

## THE 2014 LOCAL ELECTIONS AND THE PEACE AND DEMOCRACY PARTY (BDP)

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### ABSTRACT

Amidst a controversial confrontation between the AK Party government and the Gülen Movement, the 2014 local elections in Turkey became part and parcel of national politics and led voters across the nation to approach local races with an eye on this election season's broader implications. Millions of citizens in Eastern Anatolia and the Southeast, where the Kurds constitute a majority of the population, arguably cast their votes with similar consideration in mind. As such, the elections of March 30, 2014 reaffirmed the dominance of the ruling AK Party and the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), which almost exclusively shouldered the burden of the Kurdish peace process over the past 18 months. After the elections, the BDP announced that it would merge with the People's Democratic Party (HDP) as part of an outreach strategy to become Turkey's main opposition party –a quest that, despite slim chances of success, will guide the Kurdish political movement's future moves.

**Keywords:** The 2014 Local Elections, The BDP, The HDP, The AK Party, The HUDA-PAR.

### 30 MART YEREL SEÇİMLERİ VE BDP

#### ÖZET

Türkiye, 30 Mart 2014'te sadece bir yerel seçim yapmadı. Hem Türkiye genelinde hem de Güneydoğu ve Doğu Anadolu Bölgesi özelinde 30 Mart, bir yerel seçim olmanın ötesinde anlamlar kazandı. Bu itibarla seçmenlerin oy davranışlarını

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etkileyen temel saik, adaylar ve yerel dinamiklerden ziyade, partilerin makro politik tercihleri oldu.

Türkiye genelinde seçimin bir genel seçim hüviyetine bürünmesinde iki olay belirleyici oldu: Biri, 17 Aralık 2013'te başlayan ve hükümet ile Gülen Cemaati arasında büyük bir mücadeleye sebep veren operasyonlardı. Diğer ise, yaklaşık birbuçuk yıldır sürdürülmekte olan çözüm süreciydi.

Yapılan seçimlerden, genel olarak, AKP ve BDP zafer ile çıktılar. Halk, barış sürecini yükünü omuzlarında taşıyan iki partinin arkasında durdu. Çözüm sürecine mesafeli duran CHP ile karşı bir pozisyon takınan MHP, halktan destek görmedi.

Bölgede ise AKP ve BDP'nin hâkimiyeti bir kez daha ortaya çıktı. Mevcut parametreler dâhilinde bölgede siyasetin görülür bir gelecekte de AKP ve BDP üzerinden yürüyeceğini söylemek mümkün. Her seçimde diğer partilerin tabanları küçülüyor. Keza bölgede bu iki partiye rakip olabilecek evsafa yeni bir siyasi oluşum da ufukta görülüyor. Bu takdirde AKP ve BDP'nin daha bir süre bölge siyasetini domine etmesi beklenebilir.

Her seçimden sonra siyasal partiler için bir inşa süreci başlatır. Alınan sonuçlar gözden geçirilir, eksik ve hatalı olan yönler bulunmaya, güçlü taraflar tahkim edilmeye çalışılır. Oluşan siyasi manzarayla irtibatlı bir şekilde yeni pozisyonlar edinilir ve siyasetler üretilir. 2014 yerel seçimlerinin ardından AKP bölgede tabanını daha da genişletecek bir siyaset üretme çabasına girerken, BDP ise HDP projesiyle "Türkiyelileşme" iddiasını ve hedefini öne çıkaran bir yola girdi.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** 30 Mart Yerel Seçimleri, BDP, HDP, AK Parti, HÜDA-PAR.

## I. INTRODUCTION

What took place in Turkey on March 30, 2014 was no local election. For the country's eastern and southeastern provinces as well as the general population, the most recent elections had repercussions beyond the reasonable extent of local contests. It was in this sense that voters expressed their macro-preferences instead of their opinion of candidates, campaigns and local issues.

The December 17 operations played a crucial role in transforming the 2014 local elections into a matter of national politics, as the Gülen Movement launched an attack against the government under the pretext of corruption and bribery charges. As the government responded by identifying the allegations as part of a dirty war against the political process, all opposition parties, with the notable exception of the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), assumed that the charges indeed reflected the truth and rallied behind the effort. The public debate surrounding the December 17 operations thus turned the local elections into a vote of confidence for the AK Party government – a fact that both government officials and opposition parties acknowledged prior to the elections by gearing their campaigns toward this objective.

