

WORKING PAPER

PRIMACY OF FOREIGN POLICY IN TURKEY'S KURDISH REFORMS

MEHMET UĞUR EKİNCİ

ABSTRACT

The Kurdish issue is an extremely important political question in Turkey. While the citizens of Kurdish origin have been demanding various reforms in political and cultural sphere, the state and political establishment in Turkey have been somewhat reluctant to respond to them positively due to several reasons. Nevertheless, certain reforms have been made since the 1990s. When we observe the two episodes of the major reforms, namely the repeal of the ban on the Kurdish language in 1991, and the permission to broadcast in and to teach Kurdish in 2001-3, we see that they were largely driven by foreign policy considerations. Even though certain domestic actors had voiced the need for these reforms for a long time, internal dynamics in Turkey were insufficient to create a consensus among the decision-making elite. Normative, legal, and institutional international pressures, as well as certain international developments had substantial role in bringing these actors together and inducing them to decide on reform. In other words, these reforms were introduced more as a response to international factors than to the Kurds or any other domestic pressure group. Thus, not only were the reforms influenced by foreign policy, but they also functioned as a part of foreign policy.

This paper, based primarily on newspaper accounts from the period of the 1980s to the 2000s, will demonstrate that internal dynamics have largely been insufficient and foreign policy considerations have been almost essential to induce the Turkish political elite to respond favourably to the demands raised by Kurdish citizens, and suggest possible explanations for this. It will argue that a state-centric approach of policymaking that assigns primacy to foreign policy has prevailed in Turkey's Kurdish reforms. When significant international incentives or pressures were present, the state's longstanding red-lines with regard to the cultural and educational rights of ethnic groups were revised for the sake of foreign policy objectives.

Mehmet Uğur Ekinci is currently a PhD candidate in Politics and International Studies at the University of London, SOAS. He has received BA in International Relations (2003) and MA in Ottoman History (2006) from Bilkent University, Ankara.