



**Independent
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REPORT

**Turkey's Kurds: A Political Power under Pressure
A History of Oppression and Influence In Politics**



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This abstract is part of a report by the International Independents Organization titled “**Turkey’s Kurds: A Political Power under Pressure - A History of Oppression and Influence in Politics**”. The report, which spans 32 pages and drafted in Arabic, covers the human rights issues that the Kurds face in Turkey. It looks at how the Kurds interact with the Turkish government and President Erdogan, as well as their foreign relations with other countries. The report also studies how the Kurds influence Turkish politics through their voting patterns and participation in elections. It compares the results of the 2018 and 2023 elections and evaluates how the Kurdish minority affects the outcomes under the Justice and Development Party’s rule. Moreover, the

report explains the political system and the electoral process in Turkey, and gives insights on the 2023 Turkish elections.

Introduction

Kurds in Turkey confront grave challenges pertaining to the violation of their human rights, which deeply affect their lives and fundamental rights. These challenges encompass arbitrary detentions, torture, cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment, as well as political suppression and curtailment of freedom of expression and association. Kurdish prisoners endure torture, physical and psychological abuse, including sexual torture and electroshock. Moreover, Kurds also face racial discrimination across various spheres, such as employment, education, and access to public

services. Kurdish regions encounter obstacles in economic development and infrastructure, leading to poverty and a weakened economy within these areas.

Turkish elections have always been influenced by minorities, most notably the Kurds who make up about 20% of the population and 18% of the voters. The Kurdish vote can affect the outcome of the elections, as seen when the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party endorsed the opposition candidate against President Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party. The Kurds have also faced oppression and injustice, such as the imprisonment of their leader Salahaddin Demirtaş since 2016 on false charges. The Peoples' Democratic Party has become the third-largest party in Turkey and has attracted support from other minorities and regions. Moreover, some minorities have ties with Western countries, especially Germany, which could shape Turkey's future relations with Europe. The recent elections showed how the demographic changes among minorities in Turkey have changed the electoral dynamics and strategies of the parties and candidates.

Turkey's Human Rights violations against the Kurds

The Kurdish population in Turkey has been consistently confronted with grave challenges in terms of human rights violations, which directly impede their enjoyment of fundamental rights and liberties. These violations encompass arbitrary detentions, instances of torture, severe and degrading treatment, inhumane practices, political repression, and infringements upon freedom of expression and assembly, as well as racial discrimination.

The Anti-Terrorism Law poses a significant obstacle to the enjoyment of human rights by the Kurdish population in Turkey. This law allows the authorities to arrest and imprison many Kurdish politicians, activists, and journalists on false charges of terrorism, violating their basic rights to freedom and justice. Torture, both physical and psychological, is a common experience for Kurdish detainees. This includes sexual abuse and electric shocks. The Kurds also face ethnic discrimination in various domains, including work, education, and public services. Furthermore, Kurdish regions¹ lack economic development and infrastructure, resulting in poverty and a weak economy.

The international community should intervene to stop the blatant human rights violations against the Kurds in Turkey. The Turkish government also needs to take effective steps to protect the rights of the Kurds and promote equality and justice within its territory.

Some of the critical issues documented by international reports and non-governmental organizations are as follows:

- **Arbitrary detentions and unfair trials:** Numerous Kurds are subject to arbitrary arrests on diverse grounds, devoid of fair judicial proceedings. Kurds are confronted with

¹ A report by the UN Human Rights Office on the flagrant human rights violations and massive destruction in southeastern Turkey in March 2017. See the link below for more details:

https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Countries/TR/OHCHR_South_East_TurkeyReport_10March2017.pdf

accusations of terrorism and membership in proscribed organizations, with instances of arbitrary detention of Kurdish political activists and journalists duly substantiated. Prolonged periods of apprehension without appropriate legal measures may be enforced upon the suspects.

