

Trustee Appointments Have Ended Local Democracy for Supporters of Pro-Kurdish Parties in Turkey

Key Takeaways

- Since 2015, the government of Turkey has systematically overturned democratic election results in Kurdish regions by installing unelected leaders in place of elected ones in order to prevent pro-Kurdish parties¹ from governing at the local level.
- This strategy has consistently left more than 75% of voters who supported successful pro-Kurdish candidates at various levels of local government without elected representation, effectively ending local democracy for these constituencies during the time period under review.
- Currently, 77% of voters who supported successful pro-Kurdish candidates at the district level in 2019 and 100% of voters who supported successful pro-Kurdish candidates at the metropolitan municipality level in 2019 live under unelected state appointees.
- The frameworks under which this strategy is possible were fundamentally anti-democratic in their creation, intent, and application and have been condemned by the United Nations and major international human rights organizations.
- Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Turkish Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu, among other actors, hold responsibility for this policy and for any and all detrimental impacts it has had on peace and human rights.

Turkey's Repressive Toolbox: Frameworks and Actors

While the repression of local pro-Kurdish politics in Turkey is not a new phenomenon, the overturning of election results in Kurdish regions by means of state takeovers of municipalities is a new strategy. Like other elements of Erdogan's ongoing crackdown, it was made

¹ The Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) and Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) were affiliated pro-Kurdish parties and are considered equivalent for the purposes of this study.

possible by the period of emergency rule² in Turkey that lasted from 2016 until 2018.

As a 2017 report from the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights explains:

“On 1 September 2016, using emergency powers adopted after the attempted coup, the Government adopted a decree (KHK/674) permitting it to appoint “trustees” in lieu of elected mayors, deputy mayors or members of municipal councils suspended on charges of terrorism. The decree thus allows the Minister of Interior to appoint such “trustees” in metropolitan municipalities, whereas provincial governors appoint “trustees” for second tier municipalities, known as district municipalities...Decree KHK/674 may result in the wholesale replacement of elected officials of Kurdish origin throughout South-East Turkey...In most cases, the “trustees” were appointed immediately following the arrest of the democratically elected officials,

² For more on the overall anti-democratic conditions of emergency rule in Turkey, see: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Countries/TR/2018-03-19_Secund_OHCHR_Turkey_Report.pdf.

indicating a high degree of coordination between the judiciary and the executive branches³.

The same report called on the government of Turkey to:

“reconsider the collective arrests and/or removal from office of democratically elected parliamentarians and municipal representatives in South-East Turkey and...revoke the provision of Decree KHK/674, which provides for the appointment of “trustees” at the municipal level in South-East Turkey and reinstate the democratically elected co-mayors. Ensure in this regard due consideration to the right to vote, women’s rights and the right to be free from discrimination[.]”⁴

Rather than heed these recommendations, the Turkish government incorporated the decree measures into permanent law, institutionalizing the practice.

³ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Report on the human rights situation in South-East Turkey, July 2015 to December 2016*. https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Countries/TR/OHCHR_South-East_TurkeyReport_10March2017.pdf.

⁴ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Report on the human rights situation in South-East Turkey, July 2015 to December 2016*. https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Countries/TR/OHCHR_South-East_TurkeyReport_10March2017.pdf.

Prior to the 2019 local elections, Turkish leaders publicly and consistently endorsed trustee appointments and expressed willingness to overturn election results and remove elected leaders once again. Human Rights Watch reported that:

“On October 7, 2018, [Erdogan] made a speech in Kızılcahamam, Ankara, saying: “If in the upcoming elections people involved in terrorism win at the polls, we will not wait, we will continue on our way with the trustee appointments immediately. No waiting.”

The president repeated the same message during an election rally in the central Anatolian town of Yozgat on February 25, 2019.

On March 18, the Interior Ministry released a report justifying the appointment of trustees in 2016-17, raising concerns that the government already had plans to replace mayors with trustees. In the report, the ministry contended that appointing trustees was not a choice but an obligation and a legal duty, disregarding the political implications of such a

move and the scant evidence in the earlier cases that mayors had been engaged in criminal activity⁵.”

