THE 2014 LOCAL ELECTIONS
REFLECTIONS ON THE KURDISH QUESTION

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ABSTRACT

Turkey went through an extraordinary local elections process in March 2014. The local elections of 2014 meant more than what it was supposed to, due to various significant events preceding the elections. Political parties carried this message to their electorate through their election campaign and party meetings. Perhaps, it was the ruling AK Party who had to carry most of the burden of this equivocal election process. Due to a series of corruption cases and leaked phone calls, the local elections were billed as a referendum for the legitimacy of the AK Party and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. On the other hand, the election campaign was a test for both the AK Party initiated peace process and autonomy demand for the Kurdish-majority region. Because the peace process was put into question by opposition parties, the 2014 local election was going to gauge popular support for the process. Also, several politicians of the main pro-Kurdish party, i.e., the BDP, embarked on a campaign that would represent the election results as their success in autonomy demands. In this policy brief we will analyze the votes in 16 Kurdish-majority provinces, firstly to find out whether the AK Party and Recep Erdoğan succeeded in reinstating their legitimacy in the region, and secondly to answer in what proportions the Kurdish constituency voted in favor or against regional autonomy.

The election campaign was a test for both the AK Party initiated peace process and autonomy demand for the Kurdish-majority region.

INTRODUCTION

As was obvious almost to everyone keeping an eye on Turkish politics, the 2014 local elections were billed as a referendum for the legitimacy of the ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, henceforth, AK Party).[1] Among purported reasons are the antigovernment protests in the summer of 2013, the corruption allegations against the AK Party in the last month of 2013, and numerous leaked private phone calls and conversations among figures close to the AK Party. The wiretapped talks also targeted AK Party's efforts and policy for a solution of decades-long Kurdish question in Turkey. This campaign aimed at derailing the process on two sides. On the Kurdish side, for example, a leaked conversation aimed to increase suspicion among Kurds that the Turkish state had been involved in the killing of three Kurdish activists in Paris at the beginning of 2013. On the Turkish side, more importantly, the leaked recordings of the conversations of Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK's prisoned leader, with other prisoners aimed to imply that the AK Party government had reached an agreement with Öcalan on certain issues such as regional autonomy. Surely, the leaked recordings targeted the legitimacy of the resolution process between the government and Öcalan beginning from the late 2012. The 2014 local elections, therefore, was going to test whether the alleged involvement of the government in the Paris incident and Öcalan's indiscretion were bought respectively by Kurdish and Turkish voters.

The 2014 local elections had also some special connotations for the Kurdish actors. The Peace and Democratic Party's (BDP) 2014 election declaration propounded that "democratic autonomy is the minimum condition for coexistence with the dominant national state".[2] Accordingly, the BDP members and significant Kurdish organizations close to the PKK campaigned that the 2014 local elections would be a referendum for regional autonomy for the Kurdish-majority region in Turkey.[3] Therefore, the KCK (*Koma Civakên Kurdistan*, Group of Communities in Kurdistan) emphasized that the local elections would be the most important stage of the autonomy project. In a similar vein, the BDP's election manifesto for the 2014 local elections declared democratic autonomy as the most plausible way to solve the Kurdish question in Turkey.[4] Indeed, after the elections, important pro-Kurdish dailies interpreted the election results as the approval of the regional autonomy by Kurds.[5]

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1. Among many others see, "In Local Election, a Referendum on Turkey's Leader, The New York Times, March 28, 2014; "A Referendum on Erdoğan's Rule", *The Economist*, March 31, 2014.

2. "BDP'den yerel seçim beyannamesi" [Local Election Declaration from the BDP], *Firatnews.com,* January 23, 2014.

3. For example Sara Kaya and Cengiz Kök, co-candidates for Nusaybin, declared that they pleaded vote for democratic autonomy not for mayoral office. This statement was posted on the website of BDP, "Seçimler özerklik referandumudur" [Elections are a referendum for autonomy] March 1, 2014; http://www.bdp.org.tr/tr/?p=5879 For a more elaborate discussion of why 2014 local elections meant more than "local services" struggle for the Kurdish community, see Ertuğrul Kürkçü, "Yerel Seçimler ve Yerel Özerklikler" [Local Elections and Local Autonomies], Özgür Gündem, December 17, 2013.

4. Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi 2014 Yerel Seçim Beyannamesi, "Demokratik Kurtuluş ve Özgür Yaşamı İnşa Yürüyüşünde: Öz Yönetimle Özgür Kimliğe", bdp.org.tr, pp. 12-13

5. "Kürdistan Özerkliğe Evet Dedi" [Kurdistan Said Yes to Autonomy], *Firatnews,* March 31, 2014; Özerkliğe ve Öcalan'a Evet [Yes to Autonomy and Öcalan], Özgür Gündem, March 31, 2014.

This paper will mainly seek to answer these questions: (1) Is the approval of the regional autonomy *really* the case when the 2014 elections are considered? (2) What do the 2014 elections tell us about the future of the peace process? While doing this, we will present a comparative analysis of the votes in Kurdish-majority provinces cast for the AK Party and Kurdish parties since the 2002 elections. We will limit the analysis to metropolitan cities and provinces which are populated by a Kurdish majority (Adıyaman, Ağrı[6], Batman, Bingöl, Bitlis, Diyarbakır, Hakkari, Iğdır, Kars, Mardin, Muş, Siirt, Şanlıurfa, Şırnak, Tunceli, Hakkari, and Van).[7] At the end of the paper, we will also elaborate on the importance of the new Islamist Kurdish party, Hüda-Par (the Free Cause Party), for the Kurdish question politics. Before going into detail, it is important to note that the local elections took place under a relatively peaceful climate, in the context of Kurdish problem, thanks to the resolution process.

OVERVIEW OF THE 2014 ELECTIONS IN THE KURDISH REGION

The 2014 local election results[8] point to a number of important conclusions with regard to the evaluation of the Kurdish question in Turkey. Firstly, two parties (AK Party and BDP) dominated the Kurdish-majority region. The Republican People's Party (CHP) and the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), two leading opposition

FIGURE 1: KURDISH-MAJORITY PROVINCES

FIGURE 2: KURDISH-MAJORITY METROPOLITAN PROVINCES IN THE 2014 MAYORAL ELECTIONS

	Diyarbakır	Mardin	Şanlıurfa	Van	Total
AK Party	34.47%	37.55%	60.76%	40.84%	45.35%
BDP	55.32%	52.08%	30.70%	54.14%	46.00%

parties of Turkey, continued to be marginal and somewhat non-existent in Kurdish-majority cities. While the CHP received more than 25% of the votes only in Tunceli, and Kars, and only 15,9% in Adıyaman[9], the MHP won the municipality of Kars and lost the municipality of

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6. Note that the elections in Ağrı are cancelled, thus all numbers relating to Ağrı in this paper belong to the cancelled elections.