- **Torture, inhumane and degrading treatment:** Kurds endure numerous instances of torture, mistreatment, and degrading actions within detention facilities. These include physical and psychological torture, secret detentions, humiliation, and various forms of sexual violations, all of which flagrantly violate their fundamental human rights.
- **Restrictions on freedom of expression and media rights infringements:** Kurdish media outlets in Turkey face constraints on freedom of expression and media rights pertaining to Kurdish matters. These outlets encounter limitations, repression, and impediments in their ability to provide unfettered and independent coverage of news concerning the Kurdish population. Furthermore, Kurdish newspapers and online media platforms may be subject to prohibitions, while Kurdish journalists and activists experience harassment and arbitrary detentions.
- **Ethnic and economic discrimination:** Kurdish regions in Turkey suffer from systemic racial discrimination, which severely impedes their access to essential public services and hinders their economic opportunities. Additionally, Kurds encounter significant challenges in securing employment, accessing quality education, and obtaining adequate healthcare services. Furthermore, a substantial number of Kurds residing in Kurdish regions experience dire poverty, lack of sufficient infrastructure, and pervasive economic underdevelopment.
- **Attacks and assaults:** Armed groups and extremist right-wing factions commit acts of aggression against the Kurdish population. These attacks constitute violations of international law by specifically targeting Kurdish individuals, civilians, and institutions.

Erdogan and his regime's relationship with the Kurds in Turkey

Erdogan, the Turkish president, initially showed some positive signs towards the Kurds. He said he wanted to solve the Kurdish issue peacefully and give them more rights and social justice. This led to the start of the peace process in 2013 between the Turkish government and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). The goal was to stop the fighting and reach a political settlement.

The peace process collapsed in 2015 and Turkish President Erdogan's relations with the Kurds soured dramatically. A new round of violence broke out between the Turkish state and the PKK. The government intensified its assaults on Kurdish areas and arrested Kurdish activists. This provoked strong condemnation of President Erdogan and stirred up resentment among the Kurds. Moreover, Erdogan has faced charges of eroding democracy and infringing on the rights of ethnic and cultural minorities. He has been accused of curtailing public freedoms and human rights for the Kurds, such as limiting freedom of speech and imprisoning Kurdish political activists.

Kurds foreign relations

Different regions and political contexts affect how the Kurds interact with foreign actors. Since the Kurds are not a sovereign state, they use various national, cultural, and political groups to represent them in international affairs. For example, in Syria, where a violent conflict persists, the

Kurds attempt to build ties with global powers and coalitions to protect their interests and advance their rights.

Kurdish movements have actively pursued stronger international relations to garner support and endorsement for their causes. They have sought alliances and connections with other countries and global organizations to advance their political agenda and secure their cultural rights.

Kurdish movements seek to get international support for their causes and goals. They use diplomacy, lobby with international actors, and talk to human rights, humanitarian, and non-governmental organizations to raise awareness of their problems. Kurds attempt to grow their international connections and work together with other groups who face racial and cultural discrimination.

The factors that increased the electoral power of Turkish minorities

1. **Broad electoral base:** The Kurdish bloc constitutes approximately 20% of the population of Turkey and possesses nearly 6 million electoral votes, accounting for 18% of the total votes cast in Turkey. The Kurdish minority's vote has played a decisive role in the opposition alliance's victory², leading to the election of several major municipalities in the local elections held in 2019. They provided undisclosed support to opposition candidates, tipping the scales in their favor against candidates from the ruling party alliance.

The Alawite minority is the second-largest religious sect after Sunni Muslims in the country, and its population is estimated to be around 10-15% of Turkey's total population of 84 million. They have approximately 4.5 million eligible voters and are dispersed in various regions of eastern and western Turkey.

