

WITNESSING THE TURKEY ELECTIONS



REPORT FROM THE UK DELEGATION

July 2015

Compiled by Peace in Kurdistan Campaign

Peace in Kurdistan

Campaign for a political solution of the Kurdish Question

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INTRODUCTION

In early July 2015, a delegation of observers from the UK travelled to Diyarbakir and Gaziantep in Turkey's southeast to witness what was going to become a historic election in Turkey. For the first time, the People's Democratic Party (HDP) would contest the election as a party and attempt to pass the infamous 10% threshold, which has been repeatedly criticised over the years for deliberately blocking minority parties, in particular Kurdish parties, out of the political process.

Given the importance of the election, the HDP put out an international call for election monitors to which Peace in Kurdistan Campaign and our 6 delegates responded. They were part of a massive international effort to ensure that outside eyes were firmly watching the election process and this latest attempt by the broader Kurdish movement to play their rightful part in the country's democratic process. The UK delegates were as follows: **Sean Hawkey**, official representative of the Green Party for England and Wales; **Melanie Gingell**, human rights lawyer, barrister, Doughty Street Chambers; **Dr Thomas Jeffrey Miley**, Lecturer in Political Sociology in Department of sociology at Cambridge University; **Bronwen Jones**, family and immigration barrister at Mansfield Chambers; **John Hunt**, Journalist, writer, and editor; **Dr Austin Reid**, consultant in international university development.

This report is a series of personal and political reflections from the delegates, written either during or soon after their visit. Compiled, they form an insightful analysis of both the origins of the HDP's success and the implications of it for the future of Turkey's democratic state and Kurdish progress towards self-determination.

All photos reproduced here are courtesy of Sean Hawkey and were used with his permission. Many thanks to Andrew Penny for his work coordinating and interpreting for the delegation.

A PERSONAL REFLECTION ON THE ELECTIONS IN GAZIANTEP JUNE 2015 by DR AUSTIN REID

I had been in Gaziantep in Turkey for four days, for me four days of some significance. I was invited, as part of an international delegation to observe the elections for the Turkish parliament here in the Southeastern of Turkey in Gaziantep 30 km from the border with Syria. The purpose was primarily to draw international attention to the elections in Turkey, to let the local population know that the international community cared about what happens here, to give the electorate in this area where there is a sizeable Kurdish population some confidence that they would not be prevented from carrying out their civic duty to vote, and to give some protection to the candidates from intimidation and violence. These then are my reflections on the elections, on the electoral process, on the voters, on the party activists, on the HDP Parliamentary candidates, on their rivals and finally on the country itself.

The election, 7 June

The Turkish government election is over, polls closed throughout this large country at 5.00 pm to-day Sunday 7 June. By 7.00 pm the final result was becoming clear and by 9.00 pm 99.7% of the vote had been recorded electronically and the People's Democratic Party (HDP) have exceeded the 10% entry point below which all its votes would be ineffective and would have



been transferred to the other parties. It got 13%, an astonishing result. The party was told by its leaders not to celebrate in the light of the deaths in Diyarbakir, and in order not to be seen to be provocative, but by 9.00 pm fireworks were being let off. This was not a celebration I was told, just fireworks of joy! Diyarbakir seems to have stayed quiet. A number of the party leaders from here in Gaziantep went to Diyarbakir to ensure that no hotheads tried to let off steam. The bombs in Diyarbakir were seen as an attempt to provoke violence and to give grounds for discrediting the HDP party, but the nature of the bombs seem to have the hallmarks of ISIS. There had previously been trouble there between HDP and ISIS.

The Election Process

I have been impressed by the orderly election process, potential electors presenting their identification, it being checked by election officials, a long multicoloured voting slip and an official stamper being handed over to the voter, the voter then casting casts his or her vote in a private polling booth, the voting slip is put in a large brown envelope and that envelope is placed in a transparent voting box, for subsequent delivery to the counting station.

The Voters

I was impressed by the determination of the people to vote. Young and old, rough and suave, individuals and families, crowds of them came to the polling booths, despite the potential for danger.

The Party Activists



I was impressed by the work of the party activists, their determination to protect the party electoral candidates and the electors from real danger. In the short time that I was in the city there was no violence that I heard of, but in the neighbouring Diyarbakir bombs were exploded in an HDP electoral rally and subsequently some party officials were murdered.

In the short time in which they had been able to establish the party in its new form and prepare for the election, the party had, in the city of Gaziantep mobilised 3,000 party supporters to go with the candidates in their election tours, to go with them to the polling stations, to be at each polling station to ensure that electors were not deprived of the civil rights in voting for the candidate of their choice. One party activist told me that they were prepared to die to ensure that electors could vote, and that she realised that such a demand might truly be made of them. For them the conviction that they and the people needed to be able to vote was an existential requirement.

