

“IN THE CONTEXT OF LIFE OR DEATH, NON-VIOLENCE IS A PRIVILEGE”

Ayla Akat Ata

- *The Kurdish activist who leads a radical project of feminist, anti-capitalist and anti-nationalist democracy*

By Laura Daudén

The conference room in a resort in the north-east of Brazil was packed, but what caught one's attention were the people missing. At the table that had been prepared for five, only two people were seated: activist, writer and PhD student at Cambridge Dilar Dirik and lawyer, activist and ex-parliamentarian Ayla Akat Ata.

Ayla was the only one from the group who had managed to leave Kurdistan – a territory divided up between Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran – to participate in the AWID Forum. Nobhar Mostafa, Meral Çiçek and Özlem Yasak did not have the same luck. The state of emergency in Iraq, the persecution of political opponents in Turkey and the constant attacks at the Syrian border by the Islamic State prevented them from travelling.

At Ayla's side, they would have talked about their struggle to implement a radical project based on democracy, ecology and women's liberation in one of the most

complex political and military contexts in the world. Speaking Turkish, between the smiles and applause, Ayla was not worried about hiding her discomfort. "I grew up in a state of emergency. I don't know how to live without a state of emergency. The harmony in this hotel is too much for me."

Ayla was born in Sur, in the heart of the Diyarbakir region in the north of Kurdistan (eastern Turkey). However, it is not the historical value of her hometown, with its hundreds of ancient buildings and structures that fills the lawyer's stories and memory. After more than one attempt at peace talks between the government of President Recep Erdogan and the Kurdish liberation movement, which began in 2013 and ended unsuccessfully in April 2015, Sur was the target of successive sieges and attacks by the Turkish army. The escalation of violence was brutal.

"For the first time in history, we saw the war come down from the mountains and into the cities. Now, Sur is full of soldiers. There are areas that were completely destroyed or burned by the state. Neighbourhoods were closed off for over nine months and the city remained under siege for weeks on end. And obviously, people were displaced. As with any war, this one affected primarily women and children", she explained.

Sur is not a random target for the Turkish government. In 2015, the city challenged Erdogan's despotic centralisation by proposing an autonomous local administration, similar to what other municipalities led by Kurdish political parties in this region have been adopting. Ayla affirms that the victims of the military offensive were not random either.

"We are an anti-nationalist and anti-militarist movement. We are against this kind of war and we can see that the Kurdish areas of self-government and self-administration were attacked. It wasn't random. It was an attack on a democratic system resisting an anti-democratic state. They went specifically to kill three women from our movement in Silopi. The army knew exactly where they were and knew that they were not armed fighters", Ayla explained. Ayla is one of the founders and spokespersons of the Free Women's Congress (KJA), a social organisation that brings together 501 delegates and conducts its work via 12 thematic committees focusing on a range of topics from diplomacy to ecology.

The political and administrative autonomy that explains the new wave of violence against the Kurds in Turkey is today, together with women's liberation, one of the most important pillars of the Kurdish resistance movement.

It has not always been like that. When the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) was officially created in 1978, in line with other Marxist-Leninist national liberation movements, its main objective was to create a new independent nation-state that would free Kurdistan - and the various peoples, from Armenians to Yazidis, living in its territory - from the artificial borders imposed by the Treaty of Lausanne signed in 1923 between European superpowers and the Ottoman Empire.

The paradigm began to change in 2000 at the hands of the movement's leader, Abdullah Öcalan. On the prison island of İmralı, where he has been serving a life sentence in solitary confinement since 1999, Öcalan developed the concept of "democratic modernity". He also dissolved the PKK to make way for the KCK, the Union of Kurdish Communities, an umbrella organisation with a congressional format.

The idea behind the new Kurdish liberation project, as Dilar Dirik explained to the audience in the hotel's conference room, is "to isolate the idea of the self-determination of the state". "We are victims of states that have been imposed on us, but creating another state is not the solution.

In fact, we think that it's the problem. We must separate our idea of freedom from the state", the activist affirmed. "We are fighting against strong cooperation between the nation-state, capitalism and patriarchy and we will never be able to disconnect one from the other."

The project is already a reality in various Kurdish territories and reached its peak during the revolution in Kobane, in the Rojava region in eastern Kurdistan (north of Syria). In the 1960s, this zone was targeted by the "Arab belt" policy elaborated by the Ba'ath Party regime of current president Bashar al Assad. It consisted of establishing Arab colonies in the region to alter the demographics of the area.

"The idea was to make the Arabs hostile towards the Kurds and vice-versa. It was an attempt to pit one community against the other, with one of them playing the role of an agent of the state", Ayla explained.

In 2012, the Kurdish movement decided to take over the city administration and put Öcalan's principles into practice. A revolution was declared and a social contract was signed. "The people of the region of Rojava formed a democratic opposition to Assad. They wanted to have the possibility of governing themselves and they had



the capacity to do so. It is very difficult to build self-determination without aligning oneself to one of the sides. But somehow, in spite of their ethnic and religious differences, these peoples succeeded in proposing the idea of a democratic nation in opposition to the nation-state – which is one of the main components of the capitalist system”, the lawyer stated.

“During the revolution in Rojava, military organisations, as well as civil and political organisations, succeeded in uniting Arabs, Kurds, Turks, Assyrians and Armenians around the concept of a democratic nation and in opposition to the idea of ‘one state, one nation’.”

As Ayla explained in a private conversation on the eve of the conference, this self-organisation was fundamental during the event that put Kobane in the international spotlight in 2014. After four months of resistance and hundreds of deaths, the city defeated the Islamic State. The struggle was widely exploited and romanticised by Western media, which was surprised by the images of Kurdish women of all ages taking up arms to defend the city.

