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# Media Bias, Kurdish Repression, and the Dismantling of Local Democracy in Turkey

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**Abstract:**

In this article, we explore how heightened repression and the consolidation of power by the executive branch in Turkey have allowed Erdoğan to take steps that further undermine the country's democratic evolution. We argue that Erdoğan's increasing pressure on the media, along with the state of emergency following the 2016 coup attempt, facilitated the repression of Kurdish municipalities. Focusing on the targeting of HDP mayors by the central government, we describe the political process leading to the purge of elected mayors and the normalization of the trustee system (kayyım) at the local level. We then conduct a content analysis of news articles to empirically examine potential bias in Turkish news outlets' reporting. Our findings demonstrate differences in the content and framing of articles published by national and international news outlets concerning HDP co-mayors' events and the takeover of their municipalities. We find that Turkish news outlets overwhelmingly promote the AKP party line, rarely provide balanced reporting, and propagate a 'Kurds as terrorists' frame.

*Keywords:* Turkish politics, local elections, Kurds in Turkey, media, political repression

*Word Count:* 5,996

## **Media Bias, Kurdish Repression, and the Dismantling of Local Democracy in Turkey**

On April 23, 2020, Turkey celebrated the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its Grand National Assembly (TBMM), a body instrumental in the creation of the Turkish state – forged from the remains of the Ottoman Empire – and that continues to symbolize the Turkish national identity Atatürk sought to instill in the aftermath of the First World War. Over the past century, Turkey has struggled to establish itself as a fully-fledged democracy. While it successfully transitioned from a one-party state to multi-party elections in the late 1940s, democratic governance and the peaceful transition of political power remained elusive. Indeed, since the 1960s, Turkey has witnessed several military interventions that purportedly sought to quell violence and socio-political unrest caused by both left-wing (worker and student) and right-wing (nationalist and Islamist) movements.

The AKP's rise to power in 2002 marked a new period in Turkey's democratic evolution. However, as the party established itself as a hegemonic power, its achievements and commitment to democratization dissipated. While it did shift the military from the center of Turkish politics to the sidelines, as well as taking critical steps toward recognizing and accommodating different religious and ethnic identities, the historical weaknesses in Turkey's democracy have not only re-emerged, but intensified over time (Öniş, 2013). Chief among these are the lack of free press, media and expression, state repression of Kurdish citizens, and the politicization of the judicial system. According to a 2019 International Press Institute report (IPI, 2019a), Turkey has been the undisputed global leader in jailing journalists for over a decade, in part because Turkish officials and courts conflate critical journalism with support for terrorist groups. The AKP's removal of judges, itself harmful to the Turkish rule of law, increased after the attempted coup in 2016 (Cockburn, 2016) and contributed to the significant number of journalists behind bars and facing prosecution.

