

# Radical Democracy and Self-Governance in Kurdistan

Written by Hanifi Baris

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HANIFI BARIS, DEC 15 2020

Although Kurdish politics in Turkey is dominated by a national liberation movement, the movement makes no explicit appeal to nationalism and adopts a radically critical stand towards the nation-state (Miley 2020; Sunca 2020). The movement envisages the co-existence of plural political communities at local, municipal, provincial, regional, national, and transnational levels (Akkaya and Jongerden 2013; De Jong 2015; Jongerden 2017). It has developed a model of government called *Democratic Confederalism*, which aspires to establish a multi-layered system of political communities based on residency and cosmopolitan membership (Akkaya 2020; Baris 2020; Colasanti et al. 2018; Hunt 2019). The model promotes a system of plural political communities in which sovereignty is *not* 'understood to be the exclusive prerogative of the central authorities of the state, but, rather, a collection of functions that can best be exercised at different levels of society, depending on the nature of decisions that need to be made and the manner of their most appropriate implementation (International Conference of Experts Report 1998: 17, cited in Bayir 2013: 9).

The most important aspect of the project is that it positions itself against territorial sovereignty of the nation-state *(the form)*, political participation through representative democracy *(the political system)*, and exclusive citizenship based on affinity *(membership)*. In the Kurdish model, *the form* is a coexistence of scattered autonomous political entities such as communes, villages, neighbourhoods, districts, cities, federations, and confederations; while confederations ideally stretch across the borders of nation-states.

According to the model, local assemblies delegate political power via delegates sent to city councils and regional assemblies (Akkaya and Jongerden 2015; Jongerden 2019; Rojava Information Center 2019; Tax 2016). In other words, citizens exercise political power directly and delegate representatives only when the matter is not exclusively in the jurisdiction of the local political community. Thus, political power runs counter to the way it runs in parliamentary democracy: it flows from below to the top, not the other way around. In this *political system*, there is no central national parliament with the privilege of exercising sovereignty. The political system in this model combines institutions of direct and semi-direct democracy with political parties, thematic councils such as women, ecological and youth councils, and with civil society organisations. Finally, *membership* is based on residency, not on cultural or national identity. What we witness here is the birth of a political community other than the nation-state, delivered by a national liberation movement.

### Political Communities in North and West Kurdistan

"Our aim", the chair of the council explained, "is to face the problems in our lives, in our neighbourhood, and solve them by ourselves without being dependent on or needing the state". Others add that "the state is a hump on the back of the people," and "we try to live without the state" (Councilmen from the city of Diyarbakir in North Kurdistan, quoted in Akkaya and Jongerden 2013:196)

The quote above expresses, in a nutshell, the prevailing view of politics in the Kurdish movement. The kind of political community emerging from this quote is informed by Aristotelian face-to-face political community: the autonomous commune, a face to face community that comprises 100 to 300 households (depending on the size of the autonomous settlement) is at the foundation of the Kurdish model (Biehl 2014; Rojava Information Center 2019; Tax 2016). Additionally, the Kurdish model envisages and experiments with direct democracy through assemblies

# Radical Democracy and Self-Governance in Kurdistan

Written by Hanifi Baris

and councils at every level of decision-making, which include communes, neighbourhoods, towns, districts and cities. Direct democratic political participation is associated with Athenian democracy (although that is not accurate according to John Keane (2009)). Accordingly, there is plenty of reference to ancient Athenian democracy in the documents of the movement (Rojava Administration 2014) as well as in the literature on the Kurdish model and in the writings of the architect of the model Abdullah Ocalan (Akkaya and Jongerden 2013, 2015; De Jong 2015; Leezenberg 2016; Sary 2016; TATORT Kurdistan 2011, 2014; Yegen 2016).

Murray Bookchin, the political theorist considered to be the source of inspiration for the Kurdish model, is known for his vision of political community modelled on Athenian democracy (Bookchin 2015). The model is based on the full political autonomy of communities of residence such as villages, neighbourhoods, towns, and cities.[1] These communities are assumed to possess, by *nature*, the right to self-rule and self-defence. This makes them political communities in and of themselves. The model also explicitly dismisses establishing a Kurdish nation-state (Öcalan 2011).

Why should a national liberation movement dismiss nation-state altogether and envisage a political community other than the nation? What historical dynamics and which theoretical principles motivate Kurdish Liberation Movement to develop a model of political community based on residential citizenship, direct/semi-direct exercise of political power, and a fragmented sovereignty of plural, horizontal political entities?

