

Bakur Rising: Democratic Autonomy in Kurdistan

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Urban Warfare

The Kurdish experiment in radical municipalism obliges us to rethink the issue of state violence and how new worlds can be created as well as defended.



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In recent years, following the collapse of the peace process between the Turkish state and the Kurdish freedom movement, the struggle for autonomy in the towns and cities of northern Kurdistan, or Bakur, has undergone a significant shift from a non-violent re-organization of social and political life to a militant self-defense movement.

The declaration of round-the-clock curfews in the summer of 2016 left many Kurdish cities under a *de facto* military siege, setting the scene for an urban war. Local youth dug trenches and built barricades to protect their neighborhoods and their democratic autonomous initiatives from police raids. While the guerrillas who had until then stayed up in the mountains came down to support the youth, Turkey's special forces tore apart towns and cities and razed entire neighborhoods to the ground. According to a UN report, at least 2,000 people died during these clashes.

<https://roarmag.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/final-1.jpg> [The devastation of the war was not just material, however. The fact that Turkish special forces burnt civilians alive, stripped people

naked, did not allow the bodies of those killed to be buried, and widely circulated images of mutilated dead bodies and cut-off limbs to celebrate their victory via social media, made a lasting mark on Kurdish people. Today, the experiment with democratic autonomy in urban Kurdistan has come to an end as thousands are imprisoned, organizations closed down, elected officials removed from office and towns and cities occupied by heavily armed security forces.

From Anti-Colonialism to Democratic Autonomy

The idea of democratic autonomy developed in Kurdistan during the late 2000s, in the context of an armed struggle against Turkish occupation and colonization. In his book *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon argues that colonization is violence. The defining characteristic of a colonial regime is that its violence destroys nature, people and culture without ever needing to build consent. Many Western liberal legal regimes were formed within a framework of colonization. Such regimes protect the state's monopoly of violence against colonized communities as well as the right of the state to exert violence against its "others." By alluding to the imagined threat posed by the "other" to resort to violence to defend itself, liberal law transforms this possibility into an issue of security and thereby legitimizes and legalizes its own organized violence.

As the only internationally recognized discourse for the oppressed, claims of human rights violations are in turn burdened with the responsibility of producing evidence that the state has transgressed its legal and legitimate use of monopolized violence. Also, in order to sustain their legitimacy, human rights institutions are obliged to unquestionably condemn the violence used by actors other than the state and hence further contribute to the normalization of the state's monopoly on violence. Fanon invites those who struggle against colonization to create a world different from the one Western liberal law institutes.

Postcolonial writers who follow in Fanon's footsteps criticize the nation states that emerged after the anti-colonial struggles. They point out that nationalism has created a new hegemony in these states, shifting power from colonial elites to national elites and acting as a means by which colonized peoples enter the stage of global capitalism as workers and capitalists. In this process, peasants, women and the poor — who actively participated in the anti-colonial struggle — are sent back home, and the means to govern, produce, reproduce and defend themselves are confiscated from them by the newly independent state apparatus. They are then transformed into citizen-subjects capable of operating within and subjecting themselves to the social, economic and legal context shaped by a global capitalist reality.

In Kurdistan, the idea of democratic autonomy emerged as a response to this colonial and postcolonial experience. The Kurdish freedom movement can be understood as a movement that seeks to reclaim the means of self-governance, self-production, self-creation and self-defense from the Turkish state and the ruling elites of Kurdistan. Democratic autonomy invites people to transgress social relations and loyalties that have long been imposed on them. It promotes spaces where forms of representation and belonging can multiply to resist the homogenizing effect of the nation state, of the nuclear family, of capital and of positivist science.

Autonomy is not a turn inwards, nor does it denote independence from external relations. To the contrary: autonomy involves an engagement with multiple levels of conversation, negotiation and exchange. It suggests horizontality in place of the verticality instituted by the nation state and capital. Whereas capital seeks to secure geographies for accumulation, whereas the state system tries to homogenize social identities, and whereas the modern legal system attempts to monopolize the law and the legitimate use of force, democratic autonomy opens these up to a future of indeterminacy and possibility.

For the Kurdish freedom movement and its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, democratic autonomy is therefore a political form in which Kurds, Turks and other people in the Middle East can pursue empowerment and liberation and can struggle against nationalism, patriarchy and capitalism without recourse to the

state-form. As such, the movement argues that the pursuit of democratic autonomy can serve as a means of peace-making in the wider region.

Autonomy and the Peace Process

Social scientists have long debated why post-conflict societies — from Ireland to South Africa — often face the disempowerment of emancipatory social forces. Some believe this to be a result of the fact that national regimes and peace processes have often been formulated by global capitalist actors whose primary goal is to secure capital accumulation, consolidate the nation state and invalidate ideologies alternative to neoliberalism.

Having learned from the negative experiences of the past, latecomers to the conflict resolution process like the PKK and the FARC therefore argue that the peace process should be seen as a social and political struggle more than a diplomatic endeavor — as a means rather than an end in itself. Society must exercise its self-defense and increase its capacity for freedom *during* the peace process. In other words, the spaces that open up during peace negotiations and peace struggles have to be seized upon as spaces for exercising freedom *here and now*. Only a society that can defend and govern itself can achieve peace without losing its potential for radical social transformation and its capacity to build alternative worlds.

