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Dialogue with Ahali on the Kurdish question and anarchism

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For a century the Kurdish people, a nation divided under the Turkish, Iraqi, Iranian and Syrian States have not had the right to exist. They've been denied the right to self-determination, to organise as they see fit, to own their land, to live their culture, even to speak their language, while they are crushed under the weight of an extremely authoritarian and back warded semi-feudal organisation for purposes of social control.

"*Kine em?*". "Who are we?" says a popular Kurdish song; it is not easy to define in a couple of words what the Kurdish people are: they are not an ethnic group, they do not have religious unity and even their language has dialects which are difficult to understand with one another. Yet, they all recognize themselves as Kurdish. And they have been fighting in many of the above mentioned countries vicious fights in order to have that right to exist. As a result, they have been gassed, massacred and displaced in the millions.

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But the Kurdish struggle keeps going on no matter what with an impressive force fed by every single community in the Kurdistan area; this is a struggle not only against the colonial States, not only against the imperialist forces that often back them, but as importantly, a struggle against the very feudal class of wealthy Kurdish landowners that have been key allies of the colonial states and who have made huge profits out of this situation. We are not in front of a mere nationalistic struggle in the narrow sense of the word; we are in front of a social conflict, of a struggle for the complete emancipation of the Kurdish people from the chains of colonialism and capitalism. This is a struggle for national liberation in the complete sense of the word.

During the celebration of Newroz in Istanbul, the Kurdish New Year and a resistance day (21st of March), an impressive celebration where 300,000 Kurdish came together in spite of the police and military harassment to the people, we met a number of anarchists, both Turkish and Kurdish. They have an organisation called *Ahali*, meaning “People” in Turkish and they have been quite active in trying to bring the Kurdish question to the attention of the Turkish working class organisations and to give their support as libertarians in whatever way they see fit.

We had the chance to exchange some opinions on the Kurdish question and anarchism a couple of months ago. Here we reproduce them in the hope that it will bring some light on the Kurdish question and on the complex scenario that anarchists face in Turkey, where this struggle cannot, and should not, be ignored.

José Antonio Gutiérrez D.

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1. What are the core issues, the main problems, on the Kurdish struggle today?

The struggle of the Kurdish people, who have been under the pressure of the hegemony of four nation states, such as Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey, is getting clearer today. Actually such anti-imperialist struggles are becoming increasingly important in the New Order of Global Capitalism. Far away from these global similarities with other repressed nations, the Kurdish struggle represents a “war in the making” in the Middle East for hundreds of years.

The historical character of Kurdish struggle is at the core of today’s rebel movement. Kurdish people have been ignored, killed; states have forbid them to speak their language or to live according to their culture. So the freedom of living in their lands without the tutelage of the Turkish state, freedom to speak the Kurdish language, freedom to live according to the Kurdish culture constitute the anchors of the struggle.

Assimilation policies against the Kurdish people have been carried since the early years of the Turkish state, and resistance to these policies first was seen in Ağrı¹, Dersim² and with the rebels of Sheikh Said³. This rebellious character of the Kurds meant the State resorted to more radical methods of assimilation. Today’s struggle’s roots must be looked for in the early times of Turkish state and maybe in the last few decades of the Ottoman Empire. Resistance to the hegemony process of the Turkish state was responded to with genocide, particularly in Dersim, and forced displacement.

2. The Kurdish struggle has been largely a peasant struggle. Tell us about the Kurdish land problem...

Since it was not possible for Turkish state to take control over the lands of the Kurds by using direct force, in spite of massive

¹ Scenario of a Kurdish rebellion in 1927 that declared the Kurdish Republic of Komara Agiriyê, that lasted from 1927 to 1931, when it was crushed by the Turkish army.

² Region of another rebellion in 1937.

³ Leader of a rebellion that extended to the Diyarbakır region in 1925.

bombings, the state attacked the economic facilities with the aim of controlling Kurds economically and also politically.

