How Authoritarians Win When They Lose

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What happens when authoritarian populists lose elections, even when the playing field is tilted in their favor? When Turkey's long-ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) started performing poorly at the polls, it set about undoing the results. Since 2016, the ruling party has dismissed more than 150 democratically elected mayors—mostly in Kurdish-majority cities and on suspect terrorism-related charges—and replaced them with state-appointed trustees called *kayyums*. With these power grabs, the AKP not only captures the political offices it lost but also expands patronage networks, erodes opposition support, and makes challenging its dominance harder than ever.

The adoption of this strategy marks a new phase in Turkey's authoritarianism. Before a failed coup attempt in July 2016, kayyums existed in civil law only as a way to establish guardianship over a dead or missing person's property or, beginning in the 2000s, to manage firms in crisis and resolve financial and administrative stalemates. Using the temporary emergency power approved by parliament to eliminate putschists after the coup attempt, the AKP regime amended the municipality law by executive decree, giving itself the authority to replace elected officials with kayyums. But the regime still holds this power today, along with a host of others it gained when a 2017 constitutional referendum transformed the 94-year-old parliamentary system into a presidential one and made numerous temporary emergency measures permanent.

Elections were pivotal in Turkey's democratization, and they have been key to its backsliding under the leadership of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who first came to power as prime minister in 2003. Little more than a decade later, the country once described as a model

democracy in the Middle East had become a competitive authoritarian regime, holding regular elections but flouting democratic norms. As the AKP's electoral dominance began to wane beginning in 2015, the regime increasingly turned to postelection mechanisms to manage or reverse election results—for example, repeating lost elections, as happened after the 2019 Istanbul mayoral vote (though to no avail), and criminalizing elected politicians and replacing them with kayyums, which has been a more widespread, systematic, and largely overlooked practice.

We see postelection capture, exemplified by kayyum appointments, as a new authoritarian survival strategy. While elections are indispensable to autocrats' claims of legitimacy, fully competitive contests are risky, and regime candidates sometimes lose even despite their disproportionate advantages.[1] Yet victory at the polls does not always guarantee that an opposition-party candidate will get to assume (or stay in) office. If able, an authoritarian regime might reverse a result—thereby keeping or gaining control of an office it lost while keeping the veneer of democracy intact by following supposedly legal procedures and continuing to hold elections. This is how Erdoğan has solved the so-called election dilemma.

Understanding how the strategy works also sheds light on how authoritarians use and depend on state infrastructure for regime durability.[2] Kayyum appointments, for example, allow the regime both to hold elections and to make them meaningless. The AKP does so by wielding the state's coercive power against opposition parties and their supporters. Having government-appointed municipal leaders in place removes obstacles that would otherwise prevent the regime from expanding local patronage networks. Finally, dismissing and imprisoning Kurdish mayors on terrorism-related charges diminishes the role of politics and helps to preserve the ruling coalition by deepening polarization along ethnic, ideological, or religious divisions in society, thereby undermining the formation of a stronger prodemocratic coalition.

Undoing Democracy

Turkey's democracy has been shaped by local elections. Erdoğan's rise to power is the product of a series of successful electoral bids, beginning with his election as mayor of Istanbul in 1994 and then as leader of the AKP in 2002. The rise of Erdoğan—once jailed for offending the country's secular military leaders by reciting a controversial poem in the city of Siirt, which is now kayyum-ruled—hinged on antiestablishment discourse that emphasized the primacy of elected representatives over appointed state officials and the need to rein in the power of the military and state bureaucracy. With broad popular support, his AKP governments undersigned many legal and administrative changes that empowered elected government. Voters signaled their approval of the party's

rule and sweeping changes in sixteen elections—six parliamentary, four local, and three presidential—and three referendums.

