



2024

ELECTION REPORT

local elections Turkey

March 31 2024

This report is written to reflect the electoral fraud in Kurdish-populated provinces for the international community and related institutions. The report is created by observations and experiences of 125 international and independent election observers.

Contact:

Norway: Johan Petter Andresen (NO/EN)
johanpetterandresen@gmail.com

Switzerland: Franziska Stier (DE/EN)
Franziska.Stier@gmx.de

France: Roseline Kisa (FR/EN)
r.b.kisa@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION

Local elections were held in Turkey on the 31st of March 2024. The negative trends characterising the development: internationally criticised undermining of democracy, worsening economic conditions for the vast majority, illegal aggression and occupation of parts of Syria and Iraq, and increasing instability internationally, regionally and locally, described the background for the elections.

In the Kurdish-dominated areas in the Southeast, there has been the most negative situation inside Turkey. After the local elections in 2019, many democratically elected mayors, were deposed by the central authorities, and replaced with Trustees. Many politicians and political activists were jailed and otherwise persecuted. All of this was criticised by European human rights authorities and organisations.

In the run-up to this year's local elections, there were also allegations that there were preparations for illegitimate initiatives to undermine democracy by moving security forces, and registering Turks originally from the West of Turkey as local voters in the Southeast. DEM, the major pro-Kurdish party, therefore took the initiative to invite election observers from Europe as an attempt to counter and expose this and other undemocratic moves.

One hundred and twenty five election observers came and attempted to observe the elections. This is a report of their findings.

VISITED REGIONS



original Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a8/Turkey%2C_administrative_divisions_-_de_-_colored.svg (edited by Franziska Stier)

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SUMMARY

In the course of our election observation, almost all delegations had to contend with intimidation and access bans by the authorities. In addition to some irregular incidents and suspicions of election manipulation through bribery and extortion in several regions, we were able to identify two gross and widespread violations. Firstly, an excessive and intimidating police and military presence in almost all areas. In two regions (Van and Şirnak), repression against the population and the DEM party was also documented in the aftermath of the elections. Secondly, a new strategy to influence the election results through targeted voter transfers of 46.901 state employees such as police officers and soldiers.

While in previous years the will of voters was undermined through targeted political repression, the imprisonment of elected mayors and the use of trustees, this time state employees such as police and military were now sent to the Kurdish regions to vote. In some cases, these people were registered in the regions over a period of 6 months. In other cases, the process was ad hoc. Masses of males between the ages of 20 and 30 were registered in government buildings such as police stations and spent the night in schools and universities specially cleared for this purpose in the days before the election. The use of security forces to reduce the voting power of the local Kurdish population, other local minorities and especially women can be seen as strategic, as these voter transfers were concentrated in regions where a close election result between AKP, MHP or DEM party was expected, and the participation of thousands of soldiers could tilt the result.

In our view, this is a gross and deliberate attempt to manipulate the local elections against opposition parties. We would like to draw the attention of the international public to this and urge the official election observation institutions to check the voter registers of affected regions in order to get a final picture.

1. POLICE AND MILITARY PERSONNEL, AND REPRESSION

AT POLLING STATIONS

Of the 150 or so polling stations visited, almost all had a police and military presence. Due to the fact that almost all groups were prevented from visiting the rooms where the actual voting took place, or even entering the school premises, we could not get a complete picture of the massive presence of police and military forces. Even so, we witnessed armed police and military personnel outside schools, in schoolyards, in the schools and in the voting rooms. Outside some schools were also different types of armoured vehicles.

According to Turkish law, „*With the exception of law enforcement officers in charge of election security, persons in official uniform carrying weapons, including private security guards and municipal police officers, are not allowed to enter the buildings, facilities and outbuildings where the ballot box is located.*”¹

Civil society election observers and lawyers informed us that, as a rule, the police and military must keep a distance of 50 meters from schools. However, according to our observations, this remained the exception.

In many cases, where we were able to enter the schools, we encountered armed police and

uniformed soldiers in the polling stations.

Here are just three short examples from the vast amount of observations of illegal police and military presence:

The observer group in Hakkari reported that they encountered an above-average police and military presence, which was clearly intimidating: at *Şehit Selahattin İlk Okulu* a total of around 30 police officers could be seen outside the polling station. Inside, voters had to push their way past several uniformed police officers at the entrances to the polling stations. There were three to five uniformed police officers on each floor.



