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Middle East Brief

Mayors and Municipalities: How Local Government Shapes Kurdish Politics in Turkey

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The cities of southeast Turkey have been in the forefront of pro-Kurdish politics in recent years. The armed conflict between the PKK (*Partîya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, the Kurdistan Workers' Party) and the Republic of Turkey has been at the center of Turkey's Kurdish question. In the 1970s, rural populations provided crucial early support for the PKK; but by the late 1980s, the peasant base had begun to erode through village evacuations, internal displacement, and substantial new migrations from rural to urban areas. Yet, despite the destruction of its peasant base, the pro-Kurdish movement successfully sustained its power in the southeast.

This Brief argues that the key to this exceptional, historic success was how pro-Kurdish parties came to control municipal government and transform urban space using municipal power. The southeastern city of Diyarbakır—the symbolic capital of the Kurdish movement—was administered by pro-Kurdish political parties from 1999 to 2016. During this time, the parties sustained Kurdish mobilization and successfully built powerful blocs of Kurdish supporters in the city, notwithstanding the existence of different interest groups within Kurdish society as well as the strong coercive measures undertaken by different state institutions against Kurdish politics.[1] Thanks to the urban sites of engagement they created—from women's organizations to public parks—members of seemingly incompatible identity clusters, such as LGBTQ and religious groups, were able to find common ground in their shared Kurdish identity. The pro-Kurdish municipalities not only brought public services to cities,[2] but also elevated Kurdish political identity in every service they established.

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A crucial factor in the success of pro-Kurdish parties was thus their ability to make extensive use of urban resources while bringing diverse local components—youth and women's organizations, unions, political associations, traders and businessmen—together in the urban space.[3] This Brief argues that urban politics and municipal control over cities in the southeast has been the key to Kurdish mobilization—and that the recent government clampdown on municipal power risks jeopardizing the gains of the Kurdish movement in Turkey as a whole.

A Brief History of Pro-Kurdish Parties in Turkey

Kurds—the largest minority in Turkey—make up around 18 percent of the population.[4] But since the founding of the Republic in 1923, Kurds have been subjected to campaigns of assimilation, suppression, and everyday violence, including a policy of denying the existence of a Kurdish ethnic community, heavily militarized surveillance of Kurdish territories, bans on Kurdish language and symbols, and restricted political representation, as well as the persecution of activists, politicians, and ordinary civilians. For much of the twentieth century, the Kurdish movement therefore adopted alternative forms of political, social, and armed action to promote Kurdish autonomy and identity.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the young Republic witnessed a series of revolts by Kurdish tribes, almost all of which were brutally suppressed by the central state. The following years were known as the "decades of silence" and ended in the 1960s, when Kurdish unrest resumed as part of the rising leftist opposition in Turkey.[5] Engagement with left-wing political organizations provided new institutional platforms that enabled Kurdish activists to articulate demands for justice and equality, to develop new social and political networks, and thereby to challenge both state authorities and the traditional feudal Kurdish leadership.[6]

Throughout the 1960s, Kurdish intelligentsia, activists, students, and politicians involved with left-wing political parties were frequently detained and imprisoned. Although legal and juridical repression against Kurds increased, the Kurdish movement itself continued to grow. From the end of the 1960s, however, the movement gradually split from the mainstream of Turkish socialism as Kurdish activists moved beyond questions of justice and underdevelopment to focus on Kurds' cultural and national oppression. Although Kurdish activists began to engage in electoral politics under the auspices of socialist parties in the mid-1970s, they nevertheless began to promote a specifically pro-Kurdish agenda and to mobilize pro-Kurdish groups. At the same time, a more radical discourse of "national liberation" began to emerge among some pro-Kurdish organizations. The PKK, which has historically operated throughout the mountainous Kurdish-majority regions of southeastern Turkey and northern Iraq, was one of the most important of these radical organizations in Turkey.[7]

The dramatic escalation of violence between armed PKK militias and Turkish military forces in the rural southeast in the 1980s forced many Kurds to flee their homes for major cities such as Diyarbakır and Batman in the east, Adana and Mersin in the south, and Istanbul and Izmir in the west. After their social, cultural, and infrastructural needs in the rural peripheries had been ignored for decades by successive Turkish governments, Kurds began to populate urban centers. In the southeast, the urban population rose sharply: In particular, the population of Diyarbakır almost doubled. The influx of new residents and their active participation in everyday political life made Kurdishness more visible in the cities

and politicized Kurdish society, leading to new political circumstances in the southeast and across the country.