The Kurdish model steers away from statehood because its architect Abdullah Ocalan has made his life's work to develop an alternative to the *statist* Turkish nationalism (Baris 2020). Kurdish national liberation movements in North and West (Turkish and Syrian) Kurdistan, thus, inspired by the architect and his model, have been striving to 'liberate' Kurdistan and Kurds with an ideology that dismisses statehood and nationalism (Akkaya 2020; Matin 2019; Öcalan 2020).

The Kurdish model has atomic communities at the centre of its moral and political philosophy and envisages a social order without cultural hierarchies in the form nations, ethnicities, nationalities etc. The statist Turkish nationalism, on the other hand, puts the State at the centre of moral and political philosophy and imposes a hierarchical order on cultural categories based on this *statist* outlook. Statist Turkish nationalism suggests that the nation has the prerogative to dominate other groups because it 'has a state of its own' (Mohammadpour and Soleimani 2019; Özdoğan 2010; Yesiltas 2014). Adherents of this logic deduce, from this assumption, that other groups are not equal, in dignity and rights, with nations, because they 'lack' a State of their own (Bacik 2016; Baris 2020; Gökay and Aybak 2016). The fact that there is no Kurdish state, for instance, is taken as the proof that they do not deserve one. If they did, the argument goes, they would have found one at some point in history. Surely, this is not historically accurate, because there are states and state-like entities founded by Kurds throughout history (Özoğlu 2004), but that is not the point. The point is that the Turkish political elite seems to have convinced themselves that this is the case, in order to maintain and legitimise the *status quo* that is founded on the dominance and superiority of the Turkish identity and denies the Kurds the cultural rights and territorial autonomy they have been demanding since the establishment of the Turkish republic (Gökay and Aybak 2016; Xypolia 2016).

For instance, Birgül Ayman Güler, an MP of the main opposition People's Republican Party *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*-CHP), also a professor of political science at one of the most prestigious universities in Turkey, the Ankara University, stated that 'You cannot convince me that the Turkish nation (*Türk Ulus*) and the Kurdish nationality (*Kürt milliyeti*) are equal'[2]. The statement implied that 'Kurdish nationality', as a political category, is secondary to the superior one; i.e. the Turkish nation. This interpretation relies heavily on the formal/legal narrative (also the mainstream one), which suggests that the 'Turkish nation' is the one and sole political community in Turkey and that it is all-encompassing. Moreover, membership in this single political community, according to Article 66 of the current constitution, is based on Turkishness: 'Everyone bound to the Turkish State through the bond of citizenship is a Turk'. Consequently, there is no room for another group to become the basis of political rights and prerogatives or to claim political agency.

The precondition of being a nation, according to this mainstream view among Turkish politicians, is having a state of their own. It follows that the Kurds have no state of their own and that they cannot be considered equal in ranks with

# Radical Democracy and Self-Governance in Kurdistan

Written by Hanifi Baris

the Turkish nation. Contrasting with this narrative, the prevalent opinion among the Kurdish political elite and intelligentsia suggests that two separate nations, Turkish and Kurdish, exist in Turkey and that they founded the state in alliance and partnership. Thus, they are equal in rank and should be equal in political and legal status. They demand that the Kurdish nation should be constitutionally recognised as the equal, constituent partner in Turkey.

In another instance, the former deputy prime minister Bulent Arinc stated that Kurdish is 'not the language of a civilization' (Derince 2013), and hence, it could not be considered equal to the Turkish language. Therefore, no point of demanding the same protection and/or promotion available to the Turkish language for the Kurdish language as well. Kurdish is also seen as a language that has not produced enough literature to be valued equally compared to Turkish. When in fact, the primary reason for that has been the restrictions imposed by the political establishment on education, publication and broadcasting in Kurdish in Turkey for the last nine decades (Cemiloglu 2009; Coşkun, Derince, and Uçarlar 2011; Derince 2013; Zeydanlıoğlu 2012).

Departing from the statements above, it is a matter of course for Turkish politicians, academics and statespersons to conclude that the Kurds, as a community, should not be considered as a nation and hence are not mature enough to rule themselves. That a typical nineteenth-century colonial mindset is at work here would not be far-fetched a deduction. This mindset is pervasive in Turkey because of a particular nationalism there: statist nationalism.

This sort of nationalism holds the sanctity of the Turkish state above everything else and deems natural doing whatever it takes to preserve the 'integrity of the state with its nation'. Constitutional provisions such as 'national and territorial unity', 'the indivisibility of the state with its nation', 'the supreme leader Atatürk[3] and his nationalism', and the widely shared, frequently uttered motto *one language, one flag, one nation, one state* are mainly directed at preserving the state as it is.