This explains why the Kurdish freedom movement in Turkey has created various local, national and international institutions, brought various sections of the Kurdish and Turkish public together and formed new alliances during the peace process. It aimed to expand the space of negotiation by including new actors in the process through the many conferences it held and the three political parties it created. Meanwhile, Abdullah Öcalan, as the key negotiator of the Kurds, used the “negotiating table” as a platform to formulate a legal framework for the struggle for liberation.

The Turkish government, however, had other expectations of the peace process. It aimed at increasing its regional power by declaring itself as the representative of Kurds and Turks alike. Its objective was the disempowerment of the Kurdish freedom movement’s discursive, representational and operational capacity. It hoped to secure Kurdish territories for the investment of capital, and to consolidate state power by promoting a collective Islamic identity that unite the varying historical trajectories of Kurds and Turks alike. In 2015, two years after it began, the Turkish government gave up the peace process and resorted once more to military means to deal with the “Kurdish question” — a decision that appears to have been motivated at least part by the fact that Kurdish groups were much more effective at using the peace process as a way to address various oppositional groups inside Turkey and bring them together against the policies of Erdogan’s AKP government.

From Model to Movement

While Öcalan introduced the concept of democratic autonomy to the vocabulary and discourse of the Kurdish freedom movement in the early 2000s, it only became a subject of debate, criticism and elaboration for a wider public beyond the movement’s cadres after the launching of a key meeting in Diyarbakır in 2010, when Kurdish activists invited Turkish journalists and intellectuals to evaluate their proposed solution to the Kurdish question. There, they presented their ideas of democratic autonomy and encountered a fierce opposition — not because the invited journalists and intellectuals were hostile to the recognition of Kurdish identity, but because they deemed this proposal to be utterly unrealistic.

Apart from a reform to the constitution that would exclude any reference to ethnicity, the proposal promoted by the Kurds had little to say about the restructuring of the Turkish state and the correcting of past wrongs. Rather, it included an elaborate model of self-governance and power-sharing where

references like “people’s parliaments”, “communes”, “peasants”, and “women” expressed a desire to build a radical democracy in the political and economic realm as well as in health, education and other fields.

For the intellectuals of Turkey, who at the time were heavily invested in the fantasy of liberal democracy and the rule of law, the proposal seemed to be distracting energy and attention from “real issues.” However, only a few years later, that which was once deemed unrealistic was already being practiced in many cities and towns across Kurdistan. Moreover, and somewhat ironically, the desires that informed the Gezi protests of 2013, when a million people took the streets of Istanbul and cities across Turkey, had an undeniable affinity with the demands for democratic autonomy as formulated by the Kurdish opposition.

Democratic autonomy in the Kurdish cities primarily involved the creation of assemblies at the local and regional level. Residential assemblies in neighborhoods, towns and cities would make decisions concerning infrastructure and other important social issues. In the local elections of 2009, the Kurdish opposition gained 97 municipalities and expanded this number to 99 in 2014. Now, however, these new municipal authorities had to respond to the demands of the unofficial people’s assemblies, limiting their decision-making capacity and devolving the power of educated, middle-class elites and professionals to everyday people and workers. In addition to the general popular assemblies, there were also thematic assemblies on health, justice, the economy and education that aimed to democratize social policy and local governance.

While the economy assembly encouraged the formation of cooperatives and held meetings with businessmen, trade organizations and entrepreneurs along with the poor and the unemployed, the assemblies on public health provided free services and educated health workers. Academies opened up around Kurdistan providing ideological formation and skills training for those who participated in the construction of democratic autonomy, while truth and justice assemblies aimed to resolve local disputes to ensure that people in Kurdistan would stop using formal institutions of law and to promote the dissemination and democratization of community justice.

Another important characteristic of the democratic autonomy experiment in Kurdistan has been its strong feminist component. The Kurdish women’s movement formed all-female assemblies in towns and cities and women held the right to veto decisions concerning women made in mixed-gender collectives. Furthermore, all assemblies and all formal institutions — including the municipality itself — had one woman and one man serving as co-presidents. In many mixed assemblies, the movement achieved the goal of equal representation of women and men.



Advances and Challenges

Between 2009 and 2015, different local, regional and national institutions and organizations — including assemblies, parties and congresses — continued to spread across Kurdistan. The Kurds already had extensive experience in building new models of self-governance as they had developed various organizations throughout the 1990s and 2000s to document human rights violations in the Kurdish regions — including forced displacements, disappearances and extra-judicial killings — and to assist villagers who had come to city centers as a result of the government's evacuation and destruction of their villages. The new forms of democratic autonomy built on these past experiences and were quickly put in place.

The strength of the experiment in democratic autonomy in Kurdistan came from dispute rather than harmony. Democracy was achieved by the fact that jurisdictions overlapped and sovereignties were being erased. It was precisely the social mobility and conflict between local actors generated by the creation of various assemblies, congresses, parties and institutions that caused more and more people to enter into local processes of decision-making and implementation. However, there were also some important problems with the construction and implementation of democratic autonomy in Bakur.