The local election results, according to this narrative, would have determined the ruling party's political future, as voters would either accept or reject the government's policies. As such, victory would have demonstrated the people's continued support for incumbents, while a defeat would make the case that the AK Party government, with its popular appeal in decline, should resign and lead the country to early parliamentary elections.

With its political future at stake, the AK Party entered the 2014 local elections and won an undisputed landslide victory by outperforming its opponents. Out of the country's 30 metropolitan districts (which are home to 77 percent of all registered voters), the AK Party won 18 (i.e., Istanbul, Ankara, Ordu, Samsun, Antalya, Balıkesir, Denizli, Kahramanmaraş, Kayseri, Konya, Sakarya, Malatya, Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, Kocaeli, Bursa, Trabzon and Erzurum), while the CHP captured six municipalities (İzmir, Aydın, Muğla, Tekirdağ, Eskişehir and Hatay). In response to the BDP's victories in Diyarbakır, Mardin and Van, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) won Adana, Mersin and Manisa.<sup>1</sup>

Local races in the remaining 51 cities yielded similar results as the ruling AK Party finished first in 30 districts, followed by seven municipalities for the CHP, seven municipalities for the BDP and five municipalities for the MHP. In Ağrı and Yalova, local elections will take place on June 1, 2014 in line with the Election Authority's decision to declare the original results null and void. Similar results emerged out of county elections as the AK Party won 670 races out of a total of 970. The ruling party thus added to its reputation while the opposition's campaigns proved ineffective.

For Eastern Anatolia and the Southeast, the 2014 vote represented a particularly special occasion as, for the first time since the PKK's violent campaign began in 1984, violence was notably absent from the election season thanks to the Kurdish peace process. In this sense, the March 30 local elections were arguably the most peaceful elections in the past quarter century.

In previous years, the PKK tended to declare either official or unofficial ceasefire during elections but voters and candidates in the countryside often encountered pressures from militants and security forces alike. This time around, the elections took place in a much milder context as tensions were limited to the occasional local brawl, candidates of diverse

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<sup>1</sup> Pending the Election Board's confirmation of official election results, this study employs unofficial data available on <http://secim.haberler.com/2014/>.

political backgrounds could freely organize their campaign events and voters expressed their opinions devoid of repression. Such an atmosphere alone represented a noteworthy and valuable achievement for the country.

## II. TWO GENERAL IMPLICATIONS

The 2014 local elections produced two major outcomes for Eastern Anatolia and the Southeast. First, the elections reaffirmed the regional status quo that consists of two political parties, namely the BDP and the AK Party, whose origins date back to the 2002 parliamentary elections when all center-right and center-left parties disappeared from the national political scene. Just like everywhere else, this major transformation shifted the balance of power and gradually channeled center-right and leftist voters to the AK Party and the BDP, respectively. The two-party setting became more visible after the 2004 local elections and, especially, the 2007 parliamentary vote. From that point onwards, regional politics came under the exclusive influence of these two political parties.<sup>2</sup>

The March 30 local elections arguably consolidated the two-party status quo as the AK Party won seven out of 14 provinces in Eastern Anatolia (Elazığ, Malatya, Erzincan, Erzurum, Ardahan, Muş and Bingöl), while the BDP won five (Iğdır, Tunceli, Bitlis, Van and Hakkari). Only one mayoral race, in Kars, ended with an MHP victory.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the Southeast witnessed a 5-4 split between the BDP, which claimed Diyarbakır, Batman, Siirt, Şırnak and Mardin, and the AK Party (Kilis, Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa and Adıyaman).

The distribution of Eastern Anatolian and Southeastern municipalities confirms the view that two out of four national political parties – the CHP and the MHP – have almost no influence in the area. Considering the MHP's ideological roots in Turkish nationalism, it would be somewhat understandable that the party has limited appeal in districts with a significant Kurdish population. The situation that the CHP – the main opposition party and therefore a contender for governance – finds itself in, however, raises serious questions about its popular appeal. After all, the

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed analysis on this matter, see: Vahap Coşkun, Güneydoğu ve Doğu Anadolu'da İki Partili Siyasi Yapı [The Bipartisan Political Structure of Southeastern and Eastern Anatolia], *Demokrasi Platformu*, Vol. 3, No 11, Summer 2007.