In the 1970s, the Kurdish movement began to have a say within the other leftist parties. But these parties soon fell short in meeting demands such as the right to Kurdish identity and education in the Kurdish language. Eventually, the Kurdish movement established its own parties. In June 1990, the first legally recognized Kurdish political party in Turkey, the People's Labor Party (HEP), openly committed itself to advancing democracy, freedom, and human rights for Kurds in Turkey.[8] Members of the party nevertheless participated in elections under the aegis of the leftist Social Democratic Populist Party (SHP) owing to the possibility of falling below the election threshold. A major challenge for all pro-Kurdish parties was the 10-percent-of-the-national-vote threshold for parliamentary elections, which had been introduced in 1983 by the military government of the day. So even though pro-Kurdish parties were able to participate in elections and won the majority of votes in the southeast, they were not able to gain seats in the parliament because they often failed to meet the minimum threshold at the national level.[9] This requirement incentivized the creation of party coalitions that could win votes from a significant portion of the electorate.

Beyond this impediment, the pro-Kurdish parties frequently encountered other restrictions. Several times, parties were closed down, their property seized, and activists and party members detained and arrested, or even shot. On several occasions, however, when the Turkish constitutional court closed down a pro-Kurdish party, its members simply created a new organization to replace it. By the time the People's Labor Party (HEP) was shut down in July 1993, for example, its chairman and the majority of its members had joined the newly formed Democracy Party (DEP). When the constitutional court closed down the DEP in 1994, it was in turn replaced by the People's Democracy Party (HADEP). HADEP was itself closed by the court in 2003. Another pro-Kurdish party, the Democratic People's Party (DEHAP) was founded in 1997 and then replaced in 2005 by the Democratic Society Party (DTP), which was then dissolved by a court order just four years later. Prior to the closure, several members of the movement founded the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), to which many DTP members transferred. The BDP thereafter provided the foundation for establishing a new party, the People's Democratic Party (HDP), in 2012.

Importantly, although these parties—HEP, DEP, HADEP, DEHAP, DTP, BDP, and HDP—exhibited some differences in their political programs, each of them was initially founded, in a context hostile to pro-Kurdish parties, as a substitute for its immediate predecessor. Despite legal interruptions, the very same leadership would often manage the new party—if those party members had not already been detained themselves.

Overall, between 1994 and 2007, there was no official pro-Kurdish party represented in the Turkish parliament on account of the 10% election threshold. But despite the party's absence from Parliament, the pro-Kurdish movement consistently won power in local elections. Municipal control provided financial, infrastructural, and social resources to pro-Kurdish parties that they could not access from the national level.[10] The pro-Kurdish municipalities established neighborhood councils and local associations, each tied to district councils and city councils. These councils and associations helped the party develop strong ties between civil society and political society. In an environment that prevented political representation and obstructed conducting politics at the national level, municipal power became a crucial tool for pro-Kurdish parties to visibly engage in politics and mobilize support.

Control over Cities

Turkey's cities are governed by two parallel administrative systems: 81 governors (each one appointed by the central government in the capital, Ankara) and 1,391 municipalities (all led by mayors elected for five-year terms).[11] Turkish cities are at the same time units of the central government with their principal agencies (district chief, city and district managers) tied to the state-appointed governor and also clusters of multiple, locally-elected municipalities.