The Agha system, a particularly backward form of feudalism, was supported by the state. Through this type of land system, the state planned to attack directly the agriculture which was and still is crucial in Kurdistan's economy. The Aghas were tribal chiefs whom the government supported economically and technologically. Thus they became quite powerful both in terms of land-owning, but also because of the technology support, in terms of agricultural production. Kurdish peasants were therefore forced first to use technology from the Aghas to be able to produce. But in return they had to give half of their produce to the Aghas. This "half-cropping" system did not last for long as soon the peasants began to sell their lands to the Aghas and became rural labourers under their authority. Some others migrated after selling their lands.

Besides this economic role, Aghas also played a political role. Governments used them in order to get votes of Kurds and to integrate Kurds into the system. This political character was also backed by some religious aspects of the system. The Turkish state even gave quotas in parliament to Aghas in order to represent the Kurdish people⁴.

Under these circumstances — assimilation, genocide, ignorance, forced land loss, having handed representation only to Aghas, etc.- Kurdish people said "*Edi Bese*" —Enough — and started to resist as Kurdish people, in the name of the right to speak their language, in the name of their right to live according to their culture, in the name of having right to their own land.

⁴ The Agha system actually works as a State within the State. These tribal chiefs had been given absolute power in their villages in order to contain the PKK armed struggle (especially since 1984). They have been armed to the teeth by the State, with their own paramilitary gangs called the "village guards", who are responsible of countless atrocities (including massacres, torture, etc.)

with groups like ours which has less experience. These shared experiences could assure us to solve the problems that we face while spreading anarchism in our lands.

Anarchists has mostly been organised for short term goals, with small campaigns carried by little groups until recently. International solidarity is crucial to make anarchism gain a social character with long-term goals. We need to share our experiences in the process of these long-term projects. We got the spirit of 1850's but we are acting since 2004. We are expecting, for example, from you who have a revolutionary tradition in Latin America, to share your experiences and to listen to ours.

revolution. They don't give enough importance and do not express really much solidarity with the Kurdish people.

Maybe the most important reason for this lack of "interest" in the Kurdish question is the fact that some Turkish "left" groups still see Mustafa Kemal, the authoritarian founder of the Turkish Republic, as an anti-imperialist hero and so they adopt his nationalist ideas. They see him as a sort of a Che Guevara while they see the Kurdish struggle as a "tool" of the USA to divide Turkish lands in two and then "eat the two smaller pieces of pie." So the initial anti-imperialist approach becomes a nationalist one which does not hesitate to blame the Kurds as the ones which cause problems and who are the pawns of imperialist USA.

On the other hand, the Turkish popular movement, as it is "modernist", is divided from the Kurdish movement, whose theory is getting closer to anarchism by its relentless criticism of State-centred socialism. Especially over the last ten years, the Kurdish movement has turned away from a State-centred struggle to a more thorough idea of social revolution. This is sometimes named as "democratic confederalism" or sometimes "democratic comunism" etc. But we can say this theory is getting richer with the views of social ecology, inspired by the teachings of Murray Bookchin.

7. What would you expect from the international libertarian and solidarity movement?

Globalisation of power is making resistance global today. Having information about the resistance from all over the world gives us hope and strength to cope with the struggle against the system. We believe that we can expand our resistance by this international solidarity network. We, as those who oppose capitalism, racism, sexism, State's authority etc., need each other under current circumstances, when capitalism increasingly controls the lives of the individuals and the Nation States have a more strategic role in this new order of global capitalism.

We believe that we can learn many things from other people's experiences. Firstly, it is really important to share your experiences

Today, the struggle does not only resist these conditions imposed by feudal landlords, but also the conditions imposed by the new order of Global Capitalism, or the new faces of power like neo-racism, sexism etc. Questioning the new aspects of power and oppression has made the struggle more lasting.

3. As anarchists, what is your view on the Kurdish struggle?

The Turkish state named the struggle as the "Kurdish Problem" and also it is referred to as such in international political literature. We insist that this not the issue, the real issue is the "Turkish state assimilation problem". As anarchists who question all kind of power relations, we cannot close our eyes to the resistance of the Kurds. Kurdish people have been confronted to the real face of State since the birth of the modern Turkish republic. Their struggle is nurtured by the rebel tradition in these lands.

