe in reality and materially” (Ahmad 1993: 82). As Atatürk himself put it, so long as Turkish was written from right to left it could never properly express the ideals of European civilisation. The picturesque involutions and intricacies of Arabic script afforded a psychological background to the Oriental mentality which stood as the real enemy of the Republic” (Çolak 2004: 73).

The Language Revolution had the important role of advancing national culture and the idea of a pure Turkish language. The Law on the Adoption and Application of the Turkish Alphabet (*Türk Harflerinin Kabulü ve Tatbiki Hakkında*

Kanun) (1928)³ ordered all state institutions and private societies to use the new Turkish alphabet in all their activities (Yildiz and Fryer 2004: 22). The revolution was to ensure that all citizens could consider themselves part of the new nation through a common language. Being able to speak Turkish was the single most important criterion for being considered Turkish, as Atatürk noted, “it is difficult to believe a person who claims to belong to Turkish culture and society if they don’t speak Turkish” (Okutan 2004: 181). Other laws passed had the same purpose. The Law on the Unification of Education (*Tevhid-i Tedrisat Kanunu*) (1924), with its roots in nineteenth century Ottoman reforms, secularised and centralised the education system introducing mixed gender education. This law banned the *medrese*, traditional religious institutions that had provided education in non-Turkish languages such as Kurdish. The Surname Law (*Soyadı Kanunu*) (1934) stipulated that all citizens had to adopt either Turkish surnames or surnames derived from Turkish.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s the Kemalist regime mobilised all its forces to promote Turkish and spread the ideas and products of the language revolution. For example, during the “Citizen, Speak Turkish!” (*Vatandaş, Türkçe Konuş!*) campaign, launched in 1927 and which peaked in 1937, posters were hung on walls, bulletins were distributed on the streets and public declarations were made advocating that all Turkish citizens should speak Turkish (Sadoğlu 2003: 275–290). An important institution at the heart of the language revolution was the Turkish Language Institute (*Türk Dil Kurumu*) founded in 1932 through the initiation and encouragement of Atatürk, with the task to create a cohesive national language to shape a homogeneous nation. The aim of The Language Institution was the creation of pure Turkish (*öz Türkçe*) through eliminating Persian and Arabic words and influences and in their place inventing new words or introducing “pure” Turkish words assembled from various Turkish dialects. The Language Institution was part of an arsenal of other Kemalist institutions such as the Turkish History Institution (*Türk Tarih Kurumu*), with the primary aim to write and disseminate the new national history of the Turks. These and other institutions enabled the state to maintain control over all knowledge production. With the Turkish History and Language Institutions at its heart, the 1930s saw the launch of several conferences that were to provide the “science” behind the invention of the new Turkish language, nation, history and myths of origin for the new proud citizens of Turkey and at the same time deny any legitimacy to competing discourses of nationalism. These conferences resulted in the “Turkish History Thesis” (*Türk Tarih Tezi*) and the “Sun-language Theory” (*Güneş-Dil Teorisi*). The

3 For the Turkish original of the Law see: <http://www.mevzuat.adalet.gov.tr/html/463.html>.

basic argument of the History Thesis was that the Turks had historically been “culture creators” and disseminators of “civilisation” and that their homelands (Central Asia and Anatolia) were the cradle of human civilisation. The Sun-Language Theory, supported by the “findings” of the History Thesis, claimed that Turkish was the source of all languages. Although such ideas had a longer history dating back to earlier nationalist thought in the late 19th century Ottoman Empire, it was in this period that they were systematised with the potential to reach a wider section of the population disseminated through state apparatuses and the new national media. İbrahim Necmi Dilmen, the General Secretary of the Turkish Language Institution, for example, laid out the main purpose of the Sun-Language Theory during The Third Turkish Language Conference in 1936, arguing, “it would be impossible not to find the traces of Turkish cultural presence in the cultures of all languages known by history. By relying on these main lines of history, the fact that Turkish is the ultimate source of all languages will be established” (*Üçüncü Türk Dili Kurultayı* 1937: 64–65).

Through such arguments the “greatness” of the Turks was being “proven”, thereby debunking European Orientalist discourses on Turks as a “backward” race that had made no significant contribution to civilisation. It was important for Kemalist ideologues to prove to “the West” that Turks were not backward or members of the “yellow race” but in fact members of the “civilised White race”. As such, “rather than being the result of a profound change of mentality, the use of that terminology was an attempt to neutralise the racist condemnation of the Turks from within by utilising the same jargon” (Aytürk 2004: 19). The Turks were “carriers of civilisation” and it was a natural duty for the Turks to “spread civilisation”, particularly to other “backward peoples” (Aydm 2001: 346). In the case of the Sun-Language Theory, this meant that Turkish as the source of all languages and the language of civilisation had to replace all “uncivilised” languages. For example, the scholar Celal Sahir Bey, during the proceedings of the First Turkish Language Conference in 1932, stated that the Theory was concerned with studying the languages of civilised nations and “without doubt, languages spoken by uncivilised tribes cannot be considered” (*Birinci Türk Dil Kurultayı Müzakere Zabıtları* 1933: 438). As Alastair Bonnett has argued, Turkish nationalism in this period “deployed a form of orientalism in which the East is cast as a separate and primitive realm, to be distinguished from both the West . . . as a model . . . and ‘the Turk’ as an idealised ethno-national identity” (Bonnett 2004: 74–76). The authorities went to great lengths to disseminate these new ideas across society, in schools and school textbooks and the theories came to form the basis of Turkish historiography, official arguments and policies, also influencing literature, theatre and journalism of the period. Until the 1970s, historical or sociological research that did not confirm these theories were not published (Nezan 1993: 76). In

fact, they continue to influence contemporary state, military, academic and popular discourses in Turkey to varying degrees (Copeaux 1998).

