

# Interview: Diyarbakir-based journalist on oppression and resistance in Turkey's Kurdish regions

by Anya Briy / Mahir Kurtay - 16/11/2018 09:01



*As the date for the local elections in Turkey was set for March 2019, Erdogan publicly stated that, in the case of the victory of Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP)-backed candidates in the predominantly Kurdish southeast of the country, the state will once again take over municipalities. 94 out of 102 municipalities in Kurdish-majority cities and towns have been governed by Ankara-appointed trustees since 2016. Erdogan's statement came as the government carried out a new wave of oppression against the Kurdish opposition, arresting more than 150 people, including activists, members of the HDP, local politicians and journalists. This was followed by the dismissal in the Kurdish provinces of more than 250 elected village and neighbourhood heads, known as mukhtars, suspected of having links to "terrorist groups," that is, to the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).*

*We talked to a Kurdish journalist based in Diyarbakir about the general atmosphere*

*in the Kurdish region of Turkey in the aftermath of the 2015-6 conflicts and the June 24, 2018 elections. Due to the increasing crackdown on the opposition, YN preferred not to disclose her real name.*

*The interview was translated and edited for clarity*

The recent presidential and parliamentary elections took place under relatively less state oppression in the western part of Turkey compared to the predominantly Kurdish Southeast. How were the elections experienced in Diyarbakir?

YN: The 24 June elections in the [Kurdish] regions were not very different from the previous ones in terms of the pressures, rights violations, anti-democratic practices, moving voting stations, etc. Yet, violations have been getting worse with every election. This time, people saw that the AKP and MHP single-handedly decided and carried out an early election. It is unclear how well one could prepare for it in two months. Those in power wanted to catch the opposition unprepared. HDP members were not able to do much campaign work since many of them were in prison.

The Kurds were more prepared, however, than the parties in power, the opposition and the HDP. The Kurds voted for their future life because they had just seen a massacre that will enter the Kurdish history. Both AKP and HDP supporters had made up their minds before the election. At the same time, there was anxiety in terms of what would happen after the election. A war could have happened, for example. If you take into consideration the last 3 years, it was obvious that things would not improve for the Kurds. For this reason, the minds of the Kurds coming from different political perspectives were very clear. Everybody went to voting stations to say "We're here." I don't think they were really concerned about the outcome. Everyone knew that Erdogan would be elected. It was more important what would happen after the election.

You have been working as a journalist since the 1990s. What are the current conditions for journalism in the Kurdish region compared to the previous periods?

YN: In the 90s, we lived through very violent conflicts in regards to the Kurdish question. Journalists had no safety then. We regarded survival as good luck. But the authorities during that period were not targeting all of the people. Politically prominent people would be punished. Those who were open to cooperation [with the state] were protected by the authorities. Nowadays, the violence started to take place in the cities rather than the

countryside. Previously, the urban middle class was not able to see what was happening in the countryside, so journalists' goal was to witness and write about that. However, if we look at the conflicts of the last three years, the state started punishing even those who empathize with the Kurds. This could be seen in the example of the Suruç bombing: they targeted the Turks who were in solidarity with the Kurds. They arrested sympathizers from the art community. Kurdish liberal intellectuals were attacked. Then the middle-class Kurds were subjected to economic sanctions with the State of Emergency Decrees. Finally, there was urban fighting, such as in Cizre and Sur. Although teachers' job was to assimilate the Kurds, the state started attacking them as well. They threw everyone into a fire. The whole community was destroyed in front of our eyes.

It is very common for our newspapers to be closed or even bombed. But by now, everyone who had not yet seen state violence has been subjected to it. While in some ways the 90s were bad, in other respects what is happening today is even worse. In the past, they would shut down our newspapers and TV channels; now they also confiscate the buildings from which we broadcast. When they saw that even bombings would not stop us from doing journalism, they started stealing our property by confiscating our buildings with everything inside. Previously, we used to be able to predict what would happen but now we do not know what to expect. In terms of journalism, we are going back to the 90s. It is our duty to do our work, that's why we are continuing. On the one hand, we have concerns about our survival. On the other, we cannot say in all conscience "Let's not write" when there is a demonstration happening somewhere.

Sur, Cizre and other cities in southeastern Turkey experienced the most egregious violence as the state attacked in 2015-6. How has the life changed since the conflicts and the subsequent imposition of the kayyum system under which state-appointed trustees govern the Kurdish municipalities?