It was not the first time Kurdish men and women had faced religious fundamentalism. In August, shortly before the attack on Kobane, the Yazidi population of the Iraqi city Shingal (or Sinjar) was left to its fate by the local Kurdish government and was massacred by the Isis forces, strengthened at the time by the seizure of the city of Mosul. This all occurred under the deafening silence of the actors involved in the Syrian war. The vague estimates that exist on the attack talk about 5,000 to 10,000 deaths, in addition to the 7,000 women who were kidnapped and held prisoner as sexual slaves (thousands of whom are still in captivity).

As Ayla explained, far from succumbing to the victimisation or the romanticisation of their struggle, the Yazidi women were the protagonists in the process to rebuild the city. Also, in a historical step for the Kurdish feminist movement, they created the first autonomous women’s councils in Shingal.

The same process occurred in Kobane. “Islamist forces affirmed that the attack was halal, which is the word for permissible or legal. So, they would be allowed to do whatever they wanted with the land and Kurdish women. But the women from Kobane decided to resist. They did not surrender and set up self-defence units.”

For the lawyer, “there is an ideological reality behind this decision and it is not just a question of a physical force opposing an oppressive force. This is the result of decades of struggle, decades of work, and of Kurdish women’s desire and the sacrifices they have made to organise themselves.”

On the morning of the debate, the issue took centre stage once again. When questioned by one of the activists in the audience on the apparent contradiction between armed self-

defence and the principles of the feminist movement, Ayla answered without hesitation. “The Kurdish movement is anti-militarist, but in this context of life or death, saying you are non-violent is a privilege”, a response that was met with loud applause.

Despite the attention given to the Kurdish women’s strategies of self-defence, organisations and movements such as the Free Women’s Congress (KJA) to which Ayla belongs have proven that the Kurdish feminist struggle is central in all areas of life and builds new relations between local and central structures.

The KJA was officially founded in 2015, but it dates back to the resistance struggles of women such as Leyla Zana. Leyla was the first Kurdish woman to become a parliamentarian in Turkey - a victory that Ayla Akat and other women repeated years later. Leyla shocked the central government by giving part of her inaugural speech in the Kurdish language. “I will do my best to fight for fraternity between Turks and Kurds”, she affirmed. At that time, speaking Kurdish in public places was still illegal. Three years after the speech, Zana’s party was banned and she was arrested and sentenced to 15 years in prison.

Ayla upholds the path forged by Leyla. Representing the province of Batman, she was elected for two consecutive mandates, between 2007 and 2015. In parliament, she was a member of the Committee of Justice and Constitution and the Committee of Equal Opportunities for Men and Women. She also participated in the special committee on constitutional reform: of the 12 members, she was the youngest and the only woman. In 2013, when the peace process between Turks and Kurds began, she was one of the first women politicians to meet Abdullah Öcalan in prison.

One of the most successful - and innovative - political initiatives defended by Ayla and other Kurdish women politicians is the co-presidency system. The system establishes that all leadership positions - whether in the parties or the community councils - must be shared by one man and one woman.

“It may seem unbelievable that people in the 21st century are persecuted for demanding quotas for women, but this is what happened to us. Many of us face sentences for defending this system, which establishes that the presidency of any institution must always be shared by one man and one woman”, she explained. Despite resistance from men and the institutions, co-presidency is already a fact in Kurdish cities in Turkey. According to Ayla, after the 2014 municipal elections 105 cities in Kurdistan adopted the system.

Other changes have gradually been introduced to society thanks to the work of the feminist movement. For example, the “houses for women”, which offer shelter and care to Kurdish women facing harassment and sexual or domestic violence. Any case involving gender violence is judged by autonomous tribunals formed exclusively

by women. The educational system was also reformulated to include the history of women in the curriculum and there have been changes in the communications sector. For example, Jinha, the first all-female news agency in the Middle East, was created.

"Our idea of liberation is one that is truly reflected and expressed in society", Ayla affirmed. Even so, for her, all of the work already done is not enough and not even the all-so-elusive peace in the region alone could guarantee the radical democratic freedom that the Kurdish women are proposing.

"Yes, we want to live in equality and freedom with the people with whom we live. Yes, we do want a new definition of homeland and citizenship. We want the right to education in our mother tongue. We want a central government that gives more power to local bodies. We want a new definition for secularism by which all religions, all identities and all languages can be expressed and can survive in this context. If there were peace, perhaps some of these demands would be met. Many feminist and national liberation movements went through the experience of sending people back to their homes once the general idea of liberation had been reached. But we are not here to be sent back. The women's struggle is a much longer fight."

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On October 26 2016, a few weeks after this article was written, Ayla Akat was arrested by the Turkish police while participating in a protest in front of Diyarbakir city hall against the arrest the day before of Kurdish co-mayors Firat Anli and Gültan Kisanak. Former parliamentarian Gültan was the first woman to be elected mayor of the city and is also an important figure in the Kurdish feminist movement.

The three were held for four days and, after being tried by a local court, they were transferred to the Kışanak maximum security prison over 1,300 kilometres from Diyarbakir. Their lawyers were not notified.

The public prosecutor accused Gültan of "being a member of an armed terrorist group" and Firat of "attempting to separate a portion of land under state sovereignty". As for Ayla, she was charged with "running a terrorist organisation".

Since the arrests, the Women's Free Congress has led an international campaign to pressure the Turkish government to release the group.

As mentioned in the article, the region of Diyarbakir is the epicentre of President Recep Erdoğan's latest attack on Kurdish opponents. In October and November,

dozens of activists, authorities and journalists were detained and television and radio stations were invaded and closed down.



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