Democracy and Violence: Anti-Kurdish Communal Violence in Turkey
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This paper analyzes the eruption of anti-Kurdish communal violence in Turkey in the 21st century. It aims to answer the following questions: Why violent attacks against Kurdish civilians escalated in a period when democratization has increasingly become the norm for resolving the Kurdish armed conflict? And why ordinary people played a major role in these violent attacks? To examine this puzzling relationship between democratization and ethnic violence, this paper uses (1) a new database on right-wing nationalist and communal violence in Turkey compiled by the author from newspaper archives (The Ethnic and Nationalist Violence in Turkey (ENViT) database), (2) interviews conducted by the author in regions with high levels of communal violence, and (3) archival data from secondary sources. The paper argues that contrary to what is widely assumed in the literature, the emergence of ethnic violence in post-conflict democratization processes is not necessarily due to deep divisions emanating from a history of ethnic warfare. Likewise, the rise of anti-Kurdish communal violence in the early 21st century is not related to socio-economic competition or deprivation, state incapacity, or revenge and retribution due to secessionist conflicts in Turkey. Instead, democratization-from-below led by the Kurdish population in Western cities of Turkey through social movement and electoral mobilization in 2000s was the critical factor in the emergence of anti-Kurdish communal violence in Turkey in the twenty-first century. More specifically, the paper shows that social movement mobilization by minorities demanding recognition plays a significant role in the transformation of ethnic boundaries on the ground and makes ethnicity a politically salient cleavage. This transformation is marked by a power struggle on the ground, which incorporates a violent contestation over ethnic boundaries.