



# THE REPRESENTATION OF THE KURDISH POPULATION IN THE TURKISH LEGISLATURE: AN OVERVIEW ON THE RESULTS OF THE KURDISH PARTIES IN THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS FROM 1965-2018

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*The paper represents an analysis of the Kurdish political movements on the territory of Turkey, focusing on the evolution of the parties which main purpose is to support the rights of the minority. In terms of time, the study covers the entire period of manifestation of Kurdish political formations in the parliamentary elections in the Turkish state, from 1965 to 2018. Special attention was given to the Peoples' Democratic Party, which became the main political force that militates for the affirmation of Kurdish identity in Turkey, after 2015 elections. Also, in order to ensure a comprehensive analysis of the topic, the paper identified the major impediments to the political representation of the Kurdish minority that appeared during the political and social developments in the Republic of Turkey.*

**Keywords:** Turkey; Kurds; political parties; parliamentary elections; Peoples' Democratic Party.

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## Introduction

The formation of the Republic of Turkey meant the end of the possibility of the Kurds to establish their own state in the territories mostly populated by them. Moreover, due to the fact that in the period 1924-1946, the Turkish system of government was of a single-party type, and the political formation in power (the People's Republican Party) had promoted the Kemalist ideology (Glazer 1988, 52), the Kurds were not guaranteed any political rights.

Even after new political formations began to appear on the Turkish legislature scene, pro-Kurdish parties have not had the opportunity to consolidate a strong position in the parliament for a long time. However, gradually, some representatives of the minority have managed to take seats in the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, starting with the '60s. The number of Kurdish political parties, as well as the influence of this minority in Parliament, have increased considerably during the '90s. Moreover, in 2002, the rise of Justice and Development Party (AKP) to power marked a moment of openness of the Turkish government towards the manifestation of Kurdish identity at the social and political level. However, impediments to Kurdish political representation persisted, especially following the failed coup in 2016.

The purpose of this paper is to present the evolution of the Kurdish political movements in Turkey, beginning with 1965. Also, this study aims to demonstrate that, despite the democratic regression recorded by the Turkish state in recent years, the Kurds have managed to consolidate their position in the Grand National Assembly of Turkey. In this regard, special attention was paid to the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), which, as will be seen, became the main promoter of the Kurdish rights after the 2015 elections.

### 1. The Emergence and Evolution of Pro-Kurdish Parties

Political representation in the Turkish legislature has been an elusive ideal for the Kurds. This was caused by a political reality within Turkey, described by researcher Walter J. Fend as the antagonism between the idea of a multi-ethnic nation and the nationalist concept of one nation - one country (Fend 2018, 52). Also, another impediment for the Kurdish cause was the fact that immediately after the implementation of the multi-party system in 1946, the political scene was dominated by right-wing movements that rejected the idea of a Kurdish nation, distinct from the Turkish one. Precisely for this reason, starting with the '60s, the Kurdish emancipation movement was closely linked to the admission of the leftist ideology in Turkey (Fend 2018, 53).

The Turkish Workers' Party (Türkiye İşçi Partisi - TIP), based on the Marxist-Leninist ideology, was the first to recognize the existence of a Kurdish identity.



Although the status of the Kurds within the republic was not a main point on its political agenda, the party played an extremely important role for the minority, as four Kurdish representatives joined the parliament through it (Fend 2018, 55). Five years after the formation of the Turkish Workers' Party, the Kurds manage to form the first political organization that militates for the autonomy of the areas that are part of Turkish Kurdistan, namely the Democratic Party of Kurdistan - Turkey (Türkiye Kürdistan Demokrat Partisi - TKDP). In the '70s, however, because of the extreme left-wing orientations of the members, as well as accusations related to the violation of the principle of territorial indivisibility, both parties were banned following a coup d'état organised by the armed forces. An important thing needs to be mentioned: some of the members of these leftist organizations were the ones who formed the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan - PKK) together with Abdullah Öcalan, in 1978. As will be seen next, many pro-Kurdish organisations were disbanded on allegations of cooperation with the PKK. Sometimes, these accusations were founded, but there were several times when, under the guise of fighting terrorism, the government tried to prosecute Kurdish political parties (Insel 2018, 80).

In addition to those already presented, the Kurds have also faced another major impediment in terms of their political representation: after the 1980 coup d'état, a new constitution was adopted, which raised the electoral threshold to 10% and significantly reduced the chances of the newly formed parties to occupy seats in the parliament. However, during the 1990s, the first political groups of the Kurdish minority emerged, some of them managing to get directly involved in the government.