In front of school ground armed soldiers, Ağrı merkez - İsmet Ömeroğlu İlkokulu



Policemen in the school, Ağrı merkez - Şeref Saraçoğlu İlkokulu.



Ağrı merkez - İsmet Ömeroğlu İlkokulu

A delegation in Hazro, Diyarbakir reported at çok programli Anadolu Lisesi: Two heavily armed soldiers with visible machine guns and magazines, were leaving the school as we arrived.

In Şirnak, at *Hemet Akif Erosy Anadolu Lisesi* there were three floors where voting took place. The observers were only allowed to enter two of them. Each floor had three voting rooms. In the corridors between the rooms, there were many armed and unarmed police and military personnel. At *Bulakbaşı İlkokulu* in Ortaokulu, they encountered eight soldiers in front of the building, three of whom were armed with M16 rifles.

At Uludere *Çok Programli Anadolu Lisesi*, there were two armed policemen in the building.

At Yunus Emere (*şheit mehmet paksoy*), the group saw armed police officers and two officers from a special police unit, as well as a large armoured car and a bus. Inside the school, they encountered about eight armed police officers. At Toki Sehit Komiser *Umut Tuncay İlkokulu-Ortaokulu*, the group saw three military vehicles, one of which was parked on the premises. Armed military personnel were right at the entrance.

The presence of the delegation immediately led to the group being surrounded by around ten police officers, both in civilian clothes and in uniform.

¹ «(Ek fıkra : 13/3/2018-7102/8 md.) Seçimin güvenliğini sağlamakla görevli kolluk güçleri hariç, özel güvenlik görevlileri ve belediye zabıtalari gibi görevliler de dâhil olmak üzere resmî üniforma ve silah taşıyan kişiler, sandığın konulduğu bina, yapı ve bunların müstemilatına giremezler.» <https://www.mevzuat.gov.tr/mevzuat?MevzuatNo=298&MevzuatTur=1&MevzuatTertip=4>

2. THE GREAT COUP: VOTER TRANSFERS

State-organized manoeuvres, in which soldiers are transported to the polls by buses, appear to be legal but are illegitimate and deprive the Kurdish people and women of their right to decide their own politics.

In the run-up to the elections, we were informed by the DEM party about large voter transfers. 46.901² state employees such as police officers and soldiers from other regions of Turkey were registered specifically for the elections in the Kurdish regions.³The focus was on regions where a close election result was expected and the total number of soldiers accounted for a significant percentage of the votes in the respective regions.

These transfers of almost exclusively male voters were to a large extent recognizable through the voter lists, as they were often registered

by the hundreds at one address, and mainly in government and administrative buildings that are not actual residential addresses. As we only had very limited access to the voter lists, we were partly dependent on input from the DEM party and local civil society election observers. (Where this is the case, the observers have indicated this.)

We also observed coaches transporting soldiers to polling stations in several regions, particularly in the morning. As the civilian population also was aware of this election coup, the atmosphere was already tense before the election. The group from Iğdır reported: „The night before the election, the city was full of groups of men, some of whom were armed. Residents complained that they couldn't find a seat in the restaurants and cafés. The overall situation seemed tense and even threatening.”

² Official information of DEM Party (10th April 2024). These results have been confirmed and compared with the records and database of the supreme Electoral Board (YSK).

³ Different media discussed that topic for example: <https://www.turkishminute.com/2024/03/31/allegations-of-voter-fraud-in-predominantly-kurdish-se-mar-turkeys-local-elections/amp/>

SIFTING THROUGH THE LISTS

Here are two examples:

Kulp: At the school in Hamzali, observers were able to verify this phenomenon of registering new voters in the relevant electoral lists: There were about 60 people registered at one registration address, all males.

In Şirnak, an observer was able to take several photos of the voter lists, which clearly documented that there were many voters whose addresses were not local.

OBSERVING THE VOTER TRANSFER ON ELECTION DAY

The voter transfers were also noticeable on the streets and in front of the polling stations.