During the AKP's first decade in power (2002–13), elections were largely free and fair.[3] But over time, the regime tightened its grip on the media, the courts, and the election authority. During the 2014 local elections, irregularities including blackouts that interrupted vote counting in hotly contested areas triggered fears of fraud, leading to the formation of the country's first domestic civilian election-monitoring body, Oy ve Ötesi. In parliamentary elections the following year, the AKP for the first time lost its majority in the then 550-member Grand National Assembly, while the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) took 13 percent of the vote, surpassing the 10 percent threshold to enter parliament. This elevated the HDP from a regional formation to a national political player and the country's largest opposition party after the Republican People's Party (CHP). In response to the AKP's first defeat at the polls, Erdoğan abruptly ended coalition negotiations to form a government and called for a new election. In the "repeat elections'' of November 2015, the AKP restored its electoral majority by joining forces with the Nationalist Action Party (MHP). The regime then launched its first of several attempts to eliminate the post of prime minister and move to a presidential system.

The AKP's electoral dominance derives largely from its political pragmatism and ability to form strategic coalitions with unlikely partners. For example, the party drafted the HDP to mediate peace negotiations (2013–15) with the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The AKP's attempts to reach a peace deal included some (short-lived) concessions to the Kurdish population and the promise of amnesty for several militants,[4] making the party's future alliance with the ultranationalist MHP all the more improbable.

A year after the peace process collapsed and devastating urban battles between the PKK and the military came "a gift from God," in Erdoğan's words: the July 2016 attempted military coup. The failed putsch, which was linked to the Gülenists, a clandestine Islamic network and former AKP ally, gave the president reason to declare a state of emergency, hold a constitutional referendum to remake the key institutions of government, and punish dissidents. Although the numbers are disputed and continue to rise, the government reportedly purged more than 150,000 state personnel, military cadres, academics, and journalists.

It was in this context that the AKP also dismissed 95 of 102 democratically elected Kurdish mayors in 2016 and 2017. And since 2016, the HDP's nine members of parliament, including its then co-chair and 2014 presidential candidate Selahattin Demirtaş, have been in prison. The removal of HDP mayors was a significant setback for the party, but it entered the 2019 local elections believing that rewinning them would end the kayyum period. Although the HDP managed to regain control of many municipalities in the predominantly Kurdish cities[5] of

eastern and southeastern Turkey and even managed to eke out a win in Kars, a northeastern border city, the party had significant losses (see Figure).[6] Conversely, the AKP, despite its overall national decline, increased its vote share in the region significantly. It won in three kayyum-ruled former HDP strongholds—Bitlis, Ağrı, and Şırnak— and in a number of districts that it had previously lost to the HDP.[7] How did kayyums help the party to claim new areas of influence, and why did the forced removal of democratically elected mayors actually strengthen the AKP's support in some cities? Why, in essence, has this strategy been effective in perpetuating the authoritarianism of Turkey's ruling party?

Elections, Coercion, and Clientelism

Authoritarian control and resilience depends not only on how skillfully authoritarian leaders and parties win or manage elections but also on how masterfully the autocratic regime wields state power to manage, avoid, or resolve crises in its favor.[8] The AKP regime uses the kayyum process to 1) coerce rivals by criminalizing elected officials, 2) expand patronage by taking over municipalities, and 3) undermine the opposition's ability to form alternative, antiauthoritarian electoral coalitions.

Coercing rivals. The state's coercive power is central to autocratic strategies for managing or overturning opposition electoral gains. But coercion is not a straightforward process; it involves multiple state institutions and ambiguous legal processes that are open to abuse by political authority. Turkey amended its 2005 municipal law in 2016 by executive decree to allow the Interior Ministry to suspend mayors who are under judicial investigation—often for political activities protected by the constitution but sometimes also for tenuous terror-related allegations—before any trial or court decision. And in cases where there is actually an indictment, it is often based on hazy evidence such as the testimony of "secret witnesses," making it impossible for the defense to challenge the claims.

