

The Pivotal Role of the Pro-Kurdish Party HDP in Turkish Politics

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Abstract

The People's Democratic Party (HDP), a leftist political party that mainly promotes political rights of the Kurds and other minorities in Turkey, has been an important actor in the Turkish-Kurdish politics in the recent years. The party is facing a closure case over its actions and has apparent relations with the armed group Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Regardless of these issues, the HDP has now an important vote share that can help the opposition to win the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections. However, the controversies over the relations with the PKK and the ideological affiliation of the party have been a barrier to formally join any coalition. This policy paper investigates the role of the HDP in current political landscape in Turkey and provides an analysis of the current HDP-PKK relation and its impact on the upcoming elections.

Introduction

As the 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections in Turkey are approaching, the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP) is becoming a key player again not only in the coalition-building against Erdoğan's regime but also in the daily politics of Turkey. The opposition has little chance to win the presidential election without the HDP. In that regard, there is a mathematical equation that needs to be acknowledged by the opposition that is going to be competing with Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the election.

The votes of the ruling and opposition blocs are more or less equalized. The determining factor that will change the balance is the HDP and its power to direct voters. If HDP voters do not go to the polls or turn to the ruling bloc of the People's Alliance, which consists of the Erdoğan's AKP and the right-wing Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), it will be

very difficult for the opposition to win. On the contrary, it is important to understand the crucial support of the HDP for the Nation Alliance, which is the bloc of the Republican's People Party (CHP) nationalist IYI Party, and the Islamist Felicity Party (SP). In case the HDP supports the opposition alliance in the presidential elections, they may not only put an end to the AKP regime but also outperform their expectations in the parliament with regards to their demands on the solution of the Kurdish question. However, it is always crucial to underline the relations between the HDP and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which have been used by Erdoğan to divide the voters among the HDP supporters.

The ruling bloc (Nation Alliance) is aware of the decisive role of the HDP. That is why the Nation Alliance is trying to divide the political components of the People's Alliance into a discussion over the HDP. In other words, one of the main aims of the Nation Alliance is to block the support of the HDP to the opposition bloc. This policy paper aims to analyze the role of the HDP in the upcoming elections in Turkey with the controversies over the pro-Kurdish party. The paper examines the HDP's relation with the armed group PKK, which is a type of relationship that has 'demonized' the HDP within the Turkish politics. It has also been emphasized that it is difficult for the opposition to be in an official coalition or partnership with the HDP as it can cost them loss of the nationalist votes. In the paper, the importance of the HDP and the vote share of the HDP for the ruling and the opposition bloc, and the possible impacts of the closure case of the HDP are also investigated.

HDP's Political Journey

The political journey that started with People's Labor Party (HEP) in 1990 continued with the parties under different names such as Democracy Party (DEP), ÖZDEP, People's Democracy Party (HADEP), Democratic People's Party (DEHAP), Democratic Society Party (DTP), Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), and finally Peoples'

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Democratic Party (HDP).ⁱ Although the first representation of the Kurdish political movement in parliament started with the HEP, which was established on June 7, 1990, the name of the party has changed many times from HEP to HDP due to different reasons.

Founded on May 11, 1994, the People's Democracy Party (HADEP) received nearly 1.5 million votes in the 1995 parliamentary elections but failed to pass the 10% electoral threshold and enter the parliament. In the 1999 local elections, the same party won 37 municipalities in total, along with Diyarbakır Metropolitan Municipality, Ağrı, Batman, Bingöl, Hakkari, Siirt and Van. The Abdullah Öcalan poster and the PKK flags unveiled at the HADEP Congress led to the arrest of the party leader and some party members. The Constitutional Court closed the HADEP on March 13, 2003, on the grounds that it "aided and abetted the PKK and became the focus of illegal activities," and party leaders were given a five-year ban from politics.ⁱⁱ

The Democratic People's Party (DEHAP), which was founded in 1997, was sued by the Constitutional Court in 2002 on the allegation that it "entered the elections without completing its organizational duties." The DEHAP dissolved itself on November 19, 2005.