7. This grouping of the Kurdish-majority provinces belongs to Mesut Yeğen. We agree on this taxonomy. See, Mesut Yeğen, "The 2011 Elections and the Kurdish Question", *Insight Turkey*, 13(4), 2011, pp. 147-169

8. The results we cite here are not official yet. We have retrieved these results from various newspaper websites. Therefore there might be slight differences across different sources regarding the election results.
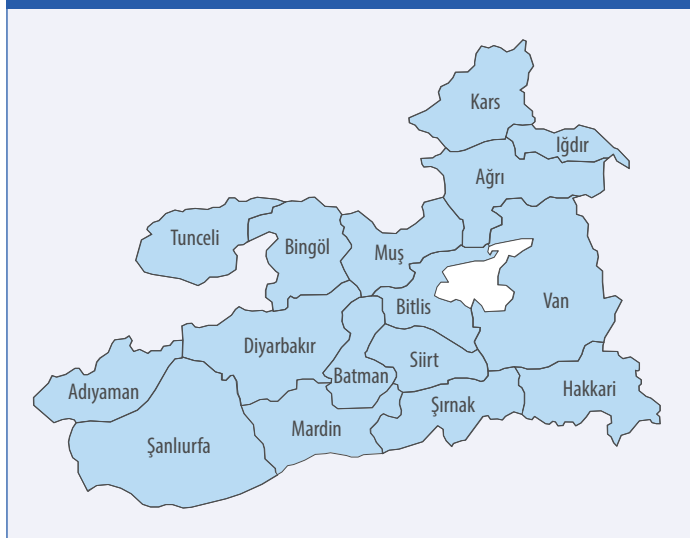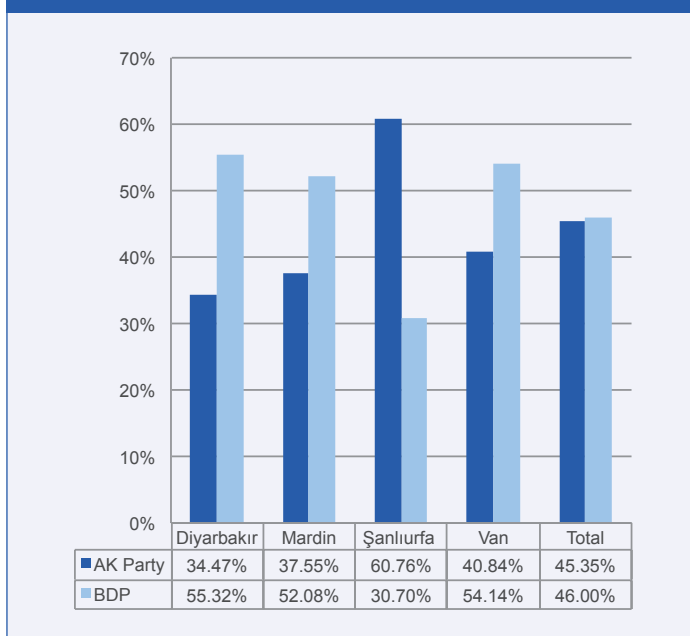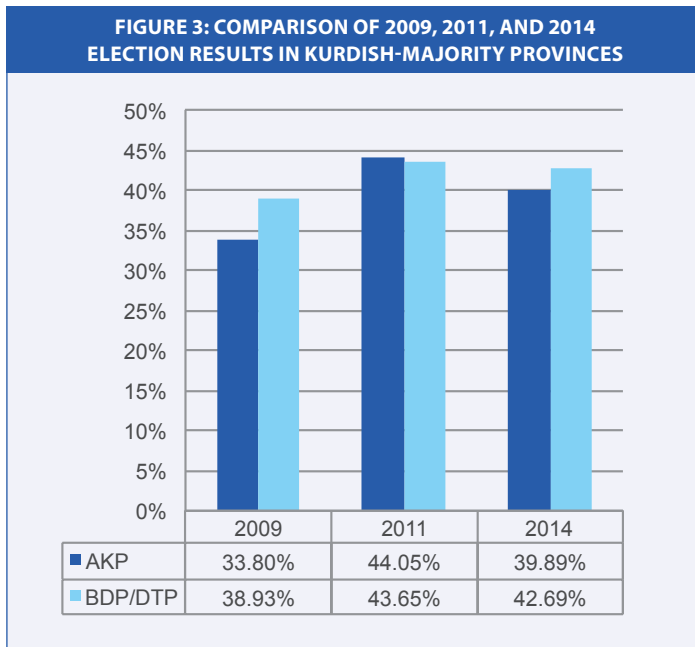
9. These numbers relate to the provincial council elections.

TABLE 1: DISTRIBUTION OF THE NUMBER OF SUB-PROVINCES IN 2009 AND 2014					
	DTP	AK Party	Others	BDP	AK Party	Others
Adıyaman	3	5	0	0	4	4
Ağrı	3	2	2	3	4	0
Batman	2	3	0	2	2	1
Bingöl	1	3	3	0	5	2
Bitlis	2	2	2	3	3	0
Diyarbakır	14	1	2	14	3	0
Hakkari	3	0	0	3	0	0
Iğdır	0	2	1	1	0	2
Kars	2	2	3	1	3	3
Mardin	5	1	2	8	2	0
Muş	3	0	2	3	2	0
Siirt	2	3	1	2	4	0
Şanlı Urfa	3	1	5	4	9	0
Şırnak	5	1	0	5	1	0
Tunceli	0	1	6	0	1	6
Van	4	5	2	11	2	0
Total	56	38	31	71	49	16
%	44,80%	30,40%	24,80%	52,21%	36,03%	11,76%

FIGURE 3: COMPARISON OF 2009, 2011, AND 2014 ELECTION RESULTS IN KURDISH-MAJORITY PROVINCES

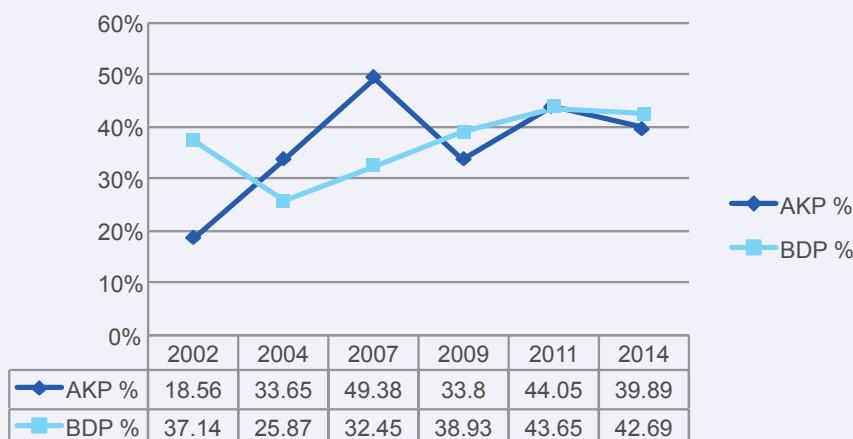|	2009	2011	2014
AKP	33.80%	44.05%	39.89%
BDP/DTP	38.93%	43.65%	42.69%

Iğdır to the BDP, with a margin of 1%. Except these three provinces, two leading opposition parties took less than 5% of the popular votes in the rest of Kurdish-majority provinces. When

four Kurdish-majority metropolitan provinces are considered, the BDP and the AK Party dominated the region by pulling 46% and 45,35% of the votes respectively (see, Figure 2) whereas two leading opposition parties received less than %2 of the votes in total. Hence, it can be gleaned from the above figures that a *de facto* two-party system dominates the region.