This brief overview establishes that the framework under which the government of Turkey overturns elections in Kurdish regions:

- a) was created by unilateral decree from the President and Council of Ministers under conditions of emergency rule;
- b) with the explicit intent of replacing officials elected by local voters with officials appointed by a central government institution (the Interior Ministry); and
- c) is implemented through politicized judicial processes in which courts follow the government’s publicly stated intent.

It can therefore be assessed that this strategy is fundamentally anti-democratic in its creation, objectives, and application; and that senior Turkish officials, including Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Turkish Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu, hold responsibility for this policy and for any and all

⁵ Human Rights Watch, “Turkey: Kurdish Mayors’ Removal Violates Voters’ Rights.” <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/02/07/turkey-kurdish-mayors-removal-violates-voters-rights>.

detrimental impacts it has had on peace and human rights.

Overwhelming Majority of Pro-Kurdish Voters and Municipalities Impacted

To understand the severity of this strategy, it is important to quantify its impact. This study utilizes election results and public information on trustee appointments to determine the raw numbers and relative percentages voters who supported pro-Kurdish parties lost their chosen elected representatives as a result of trustee appointments.

2014-2019

In the March 2014 local elections, the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) won control of 73 district municipalities. Across all 73 of these municipalities, 1,260,830 people voted for the BDP in total.

Between September 2016 and March 2017, the state took over 68 of these municipalities via trustee appointments, leaving a total of 1,107,404 BDP voters without the elected representation that they voted for at this level. These disenfranchised BDP voters constitute

88% of all BDP voters in district municipalities that elected BDP mayors in 2014.

The BDP won three metropolitan municipalities in 2014: Diyarbakir, Van, and Mardin. Across all three municipalities, 817,706 people voted for the BDP in total. In November 2016, the state took over all three of these municipalities via trustee appointments, leaving a total of 817,706 BDP voters without the elected representation that they voted for at this level. These disenfranchised BDP voters constitute 100% of all BDP voters in metropolitan municipalities that elected BDP mayors in 2014.

2019-present

In the March 2019 local elections, the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) won control of 50 district municipalities. Across all 50 of these municipalities, 1,264,100 people voted for the HDP in total. Between September 2019 and October 2020, the state took over 38 of these municipalities via trustee appointments, leaving 969,097 HDP voters without the elected representation that they voted for at this level. These disenfranchised HDP voters constitute 77% of all HDP

voters in district municipalities that elected HDP mayors in 2014⁶.

The HDP won three metropolitan municipalities in 2019: Diyarbakir, Van, and Mardin. Across all three municipalities, 959,920 people voted for the HDP in total. In August 2019, the state took over all three of these municipalities via trustee appointments, leaving 959,920 HDP voters without the elected representation that they voted for at this level. These disenfranchised HDP voters constitute 100% of all HDP voters in metropolitan municipalities that elected HDP mayors in 2019.

Conclusions

On average, over the last two local election cycles in Turkey, 100% of voters who supported successful pro-Kurdish candidates at the metropolitan municipality level and 83% of voters who supported successful pro-Kurdish candidates at the district municipality level lost their elected representation due to the appointment of trustees.

Supporters of pro-Kurdish parties cannot reasonably expect to be able to elect district or metropolitan mayors from pro-Kurdish parties without the central government directly intervening to remove their chosen mayors and replace them with state appointees who are actively hostile to pro-Kurdish policy agendas. There is no alternative party with a similar policy agenda that these voters can support.

This amounts to the effective end of local democracy for supporters of pro-Kurdish parties in Turkey and the near-complete exclusion of these voters and their policy preferences from the local democratic process.

⁶ In addition, after the March 2019 elections, the mayors of five municipalities won by the HDP were denied their mandates and prevented from taking office. An additional number of HDP voters were denied elected representation in this way.

