

# Kurdish political movement under crackdown in Turkey

## The case of the HDP



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# **Kurdish political movement under crackdown in Turkey**

## **The case of the HDP**

### **INTRODUCTION**

**T**he Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), the third largest political party by number of seats in the Turkish Parliament, has come under increasing pressure, with the government jailing its leaders, deputies, local elected representatives and members in large numbers. The HDP, once tapped by the government as an interlocutor with leaders of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)<sup>1</sup> to resolve armed clashes, has become demonized and vilified.

The main reason for the government hammering the HDP was the frustration on the part of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) in their failure to woo Kurdish voters and thus lose the majority in the Turkish Parliament for the first time in their 13 years of rule. The clampdown on the HDP began long before a failed coup bid on July 15, 2016 but intensified in the aftermath under the emergency rule that was extended by the government for the sixth time on January 18, 2018. Representatives of the Kurdish political movement who are involved with the HDP and its affiliates are the ones most affected by the Erdoğan regime's oppression after the unprecedented crackdown on the Gülen movement.<sup>2</sup> Tens of mayors and thousands of HDP members and supporters have been arrested and put in prison.<sup>3</sup> The HDP's Istanbul deputy Filiz Kerestecioğlu brought

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1] The PKK is listed as a terrorist organization by Turkey, the United State and the European Union.

2] Turkey has suspended or dismissed more than 150,000 judges, teachers, doctors, police and other civil servants since July 15, 2016 on real or alleged links to the Gülen movement. Turkey's Justice Ministry announced on July 13, 2017 that 50,510 people have been arrested and 169,013 have been the subject of legal proceedings on coup charges since the failed coup.

The Gülen movement is inspired by US-based Turkish Muslim intellectual Fethullah Gülen, who advocates science education, poverty reduction, community contribution and interfaith and intercultural dialogue. The movement promotes a moderate version of Islam with a heavy emphasis on public service and volunteer work for the community. It remains staunchly opposed to any violence or terrorism in the name of religion or nationalism. Gülen has been a vocal critic of the Turkish government and Turkey's President Erdoğan over massive corruption in the government as well as Turkey's aiding and abetting of radical groups in Syria and other places. Erdoğan launched an unprecedented persecution against Gülen and his followers in December 2013 immediately after a major corruption probe went public and incriminated Erdoğan's family members.

3] Ari Khali, A year after Turkey crackdown, pro-Kurdish party appeals to supreme court, November 2, 2017, Kurdistan 24, <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/02adf5f6-0dcb-44c4-827f-51225ce7ce16>



to mind that during the past year, 27 of 59 lawmakers faced arrest, while 309 trials were held for those in pretrial detention, including Co-chairs Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ.<sup>4</sup> Following the conviction of Yüksekdağ and the stripping of her parliamentary status, Serpil Kemalbay was elected co-chair of the HDP.<sup>5</sup>

Additionally, most of the affiliates of the HDP face politically motivated investigations and prosecutions. This has become so much of a routine that it would prove challenging to keep track of who has been detained, arrested or released. For example, currently, the HDP's Co-chair Demirtaş, along with the HDP's previous Co-chair Yüksekdağ, who had to resign from her position due to a final court ruling, and Diyarbakır Metropolitan Municipality Mayor Gülten Kışanak are all in prison.

The unrelenting pressure on the HDP is not limited to criminal prosecutions and imprisonment. The party, its administrators and members are being subjected to a systematic campaign of defamation and hatred led by Erdoğan, his associates and his propaganda machine. They are often portrayed as terrorists, traitors and pawns of foreign governments as part of demonization efforts by the government.

It can be said that the government's targeting of the HDP intensified during and after the general elections of June 7, 2015. The results showed that the HDP competed for the first

4] Ari Khali, A year after Turkey crackdown, pro-Kurdish party appeals to supreme court, Kurdistan 24, November 2, 2017, <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/02adf5f6-0dcb-44c4-827f-51225ce7ce16>

5] Figen Yüksekdağ'ın yerine seçilen eş başkan belli oldu, Sözcü, May 20, 2017, <http://www.sozcu.com.tr/2017/gundem/figen-yuksekdagin-yerine-secilen-es-baskan-belli-oldu-1860404/>





time as a political party, instead of fielding independent candidates, garnered more votes than many predicted and passed the 10 percent national election threshold to enter Parliament. The party won the highest number of votes it had ever received and won the most seats in the history of the Kurdish political movement. Erdoğan's party lost a record number of voters, causing the AKP to lose the majority to form a single party government for the first time in the 13 years of its rule. The government could not be formed, and Erdoğan called for snap polls on November 1, 2015. The repeat elections were held under a campaign of increased government threats, pressure and intimidation, causing the HDP and nationalists to lose votes. The AKP regained 59 seats and came to power alone.

In this report, SCF investigates the Erdoğan regime's campaign of stigmatizing, demonizing and marginalizing the most substantial Kurdish political movement in Turkey, namely the HDP. It picks up from the date when HDP representatives and AKP ministers came together for the last time, on February 28, 2015, to publicly discuss how to move forward in resolving the Kurdish problem, coming up with a deal known as the Dolmabahçe Agreement. The first chapter covers events that took place after this historic meeting until HDP members started to be detained. The second section discusses impediments to working in politics put in the HDP's way. The third chapter focuses on national and international reactions to the oppression of the Kurdish political movement. Additionally, the silence of the grass roots of the party is also analyzed.



# CHAPTER 1

## AFTER DOLMABAĞÇE

### 1.1. The Dolmabahce Agreement

On February 28, 2015, Istanbul's historic Dolmabahçe Palace was the venue of an important meeting regarding the resolution of the Kurdish problem in Turkey. From the government side Deputy Prime Minister Yalçın Akdoğan, Interior Minister Efkan Ala and AKP parliamentary group deputy chairman Mahir Ünal, and from the HDP, parliamentary group deputy chairpersons Pervin Buldan and Idris Baluken and Istanbul deputy Sırrı Süreyya Önder represented their parties to publicly announce jailed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Öcalan's call to lay down arms. At the end of the meeting, Önder gave a speech in front of the cameras, saying: "These are Öcalan's thoughts regarding the phase that the process has reached: While ending the controversy that has lasted 30 years and moving into permanent peace among us, reaching a democratic solution is our primary goal. The foundation of the principles of an agreement at a minimum is being laid. Therefore, I am inviting the PKK to gather in an extraordinary congress to make a strategic and historic decision on ending the armed struggle. This invitation is an important declaration of will to replace armed struggle with democratic politics."<sup>6</sup> Deputy Prime Minister Akdoğan also stressed that the declaration was significant because it contained a statement about accelerating efforts to abandon weapons and emphasized the importance of democratic politics as a method.<sup>7</sup> For him, due to this statement, the reconciliation process had arrived at a milestone phase.

This meeting came as a surprise to the public, especially after the Kobane incidents, which took place in October 2014. That is because when Kobane, located in the north of Syria, faced a blockade by militants of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), the HDP and other Kurdish groups sought a land corridor through Turkey to help the city's Kurdish fighters against the ISIL militants. However, the AKP government rejected the request. After that, the HDP called for people to take to the streets to protest the Erdoğan government in the face of a lackluster effort on the part of Turkey to help the Kurds in Kobane. According to the government's official records, 35 people<sup>8</sup> lost their lives, while the Human Rights Association, affiliated with the HDP, announced that 46 people had died.<sup>9</sup> The government held the HDP responsible for the people who were killed. As a result, the resolution process was damaged, and therefore the Dolmabahçe

6] "Çözüm sürecinde ortak açıklama: Öcalan'dan silah bırakma çağrısı," Cumhuriyet, February 28, 2015, [http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/video/video/223667/Cozum\\_surecinde\\_ortak\\_aciklama\\_\\_Ocalan\\_dan\\_silah\\_birakma\\_cagrisi.html](http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/video/video/223667/Cozum_surecinde_ortak_aciklama__Ocalan_dan_silah_birakma_cagrisi.html)

7] "Dolmabahçe Anlaşması" Cumhuriyet, February 28, 2015, [http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiye/224047/Dolmabahce\\_anlasmasi.html](http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiye/224047/Dolmabahce_anlasmasi.html)

8] Kobanê protestolarının bilançosu, Evrensel, October 10, 2014 <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/93630/koban-protestolarinin-bilancosu>

9] "Kobane raporu," İnsan Hakları Derneği, October 12, 2014, <http://www.ihd.org.tr/kobane-direnisi-ile-dayanisma-kapsaminda-yapilan-eylem-ve-etkinliklere-mudahale-sonucu-meydana-gelen-hak-ihlalleri-raporu-2-12-ekim-2014/>



agreement was read as a sign that the tension between the government and the HDP was fading and that the resolution process was still going on.



The Dolmabahçe agreement was hailed as a historic phase by the pro-government media, which presented the event as a turning point in resolving the Kurdish problem. The following headlines were published by these newspapers: Sabah, “Now Is the Time for Peace”; Türkiye, “The Historic Day”; Star, “The Time for Peace”; Takvim, “Peace of Spring”; Yeni Şafak, “The Call to Lay Down Arms”; and Akşam, “The Giant Step to Peace.”<sup>10</sup> These newspapers were either owned by Erdoğan’s family or controlled directly or indirectly through caretakers that the government put in charge of running their editorial policies. Therefore, it is fairly reasonable to assume that these headlines reflected government approval and knowledge of the meeting.<sup>11</sup>



The most prominent reaction to the Dolmabahçe meeting came from the leader of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), Devlet Bahçeli, who said the AKP treacherously went in front of the cameras with the PKK and staged a show. The illegitimate alliance of the AKP and PKK had become official through the meeting, and Dolmabahçe Palace had never witnessed such a dishonorable event, not even 100 years ago, he claimed.<sup>12</sup>



The MHP members were not the only ones who approached Dolmabahçe with doubt. There were also many people from a variety of political backgrounds questioning why the HDP announced it would be running in the elections as a political party shortly before the Dolmabahçe agreement and risked staying below the election threshold. HDP Co-chair Demirtaş got 9.78 percent of the vote during the 2014 presidential election, which was just shy of the required threshold for the HDP to enter Parliament. Surprisingly, it was reported that the decision to have the HDP run in the elections as a political party rather than fielding independent candidates to bypass the threshold was made by Öcalan.<sup>13</sup>

10] “Gazete arşivleri,” Netgazete, March 1, 2015, [http://gazete.netgazete.com/gazeteler\\_arsiv.php](http://gazete.netgazete.com/gazeteler_arsiv.php)

11] Sabah, Takvim, Daily Sabah are owned by Erdogan’s family, while the Star, Aksam and Gunes dailies were owned by a businessman close to Erdogan. Others are also controlled by Erdogan’s henchmen. For example, Ethem Sancak, then owner of Aksam, declared his love for Erdoğan. See details about the relations between media and power in Turkey: Associate Prof. Dr. Ceren Sozeri, Türkiye’de Medya-İktidar İlişkileri Sorunlar ve Öneriler, Platform24, May 2015, <http://platform24.org/Content/Uploads/Editor/Türkiye’de%20Medya-İktidar%20İlişkileri-BASKI.pdf>

12] “Bahçeli: Dolmabahçe’de Türkiye’nin başı öne eğildi,” Sputnik, March 1, 2015, <https://tr.sputniknews.com/politika/201503011014231432/>

13] “Öcalan’dan HDP’ye seçim desteği,” El Cezire Türkiye, February 5, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com.tr/al-jazeera-ozel/ocalandan-hdpye-secim-destegi>

**HDP lawmaker Sırrı Süreyya Önder is reading out Abdullah Öcalan's statement after the meeting with government officials in İstanbul's Dolmabahçe Palace on February 28, 2015.**