The People's Labour Party (Halkın Emek Partisi - HEP) is a worth mentioning organisation, despite its short existence (1990-1993), as it was the first legally recognized pro-Kurdish party. In the parliamentary elections of 1991, it had a considerable electoral success, obtaining 22 seats in the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (Fend 2018, 57). Later, because of the promotion of cultural rights for the Kurds (such as expanding language rights and allowing education in the Kurdish language), and its ties to PKK, it was disbanded in 1993. Several former members joined a newly formed organization, the Democracy Party (Demokrasi Partisi - DEP), which, however, had the same fate as HEP, being banned in 1994, while a large part of the representatives were arrested.

The predecessor of the two organizations, the People's Democracy Party (Halkın Demokrasi Partisi – HADEP) had a political program focused on human rights and strengthening democracy in the state. However, it did not enjoy any electoral success, as it failed to reach the threshold in either of the two parliamentary elections in the '90s. Also, just like the other pro-Kurdish parties, the formation was banned in 2003 based on accusations of collaboration with the PKK.



However, it can be stated that the Kurdish population benefited from the elections of 1995. The Prosperity Party had obtained the highest percentage of votes (over 21%), acquiring a considerable influence on the Turkish political sphere. Despite the Islamist orientation, the organization proved to be open to find solutions for the problems regarding national minorities, as the party's young members were trying to fill the void left by the inability of modernizing movements to embrace Kurdish identity claims (Insel 2018, 81). However, the hope of a possible solution to the Kurdish issue was quickly dashed. As Turkish politics expert William Hale observed, during the 1990s, the biggest problem within the Turkish legislature was the fragmentation and instability of the party system, which predictably resulted in weak and fragile coalition governments (Hale 1999, 27). Such issue could only lead to major political crises, which culminated in another coup d'état in 1997, as a result of which the Prosperity Party was dissolved, while its leader, Necmettin Erbakan, was forced to step down as prime minister.

In the same year that Erbakan's formation was disband, a new pro-Kurdish political party appears, namely the Democratic People's Party (Demokratik Halk Partisi - DEHAP), successor to the People's Democracy Party. The organization enjoyed a high level of notoriety in the provinces of Southeast Anatolia, with 40% of the region's electoral votes won in the 2002 elections. Moreover, the party obtained 3 million votes, which would have meant the right to have 30 representatives in the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (Fend 2018, 58). However, the party's result equalled 6% of the total votes, the electoral threshold once again proving to be an impediment to the Kurdish cause.

Thus, it can be stated that despite the visibility acquired by the Kurdish formations in the period 1990-2002, the consolidation of a strong political position of the minority in the Turkish state was not possible.

## **2. Kurdish Political Formations after 2002**

In 2002, the party that has been dominating the Turkish political scene to this day was established, namely: The Justice and Development Party (AKP). Initially, the party stood out for its pragmatic pro-European politics and for finding a balance between Islamist tendencies and the secular interests of the Turkish state (Yildiz and Muller 2009, 23). The AKP government was the first to openly and officially recognize the existence of a distinct Kurdish identity and language, distinct from the Turkish one. Recep Tayyip Erdogan became the party's man figure right from the beginning, having been appointed prime minister in 2003. Erdogan has also arguably gone further than his predecessors in trying to resolve the Kurdish conflict in his country (Pitel, 2019). Despite some escalations of Turkish-Kurdish tensions in the periods 2005-2009 and 2009-2013, an improvement at the level of Kurdish



situation on the territory of Turkey could be observed, which was also reflected in the elections for the Grand National Assembly.

The Democratic Society Party (Demokratik Toplum Partisi – DTP), formed in November 2005, thus managed to achieve a high degree of political performance, obtaining 22 seats in the legislature, after a period of 16 years in which the Kurds had no representative of their cause in parliament. Four years after its formation, however, given the fact that during the period 1984-2009 the dissolution of pro-Kurdish parties on the grounds of cooperation with the PKK was a recurring issue (Insel 2018, 81), the formation had the same fate as its predecessors.

A year before the dissolution of the Democratic Society Party, the Peace and Democracy Party (Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi - BDP) had been formed. The new political organization, like many of its predecessors, focused strictly on the Kurdish issue during the elections (Grigoriadis and Dilek 2018, 289). However, its strategy was an innovative one, being focused on two directions of action: the formation of a left-wing front alongside the parties with the same political orientation and the support of independent candidates in the parliamentary race. On the one hand, most of the speeches of these candidates focused mainly on the Kurds' right to self-determination, calls for the recognition of the political status of the minority and the issue of the autonomy of the predominantly Kurdish areas in the southeast of the country (Grigoriadis and Dilek 2018, 293). On the other hand, despite the party's left-wing orientation, there were also representatives from conservative backgrounds who built their political discourse around the theme of the religious rights of the Kurds (Grigoriadis and Dilek 2018, 293). In any case, the result obtained by the political formation was a victory for the Kurdish cause. As expected, the BDP dominated the predominantly Kurdish regions of the country during the elections, obtaining 53% of the electoral votes from the south-east area of the country (Aksakalli, Mogulkoc and Koc 2011, 192). This ensured the presence of 36 minority representatives in the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, the highest number reached by a Kurdish party since the formation of the Republic of Turkey until that time.

