

Radical Kurds

Re-access Their History

Many Armenians were killed at the hands of Kurds, but unlike the rest of Turkey, the Kurds — who have since faced severe repression themselves — are beginning to atone. Exactly how many Armenians are living in southeastern cities like Diyarbakir, Van, Bitlis and Mus before the genocide is hard to tell, but they were no minority. The Armenians were just one of many groups who lived on these plains and in these mountains. They lived alongside the Assyrians, the Arabs, and the Kurds.

But these days Diyarbakir, the largest city in the southeast, has no Armenian community left. Those who survived the genocide migrated to Istanbul or abroad, and the families who remained mostly left the city in the 1950s and 60s. There are only the so-called “hidden Armenians”: the descendants of those who converted to Islam to save their lives, or of Armenian children who were saved from the massacres by Ottoman soldiers and Kurds and were brought up as Muslims.

The events surrounding the killings of Armenians are tied to the breakup of the Ottoman Empire, starting in 1915, when the Ottomans, Germany’s allies in World War I, ordered mass deportations of Armenians from the empire’s eastern provinces to thwart their collaboration with Russia. By some estimates, **at least 1.5 million Armenians died** from the forced exodus, starvation and killings by Ottoman Turk soldiers and the police. **About a half-million survived**, and many scattered into a diaspora in Russia, the United States and elsewhere.

Now after its invasion of Kurdish Syrian space, Turkey is coming under increasing pressure to do the same. Last Sunday the Pope marked the 100th anniversary by using the word genocide in a speech on the subject. Turkey immediately recalled its ambassador to the Vatican and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan issued a strong rebuke: “I want to warn the Pope to not repeat this mistake and condemn him.”

Meanwhile the NYTimes reported the House voting in clear defiance of their NATO ally Turkey, 405-11 to formally recognize the Armenian genocide. Some lawmakers saw an uneasy parallel between the Armenian genocide and the potential ethnic cleansing of Kurds. On Capitol Hill, the passage of the measure was a rare bipartisan moment on the House floor at a time when House Democrats’ impeachment inquiry has exacerbated a partisan rift.

Representative Michael McCaul of Texas, the top Republican on the Foreign Affairs Committee, who in recent weeks has bitterly dueled with Democrats over the investigation, crossed the floor to hug Ms. Pelosi and offer Mr. Schiff a handshake in celebration as spectators in the gallery stood to cheer the bill’s passage. Mr. Schiff, who has a large community of Armenian-Americans in his district, lobbied for 19 years to put the legislation to a vote on the House floor, alongside Representatives Anna G. Eshoo and Jackie Speier, fellow Democrats of California. A succession of American administrations have acted out of offending Turkey. But now, lawmakers went on the record rejecting **“efforts to enlist, engage or otherwise associate the United States government with denial of the Armenian genocide or any other genocide.”**

While fear of Kurdish genocide motivates US politicians, the Kurds themselves have been rethinking their history. Some have come to see we are facing the same fate as the Armenians. In the early 1980s, some Kurds organized themselves in an armed rebellion against the Turkish state, fighting under the banner of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). The group has fought for three decades for greater autonomy for the Kurdish ethnic group in Turkey and an end to repressive government policies. An all out war between the PKK and the Turkish state followed. In the 1990s, thousands of civilians were killed in the fighting. Government forces burned Kurdish villages. There were hundreds of disappearances and extrajudicial killings.



Not all Kurds agree on the need to apologize to Armenians. But Abdullah Demirbas, a Kurdish politician, says the Kurd’s own fight for freedom and national identity since the 1980s has helped them come to terms with their role in the Armenian genocide. Now that the Kurds have become more aware, Demirbas said they have an obligation to grant others the right as well to live their identities fully. This includes Armenians and other groups like Assyrians, Arabs, and religious minorities like Alevis and Yezidis. **“Part of this vision is apologizing for our part in the genocide. The Kurds may have been used by the state but they should have resisted. Our silence makes us guilty.”**

Demirbas has backed up his words with action. During his time as mayor of Diyarbakir’s old town, the municipality began disseminating information in Kurdish and Armenian, where before there was only Turkish. The Surp Giragos Armenian church was also restored and is to be the center point of this year’s commemorations. Some Armenians campaign for the right to return to the lands where they once lived. Demirbas says they should be welcomed.

“If we call these lands ‘Kurdistan’ as a land where only Kurds live, or ‘Armenia’ as a land where only Armenians live, what difference would there be between us and the Turkish state? We have to create a ground for living together on these lands, which belong to all of us. We should no longer rely on the nation-state concept, which created these massacres in the first place.”

