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SUITS Policy Brief
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The Peace Process and Constitutional Reforms in Turkey

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Summary

Turkey seems to be on the cusp of resolving the long-standing conflict between the PKK and the government. However, this comes amidst suspicions that in exchange for pro-Kurdish reform, Erdogan will demand support for changing the constitution allowing him to run for a third term. This brief assesses the likelihood of pro-Kurdish reforms today and discusses the role that domestic and external actors might play. Inclusive negotiations that avoid partisan vetoes and are actively supported by both domestic and international actors committed to democratic principles and minority rights can contribute to yielding an outcome that may benefit sustainable peace. Without enhanced incentives to adhere to democratic principles and genuine confidence-building, deep-rooted distrust risks derailing the process, jeopardizing both peace and democratic progress.

The Issue

On May 12, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) formally declared its decision to disband, following a historic call from its imprisoned leader Abdullah Öcalan on February 27. While this development marks a significant moment in the four-decade-long armed conflict between Turkey and the PKK, it is not an endpoint, but potentially the beginning of a new phase in state-Kurdish relations.

Although the government does not label it as such, some observers see the current political developments as a renewed peace process. Others, on the other hand, see it as a strategic move to extend President Erdoğan's rule beyond the 2028 election and to manage regional dynamics, particularly along the Syrian border. Regardless of the motivation, the outcome has significant implications not only for Turkey, but also for the broader region.

There are reasons to believe that reforms will soon be implemented that will aid conflict resolution. From the Kurdish perspective, ending the armed struggle is contingent on long-demanded minority rights being enshrined in a new constitution. On the government side, President Erdoğan has repeatedly emphasized the need for a new constitution for his own purposes. While the existing constitution has already undergone numerous amendments, Erdoğan has long aspired to enact a comprehensive overhaul, potentially recalibrating the secular foundations of the state and circumventing existing presidential term limits, allowing him to extend his rule beyond 2028. In exchange for concessions on Öcalan's status and select Kurdish demands, Erdoğan may intend to secure Kurdish parliamentary support needed to push through constitutional changes.

Turkey attempted to rewrite the constitution between 2011 and 2013 in a process where all four political parties at the time participated on equal grounds under the requirement of consensus. That process failed. What are the prospects for negotiated constitutional reform addressing pro-Kurdish demands today, and how is the current context distinct from 2011-2013?

Analysis

The 2011 constitution-making process collapsed due to several complicating factors. For example, the consensus requirement gave all parties veto rights, hampering the ability of cross-party compromise to yield a change unless all parties agreed. This was particularly problematic due to polarization between the political parties, which limited their willingness to make meaningful concessions on contentious topics. Compromise was further impeded by increasing distrust toward Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) because of mistreatment of pro-Kurdish politicians and supporters and Erdogan's increasingly evident authoritarian tendencies.

The most contentious topics at the time were those relating to the AKP proposal for a presidential system, alongside issues aiming to address Kurdish grievances. The opposition was wary of the implications of a pres-

idential system for Turkish democracy. The pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), in turn, advocated for a redefinition of citizenship that did not insinuate Turkish nationality, the right to education in one's mother tongue, and a federal system of government. Turkish nationalists dismissed such demands as separatist, claiming that pro-Kurdish demands were the demands of the PKK, and refused to grant concessions to "terrorists". Today's political landscape presents new challenges and new openings for a possible constitutional reform where pro-Kurdish demands are addressed.

