

Resistance works! – a weekly news review

International commentators were quick to present last Sunday's local elections in Turkey as democracy in action, and Erdoğan took up the narrative; but it soon unravelled as the state tried to disqualify the elected DEM Party mayor of Van and replace him with the ruling party's candidate. Mass protests forced the authorities to back down, but while we celebrate the power of resistance in Van, we can't forget other, less noticed, undermining of the election - especially the mass transportation of soldiers to vote in areas where they could tip the balance against the DEM Party.

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Wednesday afternoon saw the dramatic finish to three days of roller-coaster politics following Turkey's local elections. In the face of mass protest and international opprobrium, the Turkish authorities backed down and reversed their decision to deny the mayorship of Van (Wan) to the candidate chosen by

its people. By Thursday morning, the only mass activity on the city's streets was local people [sweeping away the debris](#) of the previous days of protest, under the coordination of the Union of Chambers of Turkish Engineers and Architects.

They were [joined by the new co-mayors](#) and, through dustpans and brooms, the people demonstrated their link to, and affection for, their city, and swept it clean from government occupation.

Despite many challenges, the Pro-Kurdish Peoples' Equality and Democracy (DEM) Party had achieved a [5.7% share](#) of the national vote, matching the 2009 high for a pro-Kurdish party in local elections, and won 81 mayorships – three Metropolitan Municipalities (Diyarbakir, Mardin, and Van), seven cities, 65 provinces, and six neighbourhoods.

Their return to an independent stance – with no tactical support for another party – and their emphasis on grassroots engagement appear to have been rewarded.

The eventual retreat of the state authorities in Van was a further, hugely important win, but it is only one step in the long-drawn-out struggle for democracy in Turkey. Just in this election, there have been many other [attacks on democracy](#), and eleven municipalities have seen their democratic choice subverted by voters transported from elsewhere. Local people who gave majority support to DEM Party are thus forced to face the prospect of five more years under the AKP-MHP [Justice and Development Party and Nationalist Movement Party alliance] yoke, locally as well as nationally.

A semblance of democracy

To understand this historically important week, let's go back to Election Day last Sunday. In most places, though certainly not all, voting was carried out with few problems, and the surprise result – which saw the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) take the biggest share of the vote, winning control of new municipalities, and comfortably retaining control of Istanbul

and Ankara – allowed people across the world to greet the day as an exercise in democracy.

The [Press Statement](#) from the delegation of election observers sent by the Council of Europe's Congress of Local and Regional Authorities raised concerns over the wider political environment – [the lack of press freedom and of judicial independence](#) – and warned against the usurpation of elected mayors, as happened after the previous local elections. However, with respect to the day itself, they found little to criticise, and the news story about the press statement published on the Council's website was titled "Local elections in Türkiye overall well organised and respecting the will of the voters".

President Erdoğan responded to his unprecedented and surprising loss of support by stressing the democracy theme. With his [post-election address to the nation](#), he declared "The victor of this election is democracy". In a conciliatory speech he promised his Justice and Development Party (AKP) would engage in self-criticism – though he couldn't resist a swipe at the "servants of a separatist organisation" in the Kurdish areas, and repeated his promise to deal "the fatal blow to the terrorist organisation," meaning the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

In their excitement at the re-emergence of the CHP, international commentators focused on Istanbul and, as usual, gave little attention to what was happening in the Kurdish southeast. Had they looked further, they might have discovered that, even for Election Day, the democratic narrative begins to fall apart.

Transported voters

The DEM Party has long been warning that voter lists in Kurdish areas were being manipulated. Bringing in voters from elsewhere is an old trick, but it was being done on a large scale and without any attempt to hide what was happening. Combing through the official records, party researchers found [many addresses where hundreds](#) or even thousands of names were listed. The party challenged this with the electoral authorities, but their challenge was rejected.

There is a provision that soldiers and police can vote where they have been deployed, which can anyway make a difference in places that are essentially under military occupation. But what happened in Sunday's election goes way beyond that. Many more soldiers and police were deliberately transported to vote in targeted municipalities where this could tip the balance against the DEM Party. Thousands of names were systematically registered in these municipalities, and, on the day, [busloads of young men](#) of military age were filmed arriving at the polling stations. There were also stories of soldiers only discovering at the last minute that, without their knowledge, they had been registered to vote far from where they actually lived, and of people being [brought to vote despite being registered in other places](#).