Speculation abounded suggesting that the AKP and HDP had made a deal and that the HDP would support the presidential regime in Parliament in exchange for the Kurds' self-rule compromise. There were reports leaked to the media that gave details on Öcalan's meeting with HDP deputies on İmralı Island. These reports showed that Öcalan said: "We would support Mr. Tayyip Erdoğan's presidency. We can build an alliance with the AKP based on the presidential system."<sup>14</sup> This revelation caused many people to question the motivation behind the Dolmabahçe meeting. To address the concerns of those who were willing to vote for them, the HDP announced in its election bulletin that "the presidential system will never be in our constitution."<sup>15</sup>

On March 21, 2015 Pervin Buldan and Süreyya Önder read a letter written by PKK leader Öcalan in Kurdish and Turkish at Newroz ceremonies. Öcalan focused on the Dolmabahçe agreement in his letter and emphasized that if the Dolmabahçe agreement, outlining a 10-item list of priorities for the resolution of the Kurdish issue, were to materialize, he would call for the PKK to lay down its arms.<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, while the AKP and HDP seemed to agree on the statement in Dolmabahçe, President Erdoğan's remarks about the meeting confused everyone. During a press conference at the airport before he flew to Ukraine on March 20, 2015, Erdoğan stated that he was not aware of the meeting. The day that Öcalan's letter was being read to the public, Erdoğan was on the plane returning from Ukraine. He told the journalists on the flight that he did not support the Dolmabahçe meeting and that there was no joint

14] "İşte İmralı görüşmesinin tutanaklarının tam metni!", T24, February 28, 2013, <http://t24.com.tr/haber/iste-imralidaki-gorusmenin-tutanaklari,224711>

15] "HDP bir kez daha kayda geçirdi: Başkanlık sistemi asla olmayacak," Diken, April 21, 2015, <http://www.diken.com.tr/soz-sirasi-hdpde-hicbir-sey-ankaradan-gorundugu-gibi-degil/>

16] "Öcalan'ın mesajı Nevruz alanında nasıl karşılandı?", BBC, March 21, 2015, [http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2015/03/150321\\_diyarbakir\\_nevruz\\_hatice\\_izlenim](http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2015/03/150321_diyarbakir_nevruz_hatice_izlenim)



agreement. “I do not approve of that meeting. Personally I think it was wrong for the deputy prime minister to pose for a picture next to [representatives from] a group in Parliament.”<sup>17</sup> However, Erdoğan’s claim of ignorance about the meeting was questioned. Those who witnessed the meeting stated that an argument broke about who would sit where during the meeting, which would take place live in front of the cameras. It turned out that the AKP representatives called President Erdoğan to resolve the crisis,<sup>18</sup> meaning that Erdoğan’s statement saying he was not aware of the meeting did not reflect the truth.

## 1.2 Will the HDP pass the election threshold?

In the middle of 2015, Turkey’s agenda was totally focused on the upcoming national elections. Many were wondering whether the HDP would be able to get enough votes to pass the election threshold. The polls showed that the AKP was miles ahead of all its opponents. Although Ahmet Davutoğlu, as prime minister and head of the AKP, was not performing as well as Erdoğan in terms of oratorical skills and savviness in political leadership, AKP voters by and large stuck with the party because they knew Erdoğan was calling the shots behind the scenes. The Republican People’s Party (CHP), the main opposition, was able to protect its second place in the elections. The nationalist MHP was comfortable as the third largest party and did not see a problem in exceeding the threshold. The HDP passing the election threshold would directly influence how many seats each party would get in Parliament. Depending on the distribution of seats at the end of the elections, Erdoğan’s ambition to amend the constitution to amass more power would be either facilitated or hampered.

The HDP decided to run in the election by fielding candidates from diverse backgrounds to appeal a wider voter base. In addition to nominating candidates from the core base, the HDP went out of its way and chose candidates from socialist and conservative platforms. It not only had a close relative of Öcalan but also Armenians, a woman wearing a hijab and LGBT activists.<sup>19</sup>

The party’s electoral strategy was built on “fear of Erdoğan.” The HDP did not see a problem in keeping the party’s main base of voters on its side but had no illusions about getting votes from Turkey’s nationalist segments. The main focus of the campaign was directed at voters of secular, center-left and center-right backgrounds who did not want Erdoğan to be an executive president. Demirtaş’s words, “We will not make you the president,”<sup>20</sup>

17] Erdoğan reddettiği Dolmabahçe mutabakatından an be an haberdarmış, Evrensel, July 19, 2015, <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/256277/erdogan-reddettiği-dolmabahce-mutabakatından-an-be-an-haberdarmış>

18] “Dolmabahçe krizi nasıl başladı, Erdoğan hangi ismi istemedi?”, Ankara Review, May 29, 2015, <http://www.ankarareview.com/dolmabahce-krizi-nasil-basladi-erdogan-hangi-ismi-istemedi/>

19] “HDP milletvekili aday listesinde Öcalan sürprizi! (HDP’den kimler aday oldu?),” Hürriyet, April 7, 2015, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/hdp-milletvekili-aday-listesinde-ocalan-surprizi-hdpden-kimler-aday-ol-du-28672336a>

20] We will not make you the president, HDP co-chair tells Erdoğan, Hürriyet Daily News, March 17, 2015, [http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/we-will-not-make-you-the-president-hdp-co-chair-tells-erdogan-79792\\_](http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/we-will-not-make-you-the-president-hdp-co-chair-tells-erdogan-79792_)



was the most often-used campaign pitch at election rallies. The HDP also targeted voters of Kurdish descent who had voted for the AKP in the past but were resentful of government policies. CHP voters were also wooed on the premise that if the HDP were to pass the threshold, it would spoil Erdoğan's political ambitions to amend the constitution.

The appeal of charismatic politician Demirtaş to a larger audience in Turkey helped the HDP to some extent in overcoming the identification by many of the party with PKK violence. While other HDP representatives focused on appealing to their base, Demirtaş's masterful speeches, his rejection of violence and his remarks critical of both the PKK and the Turkish state encouraged people who had never imagined casting their vote for the HDP. Demirtaş had made quite an impression among the Turkish public during the presidential campaign a year earlier and was now locking horns with Davutoğlu and Erdoğan in a crafty manner that attracted many to him. He played a musical instrument on television<sup>21</sup> and had town hall-style meetings with young groups that at times felt like he was performing on a stand-up comedy show. He was blessed with underperforming main opposition leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, who was not a charismatic politician in challenging the ruling AKP and its leadership.

However, the campaign period was marred by violent attacks that prevented the HDP from continuing its campaign in the way it would have liked. There were a total of 114 attacks on HDP headquarters, campaign offices, stands and vehicles.<sup>22</sup> On May 18, 2015, the party buildings located in Adana and Mersin were bombed.<sup>23</sup> The deadly attack took place two days before elections during a rally in the HDP's stronghold of Diyarbakir, where a bomb planted at İstasyon Square was detonated, killing two and injuring 90.<sup>24</sup> The election rally was canceled after the bombing.

The HDP won a victory in the elections held on June 7, 2015 and managed to exceed the election threshold with 13.12 percent of the vote, or 6.1 million voters casting their ballots for the HDP. It was higher than the HDP had anticipated and secured them 80 seats in Parliament, making the HDP the third largest party in the legislature.<sup>25</sup> In the 2014 presidential election, Demirtaş was able to garner 4 million votes. The HDP's predecessor,

21] Selahattin Demirtaş CNN Türk'te Saz Çaldı Türkü Söyledi, Youtube, September 8, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6PRGECMLXvI>

22] HDP'ye karşı 114 saldırı yapıldı, CNN Turk, May 21, 2015, <https://www.cnntrk.com/turkiye/hdpye-karsi-114-saldiri-yapildi>

23] HDP'nin Adana ve Mersin binalarına saldırı, BBC, May 18, 2015, [http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2015/05/150518\\_hdp\\_adana\\_mersin\\_saldiri](http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2015/05/150518_hdp_adana_mersin_saldiri)

24] HDP mitinginde art arda iki patlama, Milliyet, June 5, 2015, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/hdp-mitinginde-trafo-patladi/siyaset/detay/2069848/default.htm>

25] "Haziran 2015 Türkiye genel seçimleri," Wikipedia, [https://tr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haziran\\_2015\\_Turkiye\\_genel\\_secimleri](https://tr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haziran_2015_Turkiye_genel_secimleri)

the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), received only 2.8 million votes (6.58 of the total) in the 2011 national elections when it competed with independent candidates.<sup>26</sup>

The AKP emerged as the first party but lost its majority for the first time in its 13-year rule. Although it managed to win 258 seats, it fell short of the 276 seats required to form a single party government. That meant the AKP had to share power to form a government in order to get a vote of confidence in Parliament.

The Turkish Constitution stipulates that unless the government is formed within 45 days of the elections, the president shall call for an early vote. After June 7, Ahmet Davutoğlu was given the mandate to form the government but was unsuccessful in striking a deal with the opposition parties. He returned the mandate to the president on the 40<sup>th</sup> day. Erdoğan's position was instrumental in preventing coalition talks as he did not want the AKP to share power with any opposition party and preferred to call an early election.<sup>27</sup> It was the first time in the history of the republic that a caretaker government was formed to take the nation to a snap poll on November 1, 2015. The CHP and MHP refused to take a part in the interim government, while the HDP was represented with two ministers. However, these ministers were later forced to resign from their positions due to obstructions to carrying out their duties and violent incidents that were blamed on the PKK.<sup>28</sup>

### **1.3 The guns start to talk**

Erdoğan's opponents were pleased that the AKP was unable to form the government by itself; however, they were not able to predict what would come before the next elections. Turkey had faced a turbulent and violent summer in 2015 and witnessed terror incidents just like what had occurred in the 1990s, as if someone had pushed a button and turned back the clock.

The PKK announced that they would target outposts and dams that were under construction in the southeastern region, followed by an announcement from the Kurdistan Communities Union's (KCK) co-chair, Bese Hozat, who said the revolutionary people's war had started.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, the HDP delegation announced on July 3 that their meetings with Öcalan had been prohibited.<sup>30</sup> In the meantime, a horrible terror incident took place in Şanlıurfa's Suruç province where a suicide bomber targeted a meeting of some 300 young people from

26] "2011 Türkiye genel seçimler," Wikipedia,

[https://tr.wikipedia.org/wiki/2011\\_Türkiye\\_genel\\_seçimleri](https://tr.wikipedia.org/wiki/2011_Türkiye_genel_seçimleri)

27] "Plunged into uncertainty, Turkey could face early election," Reuters, June 9, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-election-idUSKBN0OM0WF20150609>

28] "HDP'li bakanlar hükümetten istifa etti," BBC, September 22, 2015, [http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2015/09/150922\\_hdp\\_bakanlar\\_istifa](http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2015/09/150922_hdp_bakanlar_istifa)

29] Yeni süreç, Devrimci Halk Savaşı sürecidir-Besê Hozat, ANF News, July 15, 2015, <https://firatnews.com/kurdistan/yeni-surec-devrimci-halk-savasi-surecidir-bese-hozat-50758>

30] İmralı Heyeti açıklaması!, Sözcü, July 3, 2015, <http://www.sozcu.com.tr/2015/gundem/imrali-heyetinden-flas-aciklama-876530/>

the Socialist Party of the Oppressed (under the Socialist Youth association affiliated with the HDP) who came together on July 20 to give a press statement on the incidents in Kobane. The attack claimed the lives of 35 people including the bomber and injured almost 100.<sup>31</sup> The government blamed the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) for the attack.