<sup>3</sup> E. N: The mayoral race in Ağrı, which was contested between the AK Party and the BDP, has been cancelled by the Elections Authority and will take place again on June 1, 2014.

main opposition party won less than 1 percent of the vote in five out of 14 Eastern Anatolian provinces and six out of nine districts in the Southeast. Meanwhile, the party's popular support exceeded 20 percent in only five out of 23 provinces in the region. Since the CHP's policies indicate its lack of interest in improving its performance in this part of the country and with no prospect of change in sight, it is safe to claim that Eastern Anatolia and the Southeast will remain split between the BDP and the AK Party.

Another key outcome of the 2014 local elections was its indication of widespread support for the Kurdish peace process, as the BDP and the AK Party – the leading advocates and facilitators of direct talks between the government and the PKK leadership – pushed their competitors out of Eastern Anatolia and the Southeast. According to a recent KONDA survey, 42 percent of all Kurds voted for the AK Party while another 39 percent opted for the BDP.<sup>4</sup> In other words, over 80 percent of the country's Kurdish voters ended up voting for either of the two parties and thereby showed their support for a peaceful resolution of the Kurdish question.

With regard to the Kurdish peace process, however, it is necessary to point out that voters in western provinces also proved amenable to the prospect of peace. The AK Party did not suffer any losses due to the peace process as its popularity among Western constituencies remained largely the same. If anything, the ruling party consolidated its power during the most recent elections. In this respect, the notion that the AK Party's nationalist-conservative base would opt for an alternative due to the government's efforts to address the Kurdish question through democratic reforms proved meaningless. The people's support for the peace process, in turn, sent a message to the AK Party and the BDP to enact the necessary legislation in order to take the talks to the next level.

The two aforementioned outcomes of the 2014 local elections – the two-party status quo and widespread support for the peace process – should form the basis of all assessments about individual political parties and municipal races in general. This study will analyze the performance of not only the AK Party and the BDP but also the Free Cause Party (HÜDA-PAR), a new contender in local races which represented one of the more interesting phenomena during the lead-up to the elections.

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<sup>4</sup> Bekir Ağırır, Güneydoğu, BDP ve Kürt Meselesi [The Southeast, the BDP and the Kurdish Question], *Hürriyet*, 21.04.2014.

### III. THE BDP

The March 30 local elections proved somewhat disappointing to the BDP as the increase in the party's popular support fell short of pre-election targets. In past years, the BDP's political predecessors had to participate in each election under a different name as the Constitutional Court regularly outlawed Kurdish political parties on the basis of transgressions against the constitutional order. Over the past quarter century, popular support for this particular strand of politics fluctuated between 4 percent and 6.5 percent on a national scale as successive parties participating in the 1994, 1999 and 2002 parliamentary elections won 4 percent, 4.7 percent and 6.5 percent of the vote, respectively. In an attempt to circumvent the 10 percent national threshold in parliamentary elections, the Kurdish political movement entered the 2007 and 2011 elections through the proxy of independent candidates. Meanwhile, successive parties won 4 percent in the 1999 local elections, 5 percent in 2004 and 5.7 percent in 2009.

The data would indicate that the 7-percent mark represents the upper limit for the Kurdish political movement as the BDP – much like its predecessors – has failed to expand its influence above this level. Prior to the 2014 local elections, therefore, the party's game plan involved receiving over 7 percent of all votes – an attempt which proved futile. To facilitate such an outcome, the BDP participated in mayoral races in Eastern Anatolia and the Southeast while the People's Democratic Party (HDP) campaigned in western provinces. If the BDP's 4.2 percent, the HDP's 1.9 percent and BDP politician Ahmet Türk's votes in Mardin (who ran as an independent due to a court decision making him ineligible to affiliate himself with any given political party) are combined, the Kurdish political movement's popular support amounted to approximately 6.2 percent in the local elections.

Although the BDP failed to break the 7 percent mark, the party managed to win a number of new districts in the region. Prior to the elections, the BDP controlled 8 municipalities (one metropolitan area and seven cities). On March 30, the party not only won the same districts once again but also emerged victorious in two new districts, increasing the number of its municipalities to 10. As such, the BDP currently controls three out of 30 metropolitan areas (Diyarbakır, Mardin and Van) as well as seven out of 81 provinces (Batman, Siirt, Mardin, Şırnak, Hakkâri, Bitlis and Iğdır) in addition to 86 out of 970 districts. "Simply put, the BDP managed to win local races in a fairly large region which is home to 15 percent of the

country's entire population and 72.6 percent of the Kurds, who constitute roughly 15 percent of the total population."<sup>5</sup>

An analysis of individual cities would generate a three-tier structure with regard to BDP votes. The first group, which consists of predominantly pro-BDP areas, includes six cities, four of which the party won with over 50 percent (55.3% in Diyarbakır, 52.4% in Mardin, 53.6% in Van and 52.1% in Batman) and another two with over 65 percent (71.1% in Şırnak and 69.3% in Hakkâri). Compared to the 2009 local elections, the party experienced a decline in its popular support in Diyarbakır (4%), Batman (3%) and Hakkari (14%) and an increase in Mardin (8%), Şırnak (7%) and Van (6%).