2 The Turkish state and the Kurdish language

The Kurdish question can be said to have constituted the most important challenge to the Turkish Republic since its foundation. The Kurds, as the largest culturally and linguistically distinct non-Turkish people, have borne the brunt of the Kemalist nation-building project, which has resulted in the denial of their very existence and the banning of their language and culture, despite the fact that during the Ottoman Empire Kurdish tribes and principalities had significant self-rule and were officially recognised as an important component of the Muslim population of the Empire. However, in the early decades of the Turkish Republic, Kurds ceased to exist as a distinct ethnic group in official Turkish discourse and systematic attempts were made to forcibly “turkify” them, with the Kurdish language as the primary target. As Donald Bloxham has outlined, “the assault on the Kurds was cast in terms of the broader fight against the influence of religion and reactionary traditionalism (and indeed many Kurds objected vociferously to secularisation) as republican Turkey established a tradition of refusing to admit its ethnic cleavage, depicting the millions of Kurds as ‘mountain Turks’” (Bloxham 2005b: 230).

In official Turkish state discourse, the existence of Kurds was denied, or constructed as a threat to the very essence of the state and its identity. This discursive hegemony was achieved without the actual pronunciation of the words “Kurds”, “Kurdistan” or the “Kurdish question”. Instead terms such as “Mountain Turks”, “the East”, “banditry”, “reactionary politics”, “tribal resistance” or “regional backwardness” were deployed in order to represent Kurds as culturally and economically primitive, backward Muslims, tribal bandits, smugglers or as simple peasants exploited by feudal landlords (Yeğen 1999). This hegemonic construction, backed by the physical force of the Turkish army, created the very basis for the suppression of Kurds. In terms of language, since the primary marker of differentiation between Turks and Kurds was language, the elimination of the Kurdish language (as well as other autochthonous non-Turkish languages), became the main aim of the Turkish nation-building project. Kurds were to successfully become “Turks”, not only by taking on Turkish as their new language and Kemalism as their new ideology, but also by rejecting and forgetting their mother tongue, identity, culture and heritage. Accordingly, the modern history of Turkey can be read as not only the denial and oppression of the Kurdish ethnic identity, but particularly the long-term policy of annihilating the Kurdish language.

Turkey's Kurdish language policy has therefore been referred to as “linguicide” or “linguistic genocide”, the deliberate extermination of a language (Hassanpour 1992, 1993, 2000; Skutnabb-Kangas and Bucak 1995; Hassanpour, Skutnabb-Kangas and Chyet 1996; Skutnabb-Kangas 2000, 2005; Skutnabb-Kangas and Fernandes 2008; Skutnabb-Kangas and Taylor 2009; Skutnabb-Kangas and Dunbar 2010). As Tove Skutnabb-Kangas and Sertaç Bucak have cogently pointed out, “To kill a language you have to either kill the individuals speaking it or make these individuals change their mother tongue. Turkey tries to change the mother tongue of the Kurds and make Turkish their mother tongue” (Skutnabb-Kangas and Bucak 1995: 362).

In response to the state's centralising, secularising and homogenising policies there were a significant number of Kurdish uprisings (1925, 1927–1930 and 1937–1938), all of which were brutally crushed, followed by deportation, forced re-settlement and the massacring of a large number of Kurds. A report prepared by the Interior Minister following the Sheikh Said rebellion in 1925, for example, called the “Eastern Reform Plan” (*Şark Islahat Planı*), proposed that Kurdish provinces be ruled “in a colonial way” and that the region be turkified through forced resettlement. As part of the “reform” of the region, the Settlement Law (*İskan Kanunu*) of 1934 ordered the dispersion of Kurds in order to break up their social cohesion. The Settlement Law Interim Committee stressed that it was the primary duty of the Turkish Republic to exalt the Turks, who all shared the same race, mentality and language. Those “Turks” who had forgotten their “Turkishness” should be forced to appropriate it (Yıldız 2001: 242–253). The following year a law was passed which was aimed at “liberating” and “protecting” the “pitiful” people of the Dersim province by dismantling the tribal structure of the area, in order to better “civilise” (*temdin*) and “assimilate” (*temsil*) its inhabitants (Yıldız 2001: 258–259). All such coercive social engineering policies were being pursued in breach of the Treaty of Lausanne. Its much quoted Article 39 stipulates:

No restriction shall be imposed on the free use by any Turkish national of any language in private intercourse, in commerce, religion, in the press, or in publication of any kind or at public meetings. Notwithstanding the existence of the official language, adequate facilities shall be given to Turkish nationals of non-Turkish speech for the oral use of their own language before the courts.

3 Military coups and language policies

Turkey saw important political transformations in the second half of the 20th century, such as the transition to multi-party rule and the election of the Demo-