In the event, the size of the turnout for the DEM Party ensured that this manipulation was not always successful, but the party has produced a [list of eleven municipalities](#) where the number of "transported voters" exceeded the margin by which the DEM Party lost, so robbing the people of their electoral choice. These include the central areas of Şirnak (Şirnex) and Kars (Qers). In Kars, where it is calculated that 3,800 people were brought in to vote, transported voters allowed control to be taken by the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), while in the other ten places control was taken by the AKP.

That all this could take place so openly with hardly a comment from other parties within Turkey or from international politicians and media is a sad indictment of the more general neglect of the Kurdish situation.

The DEM Party attempted to warn people of what was happening – there have been numerous articles in Medya News – and they produced a dossier back in February that gave the details of problematic addresses they had uncovered. That dossier was sent, among others, to the Council of Europe. However, rather than verify the evidence given to them, the Council's delegation chose simply to visit polling stations chosen at random. There is a role for random inspections, of course, but these can only look at a tiny sample of the whole, and should not be at the expense of investigating evidence of serious manipulation.

The DEM Party has, again, raised many formal complaints over the manipulations, but without wider acknowledgement and interest, the authorities can easily reject them. It is important, therefore, that in Kars a [joint statement](#) was made in front of the courthouse by the DEM Party and the CHP, and two smaller parties, denouncing the practice of transported votes and calling for the “stillborn election” in Kars to be annulled. The CHP’s Kars Provincial Chairman, Onur Ulutaşdemir, has [observed](#), “the picture I saw at Atatürk Secondary School in Cumhuriyet District on the election day was very frightening. There were thousands of soldiers in the school garden. I tried to talk to the arriving soldiers, none of them gave me an answer... Voters who do not live in Kars were brought for a day for the election and they voted in a way that would affect Kars for the next five years. Perhaps it will also affect Kars for the next thirty years.”

The mayor of Van

By contrast, the attempted usurpation of the city of Van, with more than half a million inhabitants, could not pass under the radar. The DEM Party won all fourteen municipalities in the province, including the Metropolitan Municipality of Van, where their candidate received 55% of the vote – double the 27% received by the runner-up candidate from the AKP. The DEM Party operates a co-leadership system, with a woman and a man sharing all leadership roles. This includes co-mayors, but the system is not officially accepted, so one of these co-mayors has to be nominated as the mayor officially recognised by the state. In Van, the candidate chosen by the DEM Party for the official mayoral post was Abdullah Zeydan.

Zeydan had been elected as an MP for the HDP (the DEM Party’s predecessor) in 2015, and in 2016, along with other Kurdish parliamentarians, he was [arrested and imprisoned](#) under Turkey’s notoriously elastic terrorism laws. He was sentenced in 2018 by Diyarbakır 5th High Criminal Court, but the Appeals Court demanded a retrial, and in January 2022, the same Diyarbakır court ruled for his release. Zeydan then appealed for the return of his civil rights, and in April 2023 the Diyarbakır court agreed to this. There was no appeal from the state, and the restoration of rights was finalised. When Zeydan was chosen to stand for mayor, he submitted all his documents,

including those pertaining to his return of rights, to the Supreme Election Council (YSK), which approved his candidacy. Then, at the eleventh hour – five minutes before the end of the working day on the Friday before the election, Zeydan was informed that his civil rights had been revoked by the same Diyarbakir court that had restored them, at the instigation of the Ministry of Justice. After the election, on the 2 April, on the basis of this revocation, the Van Provincial Electoral Board decided by majority vote not to certify Zeydan's election, but to give the mayoralty instead to the AKP candidate.

This was essentially a [repeat of what had happened](#) after the local elections in 2019, when six Kurdish mayors were replaced in this way.