The Candidates

And then there were the candidates, busy, concerned, sometimes active, sometimes relaxing from hectic continuous activity, some at ease, some anxious, uncertain about the outcome, about their own personal future and the future of the cause for which they have given so much, and which was still in the air.

And what of their rivals?

The big one of course was the AKP, currently the party forming the government, the child of Erdogan, who as President is intended to be impartial but has campaigned ceaselessly and forcefully against the HDP denigrating it throughout the campaign. For many people, out of innocence or ignorance or bias there is no distinction between the party and the government. For example the Council employees in Gaziantep got instructions to turn out for a campaign rally by the Prime Minister who in this election is the leader of the AKP party. Thus it may seem appropriate to favour the 'government' party on every occasion. The main problems in the election process as identified by the OSCE in its April visit to Turkey are the lack of even handed access by the parties other than AKP to the press and news agencies, the harsh treatment of any journalist who questions the government, or who is critical of the president. Turkey has probably the worst record on press freedom in Europe. In the television broadcasts in the two days before the election, there was wall to wall coverage of speeches by the Prime Minister and the President, with very little else visible.

There are other parties apart from the AKP, some large and small. The Communists, for example, form one of the smallest parties and have no representation in parliament.

And what about the country after the election?

But what about the country itself, what impact has the election had on the country? I have been present at what I perceive to have been a turning point in the development of this part of the world, not just Turkey, but the Middle East. I have been present at the point where the HDP representing the minority aspirations of the Kurds and of other minority groups as well as the aspirations of ordinary people for a more democratic, non-militaristic country.



HDP has developed into a party that has jettisoned its aspirations to create a separatist Kurdish state fighting against the governments of Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran. In Turkey at least, it has broadened its appeal to include left progressive causes, including green environmental, gender equality, greater human rights, recognition of a greater cultural diversity, and a greater acceptance of religious diversity. It has thus enlarged its representation. I believe that the Kurds who number about a quarter of population in Turkey, can now feel represented

by a legitimate party, not one tied to an armed rebellion, which can represent their interests. There is the real prospect of Kurdish language, long repressed as representing an illegal disruptive force in the country, being accepted as part of the culture in Turkey, and of Kurds being given the rights and opportunity that all citizens should have, and escaping the role of an underclass in Turkish society. It harks back to Irish nationalism in Ulster, Catalan nationalism in Spain, and Scottishness in the UK. Each different but with many common aspirations. But the HDP does not just represent the Kurds it is a national party in Turkey with an agenda that is good for all of turkey and for every race within the country.

Will it work? I do not know. It can work. It will be to the immense benefit of Turkey and the surrounding countries if the position of the HDP as an important and legitimate part of the political landscape of Turkey is established and accepted. I spoke to a Turkish academic who pointed out some of the difficulties to be overcome.

1. For 100 years Turkey has been a unitary nation state founded on one language, one religion, one race, where Kurds and other races such as Armenians have been seen as non-Turkish and barely accepted as citizens. It will be difficult for many to accept a multicultural society with a diversity of linguistic heritages.

2. Turkey has had a tradition of highly paternalistic government where the government determines how everything is to be done. It will be difficult to gain acceptance of a culture where there are different ways, and acceptably different ways of doing things.
3. Some Kurds still have aspirations for a separate national state. For HDP to work effectively in Turkey, it cannot support those aspirations.
4. Governments in Turkey have hitherto have been based on simple unitary majorities, where the winner takes all. For a government administration to be formed with the present distribution of parliamentary seats will require compromise, conciliation, and cooperation, characteristics not widely practiced in politics here.

Finally

Congratulations to the HDP on its momentous election victory. As the Guardian put it, the election was won by a party that came fourth.

Congratulations on having the courage to risk all on entering as a party rather than as individuals.

Congratulations on widening your appeal to an audience larger than your core Kurdish supporters.

Congratulations on having convinced sufficient of the public that your programme is good for Turkey

Congratulations on keeping your cool under provocation

VIVA HDP!

PEOPLE'S HISTORIC VICTORY by DR. THOMAS JEFFREY MILEY

The recent election in Turkey marked a historic turning point for the country. As members of a delegation from Britain of lawyers, academics, human rights advocates and journalists, we had the opportunity to witness this vital election in the cities of Diyarbakir and Gaziantep. During our five-day trip to these cities, we spoke with Human Rights activists, representatives of trade unions, and met with and accompanied activists and candidates of the HDP in visits to hundreds of polling stations on election day.

Political tensions ran high across the Republic during the campaign, in the run-up to an election that was interpreted by many as a referendum on President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's ambitions to further tighten his grip on power by introducing a new constitution to convert the Parliamentary Republic into a Presidential regime. The stalling economy, and rising unemployment, certainly did not help Erdogan. Even more damage was done to the President and his ruling AKP by the influx of Syrian refugees, not to mention the role played by the Erdogan government in destabilizing the neighboring Syrian state.



