

# The Rojava Revolution and British Solidarity

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Since the civil war in Syria erupted, ordinary Syrians seemed to have been forced to choose between two alternatives – to either side with the Assad regime or an extremist Islamist group. The Kurds in the north of Syria rejected both of these and instead paved the way for a third option: democracy. Taking advantage of the power vacuum created after Assad's forces withdrew from the region to fight Islamic extremists, the Kurds in the north of Syria formed three autonomous cantons – Afrin, Cizire, and Kobane – in a geographic area they refer to as Rojava. The Kurds, mainly led by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), have been pushing for a comprehensive social transformation to create a radically democratic, free and egalitarian society. All around Rojava, citizens assemble in communes, councils, committees, and neighbourhood assemblies to take decisions on social, economic, cultural, and ecological matters that affect their daily lives. What is most impressive is that they are trying to implement this unique political experiment in libertarian socialism in the midst of war. However, the Rojavan model, which bears similarities to the Zapatista experience, is under threat by the fascism of the so-called 'Islamic State' (IS) and other regional actors vehemently against Kurdish autonomy. This piece aims to demonstrate that now is not the time for the international Left to be disputing the Rojava revolution and whether it fits their theoretical framework, but to instead show communitarian solidarity with the Rojavans in what is arguably a fight for freedom and popular democracy against the forces of fascism.

## DEMOCRATIC CONFEDERALISM

Before giving examples of British-Rojavan solidarity, it is helpful to describe the fundamentals of the Rojava revolution, that is, its political ideology known as 'democratic confederalism'. Developed by the Kurdish political leader Abdullah Ocalan, it challenges state power by promoting popular democracy, an ecological

society, and a co-operative economy. Ocalan sees social change as necessary to challenge the established undemocratic social order, but the principal agent leading this change must be a popular-based, trans-class movement. He argues that a peaceful environment could be achieved by relying on the tools of participatory democracy, supporting an evolving civil society and grassroots movements (2011, p11). In addition to democratic confederalism, Ocalan also developed the idea of 'democratic autonomy' as a way to guide municipalities and civil society on how to function autonomously at the local level.

In framing the models of democratic confederalism and democratic autonomy, Ocalan was inspired by many radical thinkers but perhaps to a greater extent by Murray Bookchin and his work on social ecology, libertarian municipalism and communalism. Bookchin's critique of the nation-state as a structurally oppressive institution also began to manifest itself in Ocalan's prison writings. Ocalan later encouraged his followers to place their efforts on democratising Kurdistan and the states in which the Kurds inhabit (Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria) instead of focusing on achieving statehood. Democratic confederalism thus represents a post-nationalist framework for a 'democratic, ecological, gender-liberated society' to replace totalitarianism, capitalism, and patriarchy in the Middle East (TATORT 2014).

Below is a brief overview of how the Rojavans are pursuing directly democratic, pluralist and feminist politics.

## DIRECT DEMOCRACY

In Rojava, the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM) has been actively mobilising people at grassroots level. Although, TEV-DEM appears to act as some form of higher-level confederal council, like the PYD it has no institutional role (Iltis 2015). However, TEV-DEM is leading the social coordination of the three cantons in Rojava and has assisted cities, villages and towns to create a communal form of democracy based on a bottom-up approach to politics to transfer power from the state into the hands of the people. The communes, which consist of a various number of neighbourhood assemblies, send delegates to represent them in city and regional councils. To take an example from the canton of Cizire, the city council members of its largest city Qamişlo consists of representatives from Qamişlo's six districts but the majority of the city council members (some 200) are actually in fact elected (Biehl 2015). The city council in turn selects delegates to a form of canton-wide council, which becomes responsible for larger administrative tasks but there are issues with implementing this due to the ongoing war. However, civic participation helps strengthen accountability and transparency and

there exists a close relationship between the communes and the regional councils. For example, there are area-specific committees (such as health or education) at commune level that communicate directly with similar committees at canton-level, thus better ensuring local needs are met.

Although Rojava has experienced significant changes on the social and cultural front, perhaps less so economically. A number of important reasons exist for why this is so, mainly war and embargoes, but attempts have been made to gradually develop into a social, anti-capitalist economy. Several cooperatives and councils have been established to manage agriculture and oil production (Knapp 2015). However, a vast majority of profits go to the war efforts and the defence of Rojava.

## **FEMINISM**

The emancipation of women is one of the top priorities of the Rojava revolution, which has been referred to as ‘women’s revolution’ – one that has ‘profoundly transformed not only women’s status but every aspect of society’ (Biehl 2014). Many women actively participate in the various popular assemblies, contributing to the empowerment of women in a relatively conservative and patriarchal culture. This emphasis on women’s liberation and empowerment can be accredited to Ocalan’s pronounced feminist politics. He has argued that hierarchy began with the domination of man over woman, and therefore it is vital to challenge patriarchy and the ‘dominant male’ that impede real freedom for every individual in the Middle East (Ocalan 2015).