48 of the remaining 59 HDP mayors elected at that time (Including the mayor of Van) were later removed and replaced by government-appointed trustees, with many of the deposed mayors being imprisoned or forced into exile. Of the cohort of HDP mayors elected in 2014, 97 out of 102 were removed and replaced by trustees. The basis for all these removals and trusteeships was an [unconstitutional presidential decree](#) brought in during the Emergency that was declared following the 2016 attempted coup. The decree is still in place and the threat of removal and prison hangs over every elected DEM Party mayor. Everyone is watching to see what happens this time.

This week's "coup" in Van, as the DEM Party described it, brought hundreds of thousands of angry people onto the streets: not just in Van, and not just DEM Party supporters. CHP leader, Özgür Özel, tweeted "After the certificate of election was not given to the candidate who won the election in Van, our MPs decided to defend the will of the people, show solidarity and follow the events on the spot". The main protest rally included speakers from the CHP and the Workers' Party of Turkey (TİP). Messages of support for Zeydan and criticism of the Turkish authorities were [shared](#) by international politicians, including the EU's Turkey Rapporteur, Nacho Sánchez Amor, and the international press [registered](#) their concern.

Protesters were [met by pressurised](#) water, gas, rubber bullets at close range, and beatings – including the beating and torture of children. In Hakkari,

protestors were attacked by armed men, who were accompanied by the police. A 15-day ban on protests was announced for Van. According to Interior Ministry figures, 340 people were detained over fourteen provinces, and the DEM Party noted the additional detention of 125 lawyers.

The protests were still growing when the authorities clearly recognised that they had misjudged the extent of the anger that their dismissal of democracy would provoke. On Wednesday, the YSK responded to the objection submitted by the DEM Party, and – also by majority vote – overturned the decision of the local board. The Certificate of Election was finally given to Zeydan. Resistance had worked, and mass protests were replaced by mass celebration.

The AKP candidate has accepted defeat, but the Council of Judges and Prosecutors has [launched an investigation](#) into the Diyarbakir Court for restoring Zeydan's rights last year. The government is trying to control perceptions around their retreat, with Erdoğan portraying the protesters as terrorists who have to be controlled for the sake of democracy. The government is trying to control perceptions around their retreat, with Erdoğan [portraying the protesters](#) as terrorists who have to be controlled for the sake of democracy.

More attacks on democracy

This is not the end of Erdoğan's party's attempts to subvert democracy. In Urfa, the Provincial Election Board has called for new elections in Hilvan and Halfeti, which will be held on 2 June. In both these municipalities, the DEM Party won despite reports of criminal attempts by the AKP to subvert the voting.

[In Hilvan](#), the DEM Party received 33.2% of the vote and the AKP 30.7%. On Election Day, a group including the AKP candidate's nephew were filmed burning the contents of two ballot boxes. When they failed to win, the AKP objected to the results and the District Election Board agreed to annul the election, citing the burnt ballots. Their decision was then upheld by the Provincial Board. It is not just the DEM Party that has complained in Hilvan. The local CHP MP observed on his social media account, "It is clear as day

that this incident was carried out to create evidence in order to ensure the cancellation of the election.”

[In Halfeti](#), the DEM Party’s elected co-mayor recounts that on Election Day the AKP candidate, accompanied by hundreds of supporters, entered polling stations where they beat up officials and carried out mass voting in several different places. However, this was not enough to prevent the DEM Party receiving a 906-vote majority (39.5% of the vote as opposed to 35% for the AKP). When their tactics failed, the AKP filed an objection, citing irregular voting and invalid votes, and the compliant Provincial Election Board accepted the objection and cancelled the election results.

[In Bitlis](#), the AKP was said to have beaten the DEM Party by just 198 votes, a difference of less than one percentage point in vote share. At the same time, 2018 votes were declared invalid, and there were reports of valid DEM Party votes being misallocated. Even the DEM Party’s request for a recount was rejected, and they have appealed to the Supreme Election Council.

Changing control

Where DEM Party co-mayors have taken office, they have immediately made clear that they will operate in a very different way from the government trustees who had previously controlled many of the municipalities. Their first acts have been literally to break down the barriers separating them from their fellow citizens. In [Suruç](#), a crane removed concrete barriers from in front of the municipal building; in [Viranşehir](#), wire fencing and an x-ray scanner were taken away; and in [Akdeniz](#) the co-mayors themselves took up screw drivers to take down the pompous doors of the municipal offices.

