

Shifting forms of Turkish state paternalism toward the Kurds: social assistance as “benevolent” control

Erdem Yörük · Hişyar Özsoy

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In its efforts to contain the long-standing Kurdish unrest, the Turkish state has historically utilized a repertoire of both coercive and “benevolent” means of political control. That is, in addition to means of repressive state apparatus such as the army, the police, the courts, and prisons, Turkish governments have also been deploying varied forms of ideological, religious, economic, and social paternalism, particularly when the sheer force of state violence proved to be an insufficient means to pacify Kurdish struggles. One major component of the latter strategy has been the politics of development and social welfare provisions. Indeed, the state views the economic development of the Kurdish region and alleviation of regional poverty through social assistance programs as crucial instruments to manufacture Kurdish consent in remaking its eroding legitimacy among the Kurds. In such a context, the Kurdish issue has become a key parameter shaping the trajectories of economic development and distribution of social welfare in Turkey as a whole.

The shift in the strategy of national economic development from import-substitution toward an export-oriented neoliberal growth model has also transformed the mode of paternalism the Turkish state has exercised toward the Kurds in the last couple of decades: a shift from classical economic development toward poverty alleviation programs via social policy. The developmentalist mode of paternalism, most effective until mid-1990s, discursively reduces the protracted Kurdish conflict to a question of regional economic “backwardness,” implying that the Kurds would stop rebelling once their region became richer through state-sponsored development projects. The fundamental assumption underlying this discourse is that the PKK can find popular support among the Kurds due to regional

E. Yörük (✉)
Koç University, Istanbul, Turkey
e-mail: yorukerd@gmail.com

H. Özsoy
The University of Michigan-Flint, Flint, MI, USA
e-mail: hisyar@umflint.edu

chronic poverty and unemployment. The logical conclusion of such an argument is that economic investments and employment will ensure social order and political tranquility in the region. The most important component of this “development as counterinsurgency” strategy has been the Southeast Anatolia Project (GAP), a still incomplete and more than thirty-billion-dollar regional development project in effect since the 1970s.

However, this politics of development has not brought about any development in the Kurdish region. According to official statistics, despite the ten billions of dollars invested so far, all the provinces included in the GAP project except for one have regressed in the socioeconomic development scale between 1996 and 2003. Most of these billions of dollars went into the construction of GAP’s hydroelectricity facilities—the construction of massive dams on Euphrates and Tigris that have created disastrous environmental and demographic effects in the region. About 85 % of the GAP’s planned electricity investments have been completed. Yet, most of this electricity is transferred to support the national growth economy whose engine is the industrial centers located in the Turkish populated Western regions of Turkey, and so these electricity investments do not contribute to the economy of Kurdish region. In fact, the Kurdish populated East and Southeast Anatolia regions rank as the first in national electricity production but the last in its consumption. Besides, only around 15 % of the irrigation networks planned by the GAP have been completed so far. Unlike hydroelectricity facilities, irrigation networks might enhance regional rural economy to some degree. Yet, to think that the GAP would eliminate unemployment, bridge regional disparities, and bring social justice is more fantasy than reality. This is so primarily because unemployment is predominantly located in Kurdish urban centers, especially so after the depopulation of Kurdish countryside during the 1990s, when the state evacuated or burnt down about 4,000 Kurdish villages to deplete the social base of Kurdish support to the PKK’s guerilla warfare. In this period, millions of rural Kurds were displaced without any state assistance or compensation. Of the over one and a half million population of Diyarbakir province, which has an unemployment rate of 40–60 %, about 70 % reside in the city center and surrounding towns and do not involve in agricultural production. Besides, most of the lands to benefit from the GAP’s irrigation networks are owned by absentee landlords who have had strong patronage relations with Turkish central government since the Democrat Party rule in the 1950s. Also, there has never been any substantial land reform in the Kurdish region, as most Kurdish landlords have been co-opted into the establishment during the 1950s. So, even when the construction of all irrigation networks is completed, rural Kurds will at best be working as wage laborers with poor work conditions similar to other agricultural export zones in the global South.