As Ahali, we give importance to how we can influence people to bring about an anarchist tradition in these lands. With this long-term goal in mind we try to act and plan. So, it is logical for us to be in solidarity with comrades in the Kurdish struggle without any hesitation in respect to the national character of it.

4. Do you think the past elections (April), that many see as a victory for the DTP, will have a positive role in any form to the Kurdish struggle?

Last local elections seemed to have had a positive role to the Kurdish struggle. DTP, the party representing the Kurdish independence movement, has won one metropolitan municipality, 7 cities and 50 province municipality in the 2009 local elections.

The meaning of the results of the 2009 local election was important. The elections have happened amidst polemic on whether to ban the DTP and whether to stop the political expressions of the independence struggle. With the election results, the Kurds reacted to these polemics. Not only had the prospect of a ban on the DTP, but also the polemics about Öcalan and on the separatist struggle had effects on these results. By giving their votes to a

party which was coming from a tradition that the Turkish State has always banned and blocked, the Kurds were saying that the “DTP represents Kurdish people and here we are”.

In such conditions, we did not question the problem of representative democracy even though we are against it.

Moreover, we think it is important to highlight that the free municipality activities that are a form of participatory politics at a local level, together with the public parliaments, women and youth councils and similar organisms shows the democratic character of DTP goes beyond traditional democracy.

DTP municipalities that were won in the local elections were understood as greater gains than the Kurdish representatives sitting in the Turkish parliament. We can understand this if we compare the popularity of Osman Baydemir, the mayor of Diyarbakır, with that of Ahmet Türk, the parliamentarian and co-chairman of DTP.

As we mentioned we do not believe in representative democracy or bourgeois elections. But under these particular conditions, that saw the DTP nearly banned and in the face of the advance of new aspects of the Kurdish struggle, such as giving more importance to direct public participation, we saw that support for the DTP in Kurdistan was expressing opposition to the Turkish State, and this was expressed as the will of the Kurdish people.

5. We heard that there Kurdish women are quite oppressed by tradition and those stories have certainly circulated and have been promoted by the Turkish state in order to expose the Kurdish people as back warded (honour killings, etc.)... How much of this is true? What's the position of the Kurdish liberation movement on women?

Firstly we have to consider that Öcalan, who established Kurdish struggle's theorization, took women liberation to the core. Because he claimed that women were the first social class that was taken under authority, that's why society's liberation must start with women liberation. As a result of this, Kurdish struggle gives importance to the independent organisation of women in the armed

movement as well as in the social and political arena. There's a co-chairman system in the DTP, there are local women councils, and there are women organisations both in the guerrillas and in the Kurdish cities; this could be seen as the practical application of this theory.

We also have to say that Kurdish women are among the most politicized women in the world. You can see this every 8th of March, when the number of Kurdish women on streets is 30 times more than others in the world.

The Agha system regards women as if they were nothing but commodities. They can be traded in exchange of money or live stocks. Women are unable to make decisions about their own lives and are isolated from the social, economic and political life. Being supported by the State, the Aghas play an important role in the isolation of women from the economic life. According to them, women are unnecessary in working life and unsuitable for working. Women are expected to stay home in order to do housework and to grow children.

This kind of isolation combined with religious factors lead men to claim to be the owner of women, thus being nothing but a property of men and seen only as an object. They became a symbol of honour and any violation of old customs cause women to be murdered in the name of honour killing.

The state may seem quite critical about honour killings at first. However, as we mentioned before, the Aghas are strongly supported and actually were created by the State. Due to this fact, it becomes obvious that honour killings are mainly caused by the State organisation, in spite of its apparent “efforts” to stop them.

6. What are the main difficulties to build links between the Turkish and the Kurdish popular movements?

The Turkish leftist movement is mostly focused on the working class movement. So we can say that they see the Kurdish struggle as a secondary problem that can be left to be dealt with after the