
Aftermath the Appointment of State Commissioners to Local Authorities

Local Democracy in the Kurdish Region of Turkey

(People's Democratic Party & Democratic Regions Party) - 09/09/2017



PEOPLES' DEMOCRATIC PARTY

Prelude

The latest municipal election was held when 2,5-year-long ceasefire (2013-15) between the PKK and the state was still effective. Candidates of Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), that was antecedent of Democratic Regions Party (DBP), won elections in 11 provinces, 68 cities and 23 towns. In the course election campaign for the municipal bodies in 2014, Peace and Democracy Party emphasized the link between local democracy and peace, promised that multi-culturalist policies to continue and implementing co-mayor system - consisting of one male and one female mayor in all municipalities- in order enhance gender equality, recommending novel social policies to eradicate socio-economic gaps as well as fostering pro-ecological policies both in urban and rural areas. Another crucial element of the electoral campaign was its commitment to decentralization agenda already suggested by European union and European Council for local governments.

While above-mentioned policy implementation was still in process, armed clashes started in July 2015 and escalated dramatically compared to previous years. In the course of new escalation, about 500 thousand people were forcibly displaced and houses of 255 thousand people were destructed as a result of decision taken by the government. While magnitude of armed conflicts were increasing on the one hand, co-mayors and elected members of city councils raising demands for self-governance started to face arrests. Afterwards, "The government has used powers under the state of emergency adopted following the July 2016 attempted coup to take direct control of municipalities and remove elected mayors. A September 1 decree (no. 674) amended the Law on Municipalities to permit the takeover of municipalities suspected of supporting terrorism". By September 2016, state commissioners (trustees) started to be appointed to municipalities under control of Democratic Regions Party (DBP) which have had no relation at all with failed coup attempt. As of 9th of September, 2017, state commissioners were appointed to 93 DBP municipalities (out of 105) which while 76 co-mayors are in prison. This report focuses on actions taken by governors or district governors after they were appointed as state commissioners to municipalities. Data in this report delineates that these state commissioners not only implement political agenda of the AKP government in the Kurdish region but they have also engaged in social engineering efforts aiming at reversing the progress achieved by local governments since 1999 in realms of gender equality, cultural pluralism and to halt assimilation process.



Forced migration in Sur district & Sur Municipality building after appointment of the state commissioner, Diyarbakır

I. Suspension of Activities Towards Gender Equality

Following 2014 Municipal Elections, Democratic Regions Party operationalised two crucial mechanisms to increase effectiveness of policies towards gender equality. The first was planned to be co-chair system at mayoral level. In reference to the principle of equal political representation for men and women, every DBP-led municipality adopted a new management system where two co-mayors have equal powers as well as implemented gender-sensitive budget planning. The second mechanism was formation of new departments within the municipal administrative bodies, called as Directorate of Policies for Women. Empowerment of women was aimed through these new directorates with a three-fold framework: (1) increasing women's participation into workforce, (2) prevention of violence against women, (3) research on problems faced by women. Both of these mechanisms were dismantled after state commissioners were appointed to municipalities in the region.



(1) Women working at Sara Textile Workshop in Rojin Women’s Center that was recently closed down, (2) Female bus driver prevented from doing her job after the state commissioner appointed, Van

This issue was also examined in the report released by Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in February 2017 as follows:

“Since the central Government started replacing elected mayors with politically appointed “trustees” in municipalities of Southeast Turkey in September 2016 ²⁶ the Kurdish community has reported that centres for women’s rights protection were closed down in Cizre and Silvan and across South-East Turkey, particularly in the municipalities most affected by security operations and destruction in early 2016. In the past, such centres had been providing much needed protection for women and children victims of domestic violence, and promoted their engagement in social and political life”.¹

Since almost all state commissioners halted activities of Directorates of Policies for Women just after being appointed, it is highly likely decision to suspend activities aiming at gender equality was reached at a central level. At sum, number of suspended women’s centers either officially tied to municipalities or closely working with those municipalities is 37.