The Turkish government still insists that the GAP will solve acute problems of unemployment and socioeconomic disparities and finish off the social base of “terrorism” in the Kurdish region. But this emphasis, along with its effects, has gradually declined, both in discourse and practice. For example, official data decipher that public investments to the Southeast Anatolia region have drastically decreased under the AKP rule since 2002, unlike what is propagated by the

government.¹ One of the two predominantly Kurdish populated regions, Southeast Anatolia makes up 10 % of the country's total population. Yet, the rate of public investments received by the region had an average of 7.9 % of the total national public investments between 2002 and 2007. In no year in this period could the region get a share even proportionate with its population. Besides, a significant amount of state resources has gone into military investments, which are also counted among public investment to the region in official records. For example, in a striking case, 70 % of all public investments to the Tunceli province (Dersim) in 2006 took place in the form of constructing military buildings and the infrastructure necessary for the Turkish army to operate in the province. Unsurprisingly, the pattern in regional distribution of public investments also structures the allocation of economic incentives delivered by the state to promote business. The number of state incentive documents that the region received has steadily decreased from 9.2 % in 2002 to 4.2 % in 2007. And there is no indicator showing that this pattern has been reversed since then.

It seems that the AKP government has been withdrawing from its larger project of the economic development of the Kurdish region—a project that has served the state discourse to de-Kurdify the Kurdish conflict by reducing it to a techno-political issue of economic regulation and rendering its ethno-political dimensions invisible. The strategy to replace gigantic development projects like the GAP has been to target individual poor Kurds through extensive social assistance programs. Needless to say, the means of violence and repression have remained in seat, and even with an increase in scope and extent. Yet, the paternalist seatmate of violence and repression has shifted from a region-based economic development to individual-based social policy. This shift was first and best reflected in dramatic increases in social assistance programs. During the last decade, means-tested social assistance and free health care programs for the poor have significantly expanded. This has sharply increased the number of beneficiaries and the amount of allocated government budget, leading to striking developments in the fields of free health care, conditional cash transfers, food stamps, housing, education, and disability aid for the poor. The Green Card program, which is a means-tested free health care program for the poor, has witnessed a boom during the 2000s, eventually covering 12 % of the country's population in 2010. Similarly, the General Directorate of Social Assistance and Solidarity has greatly expanded conditional cash transfer programs, food stamps, housing, and education aid during the 2000s. In 2009, conditional cash transfers covered one million beneficiaries with health-based conditions and 2.1 millions with education-based conditions. Overall, between 2003 and 2009, social expenditures increased by 85 %, free health care card (Green Card) expenditures by 115 %, education-based conditional cash transfers by 201 %, health-based conditional cash transfers by 313 %, food stamps by 422 %, housing aid by 2,500 %, education aid by 772 %, and disability aid by 1,034 %. In terms of coverage, Green Card holders increased by 27 % between 2004 and 2009, education-based conditional cash transfer by 178 %, health-based conditional cash transfer by 197 %, housing aid by

¹ Diyarbakir Greater Municipality's Report on Socio-economic Development and Regional Disparities. December 1, 2007.

903 %, and disability aid by 277 %. In 2011, the Ministry of Family and Social Policy was established to administer all central government programs and to introduce new social assistance benefits. Furthermore, there is a proliferation of social assistance programs implemented by municipalities in almost every city. Finally, the government increased the 2013 budget of the Ministry of Family and Social Policy by 67 %.²

These trends show that while economic development has mostly remained as a discourse that could never materialize in practice, poverty alleviation programs for the Kurds are on the rise and that despite the fact that such programs do not occupy much space in the state's explicit social and political discourse on the Kurdish conflict. In fact, the state has been channeling social assistance programs to Kurds in a rather clandestine way and without officially instituting a positive discrimination policy. There is evidence that the design and implementation of social assistance programs in Turkey occur mostly on an ethnic basis and social assistance programs are disproportionately directed to the Kurds.³ For example, controlling for all possible intervening socioeconomic variables, Kurds are almost twice as likely as non-Kurds to receive free health care cards. And this is true not only for the Kurds in the region but also for those Kurds residing in urban centers located in Western Turkey. In addition, internally displaced Kurds are twice as likely as other Kurds to benefit from free health care cards.

However, although the AKP has excelled in developing social assistance mechanisms to contain Kurdish unrest, it is by no means the first Turkish government to deliver social assistance to the Kurds. In fact, it was a center-right/center-left coalition government that had initiated the free health care program in 1992, when the Kurdish *intifada* reached its peak. The original law stated that the program would start from the Southeast and East Anatolia regions, where the Kurds were the majority. In the following years, some implicit positive discrimination policies have occasionally taken place in Social Assistance and Solidarity Fund programs as well.

How one is to explain such unofficial “positive discrimination” in delivering social assistance by a state that systematically discriminates against the Kurds socially, culturally, economically, and politically? It is simple. The Turkish state deploys social assistance as a deliberate and easier-to-use means to co-opt or contain the Kurds by establishing a large clientelist network among the Kurds. This has been the case since the 1990s, but particularly during the AKP rule since 2002, when the conflicts between the PKK and the state have reached the second historical peak. It seems that when the repressive state apparatus fails to pacify the Kurds and ideological state apparatus cannot hail them into “good” citizen-subjects, then social assistance emerges as a “benevolent” instrument to “buy” the consent of poor Kurds.