Perhaps even more important than all of these highly salient issues, the election constituted a critical juncture for the fate (1) of Abdullah Ocalan, (2) of the long-stalled peace process with the PKK, and (3) of the prospects for political compromise on the main grievances articulated by the Kurdish movement.

The Kurdish movement in Turkey has evolved dramatically since the arrest of its leader, Abdullah Ocalan, in 1998. Spurred on by Ocalan himself, the

movement has officially renounced its commitment to an independent Greater Kurdish nation-state, and has come to embrace a program of “democratic confederalism” in its place. It has at the same time come to express a clear and firm commitment to a peace process, despite substantial and ongoing violent provocations by the Turkish state.

The leadership of the Kurdish movement had a lot riding on this election. In past elections, they had opted to run candidates as independents in particular districts only in Kurdish strongholds in order to avoid having to cross Turkey’s extremely high 10% threshold for representation (established by the military after the 1980 coup). However, this time around, they decided to run the risk, hoping to pass the threshold and presenting candidates as a party throughout all of Turkey, by joining forces in coalition with the Turkish left as well as with other marginalized groups and ethnic minorities including Alawites, Alevites, Armenians, Arabs, Assyrians as well as the lesbian and gay community, feminists, and labour and environmental movements, all under the umbrella organization of the HDP.

The heroic defense of Kobane in the Kurdish region of Syria did much to boost the image and morale of the Kurdish movement, especially in and around the Kurdish capital, Diyarbakir, but also to a certain degree even throughout the rest of Turkey. Simultaneously, Erdogan’s open hostility to the plight of the Kurds in neighboring Syria has done much to sour his popularity among devout Kurds, who had previously sympathized with him as a fellow Muslim.

The corresponding surge in popular support for the HDP has been responded to with intimidation and violence on the part of the Turkish state and the AKP government. The prospects that HDP representation in the Turkish Parliament would block Erdogan’s ambition to introduce a new presidentialist constitution helped fan the flames of this animosity, resulting in a climate quite unpropitious for freedom of expression as well as widespread concerns about the possibility of electoral fraud.

Throughout the campaign, HDP election offices, bureaus, and activists were the targets of harassment, intimidation and violence on over 170 occasions. Indeed, during our brief stay in the country, we witnessed murderous provocation up close in Diyarbakir twice: first, at the HDP’s final election rally on Friday, where bomb explosions killed 3 and wounded over a hundred; and second, two days after the election, when 3 HDP supporters were gunned down at a coffee house that had been used as an election bureau during the campaign.



Despite the climate of intimidation and violence, the Human Rights’ activists, trade union representatives, and HDP members with whom we met over the course of our stay displayed consistent courage and restraint, while repeatedly expressing their commitment to both a peaceful resolution to the Kurdish question as well as to a deepening and strengthening of democracy throughout Turkey, even in the face of murderous provocations.

Fortunately, we witnessed no serious incidents on election day, though in many districts of the mixed city of Gaziantep a climate of tension and hostility was palpable even to the outsider. As Osman Demirci, one of the HDP candidates whom some of our members accompanied on visits to polling stations, remarked: “People here are like bombs ready to go off. You have to know how to defuse them.” Our delegation itself was received with a good dose of suspicion, especially among pro-

government and Turkish nationalist stalwarts involved in running the election, one of whom angrily commented to Demirci upon witnessing our members enter a room where citizens were voting: “How dare you bring foreigners with you to come and audit me in my own country.” To which Demirci responded smoothly by offering his hand and saying: “We wouldn’t ask for them to be here if we weren’t rightly concerned about the possibility of electoral fraud. But this is a festival of democracy, and they have only come to witness it. Let us stand here together to show the world that we know how to govern ourselves, that we all can get along.”

In the end, the HDP scored a great victory in the election, surpassing the 10% threshold by a wide margin, winning more than 12% of the vote and 80 delegates in the 550-seat Turkish parliament. The result was received with elation – though tensions still ran high in its wake. The atmosphere in Diyarbakir the day after the election – where close to 80% of the electorate had come out in support for the HDP – was festive, to say the least. Yet much tension remained, and was clearly on display even at the official post-election celebration, attended by tens of thousands, and held at the same venue where the annual Newroz celebration has taken place ever since its legalization in 2000. Attendees at the post-election celebration had to pass through fully three security checks – one controlled by the police, two by the HDP – in order to access the venue. Amid all the singing and the dancing, barely suppressed by all the elation, more than a hint of nervousness could still be detected, and surfaced for example when a sudden loud boom among the crowd probably caused by a drum was confused for a bomb, causing many to jump.