**Outlawed  
Kurdistan  
Communities  
Union's  
(KCK) co-  
chair Bese  
Hozat**

Two days later, before Turkey was able to overcome the shock of this horrifying suicide bombing, another incident took place in the town of Ceylanpınar in Turkey's southeastern province of Şanlıurfa, which became a turning point for Turkey's settlement process. Two policemen were shot execution style in the back of the head while they were home and asleep. There were no signs of forced entry. It was claimed that the killers entered the apartment from the balcony by climbing three floors up the building.<sup>32</sup> One day after the incident, it was announced that the PKK's military wing, the People's Defense Forces (HPG), claimed responsibility for the incident, which was presented as retaliation for the Suruç killings. The KCK's foreign relations spokesman, Demhat Agit, later on told BBC that they had nothing to do with murdering the police officers.<sup>33</sup>

The government's reaction to the executions was harsh. After months of inaction, the Turkish military launched a cross-border operation with air force fighters, bombing PKK targets in Zap, Gare, Metina, Haftanin and Avasin in northern Iraq and inflicting significant damage. The full details of both the suicide bombing in Suruç and the murder of the two police officers in Ceylanpınar were never fully revealed although they were cited by both sides for ending the settlement process. Commenting on the Ceylanpınar executions, Demirtaş said: "Blood cannot be cleaned with blood. Blood cannot be washed off with blood. Despite all these obstacles, we will continue our efforts within a peaceful and democratic struggle. This is our path. As the HDP, we do not approve of any other way or method."<sup>34</sup>

The HDP leader also accused the current government of the latest attacks and deaths and claimed that the attacks were organized by nefarious elements affiliated with the palace (Erdoğan's office). Erdoğan responded harshly to these accusations and said: "This person is the chief person responsible for the massacre that took place on October 6, 7 and 8 [referring to the Kobane incidents], protecting himself with [parliamentary] immunity. You know, his brother was raised in the mountains and still lives there [as a PKK militant]. He will most likely go to that mountain once he gets a chance."<sup>35</sup> The fact that Erdoğan

31] Suruç'ta katliam: 31 ölü, 104 yaralı, BBC, July 21, 2015, [http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2015/07/150720\\_suruc\\_saldiri](http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2015/07/150720_suruc_saldiri)

32] "Ceylanpınar'da 2 polis şehit," Milliyet, July 23, 2015, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/ceylanpinar-da-2-polis-sehit-gundem-2091335/>

33] "Kandil: Çözüm süreci yeniden başlatılabilir, zor değil," BBC, July 29, 2015, [http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2015/07/150728\\_kandil\\_roportaj](http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2015/07/150728_kandil_roportaj)

34] "Demirtaş: Kan, kanla yıkanmaz," Cumhuriyet, July 22, 2015, [http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/siyaset/327865/Demirtas\\_\\_Kan\\_kanla\\_yikanmaz.html](http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/siyaset/327865/Demirtas__Kan_kanla_yikanmaz.html)

35] "Abisi dağda, kendisi de fırsat bulsa..." Milliyet, July 30, 2015, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/erdogan-dan-demirtas-a-haddini/siyaset/detay/2094709/default.htm>



## Demirtaş:

“Blood cannot be  
cleaned with blood.”



**Following the murder of two police officers in Ceylanpınar province, HDP leader Demirtaş said “Blood cannot be cleaned with blood” in his unexpected remarks criticizing prime suspect PKK.**

emphasized the immunity of Demirtaş in his speech was seen as a plan to strip HDP deputies of their parliamentary immunity and jail them and their leaders.

On August 12, 2015, the PKK announced that city centers under its control would no longer abide by the government’s rules and would declare their autonomy/self-rule. On August 17, it announced that 16 cities and towns located in the Southeast had been placed under self-rule.<sup>36</sup> Many settlements

started to dig ditches and trenches. Interestingly, the security forces did not interfere while people were digging ditches and erecting barricades.<sup>37</sup>

By now, Turkey had landed back in a violent spiral:

On August 19 and 20, 12 troops were killed by IEDs planted on roads in Lice and Siirt.<sup>38</sup>

On September 5, a curfew was declared in the town of Cizre. Twenty civilians were reported have died in the ensuing clashes. The government imposed curfews on more settlements.<sup>39</sup>

On September 6, 16 soldiers lost their lives when the PKK staged an attack on an outpost in Dağlıca.<sup>40</sup> On September 9, 13 police officers working at the customs gate in Iğdır province perished when an IED explosion targeted their service vehicle.<sup>41</sup>

As the violence resumed, the government kept targeting the HDP and limiting the movements of the HDP leader. For example, on September 11, Demirtaş, accompanied by HDP deputies, wanted to visit Cizre during the eighth day of the curfew, but they were not allowed to enter the city.<sup>42</sup> On September 20, Erdoğan organized a major anti-terrorism rally in Istanbul’s Yenikapı district and bashed Demirtaş in his public speech, asking voters to cast their ballots for what he called “local and national” candidates.<sup>43</sup> His implication was that

36] “Öz yönetim ilan edilen merkez sayısı 16’ya yükseldi,” T24, August 20, 2015 <http://t24.com.tr/haber/oz-yonetim-ilan-edilen-merkez-sayisi-16ya-yukseldi,306949>

37] Mahmut Alınak, “Hükümet binalarının önünde hendekler kazılırken Valiler Savcılar MİT Emniyet çay kahve içerek seyretti,” Odatv, June 18, 2016, <http://odatv.com/hukumet-binalarinin-onunde-hendekler-kazilirken-valiler-savcilar-mit-emniyet-cay-kahve-icerek-seyretti--1806161200.html>

38] Diyarbakır ve Siirt’te 12 Şehit, Posta, August 19, 2015, <http://www.posta.com.tr/diyarbakir-ve-siirtte-12-sehit-videosu-534581>

39] ‘Cizre’de hendekler de, sokağa çıkma yasağı da yanıltı’, BBC, September 21, 2015, [http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2015/09/150921\\_baro\\_cizre](http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2015/09/150921_baro_cizre)

40] TSK: Dağlıca’da 16 asker şehit, BBC, September 7, 2015, [http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2015/09/150906\\_daglica\\_saldiri](http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2015/09/150906_daglica_saldiri)

41] Iğdır’da polis aracına bombalı saldırı! 13 ŞEHİT, Milliyet, September 8, 2015, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/igdir-da-polis-aracina-bombali-gundem-2114292/>

42] “Demirtaş: Cizre’de sokağa çıkmanın cezası ölüm,” İmc tv, September 11, 2015, <http://www.imctv.com.tr/demirtas-cizrede-sokaga-cikmanin-cezasi-olum/>

43] “Erdoğan: 1 Kasım’da Meclis’e 550 yerli ve Millî vekil gönderin,” BBC, September 20, 2015, [http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2015/09/150920\\_istanbul\\_miting](http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2015/09/150920_istanbul_miting)

representatives of the HDP were politicians who work for foreign governments.

Unfortunately, on October 10, 2015, Turkey witnessed the deadliest terrorist attack in its history. A twin bombing that took place in Ankara killed 107 people including the two suicide bombers. The attack targeted NGOs and supporters of left-wing and pro-Kurdish parties holding a peace rally outside the capital's main train station, weeks ahead of the Nov. 1, 2015 snap election.<sup>44</sup>

The PKK declared that it would not take any actions towards the November 1 elections, effective October 15.<sup>45</sup>

On October 20, 2015, Davutoğlu gave a speech at an election rally in Van, saying, “If the AKP is ousted from power, terrorist gangs will roam here.”<sup>46</sup> He was referring to the notorious period of the 1990s during which white Renault Toros vehicles used by plainclothes security officers were involved in extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances. The interim prime minister issued a veiled threat that similar incidents would resume if the AKP ended up losing power in the elections.

The government reportedly started working with highly controversial figures in cracking down on the legitimate Kurdish political movement. For example, Mehmet Ağar,<sup>47</sup> who served as interior minister and head of the police department in the '90s, was brought in to participate in government actions albeit in an unofficial capacity. He was even described as the shadow interior minister.<sup>48</sup> Gen. Musa Çitil, who was accused of involvement in the murder of 13 villagers in Mardin's Derik district, was acquitted. He was also promoted by the government and assigned to Diyarbakir.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, Hizbullah, which was involved in extrajudicial murders in the 1990s, came back in force with the backing of the government. Teams from Esedullah, a renegade armed faction allegedly linked to Turkish Hizbollah, reportedly deployed to Kurdish regions.<sup>50</sup> The

44] Ankara Barış Mitinginde Korkunç Saldırı | 104 Ölü 246 Yaralı, October 10, 2015, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HeFRStr8NEM\\_](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HeFRStr8NEM_)

45] KCK eylemsizlik kararını açıkladı, Cumhuriyet, October 10, 2015, [http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiye/3851/KCK\\_eylemsizlik\\_kararini\\_acikladi.html](http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiye/3851/KCK_eylemsizlik_kararini_acikladi.html)

46] “Davutoğlu’ndan Van’da tehdit gibi sözler: Beyaz toroslar dolaşacak,” Cumhuriyet, October 20, 2015, [http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/siyaset/391353/Davutoglu\\_ndan\\_Van\\_da\\_tehdit\\_gibi\\_sozler\\_\\_Beyaz\\_toroslar\\_dolasacak.html](http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/siyaset/391353/Davutoglu_ndan_Van_da_tehdit_gibi_sozler__Beyaz_toroslar_dolasacak.html)

47] “Susurluk’un lideri Mehmet Ağar,” Radikal, November 4, 2011, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/turkiye/susurlukun-lideri-mehmet-agar-1068581/>

48] “İçişleri Bakanı Mehmet Ağar’ın karşısında çeketini ilikliyor,” Oda Tv, February 13, 2017, <http://odativ.com/icisleri-bakani-mehmet-agarin-karsisinda-ceketini-ilikliyor-1302171200.html>

49] “Musa Çitil, Diyarbakır’a jandarma bölge komutanı oldu,” Bianet, August 8, 2015, <http://m.bianet.org/bianet/insan-haklari/166674-musa-citil-diyarbakir-jandarma-bolge-komutani-oldu>

50] The Esadullah Team started to appear when the curfew was declared and the operation began in eastern Turkey. The team wrote, “You will see the power of the Turk” and “Allah is enough for everything” on the walls in Sur, Diyarbakir. According to the CHP, the team was seen as a power outside of official security forces. They had an ISIL-like appearance. Bearded, they were speaking Arabic. See details via Vesyi Polat, Kim bu Esedullah Timi?, T24, October 16, 2015, <http://t24.com.tr/haber/kim-bu-esedullah-timi,313230>

Esedullah teams were reported to include police officers and soldiers.<sup>51</sup>

Although various incidents were claimed to have contributed to suspending the settlement process such as the re-emergence of clashes, the PKK's declaration of autonomous regions and Turkish military strikes against PKK targets in Iraq, Davutoğlu highlighted that Demirtaş's statement before the June 7 elections -- "We will not let you become president" -- had in fact been the turning point in ending the settlement process. He implicitly confirmed the backroom deal his government had with the jailed leader of the PKK, Öcalan, who pledged to support Erdoğan's ambition to become an executive president.<sup>52</sup>

## 1.4 Parliamentary Immunity lifted

As a result of the elections held on November 1, 2015, the AKP regained its majority in Parliament, enabling it to set up a single party government. The HDP lost some support but was still able to garner over 5 million votes, enough to pass the 10 percent election threshold by a razor-thin margin (10.76 percent). Compared to the election that was held four months earlier, the HDP lost approximately 1 million votes, which cost the party 21 seats. The MHP was the party that experienced the most significant decline, losing about 2 million votes, many to the AKP, which had campaigned on security threats and nationalism. While the MHP received 7.5 million votes in the June 7 elections, it received only 5.5 million votes on November 1, which corresponded to 40 seats in Parliament, almost half of what it won in the June 7 elections.<sup>53</sup>

People who believed that the AKP returning to power with an outright majority and the government being formed would stop the terror incidents were wrong. The clashes that had started before July 2015 continued after the elections. For example, during the period between the June 7 and November 1, 2015 elections, 167 members of the security forces (96 soldiers, 68 police officers, three village guards), 453 PKK militants and 242 civilians including 19 children lost their lives, for a total of 862 people.<sup>54</sup> After the elections, many towns and cities in Kurdish-populated regions sustained devastating damage as a result of the conflicts that came to be known as the Hendek (Trenches) Operations. According to the government's official records, 3,583 PKK militants and 355 members of the security forces

