

Kurdish Political Movement and the “Democratic Opening”

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ABSTRACT

There has long existed a Kurdish political movement with its illegal, legal, and semi-legal aspects of it. All of Turkey wants peace but most people in the Southeast want this peace not “despite the PKK” but with “the PKK’s consent and participation.” While the Kurdish political movement wanted the government to shoulder all the weight of the opening, they also had serious responsibilities. It became clear very quickly that the important personalities of the movement were not very enthusiastic in facing these responsibilities. The Kurdish political movement has distanced itself from the opening process and, at times, appeared against it. Parallel to this, there have been changes in the state’s perspective and even, to some degree, “return to the old state line. The discussion of “who is the counterpart?” impeded the process as much as, if not more, the opposition parties’ obstructions.

On August 1, 2009, around 15 colleagues, some of whom were from a journalist background like me and some from an academic background, gathered at the Ankara Police Academy upon the invitation by the Interior Minister, Beşir Atalay. The workshop, titled “Solution to the Kurdish Problem: Towards a Model for Turkey,” was the first step of the “Kurdish Opening” that had been announced a few days earlier by Prime Minister Erdoğan and the Minister Atalay. There were many shortcomings right from the beginning. For instance, the Minister Atalay and the Academy’s directors barely participated in the discussions. There was nobody of Kurdish origin among the journalists. Most of the participants were well-known figures who have been writing on the Kurdish opening, trying to arrive at a lasting solution, and looking to the government’s Kurdish opening with hope. Our colleagues, who have been critical of the opening or who have remained somewhat distant to

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it, were either uninvited or they excused themselves from attending. Yet, this was a very productive workshop. Most importantly, participants looked to find the “reasonable” approach in describing the problem as well as in their suggestions for a solution. They took special care not to make things more difficult.

In the workshop, every aspect of the issue was discussed thoroughly. Rather than providing concrete suggestions for the solution, the following two questions were discussed, “On what kind of political, societal, and international bases could the solution be found?” and “What kind of a method and manner should be followed in this process?” The most extended discussions were held over the kind of role the National Assembly and the opposition parties could play in this process. Most of the participants agreed that the “the AKP (Justice and Development Party) plus the DTP (Democratic Society Party) equals the solution” formulation was not realistic. However, various different interpretations were made about the perspective of the opposition parties, especially the CHP (Republican People’s Party) and the MHP (Nationalist Movement Party). For instance, I drew attention to the fact that the MHP leader, Devlet Bahçeli, has taken great care to prevent the tensions from spilling over into the streets. I emphasized that it would be unfair and wrong to identify this party as the biggest obstacle to the opening process. Unfortunately, Bahçeli, soon after the workshop, disproved my good faith and described the workshop as a form of “treason” by declaring the participants as “12 bad guys.” (It is still unclear which 3 people he distinguished and why he did not say “15 bad guys”). For, both Bahçeli and CHP’s leader, Baykal, have opposed outright the opening process from the very beginning and have been very influential in the failure of this process.

However, it would be unfair to put all the blame on MHP and CHP for the failure of the process. It is essential that we criticize the ruling party for not showing the stealth to continue the process at any cost although they began this process with great courage. What surprised me most was that AKP started this process quite unprepared. For, we knew that the ruling party had pulled up its sleeves to do something about the Kurdish issue in the wake of the PKK’s (The Kurdistan Workers’ Party) attack on Dağlica on 21 October, 2007. It was no secret that the security forces, the intelligence units, and diplomats were working really hard at the national, regional, and international levels. Thus, the opening was not a surprise at all for those following the Kurdish question closely and there were great expectations on the steps that the government would take.

The first concrete development occurred at the Habur Border Crossing on 19 October, 2009. 26 people from the Mahmur Refugee Camp in Northern Iraq

and 8 members of the organization from the PKK’s military headquarters in the Kandil Mountain entered the country and turned themselves in to the authorities. These people, who were met by welcoming demonstrations of the people of the region, were released after being questioned by officials who were sent there.