*Statist nationalism* in Turkey, thus, is *raison d'état* par excellence. Federalism, confederalism, territorial autonomy for minorities, devolution of power to local administrations, recognition of a second official language, education in mother tongue etc., the kind of political arrangements that every society needs to maintain a diverse society and a peaceable social order, are therefore not discussed in mainstream politics in Turkey. The priority is, in Benhabib's words, 'to strengthen the state via attempts to gather all the markers of sovereignty in the public authority with the consequence of increased militarisation, disregard for international law and human rights, regressive and hostile relations with neighbours' (2007:28).

The Kurdish political movement has developed their model of political community as an alternative to the nation-state in general (Öcalan 2011). But their model is also in a stark contrast with the *statist Turkish nationalism* in particular.

## Democratic Confederalism

Faced with this uniformist, monistic imposition of national identity and this strictly statist nationalism, the dominant Kurdish political movement in Turkey proposes a politics that focuses on building autonomous and partially sovereign political communities inspired by Athenian democracy in political decision-making.[4] This translates into establishing pluralist and inclusive political communities in towns and cities of Kurdistan via transferring the authority of making binding-decisions from national political institutions to citizen assemblies. This is a radical alternative to the current parliamentary and representative, procedural political decision-making that concentrates political power in the parliament at the capital of the nation. As many have pointed out, representative institutions can hardly be considered democratic enough (Benhabib 2007; Hardt and Negri 2004; Näsström 2015).

Representative political institutions are much less democratic in Turkey than in a typical liberal democracy, because bureaucrats hold much more political power than elected office holders. Governors of towns and cities in Turkey are capable of nullifying or overruling every decision made by municipalities and mayoral assemblies. After a year and half passed since the last local elections, only six of sixty-five elected Kurdish mayors remain in office: the rest are imprisoned or removed (Duvar 2020). Thus, the project developed by the Kurdish political movement reflects their frustration with the draconian central government that feeds on representative national political procedures and

# Radical Democracy and Self-Governance in Kurdistan

Written by Hanifi Baris

institutions.

The Kurdish model, on the other hand, grounds itself on a self-rule that is based on residential sovereignty and autonomy, a formulation akin to Waldron's *principle of proximity* (2011:8). The key component here is *autonomy*, i.e. 'the acknowledgement that there are multiple and different needs, values, and concerns, that these needs, values, and concerns can only be properly recognized when localisation guides the focus of social relations, and that they can only be adequately supported and cultivated through place-based mechanisms of self-governance' (Küçük and Özselçuk 2016:190).

Democratic Confederalism, in turn, refers to the umbrella superstructure, the loose and transnational confederation of those Aristotelian face-to-face communities, cities and towns, in a bid to transcend and transform the current hegemonic superstructure, i.e. the nation-state into more democratic political regimes where plural nations and political communities can coexist. The project is inspired mainly by *Communalism* in its approach to the political community. A notion developed by Bookchin (2015), communalism promotes small-scale, face-to-face community based socio-political organisation of society after the Ancient Greek model. Accordingly, the movement has established hundreds of communes in Turkish and Syrian Kurdistan in the last decade, without demanding support or permission from and mostly in defiance to centralised institutions (Küçük and Özselçuk 2016).

The ultimate aim of the project is building self-sufficient socio-political spatial units (Bezwan 2018; TATORT Kurdistan 2011, 2014). These spatial units are meant to exercise a form of political autonomy that is not necessarily granted by central states. It proposes a less rigid regime of border control to allow free movement of peoples and goods; it builds political institutions and arranges decision-making processes that ensure the more direct exercise of political will (Akkaya and Jongerden 2012; Hassaniyan 2019). The goal is founding an egalitarian society with gender equality, environmental protection and ecology friendly economic activity that prioritizes the needs and decisions of communes and communities at the grassroots level (Knapp, Flach, and Ayboğa 2016; Knapp and Jongerden 2014). In that sense, neither religious nor ethnic or national identity can be the basis of such a project. Participation of women in all decision-making and executive bodies, women councils and separate women armed forces are meant to eradicate male domination; while recognition of autonomy and self-defence for cultural minorities within Kurdistan is meant to prevent cultural hierarchies and nationalist domination. Ecology councils and communes are founded to develop an alternative economic and environmental culture and activism, an egalitarian policy in economic production and (re)distribution of wealth.

