

Questioning 'terror'

Ayşe Berktaş

Ayşe Berktaş has been in prison since October 2011. She is one of thousands, as she explains (see Spokesman 115, also). Her trial, with some 200 other activists in the Peace and Democracy Party (the BDP) has been adjourned again, until March 2013. As a celebrated writer and translator, Ayşe's case has been taken up by PEN International, which has long campaigned in support of persecuted authors. In that connection, she recently received an award in memory of Duygu Asena, herself an acclaimed Turkish journalist, author and activist for women's rights, who died in 2006.

It is with love and affection that I remember Duygu Asena, on this occasion which is held in her honour, and I send my own greetings and love to you from Bakırköy Prison. I very much wish I could be with you in person, looking at your faces and into your eyes as I speak and listen. For I am of the opinion that these times require tremendous effort on our part if we are to clearly express our thoughts and feelings and the stance we take, and to sincerely explain ourselves and genuinely understand the person sitting across from us. In my case, the communication will have to be one-sided, and for that I apologize. It is always possible for you to overcome this one-sidedness and to give me the chance to listen, too; I would be more than happy to do so.

First, I must thank you for this meaningful award. Duygu Asena was a woman who bravely defended her beliefs, who spoke out candidly about her priorities, who lived what she believed, and never backed down in her struggle to break certain taboos. She was a feminist who advocated women's right to 'be' themselves, for human rights, and for the right to freedom of thought and expression. I view this award as a meaningful act of defiance in the face of the injustice and audacious disregard for the law that has resulted in the imprisonment of myself along with over 200 fellow members of the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), 34 of whom are women. The case brought against us forms part of a continuing mass political hunt which completely disregards the freedom to practise politics, the freedoms of thought and speech, and the freedom to organize. All this constricts democratic political space and, by

targeting the BDP, aims to render the Party ineffective, disempowering the people who support it. This is not a case of a few 'innocents' who happened to get mixed up with a gang of criminals; it is, through and through, a massacre of law, democracy, and freedom.

According to the indictment, the Platform of Peace Initiatives, which consists of various smaller peace initiatives started by artists, women, anti-war activists, conscientious objectors, anti-militarists, and intellectuals, is a 'subsidiary organ of a terrorist organization'; so, too, is the Democratic City Council established by dozens of parties, political journal publishers and their followers, legal chambers, non-governmental organizations, environmental and urban movements, unions, organisations, grassroots movements, and neighbourhood and identity-based movements. This trial is based upon an indictment that claims peace is something that can only be arrived at by two states. According to the same indictment, the belief that the state should engage in peace talks with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and Abdullah Öcalan, or even 'maintaining that the PKK is not a terror organization', is evidence of PKK membership. According to this indictment, reading, conducting research, or trying to come up with different proposals for ways to end the conflict are evidence that one is a member of the PKK. Efforts to secure the release of terminally ill prisoners, writing letters to prisoners, and visiting prisoners are evidence of PKK membership. Efforts to ensure women's participation in politics and to make sure they have a say in party decisions are a crime. Citing the injustice of court verdicts, wanting military operations to stop, and mourning the dead are all crimes. People are deemed guilty of belonging to the PKK, based on their thoughts and the words and concepts that they use. The 2,401-page indictment is full of hundreds of examples showing this to be the case.

In the indictment, it is blatantly proclaimed that insistence upon the right to defend oneself in the mother tongue does not derive from any human necessity, and this position has been affirmed by the courts. The culmination of refusing to recognize this right is the refusal to allow even those friends of ours with whom we have difficulty communicating in Turkish to have an interpreter present in court for their testimony. In the courtroom, the defendant will, of course, speak in the language in which he or she best expresses him or herself; this is a matter of the very livelihood of the defendant. And who knows better than the defendant which language he or she understands best? There is only one explanation for the denial of this very basic reality, the refusal to recognize this very basic right, and the misery that so many people are made to endure in the prisons as a consequence: language is being used as a means to dominate and tyrannize.

We are people engaged in the world of writing and poetry; we live, eat, and breathe language. We could write books about the importance of language in a person's life, the sources from which each language feeds, how it develops, the death of languages and the reasons therefore, and what it means for posterity. Only we ourselves know the torment we each endure in our quest to find the best words to express a feeling, a thought, a dream delivered on the wings of a bird, a scent, hope and desperation, love and pain. Only we know how to draw that information, those intuitions, and to what depths of our souls and stories and memories of our childhood we must plunge to retrieve them. That much we should know.

Only a person whose mother tongue has been banned can know just how vital her connection with the mother tongue is. Only she can feel this in her heart; only she, and we. We know, most of all, that to ban education in the mother tongue and its use in public space, that is, constricting the space in which the language functions, means the obliteration of a people, an identity and a culture, and the murder of a language. We can make it possible for those who do not suffer this plight to understand and to feel what it means. One must realize that such a fundamental injustice is nothing less than dynamite placed beneath the foundation of peace and harmony.