2. **The impact of Kurdish participation on Turkey's governance and decision-making:** The current political situation shows how minorities can sway the ruling power by their votes. This was clear when the Justice and Development Party and President Erdogan felt uneasy after the Democratic Peoples' Party asked its supporters to vote for the opposition candidate, Kemal Kilicdaroglu. The Alawite minority also put more pressure on the regime. The Alawites did not trust the promises of the Justice and Development Party to solve their problems now, since they had failed to do so before.
3. **The perceived plight of the Kurdish minority evokes sympathy from the Turkish community:** The political scene in Turkey is influenced by the Turkish minorities, especially the Kurds who face oppression. The Peoples' Democratic Party, led by Selahattin Demirtas who was arrested in 2016 on false charges, became the third largest party in the parliament after the 2018 elections. It also expanded its support base beyond the Kurdish community and the southeast region of Turkey.
4. **The openness of certain minorities to Western countries:** Turkey's society is becoming more diverse with the growing presence of Alawites, Greeks, Christians, and Armenians,

² Ilham Al-Haddabi, an analysis of the Turkish project, prospects, possibilities, and challenges of reality, policy papers, Strategic Thought Studies Center, for more information visit the following link: <https://fikercenter.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Read-about-the-Turkish-project.pdf>

who have strong connections to some Western countries, especially Germany, where many Turks live. This makes it important for Turkey to be more open and inclusive towards its minorities, as this could help its relations with Europe in the future.

5. **The stance of minority groups on Turkey's political system restructuring:** The electoral process in Turkey was influenced by the views of minority groups, who favored the restoration of the parliamentary system as a way to gain more political representation in society. As a result, most of them voted for the opposition parties that wanted to revert to the pre-2017 system, when Turkey was a parliamentary republic. This was confirmed by several opinion polls conducted before the elections.
6. **The pivotal impact of the shifting demographics:** The recent elections in Turkey showed how the changing demographics of minorities have shaped the political landscape in the past ten years. This was reflected in the voting behavior and campaign strategies of different parties, as well as the media messages of candidates. A notable example was the higher participation of Kurdish and Alawite voters, which indicated that the younger generation of these minorities has become more active and influential in Turkish politics. Thus, the demographic shifts among these groups had a significant impact on the election outcomes.

The Kurdish perspective on Erdogan's election victory

The Kurdish community in Turkey and Syria expressed numerous concerns after President Erdogan won the Turkish presidential elections, while the Kurds in Iraq were more hopeful.

As mentioned earlier, Turkey's Kurds voted in favor of the opposition alliance in the recent presidential and parliamentary elections, hoping to oust the ruling party. Nevertheless, the party's victory raised their concerns due to four factors:

Some of the main issues facing the Kurdish people in Turkey are:

- The legal threat to the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party, which the Interior Minister Süleyman Soyly has accused of undermining Turkish democracy in recent TV appearances.
- The status of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and its leader Abdullah Öcalan, who are in prison and whose release is demanded by many Kurds.
- The ongoing arrests of Kurdish politicians and activists by the authorities.
- The persistent security and military operations against the PKK in the south of Turkey.

The Kurds in Syria are concerned about Turkey's military actions in the northeastern regions where the Syrian Democratic Forces have influence. Laila Mousa, the representative of the Syrian Democratic Council in Egypt, said that Erdogan often talks about Turkey "beyond the 100." This refers to the Treaty of Lausanne that was signed 100 years ago between Turkey and European countries and set Turkey's current borders. Erdogan wants to cancel it because he thinks it does not reflect his country's true borders.

Some Turks believe that Erdogan's borders include the Kurdish-controlled regions in northeast Syria. This makes the Kurds concerned that he might annex these areas to Turkey. Laila Mousa

says, “Erdogan might back some groups in Syria against the Syria Democratic Forces (SDF) or launch a military operation”.

Saad Al-Hamandi, advisor to Masoud Barzani, the President of the Kurdistan Democratic Party in Iraq, says that Iraqi Kurds hope for more collaboration between the autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq’s government and Turkey’s President. He also wishes for “the restart of oil exports from the region to Turkey and a boost in trade exchange between the two sides”.

The difference between the 2018 and 2023 elections

The ruling coalition barely edged out the opposition in the parliamentary and presidential elections, but it lost ground compared to its performance in 2018. President Erdogan failed to win in the first round of the presidential election, which was unprecedented since he became president in 2014. He got 49.51% of the vote, down from 52.6% in 2018. He also lost support in 12 cities, dropping from 63 to 51 cities that backed him.

