

Turkey/Kurdistan: Erdogan's war on women and the Kurdish radical women's movements

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Kurdish women in one of the strongest and most radical women's movements in the world are taking a battering from the Turkish state with impunity - as Europe looks the other way.



Ayla Akat Ata, spokeswoman of Free Women's Congress (KJA), 8th March celebration 2014 when she was still an MP.

"We will resist and resist until we win!" chants Sebahat Tuncel before her mouth is forcibly shut by half a dozen police officers who drag her along the floor and detain her in early November.

Nine years ago, a convoy of victory signs, cheerful slogans, and flowers received Tuncel as she was released from prison to enter parliament, having been elected while still inside [1]. Tuncel, now in jail again, is one of dozens of Kurdish politicians from the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) or the regional Democratic Regions Party (DBP) arrested by the Turkish security forces since late October under Turkish president Erdogan's "anti-terror" operations against those challenging his authoritarian rule [2]. This crackdown follows the attempted coup in July and represents a re-escalation of the war between the state and the Kurdish movement since the summer of 2015, ending a two- and-a-half-year-long peace process [3]. Like the advice given to the German anti-terrorist squad in the 1980s "Shoot the women first!" the toxic masculinity of the state became apparent in its declaration of a war on women; the strength of the militant Kurdish women's movement poses the biggest threat to the system. Sebahat Tuncel's case is not unique.

At the end of October, Gültan Kisanak was detained [4]. She was the first female co-mayor of Diyarbakir Metropolitan Municipality and former MP, who spent two years in the 1980s in the notorious Diyarbakir prison, where she survived the most atrocious forms of torture, such as having to live for months in a dog hut full of excrements because she refused to say 'I am a Turk'. Her arrest was immediately followed by the violent arrest of Ayla Akat Ata [5], former MP and now spokeswoman of the Free Women's Congress (KJA), the largest women's umbrella organisation in Kurdistan and Turkey, which is among the 370 civil society organizations banned by the government since mid-November [6]. She was hospitalised several times due to police violence during her parliamentary term and survived assassination attempts.

Selma Irmak is among the MPs elected from prison, where she spent more than 10 years on

terrorism charges and participated in hunger strikes. Gülser Yildirim was imprisoned for five years before elections. Another MP is Leyla Birlik, who stayed with the civilians under military fire in Sirnak during the entire duration of the military lockdown, witnessing the brutal killings of countless civilians by the army. Her brother-in-law, Hacı Lokman Birlik [7], activist and film-maker, was executed by the army in October 2015; his corpse was tied to an army vehicle and dragged through the streets. Soldiers filmed this and sent the video to Leyla Birlik with the message “Come pick up your brother-in-law”.

The list goes on. We chose such courageous women as our representatives. They are now political prisoners despite being elected by more than five million people.

The ultra-conservative policies of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) under Erdogan have led to the rise of violence against women in Turkey over the last decade and a half [8]. Not only do high profile members of the administration, including Erdogan himself [9], frequently reject equality between women and men in favour of attitudes that normalise rape culture, gender violence and misogyny, the AKP further launches explicit physical attacks on women and LGBTI+ people. The hyper-masculine state not only collectively punishes the Kurdish community as separatists, terrorists, or conspirators against the state, it portrays Kurdish women activists as “bad women”, shameful whores and violators of the nuclear family.

Historically, rape and sexual torture, including post-mortem “virginity tests”, have been used by the Turkish state to discipline and punish women’s bodies as noted by Anja Flach in her book *Frauen in der Kurdischen Guerrilla* which has not been translated from German. In prisons, women are subjected to intimate searches to humiliate them sexually. Recently, soldiers stripped the clothes off Kurdish women militants’ corpses and shared these images on social media [10]. Another brutal video showed the Turkish army shooting guerrilla women in the head and throwing them off mountain cliffs. GermanG3 rifles were used in the video illustrating western complicity in these war crimes.

While such atrocities were often committed secretly in the 1990s, sharing images on social media is a new attempt at demoralising women’s resistance and demonstrating state power. These methods resemble those of ISIS across the border and violate all war conventions. Sexually abusing an activist woman, who dares to challenge male hegemony, aims to break her willpower and deter further activism. The attacks on women politicians need to be read in this context.

Long before mainstream media was under fire in Turkey, reporters of JinHa, the first all-women news agency of the Middle East, were attacked. Committed to an explicitly feminist lens in their work, JinHa’s workers exposed the state’s crimes from a gendered perspective. Now JinHa is banned and several members are in jail.

The HDP is the only progressive oppositional party left in Turkey [11] with its secular, diverse, pro-minority, pro-women, pro-LGBT rights and ecological agenda. It has by far the highest percentage of women in its ranks. Even without the system of co-presidency [12], a policy of the Kurdish freedom movement which ensures shared leadership between a woman and a man, the vast majority of female mayors are in the Kurdish regions. Through a decades-long struggle, especially encouraged by the imprisoned Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan, the active role of women in politics is a normal part of life in Kurdistan today.