Here are some examples:

The group from Kulp reported from the *Zeyrek ilkokulu (Kulp-Zeyrek)* that they saw two large buses, numerous (about 8) smaller mini buses and an armoured vehicle in front of the polling station. There were also numerous uniformed, military personnel and police officers around the entrance of the building. Other persons were dressed in civilian clothes, but could be recognized as members of the army (exclusively young men and weapons in the mini buses) in the centre of Kulp. As they were entering the city, they saw numerous white mini buses with civilian army personnel. In the city centre there were more mini buses within walking distance of a polling station. They estimated that there were around 15-20 mini buses in total, each carrying around 15 people.



Police and Soldiers were settled in these buildings in Iğdır during elections, their registered address was a building in Serdar Yücel Street, which is under construction.

At the Usunova polling station, they encountered armed military personnel. The election officials told them that ten armed uniformed military personnel (from the Black Sea area) came to vote in the morning (they tried unsuccessfully to prevent this). They had not been on the list of eligible voters until the evening before. To illustrate the extent of the re-registration: The 630 voters who lived in the village were joined by 366 military personnel, all of whom were registered as living at a small police station.

Also at *Iğdır Şehit Öğretmen Şevki Akgün İkokulu*, 10 large white buses and 3 vans were parked in front of the school grounds at around 09:40. The delegation was told that these 13 buses continually brought soldiers to the school.



Example from Iğdır Besti Aydeniz Mesleki ve teknik Anadolu Lisesi, Soldiers left the school ground with baggage



Besti Aydeniz Mesleki ve teknik Anadolu Lisesi, uniformed Soldiers arrive in a white van and entering the school ground.

REPORTS FROM CIVILIANS AND LOCAL CIVIL OBSERVERS

Many observer delegations were informed by various local sources about different types of election fraud taking place.

For example, the delegation in Yüksekova learnt from the local DEM party that the ruling AKP party had sent 1000 security forces and civilians who did not live in the district to Savur and 500 to the Dargecit district in Mardin. These people were not on the electoral lists and it was illegal for them to vote. They were also told that most of these people had voted successfully.

In Mardin, in the village of Chalila, residents reported that around 70 soldiers from other places in Turkey had taken part in the vote. The locals showed a video of the soldiers waiting at the polling rooms and that they tried to talk to them and ask them questions.

Sunday afternoon to Monday morning was the visible start of the journey home for many soldiers. Election observers took pictures at Iğdır airport showing the departure of hundreds of soldiers.



Iğdır Airport on Monday morning (sended to us by local civil election observers)

CONCLUSION

After evaluating the reports, it can be concluded that there was an extensive, organized voter transfer. In some cases, these people were registered for the elections in the regions within the last 6 months; in other cases, voter registration was ad hoc.

The impact of voter transfers varied from region to region, but accounted for up to 50 percent of the votes in some areas. As international election observers, it was impossible for us to document the entirety of this coup, as we were most often denied access to the voter lists. At the same time, our observations and documentation are clearly more than just indications of a large-scale voter transfer that diminished the votes of the local, mostly Kurdish population and especially those of women; after all, this voter transfer consisted almost exclusively of males.

In the provinces and cities of Şırnak, Kars, Uludere, Çukurca, Gercüş, Eğil, Şemdinli, Hazro, Erüh and Savur, the reported voter transfer of a total of 46901 voters (except for those soldiers and police who have a duty certificate from the Supreme Electoral Board) may have led to a shift in the majority.

In our opinion, a re-examination taking into account voter transfers and the holding of new elections is appropriate here.

3. ATTEMPTED ELECTORAL FRAUD THROUGH BRIBERY OR BLACKMAIL AT POLLING STATIONS

In several provinces, observers were informed about attempts to manipulate elections through bribery and/or extortion.

For example, the observer group visiting Batman reported that they had been informed about economic pressure being put on the population. In return for payment or under threat of being laid off, voters had to take a photo of their vote and send it to special organized chats or telephone numbers. They also noted that „the elected DEM mayors are under high political pressure, as they are threatened with long prison sentences for alleged links to the PKK. So every candidate knows that, even if elected under such unfavourable conditions, he/she could spend many years in prison, which is a strong deterrent for advocates of Kurdish rights.

Local DEM Party members also reported that the aid packages that had been distributed in 2023 in connection with the earthquake were now being used as bait in connection with AKPs election campaign.