The Kurdish political movement has distanced itself from the opening process and, at times, appeared against it

This “return-home” operation, which was necessary and appropriate on the road to the success of the opening under normal conditions, became the main reason for the dampening of the opening within just a few days. This was because the opposition parties were very successful in creating an anti-opening public opinion by using the following arguments and facts: the courts had physically moved to the region; the PKK militants had been released despite declaring their allegiance to Abdullah Öcalan as opposed to admitting any guilt; and the video footage showing the militants with their uniforms climbing on top of buses and greeting thousands who had gathered to welcome the militants. Following this, Prime Minister Erdoğan, who had cheerfully welcomed the developments the first day, strongly criticized the Kurdish politicians and said that they would “start-over” if necessary on the very next day. It is debatable if it is in fact a “start-over” but it is obvious that the opening was seriously hampered from that moment on and a new, concrete, and exciting step has not been taken. For example, it had been announced that a large group of PKK members was to return to the country and these people had even appeared in a press conference. But this project was shelved because of the reactions against what happened at the Habur Border Crossing and because of the DTP’s insistence on organizing a large public meeting for the expected group of militants at the Atatürk Airport in Istanbul.

Pillars of the Kurdish Political Movement

The “Habur incident” and what happened afterwards demonstrated that neither the ruling party that could not manage the process nor the opposition parties that tried everything to hinder it were not the only ones responsible for stifling the opening process. On this account, those people who belong to what we can describe as the “Kurdish political movement” have a great responsibility. We need to explain what we mean by “Kurdish political movement” before discussing this issue. Although many Kurdish groups with different convictions have always existed in Turkey, groups and personalities outside Öcalan-led PKK have been marginalized to the degree that they do not even merit to be mentioned. Efforts by

certain domestic and foreign circles to create an alternative Kurdish movement and in order to reduce the PKK's strength have failed to a large extent. One of the reasons for this is the weakness of all these attempts. The other is the PKK's skill in identifying and smothering any kind of opposition before it is viable. The PKK leadership has been really merciless against persons or groups, which derive from the PKK itself and are presented by others as an alternative to the PKK. As a result, when we say "Kurdish political movement," we mean the PKK line. However, this movement does not consist only of the PKK. It operates under various organizations by using legal, semi-legal, and illegal methods in Turkey, Europe, and countries such as Iraq, Iran, and Syria where there are heavy concentrations of Kurdish population. When we look at this movement, the main centers we see are the following:

1. *İmralı*: Abdullah Öcalan is, without a doubt, the "only" leader of this movement. He has been serving his life sentence without parole on the island of İmralı. Öcalan maintains regular contacts and relations with the outside world through his lawyer and visitors from his family. He continues to lead the movement in this manner.
2. *Kandil*: Kandil has served as the main headquarters of the PKK on the mountain of Kandil in Northern Iraq for a long time now. In the absence of Öcalan, leaders such as Murat Karayılan, Cemil Bayık, Duran Kalkan are leading the organization.
3. *Brussels*: the PKK's open activities in Europe are conducted by Kongra-Gel under the leadership of former parliamentarians from DEP (Democracy Party), Remzi Kartal.
4. *Ankara*: when the opening was announced, the legal counterpart for the government was DTP. But this party was shut down like the previous ones by the Constitutional Court and BDP (Peace and Democracy Party) was founded in its place. However, this party too is stuck between İmralı and Kandil so it is unable to move. For example, the party members decided to "put their fate in the hands of the people," by going to elections. Yet, upon Öcalan's orders, they reversed their decision and went back to the Parliament.
5. *Diyarbakır*: another group constraining the BDP is the Kurdistan Democratic Confederation (Koma Civaken Kurdistan – KCK). This entity, which we can describe as a bridge between legal and illegal, oversees the legal political activities and the work of the BDP-governed municipalities in the name of the PKK and Öcalan.

The Grassroots of the Kurdish Political Movement

The Kurdish political movement is building upon a dynamic social base that is continuously expanding and strengthening. No matter how disciplined it may look from the outside, we can say that this movement’s social base is not unitary and it includes different tendencies and aspirations. For example, the social composition of the base - rural vs. urban; those who have been living in the main cities for years vs. those who have emigrated recently; women vs. men; the elderly vs. the youth – plays an important role in the way the social groups view and contribute to the Kurdish political movement. However, two groups who left their mark on the movement in recent years deserve our special attention: 1) the children and the youth filling the slums of the cities who do not have a chance to look to the future with hope, 2) women who are able to act together on many issues regardless of their age, economic situation, and educational levels. We observe that the youth and women are more committed to the symbols of the movement starting with Öcalan himself and that they are very critical of the main actors responsible for the legal activities.