The murder of 3 HDP members the very next morning only confirmed that the election result does not mean a miraculous end to the continuing climate of intimidation and violence. Erdogan has been stymied for now in his ambition to increase his grasp on power, but the AKP remains the number one party in Turkey, with over 40% of the vote. Perhaps even more disturbingly, the country’s third most-voted party was the far-right Turkish-nationalist MHP, which managed to capture close to 17% of the vote. What’s more, it remains unclear whether the AKP will be able to form a stable governing coalition, and so there is talk of new elections in as soon as three months’ time.

Nevertheless, the election result on June 7th was a great victory for democracy in the country. The representation of the HDP in the Turkish Parliament significantly strengthens the prospect of achieving a peaceful solution to the Kurdish question, at the same time that it constitutes an important step in the reconstruction of a united Turkish left.

THE TURKEY ELECTION: EVOLVING TURKISH DEMOCRACY
by BRONWEN JONES

I was fortunate to be able to be present in Gaziantep in the days preceding and following the historic election on 7 June 2015. Our delegation was able to observe campaigning by the HDP and discuss the progress of the campaign with some HDP campaign officials, and with spokespeople from IHD (the Turkish Human Rights Association), and with union representatives.

I was impressed by the enthusiasm and constant positivity of the HDP campaign. Even after violent attacks they remained calm and positive. Their slogan itself – “Bizler Meclise” (“all of us to the Parliament”) was inspirational. I think that attending a spontaneous victory rally in Vatan (a Kurdish area of Antep), with hundreds, or thousands, of people dancing in the street, singing and chanting that slogan, will always be one of the most memorable moments in my life. It was a victory of inclusion over factionalism. To me, that is the historical fact about this election. Before, factionalism was always a feature of Turkish politics. Parties represented different sections of society. Here, there was a party which tried to bring everyone under its umbrella, and their message seems to have resonated across the country.

A comprehensive overview of the truly historic nature of this election has been provided by my colleague in the delegation, Dr Thomas Jeffrey Miley, and is essential reading. I don't want to cover the same ground as it would only be repetition. I want to add some detail and background on three particular topics around the election, from my own background of having studied Turkish politics since 2002, when the AKP came to power, and from some of the discussions we had with people in Gaziantep.

My view is that this election is part of an overall evolution of Turkish democracy. Since the turn of the millennium, Turkish society has become more open to diversity, and its political system more plural and democratic. While there is still more progress to be made, I think the HDP's success at this election is a significant step forward in that process.

The AKP

When the AKP came to power in 2002, the Turkish state had had 80 years of hard secularism which outright denied rights to any minority group which didn't fit into a rigid definition of "Turkishness": broadly – ethnically Turkish, Sunni Muslim, and publicly irreligious. The existence of Kurds and the rights all ethnic (Laz, Circassian, Arab, etc) and religious (Alevi, Christian, etc) minorities was denied. This is all well-documented – Kurds being dubbed "mountain Turks," the word "Kürt" being said to be onomatopoeic for the sound of crunching snow in the cold east of the country, Kurdish being allegedly a bastardised form of Turkish, the denial of linguistic and cultural rights, the project of Turkification, bombings of villages in the 1980s resulting in repeated ECHR judgments against the Turkish government. The Kurds as Kurds had no rights or recognition in Kemalist ideology.

The AKP did not come to power on a platform of addressing all of these inequities. Primarily they declared that they wanted to address freedom of religion and the power of the military. That power had been increased dramatically following the 1980 military coup and the institution of a military constitution.

The AKP has to a certain extent been successful in those goals. The headscarf ban has been lifted, allowing religiously observant women to participate freely in all areas of society, including academia (in public universities) and government. Some constitutional amendments have been passed reducing the power of the military. Religious people – particularly covered women – in Turkey report that they finally feel they are being treated with respect in their own country. There have also been improvements in the Kurdish situation. The peace process, now faltered, was begun. Certain limited linguistic and cultural rights have been granted. The AKP government seemed, at least for a time, more open to recognising the diversity of Turkish society.

However, over the last few years the AKP's approach under former Prime Minister Erdogan has become increasingly authoritarian and intolerant of dissent. The AKP has moved from a position of advocating "American-style secularism" – which Erdogan said, in interviews before he was elected, meant the government to be entirely neutral on religious issues – to pushing an increasingly religious society. We were told by trade unionists that the government has sponsored a proliferation of religious schools, known as imam hatep schools. More of these have been built than is necessary, alongside a failure to open enough "regular" and vocational primary and secondary schools, so that children have no choice but to attend religious schools. We were also told there has been increasing Islamicisation in other areas of society – prayer rooms in schools and public offices. I am aware also of press reports of AKP ministers advocating women have "at least four" children and that women ought not to smile in public.

Also well-documented is the deterioration in the freedom of the press, and the KCK mass trials of Kurdish activists, journalists, politicians, and campaigners of all stripes.