We also heard of similar distribution campaigns in Iğdır in the run-up to the elections.

There, human rights organizations told us that in districts where the proportion of Kurdish voters is particularly high, they were promised 5,000 TL if they put empty ballot envelopes in the ballot box, and handed over the ballot paper as proof.

The reports cannot be conclusively verified by us, but they are indications of attempted fraud that should lead to a closer scrutiny.

4. DISCRIMINATION (IN THE RUN-UP TO ELECTIONS)

The issue of the ban on discrimination in the run-up to elections cannot be dealt with in depth. This is primarily the task of human rights organisations, which have been doing important work in this area for many years. We did not focus on these aspects as part of our observation. As the individual delegations wrote non-formalised reports, we nevertheless present some excerpts of their observations and notes.

The group in Bitlis was informed that there were several state-owned factories that used repressive measures against Kurds and Kurdish culture. Due to high inflation, the financial situation is currently catastrophic for many people. Poverty and hunger are real issues. In this respect, repressive measures in the workplace are a major problem. The social safety net is relatively weak and a paid job is vital for families.

In an interview with the group in Iğdır, a trade unionist reported on repressive measures against trade unionists and a de facto ban on him working.

He explained that he had found jobs several times, but that his superiors were intimidated to such an extent that he was dismissed repeatedly. As a trade unionist, he had campaigned for better conditions in the hospitals. Repression against trade union members who resisted the state of emergency has increased enormously since the curfews in 2016.

In Van, the co-president of the DEM Party, Mr Veysi Dilekçi, reported on the current situation and made it clear that the system of trustees is also an expression of a two-tier justice and democracy system that is only applied in the Kurdish regions.

5. VOTING SECRECY

The secret ballot was undermined on three levels. Firstly, through bribery and extortion, pressure was exerted on people to document and send a picture of their vote. Secondly, it was observed that several of the polling stations were overcrowded and a secret ballot was not possible. Thirdly, the conditions were detrimental for people with disabilities. The vote of these people was not secret or was even abused by external voting support.

For example, Sudüğünü village in Bingöl province has a small school with about 3 classrooms, all of which were very crowded. The atmosphere was not tense, but it was very crowded around the voting booth and military personnel were standing right next to the booth. People did not go into the booth alone to vote and all in all, a

secret ballot was not possible. When observers spoke to the residents of the village, they did not seem to see a problem with the lack of secrecy. There were about four military officers present.

Another example was a polling station where observers were informed that the poll workers stamped the votes for people with disabilities who needed assistance without them being present in the polling booth.

In one case, an affected voter realised that the stamp had not been affixed to the desired place, but to the ruling AKP party. The voter insisted that the ballot paper be filled out again. Based on a list in which the number of people with disabilities was documented, it can be assumed that this procedure could have affected 70 votes.

6. MULTIPLE VOTING

Various observer groups were informed by locals about incidents of attempted multiple voting.

For example, the delegation in Şirnak was shown footage documenting that soldiers voted twice in various schools.

The delegation in Mardin was informed that there were two types of fraud attempts at Sakarya

School. The first was an attempt to vote for a person who was on the list but not present. The other attempt was that one person tried to vote for five people. When people tried to prevent this, a brawl broke out.

The delegation in Urfa, Gönüllü polling station noticed that one person came to complain that his vote had been stolen - he had not yet voted, but his vote had already been registered!

7. FREEDOM OF PRESS ON ELECTION DAY

The delegation in Hakkari reported that a member of the press was prevented from livestreaming the election. Upon entering the polling station, he had to undergo a body search.

The group in Iğdır was informed that a journalist was physically prevented from documenting the buses transporting soldiers to the polling stations at around 09:15 at *Şehit Öğretmen Şevki Akgün İkokulu*.

8. OTHER IRREGULARITIES

Below are a few examples of further irregularities.

The delegation in Urfa reported that a lawyer was called to the village of Sabanci (200 voters) because the votes had already been cast before the voting office was opened! Only AKP observers were allowed to enter the polling station.

The observer group at Urfa reported from one school that the ballot papers were already in the ballot boxes when the polling station opened.