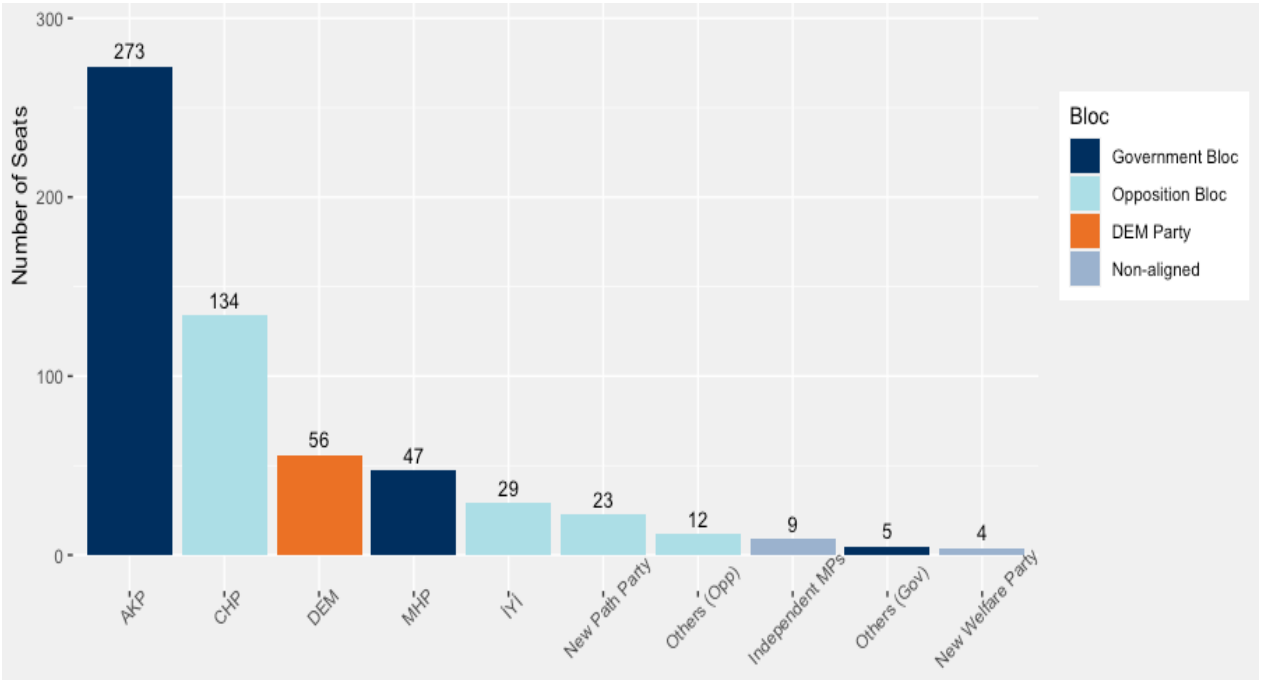
A number of conditions have changed that may favor the likelihood of a new negotiated constitution:

- The right-wing National Movement Party (MHP), previously a staunch opponent of Kurdish rights, seems to have adopted greater openness to negotiation. In October 2024, the party leader, Devlet Bahçeli, suggested that Öcalan could be granted parole if he renounced violence and dissolved the PKK, stating that the party was open to negotiating with pro-Kurdish actors.
- With the PKK's current declaration of disbandment, it can no longer be used as a pretext for refusing pro-Kurdish demands, that these days no longer call for a federal system or similar substantive changes to the structure of the country's government, but instead focus on democratic inclusion and equal citizenship within Turkey.
- The pro-Kurdish Peoples' Equality and Democracy (DEM) Party has more leverage. To change the constitution, a three-fifths majority must agree on a proposal submitted to the public for referendum. With DEM's support, Erdogan's People's Alliance of like-minded parties could reach the required number.
- The government may seek to secure the necessary two-thirds majority (400 MPs) in parliament to pass the amendment without a public vote, anticipating limited public support—particularly for reforms recognizing Kurdish rights. This makes it likely that Erdoğan will engage in negotiations with smaller parties and independents, turning the process into a multi-party bargaining effort within parliament.