Secondly, the BDP consolidated its unprecedented success in the 2011 general elections by almost keeping at the same level its share of votes in the local elections of 2014, when votes for provincial councils are considered (see, Figure 3). In addition, the BDP increased the number of cities where it won the elections from eight to eleven, taking provinces of Mardin, Bitlis and Ağrı from the AK Party. However, although the BDP won the mayoral office with a margin of only 10 votes, the election of Ağrı was cancelled by the provincial electoral boards upon the BDP's complaint that AK Party's demand to recount votes sparked an outrage among the BDP supporters. Despite the controversy, it is certain that the BDP increased its votes in Ağrı more than 10% in mayoral elections (from 32,4% in 2009 to 45, 9% in 2014). When votes for provincial councils in Kurdish-majority cities are considered, it is again clear that the BDP attained an impressive increase in its votes compared to the 2009 local elections.

Thirdly, the AK Party increased its support by around 6,01% compared to the 2009 local elections while its votes decreased remarkably when compared with the 2011 general elections in which the AK Party received 44,05% of the votes in provinces with a high concentration of Kurdish population (see, Figure 3). When the number of municipalities is considered, although the AK Party lost 3 provinces to the BDP, it managed to increase its share of sub-provincial municipalities by garnering votes mainly from other parties. Of all sub-provinces, the AK Party lost nine sub-provinces to the BDP while the BDP

FIGURE 4: VOTES OF KURDISH PARTIES AND THE AK PARTY IN KURDISH-MAJORITY PROVINCES IN ALL ELECTIONS SINCE 2002

	2002	2004	2007	2009	2011	2014
AKP %	18.56	33.65	49.38	33.8	44.05	39.89
BDP %	37.14	25.87	32.45	38.93	43.65	42.69

lost seven to the AK Party. AK Party's poor performance in Van which resulted in the loss of 4 sub-provinces to the BDP could be due to the effects of the tragic earthquake which occurred on October 23, 2011. Despite the government's efforts in ameliorating the tragedy in Van, the AK Party was only successful in two sub-provinces.

Lastly, the 2014 local elections proved that the electoral trajectory of both the AK Party and Kurdish parties is not stable. In other words, the electoral trajectory of both sides is marked by volatility. For example in Diyarbakır, while the BDP's votes decreased by 4,6% in the 2014 provincial council elections, the AK Party increased its votes by around 3,3% compared with previous local elections in 2009. When mayoral elections in Diyarbakır are considered, the BDP votes is marked by a remarkable 10,5% decrease, whereas the AK Party increased its votes by 3,7%. Similarly, the BDP managed to increase its votes by 20% in the mayoral elections of Urfa in 2014 compared to 2009. Other supporting evidence of the increase in pro-Kurdish votes pertain to the rise of the Hüda-Par, a newly established conservative Kurdish party, which pulled a considerable amount of the votes in Diyarbakır, Batman, Bingöl, and Bitlis.

BDP VOTES IN 2014: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Local elections have historically been more important than parliamentary elections for the Kurdish political movement insofar as the municipalities run by successive Kurdish parties were catalysts that opened "new spaces of communication and expression, which not only fostered cultural life, but also allowed for new political publics to emerge".[10] Pro-Kurdish municipalities, since especially 1999, have achieved limited self-rule in the Kurdish-majority region and "built nationalized and 'Kurdified' public spaces" by working at the level of local government.[11] According to Watts, author of an original book on Kurdish nationalist electoral participation in Turkey, the promotion and use of the Kurdish language, Kurdish fairs and festivals through the control over municipalities have provided avenues of further mobilization in order both to identify and redefine

10. Zeynep Gambetti, "The conflictual (trans)formation of the public sphere in urban space: the case of Diyarbakır", *New Perspectives on Turkey*, 32 (2005), p. 43–71, p. 53

11. Nicole F. Watts, *Activists in Office Kurdish politics and Protest in Turkey*, (University of Washington Press, Seattle: 2010), p. 165

FIGURE 5: CHANGE IN VOTES OF KURDISH PARTIES IN PROVINCIAL COUNCILS BETWEEN 2009 AND 2014
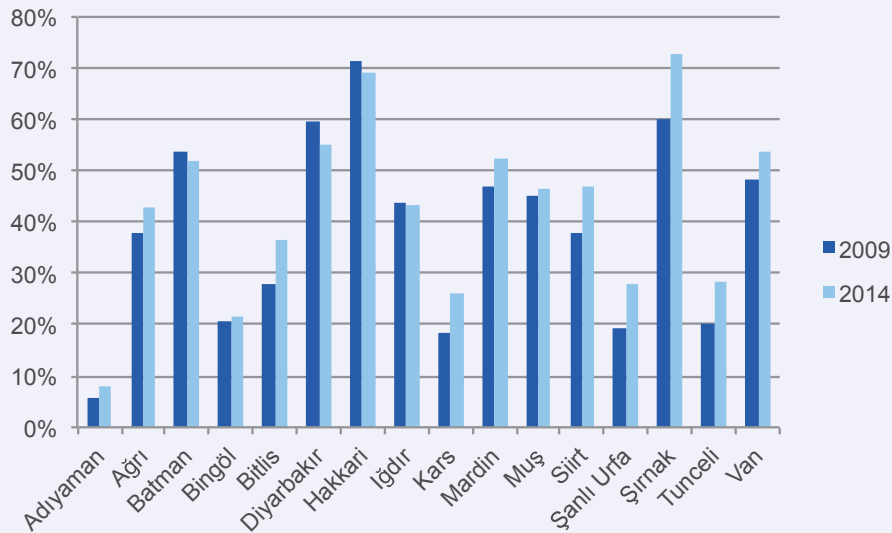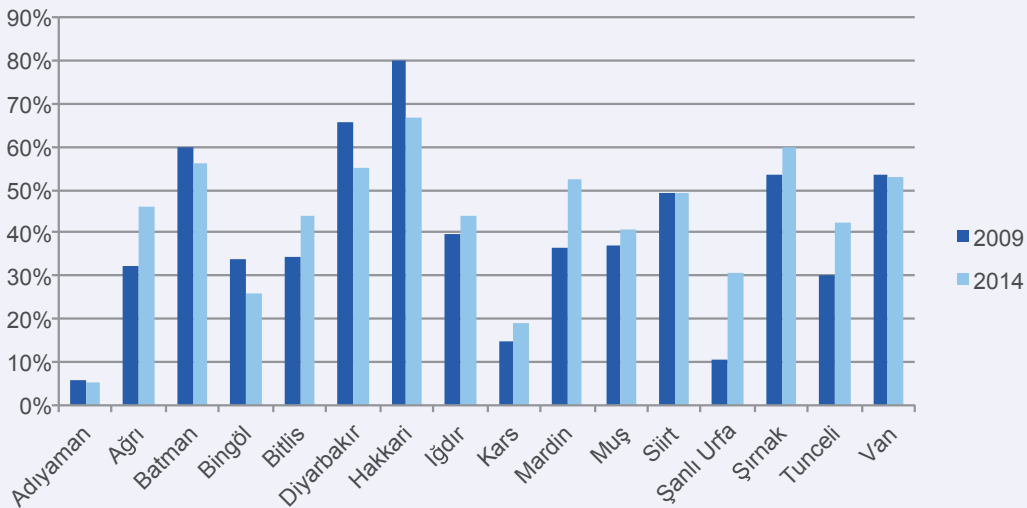

FIGURE 6: CHANGE IN VOTES OF KURDISH PARTIES IN MAYORAL ELECTIONS BETWEEN 2009 AND 2014

the Kurdish subject and to undermine Turkish state authority.[12]

In all Kurdish-majority provinces, in the 2014 local elections, the BDP almost achieved its previous success by winning the second larg-

est share of the votes with around %42,69 in total (Figure 3).[13] However, the BDP vote margins with the AK Party actually decreased from %5,13 in 2009 to -0,40% in 2011 in favor of the

12. Watts, *Ibid*, p. 159

13. Note that this number reflects only the provincial council elections results.

AK Party and to %2,8 in 2014 (see, Figure 3 and 4). By keeping vote margins on a level with the AK Party, the BDP proved that it continues to dominate the Kurdish-majority region. This fact shows that the BDP's significant vote loss in the 2007 general elections to the AK Party signals an anomaly. On the other hand, BDP was able to consolidate its leading position in the region as demonstrated in three consecutive elections. The 2014 elections also proved that the BDP consolidated its first-party position in the local elections it once lent to the AK Party in the 2004 elections (see, Figure 4[14]).