As such, Diyarbakir continues to open its arms to Armenians. American-Armenian musicians Onnik Dinkjian and his son Ara held a concert in the city’s theater recently. The Dinkjian family escaped from Diyarbakir during the genocide. It was an emotional performance. **Kurds and Armenians filled every seat in the theater.** People stood in the aisles and on the stairs. Many danced.

A concert goer, Sona, had this to say **“Diyarbakir is not an Armenian city anymore thanks to the Genocide. But who exactly are the Kurds apologizing to? There are no Armenians left here. Maybe the apologies are more important for the Kurds themselves than they are to us. They need to do it this way, so they can continue on their path.”**

Thanks to Fr derike Geerdink, GlobalPost.com
with help from NYT reporters Catie Edmondson [@CatieEdmondson](https://twitter.com/CatieEdmondson)
& Rick Gladstone [@rickgladstone](https://twitter.com/rickgladstone)

NEO-COLONIALISM IN HONG KONG

In its search for security, the **Chinese Communist Party (CCP)** is reimagining the constitution of Hong Kong in a way that enhances the Party’s role. The party plans to “establish a sound legal system and enforcement mechanism for safeguarding national security” in Hong Kong.

To do this, the CCP will strengthen and expand control over government leadership selection and monitoring, the school curriculum, and training of civil servants. These are core responsibilities of the CCP on the mainland.

Note that no representative of the Hong Kong government or Executive Council participated in these meetings about our future. Instead, the central government summoned our Chief Executive to Beijing to brief her on their content.

In this regard, Hong Kong and Macau are unlike any other local governments in China. We are completely unrepresented in the forums that matter. So far, the CCP has ruled Hong Kong through proxies, especially our titular leader, the Chief Executive.

This strategy was by design. Replace the colonial governor with a loyal Chief Executive, and Hong Kong’s well-oiled machinery that respects the bureaucratic hierarchy will adapt, shifting gears to become a special administrative region of China. This hasn’t happened.

This system now is under the management of (retired) civil servants. Our still colonial civil service selects and promotes itself, unfettered by political considerations.

This system is anathema to the CCP, which at its core controls the country through the personnel appointment system. The party now proposes to introduce more party control here where previously there has been very little.

According to the briefings, the CCP will play a more direct role in the selection and monitoring of Hong Kong’s Chief Executive and Principal Officials. The party will implement

patriotic education for our wayward youth and patriotic training for our civil servants.

The central government will make these changes using the power and authority laid down in the Basic Law. That is, rule by law. These tools will expand the carrots and sticks that the party now employs to manage the city.

A key part of the party’s new policy is to pay more attention to Hong Kong’s colonial-era system of education, currently mostly in the hands of churches. The CCP could require the government to implement compulsory patriotic education throughout the system.

Some would welcome such a policy in Hong Kong. But many others would resist it, especially those who arrived here to escape revolution, war, and violent political struggle on the mainland.

These parents and grandparents of our youth have their own understanding of the mainland and the CCP. So, short of replacing them, adding compulsory courses in schools will not be enough. Changing values will require something more.

Will the CCP or Hong Kong government introduce more control of traditional media, the internet and social media? This is easy enough to do through economic incentives (purchases, mergers, and advertising budgets), and censorship, which we already allow.

The CCP perceives that indiscipline among our civil servants is part of the problem. New regulations and disciplinary measures would prevent civil servants from protesting against government policies. Failure to comply could result in severe penalties (e.g. fast track dismissal).

In our dystopian future, led by an illiberal authoritarian regime, artificial intelligence could be used to identify civil servants who fail to comply, surveilling all their public and private communication, including social media.

Combined with a social credit system “with Hong Kong characteristics,” such a policy could effectively snuff out dissent.

The party may also require better coordination among government departments, especially the armed disciplined services on whom the government now depends.

This could involve them using the same internal communications systems, perhaps aligned with the People’s Armed Police and common training so that they act as a cohesive force for putting down dissent.

The party will play an active role in these changes, and at the same time identify activists and new party recruits here.

A problem is the CCP’s one dimensional understanding of Hong Kong, which focuses single-mindedly on security and party survival. The party relies too much on the united front and on transient party bureaucrats for intelligence.

I am sure that the party sees the causes of our discontent as multifaceted. The CCP has spoken out repeatedly about our land and housing issues. But the measures discussed above focus almost exclusively on security, especially for the CCP here and on the mainland.

Focusing only on bureaucratic accountability will rob the Hong Kong government of legitimacy, and further undermine the Basic Law’s requirement that the Hong Kong government also be accountable to the people of Hong Kong.

This constitutional requirement seems to be ignored in the party’s design. Indeed, is the Hong Kong government now in breach of the Basic Law?

John Burns

an honorary professor at the Department of Politics and Public Administration
at the University of Hong Kong.
hongkongfp.com