

# Meet Gultan Kisanak: from her daughter

by Evin Jiyan Kisanak - 02/03/2018 10:17



My mother, Gultan Kisanak, was born in 1961 when intense conflicts between left and right wing organizations were taking place. Neighbourhoods were separated by clear borders, Alevis' still had memories of the 1938 Dersim massacre, and unease pervaded the air. Growing up under these circumstances, she was the youngest child of her family. After attending elementary school and high school in Elazığ, she started studying at Dicle University, Faculty of Education in 1978. It was a time when Kurds sought to chart a new political course that would move beyond the confines of the Turkish left. As debates and conflicts continued to divide the left and right, Kurds introduced what they felt was the colonial condition they experienced in Turkey. Thousands of Kurds were taken into custody, many were tortured, and some even disappeared.

Gultan Kisanak was also arrested when she was a young university student in Diyarbakır, in 1980 just before the Turkish Military Coup d'Etat on 12 September. She learned of the coup not from televisions, but through incredible torture in prison. In the face of this all, she still proudly announced her Kurdish identity "I am not a

Turk; I am a Kurd” she used to say to her torturers knowing very well what the risks were. She even had to endure six months in the doghouse of Captain Esat Oktay, and his dog “Jo” for uttering this phrase. This is the courage of my mother.

Years after the horrors of the 1980s, Diyarbakir Military Prison No. 5 is still notorious, both to the people who reside in Turkey, and even across the world. One of the worst incarceration facilities in the world, it is a prison where gruesome torture methods are unparalleled, it is a laboratory for cruelty.

For two years, my mother stayed in this prison which is notorious for its violence.

One year after she was released from Prison No. 5, she was arrested again and spent two years in Elazig Prison. When she was released, the country was still affected by the results of the coup d'état: newspapers and journals were banned, political activities were forbidden, and state violence was omnipresent.

But, Gultan Kisanak, unhindered and unafraid, never give up her longing for “truth”, nor did she give up the courage she always had to seek it. She took the university entrance exam again so that she could tell more people about the truth. In 1986 she started studying at Ege University, Faculty of Communication, in the Public Relations Department of Journalism in Izmir. She has always clearly articulated why she made that choice, “If I become a journalist” she says, “I can confront injustice, I can be the voice of the unheard”. On the 16<sup>th</sup> of March 1988, she was taken into custody while she was protesting Saddam Hussein’s Massacre of Halabja. She was detained, yet again, for another year.

In 1990, she finally graduated from the Department of Journalism. During those years, the Kurds started to publish a weekly newspaper named *Yeni Ulke (New Country)*. She worked at *Yeni Ulke* between 1990-92. The political moment that confronted her at this time was that of the intense conflicts between the PKK and the Turkish government. Thousands of villages were evacuated, many were set on fire and razed to the ground. It is estimated that three million villagers were forcibly displaced, a very difficult but important truth to write about for sure. My mother and the staff at *Yeni Ulke* realized that a weekly newspaper was not enough to keep up with the times, they needed a daily. On the 30<sup>th</sup> of May 1992, they announced the founding of *Ozgur Gundem (Free Agenda)*, a newspaper dedicated entirely to the truth of what the Turkish government was doing to Kurdish villages. They set themselves up for a task and duty that seemed almost impossible in the 90s. While military tutelage seemingly gave way to a civilian government, as far as Kurdish provinces were concerned, the State of Emergency declared in 1987 never ended until 2002. Reporting was risky, and many were murdered by unidentified assailants

for publishing and spreading news. Reporting and distributing newspapers, to the Government, was a crime punishable by incarceration, torture, and death. Anyone could mete out the state's perverted form of justice, and nobody would get caught.

Although I was very young during those years, I still remember how I felt. I used to run around the corridors of the newspaper office, and familiar smiles and the elders who gave them would disappear. I often wondered what had happened to them.

In the following days, I would start to see their photos on the desks and walls of the newspaper office.

17,000 people were murdered by unidentified assailants during the 90s. But that did not deter independent journalists from the pursuit of telling their stories. My mother worked in a variety of positions in most of the newspapers that came to birth within the tradition of free journalism that blossomed from 1990 to 2004. She was an editor in chief, an editorial coordinator and a news director. In the role of a coordinator, she would often travel around the country to visit, discuss and inspire representatives of the free press. In every city she would visit, she was taken into custody.

Apart from the politics and journalism, she also fought for gender equality. In 2004, she started working as a social policy consultant in the Baglar Municipality in Diyarbakir. She did so in the cause of women, and worked effortlessly to design social policies aimed at disadvantaged groups. The municipality opened the "Kardelen Women's House", a sanctuary for women subjected to violence and a place where they could attend vocational courses. They reached more than 10,000 women in their first year. At a time when the ongoing war was depriving women of their most basic needs, impoverishing them, and forcing them to migrate to the cities, the Kardelen Women's House was an essential space amid intense violence. The war caused women to be detached from traditional forms of production and subjected them to more gender-based violence. My mother was one of the many women concerned with supporting her sisters.

In 2004, 9 Kurdish women were elected as mayors (Van/Bostanici, Agri/Dogubeyazit, Urfa/Viransehir, Diyarbakir/Baglar.) The new female mayors founded women's counselling centres, and women's cooperatives in every province where they were elected.

My mother was also a pioneer in this new movement to set the political stage for Kurdish women. In 2007, Gultan Kisanak became one of the independent candidates of the "Thousand Hopes" campaign in Diyarbakir, 13 years after members of the Kurdish Democracy Party (DEP) PMs were arrested in 1994. 8 of the 22 elected members of parliament were women. The Thousands of Hopes Campaign and its

MPs demanded equal political, social and economic rights for Kurds, as well as education in their mother tongue.