Table 1: Impact of Trustee Appointments on Local Democracy in District Municipalities Won by Pro-Kurdish Parties						
Election	Municipalities Won	Total Votes for BDP/HDP in Municipalities Won	Municipalities Won with Trustees Appointed	% Municipalities Won with Trustees Appointed	BDP/HDP Voters Who Lost Elected Representation to Trustee Appointments	% BDP/HDP Voters Who Lost Elected Representation to Trustee Appointments
2014	73	1,260,830	68	93%	1,107,404	88%
2019	50	1,264,100	38	76%	969,097	77%

Sources: Anadolu Agency, Human Rights Joint Platform, Peoples' Democratic Party, TRT News, YSK.

Table 2: Impact of Trustee Appointments on Local Democracy in Metropolitan Municipalities Won by Pro-Kurdish Parties						
Election	Municipalities Won	Total Votes for BDP/HDP in Municipalities Won	Municipalities Won with Trustees Appointed	% Municipalities Won with Trustees Appointed	BDP/HDP Voters Who Lost Elected Representation to Trustee Appointments	% BDP/HDP Voters Who Lost Elected Representation to Trustee Appointments
2014	3	817,706	3	100%	817,706	100%
2019	3	959,920	3	100%	959,920	100%

Sources: Anadolu Agency, Human Rights Joint Platform, Peoples' Democratic Party, TRT News, YSK.

Table 3: District Municipalities Won by the BDP in 2014

District	Province	BDP Votes	BDP Vote %	Trustee Appointed	Date of Appointment
Dogubayazit	Agri	16,831	62.46%	Yes	January 2017
Diyadin	Agri	3,568	48.43%	Yes	September 2016
Tutak	Agri	1,208	38.54%	Yes	January 2017
Batman Center	Batman	91,383	55.89%	Yes	September 2016
Gercus	Batman	1,402	52.43%	Yes	September 2016
Besiri	Batman	2,172	50.45%	Yes	September 2016
Bitlis Center	Bitlis	9,700	44.17%	Yes	November 2016
Mutki	Bitlis	519	42.44%	Yes	December 2016
Hizan	Bitlis	1,455	29.66%	Yes	December 2016
Lice	Diyarbakir	12,470	89.42%	Yes	September 2016
Kocakoy	Diyarbakir	5,709	76.55%	Yes	February 2017
Silvan	Diyarbakir	25,508	69.55%	Yes	September 2016
Bismil	Diyarbakir	33,930	68.08%	Yes	February 2017
Hazro	Diyarbakir	4,706	67.13%	No	
Baglar	Diyarbakir	91,771	58.56%	No	
Kulp	Diyarbakir	9,864	58.36%	Yes	January 2017
Kayapinar	Diyarbakir	69,672	54.74%	Yes	December 2016
Sur	Diyarbakir	29,989	54.41%	Yes	September 2016
Egil	Diyarbakir	5,579	52.10%	Yes	March 2017
Yenisehir	Diyarbakir	45,340	50.14%	Yes	December 2016
Dicle	Diyarbakir	9,222	49.71%	Yes	February 2017
Cinar	Diyarbakir	13,444	46.93%	No	
Ergani	Diyarbakir	25,020	46.36%	No	