The election shows that the country has moved away from the AKP. I don't have surveys or polling giving all the reasons for that. But I believe, and I think it is reasonable to believe, that the country thinks the AKP have gone too far in their Islamicisation project, and become too authoritarian – this could perhaps be called “the Gezi Park” factor. There are two other factors. One is the handling of the Syrian refugee crisis, and the other is Kurdish voters switching allegiance from the AKP to the HDP. The three are interlinked.

Gezi and the Kurds: “The spirit of Gezi Park”

Again, it has to be said that the AKP's government has been the most positive Turkish government to date, for the Kurdish people. There was never a peace process before. It is understandable that when the Gezi Park protests took place, many Kurdish activists were worried about antagonising a government that was, at the time, actively participating in that process. This was an issue which caused a long and intense discussion among the union members we met. It was so intense that it was not even possible for our interpreters to



translate all of it. From what I gathered (and piecing the discussion together with contemporaneous press reports), I think a neutral account would be that the Kurdish movement was not officially present at the protests, although many individual Kurds were. It is also true to say that many people present at the protests gained a new perspective of the authoritarian nature of the Turkish state. They saw people being attacked by police for protesting peacefully and thought to themselves “If this is what we are experiencing now, what have the Kurds in eastern Turkey gone through?” Many sources reported this to us, in similar words.

The protests became extremely big and came to involve people from all sectors of society, including some members of the hard-secularist CHP and the nationalist, semi-fascist MHP. They may not have been entirely safe spaces for Kurdish people for these reasons. We were told that a Kurdish student who attended the first day of the protests in Antep was stabbed and died. We were told that one of the protests attacked a BDP office. However, we were told, in the final analysis the HDP can be seen to represent “the spirit of Gezi.”

Once the peace process faltered, the Kurdish party (formerly the BDP, now the DBP) recognised that the AKP government was no longer an effective partner in peace. They joined with other parties representing disaffected parts of Turkish society – leftists, atheists, feminists, the LGBT movement, and minorities of all stripes. This is the HDP. One individual said that in his view there were four factors to the Kurdish party making this move: there was no guarantee the peace negotiations would continue; a refusal to engage with Kurdish representatives; the process being ad hoc, at the whim of the president (now Erdogan), not a proper process as in Ireland; and there being no sign of a proper, civic, egalitarian constitution (Erdogan's focus being on increasing his own presidential powers under the constitution).

Gezi could well have been more of a turning point for Turkish politics than any election, any military coup, perhaps any moment since the creation of the Turkish republic. On current evidence, Gezi seems to have been where Turkish civic society realised its strength – and they haven't forgot it yet.



We came prepared to see highly irregular elections. We were aware that President Erdogan was flagrantly violating the constitution by campaigning for the AKP and demonising all of the opposition parties. We were aware of attacks on campaign offices. Some members of our delegation who arrived in Diyarbakir left the morning of a rally which saw a double-bomb attack with multiple fatalities and casualties. One member, Sean Hawkey, stayed behind, and has produced an incredible and harrowing

series of photographs of the event (featured in this report). HDP campaigners – including election observers – were irregularly arrested the day before the election.

We were told this actually represented an improvement on previous years. The Human Rights Association (IHD) told us that in former elections, perhaps 60 people would die, as compared to 6 in this election. People would be disappeared and show up dead. There is more opportunity to publicise these violations now and the campaign could react more effectively because of new technology.

Nonetheless, to our eyes these were grave concerns, and we were told that there were worries about irregularities in the count. However, from what I can gather, this was prevented – by Turkish civic society. Again, I believe they were empowered by the spirit of Gezi. Movements were organised to place observers in the polling stations – such as “Oy ve Ötesi,” “The Vote and Beyond.” There were observers in almost every polling station throughout the country. I believe the election was fair because the Turkish people ensured it was fair. I can’t laud their efforts enough. It was inspiring to see. We were told that all the opposition parties were aware of the possibility of count irregularities and that they were even, for the first time, cooperating with each other to a limited extent to ensure it didn’t happen. Whatever they did – it worked.

The Syrian conflict and rural Kurds

The rise of Daesh has prompted a refugee crisis which is affecting all countries in the region. A lot has been written about the pathetically inadequate response of Western nations. The result is that neighbouring countries are bearing the brunt of the crisis to an almost incredible degree.

We were told that the official figures of Syrian refugees *in Gaziantep alone* is 450,000. But the union officials we spoke to thought the number is closer to between 600,000 and 700,000. Rents and house prices are soaring and wages are collapsing. Industry leaders, those already rich, are doing extremely well out of the situation. Society as a whole is suffering. The AKP has mishandled the situation. They are not granting the Syrians refugee status but calling them “guests.” The Syrians have no choice but to work and live illegally. They are building a huge black market economy which is harming society as a whole. This has had a twofold effect on the AKP’s electoral success.