Other conditions have changed that may hamper the likelihood of a negotiated new constitution:

- The nationalists are now more fragmented than they were. New nationalist parties such as Zafer (Victory) Party and the İYİ (Good) Party have emerged as potential opponents of negotiating with Kurds, complicating the prospects for consensus.
- Whether the AKP can be trusted by DEM to uphold their side of a bargain remains uncertain. The government has become ever more autocratic since 2013 with large numbers of pro-Kurdish elected officials, political candidates and activists still sitting in jail. It has not yet taken steps to gain DEM's trust,

Figure 1. Distribution of Parliamentary Seats in the TBMM (as of May 16, 2025)



Notes: *8 seats are vacant*. **Others (Government)**: *Free Cause Party (HÜDA PAR), Democratic Left Party (DSP)*. **Others (Opposition)**: *Workers' Party of Turkey (TİP), Democratic Regions Party (DBP), Future Party (GELECEK), Labor Party (EMEP), Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA), Felicity Party (SAADET), Democrat Party (DP). The referendum threshhold is 360 seats and the direct referendum threshhold is 400 seats*. **Source:** *TBMM*.

which could be done by, for example, releasing political prisoners.
- Counter-reactions to an exclusionary process may thwart the new constitution's enactment. The increasing repression of CHP, not least as demonstrated by the latest arrest of Ekrem İmamoğlu, the mayor of Istanbul and declared CHP presidential candidate, has swayed public trust further away from the government. If a new constitution is written by only a few parties and particularly if it prolongs Erdogan's hold on power, the legitimacy of the resulting constitution will be limited, and the reactions of the public are likely to be contentious.

Overarching concerns:

- It is improbable that DEM would be able to secure minority rights and thus the possibility of a more sustainable peace, while simultaneously refusing to grant concessions ensuring Erdogan's ability to be reelected.
- Making such concessions could strain DEM's already fragile cooperation with the main opposition party, CHP. While the two parties have coordinated electorally in recent years, this cooperation has been pragmatic rather than deeply ideological. Any move by DEM that is perceived as enabling Erdoğan's continued rule could provoke backlash from opposition voters and CHP figures who remain ambivalent—or even resistant—toward constitutional recognition of Kurdish demands.
- The deep polarization that impeded the 2011 process remains, and segments of the opposition remain wary of pro-Kurdish reforms. Not least if a consensus requirement is adopted again, this risks hampering implementation of pro-Kurdish reform.

Implications

While the prospects of a renewed peace process and constitutional reform in Turkey are primarily shaped by domestic actors, international engagement—particularly from Europe—can play a constructive and supportive role.

European actors should publicly support the peaceful resolution of the Kurdish conflict and encourage Turkish authorities to recognize cultural and linguistic rights through constitutional guarantees. They can offer advice and share institutional solutions from their own constitutions. These steps could ease tensions not only within Turkey, but also reduce the political polarization of the Kurdish and Turkish diaspora in EU countries.

Rather than relying solely on criticism or conditionality, the EU and its member states can offer the Turkish government positive incentives for democratic progress through constitutional change—such as closer economic cooperation (e.g. Custom Union reform) and visa liberalization steps—in exchange for demonstrable improvements in rule of law, minority rights, inclusivity of the reform process, and institutional checks and balances. These actors can also provide mediation, encourage confidence-building measures, and offer guarantees addressing credible commitment problems arising from power imbalances. However, it is important to note that the parties are unlikely to invite foreign involvement.

Should the constitutional reform process be used to further entrench executive power and undermine democratic institutions, as some fear, it will further strain Turkey-EU relations. The EU must be prepared to respond collectively to authoritarian backsliding, especially if it jeopardizes fundamental rights or undermines the credibility of future elections.

Further Reading

Petersen, Felix and Yanasmayan, Zeynep. *The Failure of Popular Constitution Making in Turkey: Regressing Towards Constitutional Autocracy*. Cambridge University Press, 2020.

Olafsdottir, Gudlaug. Constitution-Making in the Midst of Violence: The Failure of Interparty Negotiations in Turkey. In dissertation: *Precarious Pathways to Democracy: Electoral Violence and the Struggle for Democratization*. Uppsala University, 2024.