crat Party (*Demokrat Parti*, DP) in 1950. The DP successfully attracted the support of various sectors of society that had been silenced during the Kemalist single party rule (1923–1950). However, the Turkification of Kurds as a state policy persisted and Turkey's linguicidal Kurdish policy remained unchanged and was reinforced with each military coup (1960, 1971 and 1980). Kemalism continued to form the official basis of the state's ideology and the Kurdish ethnic identity continued to be systematically denied and persecuted. In 1959, Law No. 7267 stipulated that “village names that are not Turkish and give rise to confusion are to be changed in the shortest possible time by the Interior Ministry after receiving the opinion of the Provincial Permanent Committee” (Yildiz and Fryer 2004: 23). Article 54 of the new 1961 Constitution, prepared by the military regime which toppled the democratically elected DP government and hanged the Prime Minister Adnan Menderes, repeated the previous constitutional provision that, “Everyone bound to the Turkish state through the bond of citizenship is a Turk”.⁴ The new constitution secured the permanency of Kemalism as the official ideology underlining the irreversibility of Atatürk's revolution. Article 58 of the Law Concerning Fundamental Provisions on Elections and Voter Registers stated, “it is forbidden to use any other language or script than Turkish in propaganda disseminated in radio or television as well as in other election propaganda” (Yildiz and Fryer 2004: 26). Such laws were systematically deployed to imprison Kurdish speakers and those who dared to question the status quo. Following the coup, 485 prominent Kurdish intellectuals that criticised state policies were arrested and sent to a concentration camp in central Turkey without trial, while others were sent to exile in western parts of the country (Nezan 1993: 65). The Turkish Workers' Party (*Türkiye İşçi Partisi*, TIP), for example, which managed to gain 15 seats in the parliament in 1965, came to be the first political party to address the Kurdish question and challenge this taboo subject. However, this led to the banning of the party for “encouraging separatist activities” (Gunter 1990: 17; Nezan 1993: 68–70). This period also saw the names of many Kurdish villages and settlements change to Turkish as well as the launch of Turkish radio stations, hoping to spread the Kemalist ideology and counter popular radio broadcasts in Kurdish from neighbouring countries (Nezan 1993: 68–70). Boarding schools were built in particular in the Kurdish provinces (Beşikçi 1970: 552–553), in order to cut off Kurdish children from their families and community and as in other educational and military institutions, they were strongly encouraged and more often forced to forget their mother tongue and exposed to propaganda

4 The English version of the 1961 Constitution can be accessed at:
<http://www.anayasa.gen.tr/1961constitution-text.pdf>.

that Kurds were “bad”, “dirty” and “primitive”, while at the same time also maintaining that there were no such things as Kurds. Students were to feel ashamed of their language, culture and background (Skutnabb-Kangas 1981: 308–313). As emphasised so far, these strategies were part of a state policy to turkify the Kurdish population of Turkey in order to prevent the growth and spread of Kurdish nationalism.

In fact, a recently unearthed secret official report by Turkish journalists clearly confirms this policy. Prepared by the State Planning Organisation soon after the 1960 coup in order to “solve the problem of Kurdish separatism and regional underdevelopment”, titled “The Principles of the State’s Development Plan for the East and Southeast”, the report suggests various strategies in order to assimilate the Kurds (Dündar and Akar 2008). The extensive report proposes to eliminate Kurdish ethnic awareness by encouraging ethnic mixing through voluntary and forced migration. It underlines the importance of commissioning sociological and anthropological studies of the region as well as financial incentives in the transformation of the ethnic composition of the Kurdish region. This is a clear example of how sciences have always been considered by the Turkish authorities as a “tool” to serve “state interests” and social engineering policies. Some of the proposals of the report were: the re-settlement of “those who consider themselves to be Kurdish” with “surplus population” from the Black Sea region in order to favour Turkification; to sever the links between “those who consider themselves to be Kurdish” in Turkey from Kurds in Iran, Syria and Iraq; to broadcast radio programs prepared by propaganda specialists and local (Kurdish) songs with Turkish lyrics; to persuade the local population that in racial terms the Turkish political system is the most beneficial for them; to inform the international intellectual community that Turkey does not have a Kurdish problem; to immediately establish a Turkology Institute to produce scholarly work that will prove that Kurds are of Turkish origin and that the Turkish version of the history of the East be disseminated; publications to be produced and disseminated which argue that Kurds originate from Turanian tribes. Ironically, such crude and oppressive assimilationist strategies and coercive practices often had the opposite effect of raising ethnic awareness among many Kurds, and the 1970s in particular saw a rise and radicalisation of Kurdish and leftist movements that challenged the official ideology.

In this highly politically dynamic period, various new political, religious and extremist movements, organisations and publications emerged. Strong population growth, urbanisation and the spread of political ideologies played an important role in politicising urban youth and strengthening peripheral voices. The Kurdish question easily re-emerged in this political climate with leftist journals, newspapers and books drawing attention to the Kurds’ plight and enabling Turk-

ish and Kurdish intellectuals to challenge the official line. However, all such activities were systematically suppressed, with many writers and publishers imprisoned for “propagating separatism” (Gunter 1990: 4–19; Nezan 1993: 66–68). Fanned by economic recession and instability, a rise in social unrest, strikes, demonstrations and political assassinations resulted in another coup in 1971, where the government was forced to resign following an ultimatum from the Turkish army. The military urged the government to carry out reforms “in a Kemalist spirit”. Thousands of Turkish and Kurdish activists were arrested. The Diyarbakır military court sentenced more than a thousand “Kurdish separatists”, while counter-insurgency units were “raking through the Kurdish provinces one by one; several thousand peasants were pursued, arrested and tortured” (Nezan 1993: 78). The chaotic and violent decade of 1970s came to an end with the brutal military intervention of 12 September 1980, a milestone in the social engineering of the Turkish society and the severe suppression of Kurdish ethnic identity and language.