After serving ten years in prison, some important political figures such as Hatip Dicle, Orhan Doğan, Selim Sadak and Leyla Zana were released from prison in 2004 and became the pioneers of a new political movement called the Democratic Society Movement (DTH) in 2005. The DTH became the first party to implement the 'Co-Presidential' system in Turkey in 2005, under the name of the Democratic Party (DTP). The DTP, which entered the election by independent candidates in 2007 under the name of "Candidates of a Thousand Hopes," sent politicians including Selahattin Demirtaş, Gültan Kışanak and Leyla Zana to the parliament. The party decided to participate in the election with the independent candidates in order to avoid the 10%

threshold. On November 16, 2007, the Constitutional Court filed a closure lawsuit against the DTP on various charges "claiming that the indivisible integrity of the state" became the focus of the actions, it was founded by a terrorist organization, and it received instructions from Abdullah Öcalan.

After some deputies were dismissed from the parliament and arrested, the DTP formed a new group in parliament called the BDP. The BDP emphasized that the road map of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan is important for the solution of the Kurdish problem and those steps should be taken on this path. Öcalan's roadmap was a democratization and normalization plan, that also included a preparation of the new constitution for Turkey and withdrawal of the armed PKK forces outside of the country. This roadmap has also contributed to the establishment of the peace process between the state and the PKK. Nevertheless, In 2010, Selahattin Demirtaş was elected as the BDP's general chairman. The BDP took an active role in the peace process that started in 2013. Delegations were formed to meet with Öcalan in İmralı and PKK representatives in Qandil, the headquarter of the PKK, for the resolution process which ended in July 2015.

In 2013, the BDP and several other left-socialist parties united under the umbrella of the HDP. Thus, the Kurdish political movement and some Turkish leftist parties and organizations officially came together under the same umbrella. However, this unification might have had a purpose of creating a more suitable platform to attract also non-Kurdish leftist groups and to get rid of the 'PKK tag' as the HDP desired to be a party of Turkey instead of a party just for the Kurds.

Kurdish Question, the PKK, and the HDP in Context

The ongoing war between the PKK and the Turkish state since 1984 has caused uncountable human rights violations, deaths, and displacement of people.



The PKK insurgency has been the longest Kurdish rebellion, causing the deaths of more than 35,000 people including civilians targeted by both sides.ⁱⁱⁱ In particular, over 6,000 people have died due to the clashes between Turkish army and the PKK since only 2015.^{iv} This situation shows us that the conflict is still very active in certain periods.

The Kurdish issue is one of the most important unresolved problems of Turkey since its establishment. The adopted policies have deepened the problem further and caused serious social ruptures. Particularly during the first decades of the Republic of Turkey, all kinds of religious (except those that were protected with the Lousanne Treaty) and ethnic minorities were ignored in Turkey due to the aim of creating a Turkish nation state. The Turkification policies of this period also led to the nationalization of the Kurdish national identity. Because fledgling Kurdish nationalism failed to gain traction, ethnic Kurds became marginalized minority in the Middle East's newly constituted nation-state structure.^v Thus, this problem became the source of violence and the establishment of the PKK in the 1980s. However, the PKK became more willing to end the armed conflict and create a political space and be more active in the political sphere of Turkey with the capture of Abdullah Öcalan in 1999. At the same time, the political change that took place in Turkey in the 2000s also changed the perspective on the Kurdish question. Yet, despite several attempts for peace and reconciliation, the issue has not been resolved and remains a serious socio-political problem in the country.

It is very important to point out that the emergence of the PKK was a result not a cause of the existence of Kurdish question in Turkey. Nowadays, it is a common opinion in the public and political sphere to perceive Kurdish question as the PKK question. Not only the nationalist environments but also the government officials have often openly expressed that rather than a Kurdish issue, there is an issue of the PKK in the country.^{vi} However, it should be noted that the Kurdish reality and the issue of the

fundamental rights of the Kurdish people had already existed even before the emergence of the PKK.

The emergence of the PKK has a strong relationship with the political structure in Turkey in the 70s and 80s. The rise of Kurdish nationalism since the 1980s is also a consequence of the extremely severe policies adopted after the coup d'état of 1980 towards the expression of minority identities.^{vii} However, the struggle did not only have an impact on the rise of Kurdish nationalism but also had a direct influence on the Turkish nationalism. Turkish public opinion perceived the demands of the Kurdish movement as a threat against the unity and territorial integrity of Turkey and as the PKK continued its attacks on soldiers and on other state officials such as teachers, hatred against the Kurds rose in Turkish society.^{viii} More importantly, this armed conflict affected the whole country and sometimes even polarized the society in terms of the public opinion on the Kurds and particularly the supporters of the HDP.