The women of the HDP and DBP do not embody bourgeois ideas of representative politics and corporate feminism. Almost all politicians currently under attack have spent time in prison, been subject to police brutality, sexualised torture, assassination attempts or some form of violent treatment by the state. They are always at the forefront in the protests against the state and army.

Women were also significant actors in the peace process initiated by Abdullah Öcalan with the Turkish state in March 2013. Every meeting on Imrali Prison Island included women. In 2014, Öcalan recommended that women be represented in the meetings as an organised force, rather than only as individuals. Thus, Ceylan Bagriyanik joined the meetings as the representative of the women's movement. The Dolmabahçe Declaration [13], the first joint declaration between the warring parties included women's liberation as one of the ten points for justice and lasting peace. The state and media were unable to make sense of the Kurdish movement's insistence on the centrality of women's liberation in the peace process.

We face collective punishment for passing the highest election threshold in the world which requires a political party to win at least 10 per cent of the national vote to enter parliament. Our cities are razed to the ground, our loved ones murdered [14], burned alive, bombed, shot, or beaten to death. Our cultural heritage and environment are erased forever, our MPs dragged on the streets, our mayors replaced by governmental trustees against our will [15], our media censored [16], our social media blocked [17]. By destroying the possibility of peaceful, legal politics within democratic frameworks, Turkey has left the Kurds with no other option than self-defence. International institutions, above all the European Union, have failed the Kurdish people in appeasing Erdogan. In other words, western governments support the systematic elimination of one of the strongest and most radical women's movements in the world.

The philosophy of the Kurdish women's movement proposes that every living organism has its mechanisms of self-defence, like the rose with its thorns [18]. This concept is not defined in a narrow physical sense, but includes the creation of autonomous self-governance structures to organise social and political life. Protecting one's identity against the state through self-defence is partly enabled by building self-reliant political institutions.

In an era when women's naked corpses are exposed on social media by the army and elected officers are subject to torturous abuse by the capitalist-patriarchal state, women are fighting back to show that their honour is not up for men to define because honour does not lie between women's legs; it lies in our resistance, the resistance culture established by the trailblazers of our movement. Our jailed politicians defend this honour.

From prison, the HDP co-chair Figen Yüksekdağ sent this message [19]: "Despite everything, they can't consume our hope, or break our resistance. Whether in prison or not, the HDP and us, we are still Turkey's only option for freedom and democracy. And that's why they are so afraid of us. Do not, not a single one of you, allow yourself to be demoralised, do not drop your guard, do not weaken your resistance. Do not forget that this hatred and aggression is rooted in fear. Love and courage will definitely win".

Dilar Dirik

P.S.

* "Erdogan's war on women". Open Democracy. 17 November 2016:
<https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/dilar-dirik/erdogan-s-war-on-women>

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Footnotes

- [1] http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/18/opinion/18tuncel.html?_r=1
- [2] <https://roarmag.org/essays/hdp-arrests-dictatorship-turkey/>
- [3] <http://blog.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/2015/08/11/a-new-cycle-begins-in-turkey-pkk-conflict/>
- [4] <https://www.opendemocracy.net/nadje-al-ali-latif-tas-g-ltan-ki-anak/kurdish-women-s-battle-continues-against-state-and-patriarchy->
- [5] <https://www.opendemocracy.net/nadje-al-ali-latif-tas-ayla-akat/kurds-and-turks-are-at-edge-of-cliff>
- [6] <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-idUSKBN1370DP>
- [7] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/turkey-dragged-kurdish-man-video_us_56142087e4b022a4ce5fc79e
- [8] <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/tr/originals/2015/02/turkey-ozgecan-sex-crimes-murder.html>
- [9] ESSF (article 39545), [Turkey - Recep Tayyip Erdoğan: 'women not equal to men'](#).
- [10] <http://jinha.com.tr/en/ALL-NEWS/content/view/28874>
- [11] <https://www.opendemocracy.net/cuma-çiçek/hdp-focus-of-leftwing-opposition-beyond-prokurdish-mobilization>
- [12] <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/mona-tajali/promise-of-gender-parity-turkey-s-people-s-democratic-party-hdp>
- [13] <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/kurdish-peace-call-made-amid-row-on-security-bill.aspx?pageID=238&nID=78999&NewsCatID=338>
- [14] https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/turkey-under-fire-from-un-for-alarming-reports-of-rights-abuses/2016/05/10/0f9eccb7-45cd-4685-9483-181fd2cadf_story.html
- [15] <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-kurds-idUSKCN12Q19K>
- [16] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/30/turkey-shuts-media-outlets-terrorist-links-civil-servants-press-freedom>
- [17] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/2016/11/04/turkey-blocks-access-to-whatsapp-facebook-and-twitter/>
- [18] ESSF (article 39547), [Kurdish Women's Radical Self-Defense: Armed and Political](#).

[19] <https://www.hdp.org.tr/en/english/news/news-from-hdp/messages-from-our-co-chairs-and-mps/9200>