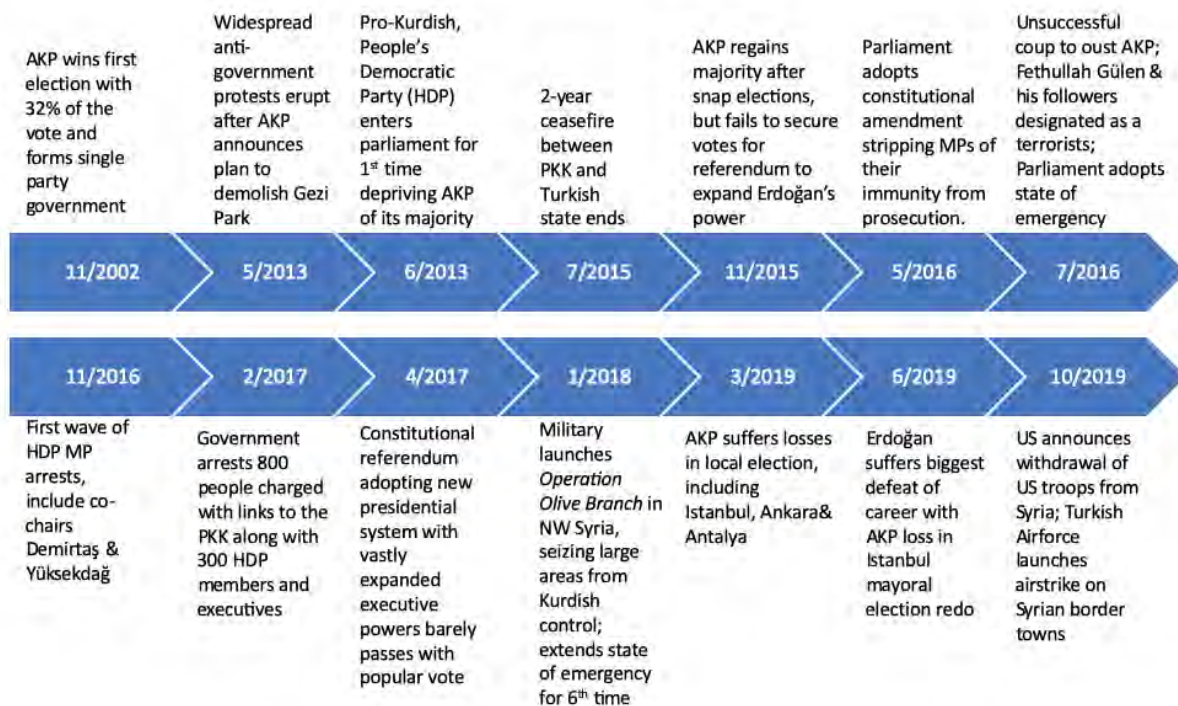
This article addresses how imbalanced reporting and pro-government media messaging regarding the central government's removal of Halkların Demokratik Partisi (HDP) mayors and takeover of these municipalities facilitated these anti-democratic actions, contributed to the normalization of this form of Kurdish repression, and further undermined Turkey's democratic evolution. We conduct a content analysis of news articles to empirically examine potential bias in Turkish news outlets' reporting. Our findings demonstrate substantial differences in the content and framing of articles published by national and international news outlets regarding HDP co-mayors and the takeover of their municipalities. In particular, we found that, compared to international news outlets, Turkish outlets overwhelmingly promoted the AKP party line, rarely provided balance

reporting, and propagated a ‘Kurds as terrorists’ framing. As we discuss in the concluding section of this article, this biased reporting may not only stoke nationalist sentiment and deepening sectarian divisions in Turkey, but also reinforces Erdoğan’s efforts to centralize power and undermine local democracy.

### *The Rise of the AKP*

It is difficult to understand the impetus for Erdoğan’s escalating consolidation of power and heightened campaign of repression without considering the broader context of the AKP and recent politics in Turkey. Using the timeline below, we briefly review the events that enabled Erdoğan and his government to chip away at Turkey’s free press and transfer nearly all political power to himself while also giving him license to violate Kurdish citizens’ constitutional rights without suffering legal or political consequences.

**Figure 1: Timeline of Key Events in Turkish Politics Under the AKP**



The AKP emerged on Turkey’s political landscape with strong support and great optimism. In the early years, its platform was based on fighting the three “Ys”: yoksulluk (poverty), yolsuzluk (corruption), and yasaklar (bans on civil and individual liberties) (Marschall, Aydogan, and Bulut, 2016). Under Erdoğan’s leadership, the AKP also supported Turkish integration into the global

economy and full EU membership (Öniş, 2013). After several years of relatively unprecedented support, the AKP suffered its first losses in the 2009 local elections - mostly in response to the economic recession – but it was not until 2015 that the party failed to hold onto its majority in the Turkish National Assembly. This was partly due to the AKP’s crumbling alliance with Fethullah Gülen and the revelation of corruption scandals among top AKP government officials. The Gezi Park protests and the burgeoning anti-government social movement also played significant roles. However, the emergence in 2012 of the HDP, the People’s Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi), is also part of the story.

Founded as a democratic socialist and pro-Kurdish party, the HDP’s liberal platform – promoting environmentalism, gender equality, and democracy – offered an attractive alternative to the more nationalist and center-right parties in the Turkish parliament (Bettoni, 2015; Koontz, 2020). And attract voters it did. In the June 2015 elections, the HDP overcame the 10 percent election threshold, taking 80 seats in the TBMM and effectively blocking the AKP from keeping its majority. The HDP’s presence in parliament prevented the AKP from unilaterally passing Erdoğan’s controversial reform that sought to turn Turkey into a strong presidential system (Hoffman, 2019).<sup>1</sup> It would take another couple of years, a much less open political and media environment, and a sweeping crackdown on the HDP before Erdoğan would secure this victory.