From the government side, some of the trustees carried out a final spending spree with municipal resources before relinquishing control. In [Cizre](#) (Cizîr) the outgoing trustee spent nearly half of the money for the April budget in her final hour in office, as well as leaving the municipality 772 million TL (over €22 million) [in debt](#). The trustee for [Kayapınar](#) transferred the municipality’s libraries into state control just before the elections.

[In Batman](#) (Êlih), where the DEM Party won with nearly two thirds of the vote, the state expressed their frustration by flying a military fighter-jet low over the city centre to show who was in charge.

The CHP and the Kurds

There is no space here for a wider analysis of the results, but before leaving the subject of the election, it is important to look at the significance, from a Kurdish perspective, of the renewed support for the CHP. The majority of Kurds in the western cities appear to have cast anti-Erdoğan votes for the CHP rather than support a DEM Party candidate who had no chance of winning, but there is no guarantee that a stronger CHP will make Kurdish lives easier. It is a party with a very wide spectrum of views, including a social democratic streak; however, it is rooted in Kemal Atatürk's Turkish ethnic nationalism, and that is what appeals to many of its supporters. When Erdoğan made peace overtures towards the PKK a decade ago, the CHP berated him for it. It's an uncomfortable thought, but some people will have been happier to vote for the CHP when they didn't have the public support from the pro-Kurdish party that they received in last year's presidential election.

The CHP can see resistance to Erdoğan's authoritarianism as boosting their democratic credentials. When one of their own defeated mayoral candidates [attempted to instigate a similar challenge](#), as in Van, to the eligibility of the DEM Party candidate who beat him, he was promptly expelled from the party – but this was a man who had previously been chosen as the CHP candidate.

It is also a source of concern that if Erdoğan is weakened, he will become more dependent on the support of the ultranationalist MHP, as happened in 2015.

In other news

I have spent so many words on the election; I can do little more than list other important recent news.

In a further victory against Erdoğan, Turkey's Constitutional Court [ruled against the much-criticised](#) law that allowed the state to intervene in NGOs and to replace their officials with trustees.

There are elections coming up in other parts of Kurdistan too. The Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) [announced](#) a week ago that they will hold municipal elections on 30 May. These are an essential part of the new Social Contract agreed last December, but any planning in North and East Syria (NES) is difficult with Turkey still promising further attacks.

In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), elections will take place on 10 June under the auspices of the Federal Government. The deadline for submitting candidate lists has now passed, and it is confirmed that the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) will be [boycotting the elections](#), as threatened.

Last week, I recalled the trial of four Turkish men accused of a foiled plot to kill two prominent Kurdish leaders in Brussels in 2017; and I noted the lawyer's criticism that the failure of the court to reach a guilty verdict was a political decision not a legal one. It is argued that the evidence shows that the plot was orchestrated by the Turkish secret service and linked to the 2013 assassinations of three Kurdish women in Paris. This week, it was revealed that [two of the men have been found guilty](#) in absentia on appeal. The Belgian De Morgen newspaper describes them as "Two Turks who were in close contact with Turkish security forces", but they were only given 5-year sentences, and it seems unlikely that the authorities will investigate the plot further.

Three quarters of a century ago last Thursday, Abdullah Öcalan was [born in a village](#) in Urfa.

In very different circumstances, the same day also saw the founding of NATO, which can be held responsible for many of the difficulties faced by the Kurds, and by many other peoples across the world.

Kurds tweeted #RojbûnaMePîrozBe – birthday greetings not just to Öcalan, but birthday greetings to us – because Öcalan, and the movement he created, are seen as inspiring the rebirth of the Kurdish people.

Öcalan has been in prison for a third of his life, and for the last three years has been deprived of any contact with the outside world. Political prisoners who have been on rotating hunger strike to demand his freedom, [announced](#) on his birthday that they were ending their hunger strike and moving on to a new tactic of boycotting courts, family visits and phone calls, under the slogan “Living in the same conditions as our Leader”.

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