When the 2014 results of provincial elections are compared to 2009, the BDP increased its votes in 9 provinces while its votes decreased in 7 including Diyarbakır (See Figure 6). Importantly, in 4 provinces (Ağrı, Mardin, Şanlıurfa, and Tunceli) the BDP increased its votes more than 10%, and more than 5% in 2 other provinces, i.e., Bitlis and Şırnak (See, Figure 6). The fall in Diyarbakır and Hakkari are remarkable since these two cities are traditionally known to be the bedrocks of the BDP. As far as provincial councils[15] are considered, BDP votes decreased in 4 cities (Batman, Diyarbakır, Hakkari and Iğdır) while a significant rise of BDP votes can be seen in the rest of the cities. In six of the Kurdish provinces, for example, BDP's votes increased around 10% (see, Figure 5). The lower rate of increase in BDP votes for provincial council representatives in 2014 (cf. Figure 5 and 6), in comparison to the increase in mayoral elections, provides a new proof for Watt's argument that "in most provinces, substantially greater support for pro-Kurdish candidates came from urban areas than from ru-

Better BDP performance in mayoral elections represents a stronger Kurdish support in urban areas.

ral areas and villages".[16] Accordingly, it can be argued that the BDP is still stronger in urban areas than in rural places.

The main success of the BDP is, of course, the takeover of the religiously conservative provinces, i.e., Mardin[17] and Bitlis, from the AK Party. For instance, the BDP increased its votes in Bitlis, traditionally a conservative and religious city, from 34,4% in 2009 local elections to 43,9% in 2014. The Kurdish parties' continuous success since the 2009 local elections can be partly attributed to the rise of religious discourse among pro-Kurdish political actors. A symbolic step in this discursive change was also represented by the election of Altan Tan, known as a religious political actor, to the parliament under the BDP banner in the 2011 elections. The change of Kurdish party members' profiles from excessively secular to new religious-friendly ones can be a reason behind the rise of BDP's votes in Mardin and Bitlis. However, Bingöl, another Kurdish city with concentration of conservative people, does not fit to the aforementioned argument. The ethnic structure of Bingöl, consisting of Zaza Kurds who hold either a lukewarm or negative view of the PKK, is likely to have caused this inconsistency.

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14. In this figure, votes for provincial councils are used for 2004, 2009, and 2014 local elections.

15. It is important to recall that provincial councils consist of representatives from each party in a province. The representatives of each party are elected by the votes coming both from the provincial centers and rural areas.

16. Watts, *Ibid*, p. 166

17. In Mardin, we counted the independent votes as BDP votes. Since in the 2014 elections the BDP supported the elected mayor of Mardin, i.e., Ahmet Türk, the chairman of the former pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP), who had to run the elections as an independent politician due to his political ban. In 2009, the Constitutional Court of Turkey voted to close the DTP, on the grounds that it had connections with the PKK, On December 11, banning 36 party members, including Ahmet Türk, from politics.

THE AK PARTY VOTES IN 2014: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Many pundits, before the 2014 local elections, anticipated that the AK Party would decrease its votes in Kurdish-majority provinces for three important reasons. Firstly, the Uludere massacre caused a mental disassociation from the AK Party among the Kurdish people. Secondly, Hüda-Par, an Islamist Kurdish party, would take votes from the AK Party in a high ratio (see below). Lastly, the AK Party's purported choice to put weak candidates for mayoral competition especially in Urfa and other conservative Kurdish cities as part of the so-called agreement with Öcalan would decrease the number of the AK Party mayors in the region.[18] However, the election results refuted these anticipations.

The attempts to turn the local elections into a referendum for the AK Party's legitimacy received a negative response from Kurdish-majority provinces.

Overall, the AK Party votes for provincial councils in 2014 is marked by a %6,01 increase in comparison to the 2009 elections (See Figure 4). When provincial councils are considered, the AK Party seems to have increased its votes in 11 provinces (See, Figure 7). Of these, Bingöl, Bitlis, and Şanlıurfa witnessed an increase of more than 10% in AK Party's votes, while the AK Party votes

increased by 7,2% in Adıyaman, 7,14% in Ağrı, 6,36% in Van, and only 3,2% in Diyarbakır. In the remaining cities, the AK Party votes reflect a slight fall, except in Tunceli and Şırnak, where decrease in AK Party's votes is more than 5%. More significantly, it is only in Tunceli, Iğdır, and Şırnak where the AK Party votes dropped below 20%. However, the low percentage of AK Party votes in Tunceli and Iğdır has more to do with the existence of the CHP in Tunceli and the MHP in Iğdır than with Kurdish consciousness in these cities. In cities where the BDP pulled more than %50 of the votes in the 2014 elections (Batman, Diyarbakır, Hakkari, Mardin, Van, and Şırnak, Figure 5), the AK Party is the runner-up party with a score more than 30%, except in Şırnak and Hakkari (See Figure 8). In addition to its conservative/Islamic political identity, three other reasons can be given for the relative success of the AK Party in the region. Firstly, the Kurdish people voted for the resolution process. Secondly, small parties lost their voters to the AK Party. Thirdly, the attempt to turn the local elections into a referendum for the AK Party's legitimacy is deflected by a Kurdish backlash. By all means, in the 2014 local elections, the AK Party seems to have either increased or maintained its competitiveness in Kurdish-majority cities where a steady increase of the BDP votes impinges on its failure.

When votes for mayoral elections are analyzed, the AK Party seems to have increased its votes significantly in three conservative Kurdish cities, i.e., Bingöl, Adıyaman, and Şanlıurfa, which signal to an unwavering support for the AK Party in the surge for its legitimacy. In other Kurdish cities, support for the AK Party is persistent (Ağrı, Diyarbakır, Hakkari, and Van). However, decreases in Batman (5,7%), Iğdır (19,6%), Kars (7,7%), Mardin (7,6%), Şırnak (13,3%), and Tunceli (12,3%) are remarkable. This sharp decrease in support for the AK Party in municipal elections, unlike in provincial council elections, shows that the AK Party managed to consolidate

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18. Emre Uslu, columnist in *Taraf* and *Today's Zaman*, championed this argument. Local dailies in Urfa covered his claim that the AK Party agreed to transfer Urfa to the Kurdish party. See for example, "Taraf yazarından şok iddia...", *sanliurfaolay.com*, December 26, 2013; "AK Party Urfa'yı Oslo'da BDP'ye mi Bıraktı?", *sanliurfahbr.com*, December 27, 2013