### ***Political Repression and the Targeting of Kurds and the HDP***

The HDP, especially its co-chair Selahattin Demirtaş, were outspoken critics of a presidential system that would give Erdoğan control over all executive branch institutions and sweeping power over the judiciary. To counter this criticism, Erdoğan began to court the anti-Kurdish nationalist right. This coincided with an escalating conflict in Syria, where Syrian Kurds (YPG) were playing an increasingly important role fighting ISIS and establishing themselves as an essential ally of the US. Thus, just as Kurds in southeastern Turkey were becoming more invested in the cause and fate of their Syrian Kurdish counterparts, Erdoğan was refusing to provide aid to the Syrian Kurds and distancing himself from the PKK peace talks (Worth, 2016). Almost immediately after the June 2015 elections, the ceasefire with the PKK was ended. Both sides revived their decades-long conflict, and urban guerilla warfare ensued. Since then, more than 4,000 people have been killed, sections of many Kurdish towns and cities have been decimated, and over 350,000 civilians have been displaced (Hoffman, 2019;

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<sup>1</sup> For more on Turkey’s presidential system, see Makovsky (2017).

International Crisis Group, Nd). The significant decline in independent media outlets and journalists, along with increased state censorship and the implementation of widespread military curfews in the Kurdish region of the country, meant that the violence, particularly the government's role in it, was largely hidden from public view (EuroMed Rights, 2016; UNHCR, 2017).

Throughout this period, Erdoğan remained steadfast in his anti-Kurdish nationalist platform, declaring in early 2016 that “Turkey has no Kurdish problem, but a terror problem” (Dogan, 2016). In May, he succeeded in passing a constitutional amendment that stripped MPs of their immunity from prosecution. With the help of the state of emergency that he imposed after the coup attempt in July, he began targeting HDP Members of Parliament (MPs). Between November 2016 and April 2017, 19 HDP MPs and some 300 HDP executives were arrested, some of them multiple times, on charges of alleged links with the PKK or for participating in protests against Operation Euphrates Shield.<sup>2</sup> Both Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ, co-leaders of HDP, were jailed. Yüksekdağ was stripped of her seat in parliament and her party membership after an earlier terrorism propaganda conviction was upheld. Meanwhile, Demirtaş was sentenced to nearly five years in prison for a speech he had made at a Newroz celebration in 2013 (HRW, 2017). Since the imposition of the state of emergency in July 2016, many Kurds have also been jailed on dubious terrorism charges.

### ***The Scope and Effect of Erdoğan's Trustee (Kayyım) System***

The Turkish government has used the state of emergency as an instrument of authoritarian repression against not only the press and individual rights and freedoms, but also judicial and electoral institutions. Particularly noteworthy has been the disenfranchisement of millions of voters via Decree Law No. 674, which was implemented under the state of emergency. This law amended an existing municipal law (No. 5393) authorizing the government to replace elected municipal officials who were dismissed or arrested for membership or ties to terrorist organizations with their own appointed trustees (kayyım). It also gave provincial governors the authority to seize municipal properties and dismiss municipal employees. The Erdoğan administration has made frequent use of this law. Between September 2016 and February 2018, mayors in nearly all DBP-governed municipalities (HDP's sister-party in local governments at the time), including four metropolitan and ten provincial municipalities

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<sup>2</sup> This cross-border operation marked Turkey's first ground intervention in Syria since the start of the Syrian crisis in 2011. The stated goals of the military intervention were to create an Islamic State-free zone, to ensure greater security along Turkey's border with Syria, and to prevent the Syrian Kurds (YPG) from linking the Kurdish cities of Kobani and Afrin, which would create a continuous corridor of territory under YPG control running along Turkey's border (Gurcan, 2019).

in the Kurdish region, were removed and replaced with trustees. Ninety-three co-mayors and hundreds more municipal assembly members were imprisoned for varying terms (Özsoy, 2019).<sup>3</sup> In the run-up to the March 2019 municipal elections, 50 Kurdish co-mayors were still in prison, 29 of whom had been under pre-trial arrest for about two years, and 15 of whom had been sentenced by the courts (HDP, 2019).