Politically, while the Turkish political establishment subscribes to the ideology of nationalism and the notion of *national self-determination*, because international law only allows sovereign states or colonized peoples to make a claim to the principle of self-determination. The Kurdish political movement invokes a framework that can be summarised, in Benhabib's words, as 'republican federalism', which amounts to:

[T]he constitutionally structured reaggregation of the markers of sovereignty, in a set of interlocking institutions each responsible and accountable to the other. There is, as there must be in any structuring of sovereignty, a moment of finality, in the sense of decisional closure, but not a moment of ultimacy, in the sense of being beyond questioning, challenge and accountability (2007:30–31).

However, the Kurdish political movement engages this framework with a slight twist to the superstructure, formulating it as *Confederalism*, but not federalism. Thus, the Kurdish political movement embeds its project of democratic confederalism firmly within the current normative accounts of cosmopolitan citizenship and direct democratic decision-making.

## Conclusion

To reiterate, the key components of democratic confederalism are as follows:

First, it suggests that members/citizens should not be *represented* by a political class through national institutions, but they should be *participants* in political decision-making processes via local councils and assemblies. This is

# Radical Democracy and Self-Governance in Kurdistan

Written by Hanifi Baris

meant to replace *obligation* with *solidarity*; since the bond that holds the community together is not vertical loyalty to a distant central authority, but a horizontal commitment to fellow citizens (literally, residents of a city).

Second, it is all residents, not only those who belong to a specific ethnic, national or religious category that is called upon to govern themselves. In the words of a citizen of the city of Kobanê who greeted visitors by saying 'Welcome! This town is yours! It belongs to humanity' (Taussig 2015:2): the city belongs to everyone.

Third, the authority that is being claimed is limited to self-governing of the city, the town, the village and the control of their natural resources. Sovereignty is thus fragmented and dispersed through a myriad of autonomous political communities.

Fourth, women take part in every official post on equal basis with men, and gender quota is established for committees, councils and assemblies etc. in order to ensure gender equality. There are mixed and women-only armed forces; women-only TV and radio stations and periodicals; and an entire scientific discipline, *Jineoloji* (English: Women Science; derived from the word *jin*, which means women in Kurdish, and *-lojî*, the equivalent of the suffix -logy), as a field of study for women, in Kurdistan.

Fifth, cultural minorities participate in every decision made about their communities; have the right to self-defence, education in their languages and cultural preservation – if traditional practices are not harmful to individual human rights.

Considering the dominance of theocratic, nationalist, monarchic and imperial visions and models of political community that have condemned politics to an oscillation between authoritarian, semi-authoritarian and autocratic regimes, the Kurdish model of political community is promising. This democratic grassroots model of autonomy faces elimination due to the threats posed by the Turkish and Syrian governments. However, Kurdish, Armenian, Assyrian and Yezidi communities in North and West Kurdistan seem to be receptive to the model of democratic confederalism (Allsopp and Wilgenburg 2019; Burç 2020; Holmes 2020; Matin 2019). They must be supported by the international community in their bid to establish and preserve the form of self-government they wish to. The Kurdish model, although not without flaws, promises a secular, democratic, pluralistic, egalitarian and environmentalist model of self-rule for all. It is a historical opportunity that must not be missed if peace, harmony and coexistence are to be established and preserved in Kurdistan. It is time for the international community to act and intervene on behalf of the communities of North and West Kurdistan, to prevent the collapse of one of the most progressive and democratic political experiments in Syrian Kurdistan; and to end their persecution in the hands of a religious extremist and ultranationalist regime in Turkey.

## Notes

[1] This autonomy also takes a cultural turn when religious communities such as Armenians and Assyrians in Syrian Kurdistan, where they form minorities within cities and towns, are recognized as autonomous, too.

[2] Birgul Ayman Guler's statement is on *Hurriyetdailynews*, 25.01.2013.

[3] Mustafa Kemal, the founder of the Republic of Turkey. He was given the surname *Ataturk* (Father of the Turks) in 1934 by the Grand National Assembly of Turkey.

[4] The first draft of the Charter of the Rojava Cantons, drafted by the ally of the Kurdish movement in Syria, had a direct reference to Athenian democracy, but it did not appear in the later text. This is due to the fact that the main inspiration for the project of democratic confederalism has been Murray Bookchin, who based his political philosophy on the Athenian model of democracy rather than the Roman model of republicanism.

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# Radical Democracy and Self-Governance in Kurdistan

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