51] "Esedullah Tim hortladı; sosyal medya onları konuşuyor," Cumhuriyet, November 14, 2015, [http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiye/418709/Esedullah\\_TiM\\_yeniden\\_hortladi...\\_Sosyal\\_medya\\_onlari\\_konusuyor.html](http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiye/418709/Esedullah_TiM_yeniden_hortladi..._Sosyal_medya_onlari_konusuyor.html) ; "Esedullah Tim bilmecesi," Sözcü, October 14, 2015, <http://www.sozcu.com.tr/2015/gundem/guneydoguda-esedullah-tim-bilmecesi-959733/>

52] Davutoğlu: Çözüm sürecinde nehrin yarısını geçmiştik," El Cezire Türkiye, October 28, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com.tr/haber/davutoglu-cozum-surecinde-nehrin-yarisini-gecmistik>

53] "Kasım 2015 Türkiye genel seçimleri," Wikipedia, [https://tr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kasım\\_2015\\_Türkiye\\_genel\\_seçimleri](https://tr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kasım_2015_Türkiye_genel_seçimleri)

54] "İki seçim arasında 167 şehit!" Sözcü, October 30, 2015, <http://www.sozcu.com.tr/2015/gundem/iki-secim-arasinda-167-sehit-973452/>



**A barricade  
set up by  
the PKK  
militants.**

the Southeast Anatolian Region (Güneydoğu Anadolu Bölgesi Belediyeler Birliği in Turkish, or GABB), 451,117 people were directly impacted in the settlements where ditches and barricades were set up. In total, 880,806 people were affected by the developments in some manner, the report concluded.<sup>58</sup>

On the other hand, there had been terrorist attacks by the PKK in major cities such as Istanbul and Ankara. On February 17, 2016, a car bomb suicide attack near the headquarters of the General Staff killed 28.<sup>59</sup> In another bombing on March 13, 2016 that took place in Ankara's Güvenpark, 37 people were killed.<sup>60</sup> On June 7, 2016, 12 people lost their lives as a result of a car bomb in Istanbul's Vezneciler district.<sup>61</sup>

The AKP government and the PKK not only resorted to force to clash with each other but

were killed between July 7, 2015 and March 27, 2016.<sup>55</sup> During that time period, 285 civilians died, including the head of the Diyarbakır Bar Association, Tahir Elci.<sup>56</sup>

In the meantime, 10,326 individuals were taken into custody; 3,387 of them were formally arrested.<sup>57</sup> While thousands of people had to leave their homes, many settlements including Diyarbakır's historic Sur district were destroyed.

According to a report by the Union of Municipalities in

55] Acı tablo: Son dokuz ayda 450'yi aşkın güvenlik görevlisi hayatını kaybetti, Aoril 23, 2016, Diken, <http://www.diken.com.tr/aci-tablo-son-dokuz-ayda-450yi-askin-guvenlik-gorevlisi-hayatini-kaybetti/>

56] "Hendek savaşlarında sona gelindi," Deutsche Welle, May 29, 2016, <http://www.dw.com/tr/hendek-savastlarinda-sona-gelindi/a-19291491>

57] "Hendek savaşlarında sona gelindi," Deutsche Welle, May 29, 2016, <http://www.dw.com/tr/hendek-savastlarinda-sona-gelindi/a-19291491>

58] "PKK hendek ve barikatları 880 bin kişiyi mağdur etti," Hürriyet, July 2, 2016, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/pkk-hendek-ve-barikatlari-880-bin-kisiyi-magdur-etti-37304400>

59] Ankara'da askeri servis araçlarının geçişi sırasında bombalı saldırı, Habertürk, February 17, 2016, <http://www.haberturk.com/gundem/haber/1197138-ankarada-askeri-araclarin-gecisi-sirasinda-bombali-saldiri>

60] Ankara Kızılay'da bombalı saldırı: 37 ölü, 15'i ağır 48 yaralı, Cumhuriyet, March 13, 2016, [http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiye/497331/Ankara\\_Kizilay\\_da\\_bombali\\_saldiri\\_37\\_olu\\_15\\_i\\_agir\\_48\\_yarali.html](http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiye/497331/Ankara_Kizilay_da_bombali_saldiri_37_olu_15_i_agir_48_yarali.html)

61] Vezneciler saldırısını PKK mı yaptı, İŞİD mi?, Mynet, June 7, 2016, <https://m.mynet.com/vezneciler-saldirisini-pkk-mi-yapti-isisd-mi-guncel-2487266>





**Tahir Elçi,**  
**former**  
**Head of the**  
**Diyarbakır Bar**  
**Association**

also tried to undermine their respective political authorities by other means. The AKP government brought the immunity of HDP lawmakers to a debate in Parliament, reminiscent of the politics of the 1990s when Kurdish lawmakers lost their seats as a result of a government-led nationalist euphoria. In 1994, BDP (the HDP's predecessor) deputies were taken into custody in Parliament in response to the increasing number of clashes that led to the killing of Turkish soldiers. The deputies were jailed for nine years before being released for retrial when the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the Turkish government had violated fair trial protections for the lawmakers.<sup>62</sup>

Erdoğan signaled the stripping of HDP deputies' immunity on January 2, 2016. "... They [HDP lawmakers] must pay a price. We need to assess the investigations that have been launched by the chief prosecutor's offices in Ankara and Diyarbakır from this perspective. I believe that stripping them of their immunity would be a starting

point for us to have a positive impact on the counterterrorism [operations] in our country. They [HDP lawmakers] have more than 160 [criminal] cases pending against them in Parliament."<sup>63</sup>

After Erdoğan made these statements, the AKP submitted a motion in the legislature seeking an amendment to the constitution that would result in the one-time removal of parliamentary immunity. Both the MHP and the CHP announced that they would back the motion. The CHP was concerned that if it did not support the motion, it would be seen as supporting terrorism. However, most CHP deputies voted against the amendment during the first round of voting. The AKP trolls on Twitter started attacking the leader of the CHP by using the hashtag "CHPsupportsterorism (#TerörDestekçisiCHP)."<sup>64</sup> Before the last vote on the amendment on May 20, 2016, the CHP leader was attacked when protestors threw eggs at him during the funeral of a slain member of the security forces.<sup>65</sup>

In the end, Parliament approved the amendment with a qualified majority that did not require the change to be put to a public referendum and became effective with Erdoğan's signature. Thus, Erdoğan was able to overcome an essential obstacle in his plan of amending the constitution to secure an executive presidency because the HDP was the most prominent opponent he faced for such a constitutional change. By stripping Demirtaş and other HDP

62] "1994'te dokunulmazlıkları kaldırılan eski DEP'liler: Kürt siyasetine fırsat tanınmadı," BBC, May20, 2016, [http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2016/05/160520\\_eski\\_dep\\_dokunulmazlik](http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2016/05/160520_eski_dep_dokunulmazlik)

63] "Erdoğan: Dokunulmazlıkların kaldırılması havayı olumlu etkileyecek," Evrensel, January 2, 2016, <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/268941/erdogan-dokunulmazliklarin-kaldirilmasi-havayi-olumlu-etkileyecek>

64] "Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu'na tepki yağıyor," haber10.com, May 18, 2016, [http://www.haber10.com/chp/kemal\\_kilicdaroglu\\_na\\_tepki\\_yagiyor-632665](http://www.haber10.com/chp/kemal_kilicdaroglu_na_tepki_yagiyor-632665)

65] "Şehit cenazesinde Kılıçdaroğlu'na yumurtalı protesto," El Cezire Türkiye, May 20, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com.tr/haber/sehit-cenazesinde-kilicdaroglu-na-yumurtali-protesto>



***A bombing took place in Ankara's Güvenpak in which 37 people were killed on March 13, 2016.***

deputies of their immunity, he had taken a significant step in pushing them out of Parliament and neutralizing the challenge they posed with his abuse of the criminal justice system.

### **1.5 History repeats itself**

On the night of July 15, 2016, a small group of officers attempted a military coup but were crushed immediately. Erdoğan called this attempt a “blessing from God”<sup>66</sup> and used it as a pretext to persecute his critics and opponents, mainly members of the Gülen movement. Many believe that the failed coup was a false flag operation by Erdoğan to crush his opponents, and there are still many unknown facts about the attempt for which the government has failed to provide answers.<sup>67</sup>

Within hours of the failed military action, thousands of judges and prosecutors were

66] Ahmet Şık, ‘Allah’ın büyük lütfü’, Cumhuriyet, 12 December 2016, [http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiye/644388/\\_Allah\\_in\\_buyuk\\_lutfu\\_.html](http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiye/644388/_Allah_in_buyuk_lutfu_.html)

67] “Erdoğan’s Coup, Stockholm Center For Freedom, July 15 2017 [https://stockholmcf.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/15\\_July\\_Erdogans\\_Coup\\_13.07.2017.pdf](https://stockholmcf.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/15_July_Erdogans_Coup_13.07.2017.pdf)

dismissed without any administrative or judicial probes, reinforcing the view that the coup was staged and that these jurists were profiled by the government for their views long before the attempt was made in mid-July. A major purge in the Turkish army began, despite the fact that only a small part of the officer corps with very limited mobilization was involved in the attempt. Nearly 160,000 civil servants lost their jobs and some 60,000 people were arrested.<sup>68</sup> Approximately 200 media outlets were closed down under the state of emergency that was declared after the coup. Among those media outlets were the IMC television station, the Özgür Gündem newspaper and the Dicle news agency, all of which were affiliated with the Kurdish political movement.<sup>69</sup> Additionally, under the state of emergency, government-appointed trustees were assigned to 79 municipalities run by the HDP and its regional affiliate, the Democratic Regions Party (DBP). The mayor of Diyarbakır, Gültan Kışanak, was taken into custody on October 26, 2016. She was held in detention for five days before the court ruled for her arrest.

The government's largest crackdown on the HDP took place on November 4, 2016, when prosecutors moved to detain Kurdish lawmakers apparently with the approval of the Erdoğan government. Detention warrants were issued for 15 HDP deputies by public prosecutors in Diyarbakır, Şırnak, Hakkari, Van and Bingöl provinces. Police detained 12 deputies including HDP Co-chairs Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ.<sup>70</sup>

Prosecutors demanded Demirtaş's arrest based on a series of accusations including insulting the Turkish nation, the republic and Parliament, disseminating propaganda on behalf of the PKK terrorist group, insulting the Turkish president, defaming the military and the police, incitement of hatred and hostility, insulting public officials while in the performance of their jobs and inciting others to commit crimes.<sup>71</sup> Demirtaş, Yüksekdağ, and seven other HDP deputies were formally arrested at the end of their arraignment hearings. Demirtaş described the developments as a civilian coup.<sup>72</sup> Later, more lawmakers and elected officials from the HDP were detained and arrested. Trustees were assigned to run 94 of the 102 municipalities held by the HDP and its sister party, the DBP. Seventy-five municipal co-mayors were arrested.<sup>73</sup> Currently, nine deputies,

68] "Erdoğan's Coup, Stockholm Center For Freedom, July 15, 2017,

[https://stockholmcf.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/15\\_July\\_Erdogans\\_Coup\\_13.07.2017.pdf](https://stockholmcf.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/15_July_Erdogans_Coup_13.07.2017.pdf)

69] "Terör örgütü propagandası' iddiasıyla kapatılan Özgür Gündem'e polis baskını," Diken, August 16, 2016, <http://www.diken.com.tr/ozgur-gundem-teror-orgutu-propagandasi-yapmak-iddiasıyla-kapatildi/>

70] "HDP'ye terör operasyonu... Figen Yüksekdağ ve Selahattin Demirtaş tutuklandı," NTV, November 5, 2016, [http://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/hdpye-teror-operasyonu-figen-yuksekdag-veselahattin-demirtastutuklandi,jSanh0QoGUC4skT1K\\_Leaw](http://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/hdpye-teror-operasyonu-figen-yuksekdag-veselahattin-demirtastutuklandi,jSanh0QoGUC4skT1K_Leaw)

71] "Selahattin Demirtaş ve Figen Yüksekdağ tutuklandı," Sabah, November 5, 2016,

<http://www.sabah.com.tr/gundem/2016/11/04/selahattin-demirtas-ve-figen-yuksekdag-tutuklandi>

72] "Demirtaş ve Yüksekdağ tutuklandı," BBC, November 4, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/turkce/live/haberler-turkiye-37869462>

73] Buldan: Tutuklanacağız, parlamento dışında bırakılacağız diye siyasi iktidar karşısında hizaya geçecek bir siyasi hareket değiliz, HDP, November 4, 2017, <http://www.hdp.org.tr/tr/guncel/haberler/buldan-tutuklanacagiz-parlamento-disinda-birakilacagiz-diye-siyasi-iktidar-karsisinda-hizaya-gececek-bir-siyasi-hareket-degiliz/11132>



including HDP Co-chairs Yüksekdağ and Demirtaş, are under arrest.<sup>74</sup>

Erdoğan's new agenda turned to transforming a parliamentary democracy into an executive presidency when he thought he had neutralized all his key opponents one by one. The constitutional amendments that allowed him to become an executive president with enormous powers was approved by Parliament on January 20, 2017. With the support of the MHP, the amendment was passed with 339 votes and put to a referendum with the approval of Erdoğan. On April 16, 2017 the AKP obtained a razor-thin victory in the referendum, which was contested on an “unlevel” playing field, according to the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR).