The systematic repression of politically dissident Turks and Kurds and the policy of assimilating the Kurds reached its peak with the 1980 coup, and the Kurdistan region continued to be ruled “in a colonial way”. The military junta declared that its goal was “to exterminate communism and separatism”. In 1982, a highly secret booklet internally distributed by the Turkish Land Forces Command identified the Kurds as the primary “divisive and destructive force” arguing that the word Kurd comes from the noise created by “Mountain Turks” of eastern Turkey when they walk on the snow (*Kara Kuvvetleri Komutanlığı* 1982: 43). Officials ordered Kurdish folk songs to be sung only in Turkish to avoid “separatism” and public speaking or printing in Kurdish was banned and thousands of newspapers, magazines and books on Kurds were confiscated and burnt. David McDowall points out that by 1986, 2,842 more Kurdish villages had been given Turkish names (McDowall 2000: 424). In fact, a study of this state policy has shown that between 1940 and 2000, the names of more than 12,000 villages, amounting to every third village in Turkey, were “turkified”, with a particular concentration in the Kurdish provinces and the Black Sea regions (Tunçel 2000). In the 1980s, the notorious Diyarbakır Military Prison, with a sign at its entrance hall ordering “Speak Turkish, speak it a lot” (*Türkçe konuş, çok konuş*), became a concentration camp where thousands of Kurds were brutally tortured and “turkified”, with many killed or maimed (Zeydanlıoğlu 2009). A fact-finding mission of the main opposition Social Democratic People's Party (*Sosyal Demokrat Halk Partisi, SHP*) in 1986 reported that all of “eastern Turkey had become a sort of concentration camp where every citizen was treated as a suspect, and where oppression, torture and insult by the military was the norm” (Taşpınar 2005: 100–101).

The new 1982 Constitution⁵ and other legislation stipulated under strict military guidance, with a heavy emphasis on Turkish ethnicity, legitimised such widespread suppression of Kurdish identity during this period and indeed continue to play a crucial role in the repression of the Kurdish language today. The Preamble of the Constitution states, “No protection shall be accorded to an activity contrary to the national interest of the Turks or their existence, the principle of the indivisibility of Turkey with its state and territory, the historical and moral values of Turkishness [*Türklük*] or the nationalism, principles, reforms and modernism of Atatürk”. The fundamental principles of Turkey’s national and territorial integrity and political unity, Kemalist nationalism and the official language are systematically embedded in the Constitution and the Turkish legal system. Article 2 of the constitution stresses that the Republic of Turkey is bound to the nationalism of Atatürk, while Article 3 provides that the Turkish state, with its territory and nation, is an indivisible entity, and that its language is Turkish. Article 4 prohibits not only the amendment of these provisions, but also the proposal to amend them. Article 26 stated that “no language prohibited by law shall be used in the expression and dissemination of thought” (amended in 2001). Article 42, which is still in force today, provides that “no language other than Turkish shall be taught as a mother tongue to Turkish citizens at any institutions of training or education”. Crucially, Article 28/2 specified at the time, “no publications or broadcasts may be made in any language prohibited by law” (also amended in 2001). The legally prohibited languages in question were “languages other than those which are the primary official languages of states recognised by the Turkish State” (Law 2932) meaning in particular Kurdish. Law 2932, which was not annulled until 1991, stipulated “the mother tongue of Turkish citizens is Turkish” (Skutnabb-Kangas and Bucak 1995: 355–356). Article 174 currently affirms the commitment to retain Kemalism by providing that no provision of the constitution can be interpreted so as to render unconstitutional a number of Atatürk’s key Reform Laws, and safeguard the secular character of the republic. Furthermore, Article 81 of the Law 2820 on Political Parties, 1982, which also still remains in force today without any amendments, stipulates that political parties cannot “claim that there exist minorities in Turkey. It is forbidden to protect or develop non-Turkish cultures and languages” (Skutnabb-Kangas and Bucak 1995: 356).⁶

⁵ For the Turkish original of the 1982 Constitution and a description of all the amendments to date see: <http://www.anayasa.gen.tr/1982ay.htm>. For the English version see: <http://www.anayasa.gen.tr/1982constitution.htm>.

⁶ For the Law on Political Parties see the website of the Turkish Parliament: <http://www.anayasa.gen.tr/2820sk.htm>.

The 1982 Constitution and the various legal provisions accompanying it continue to haunt Turkey's difficult democratisation effort to this day and justify the suppression of the Kurdish language. Such laws provided and continue to provide the legal basis for Turkey's policy of denying and oppressing the Kurdish identity and persecuting Kurdish speakers. However, instead of silencing Kurdish nationalism, these laws have played a crucial role in fuelling the largest Kurdish insurgency in the modern history of Turkey launched by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, PKK). Since the launch of its armed rebellion in 1984 for an independent Kurdish state, the PKK has successfully tapped into the frustrations and grievances of a large number of Kurds affected by the above described laws and practices. The immensely destructive civil war that has ensued between the PKK guerrillas and the Turkish army, with an estimated death toll of more than 40,000 mostly civilian Kurds, only came to an end when the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan was captured in Kenya in 1999, although military operations and sporadic clashes continue to this day.

4 Easing restrictions?

The military junta "left office" in 1983 after having brutally but temporarily silenced all possible sources of dissent, however, the 1982 Constitution and other legislation guaranteed them an "omnipotent presence" and immense powers in influencing various aspects of life in Turkey. This was certainly the case when it came to "national issues" such as the Kurdish question, where the military ultimately had the final say and there was very little room for politicians to go against the official line on the Kurds. Turgut Özal led the Motherland Party (*Anavatan Partisi*, ANAP) to victory in the 1983 general election and he faced staunch opposition from the military and Kemalist political elite when he attempted to find some sort of political rather than military solution to the Kurdish question. Despite this resistance, Özal managed to introduce a number of limited reforms under his leadership which included repealing Law 2932 that banned the Kurdish language. At least on paper, this repeal meant that the use of Kurdish for non-political purposes was no longer illegal, such as speaking Kurdish, publishing newspapers in Kurdish or playing Kurdish music. However, education and broadcasting in Kurdish were still prohibited by law (Kirişçi and Winrow 1997: 137).