The appointment of trustees had several deleterious effects on the HDP and Turkey’s Kurdish citizens. For starters, the removal of HDP mayors not only undermined a fundamental democratic right of Kurdish citizens, but also decimated the co-mayor system—an institution created by the HDP to ensure the equal representation of women in local government (HDP Kadın Meclisi, 2019). Additionally, based on audits conducted in municipalities retaken by the HDP after the 2019 local elections, there is evidence of widespread financial mismanagement, corruption, and waste that put many of the municipalities governed by the AKP appointed trustees into severe debt. According to reports, the budgets of many of these municipalities were pilfered, and municipal funds diverted to pay for lavish dinners, gifts, and excessive personal consumption by trustees (HDP, 2019)

As the March 2019 local elections approached, the state of emergency was no longer in place, but the targeting of HDP co-mayors continued. This time, the government blocked 14 winning HDP co-mayors from taking office, allowing second place (AKP) candidates in six municipalities and appointed AKP trustees in the other eight municipalities to take office instead (see Table 1).<sup>4</sup> Between August and December, co-mayors in an additional 18 municipalities were removed and replaced with trustees, bringing the total number of municipalities where HDP mayors had been deposed to 31 (out of a total of 53). Finally, amidst the Coronavirus outbreak, an additional eight HDP mayors were dismissed from office in March of 2020 (Duvar/Reuters, 2020.)

**Table 1: Municipalities Where AKP Trustees Replaced 2019 HDP Elected Co-Mayors**

Province	District	Date Kayyım Installed	HDP 2019 Vote Share	AKP 2019 Vote Share
Diyarbakır	Baglar*	3/22/19	70.3	25.5
Erzurum	Tekman*	3/22/19	48.5	46.5
Kars	Dagpınar*	3/22/19	54.2	44.4
Van	Caldıran*	3/22/19	53	43.4
Van	Edremit*	3/22/19	53.8	41.8

<sup>3</sup> These figures vary slightly by source. According to the HDP, it was 95 of the 102 DBP mayoralities (HDP 2019); whereas Özsoy (2019) counts 93 of 99.

<sup>4</sup> Note, in Siirt it appears that the HDP co-mayors were eventually allowed to take office.



Van	Tusba*	3/22/19	52.9	39.4
Diyarbakır	Diyarbakır Metro Municipality	8/19/19	62.9	55.1
Mardin	Mardin Metro Municipality	8/19/19	56.2	38.5
Van	Van Metro Municipality	8/19/19	53.8	40.5
Diyarbakır	Kulp	9/13/19	50	40.1
Siirt	Siirt Merkez**		48.4	46
Erzurum	Karayazi	9/17/19	61.8	31.8
Diyarbakır	Bismil	10/15/19	71.4	25.8
Diyarbakır	Kayapınar	10/15/19	66.3	28.6
Diyarbakır	Kocakoy	10/15/19	61.7	36.5
Hakkari	Hakkari Merkez	10/15/19	60	32.2
Hakkari	Yuksekoa	10/15/19	66.2	29.9
Mardin	Nusaybin	10/15/19	77.4	18.8
Van	Ercis	10/15/19	49.7	46.2
Sırnak	Cizre	10/29/19	77	17.6
Van	Saray	11/1/19	61.4	36.5
Mardin	Kiziltepe	11/4/19	70.5	25.6
Van	Ipekyolu	11/8/19	54.5	40.6
Diyarbakır	Hazro	11/13/19	52.6	45.5
Diyarbakır	Yenisehir	11/13/19	62.3	32.6
Sırnak	Idil	11/13/19	73.8	16.8
Tunceli	Akpınar	11/13/19	35.9	16.6
Mardin	Derik	11/15/19	69.3	28.1
Mardin	Mazidagi	11/15/19	56.4	37
Mardin	Savur	11/15/19	48	41.7
Sanlıurfa	Suruc	11/15/19	59.4	34.7
Diyarbakır	Sur	12/20/19	60.8	36.7
Batman	Batman Merkez	3/23/20	66	28.6
Bitlis	Guroymak	3/23/20	41.9	28.7
Diyarbakır	Egil	3/23/20	51.4	43.9
Diyarbakır	Ergani	3/23/20	55.9	39.5
Diyarbakır	Lice	3/23/20	77.7	19.8
Diyarbakır	Silvan	3/23/20	75.7	22.2

Igdir	Halfeli	3/23/20	47.7	37.8
Siirt	Gokcebag	3/23/20	38.6	34.1

\* Co-Mayor never took office; \*\* Co-Mayor reinstated. *Source:* Human Rights Association (2019). Election results from: <https://www.yenisafak.com/en/yerel-secim-2019/secim-sonuclari>