Understanding how kayyums delegitimize and coerce the opposition requires a closer look at the individual records of dismissed mayors. Ayhan Bilgen of the HDP, co-mayor of Kars, was removed from office and arrested in late September 2020, eighteen months after the 2019 local elections. Bilgen was detained (along with 82 other HDP mayors) on charges related to the 2014 protests over Turkey's failure to intervene during the Islamic State's siege of Kobane, a Kurdish city in northwest Syria on the Turkish border. Yet Bilgen and other HDP politicians had already spent seven months in pretrial detention. And not only did a local criminal court ultimately acquit Bilgen of inciting violence during the protests,[9] but the Constitutional Court ruled in December 2017 that

the state had unlawfully detained him and violated his rights. Nonetheless, the government launched a new investigation into Bilgen's involvement in these same protests.

Bilgen is but one example. In August 2019, just a few months after the elections, the Interior Ministry removed the mayors of Diyarbakır, Van, and Mardin for alleged assistance to or membership in the outlawed PKK, voiding about half of some four-million votes cast by citizens for mayors and city councils.[10] According to Human Rights Watch, the indictments contained "no compelling evidence of criminal activity, let alone activity that could reasonably be argued to amount to participation in violent or deadly acts, logistical support for violent acts, or incitement to violence."[11] Echoing similar concerns, the European Parliament called on Turkey "to reinstate all mayors and other elected officials."[12] Even before the most recent spate of mayoral arrests, Turkey's misuse of municipal law was on Europe's radar: The 2017 Venice Commission Report of the Council of Europe recommended that Turkey restore the authority of city councils to elect a replacement in the event of a mayor's dismissal. The Council of Europe also urged Turkey to ensure that the arrests of elected local representatives adhered to domestic law and to define "terrorism" in a manner consistent with international norms. Similarly, in 2020 the European Court of Human Rights questioned the legal foundation of the dismissals.[13] But international criticism has only validated the AKP's populist discourse in the eyes of its supporters and reinforced its coalition with the ultranationalist MHP.

The kayyum policy and criminalization of the Kurdish opposition mark a shift in the AKP's approach to the deadly Kurdish conflict that began in 1984. In 2002, the party lifted the emergency rule that had been in place for 23 years in the Kurdish region. This was followed by AKP-led Kurdish reforms and eventually a peace process with the PKK. But the peace process was short-lived. The AKP reestablished a strong hand in the region, incrementally imposing a wide range of policies that included increasing the number of security forces and compounds and suppressing HDP politicians and activists.[14]

The AKP's expanding political control of the judiciary enables the criminalization of the HDP. Since 2007, the government has been altering both the number and terms of judicial and prosecutorial appointments as well as the authority to form and dissolve judicial panels. In the aftermath of the 2016 failed coup, the government sacked almost a third of the country's judges and quickly packed the courts with young justices. Even the progovernment head of Turkey's Bar Association remarked in 2019 that the average level of experience of the country's corps of 14,000 judges had fallen to just two and a half years.[15] Erdoğan's appointment of so many judges, including Constitutional Court judges, further undermines the courts' independence. Moreover, in politically contentious cases, such as those of Kurdish mayors, the government can

reshuffle judicial panels and transfer cases from one city to another, disrupting the whole process. This happened during the trial of Diyarbakır mayor Gültan Kışanak, who was dismissed in 2016—the chief judge was replaced four times, and each time Kışanak's lawyers had to restart their entire defense.[16]

Competitive authoritarian regimes do not use coercion directly but create a framework of legality for its use and a sense of urgency to justify it. Kayyum appointments are a prime example of such a pattern. Although PKK presence in Turkey has plummeted in recent years, AKP policies treat it as an imminent threat, turning social and political issues into security issues and calling for the expansion of emergency measures. Turning Kurdish demands into a security matter allows the regime to treat the opposition as an existential threat and serves as the justification for ousting Kurdish mayors, whom the regime alleges have connections to the PKK. The AKP presents the criminalization of these mayors as an extension of its fight against the armed insurgency and thus as a way of protecting both people and politics. Faced with a tradeoff, a population scarred by conflict has largely tolerated and in some cases even endorsed the dismissals of HDP politicians rather than risk further violence and instability.

