Reforms and Turkish Kurds

Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (JDP) not only aims to strengthen its positions, which were pretty shaken in June this year during the riots against the government's policy aimed at the Islamization of society, but also to expand its area of influence by attracting adherents from among religious and ethnic minorities. The package of reforms announced by the Prime Minister R.T. Erdoğan on September 30, 2013, sounds rather electoral than democratic, according to some Turkish and Kurdish analysts.

The presidential election was scheduled for August next year, and the JDP will probably nominate its candidate. Therefore, it is no accident that the emphasis, in R.T. Erdoğan’s speech, was placed on the liberalization of the electoral system, under which small parties (including Kurdish) would be able to take part in the elections and win seats in the parliament. Candidates for deputies were allowed to campaign in the Kurdish language during the elections. It is emphasized that the package of reforms supposedly took into account the interests of religious and ethnic minorities. However, it did not meet their expectations, as they were expecting the adoption of a new constitution and new laws that would take into account the ethnic characteristics of the population. The new constitution, in their opinion, must guarantee equal rights to all citizens of Turkey, and the full right to use their mother tongue in education and public life. In addition, the Kurds were expecting a more decentralized system of government and changes in anti-terrorism laws, as well as a decrease of the voting threshold. The Kurds wanted to see a program for solving the Kurdish question, but the “democratic package of reforms” said nothing about that, and it became subject to criticism from the Kurdish community.

The representatives of the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (PDP) said that thousands political prisoners were still being kept in jails, and the “package of reforms could not solve the problems”, because it focused primarily on the implementation of the interests of JDP, not those of the people. This is not the package that can lead to democracy. They called on the JDP and the Republican People's Party to abandon the policy of assimilation and cultural genocide, ignoring the Kurdish language, culture and history. The party National Democratic Congress called the package of reforms “short-sighted”. Kurdish Women’s movement “urged women of Kurdistan and Turkey to join forces in the fight for their rights”.

The package of reforms did not meet the expectations of the opposition of Turkish Kurds as well, who counted on a promotion of the settlement of the Kurdish question, launched in March of this year, and on settlement of relations with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (KWP) headed by A. Odzhalan. The KWP hopes to create an autonomous region in Turkish Kurdistan, but today is demanding expansion of cultural rights of the Kurds, the constitutional recognition of the Kurdish identity, self-government of the Kurdish area and the use of the Kurdish language in schools. However, none of these demands was taken into account in the package of reforms, which had a limited and piecemeal character. The use of the Kurdish language is permitted only in elementary school. Villages and urban settlements are allowed to revert back to their Kurdish names, and three Kurdish letters will be introduced into the Turkish alphabet. The schools abolished the mandatory slogans: “How happy is he who calls himself a Turk”.

The Kurdish Communities Union, which is the political wing of the KWP, said in its statement that the JDP had not moved the solution of the Kurdish question from the dead point. The package of reforms is made in such a way as to
delay the peace process of the Kurdish settlement, which can be initiated only when the Kurdish identity has been recognized constitutionally, and their rights and political will have been satisfied. They explained that the refusal of the JDP from democratic politics, due to fears of losing its leading position, is fraught with the collapse of its structure. The Kurdish Communities Union called on the Kurds and all democratic forces to the fight for democracy and a just solution of the Kurdish question in Turkey.

M. Karayilan, the head of the KWP, said that the peace process of the Turkish-Kurdish settlement was at a critical stage. The proposals recently put forward by A. Odzhalan involve the transition from dialogue to negotiations, and the creation of a new format of discussions between him and the state. To promote the negotiation process, in particular, laws and constitutional principles for the solution of the Kurdish question should be adopted, and the conditions of imprisonment of A. Odzhalan should be made less strict. In the event the government fails to take these steps, the situation may get worse, and the KWP assumes no responsibility for the consequences. In his opinion, Erdoğan’s “democratic package” is not aimed at solving the problem, but it shows the “mentality of government officials, who do not recognize the Kurds and their legal rights”. He said that the KWP does not intend to break the truce, but the actions of the Turkish army in Turkey’s Kurdish area are provoking clashes with Kurdish guerrillas and breaching of the cease-fire. Thus, Kurdish fighters are ready for violent resumption of hostilities.

M. Odzhalan, the brother of the KWP leader, informed the Kurdish community about A. Odzhalan’s prior opinion – who said that the “democracy package” took the Kurdish issue out of the brackets. He called for the continuation of the truce and hoped that the Government would take steps to promote the peaceful solution of the Kurdish issue initiated in March of this year. However, there are opinions that are more radical. The functionaries of the KWP, who agreed on to the truce, also criticized the package of reforms. Thus, Dzh. Baik, one of the leaders of the KWP, said that the Kurds would stop the withdrawal of their armed units from the territory of Turkey in the Kandil Mountains. The KWP also demands the release of A. Odzhalan from detention, and to exclude the party from the list of terrorist organizations.

Turkish Kurds see the positive development of Iraqi Kurdistan and the success of Syrian Kurds, who control a part of Syrian Kurdistan, where an autonomous government was established. Therefore, the half-measures proposed in the “democratic package of reforms” of R.T. Erdoğan, aimed to delay the solution of the Kurdish question, can lead to increased political tensions in Turkish Kurdistan.

It is expected that A. Odzhalan will make a statement on the matter by the middle of this month, as he intends to make it public during a visit of the PDP delegation. The KWP leader regretted that, while being in detention, he was suspended from active participation in political life, and could not influence the settlement process to move it from the dead point. However, the PDP and representatives of the political wing of the KWP, in his opinion, will continue talks with Turkish leaders.

Having inclined the KWP to the ceasefire, disarmament and withdrawal of armed forces from Turkey, the Turkish Army, however, is creating tensions in the Kurdish area, by building new barracks, increasing the number of rural guards, and continuing flights by unmanned spy planes. It bothers Kurdish autonomists who seek to normalize relations and prevent the beginning of new military operations in Turkish Kurdistan.

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