FIGURE 7: CHANGE IN VOTES OF AK PARTY IN PROVINCIAL COUNCILS BETWEEN 2009 AND 2014
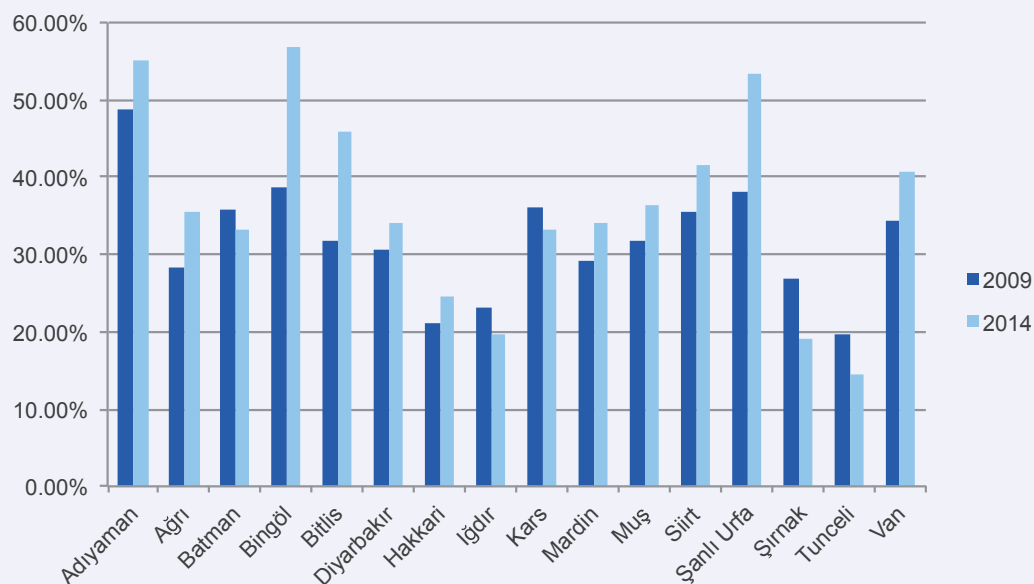

FIGURE 8: CHANGE IN AK PARTY VOTES IN MAYORAL ELECTIONS FROM 2009 TO 2014
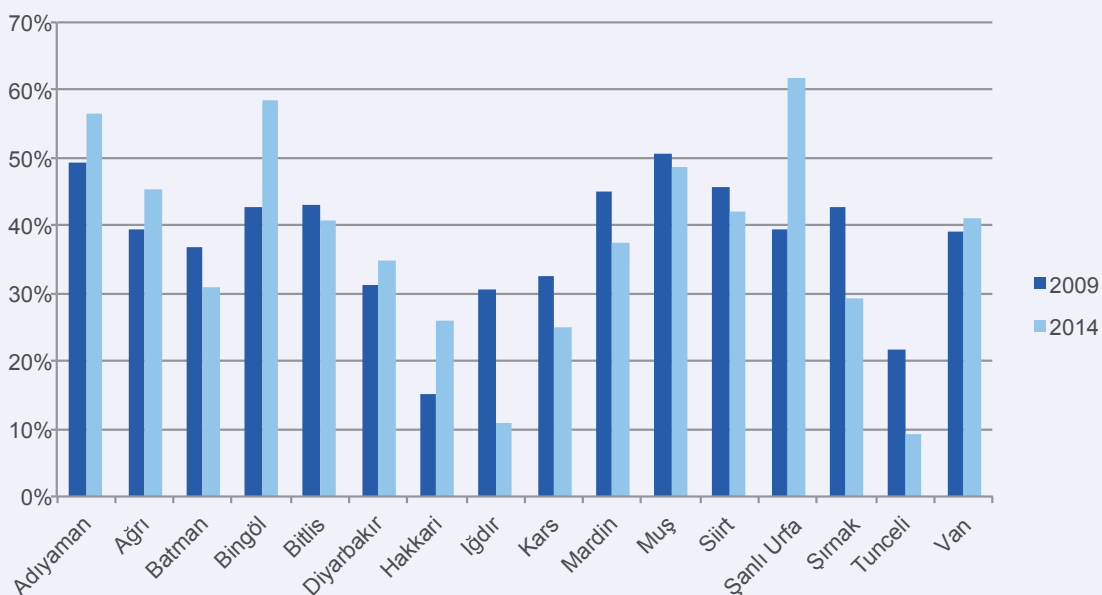
its votes better in rural areas. For example in Bitlis, while the AK Party raised its votes for provincial council by 14,24% (Figure 7), its votes in mayoral elections dropped by 2,5%.

If we put the 2011 general elections into the equation, the AK Party votes exhibits a decrease in a relatively high ratio by 3,56% (see Figure 4). This difference can be explicated by the AK

FIGURE 9: SUB-PROVINCES IN THE 2014 LOCAL ELECTIONS
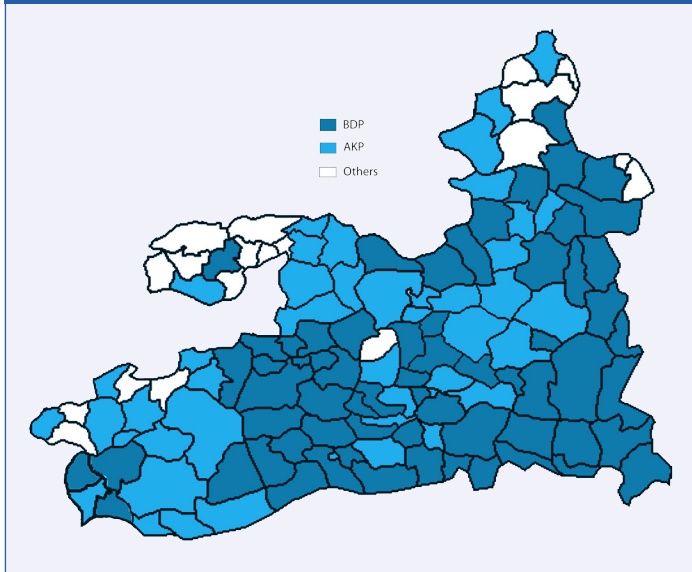
Party's overall success in general elections in comparison to local elections. In fact, despite its incommensurability, when we consider the mild decrease in AK Party votes from 2011 to 2014 (3,56%) vis-à-vis the sharp decrease in AK Party votes from 2007 to 2009 (15,58%) it suffices to say that the AK Party has consolidated its votes in the Kurdish-majority region.

VOTE FOR REGIONAL AUTONOMY?

On July 14, 2011, the Congress of Democratic Society, a legal branch of the PKK officially declared a demand for 'democratic autonomy' stipulating a fundamental restructuring of the Turkish political and administrative system. Since then, 'democratic autonomy' in areas where Kurds have a majority has been championed by the BDP in particular, and other civil organizations traditionally considered being close to the PKK, in general. Before the 2014 local elections, a BDP delegation met with Öcalan on March 9, 2014 and declared his message to the public during the Newroz festival in Diyarbakır which reads: "Local

elections on March 30 will be in the nature of a referendum for the Kurds" in order to test democratic autonomy.[19] Also, as already mentioned in the introduction, in various statements made by BDP politicians and in the election declaration of the BDP, it was made clear that the 2014 elections would be a screen for the BDP, testing the support for regional autonomy. In order to control this argument, by looking at Kurdish votes in the 2014 local elections we will try to answer in what proportions the Kurdish constituency voted in favor or against regional autonomy. Before looking at length the proportion of BDP's votes, it suffices to say that three pro-autonomy and five contra-autonomy arguments can be developed via drawing on the election results.