The common perception, cultivated by the regime, that the HDP is linked to terrorism despite its public repudiation of violence prevents the party from playing a critical role in the opposition bloc. Affiliation with the HDP is potentially damaging and could result in repression and stigmatization. Moreover, the removal and replacement of elected mayors with kayyums after two consecutive local elections has left HDP supporters feeling that elections are futile. These voters have few choices: remain loyal to the party and risk political and economic marginalization, disengage from politics and lose representation, support one of the newly established parties with uncertain prospects, or abandon the HDP for the AKP in exchange for much-needed resources.

Mobilizing and expanding patronage. The kayyum is a tool in Erdoğan's carrot-and-stick approach to politics in the Kurdish region. Removing and replacing elected officials not only weakens the opposition but also allows the government to grow and localize its patronage networks.[17] The systematic removal of HDP politicians along with expanded opportunities for AKP supporters turns state-party patronage into what we call *forced clientelism* in one of the country's most economically stressed regions.

A multifaceted patronage system fueled by easy access to credit in the international market and large infrastructure construction projects has been a pillar of AKP power and helped it to simultaneously serve both the business class and the poor. The AKP's economic policies and megaprojects have generated wealth mainly for progovernment busi-

ness groups, however. To protect its patronage relations, the party has changed the public-procurement law 198 times while shielding decision-making processes from auditing. AKP projects have created jobs but not lasting economic solutions or economic security. The party has there-fore launched various social-protection programs over the years, giving it a strong base of support among the urban poor. Still, the AKP's failure to boost local economies in south-eastern cities contributes to its poor performance in municipal races. Indeed, the kayyum appointments came on the heels of Turkey's eco-nomic freefall—by 2020, its GDP per capita had fallen to US$8,538 (a more than $3,000 drop in five years), unemployment had soared to 14 percent, and the Turkish lira had lost more than half its value. Kayyum-appointed cities were among the worst hit by the crisis, reporting over 30 percent unemployment and the least diversified economies.

> *Competitive authoritarian regimes do not use coercion directly but create a framework of legality for its use and a sense of urgency to justify it.*

Local governments play a political and economic role in patronage politics and have been indispensable to the AKP's clientelism. In addi-tion to funds allocated from the central government, municipalities gen-erate their own revenues—taxes and fees, permits, business contracts, jobs, and services. The municipal law limits spending on personnel to 30 percent of the budget; therefore, municipalities must often contract services from the private sector.[18] More important, municipalities can establish municipal economic enterprises to provide services. These lo-cal government enterprises act like private firms and avoid public au-diting while providing many jobs that the municipality can control. In 2014, the Diyarbakır municipality was the largest employer in the city, providing around three-thousand jobs, three times more than the city's largest company.[19] Deteriorating economic conditions only increased the importance of such enterprises and local governments as sources of patronage.

The kayyums are often former or current governors (the highest-ranking state-appointed local officials), and thus they blur the boundar-ies between local and state government. Their assumption of office en-ables the regime to claim the powers of municipalities and their projects, from infrastructure development and cultural activities to social aid. In other words, removing elected HDP mayors has turned the AKP into the primary source of employment, business, and social support.

Noncompetitive, clientelist management of property development has been a key driver of political patronage. In the southeast's undiver-sified economy, construction is the main source of business contracts, jobs, and housing. Since 2016, when street battles between the PKK and

security forces in Şırnak severely damaged many homes in the city, the Mass Housing Administration (TOKI) has built more than six-thousand housing units.[20] The AKP's 2018 report indicated striking growth and diversity of state-sponsored projects in kayyum-controlled areas that touched every aspect of citizens' lives, including housing units (10,000), trade centers (61), schools (35), sports centers (22), mosques (13), public service centers (2), a health center, and a community center.[21] These projects are changing urban landscapes and labor markets with new but precarious employment for locals, and are also aimed at building confidence in the AKP's ability to deliver results.

Urban populations in HDP strongholds have been shifting and growing rapidly with the mass influx of internal migrants and refugees (especially from Syria) fleeing violence and poverty, making infrastructure and housing developments especially strong AKP bargaining chips. Kayyum-facilitated housing projects range from luxury villas to post-disaster apartments, thereby providing affordable options for people of different means, including state-subsidized housing with long-term mortgages. This is especially important for low- and middle-income groups in a region with limited access to conventional bank loans. TOKI projects are also a major source of jobs for local companies, making the agency an important tool of AKP patronage and the party's key leverage in HDP strongholds during the 2019 elections.

