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## The Kurdish Identity Issue in Turkey and the Challenges Posed to the Justice and Development Party

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### Abstract

The conflict between Turkey and the Kurds is a deeply rooted issue that has posed a significant challenge to the Turkish state since its inception. The emergence of Kurdish identity, in opposition to the principles of Kemalism, which emphasized Turkish nationalism, led to the marginalization of Kurds within Turkey. This dynamic was further exacerbated by the actions of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), despite its initial attempts to modify the Kemalist approach to ethnic minorities. The AKP government's objectives included seeking membership in the European Union, improving relations with neighboring countries, and establishing Turkey as a prominent regional power. This strategy involved increasing soft power through democratization, resolving conflicts with neighbors, and enhancing Turkey's security. However, a discrepancy between Turkey's capabilities and resources, and

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its international commitments, has resulted in a widespread sense of siege, retreat, and isolation, hindering the government's ability to normalize relations with the Kurds. This research aims to analyze the Turkish government's policies towards the Kurdish minority and explore the underlying reasons for the ongoing conflict. The central question is: Why did the reforms implemented by the AKP to integrate Kurdish identity into a national unit fail, and why did the Turkish government resort to military suppression of the Kurds once again? The hypothesis suggests that these reforms failed due to Turkey's inability to address the post-Kemalist identity review of ethnic minorities, particularly the Kurds. The theoretical basis of this research is constructivism, examining the roles of structure and agency in the interactive processes of governance and power. The research methodology is descriptive, utilizing data gathered from library and online resources, including articles, books, and analyses. The analysis highlights that the emphasis on Turkish nationalism and the historical legacy of the Ottoman Empire within Kemalism, the ideological foundation of the political coalition in the Turkish government, led to stringent national policies regarding ethnic minorities. The suppression of Kurdish identity-seeking activities and the restriction of their political and cultural autonomy have been key approaches in this area. The dominant identity in Turkey has historically been unwilling to officially recognize a distinct ethnic minority called Kurds. With the rise of the AKP, there was a move towards a multicultural approach consistent with neo-Ottomanism in dealing with minorities, opening the door to a multicultural conceptualization of Turkish citizenship. Contrary to Kemalist nationalist behavior, as long as minorities demonstrated loyalty to the Republic of Turkey, their cultural rights and expressions of national identity were not seen as major threats. However, when faced with the cultural and political demands of the Kurds, the ruling party sought to secure these rights within the framework of multiculturalism and Islamic identity. Accordingly, there were efforts to modify behavior towards the Kurds, promote the use of the Kurdish language, engage in official negotiations with Kurdish leaders, and foster economic and political relations with the independent Kurdish government in Iraq, as well as cooperate against the PKK with Syria after 2015. This process of de-escalation was ultimately unsuccessful due to internal contradictions within the Turkish government. These contradictions included the ongoing challenge from the Turkish military, which adhered to Kemalist ideology; the AKP's own internal divisions, which led it to use opposition to the Kurds to gain parliamentary victories; and the military attacks on Kurdish-controlled areas in Syria, ostensibly to fight the PKK. This dynamic brought the issue of identity

reconsideration in the face of Kurdish nationalism to a head. According to structural analysis, the Turkification of Kurdish identity has consistently been a major factor in the armed struggles of the Kurds, particularly through the PKK. It is essential for the Turkish government to recognize that effective policymaking and the prevention of current tensions between the Turkish government and Kurdish military forces depend on considering the official existence of Kurdish identity. An identity reconstruction that does not include these and similar issues will face resistance from the Kurds. Therefore, the policies of the AKP, while seemingly emphasizing the redefinition of national identity based on pluralistic principles, are still heavily influenced by the spirit of Kemalism. This underlying tension between an apparent desire for pluralism and the deep-rooted adherence to Turkish nationalism has hindered meaningful progress in resolving the conflict. The situation is further complicated by the ongoing military actions against Kurdish groups in neighboring countries, particularly in Syria and Iraq, and the Turkish government's perception of these groups as threats to national security. These actions, while ostensibly aimed at combating the PKK, often result in civilian casualties and further alienate the Kurdish population. The history of conflict between the Turkish state and the Kurds includes significant events like the 1925 Sheikh Said rebellion, and subsequent uprisings in the 1930s, which were met with severe military crackdowns and the suppression of Kurdish cultural expression. The Turkish government's approach has often been to deny the existence of a distinct Kurdish identity and to characterize the Kurdish issue as a problem caused by external factors, like the influence of neighboring countries. This denial has fueled further unrest and created a cycle of violence. The PKK, formed in the late 1970s, has been a central element of this conflict, engaging in armed struggle for greater Kurdish autonomy. Despite periods of ceasefire and peace negotiations, the conflict continues due to a lack of fundamental change in the Turkish government's approach to Kurdish identity and rights. The ongoing tensions also highlight the complex geopolitical considerations, with Turkey viewing Kurdish groups in neighboring countries with suspicion, while these same groups are sometimes allies of western powers. Furthermore, there is uncertainty regarding the degree of influence Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the PKK, still has on the organization and whether he can meaningfully contribute to any peace process. The conflict is exacerbated by the use of military force and airstrikes by the Turkish military in the region, which has often led to civilian deaths and injuries. The Turkish government's attempts to establish itself as a regional power have also complicated the issue, as its pursuit of strategic interests has

sometimes been at odds with the pursuit of a peaceful resolution to the Kurdish question. Ultimately, the persistent conflict between Turkey and the Kurds is a result of Turkey's inability to reconcile its unitary national identity with the demands of its Kurdish population for recognition, autonomy, and cultural rights. The failure of the AKP's reforms can be attributed to the deep-rooted influence of Kemalist ideology, the internal contradictions within the ruling party, and the complex regional dynamics, which all have contributed to a cycle of violence and instability. A lasting resolution requires a fundamental shift in the Turkish government's approach, one that moves beyond suppression and towards genuine recognition and acceptance of Kurdish identity and rights. This will necessitate a significant change in how the Turkish state constructs its national identity and how it views the role and place of ethnic minorities within its borders.

**Key words:** Turkey, Justice and Development Party, Kurds, Kemalism, Identity seeking.