The Rojavans exemplify their feminism in many ways. For instance, Kurdish women have their own militia known as Women’s Protection Units (YPJ), who together with the People’s Protection Units (YPG) have been at the forefront in the fight against IS. Politically, all leadership positions at all levels (commune, district, city, and canton) are shared between a female and a male. There are also quotas in place to ensure female participation in decision-making (forty per cent). Also, women’s councils have been established at all levels to address concerns specific to them, attracting women from non-Kurdish backgrounds as well (Biehl 2015).

## **PLURALISM**

The ideological foundation of the Rojava revolution actively promotes religious tolerance and ethnic equality. Whilst the majority of PYD and TEV-DEM members are Kurds (who also make up the majority of the Rojava population), many are also Arabs, Assyrian-Syriacs, Armenians, Circassians, and Chechens. The PYD and TEV-DEM

strive for the coexistence and co-operation between people of various demographic backgrounds, but admit this is not always easy due to the history of the nation-state system and its role in forcing ethnic separation, resulting in prejudices and animosity between communities (TEV-DEM 2015). However, TEV-DEM believes Syria can be led on a path of peace and pluralism through radical decentralisation and popular democracy. The country can once again, TEV-DEM states, become a vibrant, multi-cultural society marked by positive coexistence as it was before the nation-state system was imposed on them by imperialist forces (ibid. 2015). It is noteworthy that while Kurds had previously struggled for independent statehood, many now realise that state formation has had destructive societal consequences that are directly linked to the historical oppression of Kurds in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria.

## **BRITISH-ROJAVAN SOLIDARITY**

Across the UK, several Rojava solidarity groups, networks, and committees have been formed since the revolution in Rojava began. Not all of these groups are new. The Kurdish Community Centre in London is a long-established centre that has in recent times been the main organiser of Rojava-related events in London. In other parts of England, one can find the Nottingham Kurdish Solidarity Campaign, Manchester Friends of Rojava, and Leeds Friends of Rojava. At the time of writing, there are plans to establish a solidarity network in the Newcastle-Durham area. In addition, there are long-established socialist and anarchist clubs in various cities and towns across the UK, which are active in their support to the Rojava revolution. While these are examples of collective action, there are of course individuals acting entirely on their own to, for example, organise charity and fundraising events in the name of solidarity.

In the UK, there have been many different solidarity events for Rojava and more are forthcoming. For those wishing to display more practical, active solidarity, either contact your nearest solidarity network via Facebook or form one of your own. Once you have formed a group, create a Facebook page where it is possible to connect with other solidarity groups and bring attention to your own group. In this way, one can also raise awareness of ongoing solidarity campaigns, such as the 'Stop ISIS campaign' initiated in 2015 by Vasiliki Scurfield, mother of Konstandinos Erik Scurfield, who was the first British volunteer to die fighting with YPG. The campaign demands direct UK aid and support for the Kurds' struggle against the Islamic State, such as medical supplies, night-vision equipment, and artillery. It calls for the UK government to create a direct communication channel with the Kurds in Rojava in order to establish what their needs are. The campaign also encourages

people to send letters to their MPs asking what they are doing to support Rojava against the atrocities committed by IS.

At the time of writing, Plan C are planning a speaker tour in the UK cities in which they are active, primarily London, Leeds, Birmingham and Manchester, and aims to cover the latest developments in Rojava as well as the promotion of radical democracy via the HDP in Turkey. With the tour, Plan C seeks to (re)launch their work on Rojava solidarity, hosting different fundraisers and direct actions. Plan C are looking to build contacts to assist in their solidarity campaign for Rojava and interested individuals can find their contact details on the Plan C website.

Further, there is an ongoing UK-wide book collection campaign for the first university to open in Rojava – the Mesopotamian Academy of Social Sciences. There is a desperate need for more books in their library but the university's finances are understandably limited. For those wishing to donate academic books, contact the nearest Rojava solidarity network via Facebook. For the time being, the library needs books in Kurdish, Arabic, and English and preferably from a variety of academic disciplines, and especially from law, sociology, politics, and history.

## **OUTSIDE THE UK**

There are Rojava solidarity networks in several western and southern European countries, in Brisbane and Adelaide, Australia, as well as in some Latin American countries including Mexico, Bolivia, and Venezuela. Many of these have active Facebook pages through which you can get in touch and request more information on how to get involved.

- For more information about the book campaign, visit its Facebook page: [https://www.facebook.com/pages/Pirt%C3%BBkek-bo-Akademiya-Mezopotamyay%C3%AA-Donate-a-book-to-Mesopotamia-Academy/870057249685677?sk=info&tab=page\\_info](https://www.facebook.com/pages/Pirt%C3%BBkek-bo-Akademiya-Mezopotamyay%C3%AA-Donate-a-book-to-Mesopotamia-Academy/870057249685677?sk=info&tab=page_info)
- For general information about the Mesopotamia Academy and its aims, read this report: <https://rojavareport.wordpress.com/2014/08/31/first-new-university-to-open-in-rojava/>
- To find the Facebook pages of the different Rojava solidarity groups in the UK listed above, simply type in their names in the search box.

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