One year after the 2011 elections, the political organization that will be the main subject of the following parts of the paper is formed, namely the Peoples' Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi - HDP). Before analysing the political formation and its influence over the Kurdish situation in Turkey, one last organization should be mentioned: HÜDA-PAR – Free Cause Party (Hür Dava Partisi). This can be seen as the successor of the Kurdish Hezbollah, an Islamist organization that was active in Turkey in the '90s (without having any historical connection with the Hezbollah movement in Lebanon). Two things differentiate HÜDA-PAR from the other Kurdish formations in the country. First, the promotion of religious rights of the Kurds and the Islamist ideology, issues that prove the right-wing orientation of the party. Second, it is the only Kurdish organization whose



relations with the Justice and Development Party of Turkey continued to be positive after the 2016 coup, so as HÜDA-PAR can be considered the *de facto* ally of the AKP (Fend 2018, 65).

The party's results in the 2015 and 2018 parliamentary elections were modest, with the percentage of votes obtained being below 1%. However, as could be seen throughout Turkey's contemporary history, many voters have repeatedly expressed their preference for Islamist parties. This fact, together with the good relations that the organization has with the political formation that dominates the Turkish legislature, prove that the Free Cause Party could become a political force in the future.

### **3. The Peoples' Democratic Party and the 2015-2018 Elections**

The Peoples' Democratic Party was formed in 2012, being a political formation whose main goal is to represent the Kurdish minority in Turkey. However, its agenda is not limited to this. In terms of political orientation, it is a left-wing party, the values promoted being participative democracy, youth rights, feminism, protection of the environment and protection of minorities (HDP 2015). At the organizational level, its leadership consists of two presidents, always one male and the other female. In 2014, it gained more prominence after the delegates of the Peace and Democracy Party decided to join (Grigoriadis 2016, 40).

The party's prestige was also increased by one of its presidents, Selahattin Demirtaş, who became a charismatic personality in Turkey, obtaining 9.76% of the votes (Grigoriadis 2016, 40) in the presidential elections. He also managed to increase the number of HDP supporters through his conciliatory policies and promotion of peaceful resolution of inter-ethnic disputes. His most important achievement is the framing of Kurdish rights in a wider spectrum of democratic policies. More precisely, the party leader built his political campaign around the Kurdish issue, presented as a key element in Turkey's democratization process, which can be best seen in what he reported in a 2014 article: "Without settlement of the Kurdish problem, developments in other areas necessary for the democratization of Turkey, such as work, identity, culture and environment, become impossible. Considering the tension caused by the Turkish political atmosphere, we can say that the Kurdish issue is still one of the most important determinants of the state's politics" (Demirtas 2014).

Thus, the HDP managed to deliver a pluralistic and inclusive electoral manifesto in which Kurdish demands for political and cultural rights were embedded in a broader program for radical democracy and the empowerment of women and marginalized social groups (Kamaran 2015, 4). In the parliamentary elections of June 2015, the Peoples' Democratic Party dominated the competition for votes in the eastern and south-eastern parts of Turkey, except for the cities of Urfa, Ardahan and Bigol. The election result was beneficial for the Kurds but negative for Erdogan's



leadership. AKP remained the dominant party with 258 seats in parliament, but lost 68 compared to the 2011 elections (Hassan 2015). HDP had the most spectacular success, obtaining 13.12% of the vote, thus having 80 representatives in the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (Hassan 2015). Unfortunately for the party members, the heyday of Kurdish political representation was not a long-lasting one.

On July 20, 2015, a suicide attack by a member of the Islamic State terrorist organization killed 33 pro-Kurdish activists in the city of Suruc, in south-eastern Turkey. The Kurds accused the Turkish authorities, claiming that they did not take the necessary measures to prevent such an event. On the same day, near Adiyaman province, a PKK attack resulted in the death of a Turkish corporal, leading to the collapse of the two-and-a-half-year ceasefire agreement between the PKK [...] and Turkey (Madiraci 2019).

Immediately after the outbreak, Erdogan undertook a series of measures aimed at restricting the rights of the Kurds, as well as their political representation. Through a parliamentary decision taken within the Grand National Assembly, 50 HDP representatives were left without political immunity (Institute for Security and Development Policy 2016), and several members of the party were placed under judicial investigation without good reason.