It should be noted, however, that despite these reforms it was under Özal's leadership that the notorious "Village Guards" (*Korucular*) system was introduced in 1985, which recruited approximately 100,000 Kurdish paramilitaries to fight the PKK (Bozarslan 2000: 24). In 1987, a State of Emergency (*Olağanüstü Hal*) was declared in the Kurdish region which bestowed the regional governor with

special powers, such as evacuating villages, restricting the press and overseeing civil trials against security force personnel (Gunter 1990: 83). This State of Emergency remained in effect until 2002. Indeed on the very same day in 1991 that the language ban on Kurdish had been repealed, the Anti-Terror Law 3713 was passed which defined terrorism so vaguely that not only were the PKK directly targeted by this legislation but also anyone involved in the promotion of Kurdish language or culture (*Terörle Mücadele Kanunu* 3713). Article 8 of the Act enabled prosecutors to charge individuals on the basis of engaging in “verbal and written propaganda [that] aims to destroy the national unity and the indivisibility of the Turkish Republic” and has been systematically used against Kurdish politicians, intellectuals and activists. The Terror-Law was also the first clear sign of the start of the Turkish state’s “low intensity war” against the Kurds and the continued militarisation of the Kurdish question (Koivunen 2002).

By the early 1990s, it had become clear that the state had failed to put an end to popular dissent and the growing Kurdish nationalist mobilisation, with the PKK transformed into a mass movement. In a letter in 1993, Özal warned the then Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel that, “the Turkish Republic is facing its gravest threat yet. A social earthquake could cut one part of Turkey off from the rest, and we could all be buried beneath it” (Pope 1993). This was a serious threat to the Kemalist nation building project and a clear sign that policies of coercive assimilation had failed to achieve the anticipated result. The limited gestures of the Özal era, most of which stayed only on paper and others which ultimately failed to alter core policies came to an end with his suspicious death in 1993 and the suppression of the Kurds as an entrenched state policy continued unabated.

The 1990s were marked by thousands of deaths and immense material and environmental cost. During the civil war the Kurdish provinces were transformed into a militarised zone by the Turkish army. As Gulistan Gurbey has put it, “the military state of emergency and the use of force by the government in Kurdish areas in the southeast of Turkey lasted for decades. Forced expulsion from their homes and farms and resettlement in other localities, banning the expression of Kurdish identity, arbitrary arrest and persecution, and torture have become the everyday experience for Kurds in Turkey” (Gurbey 2005: 137–138). In its “dirty war” against the PKK, the Turkish army deployed the Kurdish paramilitary Village Guards, intelligence organs, criminal elements and Special Forces (*Özel Timler*) without any differentiation between civilians and combatants, murdering scores of Kurdish businessmen, intellectuals, activists and politicians. Mirroring earlier resettlement policies, the 1990s witnessed the systematic siege and destruction of more than 3000 villages and settlements resulting in the displacement of 3 to 4 millions Kurdish peasants (McDowall 2000: 440–441). All this had a disastrous effect on the Kurdish society and language as Kurds were displaced

across the region and the rest of Turkey, with the natural environment in which Kurdish had thrived for centuries significantly destroyed (for the relationship between displacement and language loss see Williams [1988]). At the same time, the state's coercive policies galvanised Kurds and fuelled the Kurdish nationalist movement, with pro-Kurdish parties persistently gaining the majority of votes in the Kurdish region.

In the political arena, Kurdish politicians were repeatedly abused, harassed and prosecuted and several murdered and all pro-Kurdish parties were systematically closed by prosecutors, only to reappear under a different name. As Watts has underlined, "No political party in Turkish history had ever sustained parliamentary representation while promoting formal recognition of a Kurdish people as its central political platform" (Watts 1999: 636). This was best symbolised by the imprisonment of Leyla Zana, the first Kurdish woman elected to parliament, who scandalised the Kemalist establishment at her swearing-in ceremony in 1991 by speaking in Kurdish and wearing a headband with the traditional Kurdish colours. Adding to her oath in Kurdish, she declared, "I have sworn this oath for the sake of brotherhood between the Turkish and the Kurdish people" (van Bruinessen 2001: 107). Through this act, Zana became the first person to speak Kurdish in the parliament and was convicted at Ankara State Security Court in 1994 of membership of an illegal armed organisation, the PKK, under Article 168/1 of the Turkish Penal Code and sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment. Zana was released in 2004 but has been continually prosecuted and was sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment in 2008 for various political speeches (BBC News 2008).

5 The beginning of a new era?

Since the late 1990s, with Turkey's EU bid and the required democratisation reforms there has been a very slow and gradual easing of Turkey's prohibitive Kurdish language policy, although the process remains riddled with contradictions as politicians and activists continue to be prosecuted and restrictions on the Kurdish language remain. While, on paper, certain reforms ease restrictions on freedom of expression or cultural or linguistic rights, the staunchly Kemalist judicial bureaucracy and security forces on the ground ensure that old policies of suppression continue. In fact, the European Court of Human Rights (EctHR) has repeatedly condemned Turkey for violating the universal rights of its citizens and recently declared Turkey the worst violator of human rights among the 47 signatory states to the European Convention on Human Rights (Today's Zaman 2010).