¹ Report on the Human Rights Situation in South-East Turkey (July 2015 to December 2016), *Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights*, s. 16, Şubat 2017, <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/TR/OHCHR_South-East_TurkeyReport_10March2017.pdf#sthash.ljKDMvao.dpuf>

Province	Municipality	Action Taken by Appointed State Commissioners
Diyarbakır	Sur Municipality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Directorate of Policies for Women was abolished. Amida Women's Consultancy Center carrying out projects towards women and children was also closed down(15/11/2016)
Diyarbakır	Silvan Municipality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maya Women's Center was closed down and the personnel working at the center were dismissed. Building of Maya Women's Center was transferred to People's Education Center which is an official state institution tied to Silvan District Governor's Office (12/10/2016)
Şırnak	Cizre Municipality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sitiya Zin Women's Consultancy Center was closed down. The police seized files of women which include sensitive information (28/10/2016).
Şırnak	Silopi Municipality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Viyan Women's Center closed down (09/2017)
Mardin	Nusaybin Municipality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All municipal activities and services towards gender equality suspended after appointment of a state commissioner on 11th of September, 2016.
Mardin	Mardin Metropolitan Municipality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Head of Directorate of Policies for Women dismissed and Mehtap Büngül, Chief Physician of Mardin Maternity and Children Hospital was appointed on behalf of her (02/12/2016) Mehtap Büngül was removed from the directorate, and Abdurrahman Büngül, cousin of Mehtap Büngül was appointed on her behalf. He became the first male to lead Directorate of Policies for Women (04/02/2017).
Van	Van Metropolitan Municipality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The state commissioner closed down the Office on Violence Against Women. A man was appointed as the head of Directorate of Policies for Women (06/12/2016) Activities of Rojin Women's Center suspended while women's shelter within the center closed down (30/12/2016) Emergency Line in service for helping women facing violence on the spot closed down (12/01/2017) 53 female personnel working in various departments of Directorate of Policies for Women were dismissed (10/03/2017) Appointed state commissioner decided to unseat female bus drivers and assigned them to other departments of the municipality (26/02/2017)
Batman	Batman Municipality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Activities of Directorate of Policies for Women suspended. SELIS Women's Center founded in 2005 which was providing psychological and legal support for women subjected to violence closed down. The building of SELIS was transferred to the service of Batman Governor's Office (25/12/2016) Women's Sport Center that was only in service of women since 2010 closed down and the facility was brought into use of man as well (10/03/2017)

Province	Municipality	Action Taken by Appointed State Commissioners
Van	Ipekyolu Municipality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Directorate of Policies for Women was abolished by the state commissioner (16/01/2017) • Maya Women's Center Yaşam opened with the mission of making local women gain their economic independence closed down (28/09/2016) • Name of Sinjar Women's Park changed that was named as such to commemorate Yazidi women killed or kidnapped by the ISIS in Sinjar, Northern Iraq (23/01/2017)
Mersin	Akdeniz Municipality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • İřtar Women's Center closed down. On request by Ministry of Family and Social Policies, building of the center was transferred to provincial directorate of the ministry (03/02/2017)
Diyarbakır	Kulp Municipality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Zozan Eren Women's Consultancy Center closed down (20/02/2017)
Van	Edremit Municipality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Directorate of Policies for Women was abolished by the state commissioner. Names of Women and Peace Public Parks built by the municipality changed. Names of police officers dies in the course of armed clashes given to parks (06/02/2017)
Van	Muradiye Municipality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acitivities of Directorate of Policies for Women suspended. Sara Women's Guest House, that has been active in last 2 years and women coming from rural areas could stay for free was also closed down. where kapatıldı. Ongoing projects such as Women's Soup-Kitchen and Women's Toil & Market were also suspended (14/02/2017)
Diyarbakır	Lice Municipality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nujiyan Women's Consultancy Center closed down (01/03/2017)
Ağrı	Doğubeyazıt Municipality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ayşenur Zarakolu Health Center, Sema Yüce Women's Solidarity Center, Laundry House and Day Care Center functioning within the municipality closed down (13/03/2017)
Siirt	Siirt Municipality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Berfin Women's Center functioning within the municipal administration transferred to Provincial Cultural Directorate working under the mandate of Governor's Office (06/07/2017).
Mardin	Dargeçit Municipality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Çiçek Women's Center that was opened in may 2015 closed down, the personnel of the center also dismissed (09/2016)
Mardin	Derik Municipality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peljin Women's Center closed down, lease contract of its building canceled as well (09/2017).
Mardin	Mazıdağı Municipality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rewşen Women's Center closed down and products manufactured by women seized too (09/2016)
Van	Erciş Municipality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bûka Baranê Women's Workshop closed down. This workshop was active since September 2015 and aimed at increasing participation of women into workforce via manufacturing dolls which has also been part of local culture in Ercis (23/09/2016).
Hakkari	Hakkari Municipality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Binevş Women's Center closed down (6/10/2016)