On the right, those who blame the government for being inadequately “tough” on the influx of refugees moved to the MHP. The MHP campaigned heavily on demonisation of the refugees, calling them “kaçkin,” a word which, literally translated, means “fugitive.” We were told it has overtones of “good-for-nothing,” “cowards,” “useless people.” As with UKIP and the BNP in this country, this message will sadly always have a target audience.



But in Kurdish society a different effect is taking place. The Turkish government's refusal to support the YPG/J fighters engaged in a battle of survival against Daesh is one thing. The mounting evidence that the Turkish government has been providing unofficial support (logistics, resources, safe passage across the Turkish/Syrian border, arms, medical care, etc) to the movement is still worse. And Erdogan's public position on the issue has been to add insult to injury – Erdogan has stated loudly, openly, and

repeatedly that to the AKP government, the PKK and Daesh are equivalent: “both terrorists.”

It has been enough to cause entire clans of Kurds to switch allegiance. But I have to say that this in itself is a concern for me. We were told in our meeting with the IHD that one of the concerns about free and fair elections in Turkey is that there is still a “semi-feudal” society in rural areas. It's not just a matter of state harassment, but unofficial voter intimidation. Women especially cannot cast free votes. Their votes are dictated by their men-folk. And in some sectors of rural society, an entire family or clan's vote will be dictated by its patriarchal leader, the head of the clan. This corresponded with news reports I had seen saying that after meetings with the HDP, entire clans of people had held rallies at which they officially switched allegiance from the AKP to the HDP. Whoever people vote for, they should choose to do so themselves. Persuasion is one thing. A system in which hundreds or thousands of people are expected to unthinkingly follow the decision of their leader is quite another.

I hope that in an election to come, the HDP, or its successor, will gain equal or greater success to what they currently have, through millions of votes being cast for them through the free choice of each voter.

What now?

My final note of caution is that the election is, effectively, not over. The AKP were denied their majority and there does not seem to be a viable route to a coalition.

The AKP seems not to want fresh elections, and might be willing to work with either the MHP or the HDP. However, the HDP made a campaign promise not to work with the AKP. I am unclear on their position in regards to collaborating with the CHP, but to do that they would also need the MHP, which seems an impossible partnership given the MHP's hostility to the Kurds. The CHP has said it will work with both the MHP and the HDP if both adhere to their promises not to support the AKP, but again, on the surface this seems impossible. (I did, however, recently read a news report saying that the leader of the MHP is in fact not as hard-line in practice as he is rhetorically. I clearly do not have the full picture on the status of the MHP, but on the surface, as I say, they don't seem to be a viable partner for the HDP). The last word I heard from the MHP in the press is that they consider they would be a strong opposition to an AKP-CHP-HDP coalition, which must be ruled out by the HDP's inability to support the AKP.

The HDP are in a difficult position. If they supported the AKP – but conditional on the drafting of a civic, secular constitution and a resumption of an effective and official peace process – that might actually, in practice, be the best outcome for civic society and the Kurds. But to do that they would have to break a campaign promise and risk alienating huge numbers of voters who “lent the HDP their votes” (mostly from the CHP) to prevent the AKP obtaining a super-majority. If anything went wrong, those votes would be lost at the next election.

The only remaining option seems to be an AKP minority government, with a serious question mark over its possible longevity. But if there were new elections, what then? Either they will return the same situation, or there will be an AKP majority government, which puts the Kurds and other minorities – perhaps – right back where they started.

But I am optimistic. I think that Turkish civic society has proven its strength over the past three years. The next step may be backwards, but I am convinced that the Turkish political system is evolving to become more plural, diverse, engaged, and democratic.

LOOKING BACK AT THE ELECTIONS by JOHN HUNT



One month on from the Turkish parliamentary elections, perhaps we should remind ourselves how high the stakes were. Had the HDP not crossed the 10% electoral threshold, the party would now have no seats in parliament, all its votes would have gone to elect a tranche of extra AKP MPs, and a triumphant, Putinesque Erdogan would be beefing up his presidential powers while pursuing unfettered his authoritarian and incendiary domestic and foreign policies. Of course, there would be resistance, especially in the Kurdish heartlands, but the balance of forces

would be less favourable than it is today for Kurds, other minorities and all progressive forces. On 7 June the party that came fourth was the biggest winner; there was an historic advance for Kurds and the peace process and breathing space, at least, was gained for democracy in Turkey.

The HDP ran a very impressive campaign, positioning itself across Turkey as the main, tolerant alternative to Erdogan ("We will not make you president") and resisting many attempts to derail it through dangerous and deadly provocations, culminating in the bomb attack on the HDP's final rally in Amed.