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About the authors

Gudlaug Olafsdottir is a postdoctoral researcher at the Stockholm Center on Global Governance at Stockholm University, and researcher at the Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University. She holds a PhD in Peace and Conflict Research. Broadly, her research focuses on actions by governments and political parties in hybrid regimes, and their interplay with democratization and autocratization.

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Note: This policy brief builds partially on Gudlaug Olafsdottir's doctoral dissertation, for which she conducted field research in Turkey in 2023.

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Takeaways

Constitutional reform addressing pro-Kurdish demands is more likely today than in 2011. However, this might be achieved at significant cost for Turkey's democracy, and with significant risk given uncertainty that the government would uphold its side of the bargain. Both domestic and external actors have a role to play in shifting the likelihood of a positive outcome.

- The two trajectories—democratic backsliding and conflict resolution—are currently intertwined, but conflict resolution must not come at the expense of democracy. Recognizing this tension, all stakeholders should work toward a reform process that advances both democratic integrity and a just peace.
- International actors could advise the political parties involved in constitutional negotiations, providing neutral input relating to the design of the process, offering examples of constitutionally enshrined minority rights, mediation, public support, and incentives for democratic change.
- An inclusive constitution-making process is more likely to gain widespread legitimacy, even though agreement might be made more difficult. Given remaining polarization, the process should be designed to prioritize the possibility of reaching a negotiated majority agreement, without granting individual parties veto-rights.
- This is a unique opportunity for national reconciliation. The opposition parties should not allow partisan rivalry to override this potential. Participation in constitutional negotiations should be guided by a long-term vision for peace and democracy.
- Without an external mediator and guarantor, as well as credible trust-building measures by the government, distrust risks a failure of constitutional negotiations due to the uncertainty of what might follow.

Sammanfattning

En grundlagsreform som tillgodoser de kurdiska kraven är mer sannolik idag än 2011. Detta kan dock komma att kosta Turkiets demokrati dyrt och medföra betydande risker, eftersom det är osäkert om regeringen kommer att hålla sin del av avtalet. Både inhemska och utländska aktörer har en roll att spela för att öka chanserna för ett positivt utfall.

- Två skeenden – demokratisk tillbakagång och en fredsprocess – är för närvarande sammanflätade, men det finns en risk att konfliktlösning sker på bekostnad av demokratin. Alla berörda parter bör arbeta för en reformprocess som främjar både demokratisk integritet och en rättvis fred.
- Internationella aktörer kan ge råd till de politiska partier som deltar i konstitutionella förhandlingar, tillhandahålla neutral input kring utformningen av processen, ge exempel på konstitutionellt garanterade minoritetsrättigheter, medling, offentligt stöd och incitament för demokratiska förändringar.
- En inkluderande konstitutionell process har större chans att få bred legitimitet, även om det kan bli svårare att nå en överenskommelse. Med tanke på den kvarvarande polariseringen bör processen utformas så att man prioriterar möjligheten att nå en förhandlad majoritetsöverenskommelse, utan att enskilda partier ges vetorätt.
- Detta är en unik möjlighet till nationell försoning. Oppositionspartierna bör inte låta partipolitiska rivaliteter överskugga denna potential. Deltagandet i konstitutionsförhandlingarna bör styras av en långsiktig vision för fred och demokrati.
- Utan en extern medlare och garant samt trovärdiga förtroendeskapande åtgärder från regeringens sida riskerar misstro och osäkerhet kring konsekvenserna att leda till att konstitutionsförhandlingarna misslyckas.

About the SUITS policy brief

This policy brief aims contribute to a broad and well-researched understanding of Turkey and Turkish affairs through presenting a variety of voices on current issues and the foundational moments that impact today. The aim is to provide policy makes and others the tools to make informed decisions.

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