Hani	Diyarbakir	6,179	45.40%	Yes	October 2016
Karakocan	Elazig	3,654	51.73%	Yes	January 2017
Karayazi	Erzurum	7,807	62.08%	Yes	December 2016
Tekman	Erzurum	6,818	60.34%	Yes	January 2017
Karacoban	Erzurum	5,650	59.24%	Yes	December 2016
Hinis	Erzurum	4,921	39.08%	Yes	September 2016
Yuksekoa	Hakkari	23,908	86.57%	Yes	December 2016
Hakkari Center	Hakkari	17,861	66.83%	Yes	September 2016
Cukurca	Hakkari	1,652	54.24%	Yes	December 2016
Semdinli	Hakkari	2,892	49.64%	Yes	December 2016
Tuzluca	Igdir	2,320	51.67%	Yes	September 2016
Igdir Center	Igdir	18,485	44.79%	No	
Digor	Kars	656	51.86%	Yes	February 2017
Nusaybin	Mardin	36,697	78.78%	Yes	September 2016
Derik	Mardin	18,086	64.40%	Yes	September 2016
Mazidagi	Mardin	8,790	61.71%	Yes	September 2016
Kiziltepe	Mardin	62,464	61.61%	Yes	December 2016
Dargecit	Mardin	7,281	60.16%	Yes	September 2016
Savur	Mardin	6,534	52.54%	Yes	March 2017
Artuklu	Mardin	25,895	35.84%	Yes	December 2016
Omerli	Mardin	2,550	35.72%	Yes	January 2017
Akdeniz	Mersin	44,643	29.82%	Yes	December 2016
Varto	Mus	2,735	63.40%	Yes	November 2016
Bulanik	Mus	4,553	45.84%	Yes	September 2016
Malazgirt	Mus	3,343	39.34%	Yes	December 2016
Halfeti	Sanliurfa	10,458	58.42%	Yes	December 2016
Suruc	Sanliurfa	23,050	52.58%	Yes	September 2016
Viransehir	Sanliurfa	35,959	48.18%	Yes	January 2017

Bozova	Sanliurfa	12,230	45.82%	Yes	January 2017
Baykan	Siirt	1,530	55.56%	Yes	December 2016
Eruh	Siirt	2,089	52.37%	Yes	September 2016
Siirt Center	Siirt	31,019	49.53%	Yes	December 2016
Cizre	Sirnak	36,403	81.61%	Yes	September 2016
Idil	Sirnak	7,775	78.88%	Yes	September 2016
Uludere	Sirnak	2,242	78.50%	Yes	January 2017
Silopi	Sirnak	27,358	78.19%	Yes	September 2016
Beytussebap	Sirnak	1,699	67.42%	Yes	September 2016
Sirnak Center	Sirnak	16,286	59.55%	Yes	November 2016
Tunceli Center	Tunceli	7,250	42.46%	Yes	November 2016
Baskale	Van	21,894	90.89%	Yes	January 2017
Ozalp	Van	18,007	71.62%	Yes	September 2016
Catak	Van	6,581	67.70%	Yes	January 2017
Saray	Van	5,725	65.86%	Yes	February 2017
Caldiran	Van	13,971	58.61%	Yes	February 2017
Gurpinar	Van	9,088	54.99%	Yes	February 2017
Bahcesaray	Van	3,405	53.88%	Yes	February 2017
Edremit	Van	25,020	50.91%	Yes	September 2016
Muradiye	Van	10,164	50.89%	Yes	January 2017
Ercis	Van	34,605	49.43%	Yes	September 2016
Ipekyolu	Van	60,186	48.32%	Yes	September 2016

Sources: Human Rights Joint Platform, Peoples' Democratic Party, YSK.

Table 4: Metropolitan Municipalities Won by the BDP in 2014

District	Province	BDP Votes	BDP Vote %	Trustee Appointed	Date of Appointment
Diyarbakir Metropolitan	Diyarbakir	397,148	55.11%	Yes	November 2016
Mardin Metropolitan	Mardin	180,697	52.2%	Yes	November 2016
Van Metropolitan	Van	239,861	53.83%	Yes	November 2016

Sources: Human Rights Joint Platform, Peoples' Democratic Party, YSK.