Large-scale voter fraud was widely expected. It was feared that the HDP might cross the 10% threshold by a narrow margin but the AKP would still lock them out of parliament by invalidating votes and falsifying counts. People recalled the disputed local election results of 2014 and the strange affair of the cat that had allegedly caused a power failure, affecting several provinces, during that count. This time, the HDP and civil society organisations across Turkey mobilised tens of thousands of unofficial observers to monitor the process as closely as possible. In the end, however, the voters' swing away from the AKP and towards the HDP was too big to be concealed by chicanery.

Being based in Antep with the UK delegation as an electoral observer was fascinating, especially because the city, through its demographics and recent polling results, encapsulated the HDP's key challenge: how to win over Kurdish voters who had backed the ruling AKP for the past decade. Antep's Kurds comprise perhaps 40-50% of the population and yet, last June, Erdogan won 64% of local votes while the HDP's charismatic Demirtas got 10.5%. For the HDP to make a breakthrough nationally, it needed to do significantly better in Antep this time. The indications were promising: for example, Demirtas attracted about as many people to his election rally in Antep as did AKP prime minister Ahmet Davutoğlu.

How was 7 June in Antep? Compared to the UK, the turn-out was very high. Personally I encountered no problems observing the process at several polling stations around the city. Someone said our presence as foreign observers was giving encouragement to local HDP supporters who knew that we

could help publicise any irregularities. The main incident (at the polling station at Hatice Karsligil İlkokulu school) involved a physical assault on a lawyer by bodyguards of the AKP minister of justice, and local MP, Mehmet Şimşek. The lawyer had objected to the detention of a man who had complained about the minister touring polling stations surrounded by a squad of 15 bodyguards and police. Apparently the minister then told protesting locals: "I will destroy three schools around your heads". But, reportedly, they had the last laugh by surrounding one of the bodyguards' cars and 'de-arresting' the original complainant.

It's a small tale, perhaps, of a shift in the balance of forces which became dramatically clear that night as the results came in. Nationally the HDP had smashed the 10% threshold and locally it had won 2 MPs, with its vote increasing to more than 15%. Fearful of more provocations that night, the local HDP called for no street celebrations but it was impossible to prevent spontaneous manifestations of sheer delight in Antep's Kurdish districts, and they were a joy to behold.

In my opinion, previous events in two now-famous places - Gezi Park and Kobane - haunted Erdogan during the campaign and helped ensure the HDP's success.

The 'Gezi movement' swept Turkey in 2013 after then prime minister Erdogan sent police to smash up a peaceful protest against his plan to turn Istanbul's Taksim Gezi Park (the only green space left in the city centre) into a shopping mall. Initially many Kurds were hesitant about the protest, fearing it was a platform for Turkish nationalists. However, it quickly transcended the support of those parties. It is estimated that 3.5 million people joined thousands of 'Gezi' demonstrations across the country. The state responded with more violence: 11 people were killed, more than 8,000 were injured and thousands were arrested. Although Erdogan went on to be elected president in 2014, the Gezi events left a scar on Turkish society and engendered a spirit of resistance that translated into at least 1 million 'non Kurdish' votes for the HDP on 7 June.



The heroic resistance in Kobane not only gave ISIS its first major defeat, it also destroyed the AKP's electoral base in north Kurdistan/east Turkey - resulting in landslide victories for the HDP. Previously, it was mainly the more religious (or bourgeois) Kurds who voted AKP, but they had watched Erdogan support ISIS against their fellow Kurds in Kobane and wrongly predict their imminent defeat. They knew that so many young Kurds from their own areas had gone to fight in Kobane, and hundreds (perhaps thousands) were killed and wounded there, with Erdogan's blessing. It was too much, and they voted HDP.

Further articles by John Hunt in the Kurdistan Tribune:

<http://kurdistantribune.com/2015/ghosts-gezi-and-kobani-haunt-erdogan/>

<http://kurdistantribune.com/2015/this-is-not-an-election-for-the-parliament-but-for-turkeys-future/>

<http://kurdistantribune.com/2015/with-the-hdp-i-am-embracing-my-past-celal-dogan-interview/>

<http://kurdistantribune.com/2015/we-want-immediate-change-to-turkeys-foreign-policy-hdps-prof-dr-mahmut-togrul/>

<http://kurdistantribune.com/2015/10-then-well-see-campaigning-for-tactical-hdp-votes/>

<http://kurdistantribune.com/2015/hdp-forms-a-bridge-between-east-and-west-turkey/>

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

AKP (Justice and Development Party) – The governing party of Turkey from 2001 and the party with leading number of votes once again in 2015.

CHP (Republican People's Party) – The main opposition party in Turkey.

Selahattin Demirtaş – Demirtaş is the elected co-chair of the **HDP** (Peoples' Democratic Party).