One other important point to be underlined with respect to the base is this: although the PKK was having a hard time establishing a strong relationship with the devout Kurds because it has followed a “Marxist-Leninist” line since its foundation, there is a clear softening in the perception of religion as its ideology changes from “class” to “nation.” As a result, a peace with Islam and the devout Muslims has been established.

First Reactions to the Opening in the Southeast

I went to the Southeast about a month after the government announced the opening and I tried to understand how the people in the region viewed the new initiative. Because I thought that the debate started by the opening was one-sided and the Kurds were being transformed from “actors” to “spectators.” It was necessary to find a permanent solution to the Kurdish problem that the desires, hopes, expectations, worries and critiques of the Kurds had to be brought before the public opinion and they would constitute one of the main axes of the search for a solution. Otherwise, we would be faced with a situation where the non-Kurdish majority in the country would be forcing certain arrangements in the name of, and often, in spite of the Kurds. It was obvious that a solution could not come out of such an approach and it could even aggravate the problem.

At the end, I met with many local politicians, opinion leaders, mayors, and regular citizens in Diyarbakır, Kızıltepe, Nusaybin, Cizre, and Batman –the five



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cities where the PKK had traditionally been most powerful and effective. Whoever I spoke with, every time the “opening” was mentioned, the subject turned to the notion of “peace,” which meant stopping the guns, preventing further clashes, and voluntary disarming by the PKK. In fact, we can say that all of Turkey wants peace but most people in the Southeast want this peace not “despite the PKK” but with “the PKK’s consent and participation.” They believe this will happen sooner or later. “Peace” occupies such a central place in the public opinion in the Southeast that most debates do not revolve around the “solution of the Kurdish problem.” We can argue that the discussions in the region go as follows, “First, let the guns and bloodshed stop, and then, we can discuss the Kurdish problem in an atmosphere of peace and solve it in a democratic way.”

I observed “an anxious hope” in the Southeast during the first month of the opening. Surely, anxiety derived from the possibility that the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) might sabotage this process. MHP’s attitude, in this respect, was no surprise. However, CHP’s – the “social democrat” party that used to be very strong in the region in the 1970s – also held a negative attitude, which was causing serious malaise. Many people who voted for the DTP candidates in the last elections as well as many DTP politicians, themselves, viewed the opening positively and they were ready to extend a lot of credit to the government. They called on the government to be decisive and courageous in order to complete this process relatively smoothly.

I would like to note one thing that caught my attention during my meetings: I, as a journalist who had visited the Southeast many times since 1987 and who had conversed with the people in various areas, had never witnessed that the people owned up to Öcalan and the PKK so openly and without hesitation to such an extent. This ease could be explained, to some degree, by the positive atmosphere created by the opening. However, the main reason for this is that the people of the region has gotten used to “paying for the consequences,” and more importantly, Öcalan and the PKK have legitimacy among a considerable portion of the Kurds despite all the state’s efforts to discredit them.

Kurdish Political Movement’s Perception of the Opening

No matter how much the Kurdish political movement’s base wanted the government to shoulder all the weight of the opening, they also had serious responsibilities. It became clear very quickly that the important personalities of the movement were not very enthusiastic in facing these responsibilities. Prime Minister Erdoğan, as everyone remembers, refused to accept DTP and its leadership as counterparts because they had failed to condemn the PKK. But he warmed up the atmosphere by holding a sincere meeting with Ahmet Türk, leader of DTP, shortly after the announcement of the opening. However, the DTP members declined the government’s request to include them in the process actively, by saying, “your true counterpart is not we but Öcalan and the PKK.” For example, Öcalan prepared a “road map” for the solution but the state did not announce this to the public. Also, Öcalan complained about the physical conditions of his new cell in İmralı. Each of these events each became the source of a crisis and caused nationwide tensions. As a result, the discussion of “who is the counterpart?” impeded the process as much as, if not more, the opposition parties’ obstructions.