### ***The Vicious Cycle of Media Repression***

Media freedom in Turkey had already been steadily deteriorating under the AKP; however, post-coup, new restrictions like bans on YouTube, Twitter, and Wikipedia were introduced. In recent years, the government has also detained hundreds of journalists, and forcefully taken over television stations and newspapers, transferring ownership to businessmen close to the government. Today, the vast majority of newspapers, TV channels, and internet portals are dubbed as *Yandaş Medya* (“Partisan Media”) or *Havuz Medyası* (“Pool Media”) and engage in pro-government reporting and/or propaganda (Akser, 2018). Several media groups receive preferential treatment in exchange for AKP-friendly editorial policies. On the other hand, media not friendly to AKP are threatened with intimidation, inspections, and fines. In 2016, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights’ report noted that the violations to freedom of expression in Turkey created a distinct chilling effect, manifesting in self-censorship among both the remaining media and ordinary citizens (Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, 2017).

We argue that this control over the media has increased Erdoğan’s ability to use repression to further centralize power in his own hands while simultaneously allowing him to pursue his political interests relatively unencumbered. It may be hard for those living in more mature democracies to imagine how the slide to authoritarianism happened. How could the AKP government remove so many duly elected officials and so egregiously disenfranchise so many voters? That these voters represent the most salient ethnic minority in Turkey makes these actions all the more unconscionable. Where were the Turkish peoples’ objections and outrage? Why has there been so little apparent protest and dissent?

While the absence of an independent judiciary has undermined the rule of law in Turkey, the lack of independent media has allowed the ruling AKP to exert enormous control over information and messaging. Concerning the trustee system and removal of so many HDP elected officials, it is very likely that the average Turk either knows very little or finds just cause in the AKP’s actions. With over 90 percent of media outlets in Turkey now under the control of government-friendly businesses (Akser, 2018), neo-conservative, pro-nationalist, and most importantly, pro-AKP content and

perspectives dominate the Turkish news. Most observers believe that balanced reporting is extremely hard to find in this highly controlled and censored media environment. But is this claim true?

We addressed the question of imbalanced reporting and pro-government media messaging in Turkey by examining news coverage related to the central government’s removal of HDP co-mayors and its takeover of these municipalities. Specifically, we conducted a content analysis of articles covering these events in a sample of Turkish and international news outlets. International news outlets were selected based on the extent of their regular Turkish news coverage, which increased the likelihood that they would carry news stories about the removal of HDP elected officials. To select the Turkish news outlets, we started with the most widely circulated newspapers in the country and narrowed the list based on readership and orientation. Given that most media in Turkey have close ties to the AKP, only two of the top ten most widely read newspapers in Turkey are considered independent or oppositional: *Sözcü* and *Korkusuz*. We chose *Sözcü* as its readership is more than four times that of *Korkusuz*. While all of the remaining, widely read, Turkish newspapers are known to be friendly to the government (*yandaş havuz medyası*), there is variation in their pro-government slant. We, therefore, chose one outlet to represent a more moderately pro-AKP orientation (*Milliyet*), one that is considered average (*Sabah*), and one that is more extreme (*YeniŞafak*). Table 2 provides a summary of the news outlets and articles included in our sample.<sup>5</sup>

**Table 2: Summary of News Outlets and Articles for Content Analysis**

Newspaper Name	Newspaper Type	Twitter Followers	Sales	Number of articles
Al Jazeera	International	6.2M	NA	3
BBC News	International	28M	NA	1
Reuters	International	21.9M	NA	2
Duvar.English	International	16K	NA	8
Bianet	International	8.8K	NA	23
Ahval*	International	21.5K	NA	31
Sözcü	National	2.4M	249,504	24
Milliyet	National	2.6M	127,236	45
Sabah	National	2M	249,504	61
YeniŞafak	National	28.4K	102,726	49

<sup>5</sup> See the Appendix for additional information about news outlets and coding for the content analysis.

\* Blocked in Turkey by The Turkish Telecommunications Authority (BTK). Data on readership for Turkish news outlets based on newspaper sales from 12/30/2019-1/5/2020 from: <http://gazetetirajlari.com/HaftalikTirajlar.aspx>.

