Progress on the situation of Kurds in Turkey?

In late 2012, the Turkish government renewed direct negotiations with jailed PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party) leader Abdullah Öcalan, aimed at ending the 30-year conflict. A wave of violence, launched by the insurgent PKK in mid-2011, had broken the 2005 ceasefire. Successful talks would remove the biggest threat to political and social stability in Turkey, with Kurds representing 15-20% of Turkey's 75 million population. The PKK is listed by the EU as a “terrorist organisation”.

Kurdish demands

Common grievances of Kurds in Turkey are:

- **Full language rights for Kurds**
  Kurds demand the possibility of "mother-language education" and to use Kurdish in all areas of public life, currently prohibited by the Turkish Constitution.

- **Non-discriminatory Constitution and laws**
  Kurds want discriminatory elements, based on ethnicity (e.g. definition of citizenship), removed from the Constitution; amendments to legislation, such as the Anti-Terrorism Law and the Criminal Code, and a lifting of the ban on using Kurdish in courts.

- **Greater political and cultural autonomy**
  Support for far-reaching options (federalism or independence) is low among the majority of Kurds. The Kurdish movement (including the PKK apparently) now aims for (not clearly defined) "democratic autonomy" within Turkey.

- **Political representation**
  Electoral reform is demanded, in particular halving the current 10% threshold for a party to enter Parliament.

European Union position

The European Commission’s 2012 report on Turkey concluded there had been no progress on the Kurdish issue. It expressed concerns about large-scale arrests of Kurdish elected representatives and Kurdish activists charged with affiliation to the PKK or the KCK (Union of Kurdish Communities), as well as of writers, journalists, lawyers and academics working on the Kurdish issue. The report also highlighted the need to respect the rule of law in ongoing trials, possible abuses of the Criminal Code and anti-terror legislation (e.g. broad definition of terrorism), and the restricted scope of parliamentary immunity with regard to freedom of expression.

The European Parliament has consistently called for a political solution to the Kurdish issue through inclusive democratic dialogue and constitutional reform. In the draft resolution on the 2012 Progress report on Turkey, discussed by the AFET committee, MEPs take up the Commission's concerns and called for the "peaceful inclusion of citizens of Kurdish origin into Turkish society", and the respect for the freedom of expression, association and assembly.

Evolution of the renewed peace talks

The new talks between the AKP (Justice and Development Party) government and Öcalan (the Imrali process) reportedly aim at: disarmament, departure of PKK insurgents from Turkey, release of prisoners and recognition of the Kurdish minority's rights. Some issues are also being discussed with the main legal Kurdish party, the BDP (Peace and Democracy Party). So far, dialogue has reportedly led to agreement in principle on cessation of hostilities in March and on a calendar for the withdrawal of PKK militants from Turkey. Prime Minister Erdoğan promised PKK fighters they could leave Turkey freely if they disarm, but no general “amnesty” for the rebels is envisaged.

The Turkish Parliament has approved a law allowing defendants to use Kurdish in courts, while a government reshuffle was interpreted as a move to encourage the peace talks and constitutional reform. With Turkish public opinion in favour of the talks, the leader of the main opposition party, CHP (Republican People's Party) announced its support, contrary to the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). But doubts about Öcalan's authority to impose a solution on all PKK factions, strong opposition to the talks by PKK hardliners and Turkish nationalists, and the assassination of three PKK militants in Paris raise concerns about the prospects of the negotiations.