

# Mass protests erupt in Turkey after election of Kurdish mayor annulled

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In Van, one of eastern Turkey’s largest Kurdish cities, the Provincial Election Board dismissed the election on Sunday as mayor of Abdullah Zeydan, the candidate of the Kurdish nationalist People’s Equality and Democracy Party (DEM), with 55 percent of the vote.

Faced with mass protests since Tuesday, the Supreme Electoral Board (YSK), which evaluated the DEM Party’s objection yesterday, backed down and returned the mandate to Zeydan. Tens of thousands of people celebrated the decision in Van.

The Justice Ministry and the Supreme Electoral Board (YSK) had recognized Zeydan’s eligibility and candidacy, but the Provincial Electoral Board initially gave the mayoralty to Abdulahat Arvas, of President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an’s Justice and Development Party (AKP). Arvas had come second with 27 percent of the vote.

Protests began at noon on Tuesday in Van and continued into the night. Police fired tear gas and water cannon, while protesters responded with rocks and fireworks. Shopkeepers also closed their shutters to protest the decision by the electoral body. The governorates of Van and Bitlis announced a 15-day ban on protests and demonstrations, which are a constitutional right, as well as on entering and leaving the city. Many people were reportedly arrested in protests and house raids.

Tens of thousands of people marched after the DEM Party executive met in the city yesterday, while police once again attacked the demonstrators. Protests against the anti-democratic decision to abolish the election result spread to many cities, including Istanbul. Videos posted online apparently show AKP provincial Chairman Zeydin Kaya and his relatives shooting long-barreled firearms at protesters in Hakkari.

The Van Provincial Election Board’s anti-democratic decision came after the AKP suffered a serious defeat in Sunday’s elections. The Republican People’s Party (CHP) placed first with 37.7 percent of the vote, while the AKP, which lost millions of votes in the last elections in 2023, failed to come first in an election for the first time since 2002. It took 35.5 percent.

Erdo?an declared after the election that his government would continue the program of social attacks despite the discontent of the working class reflected in the results. He also signaled new military operations against Kurdish nationalist militias in Syria and Iraq, claiming, “We will not allow the creation of a ‘terror land’ beyond our southern borders.”

The Erdo?an government has long been waiting for a green light from Washington for a new ground assault against the People’s Protection Units (YPG), the main US proxy force in Syria. Since 2016, Ankara’s military operations to prevent the formation of a Kurdish state in Syria have been accompanied by the dismissal of elected Kurdish deputies and mayors at home.

The Peoples’ Democracy Party (HDP, now renamed the DEM Party) won 65 municipalities and placed first in the Kurdish provinces in the 2019 local elections, but the Interior Ministry appointed “trustees” to replace elected mayors in 48 of these municipalities. The DEM Party reportedly won back 37 of these 48 municipalities on Sunday, bringing its total number of municipalities to 78.

Before the government intervened in Van, the DEM Party was prevented from winning the elections by bringing soldiers and policemen en masse to vote in many places on Sunday. According to the Mesopotamia Agency, in at least 12 places the election results were changed in favor of the AKP in this way. The DEM Party objected to this undemocratic practice.

Zeydan, the winning candidate in Van on Sunday, was elected as an HDP deputy in the 2015 elections and arrested on November 4, 2016, along with 12 other HDP deputies, due to CHP support for a constitutional amendment to allow Erdoğan to lift immunity from prosecution. He was convicted of making “terrorist propaganda” and was in jail until January 7, 2022.

According to his lawyer, Zeydan regained his electoral rights last year: “We asked the court that issued the verdict against Mr. Zeydan to grant him his deprived rights. This request was dated March 21, 2023. A few days later, on April 4, 2023, the Diyarbakır 5th High Court accepted our request and ordered the return of Zeydan’s full rights.”

In his statement, Zeydan added: “I applied to the court a year ago for the return of the rights I was deprived of due to my conviction and the court accepted it. It is not enough for the court to make this decision and it has to be final. This decision has become final ... A year has passed and in this process I applied to the Provincial Election Board with the entire court decision and the final note. The YSK examined all the documents and said that there is no obstacle to my eligibility to be elected.”

The DEM Party stated that the Justice Ministry objected to Zeydan’s candidacy at 4:55 p.m. on Friday, March 29, two days before the elections: “The relevant prosecutor’s office sent to the court that had issued a final ruling to restore the divested electoral rights an administrative objection letter, which had the nature of an order.”

It added: “On the same day, the court revoked the final decision on the restitution of divested rights and rejected the application for the restitution of divested rights. Before the decision was finalized, i.e., before the right of objection and appeal was exercised, it immediately notified the YSK.”

In a statement on Monday, the DEM Party declared: “This decision is the continuation of the political coup process initiated with the intervention of the government. The decision taken by the majority of the members of the Van Provincial Election Board is illegal, illegitimate and a decision not to recognize the will of the people.” The DEM filed an appeal with the YSK yesterday.

Former HDP leader Selahattin Demirtaş, who was arrested along with Zeydan on the same anti-

democratic pretext and is still imprisoned, asked Erdoğan, the main person behind the Van decision, to solve the problem.

He said: “I would like to address you, Mr. President. On the election night, you said that you would respect the will of the people and that you understood the message. Unfortunately, what happened in Van is not in line with your message. This is not the way to respect the will of the people. Neither the people nor God will accept it.”

He continued: “We expect you to stop this state of affairs from the beginning. We expect you, as the president of the country, to put an end to this illegal attempt that frustrates the will to solve all problems through dialog and mutual trust.”

Özgür Özel, the leader of the CHP, which won the local elections, also peddled illusions in Erdoğan’s empty rhetoric about defending democratic rights. Özel said, “If [Erdoğan] speaks like this there and then, when there is a metropolitan mayor who received three times as many votes as his opponent, they try to trap him and commit the shame of giving the mandate to the second runner-up, all his words become null and void.”

In fact, these bankrupt appeals to Erdoğan, who has imposed a police-state regime for many years with the CHP’s help, underscore one central political reality: No faction of the Turkish bourgeoisie can defend democratic rights. Defending these rights depends on the unification and mass mobilization of Turkish and Kurdish workers against the ruling class and imperialism on the basis of an international socialist program.



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