A comparison between the 2011 parliamentary elections and the 2014 municipal council elections would also reveal that the BDP lost 3 percent in Diyarbakır and 10 percent in Hakkari, while winning an additional 5 percent of the vote in Van. In another three cities (i.e., Batman, Şırnak and Mardin), the BDP vote experienced no significant fluctuations between 2011 and 2014.

The above-described election results suggest that the BDP's political heartland, with the notable exception of Hakkari, did not witness major changes since the 2009 local elections. In Hakkari, however, we must acknowledge that the BDP experienced a dramatic decrease in its popularity even though minor changes, positive and negative, in five cities could be accounted for by campaign strategy and candidates.

	2009 Local Elections	2009 Municipal Assembly	2011 Parliamentary	2014 Local Elections	2014 Municipal Assembly
	DTP	DTP	BDP	BDP	BDP
<b>Diyarbakır</b>	65.6	59.4	58.7	55.1	55.3
<b>Mardin</b>	36.3	44.2	52.1	52.1	52.4
<b>Van</b>	53.5	48.3	48.6	54.1	53.6
<b>Batman</b>	59.7	53.2	51.8	56.4	52.1
<b>Şırnak</b>	53.7	60.8	72.8	60.9	71.1
<b>Hakkari</b>	80.2	73.7	79.8	66.8	69.3

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

In addition to the above-listed provinces,<sup>6</sup> the BDP won mayoral races in Siirt, Tunceli and Iğdır, which the party also controlled in 2009, although it fell short of dominating these cities; while the BDP competed with the AK Party in Siirt (49-42) and the CHP in Tunceli (42-30), it had to fight off challenges from the MHP in Iğdır (44-42). While the BDP vote in Siirt only marginally differed from the 2009 results, the party significantly improved its performance in Tunceli and Iğdır, respectively, by 12 percent and 5 percent. Provided that the growth in the party's electoral support will continue, these areas are likely to become BDP strongholds in the foreseeable future.

The second group consisted of provinces where the BDP recorded a notable increase in its popular support. In certain areas where the party traditionally performed poorly, the 2014 local elections ushered in an air of optimism. A case in point was Bitlis, where the BDP moved from 34 percent in 2009 to 43.9 percent in 2014, winning the mayoral contest.

Another key electoral district for the BDP was Şanlıurfa, one of the largest provinces in the Southeast and an AK Party stronghold in past elections. In an attempt to deal a major blow to the ruling party, the BDP devoted a lot of resources and energy into campaign efforts while meeting with tribal leaders to garner support and nominating Osman Baydemir, one of the party's most popular politicians, for mayor.

The Baydemir campaign resulted in a major increase in the BDP's popular support in Şanlıurfa, although the party fell short of capturing this AK Party stronghold on March 30. Having won 10.5 percent in the mayoral race and 19.5 percent in the municipal assembly elections in 2009, the BDP received 30.5 percent of the vote in 2014. The emergence of a de facto two-party system in Şanlıurfa between the AK Party and the BDP is likely to provide fertile ground for the Kurdish political movement to expand its reach.

Meanwhile, the province of Kars represents a particularly interesting case as all four national parties enjoy almost equal popularity (28.1% voted for the MHP, 25.1% for the CHP, 25% for the AK Party and 19.3% for the BDP). Similarly, a total of seven districts within the city limits went to five different political parties in 2014. The BDP, which received 14.7 percent of

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<sup>6</sup> For the complete table, see: Cuma Çiçek, 1999'dan 2014'e Kürt Coğrafyasının Siyasi Haritası [The Political Map of the Kurdish Region from 1999 to 2014] – 3: 2014 Seçimleri: Kürt Hegemonyasının Konsolidasyonu ve Yayılışı [The 2014 Elections: Consolidating and Expanding the Kurdish Hegemony], [http://www.kurdistan24.org/2014/04/1999dan-2014e-kurt-cografyasinin-siyasi-haritasi-3/#.U1-cbVV\\_u3w](http://www.kurdistan24.org/2014/04/1999dan-2014e-kurt-cografyasinin-siyasi-haritasi-3/#.U1-cbVV_u3w)

the vote five years ago, experienced a 5 percent increase in its popular support by winning 19.3 of the vote in March 2014. According to municipal assembly election results, the BDP became the second largest party in Kars by recording a 10 point increase from 17.7 percent in 2009 to 26.3 percent in 2014.