Based on keyword searches, we collected all articles published between June and December 2019 from the websites of our sample of international and Turkish news outlets,<sup>6</sup> yielding a total of 247 articles. For each news article, we coded: the facts that were presented, including the charges against the HDP officials who were removed from office; the legal/judicial issues surrounding their cases; the status of the accused; the actions taken by the government in removing, detaining, arresting, and jailing the HDP officials; and any other objective information reported on the event. We focused on these facts because they cover the fundamentals of the purported criminal activity. The inclusion of these facts in journalistic accounts presents potential evidence to the reader and indicates vigorous reporting. While the exclusion of these facts may mean that evidence is not yet available, it may also signify that evidence is unimportant or unnecessary, particularly as a justification for actions taken by the government. In short, media reports that include the essential facts and evidence of the story allow a free and independent media to keep the population informed and hold leaders to account.

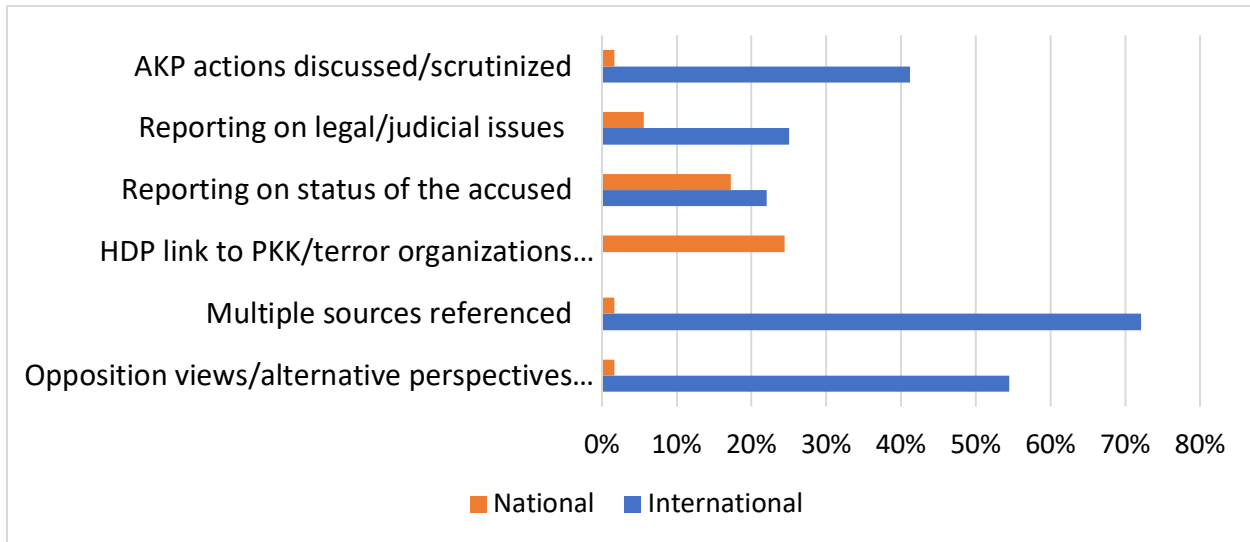
We also coded each article according how the event was framed—namely, whether it explicitly linked the HDP or HDP officials to the PKK and/or terrorist organizations or activities, and whether or not the article presented more than one perspective or viewpoint. This allowed us to measure the degree to which each article provided balanced reporting or simply restated Erdoğan’s or other AKP officials’ positions. Finally, we coded the number of sources each article referenced (e.g., government documents, international reports, local officials, etc.) to measure whether and how much evidence was presented in each article’s reporting the news.

Using the data collected from our content analysis, we compared national and international media outlet coverage and framing of news about the Turkish government’s removal of HDP co-mayors and use of the trustee system to govern HDP municipalities. Overall, while articles published in both sets of news outlets reported the charges and status of the accused in a similar manner, there were significant differences across the two types of news outlets regarding nearly all other aspects of content and framing. Figure 2 includes a summary of the findings from our content analysis.

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<sup>6</sup> All international news outlets were in English, while all Turkish outlets were Turkish language media.

**Figure 2: Content and Framing of News Articles**



For starters, the majority of news articles (54%) appearing in international outlets relied on multiple sources in their reporting (e.g., reports; quotes from observers, AKP and non-AKP officials). Additionally, nearly three-quarters of these articles presented a detailed account of the events and the broader context, including multiple perspectives. For example, some cited critical developments in other places, such as the European Court of Human Rights’ (ECHR) review of the jailing of HDP co-chair Demirtaş. In contrast, most articles from national news sources were very brief and did little more than report the charges and removal of the HDP official. Very few of these articles (2%) either included multiple sources or presented different points of view. When additional information was provided, it focused on linking the HDP to the PKK in an effort to underscore a terrorist connection between the two organizations. References to other charges and accusations against the HDP official in question were common. For example, an article about Filiz Buluttekin – HDP co-mayor of Sur – not only stated that Buluttekin was arrested for “being a member of an armed terrorist organization,” but also mentioned that she had previously been sentenced to a 10-month prison sentence for “making propaganda for a terrorist organization,” attended the funeral of the terrorist who martyred Eren Bülbül, was accused of participating in actions that turned into terrorist propaganda, and received instructions from terrorists (*YeniŞafak*, 2019).