Province	Municipality	Action Taken by Appointed State Commissioners
Diyarbakır	Yenişehir Municipality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> After appointment of a state commissioner, a kiosk operated only by women closed down (27/02/2017)

II. Closure of Yazidi Refugee Camp

In August 2014, an ISIS attack targeted Yazidi Kurds in Sinjar region of Iraq, that is recognized by the United Nations as an attempt for genocide. Approximately 500 thousand Yazidis had to flee Sinjar area. While majority of these Yazidi refugees were settled in refugee camps run by UNHCR in Syria and Iraq, thousands of Yazidis crossed the border and sought refuge in Diyarbakır or nearby cities.

Yazidi Kurds have been subjected to mass massacres in history many times just because they are not Muslims. Thus Yazidi refugees in Diyarbakır demanded a Yazidi-only refugee camp which was met by Diyarbakır Metropolitan Municipality. A camp was built by the municipality on 26 of August, 2014, in a former picnic area that is 15 KM away from the city center. Number of Yazidi refugees in the camp constantly fluctuated since August 2014 to December 2016, until the state commissioner decided to close down the camp. Most of Yazidi refugees who stayed for a while in camp managed by AFAD the state institution had already left those camps by claiming that they were discriminated and ended up in camps under control of municipalities. In camps managed by municipalities, all expensed of refugees (food, health, etc.) were met by municipalities, NGOs and donations. Nevertheless, refugee camps were closed down by state commissioners. When it was closed down, number of refugees in municipal camps was about 1500. Yazidi refugees initially asked the Governor of Diyarbakır to make them continue to stay in municipality's camp but their demands denied. Finally, they were stationed to AFAD Camp in Midyat. Since January 2016, complaints by Yazidi refugees staying in AFAD camps are as follows:

- Not being able to pray comfortably
- Insufficient Health Care Services: Unlike Syrian refugees, only primary care health services have been offered to Yazidi refugees. They cannot access health care facilities for serious illnesses and not offered medicine in such circumstances.
- Restriction: Yazidi refugees who have been accustomed to have freedom of mobility in municipality's camp have faced restrictions in AFAD camp.
- Nutrition problems: Yazidi refugees state that the support for their nutrition needs is not sufficient

III. Suspension of Activities Towards Multi-Culturalism and Prevention of Assimilation

One of the principles adopted and practiced in all DBP municipalities was *multi-lingualism and multi-culturalism*. Communities in Turkey which are not ethnically Turkish and/or Sunni Muslim in faith have been facing systematic assimilation and repression since establishment years of Republic of Turkey (1920s). DBP municipalities have taken important steps since 1999 in order to halt this ongoing process which has meant constant violation of civic and cultural rights of minority groups living in Turkey. Looking at practices put forth by state commissioners evidences that their policies aim at suspending transformation in this vein created in last 15 years through local democracy mechanisms. In this regard, educational support centers, theatres, day care centers which have been working in line with *multi-lingualism and multi-culturalism* principles have either been closed down or made nonfunctional. Statement made by Mr. Osman Kaymak, current governor of Dersim/Tunceli province who was also appointed as the state commissioner is quite striking in terms of evidencing perspective of governors towards collective identity rights of minorities. Mr. Kaymak organized a meeting on 16/02/2017 after announcing that participation was mandatory and gathered all municipal personnel most of whom are Kurdish Alevis and said that “You are originally Turkomens”.

Province	Municipality	Actions Taken
Diyarbakır	Sur Municipality	Appointed state commissioner removed writing in Armenian and Assyrian from the signboard of municipality. Ancient Sur city is known to be one of the iconic symbols of multi-culturalism in the Middle East (08/12/2016)
Van	Edremit Municipality	Signboards in Armenian language were removed in Edremit, which is one of the cities where overwhelming majority of the population was Armenian before 1915 (20/01/2017)
Van	Erciş Municipality	All multilingual signboards in the city were removed (26/01/2017)
Tunceli / Dersim	Tunceli Municipality	“Dersim”, local name of the city, was removed from signboards of underground market, wedding hall, bus terminal and municipal building which belong to municipality. “Dersim” was replaced with “Tunceli”, the name given after mass massacres committed by the army in 1938 (14/02/2017).