The EU's Copenhagen criteria, which requires that the candidate state has institutions to preserve democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and the

recognition and protection of minority rights, has led to a number of reforms, however, there have been serious problems with their actual implementation. Turkey's candidacy for EU membership was initially accepted in 1999 and the EU held its first talks with the republic in 2004. Following these talks, Turkey pledged to carry out constitutional reforms in line with EU standards. The Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP), with its roots in political Islam, which came to power in 2002, has spearheaded a number of reforms in order to comply with EU accession criteria. These have been introduced through "Harmonisation Laws" which have resulted in various amendments to the 1982 Constitution and other legislation. However, in 2007 the Kemalist military threatened to oust the AKP from power and the party narrowly evaded closure in 2008, accused of violating the constitution by attempting to change the country's secular character. It has also recently emerged that since the AKP came to power, high-ranking generals have hatched several plots to create instability and chaos in the country in order to undermine the government and create an atmosphere favourable for another coup (Erdem 2010). Therefore, the AKP has had to tread a delicate path when pursuing reforms, particularly relating to the Kurdish question, which perhaps explains in part why the implementation of these reforms has often been slow and unsystematic. It is also worth noting that not a single one of these constitutional and legislative amendments ever refer to the Kurdish language or Kurds specifically.

The amendment of Article 26 of the Constitution was a significant reform as this article had proscribed the use of prohibited languages "in the expression and dissemination of thought". This led to changes in other existing legislation which had previously banned Kurdish as a "prohibited language", such as the harmonisation law which amended legislation on radio and television broadcasting:

Although Turkish will be the basis of TV and radio broadcasts, broadcasts in different languages and dialects used by Turkish citizens in their daily lives is made possible. Furthermore, it has been emphasised that such broadcasts cannot be against the fundamental principles in the Republic enshrined in the Constitution and the indivisible integrity of the state with its territory and nation. (Kurdish Human Rights Project 2005: 17)

However, as these reforms were taking place, the widespread suppression of Kurds continued. For example, in 2001, whilst constitutional amendments improving human rights were being voted on in parliament, organisers of a Kurdish football tournament faced prison sentences of up to five years after footballers played in kits sporting the Kurdish national colours (Huggler 2001). Although reforms made it possible for newspapers and books to be produced in Kurdish, their political content led to court cases against many authors and publishers. For ex-

ample, *Azadiya Welat* [Free Country], the only Kurdish daily newspaper in Turkey, “has had to re-establish itself 3 times in the 12 years it has been in existence, and had 25 cases against them in that 12-year period” (Kurdish Human Rights Project 2005: 22). Similarly, changes in legislation granted parents the right to give Kurdish names to their children as long as they were not “subversive” or containing letters not in the Turkish alphabet (Q, W and X; letters used in the Kurdish alphabet). Kurdish politicians continued to be prosecuted for speaking Kurdish; a member of the pro-Kurdish Democratic People’s Party (*Demokratik Halk Partisi*, DEHAP) was sent to jail for 6 months in 2005 for simply saying “I” in Kurdish at an official function and in the same year there were “60 cases pending against the DEHAP president in Ankara for saying ‘Rojbaş’ (*Hello*) in Kurdish, versus ‘Merhaba’ which is used in Turkish” (Kurdish Human Rights Project 2005: 26) (this party has since also been banned). Abdullah Demirbaş, the mayor of the municipality of Sur in Diyarbakır, was dismissed in 2007 and the municipal council dissolved for providing multilingual services in the municipality. The “separatist” services in question included bilingual publications for children in Kurdish and Turkish, tourist guides in six languages, and a promotional video of Diyarbakır in Turkish, Kurdish and English (Toumani 2008). More recently in 2009, the Kurdish politician Orhan Miroğlu was found guilty for speaking Kurdish during the campaign for elections in 2007. The court held that, among others, Miroğlu had breached Law 298 on Basic Provisions on Elections and Voter Registers which prohibits the use of languages other than Turkish in electoral propaganda (Önderoğlu 2009). Thus, reforms have failed to change the reality on the ground as prosecutors have continued to launch cases against Kurdish politicians and activist for speaking Kurdish or for campaigning for Kurdish rights.

Reforms with regards to the Kurdish language education have faced similar restrictions. The 2003 Law on Teaching in Different Languages and Dialects Traditionally Used by Turkish Citizens in their Daily Lives (for the English translation of the law see BIA News [2003]) allowed private courses teaching Kurdish to be opened, but as with other reforms, serious caveats were introduced. For example, courses could only last for 10 weeks and no more than 18 hours per week and were for adult students only; teachers had to be native speakers of Turkish and have a diploma (it was not clarified how these diplomas were to be obtained); students were to pay high fees and the buildings in question were to meet unusually strict regulations and that the private courses were not to receive financial support from the state (Yildiz and Muller 2008: 87–88). This legislation was a good example of the Turkish authorities’ contradictory position vis-à-vis the Kurdish language, as law-makers were going to great lengths to prevent an actual change in Turkey’s language policy, through the very law that was to make this possible. Not surprisingly, Turkey’s brief experience with the few private Kurdish

language courses that were eventually set up after immense bureaucratic hurdles failed as a result, with certain mainstream Turkish newspapers and news agencies presenting this as a “proof” that Kurds were not interested in learning their own language (on the representation of Kurds in the Turkish media see Zeydanlıoğlu and Demir [2010]; Sezgin and Wall [2005]). Kurdish parents, students and activists in response launched a large-scale campaign for public Kurdish education and called for changes to the constitution, successfully collecting hundreds of thousands of signatures that were then submitted to the parliament. The authorities responded to this campaign by arresting hundreds of students for “supporting an illegal organisation” under Article 169 of the Penal Code (Mater 2002). Thus, the above described half-hearted “concessions” have often come too late and generally fall short of Kurdish expectations, especially when one considers the fact that Kurdish is now an official language of federal Iraq. As Hamit Bozarslan has underlined, “they deepen the feeling of humiliation; no private teaching institution, for example, has yet obtained the right to teach in Kurdish. In Batman, for instance, the courses could not start for one technical reason; the outside door was 85 cm. large, instead of the 90 demanded by the authorities” (Bozarslan 2005: 133).