YN: Oppression has always been present in these cities: when we didn't see military vehicles, we would ask in surprise where they were. Yet, in the last three years, things started becoming increasingly worse. The state is trying to prove to the people that it is not here simply because of security problems. Their presence reveals their policy. There is great pain in Diyarbakır. Cizre is in a much worse position than Diyarbakır today. There are traumas. Civilians died. Thousands of people lost their homes. People were subjected to forced displacement three-four times. The lack of legal means, the lack of anyone to ask for accountability creates inward-turning anger, fear and disappointment. I do not want to paint a very hopeless picture. I think

the current calm will lead to a serious reaction. Such an atmosphere cannot go on like that. From the period of peace, it went very quickly to the period of great destruction. This accumulated energy will explode. This society can become a serial killer, a thief or a rebel on top of these traumas. Suicides may increase. Everything can happen in the time of the collapse of a society. The only thing that keeps the Kurds here alive is the struggle in Rojava. The existence of that struggle affects people here. There is energy waiting for a magic wand.

The Kurds could give up the struggle due to the feeling of a very heavy defeat. On the other hand, a new method of struggle --rather than a new political party-- could also emerge: an anarchist current or a new democratic method. In the recent elections, those in power saw that the Kurds, despite being angry at the Kurdish movement, staked their claim on it. There is currently a passive resistance.

The Sur or Cizre situation could also lead to a reckoning within the Kurds themselves. Sur is the heart of the Kurds' capital. There was not a momentary conflict -- it lasted 6 months. Those families who were exposed to the conflict are angry at both the HDP and at the rest of Diyarbakir. The Kurdish movement was able to gather 2 million people for demonstrations. But there were not many protests during the Sur conflicts. Families who live in Sur and who criticize both the HDP and the Kurds living outside of Sur are actually right in their criticism. It is unclear how much the HDP intervened in the conflicts. In Diyarbakır, the rest of Sur reacted. There were support rallies in Sur and, if I recall correctly, 12 young people died during these actions. There were clashes when the protesters wanted to go into Sur, but these protests failed to become massive due to the unprecedented violence by the soldiers and the police. The HDP, DTK and DBP could not organize protests well. They tried, but they failed. People could not be mobilized.

We can talk about a lot of factors here. Thus, bullets coming from Sur wounded many people. There was fear that one could die just by going out to the street. The state showed that it would kill those who go to the streets and protest. Sur and Cizre were given a very solid message. We saw that there is no limit to state violence. They destroyed everything. To which degree can civilians withstand an armed force? For example, in Cizre, people did not want to leave their homes, but when the state directly targeted their houses, they had to leave. It is not clear where things are going. It looks like fear has become less since the end of the war in Sur; things did become more normal.

During the brief peace process between the Turkish state and the PKK in 2013-5, one of the advances that the Kurdish movement was able to make was in regards to

the use of Kurdish language. Can you talk about the current status of Kurdish and the government's policies in this regard?

YN: The Kurdish language is at the top of the Kurds' demands; they identify themselves with their language. Kurdish is both a target and a political tool. This question played an important role in the negotiations [peace process]. There were great advances in research of the sources and foundations of the Kurdish language. But the language has been one of the primary targets for attacks during the war and afterwards. For example, playing Kurdish songs again became partially banned with the State of Emergency.

In the past, being a banned language, Kurdish was not even attractive from the Kurds' point of view. Parents thought that their children could not make money if they knew Kurdish. This started to change in the last 15-20 years. Some started saying that Kurdish, being very political, should be used more in normal life. The language is equal to existence. A society began to form around the Kurdish language. Kurdish began to be institutionalized. But language is a very dangerous tool against those in power. After the appointment of the trustees, they started banning Kurdish again as it began to be seen as dangerous. For instance, teachers of EÄŸitim-Sen, who were dismissed with the State of Emergency decrees, spoke Kurdish with children and gathered sympathy [from the communities]. The newly appointed teachers began to prohibit Kurdish in schools again. Even NGOs who have shown empathy with the Kurds in Turkey began to see Kurdish as dangerous. Kurdish has become a language that no one should hear. It became again a language spoken only at home.

When Kurdish TV channels were shut down [after the coup attempt in 2016], the closure of [the children channel] Zarok TV was met with backlash even from AKP supporters and village guards. Because it is a channel that broadcasts cartoons in Kurdish such as Smurfs, Spongebob and Heidi, prepares programs for children and does not play any political role. The AKP could not explain the closure of this channel to the public. Even the European Commission has asked the government to explain this act. Zarok TV was re-opened that time thanks to the public pressure. But it is very difficult to broadcast now because it is subject to the Radio and Television Supreme Authority.