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Kurdish Voters Will Continue to Exercise their Vote in Turkey

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Brief Analysis

Recently, Turkish municipal politics have become another lens into the complicated relationship between the Turkish government and the country's Kurdish voters. On August 19, Turkish authorities removed the People's Democratic Party (HDP) mayors of the majority Kurdish cities of Diyarbakir, Martin, and Van on unspecified charges of terrorism. These mayors had come to government during the March 31 elections, which showcased the importance of Kurdish voters in Turkish local politics, both in majority Kurdish areas and in the more hotly contested elections of Istanbul.

Since these events, the relationship between the Turkish government and its Kurdish citizens has continued to suffer, especially given the continued pressure on the HDP. Moreover, the political fallout from this decision has spread—senior AKP member and former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu has just been expelled from the party for criticizing the decision. However, the results of another of Turkey's municipal elections—in Istanbul—suggest that Kurdish voters and politicians may seek another strategy to participate in upcoming elections in order to avoid pressures on the HDP.

The AKP has been the ruling party in most, if not all, state institutions. The party has increased its hegemony since a failed military coup in mid-July 2016, and in 2018 when the Turkish government changed from a parliamentary system to a presidential system, which came into effect more than a year after the opposition was suppressed and many media outlets were shut down.

However, the example of the two Istanbul municipal elections demonstrates the power that Kurdish voters can still have in Turkish politics. Of course, the decision to annul Istanbul's mayoral election results and to hold a second election prompted significant pushback throughout Turkey, even from supporters of the ruling party. Some supporters chose to vote for the opposition candidate in the redo elections as a reprisal for the High Election

Council's decision, particularly after the decision had an economic impact on the Turkish lira, which is still struggling to recover from its recent dip earlier this year. To be sure, during the re-elections there was still plenty of support for the AKP's candidate, but the much wider margin of the CHP candidate's success—with the CHP candidate taking 54 percent of the votes compared to the AKP's 45 percent—demonstrated the frustration of Istanbul's voters with the choice to re-do the elections.

However, one particularly notable trend within the elections in Istanbul was the CHP candidate's success with the municipality's Kurdish voters. The CHP candidate originally had the support of millions of Kurds in Istanbul, leading Erdogan to accuse the pro-Kurdish HDP of forming a secret alliance with the CHP opposition party during the elections.

Simultaneously, the Turkish government tried several methods of decreasing Kurdish voter turnout for the CHP candidate. In a concrete step from the government towards winning the Kurdish vote in Istanbul, the largest city in Turkey, it was announced in early May that the lawyers of Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan would be allowed to visit him, after visits had been forbidden since 2011. It was in fact on the same day that the High Election Council announced the annulment of Istanbul's election results that Öcalan's lawyers reported they had been able to visit him.. Erdogan, however, did not win the Kurds' support and lost their votes in this election forever.

This visit occurred promptly after a video message was published by Selahattin Demirtaş the former co-chair of the People's Democratic Party, from the prison in which he has been held for more than two years. In the message, he called for the Kurds to vote for the opposition candidate in Istanbul. The subsequent approval for the visit sent a clear message from the Turkish government to the Kurds, namely, "Your votes in exchange for peace" with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which Öcalan leads from prison and which the Turkish government considers a terrorist organization. Demirtaş's video message was followed by statements from the current HDP president Sezai Temelli, in which he indicated that the party "was not trying to win municipal elections, but rather to break the hegemony of the ruling party."

The government also sought to form a new party with a Kurdish focus: Ahmet Davutoğlu, the former prime minister of Turkey and the second-in-command in the AKP, signaled during this period that he was creating a new party in Diyarbakir, one of the cities where the elected mayor was recently removed with an appointed official. The symbolic step of announcing the formation of the political party in the largest majority Kurdish city in Turkey appeared to be designed as a symbolic gesture

However, the re-elections, and certainly the recent removal of HDP mayors, have cemented the views that pro-Kurdish political leaders and Kurdish voters in general hold of Turkish politics: they no longer trust any promises of the Turkish president. And though Kurdish voters recognize that Turkey's main opposition is not more likely to help their situation than the current ruling party, either regarding their ambitions for recognition as a nation, political and cultural rights, or otherwise, Kurdish citizens' open defiance of the AKP has made them favor the CHP and could in future elections actually encourage greater Kurdish voter participation in areas with contested elections. This defiance could become a sort of symbolic presence for Kurds in Turkey's political scene, and liberal figures in the CHP are capitalizing—now publicly calling for Kurdish rights.

We can thus say that the ball is now in the court of Istanbul's Kurds, and of their party, which constitutes the second largest opposition party in the country. The Kurds have said their words in Istanbul and will be the focus of most Turkish parties in all upcoming election that Turkey may witness.

Moreover, recent criticism of Erdogan's policies suggests a fragmentation in Erdogan's party, it is possible that Erdogan's warning will come true: that the HDP will form an alliance with the CHP, especially since the Kurds alone cannot make real changes in the country without engaging in political alliances. The Kurds have become an integral

part of the Turkish political equation and should be expected to continue to exercise their voting weight as an effective instrument to pressure for their legitimate rights and their dream of autonomy. ❖



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