With 350 registered voters and in the hands of the polling station manager, the ballot box was full and 400 votes had been cast. It was demanded that all ballots be cancelled, whereupon the election was cancelled by the district election commission.

9. GENERAL REPRESSION AND INTIMIDATION

AFTER THE ELECTIONS

After the elections, there was repression and police violence in various places. The delegations' experiences were limited to Şirnak and Van.

The delegation in Şirnak reported that they returned to the city on the evening of the elections and saw numerous cars with men making the wolf salute from their windows. (Note: the distinctive sign of the fascist Grey Wolves militia)

On the same evening, the police also raided the DEM Party office and arrested about 25 people. Shortly after the delegation had left the Tuggeneral Ömer Kececigil İöo school, they were informed that a union member of the Union of Health Workers had been arrested. The police used rubber bullets and pepper spray during a scuffle in connection with the arrest. Some party members and civilians were injured. The observers were shown existing video footage.

SITUATION IN VAN

The group from Van reported that they reached the city at around 21:00 on election day. There was great joy at the outcome of the elections. Motorcades and celebrating people populated

the streets. Mainly young people were out and about. At various places they encountered armoured vehicles and special police units. The city smelled of tear gas. At around 23:00, the DEM party presidium appeared on camera together with the co-mayors. At around 00:30 they made their way home. White and black armoured vehicles could be seen on the streets.

DEM MEETING IN VAN ON MONDAY 1ST OF APRIL

The DEM meeting and the election ceremony were due to take place on Monday at around 14:00. The observer group set off to attend. On the way there, they passed several police checkpoints and saw many armoured vehicles. There were water cannons at the entrance of the rally site.

The atmosphere inside the event was cheerful and exuberant. Thousands took part in the event, celebrating and dancing.

HEAVY PROTESTS AND HARD REPRESSION ON TUESDAY THE 2ND OF APRIL

The situation in Van escalated on Tuesday

morning. The candidate for Co-Mayor, Abdullah Zeydan, was elected with 55 percent of the vote, but a political and legal coup followed. He was subsequently stripped of his eligibility by YSK, the electoral commission. The YSK then handed the position to AKP's candidate, who only received 27 percent of the vote. While the DEM party took legal action against this coup, simultaneously thousands of people took to the streets to prevent their votes from being stolen yet again by a trustee. There was much anger. The state responded with an enormous deployment of police and military personnel. Water cannons stopped at the crossroads at regular intervals to spray (at least some of) the side streets with water laced with tear gas. Numerous tear gas grenades were fired along the main road. Rubber bullets

were also used. Young people responded to the armoured water cannon with stones. During the night, as far as the observers could see, there were buses filled with police officers at every junction. The observers witnessed several arrests.

Throughout the day, other cities also joined the protests in favour of Abdullah Zeydan.

In addition, almost 500 citizens were detained in various provinces as far away as Istanbul and Hakkari. Further arrests were made in various provinces. In response to the growing nationwide outrage, the Supreme Election Council (YSK) finally confirmed Mr Zeydan's election as mayor on Wednesday.

10. THE AUTHORITIES' ATTITUDE TO THE INDEPENDENT, INTERNATIONAL ELECTION OBSERVATION DELEGATION

As independent election observers, we were confronted with repression at various levels.

Our ability to carry out our work as independent election observers was severely constrained, and this section will outline the limitations we faced.

The AKP/MHP government made it clear to our delegations that they considered us unwelcome. However, we were there at the request of the opposition, the DEM party, and as independent election observers we only feel committed to democracy and human rights.



Inspection of the group in Iğdır, in the background the entrance to the school Hüsnü M. Özyeğin İlkokkulu 08:00 a.m.

In this section, we therefore document our experiences with regard to the human rights work we attempted to carry out as part of the election observation. And we would like to encourage the international community to reflect on what human rights representatives have experienced. Here are some examples of how the state worked to obstruct the international observers from accomplishing their goal.

The delegation in Ağrı and Iğdır was also expelled from the premises of all schools. There were also lengthy ID checks at the entrances to the DEM party meetings in Van.

The delegation in Hakkari reported that they were very quickly expelled from the polling station at the *Şehit Selahattin İlk Okulu* school by the police officers present, without being able to enter any of the polling rooms.

