

After the elections, HDP faces Erdogan's war coalition

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“Exhilaration and depression”. That’s how one newly-elected HDP (People’s Democracy Party) MP, described her mixed feelings as the official results of Turkey’s elections were announced on Sunday 24 June. This emotional ambivalence was likely experienced by many of the party’s supporters that night.

The left wing, pro-Kurdish party achieved extraordinary electoral success in the face of a ferocious campaign of state repression. On 9 June, for example, at a closed meeting of ruling AKP party activists, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan called for “special measures” to push the HDP’s vote below the 10% threshold required for it to retain any seats in parliament. Soon after a video of this speech went viral there was a bloody clash in Suruc culminating in the brutal murders of a pro-HDP shopkeeper and two of his sons inside a local hospital. The HDP’s presidential candidate Selahattin Demirtas mounted an inspiring, historic challenge from his prison cell and Erdogan publicly threatened to have him executed. Thousands of HDP members,

including many elected MPs and mayors, were jailed under the State of Emergency and hundreds of organisers were rounded up during this campaign. The party was almost completely excluded from the overwhelmingly pro-government mass media. On polling day there were myriad instances of bias, harassment, intimidation and fraud directed against it by the state, some of which I witnessed as an elections observer in Sur, the old city of Diyarbakir, an area the authorities substantially demolished in 2016.

Despite all this, and more, the HDP not only crossed the 10% threshold but also increased its officially-declared vote compared to the last elections in November 2015 and, with 5.8 million votes and 67 MPs, it's now the third party in Turkey.

The received wisdom was that, if the HDP crossed the threshold, Erdogan would probably lose his majority in parliament. Millions in Turkey were hoping for this and for Erdogan to be forced into a second-round presidential vote. However, neither scenario materialised and instead Erdogan managed to secure the presidency in the first round and, through his alliance with the far-right MHP, maintain a parliamentary majority.

While Erdogan's AKP lost 2.3 million votes, his MHP ally did much better than widely expected. The opinion polls predicted a big drop in the MHP's vote after the party split last October. Yet, according to Erdogan, it was MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli who persuaded him to call these elections 17 months early. The MHP lost ground to the breakaway İyi Party, didn't challenge Erdogan for the presidency and ran a low-key parliamentary elections campaign. And yet it still got more MPs and almost as many votes as last time. No doubt Erdogan's war against the Kurds, pursued since 2015 in Turkey, Syria and Iraq, has created a fertile environment for the racist MHP. But that doesn't fully explain why, for example, the MHP's officially-declared vote doubled or trebled in the mainly Kurdish south-eastern provinces. As [one pro-Erdogan journalist gnomically observed](#): "Neither the MHP's voters nor the mindset of the state could allow the party to disappear with 3-5% vote share. This is what happened".

In 1968 the MHP set up the Grey Wolves, a neo-fascist paramilitary organization that has killed thousands of Kurds, Alevis, leftists and others in often state-approved massacres and assassinations. In March 2018 Erdogan greeted his supporters at a rally in Mersin with the unmistakable Grey Wolves hand sign, a deliberate gesture indicative of his administration's trajectory since he abandoned the peace process with Kurds in 2015 and later broke with the Islamist Gulenist movement after the failed coup in 2016. Unfortunately, Erdogan's racist ultranationalist alliance was boosted by these election results and that's why the HDP's celebrations in Diyarbakir and elsewhere were short-lived.

“Our people in jail will probably stay in jail for now and those who went abroad will have to stay abroad”, said one party official. “Many of us must carry on knowing that they can come and break down our front doors at any time”.

In Istanbul, where the HDP won more votes than ever, several of its offices were attacked on election night by mobs of AKP and MHP supporters. “We were very worried that night and warned people not to respond to provocations”, an Istanbul HDP spokesperson told me last week.

“Erdogan has this coalition based on the Kurdish issue. It’s a coalition of the AKP, the MHP, the state apparatus, the military and capital, and it has the support of the international powers”.

“Our good results weren’t a surprise for us. While we gained some tactical votes from CHP supporters we also lost some tactical votes in the presidential vote. We didn’t expect the MHP to get as many votes. It’s a mystery to us. This is a party based upon hostility to the Kurds. We’ve been under attack all along and now there’s a big danger in front of us”.

“We’ll work to regroup the opposition to the regime. Our 67 MPs can’t do so much on their own and they will try to work with other opposition MPs. But the most important thing for us is to strengthen links with a wide range of civil society organisations, working with the People’s Democratic Congress”.

“This is a war coalition, made to fight the Kurds”, said HDP MP Hishyar Ozsoy. “But it can’t stabilize the country economically or in its foreign relations”.

“The HDP got votes from all over the country and made it very clear that we are not going away. We are the party of the women, the youth, the minorities, of all the ‘unwanted’ of this country”.

Shortly before polling day Esengul Demir, co-chair of the Istanbul HDP, explained to me that the party has become a progressive pole of attraction because, despite everything, “We showed the people we wouldn’t take a step back”. This movement of brave women and men is on the frontline in Turkey and globally, confronting a rising tide of racist authoritarianism cloaked in democratic facades. Now, more than ever, the HDP needs international solidarity. It is our duty.