“The referendum took place in a political environment in which fundamental freedoms essential to a genuinely democratic process were curtailed under the state of emergency, and the two sides did not have equal opportunities to make their case to the voters,” said Tana de Zulueta, head of the ODIHR limited election observation mission. Cezar Florin Preda, leader of the delegation from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), noted that “in general, the referendum did not live up to Council of Europe standards. The legal framework was inadequate for the holding of a genuinely democratic process.”<sup>75</sup> Despite the unfair referendum, Erdoğan managed to get only 51.12 percent of the popular vote. Votes in the AKP's favor increased in 14 out of 23 provinces located in the east and southeastern parts of Turkey compared to the election that was held on November 1, 2015. Among these regions were Diyarbakır, Şırnak, Hakkari and Tunceli, where HDP had strong grass roots.<sup>76</sup>

After the referendum was approved by little more than 50 percent of the vote, the discussion turned to the changing behavior of Kurdish voters in the Southeast. The fact that unsealed votes<sup>77</sup> were mostly used in the Southeast prompted claims of vote tampering.<sup>78</sup> It can also be stated that the HDP was not able to display the same success as they did in the 2015 elections. Indeed, the arrest of Demirtaş and other prominent deputies and the imprisonment of thousands of the HDP's campaign workers played an important role in suppressing the opposition campaign in the referendum. The PKK's “trenches” policy that caused many people to lose their lives while damaging the property of countless

74] HDP'li Konca: AKP'nin kadın politikalarını teşhir ettiğimiz için saldırıyorlar, Demokrat Haber, November 4, 2017, <http://www.demokrathaber.org/siyaset/hdp-li-konca-akpnin-kadin-politikalarini-teshir-et-tigimiz-h92229.html>

75] “Lack of equal opportunities, one-sided media coverage and limitations on fundamental freedoms created unlevel playing field in Turkey's constitutional referendum, international observers say,” OSCE, April 17, 2017, <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/turkey/311726>

76] “Doğu ve Güneydoğu illerinde ‘evet’ cephesi 14 ilde oylarını yükseltti,” Milliyet, April 17, 2016, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/dogu-ve-guneydogu-illerinde-evet--siyaset-2433621/>

77] The Supreme Board of Elections (YSK) issued instructions late in the day of the referendum that significantly changed ballot validity criteria, undermining an important safeguard and contravening the law.

78] “En çok mühürsüz oy Doğu ve Güneydoğu'da,” Gazete Duvar, April 17, 2017, <http://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/gundem/2017/04/17/en-cok-muhursuz-oy-dogu-ve-guneydoguda/>

Kurdish families reportedly contributed to loss of support for the HDP as well. The state of emergency and the lack of coverage by the media had hampered the HDP's ability to inform its voters, while many meetings and rallies planned by the HDP were not allowed by authorities to proceed. As a result, the low turnout of HDP voters resulted in fewer "no" votes in the referendum.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE HDP EXCLUDED FROM POLITICS

#### 2.1 Criminal prosecutions

##### 2.1.1 Detentions and arrests

The method Erdoğan's regime often utilized to marginalize the HDP in politics is the criminal prosecutions apparently motivated by the political goals of the government. Nine HDP lawmakers are still jailed: Selahattin Demirtaş, Figen Yüksekdağ, Çağlar Demirel,

İdris Baluken, Selma Irmak, Gülser Yıldırım, Abdullah Zeydan, Ferhat Encü and Burcu Çelik. A court in Diyarbakır ruled for the re-arrest of Kars deputy and HDP spokesperson Ayhan Bilgen, who had been jailed for eight months as a part of a counterterrorism investigation and released on September 8, 2017. This arrest warrant was cancelled by an upper court due to the objections of Bilgen's lawyer on September 25, 2017.



**Figen Yüksekdağ,**  
former co-  
chair of HDP.

Two hundred seventy-eight cases have been filed against 41 HDP deputies. According to the summaries of proceedings submitted to Parliament, there are 57 criminal cases pending against Selahattin Demirtaş, 46 for Pervin Buldan and seven for Figen Yüksekdağ.<sup>79</sup>

Demirtaş is currently standing trial for the charges leveled against him. On February 21, 2017 the

Doğubeyazıt 2nd Criminal Court of First Instance sentenced him to five months in prison for insulting the Turkish nation, the Turkish Republic and state institutions and organs,<sup>80</sup> although an upper court in Erzurum later reversed the decision.<sup>81</sup> At the end of 245 days of imprisonment, Demirtaş was expected to appear in court on July 7, 2017. However, after he was informed that he would be taken from Edirne to Ankara (687 kilometers) in a prison vehicle and kept handcuffed during the trip, he refused to appear.<sup>82</sup> Currently, other HDP deputies are refusing

79] “TBMM’de hangi partiden kaç milletvekili hakkında fezleke var?” Evrensel, March 17, 2016, <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/275194/tbmmde-hangi-partiden-kac-milletvekili-hakkinda-fezleke-var>

80] “HDP’li Demirtaş’a 5 ay hapis cezası,” TRT Haber, February 21, 2017, <http://www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/hdpli-demirtasa-5-ay-hapis-cezasi-300187.html>

81] Demirtaş’a verilen hapis cezası bozuldu, Evrensel, July 13, 2017 <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/326244/demirtasa-verilen-hapis-cezasi-bozuldu>

82] “Demirtaş, kelepçe dayatması nedeniyle duruşmaya katılmadı,” Evrensel, July 7, 2017, <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/325652/demirtas-kelepce-dayatmasi-nedeniyle-durusmaya-gelmedi>

to appear in court for the same reason. After their parliamentary immunity was removed by the legislature, the HDP decided that none of its members would willingly testify.<sup>83</sup> In addition to lawmakers, mayors and party members have also been subjected to arrest and detention. Eighty-three co-mayors are currently in prison. Arrest warrants are also outstanding for seven mayors.<sup>84</sup> About 4,000 party members have been arrested and jailed since July 2015. Almost all of these people are members of the DBP, the local affiliate of the HDP.

There have been concerns that the state's destructive policy of denial regarding the Kurdish identity -- reminiscent of the 1990s -- has reared its ugly head again.<sup>85</sup> A statue of prominent Kurdish thinker and writer Ahmet Hani was demolished by a government trustee who replaced the elected mayor. Memorials erected to remember Kurdish villagers who were killed in an airstrike in the town of Roboski (Uludere) as well as Uğur Kaymaz, who was killed on accusations of being a terrorist along with his father at the age of 12, also shared the same fate.<sup>86</sup> Tahir Elçi, who was a human rights activist and president of the Diyarbakir Bar Association, was murdered while giving a press statement. His killers are still at large. The name of a park named after Elçi was recently changed.<sup>87</sup> Kurdish signboards in municipalities have been removed,<sup>88</sup> although some of them were put back into place upon criticism and adverse reactions. A trustee who was appointed to the historic Sur Municipality in Diyarbakır assigned six theater actors to work outdoors as municipal guards<sup>89</sup> and fired 31 of their colleagues.<sup>90</sup>

## 2.1.2 Dismissal of elected officials

According to records provided in February 2017 by Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu, the government sacked elected officials in 79 municipalities including Diyarbakır and replaced them with trustees.<sup>91</sup> Trustees have also been appointed to such provinces as Hakkari, Ağrı, Mardin and Batman. While provincial trustees were selected from among deputy governors,

83] “Demirtaş: “Tek bir HDP’li kendi ayağıyla ifade vermeye gitmeyecek,” CNN Türk, April 19, 2016, <https://www.cnnturk.com/turkiye/demirtas-tek-bir-hdpli-kendi-ayagiyla-ifade-vermeye-gitmeyecek>

84] DBP’nin elinde 3 il belediyesi kaldı, Gazete Duvar, November 17, 2016, <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/gundem/2016/11/17/dbpnin-elinde-3-il-belediyesi-kaldi/>

85] “Tanrıkulu’ndan kayyım raporu: Kayyımlar Kürt sorunun özeti,” Gazetekarınca, July 16, 2016, <http://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/gundem/2017/07/16/tanrikulundan-kayyim-raporu-kayyimlar-kurt-sorununun-ozeti/>

86] “Kayyım bu kez de Ehmede Xani anıtını yıktırdı,” Gazetekarınca, June 25, 2017, <http://gazetekarınca.com/2017/06/kayyum-bu-kez-de-ehmede-xani-anitini-yiktirdi/>

87] “Kayyım, Tahir Elçi parkının adını değiştirdi,” Birgün, May 20, 2017, <http://www.birgun.net/haber-detay/kayyum-tahir-elci-parki-nin-adini-degistirdi-160420.html>

88] “Kayyımın ilk işi Kürtçe tabelayı sökmek oldu,” Cumhuriyet, September 12, 2016, [http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiye/599432/Kayyimin\\_ilk\\_isi\\_Kurtce\\_tabelayi\\_sokmek\\_oldu.html](http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiye/599432/Kayyimin_ilk_isi_Kurtce_tabelayi_sokmek_oldu.html)

89] “Kayyım, tiyatrocuları zabıta yaptı,” Diken, October 6, 2016, <http://www.diken.com.tr/zaytung-degil-diyarbakir-sur-belediyesine-atanan-kayyum-tiyatroculari-zabita-yapti/>

90] “Kayyım başkandan Diyarbakır şehir tiyatrolarına darbe,” Cumhuriyet, January 5, 2017, [http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/kultur-sanat/655859/Kayyim\\_baskandan\\_Diyarbakir\\_Sehir\\_Tiyatrolari\\_na\\_darbe.html](http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/kultur-sanat/655859/Kayyim_baskandan_Diyarbakir_Sehir_Tiyatrolari_na_darbe.html)

91] “İçişleri Bakanı: 79 belediyeye kayyum atandı,” Gazete Karınca, February 13, 2017, <http://gazetekarınca.com/2017/02/icisleri-bakani-79-belediyeye-kayyum-atandi/>

rural municipalities were handed over to district governors. In many provinces, district governors have become mayors.