Table 5: District Municipalities Won by the HDP in 2019

District	Province	HDP Votes	HDP Vote %	Trustee Appointed	Date of Appointment
Diyadin	Agri	4,385	56.82%	Yes	July 2020
Dogubayazit	Agri	20,612	68.39%	No	
Patnos	Agri	11,054	44.93%	No	
Batman Center	Batman	120,014	66.03%	Yes	March 2020
Kozluk	Batman	6,359	49.32%	No	
Guroymak	Bitlis	4,358	41.94%	Yes	March 2020
Baglar*	Diyarbakir	116,369	70.34%	No	
Bismil	Diyarbakir	39,366	71.43%	Yes	October 2019
Cinar	Diyarbakir	13,968	43.07%	No	
Dicle	Diyarbakir	8,980	50.86%	No	
Egil	Diyarbakir	5,757	51.37%	Yes	March 2020
Ergani	Diyarbakir	33,234	55.85%	Yes	March 2020
Hazro	Diyarbakir	3,856	52.61%	Yes	November 2019
Kayapinar	Diyarbakir	104,690	66.35%	Yes	October 2019
Kocakoy	Diyarbakir	5,292	61.67%	Yes	October 2019
Kulp	Diyarbakir	8,866	49.97%	Yes	September 2019
Lice	Diyarbakir	10,898	77.73%	Yes	March 2020
Silvan	Diyarbakir	29,449	75.69%	Yes	March 2020
Sur	Diyarbakir	29,847	60.76%	Yes	December 2019
Yenisehir	Diyarbakir	55,677	62.32%	Yes	November 2019

Karacoban	Erzurum	5,417	54.61%	No	
Karayazi	Erzurum	7,789	61.83%	Yes	September 2019
Tekman*	Erzurum	5,176	48.53%	No	
Hakkari Center	Hakkari	19,199	59.97%	Yes	October 2019
Yuksekoa	Hakkari	20,250	66.18%	Yes	October 2019
Igdir Center	Igdir	22,227	50.10%	Yes	May 2020
Kars Center	Kars	12,192	29.58%	Yes	October 2020
Derik	Mardin	19,944	69.34%	Yes	November 2019
Kiziltepe	Mardin	79,239	70.45%	Yes	November 2019
Mazidagi	Mardin	9,579	56.40%	Yes	November 2019
Nusaybin	Mardin	34,666	77.42%	Yes	October 2019
Savur	Mardin	5,765	48.02%	Yes	November 2019
Bulanik	Mus	6,294	55.06%	Yes	December 2019
Varto	Mus	2,048	44.98%	Yes	December 2019
Suruc	Sanliurfa	25,767	59.36%	Yes	November 2019
Baykan	Siirt	902	27.74%	Yes	May 2020
Kurtalan	Siirt	8,096	50.08%	Yes	May 2020
Siirt Center	Siirt	33,227	48.36%	Yes	May 2020
Cizre	Sirnak	38,238	77.42%	Yes	October 2019
Idil	Sirnak	8,275	73.84%	Yes	November 2019
Silopi	Sirnak	30,147	73.16%	No	
Baskale	Van	15,059	73.32%	Yes	December 2019
Caldiran*	Van	12,713	53%	No	
Edremit*	Van	31,094	53.81%	No	

Ercis	Van	35,619	49.71%	Yes	October 2019
Ipekyolu	Van	76,372	54.47%	Yes	November 2019
Muradiye	Van	8,838	42.26%	Yes	December 2019
Ozalp	Van	18,649	75.04%	Yes	December 2019
Saray	Van	5,174	61.38%	Yes	November 2019
Tusba*	Van	33,114	52.93%	No	

Sources: Anadolu Agency, Human Rights Joint Platform, Peoples' Democratic Party, TRT News.

* Denotes a municipality wherein the elected mayor was denied their mandate in 2019

Table 6: Metropolitan Municipalities Won by the HDP in 2019

District	Province	HDP Votes	HDP Vote %	Trustee Appointed	Date of Appointment
Diyarbakir Metropolitan	Diyarbakir	490,571	62.93%	Yes	August 2019
Mardin Metropolitan	Mardin	208,854	56.24%	Yes	August 2019
Van Metropolitan	Van	260,495	53.83%	Yes	August 2019

Sources: Anadolu Agency, Human Rights Joint Platform, Peoples' Democratic Party, TRT News.