The BDP also enjoyed a 5 point increase in its popular support in Muş both in the mayoral race and the municipal assembly elections. Having won 37.2 percent of the vote in the 2009 mayoral contest, the BDP received 40.8 percent in the most recent elections. Similarly, the party moved from 42.5 percent to 46.6 percent in the municipal assembly race. Although the BDP failed to win the mayoral race, it won the municipal assembly elections in 2009 and 2014.

In Bingöl, where the incumbent resigned from the AK Party due to disagreements over the mayoral nomination and entered the race for the Felicity Party (Saadet Partisi), the BDP had a real opportunity to expand its voter base and build on its 2009 campaign with Fırat Anlı, who became co-mayor of Diyarbakır Metro in 2014 and won an impressive 33.8 percent of the vote. Considering the AK Party's troubles with the nomination, it was possible for the BDP to capitalize on its chief opponent's problems. The election results, however, proved commentators wrong as the AK Party increased its vote from 42 percent in 2009 to 58 percent in 2014 and the BDP experienced an 8 point drop to 25.8 percent. Keeping in mind that the party won 24 percent of the vote in the 2011 parliamentary elections, it is safe to say that the BDP's popular support will remain steady between 25 to 30 percent.

The third group includes provinces where the BDP has political claims with little or no popular appeal. After all, the party makes frequent references to Kurdistan or Turkish Kurdistan, which covers most of Eastern Anatolia and the Southeast, and voices political claims about this part of the country. Despite bold statements, however, the party lagged visibly behind in a third of the 23 provinces. In this regard, it was important that the BDP won 0-5 percent in four cities (2.6% in Elazığ, 1.5% in Malatya, 0.8% in Kilis and 0.7% in Erzincan) and 5-10 percent in another four provinces (5.3% in Adıyaman, 6.2% in Gaziantep, 6.2% in Erzurum and 10.8% in Ardahan). Although the party won a handful of districts in Elazığ and Erzurum, it is unlikely that the BDP will become a major player in this part of the country anytime soon.

#### IV. THE HDP

Another important issue to address when analyzing the BDP's electoral performance is success of the People's Democratic Party (HDP), a sister party that the Kurdish political movement established in an attempt to appeal to voters across the country. The BDP and its various predecessors have traditionally been identified as Kurdish parties among Turks. In order to transform this view, Abdullah Öcalan instructed the BDP leadership to establish the HDP, which would presumably represent a broader coalition of left parties and unify leftists of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. The People's Democratic Congress (HDK), formed for this purpose, dissolved in October 2012 to establish a new political party, the HDP. In light of this development, the Kurdish political movement entered mayoral races in eastern provinces under the BDP banner while leaving the country's western provinces to the HDP.<sup>7</sup>

In doing so, the fundamental expectation was that the HDP would develop a kind of political platform that could overcome ethnically motivated identity politics and instead appeal to social groups of diverse backgrounds. The party, however, faces serious obstacles in this path. First and foremost, the various political movements that joined forces under the HDP lack a political platform that could potentially mobilize the masses. Unable to influence voters, these groups fail to help the Kurdish political movement to gain new momentum and expand its voter base.

Moreover, various groups that became part of the HDP have a radical left platform which entails a rigid ideology that often falls short of capturing social realities and offers little except harsh criticism. Such a political platform inevitably fails to impress new voters and therefore is unable to expand the reach of the Kurdish political movement.

Briefly put, it would be impossible for the Kurdish political movement to appeal to the general population by joining forces with political movements who themselves suffer from the same problem. The election results, too, confirmed this view as local races in Istanbul, Adana and Mersin – the three provinces outside Eastern Anatolia and the Southeast where the BDP won parliamentary seats in 2011 – resulted in disappointment. In Mersin, where the movement won 17.5 percent of the vote in 2009, support for the BDP dropped to 9.6 percent. Similarly, the BDP's popularity in Adana decreased from 9 percent to 7.3 percent. In Istanbul, where the HDP sought to reap the benefits of Sırrı Süreyya Önder's celebrity status in the

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<sup>7</sup> E. N: In April 2014, the BDP has joined the HDP.

hopes of breaking the 10 percent mark, the Kurdish political movement won a meager 4.8 percent, which was short of impressive considering that the party won 4.6 percent in the previous local elections.

