

The improvised art of an imprisoned artist in Turkey

by Duygu Yildiz - 29/11/2017 09:43



Her canvas is whatever she can find, she paints using herbs, and her paintbrush is her own hand.

On Saturday, Amnesty International opened an exhibition displaying the artworks of the imprisoned Journalist and artist Zehra Dogan. Present at the exhibition, was the mayor of Geneva, Remy Pagani, and the former Co-mayor of Sur, Fatma Sik.

Zehra Dogan's art pieces reached Europe from Diyarbakir Prison and will be up on display until December 10th. Speaking at the opening ceremony, Amnesty International representative Emily Baud argued that the imprisonment of Zehra Dogan demonstrates the lack of democracy in Turkey. Dogan was arrested for her paintings.

Zehra Dogan is one of the many imprisoned members of the press who lead a life of suffering in one of the biggest prisons for journalists, Turkey. Zehra is also a painter in Turkey, where she regularly produces art pieces on Kurdish identity, culture and

resistance.

She was arrested on the 23rd of June, 2016 in the Kurdish populated, southeastern city of Mardin located in the province of Nusaybin. The charges the state pressed against her are familiar to many of the Kurdish dissidents who have been unjustly imprisoned. She was accused of having 'membership in a terrorist organisation' and 'making propaganda for a terrorist organisation.' In other words, she has been accused of having affiliations with the armed Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK).

At the time of her arrest, Zehra was working for JINHA, a pro-Kurdish women-run news agency, which was shut down by decree laws after Turkey declared a state of emergency in the aftermath of the failed coup attempt on July 15th, 2016.

As a Kurdish journalist, an artist, a woman, and a feminist, she embodies almost everything the ruling AKP party hates. The state prosecutor made this evident the most when her paintings were described as not being 'innocent'. It would be reasonable, however, to believe that the true reason for Zehra's arrest was that she reported from Nusaybin, where a military curfew was ordered due to clashes between the PKK and the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK).

In Turkey, a military curfew is usually declared when the Turkish Armed Forces have something to hide, whether it's the wholesale destruction of cities or the extrajudicial killing of civilians. For someone like Zehra, a Kurdish journalist, to be reporting from such a place was not just seen as a disturbance, it was seen as a crime. From August 2015 until March 2016, over 60 military curfews were declared by the TSK, and [according to the pro-minorities Peoples' Democratic Party \(HDP\)](#), at least 487 civilians were killed in curfew zones.

As the HDP statement put it, "The politics of war initiated by the AKP government have caused the death of at least 749 civilians, including 9 children and 96 women." Zehra decided to uncover what exactly was going on. But when the government couldn't go after her journalism, they decided to go after her art instead.

The reporting that was eventually used to imprison Zehra is an art form in itself. While on the ground, when all human rights were suspended, she didn't hesitate to write and paint the real human stories taking place in the war. It was this combination, of truth and art, which made her a threat to the state.

She painted Taybet Inan, a mother of eleven, who was shot by police snipers and left for dead in the middle of the street. Her family tried to help her but were blocked by security officials. At the age of 57, Taybet Inan died in pain, and her dead body was left on the street for seven days.



Painting of Taybet Inan by Zehra Dogan.

Zehra also painted Kemal Kurkut, a university student, who was shot dead by police during the Diyarbakir Newroz celebrations on 21st March 2017. At the age of 23, Kurkut was an unarmed civilian and a survivor of the Ankara Train Station bomb attack by Islamic State (IS).



Painting of Kemal Kurkut by Zehra Dogan.

Zehra didn't only paint and write about North Kurdistan though, indeed she was granted the Metin Goktepe Journalism Awards for her report on the Yazidi Women who suffered from IS.

Zehra was released by the court pending a trial at 9th of December but was later detained again in July 2017. She was sentenced to 3 years of imprisonment. She was only guilty of one thing, to reveal what they tried to hide: war crimes.

Zehra became the first person to be imprisoned for painting in Turkey after the public prosecutor used her art-pieces as 'evidence' of her so-called crimes. She is currently behind bars in the Diyarbakir type-E Prison. She has been banned from receiving painting materials from the prison administration and is thus compelled to make use of what is available to her.

Her canvas might be a newspaper on one day and a collection of biscuit wrappers on the other. She uses her fingers as a paintbrush and tries to make use of coffee, honey, ginger, vegetables and herbs to colour her paintings.

Prison authorities might be able to jail Zehra, but they can't limit her art.

'Artists should never stop creating art in Kurdistan and the Middle East. Our art should be fed from the land which gives us life.' Zehra once said in an interview. 'Only women and artists can destroy those hegemony who are greedy for blood and exploitation', she contended, while emphasising the importance of women struggle.