I would like to give three concrete examples of how DTP refused to take advantage of the opportunities to contribute to the opening. We observed, during the “Yes to an Honorable Peace” Meeting organized for the 2010 World Peace Day in Diyarbakır, the degree to which DTP’s view of the opening had changed in a short amount of time. A week earlier, I had observed “an anxious hope” in the Southeast. During the meeting, hope as words was there but hope it was nowhere to be seen.

One justification by the DTP members was the fact that the Interior Minister, Beşir Atalay, had used the word “Kurd” only once during a press conference a day earlier. He added that a new constitution was not on the table and the PKK had to be eliminated. In addition, AKP’s National Assembly Group Deputy Chairman,

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Bekir Bozdağ, defended the death penalty, while trying to respond to MHP. DTP members grew increasingly anxious because the government did not stand up courageously to the criticisms by MHP and CHP, and even, supported the declaration by the Chief of the Turkish General

Staff, İlker Başbuğ. At the end, DTP leader, Ahmet Türk, said, “Expectations were let down big time.” Those who wanted this opening to fail in the first place were quick to take this declaration as an indication that DTP was going to remain outside this process. The public meeting in Diyarbakır seemed to teach us that there was a certain degree of backpedaling because the Kurdish political movement did not want to remain outside this process, yet, it could not fully embrace the idea of full engagement either. There was a very clear problem and a lack of trust. The fact that the previous governments did not honor their promises was causing the Kurdish movement to be extra cautious.

Our second example is the DTP’s party convention held on October 4th, 2009. The convention was being held to fill the party leadership vacancies caused by the successive KCK operations conducted by the police. It seemed to be within the realm of possibility that DTP could play an active role in the “Kurdish opening” process once again. In fact, the probability that DTP develop “new” policies only one week ahead of the Convention was close to zero. The belief that the AKP government was backpedaling because of the pressures by the opposition parties and the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) was so strong among the DTP members that non-viability of the opening was becoming the majority opinion. However, the DTP members were getting confused once again because of President Gül’s speech at the opening ceremony of the National Assembly and Prime Minister Erdoğan’s speech during the AKP Convention one day prior to the DTP Convention. It was clear that these speeches did not indicate what the concrete steps would be taken as part of the Kurdish opening. Nevertheless, they were surely comprehensive and substantive.

Many observers thought that the DTP leaders were happy about the willingness of Erdoğan and Gül – two figures at the top of the state– with respect to the opening process. They thought that DTP leadership would not turn down a hand being extended to them; yet, they were disappointed with the DTP leadership’s attitude. For example, DTP leader, Ahmet Türk’s speech at the Convention did not meet expectations in terms of expressing openness to the Kurdish opening. The same speech could have been made at his party’s group at the National Assembly,

say one year earlier, and nobody would know the difference. Given that Türk and other speakers tied their own hands by saying, “we are not the counterparts,” they did not propose a new and practicable project or suggestion. And perhaps, it was not possible for them to do so.

The third example, undoubtedly, is the events following the “return-home” of the PKK guerillas just 15 days after the DTP Party Convention at the Habur Border Crossing. The Kurdish political movement in general, and DTP in particular, either did not or could not see or care what kind of feelings this development, which was a welcomed one for them, could cause among the rest of the population in the country. The fact that they did nothing to ease the reactions against the scenery at Habur and the insistence on organizing a public meeting for the PKK members returning from Europe have, undisputedly, been the foremost reasons why the government shelved some of the projects.

Mistake upon Mistake: DTP’s Closure and KCK Operations by the Police

The Kurdish political movement has distanced itself from the opening process and, at times, appeared against it. Parallel to this, there have been changes in the state’s perspective and even, to some degree, “return to the old state line.” For instance, the Constitutional Court delivered its verdict on the DTP closure case right at that particular moment after delaying it for so long, and closed down the party. The fact that the Court banned the most moderate DTP members, Ahmet Türk and Aysel Tuğluk, was interpreted as “sacrificing the doves instead of the hawks.”

Several developments led us to question the utility of the closure decision just as we questioned party closures before. The fact that BDP, which was founded prior to the closure, simply replaced DTP; that the parliamentarians and local mayors joined this party; and that the DTP base continues the course in a politically more sharpened manner bring back the question whether party closures are of any benefit at all.

