

'All we have left to protest with are our bodies': Kurds around the world on hunger strike in solidarity with Leyla Guven

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Kurdish activists around the world have gone on hunger strike in solidarity with Leyla Guven, an imprisoned HDP MP-elect who has been on hunger strike for 28 days herself, in protest of what she has described as the "isolation" imposed on imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan.

Guven was arrested in January for speaking out against the Turkish invasion of Afrin, Syria, and is currently held in Diyarbakir E-Type High Security Prison. She was elected as a HDP MP for Hakkari in June of 2018, but was not allowed to formally take office due to her pre-trial detention. She began her action in November, announcing the beginning of her hunger strike in a court hearing.

"I am starting an indefinite hunger strike to protest the isolation on Mr. Ocalan. I will not submit any defense to the court from now on. I will continue my protest until the

judiciary ends its unlawful decisions and this politics of isolation is terminated, Guven told the court.

Ocalan has been imprisoned on Imrali Island for nearly 20 years. For much of that time, he was the sole prisoner housed there. Since late 2016, Turkish authorities have blocked visits from his lawyers and relatives. He has had no contact with the outside world for two years. Hundreds of requests for meetings proposed by his lawyers have been denied on flimsy premises.

Guven has described Ocalan's treatment as a "crime against humanity", and has promised to continue her action indefinitely until isolation policies are lifted— or until her own death. In a letter sent from prison, she [wrote](#) that "I am a comrade of those who love to die for the sake of life—" alluding to a famous saying attributed to Kemal Pir, a co-founder of the PKK who died as a result of a 55-day hunger strike in Diyarbakir Prison in 1982.

Kurdish activists at the Toronto Kurdish Community Center have undertaken a five-day hunger strike, which they plan to extend if necessary. Several participants spoke to *The Region* about the goals of their action.

Ali Karaoglan and Songul Ates, the co-chairs of community center, said that they and other members of their community had taken action in order to amplify Guven's demands and show solidarity with her. "Of course, the overall issue is that there has been no contact with Abdullah Ocalan. That is the biggest issue. That is why Leyla Guven is [on hunger strike] also. There are worldwide solidarity actions," they told *The Region*.

"This is part of a bigger campaign and a bigger effort, in general, to bring attention to the ongoing oppression of the Kurdish people...there has never been any kind of international response to any of this, and so it is an ongoing struggle. People all over the world, the HDP, the Kurdish people, their friends, are all driven to go on hunger strike because they feel so helpless in terms of the situation at hand."

Vedat Yilmaz, a member of the community center's Arts and Culture Commission, described the treatment of Ocalan as an "international human rights violation," and said that actions would continue until Guven's demands are met. "At the very end of the day, this is just about humanity, about being humane, about international law. It is about trying to bring awareness to the lack of humanity with which the Turkish state treats the Kurdish people, the HDP, and others."

Yusuf, a Kurdish journalist, recently arrived in Canada from Turkey— where he faces an eight-year prison sentence for his reporting. "For doing what you are doing right now, I was punished with an eight-year sentence for terrorism. This is Erdogan's

AKP-MHP mafia country," he said, describing the political circumstances that the Kurdish people and their struggle for freedom currently face. "Turkey is, in all respects, violating the Kurdish people's rights. Despite that, the world is paying no attention. That is what brings us to the point we are at today. All we have left to protest with are our bodies."