The primary duties of municipalities include urban preservation and planning, housing, zoning, water, sewage, transport, and environmental services. Providing cultural and artistic resources to the residents of the city is also part of the municipality's responsibilities. For its part, however, the state generally sees local administration as an extension of the central government. Political life tends to function smoothly in cities where elected municipal officials belong to the party that is in charge nationally; where municipalities are controlled by an opposition party, cities can be sites of intense rivalry, and even antagonism, between opposing ideologies. As a result, municipal authorities have often been hotbeds of political contention in Turkey.

These tensions between central and local power in municipal government became more pronounced in Turkey after the 1970s, as the pace of urbanization accelerated.[12] In 1984, cities with populations over 750,000 were granted the status of "metropolitan" municipalities, which made them eligible for additional government funding while also significantly enhancing the political status and authority of mayors. Indeed, in addition to increasing the financial resources of municipal administrations and expanding the scope of their responsibilities,[13] one of the main objectives of these reforms was to make municipalities more independent of the central government.[14] Given the large concentration of voters in urban centers, political parties came to view local governments—and, therefore, local elections—as critical to their overall national success. Indeed, holding power in municipalities, particularly in the large metropolitan cities, has come to be interpreted by the general public as a sign that a party is a rising political force.

In the 1990s, the Islamist movement used its success in municipal elections to embark on a wider project of "Islamizing" society.[15] Parties such as RP (the Welfare Party) used their control of local administration to build connections to civil society, lending special support to groups that were aligned with their political objectives and ideology. In doing so, they effectively created Islamist municipalities that Turkish sociologist Cihan Tuğal has described as "institutional vanguards of a sociopolitical project which attack[ed] the established order."[16] Much like these 1990s Islamists who employed municipal power to form pro-Islamist blocs that stood against the central government, Kurdish municipal administrations employed similar tactics in the 2000s and 2010s to strengthen Kurdish identity and political mobilization.

This strategy can be clearly seen in Diyarbakır where, from 1987 to 2002, an emergency law enabled governors to exert extraordinary power and control over Kurdish political and social life.[17] These powers allowed security forces to search homes or party offices, ban public meetings, and order the evacuation of villages. In fact, the emergency law took several responsibilities away from mayors and granted them to the governors, who consequently behaved as though they wielded primary authority over the municipalities in their city. After the emergency law was lifted in 2002, pro-Kurdish municipal administrations sought to bolster and to some extent re-create Kurdish society through an extraordinarily broad range of urban initiatives, ranging from micro-entrepreneurship projects for the urban poor to lucrative contracts for local businesspeople.

From the early 2000s, members of the pro-Kurdish party in municipal power found themselves in a strong position to build ties with civil society in cities such as Diyarbakır, which has over 1.5 million residents. Many party leaders had previous experience working in human rights associations, unions, women's organizations, bar associations, and NGOs: Their connections with these organizations helped the pro-Kurdish party forge strong alliances with a wide-ranging organizational network at the local level.[18] From housing projects that accommodated urban migrants to memorials commemorating the victims of state violence and community undertakings designed to build social trust, new municipal activities were means of mobilizing popular support, politicizing new rural migrants and making them conscious urban supporters of the Kurdish cause, while also cementing ties between society and the pro-Kurdish party. Party programs such as poverty alleviation associations and organizations for Kurdish language and culture also provided public spaces for active political discussion, in which not only could anti-government views be expressed, but also the party's political values of justice, equality, and combating poverty could be introduced to new audiences.

Party members carefully crafted and designed their programs to suit the needs of local communities. In poor immigrant neighborhoods, for example, the party would adopt poverty alleviation initiatives; almost all programs organized by the party in informal settlements were funded from the municipal budget. In middle-class neighborhoods, the party would promote vocational skills development and Kurdish cultural activities. Each program would be guided by local community leaders connected to other city districts through a larger organization they called the "city council." As this city council was also connected to the municipality, the neighborhoods and districts of the city were connected to each other horizontally as well as being vertically connected to the municipality.

Thus, in the poorest neighborhoods of Diyarbakır, the municipality established and operated civil society organizations that tended to serve the needs of rural-to-urban migrants (and so were often gender-segregated); in the rest of the city, it developed cultural centers and extracurricular activity venues. In addition to places it controlled directly, the party also supported a network of formally independent groups that supported the Kurdish cause.