In 2010, Gultan Kisanak and Selahattin Demirtas were elected as the co-chairs of the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP). Of course, the co-presidency was not legally recognized yet. However, the process that began with Aysel Tugluk's and Ahmet Turk's election as co-chairs in the Democratic Society Party's (DTP) first congress in 2006, was legalized thanks to the amendment to the Law on Political Parties in 2014 as a result of 8 years of struggle. Gultan Kisanak served as a co-chair of BDP from 2010 to 2014.

Those were years of tragedy and hope. It was tragic that 10,000 people working under the banner of the Kurdistan Communities' Union (KCK) were arrested on the 14<sup>th</sup> of April 2009. But it brought hope to many when a peace delegation that brought 34 guerrillas from Qandil and people from Makhmur (a Kurdish refugee camp) arrived in Turkey through the Habur Border Gate on 19 October 2009[1]. They sought peace, but many of them were arrested. This was the nature of the time: tragedy and hope was cyclical, bewildering, anxiety-inducing.

One of the most tragic, and traumatizing events was the Roboski Massacre. On the 28<sup>th</sup> of December 2011, 34 civilians, most of whom children, were killed during a bombardment of Roboski village by Turkish warplanes. This left a deep wound in the hearts of the Kurdish community, which has still not healed. My mother cried out this deep hurt and anger felt against this massacre in parliament on behalf of all of us.[2]

Two years later, peace negotiations officially started between the Republic of Turkey and the PKK. This process was declared when a letter written by Abdullah Ocalan was read out to a crowd of over one million people during the Newroz celebrations in Diyarbakir, on 21 March 2013. We were one step closer to peace and equality.

In March 2014, my mother became the first female mayor of Diyarbakir. 34 years prior, she was languishing in the prisons which subjected her to the most gruesome torture. Turning Diyarbakir Prison into a museum, and confronting the past with honesty was among the first actions she wanted to take as a mayor. She knew, first-hand, about the crimes against humanity that were committed in that prison, and she sought to do everything possible to ensure it didn't happen again.

My mother had many plans.

But shortly after the elections in June 2015, the political situation started to deteriorate again. In the hopes of a peaceful peace process, many of the pioneers in the BDP entered into an alliance with the Turkish-left to forge a pro-minorities, the

left-wing party focused on LGBT rights, environmental stewardship, anti-militarism and a peaceful resolution to the Kurdish question in Turkey.

After the HDP managed to surpass the 10% electoral threshold, urban wars broke out in cities such as Cizre, Diyarbakir/Sur and Nusaybin. The Turkish State had declared a war on Kurds. Whole cities were set on fire and hundreds of people were killed. More than 500,000 people became homeless and were displaced.[3] After the failed coup attempt in July 2016, Turkey declared the State of Emergency. Ankara appointed 'trustees' to more than 90 municipalities and arrested the democratically elected mayors.

Gultan Kisanak, my mother, was targeted in this purge. She has been kept in Kocaeli F Type Prison since 31 October 2016. Her confinement puts her in a similar condition with the mayors, co-chairs of the HDP and other members of parliament arrested in the State of Emergency. Nearly all of the provincial and district members of the party – which gained more than 6 million votes in the general elections – were taken into custody or arrested.

There was once a time when the Turkish state declared that “There is no such thing as a Kurd.” Kurds reached a point where the HDP received millions of votes, won a great number of municipalities, and surpassed the 10% electoral threshold. The Kurds and their friends did the impossible. They surpassed a threshold, specifically established in the 1982 Constitution to deliberately prevent minorities and other parties from getting into parliament.

And yet, the HDP became the third largest party in parliament.

The dominant parties could not accept this threat to their power and since mid-2015 they have cracked down heavily on the Kurdish movement. Today, there are over 10,000 Kurdish political prisoners, a number that is even higher than during the period around the 12 September Military Coup in 1980. Since 31 October 2016, my mother has had 6 hearings. Each hearing has a different panel of judges and dates are constantly changing. My mother is currently in jail pending trial for her speeches, because she dared to call for equality, justice and peace. These speeches she gave during legal demonstrations and meetings brought millions of people together. On the 8<sup>th</sup> of March International Women's Day, she would inspire the passion of women everywhere, and in Newroz the Kurdish New Year, she would empower a downtrodden people.

As my mom said, “For 90 years under the name of fighting against terrorism, the Turkish state has committed massacres. There is no terror issue. Everyone knows

this very well. The issue is about the rights of a community.”

Those who do not want to be equal with Kurds, criminalise Kurds as rebels, bandits, smugglers or terrorists. This colonialist mindset continues to this day, from Turkey to Afrin. Yet, after long struggles and many sacrifices, today we are closer equality than we have ever been. My mom, who still has traces on her body from the torture she suffered, always sees light in the face of profound despair. Today she is in prison again, but her belief in peace and equality is unrelenting. Her will is unyielding.

For those who want to send her letters, her postal address is;

Kocaeli 1 Nolu F Tipi Ceza Ä°nfaz Kurumu Cezaevi PTT Ä°yubesi Ä°zmit/KOCAELÄ°  
Turkey

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[1] (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/8315088.stm>)

[2] Watch her speech after the Roboski Massacre here:  
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mCEScNJOEk4>)

[3] ([http://hakikatadalethafiza.org/en/kaynak\\_tipi/reports-on-curfews/](http://hakikatadalethafiza.org/en/kaynak_tipi/reports-on-curfews/))