The government also removed the parliamentary status of some HDP lawmakers. So far, six HDP deputies have lost their seats in Parliament. First, HDP deputy Nursel Aydoğan<sup>92</sup>

was stripped of her parliamentary position when she was sentenced to four years, eight months and seven days in prison. After being convicted, Figen Yüksekdağ also lost her seat in a parliamentary vote.<sup>93</sup>

Van deputy Tuğba Hezer Öztürk and Şırnak deputy Faysal Sarıyıldız have also been dismissed from Parliament on the grounds that they were absent from proceedings. These two deputies faced outstanding arrest warrants and were forced into exile.<sup>94</sup> Besime Konca is the fifth deputy who lost her seat in the legislature, on October 3, 2017<sup>95</sup> following a Gaziantep Regional Court ruling that upheld her conviction for disseminating terrorist propaganda on July 13, 2017<sup>96</sup>. Ağrı deputy Leyla Zana also lost her seat after a recommendation for dismissal by a commission was approved in the plenary.<sup>97</sup>



**Turkey's Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu announced elected mayors of 79 municipalities in Southern and Eastern Anatolia were replaced with trustees.**

## 2.2 Prevention of meetings and rallies

Another obstacle the HDP is facing in politics is difficulty in holding meetings and rallies that are often not authorized by the government on the grounds of public safety. In some places the HDP has a hard time booking a venue for gatherings. For example, the Istanbul Governor's Office denied the HDP's request to celebrate Newroz in public spaces in 2015

92] "HDP Diyarbakır Milletvekili Nursel Aydoğan'ın vekilliği düşürüldü!" T24, May 9, 2017, <http://t24.com.tr/haber/hdp-diyarbakir-milletvekili-nursel-aydoganin-vekilligi-dusuruldu,403483>

93] "Figen Yüksekdağ'ın vekilliği düşürüldü," Habertürk, February 21, 2017, <http://www.haberturk.com/gundem/haber/1399383-figen-yuksekdagin-vekilligi-dusuruldu>

94] "HDP'li Tuğba Hezer Öztürk ve Faysal Sarıyıldız'ın milletvekillikleri düşürüldü," NTV, July 27, 2017 <http://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/hdpli-tugba-hezer-ozturk-ve-faysal-sariyildizin-milletvekillikleri-dusuruldu,L4yTTFfLNUiWnRArn8Ckvg>

95] HDP'li Besime Konca'nın vekilliği düşürüldü, Birgün, October 3, 2017, <https://www.birgun.net/haber-detay/hdp-li-besime-konca-nin-vekilligi-dusuruldu-182518.html>

96] HDP'li Besime Konca'nın 2.5 yıllık cezası onandı, Evrensel, July 13, 2017, <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/326213/hdpli-besime-koncanin-2-5-yillik-cezasi-onandi>

97] "Turkish Parliament Revokes Pro-Kurdish HDP Deputy Leyla Zana's Parliamentarian Status", SCF, January 11, 2018, <https://stockholmcf.org/turkish-parliament-revokes-pro-kurdish-hdp-deputy-leyla-zana-parliamentarian-status/>



and 2016. The HDP sought to hold Newroz ceremonies in three public squares in 2017 but was only allowed to do so in the Kartal district.<sup>98</sup> The HDP requested permission to protest the government's lifting of parliamentary immunity on June 4, 2016 in Gündoğdu Square in Izmir, but its request was denied by the governor.<sup>99</sup>

On March 16, 2016, the Tunceli's Governor's Office announced that they would not let Newroz be celebrated. Demirtaş was expected to participate in the ceremonies, which were going to be held on March 18, 2016. During the same period, the governor's offices of Ankara, Kars and Erzincan also announced that they would not permit the HDP to celebrate Newroz. The local merchants union in Konya province refused the use of its meeting hall for the HDP to host a conference titled "A Call for Peace" on August 21, 2015.<sup>100</sup> In addition, on May 13, 2016, the Aliğa Municipality in İzmir would not provide the HDP local branch a room for a meeting on the removal of parliamentarians' immunity.<sup>101</sup>

When the HDP launched a vigil called the "Conscience and Justice Watch" on July 25, 2017 after obtaining permits for public gatherings, police surrounded the areas where deputies gathered; barriers were built, and residents were not allowed to join the lawmakers. Security forces surrounded Yoğurtcu Park, located in İstanbul's Kadıköy district, and only deputies were allowed to enter. HDP supporters were not let in.<sup>102</sup>

### 2.3 Physical attacks

The HDP also experienced physical violence when thugs targeted party buildings and offices, resulting in destruction, vandalism and arson. HDP officials claim the attacks on party buildings went unpunished and that the attackers enjoyed impunity. On January 24, 2017, HDP Adana deputy Meral Daniş Beştaş submitted a written parliamentary question to Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım asking him to explain investigations into attacks that targeted HDP buildings and administrators.<sup>103</sup> She asked how many people have been investigated, prosecuted and punished because of attacks against the HDP. The government has not yet responded to the question.

98] "İstanbul'da Newroz Kartal Meydanı'nda kutlanacak," Evrensel, March 20, 2017, <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/312930/istanbulda-newroz-kartal-meydaninda-kutlanacak>

99] "Valilik, HDP'nin İzmir mitingine izin vermedi," Milliyet, June 3, 2016, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/valilik-hdp-nin-izmir-mitingine-siyaset-2256477/>

100] Konya Esnaf Odaları'ndan HDP'ye izin yok!, Konhaber, August 21, 2015, [http://www.konhaber.com/haber-konya\\_esnaf\\_odalari\\_ndan\\_hdp\\_ye\\_izin\\_yok-386970.html](http://www.konhaber.com/haber-konya_esnaf_odalari_ndan_hdp_ye_izin_yok-386970.html)

101] Volkan Gunduz, HDP'ye Yer Yok, May 13, 2016, <http://www.aliagaekspres.com.tr/siyaset/13/05/2016/hdpye-yer-yok>

102] "Polis Yoğurtcu Parkı'na Sadece HDP'li Vekillerin Girişine İzin Verdi," Bianet, August 1, 2017, <http://bianet.org/bianet/siyaset/188752-polis-yogurtcu-parki-na-sadece-hdp-li-vekillerin-girisine-izin-verdi>

103] "Meral Daniş Beştaş HDP'ye dönük saldırıları sordu," Gazete Sujin, January 24, 2017, <https://www.gazetesujin.net/tr/2017/01/meral-danis-bestas/>



HDP buildings are often targeted when terror incidents occur. A total of 226 attacks against the HDP occurred in 2014, 2015 and 2016.<sup>104</sup> In some cases, severe damage was inflicted on party buildings and offices. On November 22, 2015, a bullet trace was found on the rear window of Demirtaş's armored car in Diyarbakir. Security guards noticed the trace after Demirtaş got out of the vehicle. The Diyarbakir Governor's Office issued a statement on the incident, saying that "after a forensic examination, it has been determined that there was no sign of a firearm having been discharged. It has been determined that the damage was most likely due to the impact of an unknown object."<sup>105</sup> In a statement to the ANF news agency Demirtaş said that "a bullet trace was detected on the bulletproof rear window

of the vehicle. The trace indicated the target was the head [of the passenger in the back seat]. We did not hear any sound, and no bullets were found."<sup>106</sup>

Furthermore, on September 13, in Ankara, an ultranationalist group attacked the funeral of Hatun Tuğluk,<sup>107</sup> mother of jailed HDP deputy Aysel Tuğluk, who attended the ceremony with special permission from Kandıra Prison in Kocaeli, where she is incarcerated. The body of the deceased was removed from the grave following the attack and moved to Tunceli, a city in the east of Turkey.

## 2.4 The media boycott and campaign to discredit

Coverage in the Turkish media, especially television interviews with Demirtaş, played a role in the HDP's impressive performance in the general elections of June 7, 2015. The Erdoğan regime was determined not to let that happen again; therefore, it is claimed that the government pressured media outlets to not allow HDP representatives to appear on TV programs before the snap election of November 2015. Some popular stations such as NTV, Habertürk and CNN Türk, which had hosted HDP representatives before and during the June 2015 elections, have ceased inviting them to appear on their shows.<sup>108</sup> The ban was in effect for the April presidential referendum as well and still continues to the present day.

104] HDP'ye saldırı haritası, Google Maps, [https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?mid=1tZkEHCz2LL-LIs12D2d0514rUhec&hl=en\\_US&ll=41.063752000000036%2C28.85930200000007&z=8](https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?mid=1tZkEHCz2LL-LIs12D2d0514rUhec&hl=en_US&ll=41.063752000000036%2C28.85930200000007&z=8)

105] Valilik: Demirtaş'a suikast girişimi yok, Yeniçağ, November 24, 2015, <http://www.yenicaggazetesi.com.tr/valilik-demirtasa-suikast-girisimi-yok-125787h.htm>

106] "HDP Eşbaşkanı Demirtaş'a suikast girişimi," ANF, November 22, 2015, <https://anfurkce.net/guncel/hdp-esbaskani-demirtas-a-suikast-girisimi-58720>

107] Aysel Tuğluk'un annesinin saldırıya uğrayan cenazesi defnedildiği mezardan çıkarıldı, BBC, September 14, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-41262278>

108] "Milli ittifak' dışında kalan HDP'ye medya ambargosu," Dicle Haber, August 4, 2016, <http://www.diclehaber.com/tr/news/content/view/529183?from=1815887918>



The boycott is not limited to privately run media outlets but also includes state-owned broadcast network TRT as well. The HDP lodged a complaint about TRT with regulators at the Radio and Television Supreme Board (RTUK). In this complaint, the airtime allocated to the HDP, which was zero, was also noted:

**Coverage of weekly parliamentary meeting on April 18, 2017**

AKP: 30 minutes

CHP: 30 minutes

HDP: 0 seconds

MHP: 30 minutes

**Coverage of weekly parliamentary meeting on May 2, 2017**

AKP: 97 minutes (President joins meeting)

CHP: 0 seconds

HDP: 0 seconds

MHP: 37 minutes

**Coverage of weekly parliamentary meeting on May 9, 2017**

AKP: 20 minutes (PM's speech at a defense fair)

CHP: 37 minutes

HDP: 0 seconds

MHP: 38 minutes

**Coverage of weekly parliamentary meeting on May 16, 2017**

AKP: 56 minutes

CHP: 35 minutes

HDP: 0 seconds

MHP: 35 minutes

**Coverage of weekly parliamentary meeting on May 23, 2017**

AKP: 23 minutes (PM's remarks after meeting Georgian counterpart)

CHP: 49 minutes

HDP: 0 seconds

MHP: 42 minutes

**Coverage of weekly parliamentary meeting on May 30, 2017**

AKP: 57 minutes

CHP: 40 minutes

HDP: 0 seconds

MHP: 40 minutes

The figures showed that zero minutes of airtime was allocated to the HDP on a public broadcasting station that is supposed to provide balanced and fair coverage for all parties in Parliament. None of the HDP meetings held during the April 2017 referendum were broadcast by TRT. According to records provided by the Unity Platform for Democracy, not a single representative of the HDP was invited to speak on any of the 17 news channels in Turkey between March 1 and March 10, 2017. The same news channels gave 53.5 hours to Erdoğan, 83 hours to the AKP, 17 hours to the CHP and 14.5 hours to the MHP, while they allocated 33 minutes of broadcast time to the HDP in the same period.<sup>109</sup>

Furthermore, the pro-government media often defamed the HDP and associated the party

109] "Ekranada HAYIR Yok!, Demokrasi için Birlik Platformu," March 23, 2017, <http://demokrasiicinbirlik.com/2017/03/23/ekranlarda-hayir-yok/>



with terrorism and killings as part of the negative campaign endorsed by Erdoğan. Demirtaş and other HDP politicians have been portrayed as PKK militants in photoshopped pictures. Many journalists who work for these government-controlled media outlets frequently target, insult and threaten HDP representatives.

## 2.5 İmralı and Qandil tutelage

One of the obstacles preventing the HDP from freely engaging in politics is the friction between two key players that exert influence among Kurdish voters. The rivalry between commanders of the armed PKK, which is headquartered in northern Iraq's Kandil region, and the jailed leader of the PKK, who is incarcerated in İmralı Prison, keeps the HDP from fulfilling its potential in legitimate and civilian politics. It weighs heavily on the HDP while turning off many voters who would otherwise support the party.