From large-scale civil and political organizations to small-scale neighborhood associations, the party built a strong network of alliances through which these

groupings generally provided support for each other. Most of the time, alliances would form based on a shared ambition for Kurdish identity and autonomy.[19] Through these links coordinated by the pro-Kurdish party of the day, different social groups, from new rural migrants to working class residents, were able to collectively move in the same direction. The associations would frequently collaborate and share resources with the pro-Kurdish party to report human rights violations, mobilize protesters, or organize petitions. Pro-Kurdish party leaders, members, and activists worked face-to-face, street-by-street, and district-by-district on a foundation of personal relationships.[20] Activists associated with the party were matched to residents in their neighborhood by gender, age, and kinship ties, thereby benefiting from existing loyalties between friends and neighbors.

By the early 2000s, the scope of activities undertaken by these associations became increasingly complex, often overtly moving from social and welfare work into the realms of politics and even commerce.[21] Women's organizations, for example, developed from offering support for daily life activities to advocating political empowerment and producing their own sources of income. These income-generating enterprises, often involving cooking and baking, were organized by the municipality and largely depended on women's labor. Across pro-Kurdish municipalities, many local civic organizations, businesses, and restaurants began to explicitly emphasize their Kurdish identity. This urban activism allowed the pro-Kurdish party to enhance Kurdish self-awareness and forge a formidable Kurdish identity in cities across the southeast from Diyarbakır to Batman and Hakkari.[22]

This new regional Kurdish bloc encompassed an extraordinarily wide spectrum of urban residents, including students, merchants, civil servants, housewives, the unemployed, teachers, businesspeople, university professors, and farmers. By the mid-2000s, its support base had expanded to include members of pious communities as well as the middle and upper-middle classes. The pro-Kurdish party had effectively deployed various means of mobilization to recast urban civil society within a new Kurdish identity, laying the foundations of a more unified and coherent expression of what it meant to be Kurdish in contemporary southeastern Turkey.[23]

The Justice and Development Party (AKP) Crackdown on the Pro-Kurdish Municipalities

In 2013, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government initiated a peace process to end the conflict with the PKK. In June 2015, the pro-Kurdish party benefitted partially from the temporary détente and scored a historic victory when it secured 13 percent of the votes in the national election, for the first time exceeding the 10 percent threshold. Yet the peace process was short-lived and ended soon after the election. In July 2015, the two-and-a-half year ceasefire broke down and violence recommenced in the southeast.

After the peace process ended, the PKK and Kurdish youth groups declared "self-rule" and "autonomous neighborhoods" in several districts of cities in the south-east, including six neighborhoods of the historic Sur district of Diyarbakır. In the summer of 2015, these autonomous neighborhoods even established checkpoints and barricades in Kurdish-majority cities. That fall, the Turkish state launched a military intervention against these self-proclaimed autonomous districts. In Diyarbakır, the Turkish army engaged in urban warfare against Kurdish militant groups and PKK guerillas until March 2016. The AKP government then directed a major crackdown on the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP). The courts arrested several top Kurdish politicians and mayors in the region (including HDP co-chairs Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ). The AKP government ousted nearly 40 municipal administrations controlled by the HDP and replaced top HDP city officials with its own appointees. Since 2016, over 90 pro-Kurdish mayors and municipality officials have been detained, while several other former municipality officials have fled the country.[24]

Many of the charges against the municipality officials were for offences such as "establishing an organization to commit a crime," "being a member of an armed terrorist organization" (the PKK), and "committing a crime on behalf of the organization." After dismissing the elected HDP mayors, the AKP government appointed unelected bureaucrats as mayors in Diyarbakır and Kurdish cities across the southeast. As soon as they arrived at their offices, the newly-appointed mayors dismissed hundreds of staff members by emergency decree which meant that they not only lost their jobs, but could never be rehired or work again in the public sector. The new administrators set out to erase all evidence of Kurdish identity from the cities. They removed any signage and symbolism

associated with Kurdish language and culture; shut down NGOs, cultural and social centers, and associations linked with the party; and terminated the HDP's urban projects and replaced them with their own social and cultural centers.