In 2004, Turkey’s public service broadcaster the Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (*Türkiye Radyo ve Televizyon Kurumu*, TRT) was allowed to broadcast in Kurdish, albeit only for two hours per week, always with Turkish subtitles and with no programmes to target children. In parallel, various other small private TV and radio stations continued to be prosecuted for broadcasting Kurdish music or Kurdish programmes. For example, the local private TV station, Gün TV, which broadcasts from Diyarbakır, has continuously faced legal harassment with more than 60 cases filed against it since its foundation in 2001 (Kurdish Human Rights Project 2005: 23). On 20 March 2009, the station was fined and taken off air for 12 days for not providing Turkish subtitles to a political debate program (CNN Türk 2009). Similarly, Roj TV, the Denmark based Kurdish satellite station, continues to be banned in Turkey, which considers the channel to be a PKK mouthpiece. Several Kurdish politicians have been prosecuted for having appeared on Roj TV or for protesting against its closure in Germany (AFP 2007).

In January 2009, however, state-run channel TRT-6 commenced its broadcast exclusively in Kurdish, with Prime Minister Erdoğan congratulating the launch of the channel with a few words in Kurdish. The content of the “family channel” TRT-6 consists of programs broadcast on Kurdish culture, literature, cuisine, music and history. There are also general interest programs on health, travel, nature, religion and cartoons for children as well as talk shows, news and debates. There is a conscious effort by the channel not to be “political” with words such as Kurd-

istan and Kurdish names of cities and settlements strictly avoided. Soon after its launch, however, the channel ran into problems, as sceptics had predicted. The popular chat show *Rojîname*, presented by the Kurdish pop-star Rojîn, came to a sudden end in April after Rojîn resigned. Rojîn issued a statement saying that she was under immense pressure by the directors, heavily censored and treated as a potential criminal, with the show deprived of a meaningful content (Today's Zaman 2009a). TRT rejected her claims, although since then the channel's production company has been dismissed (Firat New Agency [ANF] 2010). Overall, the majority of commentators considered TRT 6 to be a historic change in Turkey's attitude to the Kurdish language and the general response was positive. However, some Kurdish politicians remained sceptical arguing that it was AKP's electoral investment in the region, while the PKK called for the channel to be boycotted (Today's Zaman 2009b).

One cannot deny the symbolic significance of TRT 6 in terms of rendering Kurds and their language "visible" in Turkey after decades of denial and repression and to this date it can be said that the channel remains one of the few actual achievements of the government. However, such positive developments are continuously undermined by other measures, which cast a dark shadow over positive steps and create distrust in the reform process. For example, during a live broadcasting of the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (*Demokratik Toplum Partisi*, DTP) meeting in the parliament in March 2009, Ahmet Türk, the chairman of the party, announced that he would deliver the rest of his speech in Kurdish. The state-owned TRT1 channel immediately cut the broadcast, the announcer stating that this would breach the Constitution and the Law on Political Parties. The irony was not lost on Ahmet Türk, who pointed out, "When [Kurdish party] members salute someone in their own language, they are prosecuted or investigated. When a mayor speaks to his people in their own language, he is prosecuted. But when the prime minister speaks Kurdish, nobody says anything. We don't think this is right. This is a two-faced approach" (Sobecki 2009).

As with other examples provided, this also clearly shows the problems of the uneven reform process in Turkey, which has been a process of giving with one hand while taking with the other. As Kerim Yildiz and Mark Muller have concluded:

Turkey, then, whilst having made concessions in the field of cultural and linguistic rights which at first sight appear groundbreaking, can on closer inspection be seen to be doing little more than paying lip service to the pro-EU reform process. At root, she remains committed to promulgating official Turkish nationalism, and tied up in paranoia over increased cultural and linguistic rights spelling the break-up of the Turkish Republic. She has a great way to go before cultural pluralism is realized. (Yildiz and Muller 2008: 89)

In August 2009, the AKP government launched a “Kurdish initiative”. However, following criticism from nationalist circles, it became the “national unity and brotherhood project”, with the government declaring that it was determined to solve the Kurdish question. Despite strong resistance from the nationalist opposition accusing the government of “treason” and collaborating with terrorists, the AKP politicians declared their dedication to continue with the “initiative”, raising expectations that the AKP government would finally take serious steps towards solving the Kurdish question. In an emotional speech to party members in the parliament, Erdoğan declared that Turkey would have been in a different place if it had managed to find a solution to the Kurdish question stating, “now we are saying that Turkey has to confront the problem. Turkey has to permanently solve this problem. . . . We believe in this. We have taken steps, and we will continue to, no matter what price we might have to pay” (Today’s Zaman 2009c).

As part of the “initiative” the government anticipated that in the long term it would bring about the eventual disarmament and re-integration of PKK guerrillas in the mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan back into Turkish society and solve the Kurdish question through granting individual and cultural rights. It was emphasised by officials that such steps were to be an essential part of the process of Turkey’s overall democratisation with a new constitution and in tandem with EU reforms. Official sources added that the package was to remove restrictions in education and broadcasting in Kurdish. For example, it was pledged that Kurdish was to become an elective course in schools and private TV and radio stations were to be permitted to broadcast in Kurdish (Today’s Zaman 2009d). As part of the initiative, restrictions banning prisoners from speaking Kurdish among themselves or with visitors were soon lifted, at least in theory, as it has since been difficult to assess how effectively this has been implemented. Restrictions on religious sermons in Kurdish were also lifted in the period that followed. AKP politicians also signalled that the Law on Political Parties would be amended to allow Kurdish to be used in political speeches, campaigns, slogans, posters etc (CNN Türk 2010). In September 2009, Turkey’s Higher Education Board (*Yüksek Öğretim Kurulu*, YÖK) accepted the application of Artuklu University in Mardin to establish an “Institute of Living Languages” to provide postgraduate education primarily in Kurdish but also in other regional languages. However, despite such steps, the government remained apprehensive. For example, the “Living Languages Institutes” were originally to be called “Kurdish Institutes” but shortly afterwards came to be referred to, somehow ironically, as “Institutes of Living Languages” instead. As a hopeful 2009 drew to a close, the government’s Kurdish initiative was dealt a lethal blow by the country’s Constitutional Court, which banned the pro-Kurdish DTP in December for having links with the PKK (BBC 2009a) and