To start with the pro-autonomy arguments, the BDP votes climbed to 42,89% in 2014 from 38,93% in 2009 (See Figure 4). This overall increase in BDP votes is also reflected in the number of elected provincial and sub-provincal BDP mayors (Figure 9). In 2014, while the Kurdish party increased the number of its provincial municipals from 8 to 11 (3 metropolitan and 8 other cities), it also increased its share of sub-provincial mayoral seats from 44,80% in 2009 to 52,21% in 2014 (See Table 1). These noteworthy BDP successes in the overall distribution of votes and seats in the region seem to support the autonomy argument to an extent. Furthermore, the salient increase in the BDP votes point to melting presence of the CHP and the MHP, two main opposition parties strongly against the Kurdish autonomy demands, thereby signaling an unabated potential support for autonomy. Nevertheless, these increases per se do not represent a majority and an unproblematic Kurdish support for autonomy. At the same time, one cannot argue that Kurdish voters said 'yes' to autonomy in the 2014 local elections. This might be too optimis-

19. Hatem Ete, Yunus Akbaba, Galip Dalay, Samir Orçun Ersay, Kılıç Buğra Kanat, and Kadir Üstün, "Turkey's 2014 Local Elections", *Seta Analysis*, No. 4 (March 2014), p. 20

tic if not biased. In fact, there are more contra-autonomy arguments that can be deduced from the 2014 local elections findings.

First of all, the BDP acquired more than 60% of the votes only in two cities (See Figure 9), and the cities where it won between 50% and 60% of the votes are Van, Batman, Mardin, and Diyarbakır. This alone shows that the purported support for autonomy is not so high and, more to the point, the Kurdish party's votes in these cities were already more than %50 in two previous elections with the exception of Mardin (44% in the 2009 local elections). It is also significant to note that, both in Diyarbakır and Hakkari, BDP experienced a considerable decrease in its votes (See Figures 5 and 6). Secondly, in the 2014 mayoral elections the BDP increased its votes significantly in provinces where Kurdish party was not the first-party in the 2009 elections. This increase, however, can partly be explained by the candidates, Osman Baydemir for Şanlıurfa, Sırrı Sakık for Ağrı, both of whom are known for their moderate approaches to the Kurdish problem and its solution. It is highly likely that these politicians attracted Kurdish votes not so much with autonomy promises but by their own approach.

Added to these, the BDP's success in the 2014 local elections can be attributed to its positive role in the resolution process led by the AK Party government. And thirdly, the increase in Kurdish votes in the 2014 election results can well be read as the reflection of Kurds' support for the peace process, rather than approval of autonomy demands. Fourthly, the 2014 elections signaled a potential divergence from BDP policies, represented by the relative success of Hüda-Par which increased its votes especially where the BDP is strongest. Fifthly, when the 2014 election results are compared to those of 2011, the autonomy demands and the attempts to turn the elections into a referendum for autonomy did not mean extra votes for the BDP since its votes *decreased* by 0,96% from the level of 2011. These patterns of

FIGURE 10: PERCENTAGE OF BDP VOTES IN PROVINCIAL COUNCILS

+%60
%50-%60
%40-%50
-%40

The Van Lake
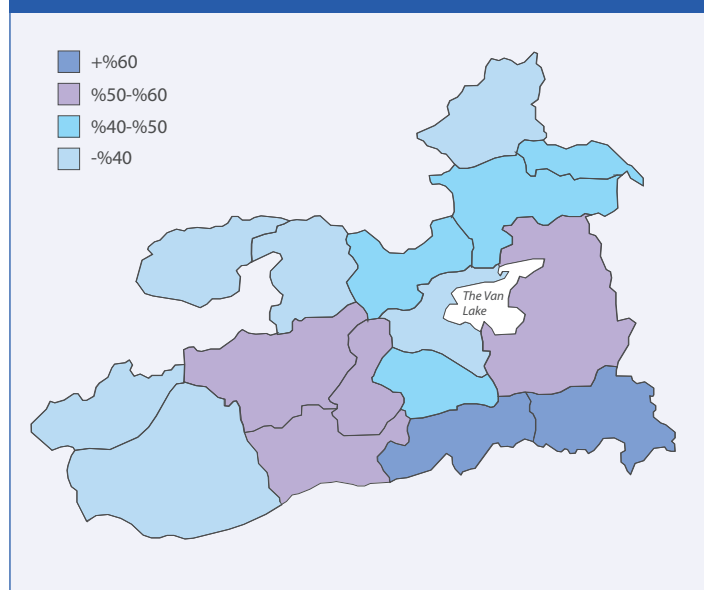
change show that pro-Kurdish block is not in a stronger position than in 2011 to claim that the Kurdish people approved regional autonomy. Last but not least, the AK Party has once again proven that it is able to attract and even increase its Kurdish votes in the region. As a result, it is too optimistic to argue that Kurdish voters, as claimed by pro-BDP actors and journalists, approved the autonomy demand in the 2014 local elections.

THE PEACE PROCESS

In the summer of 2009, the AK Party initiated the process of "Kurdish resolution" (*Kürt Açılımı*), in part as a response to March 2009 local elections in which the Kurdish party dramatically challenged the electoral success of the AK Party and increased its share of votes. However, the government's plan to engender peaceful return of the PKK militants from Turkey's Habur gate on the Iraqi border resulted in a popular uproar among the Turks against the Habur initiative. As a result, the Habur incident abus Hahad a ruinous impact on the peace process and the government suspended the return of the PKK

militants project soon after. Both the failure of the Kurdish resolution and 'KCK Operations' conducted by the AK Party government, on the grounds that the arrested belonged to the PKK's urban branch the so-called KCK (Koma Civakên Kurdistan-the Association of Communities of Kurdistan) formally headed by one of PKK's top commanders Murat Karayılan, triggered another series of the PKK violence in the following years. The AK Party started a new policy to control the spread of Kurdish political parties through coercive-punitive measures such as policing, juridical-legal, extra-legal and bureaucratic means until the end of 2012. This policy, however, did not give any fruit for the AK Party as the 2011 general elections proved. On the other hand, the PKK increased its violence with an attempted insurgency inspired by the Arab Spring in southeastern region and it put an extraordinary focus on Şemdinli, province of Hakkari, by conducting numerous raids on military outposts and carrying out checkpoints in July-August 2012. This action resulted in a considerable number of PKK causalities, highest since the capture of Öcalan in 1999, and the PKK failed to start an insurgency.

The peace process favored the AK Party and the BDP equally by pointing to a no-reverse road.

In December 2012, as a result, the AK Party government started a new peace process by talking to Öcalan, the jailed leader of the PKK and the BDP joined this process by sending its two parliamentarians to the Imrali prison in order to talk to Öcalan in early January of 2013. The first stage of the peace process was completed to an extent in July 2013 when the People of Congress of Kurdistan declared that the PKK militants had withdrawn across the border into Iraq. After this declaration, the PKK accused the Turkish state of not making the required legal arrangements for the second stage and letting the construction of new military posts continue. In response, the AK Party government asserted that the PKK did not keep its promises because it withdrew only %20 of its guerillas from Turkey. Because of this controversy over the withdrawal of the PKK guerillas, some leading figures of the PKK, for example Cemil Bayık, threatened the AK Party government by stating that they would break the cease-fire. Despite these ups and downs throughout the year of 2013, the AK Party government released a number of KCK members from prison and declared a democratization package including the restoration of Kurdish village names. And as of September 30, 2013 the letters X, Q, and W in the Kurdish alphabet were allowed to be used freely. Also, Öcalan repeated occasionally that the peace process is on track.