Another hard-to-explain and hard-to-understand development is the KCK operations conducted by the police. These operations had partially started before the opening but they were intensified by the police, as the Kurdish political movement situated itself outside the opening. In these operations, many local mayors, party member and leaders, and representatives of non-governmental organizations were taken into custody and most of them were arrested. The last KCK op-

eration, conducted during the last days of the last year, caused reaction by some individuals and groups who had strongly supported the Kurdish opening from the beginning. Because these people were waiting anxiously the kind of steps the government would take and especially how the government would deal with the issue of disarming the PKK. But they were shocked to see Kurdish politicians and leading thinkers lined up with handcuffs around their wrists as a result of the KCK operations.

These operations were wrong because,

1. If it is a fact that there are legal (formerly DTP and today BDP) and illegal (the PKK) groups within the Kurdish political movement and if it is a fact that these interact with one another, then, the existence of a “semi-legal” group should be considered normal and even necessary.
2. We can say that the government’s ultimate goal with the “Kurdish opening” is the dissolution of the illegal Kurdish movement through its own consent. Thus, there was a need, more than ever, for bridges facilitating the transition from illegality to legality.
3. The Turkish state tried to break off the relationship between the legal parties – HEP (the People’s Labor Party), DEP, HADEP (People’s Democratic Party), DEHAP (Democratic People’s Party), and DTP – and the PKK before but could not succeed. Furthermore, such operations even strengthened this relationship.
4. It was not possible to think that the operations would break off the relationship between the PKK and BDP. Analysts, who were taking the political pulse of the Southeast, knew very well that the PKK and Öcalan were considered legitimate to an unprecedented degree and repressive measures such as the KCK operations simply strengthened the phenomenon even more.

Those who conducted the operations and those who supported them tried to legitimize their actions in the following manner, “hawks are being arrested; in this way, the road for the doves within the Kurdish political movement will be opened.”

True, for the solution of the PKK problem, it is necessary to understand well the distinction between the “hawk” and “dove” – in other words, the “radicals” and “moderates” – within the Kurdish political movement. However, this is not an easy thing to do at all. We can argue that nobody spends his or her whole life

as a “hawk” or a “dove.” They can, at any moment, change in surprising ways. In the end, it is difficult to predict why one becomes “moderate” and for how long, and under what conditions one becomes “radical.”

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Accordingly, it is not realistic at all to situate the solution of the Kurdish and the PKK problems only within the hawk vs. dove dichotomy. Neither is it realistic to assume that one can intervene in this distinction within the Kurdish political movement from outside, nor to believe that such an intervention is necessary, nor to try to accomplish this through police force or the justice system. In fact, it cannot be claimed that the state, the government, and the security forces have all embraced this strategy. Especially those, who are closely familiar with the Southeast and the Kurdish political movement and who can look at the situation in good faith with a cool-headed and long-term perspective, see that this route is a dead end. But they impose their views. In other words, it can be said that the “hawks,” which believe that they can make the Kurdish political movement tow the line through harsh methods, have for the time being rendered ineffective the “doves,” moderates who believe that the oppression and intimidation strategies, which have been tried for years and do not produce any results. As a result, the crises we are experiencing today, to a large extent, derive from the “hawks vs. doves” opposition within the Turkish state not within the Kurdish political movement.

Truths Revealed by the Newroz

I think that the Newroz celebrations, held in the Newroz Square in Diyarbakır on 21 March 2010, give us an insight into the future of the Kurdish opening. In fact, these celebrations presented a serious new opportunity for the regeneration of the stifled opening process. One of the first speakers, the Mayor of Diyarbakır, Osman Baydemir, stressed “peace” by also using religious terminology. He created a new expectation by saying, “...It is forbidden (*haram*) that a Turk shoots at a Kurd and a Kurd shoots at a Turk. Now, it is time for Turkish and Kurdish mothers to embrace each other. Letting the time pass by is a shame and a sin...” However, among the speeches delivered and Öcalan’s message that was read aloud, there were almost no themes that could rejuvenate the opening.