Despite the fact that several pro-Kurdish political parties have been trying to contribute to the solution of the Kurdish issue since the end of the 80s, the HDP has been the most successful one in terms of the representation of the Kurds in the parliament of Turkey. Although a significant number of Kurds (almost half) still support the AKP mainly for its conservative policies, the HDP and the PKK were able to monopolize the Kurdish politics among the other half of the Kurds. Both the HDP and the PKK have been demanding similar political rights for the Kurdish minority, which include the official recognition of the Kurdish minority, the legal ground for education in the Kurdish language, and strengthened local administrations. Apart from the goal of establishing the democratic autonomy, which is promoted by both organizations, the HDP also adopts modern ideologies and social movements such as environmentalism and the LGBTQ+ rights. However, having the same demands with an organization that is recognized as terrorist led the



public to questions the existence and functioning of the HDP.

The 2013-15 peace negotiations between Turkey and the PKK with the inclusion of the HDP can be a significant example illustrating the relation. During the peace process, HDP officials went to Qandil (headquarter of the PKK) with the encouragement and permission of the government.^{ix} The HDP, as an actor in the peace process, was instrumental in solving the issue by dialogue. They delivered messages to and from the Qandil and they have visited Öcalan several times in prison. They were able to do this because of the fact that the HDP and the PKK appeal to the same base and the same target group. Before, during, and after the peace process, the HDP has been referring to Öcalan as an important figure in the negotiations with regards to the Kurdish solution and constantly portrayed him as the main interlocutor for the solution of the issue.

Who Are HDP Supporters?

KONDA Research has announced the report on the HDP voters it has prepared under the title of ‘Voter Clusters.’^x The report, which examines the needs and demands of the voter base profiles, examines the demographic characteristics and views of HDP voters in depth.

When all the data from 2010 to 2017 are evaluated, it shows that the HDP receives half of its support from a dynamic group of young people between the ages of 18 and 32.^{xi} Especially since 2013, when the HDP started to work more actively in terms of organization, there has been an increase in the rate of those who do not define themselves as Kurds. The HDP has become a party that can also be supported by those who do not define themselves as Kurds. In 2014 and 2015 the support of those who identified themselves as Turkish were at 8 and 9% respectively. In the June 2015 elections, the rate of votes of those who do not define themselves as Kurds has increased, and the votes received by the HDP approached 10%. However, this level of support again decreased to pre-2015 level by 2 percentage

point by 2017.^{xii} Among those non-Kurdish voters, the significant support from the leftist/socialist segment of the society as well as the members of the LGBTQ community should be emphasized. Moreover, a number of Turkish Alevi have also been supporting the policies of the HDP in recent years.

Why Is the HDP Important for Both Alliances?

Mere arithmetic of voter distribution stemming from the 2019 local election results and consequent the opinion polls make the HDP a decisive actor. The AKP-MHP bloc, called officially the People’s Alliance, polls steadily between 40 and 45%, while we experience steady decrease towards 40%.^{xiii} On the other side, there is the Nation Alliance, with the CHP and the IYI Party as its heavyweights. They altogether share around 40%. The remaining 20% composes of around 5-7% of conservatives who seem ready to collaborate with the Nation Alliance and broke away from the AKP. Approximately 10-13% of voters support the HDP, vast majority of them being Kurdish votes.^{xiv} If the Nation Alliance draws in the conservatives who have strayed from the AKP and the HDP (or its Kurdish electorate), it could easily secure majority.

While the opposition bloc Nation Alliance is doing its best to attract the remaining 20%, the AKP-MHP bloc, the People’s Alliance is doing its best to prevent this 20% from joining the opposition. The Nation Alliance is trying to win over the Kurdish votes, while the People’s Alliance is trying to neutralize the Kurdish votes and neutralize the impact of these votes on the elections. These are the main strategies. In this regard, in order to keep the Kurdish votes on their side, the opposition parties within the Nation Alliance have already begun to speak more openly about resolving the Kurdish question. For instance, the CHP and the SP leaders have stated on several occasions that they support the idea of teaching the Kurdish language in the state schools, and they started to refer to the HDP as the legitimate actor to negotiate the Kurdish question.^{xv}



However, the AKP-MHP coalition's attempt to lure Kurdish voters (or the HDP) does not bear genuine promise to solve the Kurdish question and pave the way for any liberalization. Moreover, the government is further fueling anti-HDP and anti-PKK sentiments to make it more costly for the People's Alliance to work with the HDP. Especially for the IYI Party but to an extent even for the CHP, it could result in the loss of the Turkish nationalist voters, who could drift towards the AKP or the MHP instead.