By all means, the peace process became an important part of the electoral campaign both for the AK Party and the BDP. Erdoğan believed the absence of bloodshed in 2013 (see, Figure 10[20]) and democratization reforms will work in favor of his own party and against the BDP in Kurdish-majority provinces. According to this logic, if the BDP cannot pursue politics of identity and use injustices including bans on Kurdish language and identity, the Kurdish people would vote for AK Party policies and the services it provided in the region. During the AK Party rallies in Kurdish-majority provinces, Erdoğan often used the peace process to plea for votes. On the other hand, the BDP internalized this AK Party-

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20. Numbers are retrieved from the following sources; TBMM İnsan Hakları İnceleme Komisyonu, Terör ve Şiddet Olayları Kapsamında Yaşam Hakkı İhlallerinin İncelenme Raporu, 24. Dönem, 3üncü Yasama Yılı, 18 Şubat 2013; Numbers of 2013 and 2014 are taken from Hurriyet archive (http://arama.hurriyet.com.tr/), 2014 numbers cover the first quarter of the year 2014; Güneş Murat Tezcür, "Prospects for Resolution of the Kurdish Question: A Realist Perspective", *Insight Turkey* 15.2 (2013), pp. 69-84, p. 70.

FIGURE 11: FATALITIES IN PKK-RELATED CONFLICTS
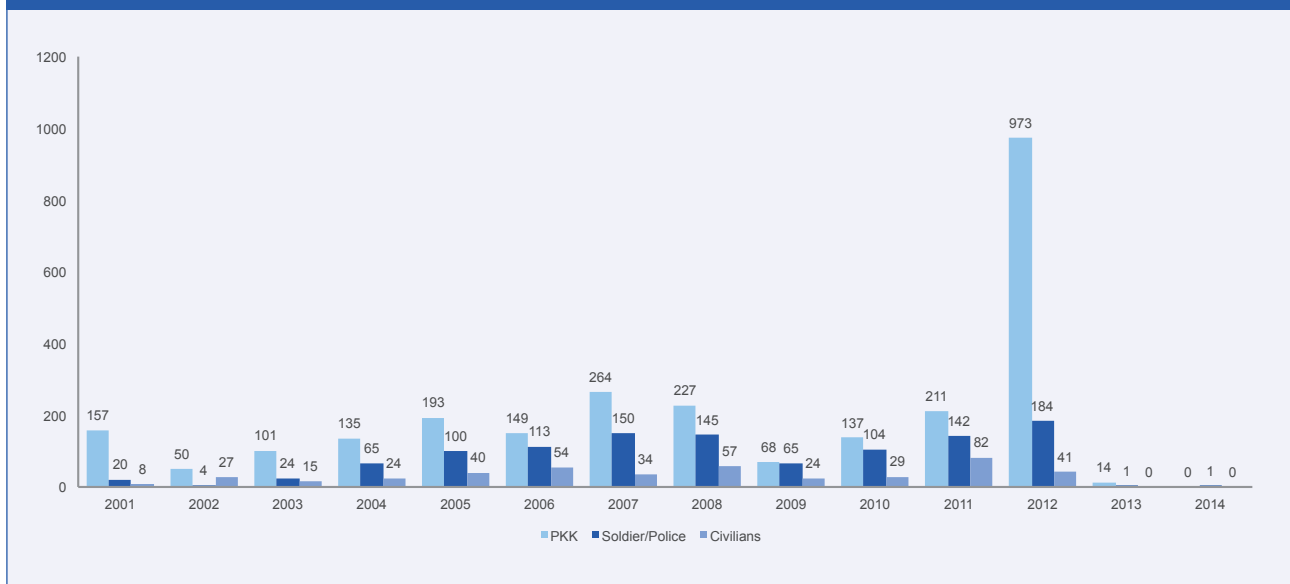
initiated process. Often BDP politicians gave statements praising the process, and moreover construed their electoral success as a necessity for the continuation of the process. To quote several examples, before the elections, Gülten Kışanak, the then co-chair of the BDP and a mayoral candidate in Diyarbakir, explained the importance of the 2014 elections for the future of the resolution process by saying "There is a feeling that if ... we achieve a stronger (election) result, the peace process will advance. However, if we relax and our votes decline, we Kurds fear that the peace process could collapse".[21]

This seemingly paradoxical situation dates back to the 2007 elections when supporters of the Kurdish parties voted for another party for the first time, an exception for Kurdish parties since. The AK Party's reform policy in line with the EU requests has been the most accepted explanation of this switch from pro-Kurdish votes to the AK Party. For example, in the fifth World Values Survey conducted in 2007 whose respondents clearly identified themselves as primarily Kurdish speakers, the Kurdish people with high-

er levels of satisfaction with Turkish democracy and human right standards were found to have a lower likelihood of voting for the Kurdish parties.[22] Therefore, after the 2007 elections when the Kurdish party dramatically lost its constituency to the AK Party, the Kurdish movement took the AK Party as its main rival, which had challenged the Kurdish movement's claim of being the real representative of the Kurds.[23] Tezcur argues that the electoral loss that the Kurdish party suffered in 2007 was one of the reasons behind the PKK's preference for radicalization and contentious mobilization.[24] This impact of the 2007 parliamentary elections on the radicalization of pro-Kurdish movements indicates that the sense of failure among pro-Kurdish parties poses a risky situation for a peaceful solution of the Kurdish question.

21. Hatem Ete, et all, *Ibid*, p. 20

22. Faruk Ekmekci, "Understanding Kurdish ethno-nationalism in Turkey: socio-economy, religion, and politics", *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 34(9), 2011, pp.1608–1617, p. 1613

23. Ali Balci, "The Kurdish movement's EU policy in Turkey: An analysis of a dissident ethnic bloc's foreign policy", *Ethnicities*, 14(3), 2013, Doi: 1468796813504551

24. Güneş Murat Tezcür, "When democratization radicalizes: The Kurdish nationalist movement in Turkey", *Journal of Peace Research*, 47(6), 2010, pp. 775-789, p. 784

Hence, the burning question is: does the PKK always return to arms when it is disappointed with the election results? If we take the failure of the Kurdish party in the 2007 general elections, and its success in the 2009 local elections which led to moderation of the PKK's activities, and compare these to the pertinent fatality levels (See Figure 11), then it becomes plausible to argue that the 2014 election results will provide a suitable condition for the continuation of the peace process. However, on the other hand, the case of the 2011 general elections in which the Kurdish party consolidated its votes presents counter-evidence for the negative relationship between electoral success and armed struggle, since the PKK violence raised dramatically in the following months and during 2012 despite its electoral success. Various attempts made by the AK Party government to curb the PKK activities in the region and the KCK arrests, as well as internal rifts within the PKK, explain this exception to certain degree.