Another set of actions taken by state commissioners after having control of municipalities has been suspension of activities and services having a great role in reproduction of Kurdish cultural identity. Majority of theatre and cinema related activities were conducted within municipalities. Initial examples of theatre plays in Kurdish language were performed in 2009.

- City Theatre of Diyarbakır Metropolitan Municipality was considered to have a pioneering role not only in Diyarbakır or nearby cities but also in international arena. After appointment of the state commissioner, 31 theatre players were dismissed and the theatre practically closed down (13/01/2017).
- 8 theatre players working at City Theatre were dismissed and the theatre practically closed down (30/11/2016).
- Ronahi Culture and Art Center in Ercis, Van was closed down (23/09/2016). Feqiyê Teyran Culture and Art Center in Hakkari was closed down (06/10/2016).



City Theatre in Diyarbakır Metropolitan Municipality & Zarokistan (Day Care Center)

- 39 personnel working at Zarokîstan Day Care Center which was founded by Diyarbakır Metropolitan Municipality were dismissed and these centers were dismantled (21/02/2017). Within the scope of Zarokîstan project, day care and kindergarten service was delivered in Kurdish, Zazaki and English to 4-6 year-old children coming from different socio-economic levels since 2 years. The state commissioner announced that centers will continue to operate but in Turkish and according to curriculum of Turkish Ministry of Education.
- Xeyri Şinik Day Care Center founded by Gürpınar Municipality in Van province was closed down by the state commissioner (23/02/2017). Building of the center was transferred to Provincial Directorate of Religious Affairs to be turned into a Quran Teaching Center for 4-6 year-old children. All writings in Kurdish within the building about mother tongue were removed. Classrooms were re-organized separately for boys and girls (23/02/2017).
- In May 2015, Day Care Centers were opened to deliver service in 4 different languages (Turkish, Kurdish, Arabic and Assyrian). These centers were closed down by the state commissioner. For the first time in Turkey, books in four different languages had been published for 4-6 year-old children (08/12/2016).
- Helin Şen Day Care Center founded by Erciş Municipality and also teaching in Kurdish was closed down by the state commissioner (23/09/2016).

- In Çatak, Van province, a bridge painted in green-red-yellow, traditional colours of the Kurds was repainted by the state commissioner as red and white, colours in Turkish flag (12/01/2017).

IV. Dismantling Memorialization Efforts

Majority of memorialization works realized by DBP municipalities focusing on human rights violations in reference idea of *Never Again!* were dismantled by state commissioners recently. Some of works which were considered to be inappropriate by state commissioners are as follows:

- Diyarbakir Military Prison No. 5 is a place where the military junta committed crimes against humanity following 1980 military coup and ranked as 4th by Time Magazine in the list of 10 Most Notorious Prisons Ever. In order to reveal truths about this prison, end impunity and turn this prison into a site of conscious, NGOs had already started an initiative in 2009. These efforts were turned into a coordinated project by Diyarbakir Metropolitan Municipality in 2014 and a museum was created. Tis museum was closed down by the state commissioner.



(1) Roboski Monument Before/After Destruction (08/01/2017) in Diyarbakir
(2) Orhan Doğan Monument Before/After Destruction (25/02/2017) in Cizre

- Orhan Doğan was a lawyer and human rights advocate in the 1990s of Kurdish region that witnessed disappearances and mass murders. Following his works in Human Rights Association, he was elected an an MP but arrested in 1994 and incarcerated for 10 years. A human rights monument dedicated to Orhan Doğan was erected by Cizre Municipality for the memory of Orhan Doğan. This monument was destroyed with the order of state commissioner appointed to Cizre Municipality.
- In 2011, 34 Kurdish villagers were killed due to an airstrike by Turkish jets in Roboski which is located near Turkish-Iraqi border. Following the massacre after which perpetrators enjoyed impunity, a monument was built to commemorate victims of

Roboski massacre. his monument was destructed with the order of state commissioner appointed to Kayapınar Municipality.

IV. State Commissioners Pursuing Political Interests of the Government

Following appointment of state commissioners, resources and facilities of municipalities started to be used in line with interests of AKP, the party in government.