Among these actors, the HDP gives the impression that it is not the one who is calling the shots in party politics. When many assumed that the HDP might actually break free from this stranglehold after its successful performance in the elections of June 7 during which Demirtaş was able to gain the sympathy of many segments of society, including Turks, İmralı and Kandil were there to bring it back to its former position. During 2015 Demirtaş frequently emphasized the fact that the HDP does not have the power to force the PKK to lay down its weapons; the power to do so rests in Öcalan's hands. A few days later Demirtaş stated, "Öcalan is the one who has the power to make the call on arms, and he is waiting in İmralı."<sup>110</sup> The Kurdistan Communities' Union (KCK), an umbrella organization

110] "Demirtaş: Öcalan silahlar konusunda çağrı yapmak için bekliyor," El Cezire Türkiye, June 11, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com.tr/haber/demirtas-ocalan-silahlar-konusunda-cagri-yapmak-icin-bekliyor>



**Outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Öcalan.**

that incorporates the PKK among other factions, published a declaration on June 12, 2016, rejecting Demirtaş's view. The KCK co-chair announced that the authority to abandon the armed struggle lay entirely in their hands.<sup>111</sup>

HDP deputies were directly targeted a month after the KCK's declaration was announced. The KCK's co-chair, Bese Hozat, wrote an article for the pro-Kurdish *Özgür Gündem* newspaper, saying: "It is a big mistake for some individuals in the HDP to fall into the trap of the AKP and show Leader Apo [Öcalan] as the key to abandoning the armed struggle. This type of approach is the same as telling the AKP to pressure Leader Apo. No matter what the intention, this type of approach is very apolitical, incorrect and unacceptable."<sup>112</sup> The PKK often made the point that HDP politicians were able to get into Parliament because of the PKK's decades-long armed struggle.

Murat Karayilan, the top figure of the PKK and close to Öcalan, also criticized Demirtaş over the HDP leader's stance on post-election coalition talks on June 17, 2015, saying, "... statements such as 'I would not form a coalition with certain individuals' sound emotional to me. This is not quite correct politically, either. ..."<sup>113</sup> Another powerful name in the PKK,

Mustafa Karasu, a member of the KCK Executive Council, lashed out at Demirtaş for saying that the HDP was aware of the additional votes that helped the party exceed the national threshold in the June elections. He called it "borrowed" votes, meaning that supporters from other parties, especially the CHP, preferred to vote strategically by deciding to cast their votes for the HDP. Karasu rejected that statement and noted that "there is no such thing as 'borrowed' votes. The HDP is looking at the situation all wrong. It is not right to speak of borrowed votes."<sup>114</sup>



No one disputed that the June 7 elections provided a historic opportunity for the Kurdish political movement to concentrate on civilian politics and the democratic process and distance itself further from the armed struggle. However, it was seen after the election that it was not possible for the HDP to do so. The spiral of terror resumed once again

as the violence between government security forces and the PKK escalated, weakening the role of the HDP and helping to marginalize it. The fact that the response of the PKK to the arrest of HDP leaders including Demirtaş has been weak strengthened the view that the armed wing of the Kurdish political movement was not too upset about marginalizing the HDP leadership.

For years, the Turkish public has expected the HDP and its predecessor parties to draw a sharp line between politics and the armed fight, asking Kurdish politicians to not only

**Murat Karayilan, a top senior PKK figure who is close to Öcalan criticized Demirtaş over his stance on coalition talks.**

111] "KCK: Öcalan ve HDP karar veremez," Rudaw, June 12, 2015, <http://www.rudaw.net/turkish/kurdistan/1206201512>

112] KCK: HDP'nin silah bırakma için Öcalan'ı göstermesi apolitik, T24, July 23, 2015, <http://t24.com.tr/haber/kck-hdpnin-silah-birakma-icin-ocalani-gostermesi-apolitik,303807>

113] Koalisyonu girmem açıklamalarında duygusallık var, Hürriyet, June 18, 2015, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/koalisyonu-girmem-aciklamalarinda-duygusallik-var-29313876>

114] KCK'li Karasu: Emanet oy yok, Birgün, June 9, 2015, <http://www.birgun.net/haber-detay/kck-li-karasu-emanet-oy-yok-82487.html>



distance themselves from the PKK but to also brand it as a terrorist organization. Because of the overlapping bases of the HDP and the PKK, this could be mission impossible both socially and politically. Nevertheless, Demirtaş has come out quite vocally against the PKK when the outlawed group targeted civilians and unarmed security forces in the past. For example, during the party's parliamentary group meeting on May 17, 2016 Demirtaş condemned a PKK attack carried out by a truck loaded with explosives that was detonated in Diyarbakir's Sur district, stating that "15 were killed in the explosion that took place in Diyarbakir. Their DNA tests were completed, and we bade our farewells to them. Ten of those people were from the same family, and five of them were from another. An incident like this can have no legitimate justification. I want to state unequivocally that we condemn this attack. In cases like this, those responsible need to apologize. We do not want war in our cities."<sup>115</sup> Demirtaş made similar statements after an attack that took place in Istanbul's Vezneciler neighborhood on June 7, 2016 and killed 12 people, including six civilians. The attack was claimed by the Kurdistan Freedom Hawks (TAK), an offshoot of the PKK. "Of course, we never thought that such an organization would benefit anyone. On the contrary, it is obvious that it is harmful," he said.<sup>116</sup>

On July 22, 2017, Demirtaş sent a statement from his prison cell for a 23-year-old teacher, Necmettin Yılmaz, who had been killed by the PKK after he was abducted in the eastern province of Tunceli in June 2017. "I condemn and criticize the murder of the teacher, Necmettin, without any hesitation. Such brutality cannot have a legitimate or moral reason. I pray for mercy from God and patience for those who love Him. I would like to say that we will not accept silence for such murders."<sup>117</sup>

However, it must be noted that not all HDP officials acted similarly to Demirtaş. The co-chairs of the HDP's Kayapınar and Bağlar municipalities and the HDP's provincial co-president attended the funeral of the suicide bomber who was responsible for the attack in Vezneciler that killed 12 people.<sup>118</sup> Although Demirtaş condemned the suicide bombing that took the lives of 29 civilians in Ankara on Feb. 18, 2016, HDP Van deputy Tuğba Hezer attended a ceremony to offer her condolences to the family of the suicide bomber, drawing the ire of many.<sup>119</sup> The HDP also failed to put a clear distance between itself and the "trenches" conflict in the Southeast during which many civilians lost their lives. Some local communities were reported to be quite upset and angry with both the PKK and the HDP.<sup>120</sup>

115] Demirtaş'tan PKK'ya özür çağrısı, Hürriyet, May 17, 2015, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/demirtas-diyarbakirdaki-saldiriyi-kiniyorum-40105113>

116] "Demirtaş'tan TAK'ın dağıtılması çağrısı," BBC, June 16, 2016, [http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2016/06/160616\\_selahattin\\_demirtas\\_rop](http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2016/06/160616_selahattin_demirtas_rop)

117] "Demirtaş: Necmettin öğretmenin katledilmesini kınıyorum," Sputnik, July 22, 2017, <https://tr.sputniknews.com/turkiye/201707221029386816-demirtas-necmettin-ogretmen-kinama/>

118] "HDP'liler canlı bombanın cenazesinde," El Cezire Türkiye, June 16, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com.tr/haber/hdpliler-canli-bombanın-cenazesinde>

119] "HDP Van Milletvekili Hezer'e tepki," Hürriyet, February 25, 2016, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/hdp-van-milletvekili-hezere-tepki-37248503>

120] "PKK Demirtaş'ı kurban etti," El Cezire Türkiye, December 5, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com.tr/aljazeera-ozel/pkk-demirtasi-kurban-etti>

## CHAPTER 3

### REFLECTIONS ON THE DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL AUDIENCE

#### 3.1. No reaction at all

After Erdoğan criticized the Dolmabahçe agreement of February 28, 2015, the negative campaign against the HDP intensified, with pro-Erdoğan media associating the party with terrorism. Apart from a courtesy visit from Ahmet Davutoğlu, who was given a mandate to form the government after the June 7 elections, there was no contact between the HDP and the AKP government. Binali Yıldırım, who replaced Davutoğlu as prime minister in May 2016, has not met with HDP leaders at any time during his term in office.

After the coup attempt on July 15, Erdoğan held a leaders summit at the palace with the intention of sending a message of national unity to the public. None of the representatives from the third largest political party in Parliament, the HDP, were invited.<sup>121</sup> The HDP was not invited to a big rally to condemn the coup held at Yenikapı Square in Istanbul, either.

The discrimination and political embargo that was being imposed on the HDP by Erdoğan's regime adversely affected the public perception of the HDP as well, leading to further marginalization of the pro-Kurdish party. Any support or favorable comment for the HDP was interpreted by the government, media and pundits as support of terrorism. The criticism voiced by CHP leader Kılıçdaroğlu of the arrest of Demirtaş and other HDP deputies was portrayed as supporting terrorism by government officials.<sup>122</sup>

When Kılıçdaroğlu embarked on the 450-kilometer Justice March in June 2017 from Ankara to Istanbul in protest of the arrest of CHP deputy Enis Berberoğlu, Erdoğan lambasted the CHP for working closely with the HDP, which it called a terrorist organization. Although the HDP gave only limited support to the march, that did not prevent Erdoğan from criticizing the CHP. "Aren't they walking hand-in-hand with terrorist organizations now?"<sup>123</sup> he asked. Mardin Mayor Ahmet Türk, a 75-year-old HDP politician who was arrested but later released for reasons of health, participated in the march. Erdoğan publicly scolded Justice Minister Bekir Bozdag for securing Türk's release and said: "How is he sick? He was released and later joined the march. Mr. Minister, did they get a medical report from a competent hospital? Did they show the report to you?"

121] "Saray'a çağrılmayan Demirtaş'tan Erdoğan'a tepki," *Hürriyet*, July 25, 2016, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/saraya-cagrilmayan-demirtastan-erdogana-tepki-40168313>

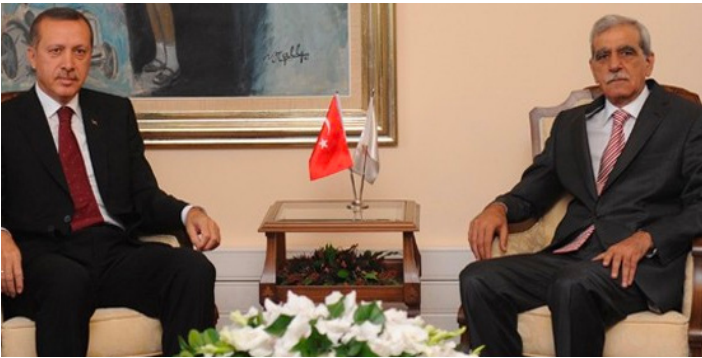
122] "CHP'den skandal HDP açıklaması," *Yeni Akit*, December 7, 2016, <http://www.yeniakit.com.tr/haber/chpden-skandal-hdp-aciklamasi-231609.html>

123] Erdoğan'dan 'Adalet Yürüyüşü'ne: PKK, HDP, FETÖ'yle el ele kol kola, *Diken*, June 20, 2017, <http://www.diken.com.tr/erdogandan-adalet-yuruyusune-pkk-hdp-fetoyle-el-ele-kol-kola/>

How was he released?”<sup>124</sup>

With the state of emergency declared on July 20, 2016 many HDP meetings and demonstrations were prohibited on the grounds of public safety and security. Those who participated in protests and rallies were immediately taken into custody with the claim that the gatherings were being held without permission, and judicial proceedings were initiated against them. Local HDP branches that wanted to protest of the arrest of HDP leaders were prevented from doing so.