In contrast, none of the international news stories affirmed the link between HDP and PKK or implied that HDP is itself a terrorist organization. Instead, they often referred to charges as links to “terrorism” (putting the word terrorism in quotations) or explicitly stated that the HDP denies links to “terrorism” or the PKK. In addition, international news outlets were more likely to report on legal

and judicial issues surrounding the removal of the elected HDP officials—for example, whether a trial date had been set or what type of evidence was given for the charges. Articles in international news outlets were also much more likely to discuss other actions taken by the AKP in association with the removal or arrest of HDP co-mayors. For example, the fact that more than 300 people were arrested for social media posts that criticized Turkey’s offensive into northern Syria in January 2018, or that the removal of HDP co-mayors was part of a broader crackdown by Ankara on the “Kurdish political movement.” International news outlets were also more likely to raise questions about the legality or constitutionality of the actions of the AKP and the possibility that democratic rights of HDP officials and constituents had been violated. This kind of reporting was scarce in the news articles published in Turkish media outlets.

Overall, our findings confirm substantial differences in the content and framing of news stories about events related to HDP co-mayors and the takeover of their municipalities by national and international news outlets. Our content analysis empirically demonstrates that the Turkish news outlets overwhelmingly promote the government’s political line and rarely provide balanced reporting. This is not surprising given the lack of independent media and the real threat journalists in Turkey face. After all, Turkey leads all other countries when it comes to jailed journalists—over 135 in 2019 (IPI, 2019b). While most jailed journalists face criminal prosecutions based on charges of terrorism-related offenses, data presented in the International Press Institute’s report showed that, in 81 percent of the cases it monitored, the evidence cited by the government was journalists’ published articles, photographs, or social media posts—none of which supported the charges against them. In this environment, it is easy to see how self-censorship has become increasingly necessary for survival. In conjunction with media bias, the effect of this censorship is not just that Turks lose access to essential information, but that they no longer realize what they are missing or that they are missing anything at all. As Suzy Hansen – an American journalist who spent more than a decade in Turkey – observed, when this happens, Turks gradually cease to know who they are as a people (Hansen, 2019).

### ***Looking Back and Looking Ahead***

Over the past decade, Turkey’s political power has been centralized in the executive office, and the country has seen a gradual erosion of the rule of law. Though never wholly independent institutions in Turkey, the media and judiciary are now firmly under the president’s control. In what increasingly looks like a return to palace rule, Erdoğan has now begun to dismantle local democracy. Through the trustee system, he has undermined the political representation of the HDP, silenced Kurdish voices,

and portrayed Turkey's largest minority group as an enemy of the state. For the most part, the Turkish media have ranged from merely condoning these policies of active repression to outwardly propagating them. As findings from our content analysis reveal, Turkish news outlets overwhelmingly promote the AKP party line, rarely provide balanced reporting, and promote a 'Kurds as terrorists' frame. These actions likely sow discord and fear among Kurds, stoke nationalist sentiment, and deepen sectarian divisions and distrust in Turkey. While there are no longitudinal public opinion data available to empirically test these causal propositions, data from a large-scale, nationally representative survey conducted in 2015 reveal Turks' strong resentment toward Kurdish demands relating to their linguistic, cultural, and constitutional rights (Karakoç and Özen, Forthcoming). It is hard to imagine how these attitudes could have improved over the past five years.

This year, as Turkey celebrates the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its democracy, is an auspicious time to reflect on how the slide to authoritarianism happens and why it is so essential to protect democratic institutions from forces that seek to subvert them for their own personal or political gain. Of course, it is impossible to know what lies ahead for Turkey. While the country has often been held up as a model for other emerging democracies, it has also witnessed (and mostly overcome) a series of profound political challenges that have posed serious threats to its democratization project. The implementation of the trustee system after the 2016 coup attempt and continued reliance upon this policy after the March 2019 elections normalizes the disenfranchisement of Kurds and imperils local democracy in Turkey.