The election results therefore indicate that entering local races under the HDP banner offered little, if any, to the BDP in the 2014 local elections. On March 30, it became clear that the HDP received support from BDP loyalist and failed to lure away voters from the party's competitors. If anything, a portion of BDP voters turned away from the party especially in Adana and Mersin due to their disagreements with the leadership over the HDP's participation in the elections. In light of this fact, it is safe to assume that the BDP would have performed considerably better in a number of districts including Istanbul, Adana and Mersin had it entered the race directly instead of using a proxy political party.

The election results thus required the Kurdish political movement to reconsider the merits of their HDP project and, by extension, reform the BDP's political platform to attract new voters. Instead, BDP parliamentarians announced that they would join the HDP, which emerged as the primary representative of the Kurdish political movement into the Turkish Parliament. Whether this move will benefit or harm the movement's interests remains to be seen but there have already been dissenting voices from within the PKK (i.e., Cemil Bayık<sup>8</sup>) and the BDP (i.e., Altan Tan<sup>9</sup>) about the ill-fated HDP affair.

The newly-established HDP's ability to reach out to new constituencies and emerge as the country's main opposition party inevitably depends on two factors: first, the party will have to develop a new rhetoric that successfully captures real-life issues; and second, it needs to represent all social groups not just on paper but in practice. Unfortunately, the HDP's current membership and political platform indicate that the possibility of meeting such objectives remains distant.

## V. THE AK PARTY

One of the most popular pre-election speculations was that the AK Party would not run strong campaigns in Eastern Anatolia and the Southeast due to a lack of interest in local races in these regions. Some went as far as to claim that the ruling party had abandoned the country's eastern provinces

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<sup>8</sup> [http://www.kurdistan24.org/2014/04/cemil-bayik-hdp-bdp-tartismalarini-yorumladi/#.U2DUwFV\\_u3w](http://www.kurdistan24.org/2014/04/cemil-bayik-hdp-bdp-tartismalarini-yorumladi/#.U2DUwFV_u3w)

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.cnnturk.com/haber/turkiye/bdpli-altan-tandan-hdp-elestirisi>.

to the BDP. Such claims, of course, proved inaccurate during the campaign season as the AK Party candidates worked hard in the East and elsewhere in the country. Just to make the point that the party did indeed care about local races there, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan addressed huge crowds in Van and Diyarbakır despite losing his voice on the campaign trail.

Election results, too, proved rumors wrong as the party received over 50 percent of the vote in nine cities (61.7% in Urfa, 62.9% in Malatya, 58.4% in Bingöl, 56.5% in Adiyaman, 54.7% in Gaziantep, 50.8% in Kilis, 55.8% in Elazığ, 54.7% in Erzincan and 58.8% in Erzurum), while breaking the 40 percent mark in another four provinces (48.5% in Muş, 40.6% in Bitlis, 40.2% in Van and 42% in Siirt). The ruling party's electoral support was over 30 percent in three districts (35% in Diyarbakır, 31% in Batman and 34.3% in Ardahan) and over 20 percent in another four cities (25% in Kars, 27.2% in Mardin, 29.3% in Şırnak and 26.1% in Hakkari). The AK Party received less than 20 percent of the vote in only two cities (9.3% in Tunceli and 10.9% in Iğdır).

To put the election results in perspective, the AK Party won 11 out of 22 cities (Şanlıurfa, Gaziantep, Muş, Adiyaman, Bingöl, Kilis, Malatya, Elazığ, Erzincan, Erzurum and Ardahan), while finishing second in another eight districts (Diyarbakır, Mardin, Batman, Bitlis, Hakkâri, Şırnak, Van and Siirt). In Iğdır, Tunceli and Kars, the party's mayoral candidates finished third.

At least two factors account for this significant achievement by the ruling party. The leading reason, without a doubt, was the Kurdish peace process. In the 2011 parliamentary elections, the AK Party's nationalistic campaign was an impediment on its popular appeal. The peace process, which has been going on for over a year, made the campaign season easier for AK Party candidates as they found themselves in a better position to speak to the people as representatives of a key political party and ask citizens to support peace. As such, the Kurdish peace process was an absolute trump card for the AK Party in the 2014 local elections.