A group of academics who had criticized the government’s previous disproportionate violence during the “trenches” conflict published a statement calling for peace and asking that the clashes in the streets come to an end. Although 1,128 academics signed the peace declaration, Erdoğan branded them as “villains and sinister people.”<sup>125</sup> Soon after the Turkish president’s criticism, academics who were working for government institutions were dismissed because of their signatures on the peace petition. Many of them were also detained and arrested.<sup>126</sup>



### 3.2 Why was the local community silent?

Even in Turkey’s southeastern region, where the HDP is particularly strong, there have been very limited protests and rallies. The public mostly remained silent in the face of the crackdown on the HDP and the arrest of its deputies. Although some in the region also blamed the PKK and the HDP for the resumption of violence, the climate of fear perpetuated by the government and the harsh and brutal response by the security forces in cracking down on any protest as well as the return of the unlawful practices of the security forces that were tolerated all played a large role in muzzling critical voices in the Kurdish constituency.

HDP Kars deputy Ayhan Bilgen explained the silence of the people of the region by pointing to government oppression. He mentioned that “after every press release, some people who were caught in security footage were arrested by police and even their children were fired from their jobs.” He added that “the biggest reason behind people staying silent is that the public had witnessed how the government can lay siege to their lives, as was displayed in the town of Cizre and Diyarbakir’s Sur neighborhood. The government made sure there was an

[124] “Erdoğan’dan Adalet Bakanı’na ‘Ahmet Türk’ tepkisi: Nasıl çıktı?” T24, July 14, 2017, <http://t24.com.tr/haber/erdogandan-adalet-bakanina-ahmet-turk-tepkisi-nasil-cikti,414412>

[125] Erdoğan’dan barış çağrısı yapan akademisyenlere: Aydın müsveddesi, cahil, Diken, January 12, 2016 <http://www.diken.com.tr/erdogandan-baris-cagrisi-yapan-akademisyenlere-aydin-musveddesi-cahil/>

[126] “Çoğu barış bildirisi imzacısı 330 akademisyen ihraç edildi!” Evrensel, February 7, 2017, <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/307314/cogu-baris-bildirisi-imzacisi-330-akademisyen-ihrac-edildi>

**President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan criticized then Justice Minister Bozdağ over the release of Ahmet Türk (right), a 75 year-old veteran Kurdish politician and former mayor of Mardin from prison due to health problems.**

environment in which public reaction became impossible.”<sup>127</sup>

Another HDP deputy, Altan Tan, acknowledged the impact of the state of emergency on the silence of Kurds but said the HDP played a role in contributing to this silence as well. Criticizing the PKK, Tan stated: “These people were opposed to the practices of the AKP, the state and the government. In the June 7 [elections], 80 percent of them voted for us. At the moment, there are not a lot of people who are saying ‘The AKP is right, the state is on the right track.’ This is for sure. But there are a sizable number of people who say ‘The PKK made it wrong, and the HDP could not stop them.’ This reality must be recognized as well. This is the main reason for the silence.”<sup>128</sup>



Many in the region also believe the PKK sacrificed Demirtaş. HDP Mersin deputy Dengir Mir Mehmet Fırat agreed that the government and the PKK both had harmed the HDP. “It is as if HDP is being squeezed by both sides into toast. From this perspective, the question that comes to mind is, ‘Is there a relationship between the PKK and the government?’” According to Fırat, it is wrong to say that the PKK is not a terrorist organization while the number of slain soldiers keeps increasing.

Another frequently expressed view is that the PKK and Öcalan were both disturbed that the HDP emerged as a powerful political actor in the elections. Fearing that they would lose ground to the HDP, both played a role in preventing the HDP from becoming an independent actor.<sup>129</sup> The fact that the PKK seems unconcerned over the arrest of HDP deputies

and the replacement of elected HDP officials with government caretakers in municipalities bolstered this perception. Likewise, the increase in terror attacks following the HDP victory in the June 7 elections also contributed to this claim.

**HDP Deputy  
Altan Tan  
HDP Deputy  
Mehmet Mir  
Dengir Fırat.**

### **3.3 Robust response from abroad**

In contrast to the relative silence on the domestic front, Turkey’s allies, especially the US and the EU, reacted strongly to the removal of parliamentary immunity, the arrest of HDP deputies and the sacking of local elected officials in predominantly Kurdish regions.

The first reaction to the HDP deputies being detained on November 4, 2016, came from

127] “PKK Demirtaş’ı kurban etti,” El Cezire Türkiye, December 5, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com.tr/al-jazeera-ozel/pkk-demirtasi-kurban-etti>

128] “PKK Demirtaş’ı kurban etti,” El Cezire Türkiye, December 5, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com.tr/al-jazeera-ozel/pkk-demirtasi-kurban-etti>

129] “HDP-Kandil-İmralı arasında güç mücadelesi,” Sabah, August 9, 2015, <http://www.sabah.com.tr/gun-dem/2015/08/09/hdp-kandil-imrali-arasinda-guc-mucadelesi>



Kati Piri, the European Parliament’s rapporteur on Turkey. Piri suggested Turkey’s accession talks with the EU be suspended, stating that Turkey was fast becoming a dictatorship.<sup>130</sup> Then president of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz, said Turkish authorities were not only keeping Turkey away from democracy, they were also turning their backs on the values, principles, norms and rules that support EU-Turkish relations.<sup>131</sup> The EU’s high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, Federica Mogherini, called the EU

ambassadors in Ankara for an emergency meeting after the HDP deputies were taken into custody.<sup>132</sup> Germany recalled its chargé d’affaires in Ankara to assess recent developments.<sup>133</sup>



German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who visited Turkey on February 2, 2017, conveyed to Erdoğan that she was disturbed by the arrest of HDP members. Merkel also met with an HDP delegation as part of her trip.<sup>134</sup>

Secretary-General of the Council of Europe, Thorbjørn Jagland, noted in a speech at

the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe session on June 26, 2017 that jailed journalists and members of Parliament were the priority for the Council of Europe.<sup>135</sup>

In its annual Country Reports on Human Rights Practices released by the US State Department on March 4, 2017, the arrest of HDP deputies and mayors was widely covered.

**German Chancellor Merkel met with an HDP delegation during her visit to Turkey on February 2, 2017.**

130] “EU rapporteur calls for suspension of talks with Turkey,” Turkish Minute, December 4, 2016, <https://www.turkishminute.com/2016/11/04/eu-rapporteur-calls-suspension-talks-turkey/>

131] “European politicians condemn Turkey’s crackdown on HDP,” Deutsche Welle, December 4, 2016, <http://www.dw.com/en/european-politicians-condemn-turkeys-crackdown-on-hdp/a-36261139>

132] “Mogherini Calls Ambassadors’ Meeting After Detention of Turkish Lawmakers,” Sputnik, December 4, 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/politics/201611041047066226-mpgherini-turkey-ambassadors/>

133] “Avrupa Birliği Ankara büyükelçilerini toplantıya çağırdı,” BBC, December 4, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-37871841a>

134] “Merkel, HDP heyeti ile görüştü,” Evrensel, February 2, 2017, <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/306701/merkel-hdp-heyeti-ile-gorustu>

135] “Jagland Says Jailed Journalists And Deputies Are Priority For Council Of Europe,” Stockholm Center for Freedom, June 29, 2017, <https://stockholmcf.org/jagland-says-jailed-journalists-and-deputies-are-priority-for-council-of-europe/>

“The government restricted the activities of some opposition political parties and leaders”, the report said, adding that police detained local party officials and supporters; and the government replaced democratically elected officials with state trustees when local officials were accused of affiliation with terrorist groups. “These tactics were most commonly directed against politicians affiliated with the HDP and its sister party, the DBP” it noted.<sup>136</sup>

Finally, on July 6, 2017, the European Parliament took a vote on a proposal to suspend the ongoing EU membership negotiations with Turkey. The suggestion was approved with 477 votes in favor, 64 votes against.<sup>137</sup> For the first time in the history of the EU, a report was written to suspend ongoing membership negotiations with a candidate country.

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136] “Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2016,” US Department of State, March 4, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm?year=2016&dlid=265482#wrapper>

137] Avrupa Parlamentosu müzakereleri askıya alan raporu kabul etti, İndigo, July 6, 2017, <https://indigoder-gisi.com/2017/07/avrupa-parlamentosu-uyelik-muzakereleri-askiya-alinmasi/>

## CONCLUSION

The crackdown on the HDP represents one of the major attacks relentlessly conducted by the Erdoğan government on freedom of association and freedom of assembly. The jailing of the party leaders and other elected officials on dubious charges is not only a major threat to the viability of Turkish democracy but also complicates the resolution of the longstanding Kurdish problem in Turkey.

The HDP is suffocating under the pressure and unable to connect with voters in the media blackout. The AKP government demonized the party and at times turned it into a scapegoat for its own failures. While it was accepted as a partner by the AKP in attempts to find a resolution to the Kurdish problem until mid-2015, it was turned into a villain during the campaign period leading up to the June elections and portrayed as a terrorist group after a successful performance in the polls. The defamation campaign in the pro-government media helped justify the crackdown on the party leadership as well as on its rank and file.

The developments that took place between June 7 and November 1, 2015 show how the surge in terror events helped the Erdoğan government regain its lost majority in Parliament. The secret deal Erdoğan struck with nationalist MHP's leader, Devlet Bahçeli, suggests Erdoğan would lean more on nationalist and statist policies when dealing with the Kurdish problem in general and with the HDP in particular.

In the presidential and national elections likely to take place in 2019 or earlier, Erdoğan's goal is to make the HDP bleed votes in order to garner more than 50 percent of the vote, which is required for him and his party to stay in power. The government will not let up on the negative campaigning depicting the HDP as a terrorist entity or agents of foreign powers while forging more alliances with other smaller parties like Huda-Par (also known as the Kurdish Hizbullah. It is unlikely that Demirtaş or other prominent figures of the HDP leadership will be released from prison before the 2019 elections or a snap election in 2018.

Although the PKK failed to display a strong reaction to the government hammering the HDP and cracking down on the Kurdish political movement on the Southeast, it may not keep silent this time, especially if it can manage to consolidate its gains in Syria through its affiliates. The PKK knows it cannot wage a battle on two fronts, in Turkey and Syria, at the same time, and therefore would be more likely to focus on Syria before anything else. Perhaps with more acceptable people in the HDP leadership who will be approved by Öcalan and the PKK commanders, the HDP may be more amenable to the influence of the Erdoğan government. In either case, clashes are unlikely to stop any time soon.

The Kurdish problem and the crackdown on the HDP is a subset of a larger democratic deficit that has been widening under the autocratic regime of Turkish President Erdoğan, which has consolidated all legislative, judicial and executive powers in the hands of one man. The suspension of the rule of law, the massive violation of fundamental human rights

and the abandonment of the democratic principles of governance is a major challenge for all of Turkey that automatically impacts the rights of Kurds as well. Therefore, even if Erdoğan is willing to go back to the negotiating table to settle the Kurdish problem, the democratic base in the country necessary to sustain such a momentum is no longer there.

While the HDP has been put on the anvil to be hammered hard, the alternative radical Islamist-based Huda-Par, a political party close to Hizbullah, is actively being promoted by the government instead. In the meantime, the use of brute force in Kurdish-populated areas is leaving scars that will not be easy to heal. The deployment of paramilitary forces including radical Islamist militants to persecute Kurds in the Southeast is aggravating the situation. As a result, it will be more difficult, though not impossible, to frame another round at the negotiating table to resolve the decades-old Kurdish problem in Turkey.

Turkey's military incursion in January 2018 dubbed Operation Olive Branch targeting Syria's Afrin region, which is controlled by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), considered by Turkish authorities to be the Syrian extension of the PKK, will certainly complicate the Kurdish problem further.





# Kurdish political movement under crackdown in Turkey

## The case of the HDP



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