While these developments clearly give ample reason for a pessimistic view of Turkey's democratization project, the outcome of the March 2019 local elections (and the repeat election for Istanbul's mayor in June) were viewed by many as a hopeful development. After 25 years of uninterrupted electoral victories, many see AKP's losses in Istanbul and Ankara, Turkey's two largest and most important political and financial centers, as a real turning point. Indeed, as Taşpınar (2019) notes, Erdoğan's attempt to turn these local elections into a referendum on national security by stirring up anti-Kurdish nationalism and even labeling his opponents as "sympathizers of terrorism" failed. Perhaps the glass is still not half full, but maybe Istanbul mayoral candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu's campaign slogan, "Her şey çok güzel olacak" (Everything will be fine), will prove to be true – not just for him, but for Turkish local democracy as a whole.

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## Appendix: Content Analysis Methodology

We collected all news articles from our sample of news outlets that reported on the trustee system, the removal of or detaining/arresting/jailing of HDP mayors, council members, MPs, or other party members. Our coding sheet includes more dimensions than we reported here, but we coded each dimension as 1 if the news article included keywords or text that affirmed the presence of the content, frame, or characteristic in question. The list below represents a sample of the fields that we coded:

- References to PKK as a terror organization
- Links HDP official to a terror organization
- Cites reason for arrest, removal, or detention of HDP official as terrorism or association with terrorists
- Raises questions about the legality of removal/arrest of HDP official
- Mentions actions of AKP/government as violating existing laws, constitution or will of the people
- Mentions court decisions regarding the accused HDP officials
- Mentions personal/family details of HDP official

### *Additional information about news outlets included in the sample:*

Duvar English: Launched in 2016, this outlet is the English language counterpart to the Turkish language *Gazete Duvar*. As Hansen (2019) notes, many of its editors, columnists, and journalists had either been fired by or pushed out of Turkish newspapers and universities. From the beginning, it aspired to be a free, independent, and critical source of information and opinion.

Bianet: *Bianet* was established in 2000 by journalist Nadire Mater, former representative of Reporters Without Borders, and left-wing activist Ertuğrul Kürkçü. According to Wikipedia, *Bianet* is an independent Turkish press agency based in Istanbul. It is one of the earliest internet-based alternative news portals in Turkey. Its news is often based on reports of human rights abuses on Turkish citizens.

Ahval: Launched in November 2017, this online news website primarily reports on Turkey and provides content in Turkish, English, and Arabic. It is based in Cyprus and believed by some to be

subsidized by the UAE. *Abval* was blocked in Turkey by The Turkish Telecommunications Authority (BTK) (Turkey's Internet watchdog) based on unsubstantiated claims that it has links to the US-based Turkish cleric, Fethullah Gülen.

*Sözcü*: The secular daily is known for its Kemalist stance, a school of thought that supports the founder of the Turkish Republic Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his take on secularism. It is one of the few oppositional media outlets in Turkey. In 2018, it topped the list of articles censored by the government, with 204. In December 2019, seven journalists from *Sözcü* were sentenced to prison for allegedly aiding the Gülen organization, an accusation many believed was ridiculous given the *Sözcü*'s secular, Kemalist reputation.

*Milliyet*: The prestigious and long-established daily newspaper owned by the Dogan Media Group was sold in 2011 to the Demirören Group, which has extensive dealings with the government. Since then, *Milliyet* has become less critical and neutral and more pro-government, firing many of its most prominent journalists and columnists – including Ece Temelkuran, Nuray Mert, Hasan Cemal, and Can Dündar – for writing articles or taking stances critical of the government.

*Sabah*: In 2007, a state agency accused its previous owners of fraud and seized the paper. It was subsequently sold to Çalık Holding, whose CEO at the time, Berat Albayrak, is Erdoğan's son-in-law. Today, *Sabah* is identified as the most influential pro-government outlet (Tziarras, 2015). In fact, some of Erdoğan's advisers even moonlight as columnists (Weise, 2018).

*YeniŞafak*: *YeniŞafak* is owned by the pro-government Albayrak Group and is known as the leading conservative daily in Turkey. It has been placed among the most pro-AKP newspapers and is viewed by some as an exclusively Erdoğanist outlet with an aggressive stance toward all forms of opposition (Tugal, 2014).