



The genie of change is out of the bottle

Reflections on Peoples' Democratic Party's election manifesto

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The manifestos of political parties during elections may appear as rhetoric tools with plenty of promises, but in the context of the upcoming general elections in Turkey in 7 June, parties' manifestos could prove to be sound indicators of unfathomable social and political changes.

By far, the most radically innovative and all-embracing pluralist manifesto is the Peoples' Democratic Party's (HDP)¹.

It is the first time ever that a Turkish party's manifesto includes such deep and wide-ranging demands for political, administrative and social transformation, thus going far beyond what are considered to be the "conventional" Kurdish demands.

Through its manifesto, HDP is officially portraying itself as a pioneering reformist and democratic Turkish party expressing the pleas of change coming from the whole society.

Identity politics have always been very present in Turkish political life and even more so during electoral campaigns and pre-election debates.

But this time, there is an unprecedented novelty: The scope and depth of the references to, and demands for, inclusion of various identities are beyond anything witnessed until now in modern Turkey².

Along the identity references and demands, there are also significant references to, and demands for, groundbreaking changes to the structure and the philosophy of the Turkish state.

HDP's manifesto³ pleads in its essence for a pluralistic metamorphosis of the traditional nation-state, for the end of the dominant exclusive Turkish-ethnic identity

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¹ Moreover, this manifesto is of additional importance because it is the first election manifesto of a party originally steaming from the Kurdish movement. HDP is the first such party to run in general elections; until now, the Kurdish and pro-Kurdish candidates were running individually in order to bypass the 10% threshold needed for a party to enter the National Assembly.

² In fact, the party itself is embodying all different identities and ways of life and it is impressive to observe, for instance, that conservative Kurds and Christians from the southeast are in the very same party as LGTBs and Turkish progressives.

³ References are from the Turkish and English versions

(http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/siyaset/259275/iste_HDP_nin_secim_bildirgesinin_tam_metni.html www.diclehaber.com/en/news/content/view/453676?from=3534286294)



and its inherent association to Sunni Islam, for the constitutional and political recognition of different identities, for the definition of a new citizenship and for a wide decentralization with local autonomy and an actual devolution of the state:

- Calling for an end of the traditional “one nation-one sect” philosophy of the state, i.e. for the end of the domination of the single identity associated to Turkish ethnicity and Sunni Islam.
- Appealing for “a new Constitution based on humanity and pursuant to the multi-identity, multi-cultural, multi-faith and multi-lingual structure of Turkey”.
- Calling for “a constitutional assurance to every single person, whether with a belief or not, on the basis of "equal citizenship"”.
- Calling for ““a democratic autonomy” everywhere in Turkey” and for “democratic models of decentralization to involve all ethnic identities and to ensure their self-administration. Through regional assemblies, we will switch into a decentralization system”.
- Moreover, HDP’s manifesto calls for constitutional, political and social guarantees for cultural rights and civil rights and has a pioneering section about “LGTBs’ right for an equal, free and with dignity life”.

Overall, HDP through its manifesto proposes a modern alternative vision of Turkey, well-tuned with the new social and political developments in the country, but equally so in the West and the Middle East, without restraining its electoral campaign to mere rhetoric accusations and criticisms against the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and R.T.Erdogan⁴.

The inclusion of such references and demands into an election manifesto can be better explained in view of the recent developments and the Turkish social context: Two years after the Gezi demonstrations that for the first time brought together different, and until then, “contradicting” and even “opposing” identities⁵ against the state. The traditional identity fault lines emerge more blurred than ever, while the Kurdish issue in Turkey and its inherent interactions with Ankara’s policies and with the regionalization of the Kurdish identity have brought the Kurds in the center of the political life. Equally important is the prospect of a wide constitutional reform after June 7th created the opportunity for a new democratization dynamic and opens the door for various thorny debates, while the AKP’s previous reformist ability and will has fallen into a significant limbo and the party, under R.T.Erdogan’s

⁴ Murat Yetkin,
http://www.radikal.com.tr/yazarlar/murat_yetkin/muhalefet_henuz_tuzaga_dusmedi_ama-1345781

⁵ Just to name a few: Macho football fans and LGTB, non militant Turks with non militant Kurds, pious Muslims and leftist atheists.