- Bilal Özkan, state commissioner appointed to Sur Municipality, sent an SMS to all municipal personnel on 17th of February, 2017, and said that “Our country is going through a challenging period, this is like a war of independence so I say *yes* (in upcoming referendum) for a powerful Turkey” which is a sentence princely used by the AKP for the referendum to take place on 16th of April, 2017. Mr. Özkan had already posted that he will vote as yes through his social media accounts on 30/01/2017.
- Mr. Mekan Çeviren, appointed state commissioner to Diyan Municipality in Ağrı, placed signboards to all billboards in the city on 5th of February, 2017, which states “Yes to New Constitution” with his signature on it. Mr. Çeviren had enforced all shop owners in new years’ eve to place calendars having picture of R. Tayyip Erdoğan on it.
- Zeynep Alkış, Member of Central Administration Council of the AKP, has given conferences more than a dozen time in municipalities appointed a state commissioner in line with political agenda of the government. On 22nd of January, 2017, Ms. Alkış lectured in Mittani Culture Center of Nusaybin Municipality and said that “Gezi protests was one of the projects utterly designed by Germany and United Kingdom. Gezi protests were organized through using a tree as an excuse and people were divided into two camps. Specifically the youth provoked”.²

Analyzing cultural and social activities organized by municipalities appointed a state commissioner shows that while activities and services towards gender equality, multiculturalism were suspended on the one hand, a new policy shaped on the grounds of Islamism, nationalism, militarism, praising the state and disregarding of “the other” has been adopted on the other hand.

² “Nusaybin'de "15 Temmuz Ve Türkiye Gerçekleri" Konferansı”, 22 Ocak 2017, *Milliyet Gazetesi*, <<http://www.milliyet.com.tr/nusaybin-de-15-temmuz-ve-turkiye-gercekleri-mardin-yerelhaber-1795018/>>



(1) Children brought from villages to Ercis city lectured in armoured military vehicle as part of “We Embrace Our Future Project” organized by Ercis Municipality, Van (10/02(2017) (2) “Contest of Reading Quran” hosted by Nusaybin Municipality (2/03/2017)

VI. Dismissal of Municipal Personnel as a Form of Punishment

Two different mechanisms have been employed to dismiss or suspend municipal personnel in Kurdish cities. Either through issuing decrees directly with signature of Council of Ministers or via decisions directly made by state commissioners. Those dismissed by decrees were allegedly having an affiliation with terrorist organizations and they were not offered any compensation and severance pay. Moreover, dismissed personnel were also deprived of healthcare rights as well as employee personal benefits. On the other hand, municipal personnel directly dismissed or suspended from duty by state commissioners were not presented any official justification.

Looking at the profile of municipal personnel dismissed or suspended from duty evidences that majority of them have been members of trade unions considered to oppose policies of the government. Statement made by Genel-İş Trade Union, whose members are workers or subcontracted workers in municipalities is as follows: “Contracts of 1263 workers in Diyarbakır, Şanlıurfa, Mardin, Van, Batman, Şırnak and Hakkari municipalities were terminated so far while 185 of which were suspended. In March 2017, contracts of 100 members from Mersin, 51 from Tunnel, 62 from Ağrı were terminated”.³

According to information provided by Tümbel-Sen, the trade union where permanent civil servants or contracted civil servants can have membership with, 506 civil servants were dismissed in DBP municipalities, 400 civil servants were suspended while contracts of 355 civil servants were not renewed. In July 2017, 605 municipal employees were dismissed with a decree issued by the AKP government. Merging data provided by two different trade unions show that 2982 municipal personnel were dismissed so far. The

³ “Hukuksuzluk Bitsin Artık!”, *Genel-İş*, 21 March 2017, <<http://www.genel-is.org.tr/hukusuzluk-bitsin-artik,2,14450#.WNjNJxKGNE4>>

actual number has been quite higher than this since thousands of sub-contracted workers who have no union membership have also been dismissed.

VI. Conclusions

There had been a crucial progress in Kurdish cities despite level of local democracy fluctuated during 1999-2015 while promising developments occurred between Turkey and the European Union. Appointment of state commissioners has dismantled all local democracy mechanisms built since 1999. In the light of data presented in this report, it is evident that decision to dismiss elected co-mayors and to appoint state commissioners mainly aims protecting political interests of the government rather than interests of local people. Analyzing activities carried out by state commissioners after taking control of municipalities evidence that they mobilise available resources to transform political and social structure in Kurdish cities in line with the ideology of the government. In order to overcome this conundrum, there is an urgent need for release of imprisoned mayors, re-activation of city councils and putting an end to state commissioner regime in Kurdish cities.