Kayyum rule also helps to circumvent opposition to contentious projects. The Sur Renewal project in Diyarbakır, the country's largest Kurdish-majority city, was launched in 2009 by two municipalities, Metropolitan and Sur, run by the HDP's predecessors and Turkey's Ministry for Environment and Urbanization.[22] The municipalities secured protections for the community in the project's terms. But the PKK and military clashed on the streets of Sur in 2015, and the following year the Ministry took emergency control of the area, now deemed "risky" and in need of urgent urban renewal. By then, HDP mayors had been removed, leaving no one to mediate on behalf of local interests or defend the protections negotiated at the outset.[23] Instead, and despite local opposition, the Diyarbakır kayyum facilitated the central government's land-appropriation order and reconstruction project, which led to permanent displacement of many residents, many of whom were poor.

The kayyum process relies on effective state power but ironically weakens that power by eliminating its neutrality and bypassing legally mandated municipal operations and systems of accountability. The state's own auditing institution, the Supreme Court of Public Accounts, has reported many irregularities in cities run by kayyums, raising questions about their impartiality, transparency, and accountability. Diyarbakır Municipality, for example, has frequently violated procurement law with "bargaining-based" distribution of contracts, excessive personnel expenses, and use of unqualified vendors. Court reports also

indicate that some kayyums withhold legally mandated funds from smaller HDP-run district municipalities within their cities, hamstringing the opposition's ability to serve constituents.[24] Likewise, reports on kayyum-controlled Şırnak note the municipality's failure to register its properties and transactions with other state institutions such as the Directorate of State Highways. Free of the accountability and any local opposition that could curb excessive clientelism, kayyum-run municipalities have become instrumental in increasing AKP support in predominantly Kurdish cities.

The kayyum system also serves as the interface between the AKP's national-security policies and its local economic programs. It does so by using allegations of terrorism to capture HDP-run municipalities, which in turn helps the party to expand its clientelist management of the economy in opposition strongholds. This is also part of a rhetorical strategy that marries national-security discourse with local patronage activities; hence, kayyum-led projects are often presented as reconstruction works necessitated by terrorist destruction in battle-scarred localities.

In such a context, what option is left for vulnerable citizens in kayyum-run cities except to support the AKP? The party has left them no obvious alternative path to political expression without risking political persecution and economic marginalization. The AKP's unprecedented electoral success in some kayyum-appointed municipalities shows that the impact of forcefully removing elected leaders can be substantial. Furthermore, kayyum projects such as road construction and urban landscaping, though criticized for being largely cosmetic and symbolic, give locals a sense of normalcy while also signaling the AKP government's commitment to service delivery in return for electoral support.[25] The party's electoral gains in the Kurdish region in 2019, despite the disenfranchisement of many, may be a sign that a credible commitment to the delivery of services is enough to secure victory at the polls—a trend seen in other countries where patronage dominates politics.

Fragmenting the opposition. Accounts of authoritarian resilience often highlight the organizational or ideological weaknesses of the opposition and thus their electoral limitations. Yet the AKP's ousting of elected opposition mayors suggests that Turkey's authoritarian regime stays in power not because of the inability of opposition parties to win elections but because of the AKP's carrot-and-stick politics. The kayyum epitomizes a dual strategy of coercion and patronage to maintain power, and the impact of this strategy is neither temporary nor limited to elections. Kayyum appointments enhance the AKP's polarization politics, particularly by associating the second largest opposition party in the most recent parliamentary elections with terrorism, which helps to stall the formation of a stronger counter-authoritarian coalition that includes the HDP.