Following these developments, the pro-Kurdish party was re-elected in several Kurdish cities in 2019, but did not remain in power for long. In the span of a few months, the courts once again detained pro-Kurdish party mayors; the AKP replaced them with its own bureaucrats. More recently, in mid-2021, the Chief Public Prosecutor's Office of the Supreme Court of Appeals filed a lawsuit demanding the closure of the HDP on the grounds that "the HDP is the focus of terrorist activities, and HDP members aim to disrupt and destroy the indivisible national integrity of the state."[25] In the 850-page indictment, a political ban was requested for some 500 party members, including the party's co-chairs, Mithat Sancar and Pervin Buldan. The Court demanded a full political ban that would prevent party members from all political activity in general. This ban was intended to prevent the Kurdish movement from repeating its old tactic of establishing another party after the previous one was shut down. By targeting not only the formal party apparatus but Kurdish politicians themselves, this new development has serious implications for the movement's ability to survive in the future.

What Future for the Pro-Kurdish Movement in the Cities?

Some journalists and commentators have argued that the comprehensive ban on Kurdish politicians might, in the words of one policy analyst, "very well backfire [and] mobilize Kurdish voters to support the opposition."[26] It may be true that the current policies could bring out the vote for the HDP: Kurds might indeed vote for the HDP, or for another opposition party endorsed by the HDP, in the 2023 national elections or the 2024 local elections. However, this would not necessarily mean civil society would be restored and Kurdish society mobilized on a sustained basis. The comprehensive political ban will add another layer of suppression onto the party and its local representatives, leading to severe difficulties in reviving civil society organizations and maintaining activism in Kurdish cities over the long term.

The 2019 local elections provided a glimpse of what the possible consequences of the comprehensive ban might be. At the time of those elections, so many party members had been imprisoned or politically blacklisted that the party was experiencing a shortage of experienced local personnel to appoint to positions of responsibility. Instead, it decided to bring outsiders into leadership positions in the major southeastern cities. The HDP ran its campaign with limited resources: The party did not compete in elections in every city, instead focusing on crucial Kurdish cities where it wanted to sustain its power. But even though the HDP won the 2019 local elections, the party subsequently experienced severe difficulties in mobilizing its supporters. Almost all of the channels that the party had relied on in the past, including women's organizations and neighborhood associations, were shut down. And the party did not have a chance to reorganize, as its municipal power had been taken away.

The AKP's military, legal, and political persecution of the pro-Kurdish movement has created an atmosphere of fear that has discouraged, but not destroyed, active participation in Kurdish politics. Even if the AKP lost power, the future of the Kurdish movement would not necessarily be rosy: The rest of the Turkish opposition largely shares the AKP's perspective on the Kurdish cause. In February 2022, for example, six different opposition parties—the Republican People's Party (CHP), the İYİ Party, the Felicity Party (SP), the Democrat Party (DP), the Future Party, and the DEVA Party—issued a joint statement against the AKP government, but did not think to include the HDP, which in the 2018 national elections had received the second most votes of any opposition party (only the CHP received more). Despite some nuanced differences, Turkish political parties are still united only in their opposition to the Kurdish movement, which narrows down future pathways for the Kurdish movement. An additional comprehensive blacklisting of Kurdish politicians will restrict once more the party's municipal and local power and its urban networks and avenues for activism, thereby creating an even rougher passage for the Kurdish movement to navigate.

Endnotes

1   For the effectiveness of political parties in creating coherent blocs see Cedric De Leon, Manali Desai, and Cihan Z. Tuğal, *Building Blocs: How Parties Organize Society* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 4.

2   Nicole F. Watts, *Activists in Office: Kurdish Politics and Protest in Turkey* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010).

3   Muna Güvenç, "Constructing Narratives of Kurdish Nationalism in the Urban Space of Diyarbakir Diyarbakir, Turkey," *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 23.1 (2011): 25–40.