Another key development was the AK Party government's recent troubles with the Gülen Movement, which convinced the party's supporters that the Gülenists were indeed a threat to their party and therefore led them to treat the 2014 vote as a battle for political survival. In light of this factor, AK Party supporters decided not to voice their disagreement with some of the party's policies and/or candidates and instead rallied behind the leadership.

## VI. THE HÜDA-PAR

The hegemony of the AK Party and the BDP in the country's eastern and southeastern provinces led dissatisfied social groups to look for alternatives and gave rise to the Azadi Initiative and the HÜDA-PAR. The main premise of these organizations was that the AK Party and the BDP failed to address popular demands for the recognition of Kurdish identity and Islamic sentiments, respectively. As such, the new movements aimed to represent a viable alternative to the regional two-party system by simultaneously emphasizing their Islamic and Kurdish credentials. While the HÜDA-PAR ended up participating in the 2014 local elections, the Azadi Initiative remained a non-governmental organization.

The HÜDA-PAR's decision to form a political party was especially important due to at least two distinct reasons. First and foremost, the movement's participation in the political contest contributed to the process of normalization in the country's politics. Considering that all organizations seeking to expand their influence within the domain of legitimate politics must adapt to existing rules and realities on the ground, such efforts to win the people's support inevitably requires movements to recognize popular demands, develop necessary policies to meet voters' expectations, cooperate with other social groups and, for this purpose, revisit and revise itself.

Another benefit of the HÜDA-PAR's participation in the local elections was that the party would be able to size itself up against competing movements and clearly identify its popular appeal. Until political movements evolve into political parties and participate in free and fair elections, the only available data about its impact on the ground stems from rumors and speculations that either exaggerate or underestimate the movement's popularity among the general population. Participation in the political process, on the other hand, offers clarity; the political party's advocates turn into real people who are identifiable and therefore can be, if necessary, held accountable for their actions and policies. Similarly, elections establish the movement's real power beyond all doubt. Playing the game of politics thus puts urban legends of all sorts to rest.

In this sense, how the HÜDA-PAR would perform on election day represented one of the most interesting questions during the lead-up to March 30. After all, participating in the local elections was a rather risky decision by the recently-established political party; failure to meet pre-election objectives would have led to second thoughts about the movement's self-proclaimed popular appeal and political influence. Having entered the race under such circumstances, the HÜDA-PAR succeeded in reaching the 5 percent mark in only two provinces, namely Batman (8.1%) and Bitlis (5.9%). In another seven districts, the party received less than three percent

of the vote (3.1% in Bingöl, 2.6% in Şırnak, 2.3% in Mardin, 1.4% in Muş, 1.2% in Siirt, 0.8% in Şanlıurfa and 0.7% in Van). The HÜDA-PAR also won 4.6 percent of the vote in Diyarbakır.

A significant detail about the election results was that the party did not participate in local races across the Southeast and Eastern Anatolia. Instead, it concentrated on provinces where the HÜDA-PAR campaign could rely on local organizations and would presumably find relatively more popular support. Despite such considerations, however, it would be inaccurate to claim that the party proved successful in the 2014 local elections. According to Cuma Çiçek, at least two factors influenced the party's performance. Primarily, this radical brand of political Islam has a limited audience among Kurds, whose notion of religion and specifically Islam rests on cultural, social and economic elements as opposed to political identity: "Political Islam, which regard the Islamic faith as the centerpiece of a political and administrative system receives limited interest from the Kurdish community. Radical Islam, which seeks to establish a Shari'a-based order, in turn has a much smaller audience. As such, the HÜDA-PAR's performance in the 2014 local elections marked the limits of this radical type of political Islam."<sup>10</sup>

Secondly, the election results reflected the Kurds' negative view of Hizbullah especially due to their memories of the organization's actions in the 1990s: "It is possible to claim that, despite objections from the HÜDA-PAR itself, the Kurdish community had a deep understanding of this political party and therefore knew that it succeeded the Hizbullah. [The Kurds' familiarity with the movement] represented one of the main reasons for the party's poor performance. The Hizbullah's actions in the 1990s led the majority of the Kurds to develop a negative view of this community. It is important to note that such opinions prevail not only among the BDP's voter base but also among most AK Party supporters."<sup>11</sup>