As soon as they arrived on the school grounds, the identity cards of the delegation and accompanying persons were taken by employees of „Terörle Mücadele“. The election observers were then pursued by the „Terörle Mücadele“ employees the rest of the day and monitored very aggressively, so that visits to other polling

stations were no longer possible.

In Ömerli (Mardin), a delegation visited the *Cumhuriyet* primary school. There were two armed police officers in the school. They prevented the observers from observing the election and ordered them to leave the school. The policeman told the translator that he had received orders from above.

At the next school, *Imam Hatip Lisesi*, the delegation was expelled by three armed policemen at the steps leading up to the school entrance. These policemen also referred to orders from above. As a result, the visits to other schools in Ömerli were cancelled.

A group in Mardin was not allowed to enter a school. They were told that the governor of Mardin had banned foreign groups from observing. They were confronted by a contingent of up to 20 armed guards and police officers and were pursued by police officers all the way to Mardin city after the mission was cancelled.

A third group in Mardin was also followed by civilian police cars. The group was denied access to the schools without exception.

A group in Diyarbakir reported that they were only able to visit nine out of eighteen schools and that there were frequent attempts at intimidation by the local authorities.

An other group, visiting Hazro wrote: "The lawyer accompanying us presented her card, but we were prevented from entering, first by the police who asked for our passports (and photographed them) and then by the army who did the same thing. Although the police were not hostile, they did apply indirect pressure by surrounding the delegation and momentarily restricting our mobility." This group resumed: "We weren't allowed access to the polling stations at any time; we were systematically turned away, intimidated and questioned on several occasions by armed men or aggressive individuals in civilian clothes. Our lawyer was also unable to assert her right to enter and observe."

11. WORKING METHODS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE REPORT

As election observers, our aim was to understand and follow how the actual voting process took place in the various polling stations without influencing the process.

Turkish electoral law and the OSCE/ODIHR recognize the role of civil society election observers, although their role and mode of operation is different from that of the Council of Europe and the OSCE. Invited by the DEM Party, we accompanied local civil society election observers in order to form our own independent assessment of the ground situation.

The delegations mostly received a briefing on Saturday from the DEM party, human rights organizations or other civilian election observers on the overall situation and the expected problems in the regions to be visited. They then travelled to the regions on the eve of the elections or on the morning of election day. Normally they were accompanied by accredited local election

observers and translators. Where possible, polling stations and schools were inspected and discussions were held with the election officials. In some cases, interviews were conducted on site with the population and other local civilian election observers about the election process. The delegations took notes and photos. A non-formalized report was then created.

We tried to capture several aspects of the election process, but were strategically prevented from observing and documenting it.

The report does not provide a comprehensive picture of the 2024 Turkish local elections and is regionally limited to the areas we monitored.

A comprehensive picture would require a detailed analysis of the human rights situation such as freedom of assembly and association, freedom of expression and information, freedom of the press and other issues.

Generally speaking, without freedom of the press, freedom of assembly and freedom of association, fundamental principles of electoral law are violated. We are aware, for example, that the media law passed in October 2022 severely restricts Article 19 of human rights, freedom of information and freedom of expression, but we have not analysed the consequences of these restrictions.

In this context, party bans and lawsuits such as those against the HDP also violate freedom of assembly and association as the basis for free and equal elections. If parties and parliamentarians are prevented from standing as candidates, for example through banning proceedings or if the will of voters is overridden by the use of trustees, we believe that elementary electoral principles are being violated.

We recognise certain double standards in dealing with the predominantly Kurdish populated areas in south-eastern Turkey. However, it was not possible to precisely analyse the effects of this situation and legislation within the scope of our observation.

The same applies to the fair distribution of parties in the media coverage in the run-up to the elections. The same applies to the opening of polling stations, the inspection of polling booths and the counting process, which we were not able to monitor.

When it comes to these matters, the report focuses on information from human rights organizations, lawyers and civilian party-affiliated election observers for example of the DEM party as well as the experiences of the observers who visited polling stations in the above-mentioned provinces between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. on the 31st of March. Following the observation process, the various delegations submitted their non-formalized observation reports. An editorial group consisting of Franziska Stier (Switzerland), Johan Petter Andresen (Norway), summarized the results for the current report.



Franziska Stier



Johan Petter Andresen