FIGURE—MUNICIPALITIES WON BY THE HDP
IN LOCAL ELECTIONS, 2014 VS. 2019
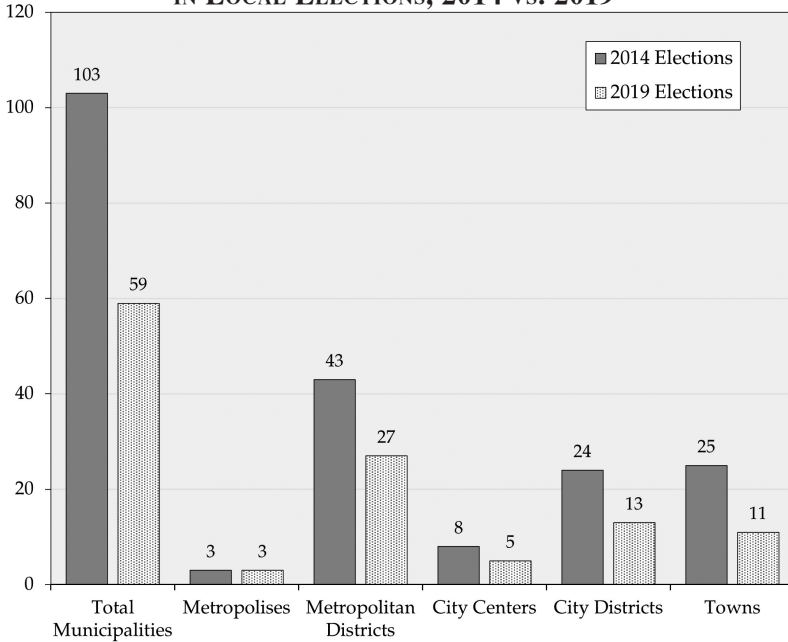
Source: The Ministry of Interior, 23 November 2020; Supreme Election Council of Turkey.
Note: The reports of HDP, which ran as the Peace and Democracy Party in the 2014 local elections, indicate 102 and 65 mayoral positions were won by the party in the 2014 and 2019 elections, respectively.

A survey of local election results after the first wave of kayyum appointments in 2016 shows that the AKP significantly increased its vote share in kayyum-appointed areas, including the three HDP strongholds of Şırnak, Bitlis, and Ağrı. The shift in certain areas can be explained by the increased presence in the region of security and state personnel, who tend to vote for the AKP and MHP, and in others by the HDP's internal decision making and nomination process, which did not always field its most popular candidates. Yet none of these explanations fully accounts for the overall results. The kayyum system seems to have played a big role in the vote shift. A district-level comparison of election results (see the Figure) shows that since the first wave of kayyum appointments, the AKP has increased its vote share in the region, won in several cities, and made inroads in other areas where it had less power.

The 2019 local election results suggest that the AKP's kayyum practice has altered the electoral profile of many predominantly Kurdish cities, with important implications for the party's electoral math and polarization politics. In Turkey's new presidential system, President Erdoğan needs either a majority of the popular vote or 301 seats in the now 600-seat parliament to remain in power. Any viable electoral challenge to the

AKP's authoritarian grip would need to include the HDP. Recent election results and polls show that despite having 13 million party members, AKP support is dwindling and now hovers below 30 percent of the electorate. With the current electoral arithmetic, no party could achieve a majority in parliament without an election coalition or alliance. In advance of the 2023 election, therefore, Erdoğan must work to keep the opposition divided, in large part by continuing to delegitimize the HDP (such as with the attempt to shut down the party in June 2021), but also by trying to attract broader support—in particular, from Kurdish voters, among whom the AKP remains the second most popular party.

The impact on politics of the AKP's takeover of HDP municipalities, however, goes beyond electoral math. Although criminalizing the HDP aims at and has at least partly succeeded in diminishing its appeal to Kurdish voters and potential opposition allies, the strategy has had two other troubling effects: First, pushing the HDP out of the domain of legal politics has undermined innovations that could strengthen democracy, such as the party's co-mayorship model. Since 2014, mayorships under the HDP have been jointly held by one man and one woman, increasing the number of women in local government. This is important in Turkey, where politics is heavily male dominated—just 3 percent of mayors were women in 2019, and the country ranked an abysmal 114 of 156 countries on the World Economic Forum's gender-gap subindex for political empowerment in 2021 (down from 96 in 2006).[26] The party also challenged traditional top-down political decision-making, for example, by holding 188 community meetings in 2014 and involving more than eleven-thousand citizens in the development of Diyarbakır municipality's strategic planning.