Looking prior to 2019, particularly after 2015 as a result of the unsuccessful peace negotiations with the PKK, the AKP followed a policy that criminalized not only HDP members and PKK members. Prior to the upcoming election, the AKP is following a much more nuanced policy while revising his position on the Kurdish issue. Its main goal is to prevent HDP votes from affecting the election results. To that end, president Erdoğan's and AKP's game-plan involves a complex set of different instruments. Firstly, it aims at the dissolution of the HDP through the court case. This case is progressing at a rapid pace, and a verdict will most likely be out by the end of this summer. However, there are significant critics towards the judicial independence and the verdicts of the constitutional courts of Turkey as the constitutional court is overfilled with the members appointed directly by the president.^{xvi} Consequently, nearly 500 HDP politicians would be banned from politics. The only way to prevent this outcome is for the HDP to dissolve itself while its members join another party. The most likely scenario is the HDP politicians joining the Democratic Regions Party (DBP), the back-up party, at the moment dominant at municipal level (on the DBP see more details below).

To sum up, looking at presidential election polls, HDP's vote share seems to be on a crucial rate. Likewise, it is possible that there will not be a serious increase in the HDP's vote. Therefore, HDP may reach 12-13% as some polls have stated but it is not very likely that the party will get a higher vote rate than the 13%. However, this also depends on different factors. A development that will boost

Kurdish identity politics, such as the closure case against the HDP, may increase the HDP's vote. The closure of the HDP can consolidate the Kurdish votes again and prompt (Kurdish) voters to turn against the AKP. This could cause the AKP losing even more votes from Kurdish-populated areas and cities.

Moreover, two newly established parties by former AKP members Ahmet Davutoğlu and Ali Babacan may also get a certain support from the Kurds who have negative perception of both the AKP and the HDP. Both of the former AKP members openly criticize the government's attitude towards the solution of the Kurdish question and may attract, although it would not be a significant number, the conservative voters from the HDP side.

Closure Case of the HDP and its Importance for the Elections

In June 2021, a lawsuit has been filed for the HDP's permanent closure on the accusation that it "aims to disrupt and destroy the indivisible unity of the state and the nation." The Constitutional Court accepted the indictment and the process against the HDP, officially started.^{xvii} The Constitutional Court may decide to close the HDP completely, to ban all or some of more than 500 executives or members, against whom a political ban is sought, or to simply cut off the financial support from the state to the party.

The closure case might have been promoted by the ruling bloc for a reason. There must be a good reason why the Nation Alliance started to put pressure on the closure case again and like before several other elections when they tried to create a conflict between the Qandil and the HDP. It may happen again that the government will decide to sit at the bargaining table with Öcalan and HDP prior to the elections. In this regard, the government may even initiate another set of negotiations in order to solve the Kurdish question. On the other hand, the government might try to revive the 'Öcalan pressure'



over the HDP, which was partially broken by Demirtaş. Demirtaş was able to limit the influence of the PKK leadership Qandil and Öcalan in the last local elections in 2019 by his strong opposition to the AKP. In the last local elections, especially in the large cities such as Istanbul and Ankara, Öcalan suggested the HDP must stay neutral and should not support either bloc. However, due to Demirtaş's strong call on the HDP voters, the Kurds supported the Nation's Alliance in the western cities and the bloc had a significant success against the AKP. Therefore, this can repeat by again putting Öcalan on the scene to direct the HDP voters and influence the election policies of the HDP. They can try to put pressure on the HDP by dismissing Demirtaş and negotiating with Öcalan.

The timing is also perilous: The HDP's closure case at Constitutional Court was launched about a year prior to the elections and thus creates multiple complications for the HDP. These hurdles include the HDP diverting its energy from election campaigning under an established banner to prepare a new political organization and to form a new cadre structure. As part of the case, the Sword of Damocles of political ban also hangs above the head of 500 HDP politicians. This gives the AKP-MHP government an opportunity to extort concessions on the HDP, including pressuring the HDP not to work with the opposition camp.