On November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015, the president called for early parliamentary elections during which there were numerous attacks on HDP headquarters, which were ignored by the Turkish media and political leaders. On November 1<sup>st</sup>, the Peoples' Democratic Party managed to cross the electoral threshold again, but lost 21 seats in the parliament. Party leaders attributed the failure to the violent atmosphere that made pro-HDP demonstrations impossible during political campaigns (Gunter 2016, 78).

On July 15, 2016, a coup was organized by the Peace Council, a military group that was part of the Turkish armed forces. The coup was easily suppressed and ultimately proved to be a beneficial event for Erdogan who imposed a state of emergency, used as a pretext to eliminate any form of political opposition. He had long dreamed of such a purge, initially impossible because of the laws guaranteeing fundamental human rights (Insel 2018, 13). The main target of his actions was represented by the Kurdish politicians, in almost half of the 102 town halls run by pro-Kurdish parties, the elected mayors being left without mandates and put into prison (Insel 2018, 13). Also, the two HDP leaders are arrested along with nine other members, while five party representatives in parliament are left without diplomatic immunity.

All these non-democratic movements culminated in the 2017 referendum which established a presidential republic political system. Erdogan has taken several measures to concentrate as much power as possible in the hands of the president, the most controversial one being the imposition of a greater control over

the media. This, along with the intimidation of political opponents, made the 2018 parliamentary elections, held under a state of emergency, among the most unfair in Turkey's modern history (Taş 2018, 1). However, in these extremely unfavourable conditions, the political opposition proved its ability to attract a significant part of the electorate's votes to its side (Taş 2018, 1). The HDP managed to obtain 67 seats in the Turkish parliament, thus having eight more representatives at the legislative level compared to the 2015 elections.

In order to understand the major political impact that the Peoples' Democratic Party has had on the legislative representation of the Kurds in the Republic of Turkey, an overview of the electoral performance of Kurdish parties from the 1990s to the present is necessary, as well as the periods in which they carried out their activity.

**Table no. 3.1:** List of Kurdish parties from 1990-2022 (Grigoriadis 2016)

Party	Period	Representatives in parliament
People's Labour Party (HEP)	1990-1993	22
Democracy Party (DEP)	1993-1994	-
People's Democracy Party (HADEP)	1994-2003	-
Democratic People's Party (DEHAP)	1997-2005	-
Democratic Society Party (DTP)	2005-2009	22
Peace and Democracy Party (BDP)	2008-2014	36
Free Cause Party (HÜDA-PAR)	2012 - present	-

By analysing the data in the table, the first thing that can be observed is that, except for the Freedom Cause Party, there has been no Kurdish organization as long-lived as the Peoples' Democratic Party. Moreover, the party achieved much better results in the parliamentary elections compared to the previously mentioned formations, the number of representatives in the Turkish legislature never being less than 59. Therefore, the HDP can be considered the most important element for promoting the rights of the Kurds and democracy at the level of the Turkish state.





## Conclusions

With the ideology that stood at the basis of the Turkey's state construction, among other things, characterized by populism, and the parties in power in the period between the 50'-70' that promoted a conservative policy, the emergence of Kurdish parties was closely related to the penetration of leftist orientations in the republic. However, there were numerous moments when various Kurdish formations were disbanded at the decision of the Ankara authorities, on the grounds that they represented a threat to the territorial integrity of the state.

Since 1990, Kurdish activism has experienced a new stage of development, characterized by the intensification of movements aimed at creating and consolidating the position of the minority in the Turkish legislature. However, this desired could not be achieved. As presented in the first part of this paper, the constitution introduced in 1982 that raised the electoral threshold to 10%, constituted a constant obstacle for the representatives of the Kurdish cause. Added to this are the (more or less unfounded) accusations of the Turkish authorities regarding the collaboration of certain Kurdish organizations with the PKK, which have repeatedly led to the dissolution of the parties of this minority.

After the AKP had become the main political force in Turkey, the Kurdish situation improved considerably. After 15 years in which no Kurdish formation managed to exceed the previously mentioned electoral threshold, the Democratic Society Party obtained 22 seats in the parliament. Despite its ban in 2009, the Kurds continued to enjoy representation in the legislature due to the Peace and Democracy Party.

The elections of July 2015 represented one of the most important moments in terms of the struggle for the Kurdish cause. The HDP, the party that managed to integrate the rights of the Kurdish minority into a larger program of democratization of Turkey, became the third force in the Turkish legislature. Moreover, despite the previously mentioned unfavourable factors, the party managed to consolidate a considerable position in the Turkish legislature, being at the same time the longest-lived political formation in the recent history of Turkey.

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