Second, the kayyum appointments effectively pulled the reins on important HDP efforts to depolarize politics. Since 2014, the party's strategy—dubbed "Turkey-ization," due to its goal of transforming the HDP from a Kurdish-identity–based provincial party into a national party of the democratic left—aimed to represent and unite the country's marginalized groups, regardless of gender, ethnicity, or religion. The party even expanded its agenda to include defending Turkish Cypriots' rights, an issue typically monopolized by nationalists. For example, after the 2019 municipal elections, the new HDP co-mayors of the multiethnic city of Kars crafted a range of policies that were embraced by a divided city council which included members of the ultranationalist MHP. Balanced budget and transparency initiatives, especially, brought together disparate interests and ideologies in a way that could have served as a municipal model for countering the AKP's polarizing authoritarian agenda. The co-mayors' removal and replacement with a kayyum, however, ended all this.

The HDP's electoral success and its postelection reversal illustrate Turkey's democratic bottleneck. The party's successful bid to become more than just an ethnic or regional formation and the new practices, such as co-leadership, that it embraced represent a significant shift in

Turkey's political landscape and prove that the HDP can navigate the country's ethnic (Kurdish versus Turkish) and religious (secular versus Islamic) fault lines. The replacement of elected HDP officials therefore does more than harm the party; it smothers opportunities for depolarization and democratic renewal.

Winning in Defeat

The AKP's management of its local electoral losses exemplifies the "subtle and sophisticated" measures that Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way warned against in their 2020 *Journal of Democracy* essay, "The New Competitive Authoritarianism." The practice of kayyum appointments, part of the AKP's shrewd strategy to stay in power indefinitely, highlights the significance of postelection capture in achieving authoritarian durability. The legitimacy of the Erdoğan regime depends on regularly held elections, in which the AKP deploys a range of strategies and resources to ensure that it prevails. But still it sometimes loses. With the removal and replacement of its winning opponents with kayyums, however, the AKP turns election losses into double victories—it controls those political offices and all the resources that come with them while steering support away from the opposition and seriously diminishing its future prospects.

Local politics played an important role in Turkey's democratic transformation, as small or fringe parties gained national prominence by successfully running municipalities. The best-known examples of this are Erdoğan himself and pro-Islamic political parties. The HDP prioritized winning local offices as part of the groundwork for countering the AKP's authoritarian regime, polarizing politics, and conservative ideology. The brief rule of the HDP mayors demonstrates the promise and potential of an alternative politics that prioritizes ethnic and cultural diversity, gender equality, and political inclusiveness. The undemocratic ouster of the mayors cuts these efforts off at the knees and undermines the long-term development of the HDP's budding alternative politics, which had been gaining traction even among constituencies outside the Kurdish-majority cities.

Competitive authoritarian regimes everywhere are facing serious economic and political crises. The depth of these crises requires new solutions. In Turkey and elsewhere, opposition parties and politicians are coming to the fore with fresh ideas and innovations and are mounting competitive challenges at the polls. Authoritarians recognize the threat and increasingly have been responding with some form of postelection capture: In Turkey, it has been through kayyum appointments; in India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is seeking to limit the main powers of Delhi's opposition-controlled government through proposed legislation; in Hungary, Viktor Orbán's regime has denied elected opposition mayors much of their revenue and used state taxes and financial measures to limit local-government capacity; and in Russia under Vladimir Putin, gover-

nors are removed based on dubious corruption charges.[27] In other words, kayyum appointments are but one of many ways in which authoritarian regimes are preventing the opposition from gaining too strong a foothold at the local level.