The ruling coalition also lost some of its seats in the parliament. It secured 322 seats, which is 53.7% of the total, but 3.6% less than what it had in the 2018 elections, when it had 57.3% (344 seats).

The Justice and Development Party (AKP) has been losing its popularity for a while, as shown by the 2019 local elections where it lost major cities like Istanbul and Ankara to the opposition. The main reasons for this decline are the voters’ need for change, especially among the younger generations, and their dissatisfaction with Erdogan’s economic policies, which have hurt his electoral base and alliance. Many opinion polls before the elections confirmed that Erdogan’s style of leadership has alienated some of his former supporters and reduced his voting rates in several areas.

The opposition gained more popularity and votes in the latest elections, both for the parliament and the presidency, than in 2018. Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the presidential candidate who challenged Erdogan, received 14.2% more votes (44.88%) than Muharrem İnce, who ran against Erdogan in 2018 (30.64%). The opposition coalition “Nation Alliance” also increased its share of seats by 4% (35.5%), or 213 seats, compared to its previous performance in 2018 (31.5% or 189 seats).

On the other hand, the voting map of Turkish cities showed that the opposition was more popular in the urban areas. Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the opposition leader, beat President Erdogan in Ankara with 47.31% of the votes against 46%. He also won in Istanbul with 48.55% versus 46.69%. He had a bigger margin in Adana and Antalya, where he got 50.89% and 53.13% respectively, while Erdogan got 43.92% and 39.85%. This voting pattern was consistent with the 2019 local elections, when the opposition took over the mayorships of Ankara and Istanbul.

The first round of the Turkish elections changed the balance of power among the candidates and parties. The “People’s Alliance” coalition, led by the Justice and Development Party and supported by three other parties, secured more than half of the parliament seats with 53.7% (322 out of 600). The “Nation Alliance” coalition, composed of six opposition parties, came second with 35.5%

(213 seats). The “Labor and Freedom” coalition, formed by two leftist parties, got the third place with 10.8% (65 seats).

The Justice and Development Party won the most seats in the parliament, with 44.5% of the total (267 out of 600). The second largest party was the Republican People’s Party, with 28.2% (169 seats), followed by the Green Left Party “Democratic Peoples’ Party” with 10.2% (61 seats), the Nationalist Movement Party with 8.3% (50 seats), the Good Party with 7.3% (44 seats), the Welfare Party with 0.8% (5 seats), and the Turkish Workers’ Party with 0.7% (4 seats).

President Erdogan of the “People’s” alliance won the first round of the presidential elections on May 14, 2023, with 49.51% of the votes. His closest rival was Kemal Kilicdaroglu of the “Nation” alliance, who got 44.88%. The third and fourth places went to Sinan Ogan of the “Ancestors” alliance (5.17%) and Muharrem Ince (0.44%), who had withdrawn from the race.

One intriguing observation is that the major cities that favored the opposition in the presidential elections did not do the same in the parliamentary elections. The “People’s” alliance, led by Erdogan, won in Ankara, Istanbul, and Adana, except for Antalya, where the “Nation” alliance had a narrow victory of 43.6% over 41%. This suggests that Erdogan’s popularity has declined among his usual supporters in these areas. However, they still voted for his alliance in the parliament, perhaps to balance the executive power that would have gone to the opposition if Kilicdaroglu had won the presidency.

The voting patterns of some states changed noticeably, most notably Istanbul, which has a lot of significance and symbolism. It has more than 11 million voters and it is usually said that whoever wins Istanbul rules Turkey. It also has a symbolic meaning for Erdogan, who was its mayor before becoming Turkey’s Prime Minister. Losing Istanbul in the 2019 local elections made this round more important.

Interestingly, the current President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, won in seven southern states that were hit by the February 9 earthquake: Malatya, Adiyaman, Sanliurfa, Gaziantep, Kilis, Osmaniye, and Kahramanmaras. The opposition tried to use the government’s poor response to the earthquake and the corruption in the sector run by government allies as criticisms, but that did not work. Only Adana and Hatay voted for Kilicdaroglu, but with a small difference, especially in Adana. Diyarbakir did not vote for Erdogan as usual.