We know that languages are the memories of nature and humanity, and that obliterating a language is a crime, a crime against humanity, which means obliterating a piece of the family of humanity, a crime which cannot be undone. Whether we realize it or not, we possess the knowledge that the pain and victimization of a people or peoples whose memories are under attack and in danger of being erased, render us all victims, that the voices which are lost mean our own impoverishment as well. And all of this knowledge brings with it responsibility: the responsibility to take steps rendered necessary by such knowledge.

This state of affairs begs a question: how to explain the fact that we who are so closely engaged with language, have failed to stand up and join our voices with those who have been demanding education in the [Kurdish] mother tongue for ten years, and the right to defend oneself in court in the mother tongue for three-and-a-half years?

I'm looking at our court case, a travesty of justice, democracy, and freedom, at the increasingly commonplace infringements against human rights, and how those infringements are rendered somehow 'legitimate', at how the massacres in Antep and Afyon are made to disappear from the media and the government's agenda, as if by the wave of a magic wand, with the help of a few days' worth of poisonous propaganda, at the utter

lack of effort to identify and punish the culprits responsible for the Uludere massacre, at the deaths of gravely ill prisoners as they pass from our midst one by one, at the hunger strikes which have been happening for a month now, in which, presently, 400 prisoners in 40 prisons are participating, their numbers ever growing, at the members of the BDP being thrown into prison, including children and the elderly, by the dozens, their numbers having swelled to more than ten thousand. I look at those on hunger strike who, on the orders of the Minister of Justice, have been placed in solitary confinement in the Silivri No. 2 L-Type Prison and thus forced into a death fast. Why, I ask, is it that those circles we know to be democratic have failed to react, to take serious action aimed at achieving results? How is it that we fail to react to police attacks on every demonstration with a readiness and determination matching their own? How can the people of this country be so willing to live with this injustice and tyranny? How is it the willingness to live this lie reproduced?

The hate-filled, unlawful politics and warmongering that saturate the case against us are a perpetuation of the same language that has been used for so long, a polarizing language of warmongering in which the state claims that its actions are in the name of 'security' in the 'war against terror', a language which the state has successfully rendered as the dominant discourse. This case is a striking expression of the extremes to which the state is capable of going, feeding upon the mentality which defines as a terror issue the state of conflict/war that has been happening in our country in various degrees of intensity for decades, and which claims that there is in Turkey not a Kurdish issue but a terror issue. And it is precisely for this reason, that is, because it is not a singular/incidental case, because it is a part of the approach of the mainstream, which dominates all official levels of government, whether of the ruling party or the opposition, that all this is especially troubling. Categorizing stances on issues and even lives themselves solely within the framework of the 'war on terror', according to whether or not a particular action represents a 'weakness' in the face of terror, whether or not it will be beneficial for 'terrorists', and whether or not the person in question has ever given voice to similar opinions on any topic; this indictment clearly illustrates the aforementioned mentality, a mentality that comprises the greatest threat to peace, friendship, democracy and freedom in Turkey, and the greatest obstacle to efforts to resolve the issue. In fact, we might say that this is true not only for Turkey, but also for the entire world.

This case should worry not only us and our families, Kurds and members of the BDP, but everyone who still believes that another world is

possible, who exalts the values of equality, democracy, freedom, and justice, and who envisages a peaceful world in which women are free, in which there is no tyranny of one gender over the other, which is respectful of humans and nature, and which embraces diversity.

In one of his essays, Eduardo Galeano writes that,

‘in the schools in Uruguay, we were taught that the country had been relieved of the native problem in the previous century thanks to the generals who had destroyed Jon Charrus and his ilk.’

That is precisely what I mean by a security-centred approach; the same approach espoused by the Prime Minister [Erdogan] when he refers to giving precedence to citizens’ security, not an approach which gives priority to myriad other concerns along with that of ensuring citizens’ security. Trying to solve this ‘democracy problem’, which has arisen from what we call the ‘Kurdish problem’ but is, essentially, the failure to grant constitutional protection and thus meet the Kurdish people’s demands for equality, democracy, and freedom, and the rejection of the Kurds’ right to ‘exist’, by exterminating those who demand those rights: that is a security-centred policy or ‘solution’.

There is an alternative to all this: a peace-centred resolution, an approach that, first and foremost, strives to identify and rectify the injustices and inequalities that lead to conflict and crisis. When problems reach an, apparently, unsurpassable impasse, and when deadlock reigns, or appears to, I believe that we must put aside all manner of prejudices, stereotypes, cliché words and thoughts, and review the issues thoroughly once more; that we must make serious efforts, requiring genuine labour, to listen, read, understand, and hear, without categorizing, labelling, or ostracizing, saying that this is so-and-so’s idea. Every word which is obstructed or limited in its expression, and therefore fails to be conveyed or heard, every actor whose participation in this pool is obstructed, limits the possibility of an immediate, satisfying resolution. It is at precisely this point that we must defend freedom of thought and expression with no ‘buts’, not only for writers, artists, and academics, but also for everybody else. The ordinary citizen’s freedom of expression is no less valuable than anyone else’s. That is precisely the reason why the security-focused approach to resolution and the ‘anti-terror’ paradigm comprise the greatest obstructions on the path to peace, resolution, and democratization. We are not allowed to discuss and debate our thoughts and suggestions. Ours is a monologue, in which it is forbidden to speak in favour, but perfectly acceptable to oppose.