Notwithstanding the problems and reactions from the main oppositional groups, the peace process has proved its electoral benefits both for the AK Party and the BDP in the 2014 local elections. By marginalizing all other parties and bestowing an electoral success both for the AK Party and the BDP, Kurdish voters have shown that they endorse the peace process. Added to this, the 2014 elections results have put these two parties in a position from which any departure will be punished in terms of electoral support. However, it should be kept in mind that the PKK is not disarmed yet and its members are in the Northern Iraq. This makes the peace process brittle.

HÜDA-PAR: A NEW POLITICAL ACTOR?

The emergence of a new Kurdish Islamist party by the remnants of the Kurdish Hezbollah posed a question whether it would change the electoral

TABLE 2: HÜDA-PAR'S VOTES IN 2014		
Provinces	Provincial Councils	Mayoral Elections
Adıyaman	0,4%	0%
Ağrı	0,44%	1,38% (616)
Batman	7,12%	7,80% (12.733)
Bingöl	4,85%	3,07% (1.510)
Bitlis	0,92%	5,58% (1.294)
Diyarbakır	5,42%	4,78% (34.543)
Hakkari	0%	0%
Iğdır	0%	0%
Kars	0%	0%
Mardin	2,62%	2,01% (6.456)
Muş	1,52%	1,46% (551)
Siirt	0,69%	1,16% (729)
Şırnak	2,90%	2,32% (630)
Şanlıurfa	1%	0,76% (6.077)
Tunceli	0%	0%
Van	0,77%	0,66% (2.879)

balance in favor of or against the BDP and the AK Party. Although Hüda-Par (*Hür Dava Partisi*, Free Cause Party) is a new party, it proved its electoral strength in 2006 by organizing a mass meeting gathering around 50,000 people in Diyarbakir under the banner of Mustazaf-Der. Pundits, emphasizing Hüda-Par's Islamic character, anticipated that it would take the most votes from AK Party's constituency in the 2014 local elections since supporters of the AK Party in the region are supposed to be conservative. On the other hand, street battles between Hüda-Par and BDP supporters during the election campaign signaled that Hüda-Par could steal votes from the BDP in the 2014 elections.

The election results, however, proves neither argument; i.e., a considerable number of BDP supporters would vote for Hüda-Par and there would be defections from the AK Party to the Hüda-Par. Of provinces where Hüda-Par received a considerable percentage of votes, Diyarbakır clearly shows that many BDP supporters switched to the Hüda-Par since the BDP decreased its votes in both mayoral and provincial

council elections while the AK Party increased its respective votes. Similarly, the Hüda-Par candidates received votes from the BDP constituency in provincial council elections of Bingöl by taking 4,85% of the votes and pushing BDP's votes down by 8%. In Batman, the Hüda-Par bought off electorates of both the AK Party and the BDP, since total loss of these two parties in votes for provincial council is equal to Hüda-Par's share. In the mayoral election of Bitlis, it is clear that the AK Party votes switched to Hüda-Par because the BDP's votes increased by almost 10% while the AK Party lost its supporters by almost 3%. The Hüda-Par, as the election results prove, is a strong political actor in Batman, Bingöl, Bitlis, and Diyarbakır (See, Table). Since the Hüda-Par was able to appeal both to Islamic and Kurdish identities in the region, it managed to emerge, in the 2014 elections, as a third competitor in these cities. Although the Hüda-Par has a strong appeal for Kurdish rights and self-rule, similar to the promises of the BDP, its main difference lies in its distinctively highlighted Islamist character. As for other Kurdish parties, such as the Hak-Par (Rights and Freedom Party), led by famous Kurdish activist and intellectual Kemal Burkay, and the KADEP (the Participatory Democracy Party), their votes remained below 0,1% in general. Consequently, the 2014 elections demonstrates that Hüda-Par, unlike other small Kurdish parties, has a certain degree of support in the region and it can change the pattern of voting behavior among conservative Kurds.

CONCLUSION

Turkey experienced an extraordinary electoral process, as concurred by many politicians, in 2014. It was true in the sense that, the events and scandals that broke out prior to the elections turned the whole environment into a war of existence especially for the AK Party and its opponents alike.

The 2014 elections was exclusively significant for the Kurdish politicians inasmuch as it came across a period when Kurdish rights and especially demands raised to a point of no reverse. The elections became much more interesting in the Kurdish-majority region where the AK Party's surge for legitimacy clashed with the BDP politicians' desire to gauge support for its autonomy demands. The results, however, are more complex than granting an easy affirmation for both.

The AK Party and the BDP did better in reading the Kurdish majority region.

Comparative analyses of all local and general elections since 2002 show that while the AK Party monopolized Kurdish votes that were previously fragmented among several other parties, it failed to convert much votes from pro-Kurdish parties except in the 2007 elections. Despite its superior success in general elections, the AK Party managed to increase its votes by 6,69% in the 2014 elections, compared to the 2009 local elections, despite a few mayoral loses to the BDP. The success of the BDP, however, appears to be persistent across the regions, and especially in conservative Kurdish provinces, which can be identified as a reflection of the discursive change within the party. The 2014 election results also show that Kurdish votes are not immune from fluctuations because the Hüda-Par has attracted a considerable amount of Kurdish votes in the cities where the BDP has a stronghold, as in Diyarbakır.

Reflecting on these results, it can be argued that the efforts to put the AK Party legitimacy into question before the 2014 elections were met by a considerable Kurdish backlash. AK Party was the leading or runner-up party in most Kurdish-majority provinces. More importantly,

the initiation of the peace process seems to have lent further Kurdish support for the AK Party, as can be clearly seen in the provincial council elections. As for the BDP, though the election results fell short of an apparent approval of autonomy, it either increased or maintained it votes, thereby strengthening its political representativeness. The positive role assumed by the BDP politicians in line with Abdullah Öcalan in the peace process seems to have found a positive response among the Kurdish electorate. This is also represented by a considerable increase in Kurdish votes in the 2014 local elections. The electoral response in 2014, compared to the election results of 2009, points to a boost in the determination to continue the peace process. The poor performance of both the CHP and the MHP, who are vociferously against the peace process, is evidence that the Kurdish-majority provinces were still content with a two-party rule in the region.

All in all, we believe the most important consequence of the 2014 elections is the unshaken support for both the BDP and the AK Party. This consequence is a credit given by the people in the region for the continuation of the peace process but not so much for autonomy demand of the BDP. By not putting one party ahead of the other in terms of total votes, Kurdish people showed a belief that these two parties should be equally involved in the peace process.

Turkey went through an extraordinary local elections process in March 2014. The local elections of 2014 meant more than what it was supposed to, due to various significant events preceding the elections. Political parties carried this message to their electorate through their election campaign and party meetings. Perhaps, it was the ruling AK Party who had to carry most of the burden of this equivocal election process. Due to a series of corruption cases and leaked phone calls, the local elections were billed as a referendum for the legitimacy of the AK Party and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. On the other hand, the election campaign was a test for both the AK Party initiated peace process and autonomy demand for the Kurdish-majority region. Because the peace process was put into question by opposition parties, the 2014 local election was going to gauge popular support for the process. Also, several politicians of the main pro-Kurdish party, i.e., the BDP, embarked on a campaign that would represent the election results as their success in autonomy demands. In this policy brief we will analyze the votes in 16 Kurdish-majority provinces, firstly to find out whether the AK Party and Recep Erdoğan succeeded in reinstating their legitimacy in the region, and secondly to answer in what proportions the Kurdish constituency voted in favor or against regional autonomy.

SETA