



Dear Colleague,

We are writing to you as elected co-mayors, respectively, of the metropolitan municipalities of Mardin, Diyarbakır and Van. These three major Kurdish provinces in Turkey, which host a total of 3.8 million citizens, are among the political and electoral strongholds of our party, the People's Democratic Party (HDP). In the municipal elections of 31 Mart 2019, we won the seat of the mayor in these provinces with high margins; 56.24% in Mardin, 62.93% in Diyarbakır, and 53.83% in Van. On 19 August 2019, we were removed from our offices, replaced by government-appointed trustees, and saw our municipal councils disbanded with an arbitrary decision of the Interior Ministry that violates both the Turkish Constitution and the European Charter of Local Self Government to which Turkey is a signatory.

We acknowledge this decision as a government coup -- the last one in a chain of attacks of the Erdogan regime in recent years against pluralist democracy, against the Kurdish democratic will in particular. In the aftermath of the abortive coup of 15 July 2016, which Mr Erdogan utilized to consolidate his authoritarian rule by declaring a two-year-long nationwide emergency rule, more than five thousand members and administrators of our party were arrested, including co-chairs of HDP Ms Figen Yüksekdağ and Mr Selahattin Demirtaş, several MPs, about one hundred mayors, and hundreds of administrators in localities. In this process, about one hundred elected mayors in Kurdish provinces were removed from their offices and replaced by bureaucrats appointed by the central government -- the so called-trustees.

The two-and-a-half-year-long trustee rule in Kurdish municipalities over 2016 and 2018 has not only severely circumvented local democracy but also devastated municipal infrastructures with embezzlement, graft, cronyism, and bribery. Therefore, reclaiming expropriated municipalities in the 31 March 2019 elections served a platform to protest and hold accountable the regime's autocratic and corrupt foreclosure of Kurdish electoral will and local democracy. Since the elections we have spent most of our efforts to bring our municipalities back on a functioning state by paying debts, finding credits, and restoring essential services, including the payment of workers' salaries.

In his written statement ordering our deposition and substitution by government trustees, the Minister of Interior argues that we have "links with terrorism." It has been amply noted by local and international human rights observers how the Erdogan regime employs Turkey's over-expansive and vague "anti-terror" legislation to silence and subdue any form of internal dissent. Any critical journalist, intellectual, human rights defender or opposition politician has the risk and threat of being targeted by "terrorism" charges in today's Turkey. This threat is all the more immediate and wholesale for those who criticize the government's recently resuscitated denialist and militarist Kurdish policy. One 2017 UN report, for instance, concluded that the removal of our predecessors in Kurdish local governments amounted to "the wholesale replacement of elected officials of Kurdish origin throughout South-East Turkey... with [central government appointed] "trustees." More recently, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the unlawful detention of our former co-chair, Selahattin Demirtaş, "pursued the predominant ulterior purpose of stifling pluralism and limiting freedom of political debate, which is at the very core of the concept of a democratic society."

Within this broader context, each of the three of us has pending investigations and legal proceedings which incriminate our political mandate and actions as former HDP lawmakers, and Mr Türk also as the co-mayor of Mardin in the previous term, under the existing "anti-terrorism" law. There is hardly anything surprising about these abusive prosecutions given the political context, except perhaps that since none of these proceedings have received a verdict. The Minister of Interior's declaration of

Contact: international@hdp.org.tr **Web:** www.hdp.org.tr

Address: Barbaros Mah. Tahran Cad. Büklüm Sok. No: 117 06680 Çankaya, Ankara - Turkey

Phone: +90 312 427 17 80 **Fax:** +90 312 4288957



conviction in pending cases implies confession of the government's firm control over the judiciary. It is a naked fact that we do not have separation of powers and an independent judiciary in Turkey. In fact, the government had declared its will to remove us from the office even before we were elected. During the election campaign of 31 March, President Erdoğan had repeatedly stated that if HDP candidates won the ballot, trustees would replace them. We have recently learned that the centrally appointed governors of Mardin and Diyarbakır did not lose any time in pursuing the threats of Mr President. They officially petitioned the Interior Ministry on 1 April 2019, one day after the election and before the election results were ratified, demanding our deposition.

Dear Colleague,

As you know, the right to vote and the right to public office are among the pillars of democracy. Those who are elected by the people can be deposed only by the people themselves. The Kurdish constituency in Mr Erdogan's Turkey has been de facto disenfranchised by the repetitive liquidation and punishment of their popular will and representatives. As we are writing this letter to you, the government is extending its repressive grip on the Kurdish people in Diyarbakır, Van, and Mardin who protest the expropriation of their democratic will. Over the past week, hundreds of protestors were detained in our cities, and dozens have been injured and hospitalized, including several of our MPs and local government administrators.

We, together with all peoples of Turkey, have been struggling for democracy, justice and the rule of law for decades. We have lost many good people in this struggle, we have seen tens of thousands more imprisoned, tortured, scarred for life. Thousands of our party members and executives are still serving arbitrary prison terms only because of their political beliefs and ideas.

As popularly elected co-mayors of Diyarbakır, Van, and Mardin, we remain committed to our struggle against tyranny until the rule of law and democracy reign in our country. For the past week, our removal from the office has been massively criticized by a wide range of actors from all around Turkey, including the metropolitan mayors of İzmir and İstanbul, former prime minister and president of Turkey, representatives of opposition parties, over thirty bus associations, numerous civil democratic associations, professional chambers, hundreds of intellectuals, and international organizations. We appreciate these as invaluable acts of solidarity.

We feel empowered, when we hear voices of solidarity from across the borders. Carrying our dignified struggle against tyranny, we would be most obliged to receive your sustained solidarity through initiatives such as organizing public opinion in your country, putting democratic pressure on the Turkish government, building solidarity networks, or visiting our electoral provinces. We promise to you that no matter how dire the circumstances currently are in our country, we will win the struggle for democracy, justice, and peace.

In Solidarity,

Ahmet Türk, Co-Mayor of Mardin
Selçuk Mızraklı, Co-Mayor of Diyarbakır
Bedia Özgökçe Ertan, Co-Mayor of Van
28 August 2019

Contact: international@hdp.org.tr **Web:** www.hdp.org.tr

Address: Barbaros Mah. Tahran Cad. Büklüm Sok. No: 117 06680 Çankaya, Ankara - Turkey

Phone: +90 312 427 17 80 **Fax:** +90 312 4288957