Faruk Ekmekçi, in response, posits that it would be "cruel" and "hasty" to conclude that the HÜDA-PAR has been a failure, primarily because the March 30 local elections represented a first attempt for the party

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<sup>10</sup> Cuma Çiçek, 1991'den 2014'e Kürt Coğrafyasının Siyasi Haritası [The Political Map of the Kurdish Region from 1999 to 2014] - 8, [http://www.kurdistan24.org/2014/04/1991dan-2014e-kurt-cografyasinin-siyasi-haritasi-7-2/#.U2DyBVV\\_u3z](http://www.kurdistan24.org/2014/04/1991dan-2014e-kurt-cografyasinin-siyasi-haritasi-7-2/#.U2DyBVV_u3z)

<sup>11</sup> Cuma Çiçek, 1991'den 2014'e Kürt Coğrafyasının Siyasi Haritası [The Political Map of the Kurdish Region from 1999 to 2014] - 8, [http://www.kurdistan24.org/2014/04/1991dan-2014e-kurt-cografyasinin-siyasi-haritasi-7-2/#.U2DyBVV\\_u3z](http://www.kurdistan24.org/2014/04/1991dan-2014e-kurt-cografyasinin-siyasi-haritasi-7-2/#.U2DyBVV_u3z)

and religious Kurds went to the polls against the backdrop of assaults against the AK Party government and, in particular, the peace process. In light of this, Ekmekçi adds, it would be better to wait until the 2019 local elections to get a more accurate reading of the HÜDA-PAR's actual and future popularity when "the elections will take place under more ordinary circumstances and the extent and the benefits of the peace process will be more obvious."<sup>12</sup>

This competing view deserves some merit. Surely enough, the HÜDA-PAR's political future closely depends on Turkey's economic and democratic performance as well as the popular appeal of both the AK Party and the BDP. However, in the absence of any major transformation and considering that the HÜDA-PAR is unlikely to garner extraordinary support anytime soon, it is possible to predict that the status quo will continue without interruption.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Political parties tend to engage in a constructive process after each election season to reflect on their performance, identify problems and shortcomings, and build on their strengths. Depending on the broader political landscape, they revisit some parts of their platforms and seek to develop new policies. In the same spirit, the aftermath of the 2014 local elections will involve a considerable amount of self-reflection and realignment among political parties from across the political spectrum.

Empirical evidence would suggest that the AK Party and the HDP will continue to dominate the region's political scene as all remaining parties experience a downward trend in their popular support. Meanwhile, the lack of any emerging alternatives to the regional two-party system further adds to the resilience of the status quo.

New additions to the BDP's sphere of influence will impact the party's platform in at least two ways. First, as a mainstream political party in the region, the BDP's discourse is likely to grow softer and more inclusive. Winning over new voter blocs, consolidating the party's power among loyal constituents and thereby broadening its appeal will understandably require a discourse that welcomes individuals from diverse backgrounds. The key point, in this sense, will be the influence of the BDP's transformation into

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<sup>12</sup> Faruk Ekmekçi, Doğunun Seçim Karnesi [An Electoral Analysis of the East], <http://fekmekci.wordpress.com/2014/04/15/dogunun-secim-karnesi/>

the HDP over such local dynamics considering the latter party's vulnerability to ideological rigidity.

Second, greater influence at the local level will inevitably push the BDP away from ideology and toward a *politics of service*. After all, additional power entails new responsibilities that the party must shoulder in order to address various demands and meet the people's expectations. It made perfect sense for the BDP's predecessors to pursue political goals on the basis of identity politics 15 years ago. After all, the political mainstream at the time did not recognize a significant part of identity-related demands and the lack of representatives at the national legislature prevented such demands from penetrating the mainstream. Under these circumstances, the BDP's municipalities served a dual purpose of handling local affairs and voicing popular demands. Today, however, the Kurds' various identity-related demands have already been addressed by the central government, which a capable group of BDP parliamentarians expose to other pressing issues on a regular basis. Given the situation at hand, local governments affiliated with the party have to prioritize local problems over national objectives and improve their services – a challenge that several members of the BDP leadership have already acknowledged. For instance, after the election, Selahattin Demirtaş and Gültan Kışanak both announced that the party would concentrate its efforts on improving infrastructure in the countryside. Reflecting the same set of priorities, the newly-elected co-mayors of Diyarbakır opted for “Time for Service” as their motto for their post-election ads.