I was most disappointed with Leyla Zana during the Newroz. During the celebrations of the past year held in the same location, Zana first spoke in Kurd-

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the opening; but that did not happen. This was because Zana made her not-so-short speech in Kurdish and left the podium without saying a word in Turkish. Zana is one of the key Kurdish figures that take the “Turkish public opinion” seriously. Clearly, the fact that she did not want to speak Turkish has a very deep symbolic and, in relation to that, political meaning. It is overdue that we are as honest as possible in regards to the Kurdish problem and we face the realities without hesitation. Newspapers reported the fact that the Newroz celebrations took place in a celebratory atmosphere and without serious tensions. There was no problem there. But there was a need to go beyond that. For example, let us consider these questions, “with what kind of a motivation would tens and even hundreds of thousands of people from every age, gender, and social status gather under the burning sun in an atmosphere of celebration?” Again, “how could a considerable portion of these people commit, unreluctantly and even on purpose, acts such as praising Öcalan, the PKK, and the PKK members – acts considered illegal by the law?”

I would like to note this: in the 2009 and 2010 Newroz celebrations in Diyarbakır, we witnessed not only a festival but also an open declaration of a political identity and attitude. Both the media, which treated the Newroz only in terms of the public security aspect, and the security forces, which tried to state that there was a ridiculously low turnout, are not contributing to the solution but actually sabotaging the possibilities of a solution.

Let us return to Zana: there is a reality in Turkey that gets clearer every passing day. We come across two different public opinions in discussing many issues (military-civilian relations, secularism etc.) in our country, including and perhaps foremost the Kurdish problem. These public opinions, which we can differentiate in simplest terms as “Turkish” and “Kurdish,” give contrary reactions to every development. Differences are clearest on the issue of Öcalan and the PKK.

Öcalan, who is completely hated by a large segment in the country, is seen as the “leader” by a group whose size is considerable. For example, a long message by Öcalan was read aloud during the Newroz celebrations and there was a multi-media presentation of a collection of Öcalan’s speeches. But the most attention-grabbing thing was the giant banner that read, “A world without Öcalan will fall on your head.”

What Do Kurds Want?

In order to predict the future of the opening, we need to ask, “What do Kurds want?” In fact, if this question was important yesterday, it is still important today, and it will continue to be important tomorrow. However, as soon as we ask this question, we need to ask a second question, “Which Kurds?” We can answer this by saying, “Kurds of every point of view and tendency.” There is no doubt that the viewpoints of the Kurds would differ depending on where they live, their age, their economic and educational status etc. However, there is a clear reality: there has long existed a Kurdish political movement with its illegal, legal, and semi-legal aspects of it. This movement has grown stronger despite every effort against it and it has the potential to become even stronger in the future. In other words, the possibility of reaching out to Kurds directly by bypassing the Kurdish political movement is diminishing with every passing day. Even if this were possible, it is becoming harder to extract productive developments just by reaching out.

In Turkey, most of the common people hold conservative and nationalistic values. Especially in recent years, the gap between the west and southeast of the country – between Kurds and non-Kurds – is seriously widening. Parallel to this, nationalism is becoming stronger among Kurds, who are already conservative in terms of their religious outlook. Surely, this has an implication for Kurdish nationalism. Certain groups stubbornly refuse to recognize Kurdish nationalism and they are trying to indefinitely postpone the necessary confrontation with this reality. Turkey has, until very recently, ignored the existence of the Kurdish problem and the cost of this has been very heavy. And now, they are underestimating the strength of nationalistic tendencies among Kurds, for which we may pay a heavy cost.

In other words, the main concept for the Kurdish political movement is “freedom.” In the 1970s, when the slogan “Kurdara azadi” (Freedom to Kurds) was used, the reference was, in fact, the “nations’ right to self-determination.” So, what is really meant today when the word, “azadi” is used? The right to determine one’s own destiny, which could open the door for semi-independence, or cultural

rights? I could not find an answer to this vital question during the Newroz celebrations I attended in Diyarbakır. At least, what I can say is that I cannot pretend and simply say, “They demand only some cultural rights.”

In concluding, I was not someone who embraced the definition of the opening as a “National Unity and Brotherhood Project” by Prime Minister Erdoğan. However, as someone who personally witnessed during the Newroz celebrations in Diyarbakır that the cessation of the opening has really widened the gap between the East and the West of the country, I will not oppose this formulation by the Prime Minister as adamantly as I used to.