First of all, the model had been delineated in fairly detailed fashion beforehand, first by Öcalan and then by the PKK more generally, allowing it to become a means of social engineering. Second, the language of democratic autonomy was foreign to most people, and as such it produced movement elites who were experts in speaking this language at the expense of lay people on whom it imposed an alienating vocabulary. Third, autonomy was often interpreted as *national* autonomy and was understood to be the provision of services by the Kurdish movement rather than the state, without problematizing the wider relationship of “service provision” under capitalism, statism and patriarchy. Finally, certain sections of the population, especially the disadvantaged youth, could not be successfully incorporated into the institutions of democratic autonomy and remained isolated in their own organizations.

At the same time, however, this period was also one in which the Kurds further developed their repertoire of oppositional action. For one, the emergence of an autonomous government within the context of the war against ISIS in Rojava (northern Syria) influenced the struggle in Bakur immensely. In Rojava, the Kurdish freedom movement achieved universal recognition by means of armed struggle, and Kurdish youths learned and disseminated the tactics and strategies of urban warfare there.

Moreover, the peace process and the ceasefire between the Turkish army and the Kurdish forces allowed different people to visit and consult with the guerrillas at the PKK headquarters in the Qandil mountains of northern Iraq. Notably, the visibility and legitimacy that the freedom fighters acquired during the peace process firmly lodged the struggle in the imagination of ordinary Kurds. As opposed to the claustrophobia of urban spaces shaped by colonialism, capitalism and the patriarchal family, as well as the everyday conflicts that the formation of democratic autonomy inevitably entailed, guerrilla warfare represented an escape from family and work, an intimacy with nature, friendship and power. This was especially true for the urban youth. To the extent that they felt excluded from both formal political institutions and spaces of democratic autonomy, they popularized new practices within the cities that mimicked guerrilla warfare and transformed urban spaces into spaces of liberation here and now by means of armed resistance. Starting as self-defense units in neighborhoods fighting against the drug trade, prostitution and theft, these armed squads increasingly turned into urban guerrilla formations protecting neighborhoods from state violence.

Finally, people's relationship to rural areas underwent a major change during this time. Whereas in the previous period people's relationship with the rural areas had been uprooted by the experience of state violence and forced displacement, now urban actors slowly began to reattach themselves to the villages and the mountains. Children, women, men, party members and lay people, educated and non-educated, youngsters and elders walked along long roads into the countryside, resisting security forces and risking their lives together, engaging in multiple horizontal negotiations and conversations among themselves and with the guerrilla and security forces alike.

Urban Warfare

In the Kurdish cities, the youth and police often clash, with the former using stones and Molotov cocktails, and the latter rubber bullets, gas bombs and pressurized water. Already in 2013, however, these regular skirmishes had developed into more violent confrontations. While the guerrilla forces and the army maintained their ceasefire, a number of youth were shot during protests in the city. Moreover, those in urban areas also faced long prison sentences whenever the police caught them. Many of the youth were sons and daughters of the displaced, with little prospects in formal education and employment — contributing to an explosive social situation in the cities.

When ISIS attacked Kobani in 2014 and it began to look like the Turkish state was enabling the Kurdish city's siege, the youth took to the streets all over Bakur. That was the first time when the Turkish state realized the size and power of the Kurdish youth movement, and the fact that many of these youths were now lightly armed and well organized. After the defeat of ISIS at Kobani, the youth dug trenches in their neighborhoods to stop police raids aimed at arresting them. While the trenches were filled-up at Öcalan's request for de-escalation during the peace process, they were dug out again once the process collapsed.

Towards the end of 2015, Turkish special forces attacked these trenches with overwhelming force and a number of cities remained under siege for several months, while civilians were bombarded by tanks and targeted by snipers. Some of the guerrilla forces from the nearby mountains joined the youth in their campaign of self-defense. In late 2016, however, all rebelling cities were brought back under state control and reoccupied by state forces. Kurdish urban dwellers were able to survive the siege only because they shared food and safe spaces and had already established some basic autonomous health provision. Throughout 2017, in the wake of the failed coup attempt of the previous summer, the Turkish state engaged in a broad crackdown on all of its opponents, arresting Kurdish politicians, activists and youth. Many of the destroyed urban areas were confiscated by the state with the intention of rebuilding the cities in ways that would prevent any future insurgency.

The experiment with democratic autonomy in Kurdish cities and towns might seem like an extreme case in terms of the violence it unleashed from the state. Still, the Kurdish case poses some very important questions for those who want to imagine an alternative future to capitalism, the nation state and the patriarchal family. Although short-lived, the Kurds' experiment with democratic autonomy in Bakur, the various institutions they created and the negotiations they engaged in energized Turkey as a whole. On the other hand, because there was always already the external threat of the state, the internal problems that emerged in the process of self-governance remain undebated. Most importantly, the Kurdish case obliges us to rethink the issue of law and violence and how new worlds can be created as well as defended.

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