4   "Religion and Public Life: Kurds in Turkey" (Harvard Divinity School).

5   For descriptions of the "decades of silence," see David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000); Paul J. White, *Primitive Rebels or Revolutionary Modernisers? The Kurdish Nationalist Movement in Turkey* (London: Zed, 2000), 200; and Mohammed M. A. Ahmed and Michael M. Gunter, *The Evolution of Kurdish Nationalism* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 2006).

6   Nicole F. Watts, "Silence and Voice: Turkish Policies and Kurdish Resistance in the Mid-20th Century," in *The Evolution of Kurdish Nationalism*, ed. Ahmed and Gunter, 52–77.

7   During this period, the PKK announced a unilateral cease-fire on multiple occasions, in 1993, 1995, 1998, 1999, 2006, 2009, and finally in 2013, this last cease-fire ending in 2015. Hüseyin Yayman, *Türkiye'nin Kürt Sorunu Hafızası* [Turkey's Memory of the Kurdish Question], (İstanbul: Doğan Kitap, 2011).

8   Although they frequently sustained a link with the PKK (the Kurdistan Workers' Party), Turkey's first pro-Kurdish parties cannot be regarded simply as fronts for the PKK. See Erdem Yörük, "Welfare Provision as Political Containment: The Politics of Social Assistance and the Kurdish Conflict in Turkey," *Politics & Society* 40.4 (2012): 517–47, and Nicole F. Watts, "Re-Considering State-Society Dynamics in Turkey's Kurdish Southeast," *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 10 (December 2009).

9   In September 2021, the election threshold was reduced to 7 percent.

10   Watts, *Activists in Office*.

11   These divisions are based on geographical features, economic conditions, and public service requirements (City Administration Law accepted in 1949, no. 5442.). The cities have 1,397 municipalities, thirty of which, including Diyarbakır, are metropolitan municipalities.

12   Andrew Finkel, "Municipal Politics and the State in Contemporary Turkey," in *Turkish State, Turkish Society*, ed. Andrew Finkel and Nükhet Sirman (London: Routledge, 1990), 185– 218.

13   Nihal İncioğlu, "Local Elections and Electoral Behavior," in *Politics, Parties, and Elections in Turkey*, ed. Sabri Sayari and Yilmaz R. Esmer (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2002), 73–90.

14   Metin Heper, *Dilemmas of Decentralization: Municipal Government in Turkey* (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 1986).

15   Cihan Z. Tuğal, "The Urban Dynamism of Islamic Hegemony: Absorbing Squatter Creativity in Istanbul," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 29.3 (2009): 423–37.

16   See Cihan Tuğal, *Passive Revolution: Absorbing the Islamic Challenge to Capitalism* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

17   It is important to note that the Emergency Law (OHAL) was also applied to 12 other Kurdish-majority cities in the region.

18   Watts, *Activists in Office*.

19   Joost Jongerden and Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya, "The Kurdistan Workers Party and a New Left in Turkey: Analysis of the Revolutionary Movement in Turkey through the PKK's Memorial Text on Haki Karer," *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 14 (2012): 1-20.

20   Tuğal, *Passive Revolution*.

21   For a discussion of intertwined activities in squatter settlements, see Abdou Maliq Simone, *For the City Yet to Come: Changing African Life in Four Cities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

22   Cedric de Leon et al., *Building Blocs*.

23   Muna Güvenç, "Propositions for the Emancipatory Potential of Urban Spectacle," *City* 23.3 (2019): 342–65.

24   Human Rights Watch, "Turkey: Crackdown on Kurdish Opposition," March 20, 2017.

25   BBC News Türkçe, "HDP'ye kapatma davasının iddianamesinde neler var, süreç bundan sonra nasıl işleyecek?" [What is in the indictment of the HDP closure case, and how will the process work from now on?], March 18 2021.

26   Daren Butler, "Analysis: Move to Ban Kurdish Party Shows Erdogan's March to Nationalism," *Reuters*, March 19, 2021.

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