Democratic Autonomy – Conceived by **Abdullah Öcalan**, democratic autonomy is a system of governance based on grassroots participation, decentralised decision-making and common ownership. It offers a non-state social paradigm, arguing that 'States only administrate while democracies govern. States are founded on power; democracies are based on collective consensus'. It is argued that this system is the paradigm of oppressed people, as it offers an antidote to assimilationist practices of the nation-state and exploitative structures of capitalism. The canton system in Rojava, Syria, which declared autonomy in early 2014, is based on this system of governance.

Diyarbakır – Diyarbakır is one of the largest cities in South-eastern Turkey, the principal home of Turkey's Kurdish population.

HDP (Peoples' Democratic Party) – A counterpart to the pro-Kurdish **DBP** (Peace and Democracy Party), the HDP is a pro-minority rights, feminist leftist political party in Turkey. The party has a 50% quota for women, a 10% quota for LGBT individuals, and is led by **Selahattin Demirtaş** and **Figen Yukseldag**.

HPG (Peoples' Defence Force) – The HPG is the military wing of the **PKK** (Kurdistan Workers' Party).

İmralı – İmralı is a Turkish prison island. **Abdullah Öcalan**, a leading member of the **PKK** (Kurdistan Workers' Party), is currently serving a life sentence in solitary confinement here.

MHP (National Movement Party) – The far right nationalist party in Turkey.

KCK (Union of Communities in Kurdistan) – The KCK was assembled by the **PKK** (Kurdistan Workers' Party) in 2007, aiming to put into practice plans for 'democratic autonomy' as laid out by PKK leader **Abdullah Öcalan**.

Kobanê – Kobanê is one of three Kurdish cantons in Rojava, of which the majority population are Kurds, Alawis and Ezidis. Since the war in Syria, hundreds of thousands of Kurds and Arabs from Aleppo, Damascus and other Syrian Arab cities have sought refuge here. Since July 2012, the **YPG** has been fending off repeated fierce assaults by ISIS fighters on the Kobane region.

KRG (Kurdish Regional Government) – The official ruling body of Iraqi/South Kurdistan.

Abdullah Öcalan – A co-founder and leading member of the **PKK** (Kurdistan Worker's Party), Öcalan is considered to be the legitimate political leader of the Kurdish people, with over 3 million people signing a petition to declare as much. He has been held in solitary confinement on **İmralı** island since he was abducted by international secret services in 1999 and handed over to Turkey. His death sentence was commuted to life in prison after a change in law in Turkey, and since then he has authored numerous books and attempted various times to broker ceasefires and begin peace negotiations. His *Prison Writings* have been translated into several languages and argue against secession in favour of peaceful coexistence of all peoples within the existing borders of Turkey, Syria etc. In 2009, he published a *Road Map for Peace*, which was confiscated by state authorities and not published in English until 2012.

PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) – Formally established in 1978, the PKK is a political and military movement acting based in Turkey/Northern Kurdistan. Founded by **Abdullah Ocalan**, among others, the PKK was engaged in an armed struggle with the Turkish state for self-determination and self-defence from 1984 to 2013. IN an effort to facilitate peace talks, the PKK announced nine ceasefires over the years; the last began in March 2013 following the announcement of peace talks by the Turkish government and a historic call for peace by Abdullah Ocalan. The PKK is still listed as a terrorist organisation in Turkey, US, UK, and the EU.

PYD (Democratic Union Party) – Led by **Salih Muslim** (Muhammad), the PYD is a Kurdish political party established in 2003 in Rojava, Syria. The party is a leading member of the Kurdish Supreme Council, which established democratic autonomy in Rojava in November 2013.

Qandil Mountains – On the northern side of Iraq, the Qandil Mountains are situated close to the Iraq-Iran border, and 50km south of the Turkey-Iraq-Iran tripoint. The mountain range serves as a sanctuary to the **PKK** (Kurdish Workers' Party), and indeed their headquarters are based there.

Rojava – The name given to the autonomous Kurdish region of Syria, also called Western Kurdistan. Each canton in Rojava has its own constitution, its government, its parliament, its courts, its laws, and municipalities, though they must be compatible with those of the Charter of the Democratic Autonomy of Rojava. The cantons enjoy a great deal of administrative autonomy and freedom of decision-making. They have independent control over their education systems and social services, and each has its own Asayish (police), People's Defence Forces (**YPG**) and Women's Defense Forces (**YPJ**). They are: **Cezîre**, **Efrîn** and **Kobanê**.

YPG (Peoples' Protection Units) – The Kurdish armed force in **Rojava**, the autonomous Kurdish region of Syria.

YPJ (Womens' Protection Units) – A Kurdish all-female militia, affiliated with the **YPG** (Peoples' Protection Units).

Figen Yukseldag - Yukseldag is the elected co-chair of the **HDP** (Peoples' Democratic Party).