It is important to recognize that recent postelection captures are more than local aberrations. They are part of a bigger authoritarian strategy to stifle opposition and expand control by robbing elections of their democratic power. So what can the opposition do when its very success leads to its own marginalization? In the case of Turkey, specifically, how can the HDP and democratic allies counter the actions of a regime that controls most of the levers of power and happily violates the rules of the game?

Given the regime's recent policies and actions, there is no reason to expect that it will limit kayyum appointments and other efforts to weaken opposition mayors to the HDP or a particular region. On the contrary, such postelection captures are becoming more widespread in Turkey and beyond, as authoritarian regimes struggle to undercut the power of elected opposition officials, sometimes by undoing electoral victories. Since the June 2019 local elections, Turkey's regime has transferred the authority to appoint executives of municipality-run firms from opposition mayors to AKP-controlled city councils. In the middle of the covid-19 pandemic, the government blocked bank accounts set up by the opposition-controlled municipalities to collect donations for people in need. The regime has also stripped opposition-run municipalities of jurisdiction over key sites, such as Gezi Park in Istanbul, the scene of major antiregime protests in 2013, and handed control to the government's Directorate General of Foundations.

As authoritarian regimes deepen polarization and expand clientelism, meaningful elections remain the only venue for challenging their dominance. Some of these regimes, including Turkey's, benefit from deep societal divisions. The 2019 Istanbul mayoral election shows how opposition movements can benefit by overcoming these divisions. When the election commission annulled the razor-thin win of opposition candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu and a new election was held three months later, the opposition formed an unprecedented and unlikely alliance consisting of parties with clashing platforms, including the new nationalist Good (İYİ) Party and the HDP. The second time, İmamoğlu defeated his AKP opponent with more than 55.2 percent of the vote, a 6.4-point increase from the first-held election.

In the current global context, authoritarians find themselves at a crossroads. With their resources strained by the pandemic and unable to conceal their poor record in office, patronage politics, polarizing rhetoric, and a tightening grip on institutions become even more crucial to maintaining power. These same conditions make the formation of prodemocratic coalitions harder but more important than ever. The success or failure of opposition parties and voters to put away their differences and

form alliances in the name of restoring democratic norms and laws will determine whether the rising tide of authoritarianism can be reversed. Time is of the essence. For now, democracy remains the only game in town, but electoral outcomes are increasingly predetermined and winners are not always allowed to rule. Prodemocracy forces must therefore band together; otherwise, they will eventually become symbolic players in staged elections that will only serve to legitimize authoritarian rule.

NOTES

1. Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, "The New Competitive Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy* 31 (January 2020): 51–65.

2. Dan Slater and Sofia Fenner, "State Power and Staying Power: Infrastructural Mechanisms and Authoritarian Durability," *Journal of International Affairs* 65 (Fall–Winter 2011): 15–29.

3. *Shadows and Doubts: The Turkish Local Elections of March 30, 2014* (Washington, D.C.: Bipartisan Policy Center, 2014); "Turkey" in Arch Puddington et al., eds., *Freedom in the World 2017* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018).

4. The AKP's "Kurdish Opening" reform permitted Kurdish broadcasting and Kurdish-language instruction in universities. For the conditions of the process, see the Law on the End of Terrorism and Strengthening Social Integration, Law 6651, *Resmi Gazete*, July 2014.

5. Turkey's Kurdish population (around 15 percent of the total population) constituted the predominant ethnic group in eastern and southeastern Turkey. Yet the Kurdish population is spread across the country, while Istanbul is often recognized as the largest "Kurdish" city with more than two-million Kurds (0.13 percent of the city's population).

6. Turkey's local administration consists of 81 cities, thirty of which (those with populations over 750,000) have special "metropolitan" status. Each city is further divided into districts and provinces (or towns). Parties compete to gain the mayorships of 51 cities, 30 metropolises, and 1,309 districts and towns.

7. Kemal Kirişci, "The Turkish Local Elections Offer a Glimpse of the Future," Brookings Institution, 28 March 2019; "Turkey's Recent Elections: From March 2014 to November 2015," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 6 November 2015.

8. Slater and Fenner, "State Power and Staying Power."

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