dozens of senior politicians were banned from politics for five years. The closure of DTP was followed by the mass-arrest of Kurdish activists and politicians, including several mayors of Kurdish towns, accused of having links with the PKK (BBC 2009b).

The DTP has since been replaced by its new incarnation the Peace and Democracy Party (*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi*, BDP). The military and political situation has deteriorated and the “Kurdish initiative” has come to a standstill, with the PKK accusing the government of using the “initiative” to silence the Kurdish movement as the government has failed to respond to its cease-fires. Meanwhile, Turkey's only daily Kurdish language newspaper, *Azadiya Welat*, was again the target of Turkish prosecutors. Vedat Kurşun, the former managing editor of the newspaper, who was imprisoned in 2009 for previous “offences”, received a further prison sentence of 166 years and six months by the 5th High Criminal Court of Diyarbakır in May 2010. Kurşun was convicted under Article 7 of the infamous Anti-Terror Law for “spreading propaganda for an illegal organization” (Önderoğlu 2010). An Istanbul court had recently suspended the Kurdish language newspaper for two months under another article of the Anti-Terror Law. A further two editors of the newspaper, as well as editors of various other Kurdish and dissident leftist publications are currently facing separate charges and lengthy prison sentences (Reporters without Borders 2010a, 2010b). In a statement on the case, the press freedom NGO Reporters without Borders summarised Turkey's contradictory policies as follows:

We condemn the persecution of this newspaper and its editors. These disproportionate punishments expose the contradictions of the government's policies, especially last year's initiative that was supposed to give more rights to Turkey's 25 million Kurds (a quarter of the country's population) and draw them closer to international standards. The Turkish authorities seem unable to shed their repressive attitudes even when the country's only Kurdish-language daily newspaper is concerned. The sentence speaks volumes. (Reporters without Borders 2010a)

Such developments are not only casting a dark shadow over the initiative but also raising suspicion that the government is planning to “solve” the Kurdish question without the legally elected representatives of millions of Kurds. This has been most apparent in the mass show trial of 152 Kurdish politicians for their alleged affiliation with the PKK. Throughout the trial the defendants have insisted on speaking Kurdish and their right to interpreters has been rejected by the court on the grounds that the defendants also speak Turkish. When the defendants have responded in Kurdish, their microphones have been switched off and the proceedings officially recorded as having taken place “in an unknown language”. The court also rejected a report prepared by an expert on minority rights which

argued that legal defence in Kurdish was lawful under Article 39 of the Treaty of Lausanne (Üstündağ 2010).

6 Conclusion

Developments so far indicate that there have been no fundamental changes in terms of Turkey's Kurdish policy. In its totality, it can be argued that Turkey's linguicidal policy continues and that the future of the Kurdish language in Turkey remains under threat because of this very policy. There remain serious political obstacles inhibiting Kurdish speakers from passing on their language to future generations. The military and political elites ultimately continue to consider the persistent survival of the Kurdish language as a "problem" and an "obstacle"; a painful reminder that Turkey has not successfully managed to create a homogeneous Kemalist nation-state of Turkish speakers. Accordingly, public education in Kurdish in Turkey remains prohibited. Article 42 of the Constitution still maintains that "no language other than Turkish shall be taught as a mother tongue to Turkish citizens". While a 24 hour state-channel broadcasts in their language, many Kurds continue to face daily a web of legal restrictions and an insecure and hostile social context informed by a hysterical Turkish nationalist discourse. A militarist Turkish nationalism that forces Kurds to "become Turks" and yet considers those who resist this policy as "enemy others" permeates all levels of society. The Kurdish language in Turkey continues to be one of the most oppressed languages in the world. Campaigners, activists, writers, lawyers and politicians struggling for the survival of the Kurdish language and against Turkey's repressive policies are persistently harassed and persecuted. Various Kurdish linguistic and cultural organizations continue to be prosecuted and suspended for their activities. The limited pro-EU reforms have failed to change the reality on the ground as the Constitution and various other laws, such as the notorious and extremely vaguely defined Anti-Terror Law, allow prosecutors ample room to silence dissident voices. In short, Kurds continue to be deprived of their most basic rights in Turkey and persecuted simply for being Kurds.

The positive steps of 2009 by the AKP government raised great expectations, but the government unfortunately backtracked on its own project when faced with difficulties, failing to take the necessary brave steps. AKP's so far failed initiative again bitterly shows the difficulty of finding a just and democratic solution to the Kurdish question amid entrenched militarist policies and authoritarian habits, ultra-nationalist opposition and bureaucratic unwillingness for genuine change. As long as the question of Kurds' human, political, cultural and linguistic rights are not attended to and a just democratic solution not

found, then the resultant endemic conflict will continue to haunt Turkey for the foreseeable future. Today, it is obvious that Turkey is going through an important but highly turbulent and difficult process of transformation with the outcome very difficult to predict. The need for a democratic Turkey within which Kurds and their language can exist freely, however, seems more urgent today than ever.

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