

Rojava's everyday democracy

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In the villages, cities and regions of Rojava, in the predominantly Kurdish north east of Syria, political upheaval has resulted in the largely decentralised self-administration of many areas, including health, economy, law, education and internal security. The Rojava revolution led to both the secularisation and democratisation of institutions that had, until then, been controlled by an elitist-centralist national state. But what exactly does this mean? How is Rojava's decentralisation expressed in everyday life?

Administration and politics

Located in north eastern Rojava, Amûdê County demonstrates what decentralisation and self-administration can look like in practice. Starting at the end of government rule in 2012, its communes, district people's council and the municipality (Şaredarî) were all subjected to processes of democratisation. This has meant that the administration and politics of the city of Amûdê are now shaped by the people themselves.

The city is divided into four quarters, which together make up 31 communes. Each commune includes about 100 to 250 households. One to four communes each share a komîngeh (neighbourhood office), a public space that anyone can visit during opening hours – even just to drink tea. The process of local self-government in these neighbourhoods can be divided between two main areas: administration (the basic supply and distribution of resources) and politics (law, culture, education and health).

These two areas are organised by specific commissions at all political levels, from the communes up. Typical commissions include health, economy, defence, education, art and culture. In addition to linking horizontally, these commissions also link and communicate with each other vertically. For example, the defence commission of a commune organises the HPC (civil defence forces) at the local level. At the same time, it meets with the defence commissions of the next higher unit of the district defence commission, while the district defence commission exchanges information with the cantonal defence commission, and so on. Written reports thus reach the top from below, while at the same time coordinative top-down processes take place.

In elections for the co-chairs of commissions, only residents of the respective commune are eligible for election. Before the revolution, the national state appointed administrators who not only did not speak Kurdish but an elitist bureaucratic Arabic. Today, the neighbourhood offices are run by people from the neighbourhood who share the same everyday language and life with the residents.

Democratisation from the communes

The active persons in the communes carry out two basic types of tasks. First, the communes carry out logistical and distributive tasks, such as regulating the distribution of relief goods, fuel and electricity (via generators). Second, activists in the communes (co-chairs and commission members as well as the activists of the women's commune) are also active in social and legal matters.

Every bureaucratic matter starts with the communes. For example, if somebody wants to get married or go abroad, they first need a document from their commune office. The komîngeh also serves as the contact point for those in economic need or for social and family disputes. In

coordination with other commissions at the city level, women's meetings, educational activities or people's meetings are organised.

This everyday aspect of the communes has proven its worth in times of war, especially in terms of collective security. As an active citizenry breeds a collective familiarity, residents are attuned to observing the unusual. Many terror cells have been discovered and dissolved as residents report suspicious activity to their commune, which is then followed up by the defence commission.

Those who are active in the communes do not receive financial compensation for their efforts, which can prove difficult when they must also ensure their economic livelihoods. But compensation comes in the form of other resources gained from their work: social networks, education, knowledge. They become friends and establish diverse relationships with people from their neighbourhood and other communes, developing a rich understanding of the political and administrative governance of their city. Above all, this kind of experience and knowledge is a new phenomenon for people at the grassroots, providing an opportunity for communities to govern themselves.

Women in the communes

Every commune has a women's assembly that takes care of women's affairs and also serves as a contact point for women. Women also administer and make politics in the public sphere. A co-chair system ensures that every commune has both a male and female co-chair, breaking with the strong patriarchal representation that characterises the centralised state. Along with some practical advantages, this system has significant feminist-revolutionary symbolic power. But representation is only one part of a subtle and comprehensive process of addressing and transforming old attitudes and building new egalitarian social relations in the process.

The co-chairs of all the communes of the city meet in a large monthly district council meeting, where the city municipality or, if necessary, representatives of other offices are also brought in. There are often heated debates between the commune co-chairs and the municipality when it comes to infrastructural points. Much is needed, but resources are few.

The decentralised processes in Rojava provide a demonstrable alternative to the centralist tendency of nation states and the problems they create in the mosaic Middle East. The significance of Rojava is thus not only the national liberation of the Kurds in western Kurdistan and Syria, but the deepening and widening of democracy, emancipation and participation of society in a decentralised and local form of self-government.

This is the real strength of Rojava – and it is an immense and inspiring strength. The people of Rojava, a small political-geographical entity caught in a conflict between imperialist states and other hostile actors, have managed to build and maintain a fertile democratic experiment. It is the task of all of us to keep the Rojava experiment on its feet.

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