On the other hand, in September 2021 the HDP announced the 'Statement Document' regarding the 2023 Elections. The programmatic document highlights the need "to establish a strong democracy, a pluralistic democratic system instead of this authoritarian and monist system that unites the final decision authority in one man." HDP's political vision was also reflected in the following statements: "We believe that Turkey's basic need is a strong democracy based on participation, negotiation and democratic consensus, and universal fundamental rights and freedoms are provided in the widest way possible. In this context, we envision a democratic parliamentary system in which there is a pluralist

parliament with wide powers, the separation of powers is fully functioning, and the balance and checking mechanisms are really effective."^{xviii} The HDP's Statement Document also continues to adhere to non-violent politics under all circumstances: "We solve our problems not through violence; It is our basic motto to solve it through talking, negotiation and dialogue."

The Relations between the HDP and the DBP

The Democratic Regions Party (DBP), which has a close relationship with the HDP, mainly functions at the municipal level, was established on July 11, 2014, with an aim of organizing Kurdish politics at the local level. HDP mayors were ordered to move to the DBP.^{xix} However, many DBP mayors and city council members were arrested or imprisoned on charges such as "being a member of a terrorist organization," "committing a crime on behalf of a terrorist organization" and "funding a terrorist organization" (in all instances referring to the PKK). As of February 27, 2017, trustees, the state-appointed officials that did not gain the legitimacy through the local elections, have been appointed to all 72 DBP-run municipalities. In the next municipal elections held in March 2019, local candidates entered the elections under the HDP umbrella. With HDP MP Saliha Aydeniz's transfer to the DBP, the party also entered the parliament. It is likely that Kurdish politicians will simply shift to DBP if HDP is closed. Similar shift has also taken place in the past when the deputies of the BDP moved to the newly established HDP in 2014.

In July 2014, when the party held its Ordinary Congress with the slogan "We are building a free life with Democratic Autonomy" and adopted the name Democratic Regions Party (DBP), one of the most severe clashes began in the cities between the Turkish army and the PKK soon after in mid-2015. In the new process that was promoted by the DBP started with announcements of autonomy at a number of municipalities they ran. Subsequently trenches were dug, and barricades were built in many



district centers. Curfews were declared to remove the trenches and barricades, and security operations began. An intense conflict ensued between the PKK-linked militants and the government forces. After the PKK's urban insurgency was defeated by the end of 2015, trustees were being appointed to DBP-run provinces, and co-mayors were arrested. 40 out of 65 municipalities won by the pro-Kurdish HDP are now under the control of government-appointed trustees.^{xx}

So far, the DBP is seen as the 'backup plan' for the HDP deputies in case of a closure. However, for the HDP (and the PKK), the importance of the DBP is manifold. The DBP focuses solely on the Kurdish-majority areas of Turkey stressing the aim to implement and promote the local-self-government for the Kurdish constituencies. The DBP also runs different campaigns and employs slightly different strategies to attract voters being more 'Kurdish- and local-oriented.' The HDP campaigns for the whole of Turkey while trying to dispel the notion it is only focused on Kurdish issue, and it is instead a sort of umbrella for leftists group taking on topics such as LGBTQ rights or environmental issues.

Conclusion

The policy paper examined the current pivotal role of the HDP in Turkish politics. With its stable vote share and support base, the party has been a 'game changer' in the past elections. However, due to its relations and affiliations with the armed group PKK, the party found itself in a situation where it has not been easy to be officially part of any larger ruling or opposition bloc. The ruling bloc of People's Alliance have been trying to keep the HDP out of the game, most recently by opening a closure court case against the HDP. In turn, the opposition rallied in the Nation's Alliance seems to be keen on attracting the HDP votes (or possibly even the HDP itself) to their side in order to win over the AKP.

The HDP recently held its 5th congress, where the co-chairs clearly stated that in case of a transparent

negotiations, they are open to the idea of joint presidential candidate with other opposition parties for the next elections in 2023.^{xxi} However, the co-chairs have also noted that if the opposition leave the HDP out of the coalition talks, they will consider the option to join the election with their own candidate, who would most likely be Selahattin Demirtaş. It is likely that the opposition will not cooperate with the HDP in this election either. Because the opposition is also aware that the HDP would support the opposition candidate in case of the second round. In case of the closure case of the HDP, it seems like the AKP-MHP bloc will not take another step forward unless they make sure that the closure of the HDP will have a more positive outcome for them. The bloc is aware of the potential negative outcomes of the closure case for the next presidential elections, and it doesn't seem like the ruling bloc is ready to risk that.

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