

## **COMMENTARY**

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### **Turkish soccer body penalizes Kurdish club amid mounting tensions**

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**A** Turkish Football Federation (TFF) decision to penalize a third tier soccer club in the predominantly Kurdish city of Diyarbakir for adopting a Kurdish name reflects mounting tension in south-eastern Turkey. The tension is fuelled by the realization that President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is unlikely to make major concessions before parliamentary elections this summer in peace talks to which both Turkey and Kurdish insurgents remain committed and alleged efforts by some elements of the state to sabotage the negotiations.

The federation charged that the club long known by its Turkish name, Diyarbakır Büyükşehir Belediyespor (Diyarbakir Metropolitan Sport), had changed its name to the Kurdish Amedspor and had adopted the yellow, red and green Kurdish colours in its emblem without the soccer body's approval. Amed is the long banned Kurdish name for Diyarbakir, the unofficial Turkish Kurdish capital. The federation said the club had also failed to register its new name.

Turkish Kurds, who account for anywhere between 10 and 23 percent of Turkey's population, have long been restricted in the use of their languages. Turkey has so far been reluctant to concede in the peace talks to Kurdish demands that secondary school education in the predominantly Kurdish southeast be administered in a Kurdish language.

Kurdish nationalists complain that talks between the government and the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), the guerrilla group that has declared a ceasefire in its 30-year war to allow negotiations to go forward that Ankara has so far made only minimal concessions like allowing the use of

letters in the Kurdish alphabet that do not exist in Turkish. Some 40,000 people are believed to have been killed in the PKK insurgency.

Amedspor has rejected the US\$ 4,300 fine imposed by the federation and vowed to fight the decision. The incident constitutes one of several in recent months in which assertions of Kurdish national identity have spilt onto the soccer pitch.

Ilhan Cavcav, the chairman of Ankara club Genclerbirligi SK, known for its left-wing fan base, last month sparked outrage among nationalists by suggesting that the Turkish national anthem should no longer be played at the beginning of domestic matches and only in international encounters. Turkey began playing the anthem at domestic matches in response to the PKK insurgency.

A match in December between Amedspor, and Galatasaray SK, a storied Istanbul club popular among Kurds because imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan identified himself some two decades ago as a Galatasaray fan, witnessed despite pro-Kurdish expressions by supporters of both clubs the stoning of the Galatasaray team bus. Police using teargas intervened. “We love you, we love the one who loves you even more,” said a banner hoisted by Galatasaray fans in an apparent reference to Ocalan. Fans whistled as the Turkish national anthem played.

In October, the Swedish football federation took Dalkurd FF, a club in the town of Borlänge 300 kilometres north of Stockholm that has close ties to the PKK to task for unfolding a banner and collecting donations during a match for the besieged Syrian Kurdish town of Kobani. Kurdish fighters have for months been holding off attacks on Kobani by the Islamic State, the jihadist group that controls a swath of Syria and Iraq.

Turkey’s refusal to come to the aid of Kobani, even though it allowed some 150 Iraqi Kurdish fighters to transit Turkish territory en route to the Syrian town, sparked mass protests last October in which some 50 people were killed.

The protests like the renaming of the Diyarbakir club reflect growing scepticism among Kurds about the peace talks between the government and the PKK. More recently Kurdish disaffection has exploded in unrest in the town of Cizre in south-eastern Turkish where at least five Kurds have been killed in the last month.

Non-Kurdish soccer teams visiting Cizre have seen their buses and players repeatedly attacked with stones. As a result, Cavcav’s Genclerbirligi was transported in armoured vehicles when it came to play in Cizre in December. Media reports said the same vehicles had brought the Iraqi Kurdish fighters to the Turkish Syria border from where they headed to Kobani.

Government officials charge that the PKK is fuelling the tension in a bid to pressure Ankara. The charge is rejected by Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), a left-wing pro-Kurdish party that acts as an interlocutor between Ocalan, who has been imprisoned on an island in the Sea of Marmara since 1999, PKK commanders based in mountainous areas of northern Iraq, and the government. The HDP asserts that the unrest is being stoked by elements of the government opposed to the peace talks.

Writing in Turkish daily Vatan, a reporter in Cizre noted that “nobody knows the reasons (for the unrest) in Cizre. Opinion leaders can't explain their meaning. Public officials cannot explain the depth of the incidents, but step by step things are getting out of control.” Hurriyet columnist Serkan Demirtas warned that Cizre “shows that the peace process is still very fragile and existing mechanisms are still unlikely to respond effectively to such attempts at unrest in the region.”

HDP officials note that Turkey has long had a deep state that rejects any modification of the notion, coined by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the visionary who carved modern Turkey out of the ruins of the Ottoman Empire, that Turks are one people. They also point to the recent leaking of Gendarmerie documents that show that three intercepted trucks belonging to Milli İstihbarat Teskilati (MIT), Turkey's national intelligence agency, were carrying weapons destined for an Al Qaeda group in Syria.

In a bid to quell growing unrest among Turkish Kurds, the government has stepped up talks with the HDP and changed the structure of the peace talks. Senior government officials are working with the HDP to quell the unrest in Cizre. At the same time, the government, the PKK and the HDP have agreed to establish a committee for the talks. Previously, HDP officials shuttled between the government, Ocalan's prison cell and PKK commanders in Iraqi Kurdistan alongside reported direct talks between the PKK leader and MIT head Hakan Fidan, a close associate of Erdogan.

Both Erdogan's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the HDN are negotiating with one eye on parliamentary elections scheduled for later this year. Although the AKP has boosted its prestige by engaging in talks with the PKK, few expect the government to provoke Turkish nationalists prior to the elections by granting the Kurds substantial concessions.

As HDN debates whether to run as a party in the elections in which it would have to garner at least ten percent of the vote to be represented in parliament or field independent candidates, many Kurds question whether the government would be any more forthcoming after the poll.

Pessimism is prompting Turkish Kurds to raise their international profile on and off the pitch. The HDP recently sent a delegation to Moscow to negotiate the opening of a representative office in the Russian capital.

The mounting tensions have prompted warnings that the situation in southeast Turkey, inundated by Syrian refugees, was becoming uncontrollable. Writing about the spiralling soccer violence in Cizre, sports writer Zafer Buyukavci warned: “Gentlemen are you aware: The country is slipping through our fingers.” Speaking after last month’s Amedspor-Galatasaray match, Amedspor president Ihsan Avci quipped that it was not “Diyarbakır’s team but Kurdistan’s team, the people’s team” that had won the match.

**Note:** This article was originally published in the blog, **The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer** and has been reproduced with the author’s permission. Web link: <http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.in/2015/01/turkish-soccer-body-penalizes-kurdish.html>

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