In the parliamentary elections, the votes of all these states except Diyarbakir went to the People’s alliance with a big margin. But this is similar to their voting behavior in the 2018 elections, and it may be because of the government’s help and promises to rebuild the damaged areas quickly.

2018	Region	Candidate	Votes percentage	2023	Region	Candidate	Votes percentage

Marmara sea	Erdogan	50.82	Marmara sea	Erdogan	47.58
Aegean sea	Muharrem İnce	43.39	Aegean sea	Kilicdaroglu	53.96
Central Anatolia	Erdogan	60.98	Central Anatolia	Erdogan	55.62
Black sea	Erdogan	65.45	Black sea	Erdogan	61.99
Eastern Anatolia	Erdogan	52.29	Eastern Anatolia	Erdogan	50.44
South-East Anatolia	Erdogan	49.1	South-East Anatolia	Kilicdaroglu	50.31
Mediterranean sea	Erdogan	48.38	Mediterranean sea	Kilicdaroglu	47.65

The effect of the Kurdish minority on the outcomes of Turkish elections during the Justice and Development Party's tenure

The Kurds situation in Turkey, including their cultural and political rights, has been affected by various political and social developments over time. The Kurds initially hoped that the Justice and Development Party (AKP) would improve their condition, but their relationship with the party has changed since then.

The AKP is a conservative democratic party that follows a capitalist approach. It was founded in 2001 after breaking away from the Virtue Party, which was an Islamic party. The AKP does not identify as an Islamic party, but many Turkish nationalists view it as a threat to secularism. They are concerned that the AKP might try to change the secular system in Turkey. The AKP came to power in 2002 with Recep Tayyip Erdogan as its leader. Under his rule, Turkey made many economic and political improvements, most notably for the Kurdish minority. The Kurds are the

second largest ethnic group in Turkey and the largest Kurdish population in the region. They have suffered from oppression and discrimination, which led them to rebel and demand independence from Turkey. Later, they changed their demands to cultural and political rights, self-rule, and administrative decentralization instead of secession.

The Kurdish minority in Turkey has been dissatisfied with the government's lack of attention to their needs and rights. Their main voice is the PKK along with some political parties. The conflict between the PKK and the ruling AKP party has created political turmoil in Turkey. This has affected various aspects of the political system, such as the parliament's stability, with many Kurdish members losing their seats. It has also increased political violence (arrests, protests) and undermined democracy in Turkey. On the security level, Turkey has become more unsafe and unstable. Economically, the high military spending of the Turkish army has strained the state budget and harmed the economy. Socially and culturally, the conflict has deepened the rift and hostility between Kurds and Turks.

The future of the Kurdish issue in Turkey depends on how the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), interact with each other. They have three possible options:

Keep negotiating without resolving anything: This option means that both sides will continue to talk but not make any progress on the Kurdish issue, while also fighting each other militarily.

Increase the level of violence: This option means that both sides will intensify their military attacks and target each other's forces more aggressively.

Seek a peaceful solution: This option means that both sides will commit to serious negotiations with a political will to reach a peaceful and political settlement for the Kurdish issue.

These are the potential outcomes of the AKP-PKK relationship, which will shape the fate of the Kurdish issue in Turkey.

The 2023 elections in Turkey

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan secured his third term in office after winning the second round of the Turkish presidential elections on May 28, 2023. He defeated the opposition candidate, Kemal Kilicdaroglu, by getting 53.41% of the votes, while Kilicdaroglu got 46.59%. The Supreme Electoral Council of Turkey confirmed the results on Sunday and reported a high voter turnout of 83.99%, with 91.31% of overseas voters casting their ballots.

The presidential elections were held in two rounds, with the first one taking place on May 14, 2023. More than 191,000 polling stations were set up across the country for Turkish citizens to choose their new president for a five-year term. The voting process was smooth and issue-free, according to the Supreme Electoral Council.

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