domination, has identified itself with the nation-state and its traditional authoritarian reflexes. Also worth noting is the Erdogan-fatigue factor, with R.T.Erdogan having become a liability for the Islamic movement and the wider society, consolidating concurrently a strong dynamic of protest against him and the hyper-conservative and nationalistic identity he represents in the eyes of his opponents. The polarization that R.T.Erdogan used as his main electoral tactic reached its limits and now experiences a backlash . Thus, it is not surprising that some seeds of change are spread in AKP and mainly in the Republican People's Party (CHP) and they should be taken into account into the wider picture of today's Turkey.⁶

The assumption of a "nationalismless (Kurdish) nationalism"⁷ and the distance that the Kurdish movement in Turkey has established with the prospect of creating a nation-state can also explain the inclusion of such innovative approaches to different identities and such radical calls for a devolution and for an end of the classic nation-state.

HDP's opening to the wider Turkish society and the party's inherent dynamic for all-embracing inclusion could have been remarkably facilitated had the Kurdish movement having become an "identity liberation movement", rather than a national liberation movement"⁸.

This opening to the rest of the society, going beyond the Kurdish issue by considering that any solution for the Kurds must come through a widespread democratization of Turkey, combined with the fact that the party, unlike CHP, does not have the burden of previous identification with the state and its authoritarian tradition, provides a singular vigor to HDP's demands for transformation and change.

⁶ Despite the fact that its main philosophy is conservative and much closer to the traditional nation-state the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) manifesto (<http://www.akparti.org.tr/site/haberler/secim-beyannamesi-aciklandi/73293#1>), also includes, for the first time, a pledge to end the explicit reference to the Turkish ethnicity. AKP's manifesto includes also a (rather loose) reference to the European Charter of Local Self-Government. These two pledges suggest that AKP is not impermeable to appeals for change of definitions of the Turkish identity and of the structure of the state.

The Republican People's Party's (CHP) manifesto (<http://www.cnnturk.com/haber/turkiye/iste-chpnin-2015-secim-bildirgesi>) is also reflecting the need for change as expressed by the different segments of the Turkish society. Despite the fact that CHP too stays closer to the traditional idea of the nation-state, the current manifesto is considered to be an improved version of the 2011 manifesto, when the party's political thought had undergone an important liberal "lifting".

⁷ Vali A. "The Kurds and their "Others": Fragmented Identity and Fragmented Politics", *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 1998.

⁸ Ozcan A.K. "Turkey's Kurds. A theoretical analysis of the PKK and Abdullah Ocalan", Routledge, 2006



The inclusion of all these radical, innovative and even taboo-breaking references and demands in the election manifesto of a party that is becoming a key player in the Turkish political and social life, indicate that Turkish society is experiencing deep changes that now seem to find their ways into politics, currently through HDP. Turkey is not the hyper-conservative and authoritarian intoxicated country as it could seem at a first glance and HDP's election manifesto is tangible proof.

The June elections will be the first test, measuring the real power of these deep changes and will clarify if they are capable of giving a strong political message and push HDP to move beyond the 10% threshold needed to enter in the National Assembly.

The second and biggest test for HDP and the dynamics of change it represents today will be the capacity of the party to consolidate its electoral base after the elections. Therefore, to be able to enhance its presence as the party representing genuine and radical democratic forces in Turkey and not turn out to be just an ephemeral protest party against R.T.Erdogan or a mere "Kurdish" party. The dice is not cast yet; Kurdish nationalism, even in its "nationalismless" version, could still become a handicap and a dangerous threat for the party and of what it wants to represent today, in case HDP does not reach 10% and is excluded from the National Assembly.

However, the needs for inventive political, social and constitutional inclusion and legitimation of plural identities as well as the aspirations for a new form and philosophy of the state and for a deep wave of democratization seem to have found in HDP their leading political vehicle. And they don't give the impression that they will abandon it easily.

The dynamic of the party up to now and the positive reception of its elections manifesto by important segments of the society and by progressive and genuinely democratic circles in Turkey, enforce the hypothesis that regardless of HDP's success to reach the 10% threshold, the party's current pluralistic and innovative experiment will not stop.

The genie of change is now out of its bottle and is definitively riding the political wave in Turkey.

This will have immediate repercussions on the internal political and social developments just after the elections of June as well as on the interaction of Turkey with its region and the rest of the world, mainly the EU and the US.