The use of social assistance to contain Kurdish unrest stemmed from an overlap between class and ethnicity. The Kurdish region has historically been the poorest in Turkey. The displacement of rural Kurds has complicated the issue by restructuring

² Yörük (2012).

³ *Ibid.*

the ethnic composition and internal structure of working classes in Turkey. Displaced Kurds have become a large part of the expanding informal proletariat, now crowding the slums of big Turkish cities. This has simultaneously proletarianized the Kurds and Kurdicized the informal proletariat in Turkey, akin to the cases of Hispanics in the United States, Afro-Brazilians in Brazil, or the Arab banlieues in France. In all these cases, the overlap between class and race/ethnicity produces segregated spaces and political “instabilities.” The colored slums of the world have turned into spaces of political “threat” and urban riots. Kurdish slums both in the region and in Turkish cities are no exception.

The rise of social assistance to target such political threat is part of a global agenda, which has been proposed by institutions like the World Bank. The current Turkish government has been implementing this agenda by blending it with the Islamic tradition of charity. The implementation of such “state charity” forces poor Kurds to bifurcate their class and ethnic identities and prioritize their economic poverty while concealing their political Kurdishness. It is precisely through such bifurcation that the AKP creates a space in which to politically regulate the ethnic identity of Kurds via social assistance and to obstruct the politicization of both ethnicity and poverty. Through social assistance, the state seeks to turn poor Kurds into the mere poor, erasing Kurdishness in the process.

This politics of social assistance has conditioned a counter-move on the part of the Kurdish movement, however. The almost 100 municipalities in the region that are run by the BDP started providing poor Kurds with varied social assistance. As an exemplary case, the municipality of Diyarbakir initiated a process in 2006 that culminated in the establishment of *Sarmaşık*, a local NGO that provides poor Kurds with food, cash, and clothing, among other things. Other Kurdish municipalities established “education support houses” that carry out educational activities for poor Kurdish children and prepare them for competitive national exams for placement in Turkish universities. State authorities are particularly worried about such activities that reach to the Kurdish poor through social assistance, whether in the form of cash transfers, food banks, clothing banks, or education support facilities. Concurrently, social assistance has become another battleground for political struggle between the Turkish state and the Kurdish movement. While the state renders invisible the ethno-political aspects of the poverty of Kurds and pushes poor Kurds to choose being poor over being Kurdish so as to be eligible for social assistance, the BDP emphasizes the Kurdishness of poverty, pointing to the overlap of class and ethnicity in the production of Kurdish poverty.

The state does not simply view Kurdish social assistance programs as rival programs. Rather, it views them as a powerful threat to its image as the only “benevolent” entity that can “give” to poor Kurds. Accordingly, it has put immense pressures on the Kurdish institutions that involve in social assistance. For example, several investigations and court cases were launched against *Sarmaşık*, almost totally paralyzing its activities. In a recent case, upon a complaint filed by the centrally appointed governor of Diyarbakir, a Turkish court stopped the activities of *Sarmaşık*'s Food Bank, which serves 15,000 poor Kurds in Diyarbakir. Besides, the state banned all education support houses in the region. Worse, it has been criminalizing and terrorizing Kurdish politics of social assistance by linking them to

the PKK. This terrorizing of the field of social assistance is an integral part of the state policy that does not want to recognize another providing and sovereign “pater” around, especially a Kurdish one who challenges it politically.

The state’s gradual withdrawal from conventional developmentalism in favor of poverty alleviation via social policy is the end product of multiple factors: international social policy trends, the AKP’s ideological background in Islamic charity, rapid urbanization, internal displacement, and increasing poverty, particularly among the Kurds. Within such a context, social assistance appears as an economically efficient and “benevolent” means to politically control the poor, particularly the highly politicized Kurdish poor. It is important to highlight that the state’s expanding social assistance is not because the Kurds are poor, but because the Kurdish poor are being politicized. So, the regulation of Kurdish poverty becomes the techno-political mode of containing Kurdish struggles for justice, freedom, and political sovereignty. For the state, social assistance is a much cheaper and more practical technique than massive development projects like the GAP that have sucked up ten billions of dollars without creating any state legitimacy among the Kurds. However, such social assistance projects seem to have also failed politically. Indeed, in the local and general elections of 2009 and 2011, the BDP won a clear victory over the AKP in most Kurdish provinces where the state’s social assistance programs concentrate. Still, although the Kurdish movement won a few battles, the war on the front of social assistance is likely to escalate in the near future.

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