I believe it critical that we question this ‘anti-terror’ and ‘terror-

problem' paradigm, which is based upon a binary of those who are right and good versus those who are evil and, therefore, must be eliminated as quickly as possible for the welfare of all, because from the moment you approach the issue within the framework of 'terror' and 'terror issue', the entire axis shifts completely. Thus, we come to define the issue not as one that requires fixing, beginning with the very root of the problem, but rather as a menace that simply must be eliminated. Anyone who approaches the problem differently, who speaks out against the existing approach and against injustice, immediately falls within the ranks of those practising 'terror'. And so it becomes possible to criminalize them.

The election threshold [10 per cent for Turkish Parliamentary elections]; education in the mother tongue; punishment of security officers guilty of torture and rape; dam construction; inhumane prison conditions and the release of ill prisoners; empowerment of local government administration; whether or not to enter Syria; the subpoenaing of Hakan Fidan [head of Turkish intelligence]; all these matters are discussed within the same anti-terror framework, evaluated according to whether or not it will weaken the 'war against terror'. The widespread silence in the face of such blatant infringements of the right to freedom of thought and expression, and refusal to deal with the issue by means of political channels are, in large part, consequences of the perception of what is necessary and valid, a perception deliberately manufactured within the framework of anti-terrorism.

The minister, unjustly accused of impertinence, actually expresses the situation very succinctly, for he essentially explains the policy that is being implemented:

'The terror organization has another offshoot. There is such a thing as psychological terror, academic terror. There's a backyard that feeds terror ... through painting ... writing poetry ... writing newspaper articles ...'

The Prime Minister is quick to set straight the press and anyone who criticizes the KCK (Kurdish Communities Union) trials. He says that those who are critical don't know what it is they are defending, that they don't know what the KCK is, that they are not aware of the danger faced; and as soon as he says this, the number of questioning voices decreases. Rather than opposing the logic of the case, the absurdity of the charges and assumptions, and the fact that the case is based upon a presumed ability to read the intentions of the actors involved, we limit ourselves to vouching for those we know, and vouching that we are certain they are not members of an 'armed terrorist group'. We are unable to speak up and ask: what kind of an armed organization is this anyway, with no guns, no terrorist acts?

Those who know me and who know Bûsra Hoca and Ragip Zarakolu vouch for us. And so the entire objective becomes that of rescuing the few people whom we know from these trains bound for Auschwitz. Yet what is really needed is to stop these trains altogether. These trains are full of people exercising their right to 'be' different, to think differently, act differently, propose different solutions. And the track that those trains are on is nothing less than a massacre of 'the Other' – an Other-cide. If we just stop and think about it, we'll see that, actually, all of us are on that same train.

In the women's struggle, we speak not of one group raising the consciousness of another, but of learning from one another and achieving a greater consciousness together; we speak, not of standing beside the victims, but of our common victimization. To me, this stance *vis-à-vis* life itself is extremely important. Acts of violence against women, murder, harassment, and rape do not affect certain women only. They happen to all of us as a result of the patriarchal mentality, with its passion for domination, love of itself and its power, and infatuation with tyranny; this is a mentality that insults and enslaves, with complete disrespect for women, whom it considers sub-human. We consider such violence an attack against all of us.

I believe it is necessary to assume this same stance not only when it comes to women's issues, but also when it comes to all other issues. It is only by standing up for the basic rights and freedoms of everyone from all walks of life, by standing up for peace and the freedoms of thought, expression, and action for all, and standing up against the imprisonment of voices, words, and language that we can defeat the dominance of lies and militarization, which impairs minds, dims consciences, and pulls wool over the eyes of all as it stokes the fires of enmity and polarization. The only way to counter this is, first and foremost, by repudiating and subverting the categorization of one side, the state, as good and just, whose every action is deemed right and necessary, no matter what it does, versus the 'bad guys', thought to be sub-human, whose words are not worth hearing, whose language is not worth speaking or understanding, whose human rights are not worth protecting, whose problems are not worth listening to, whose beliefs are not worthy of respect; those who are not worthy of living, whose deaths are not worthy of mourning.

I hope that some benefit can be derived from this damned trial, this unfathomable and ridiculous torment. I hope the fact that there are some of us on trial who are not Kurdish, and who do not fit the image of the Kurdish militant as 'bogyman', 'sub-human', 'terrorist', 'monster', 'bloodthirsty', and so on, an image which has been created in the minds of people, not only by the existing AKP Government in Turkey, but also by

decades of state tradition, will topple prejudices and stereotypes and give rise to questioning about what injustices the Kurds (those 'naturally born suspects', who have been struggling with the same problems for decades) face. I hope that this 'fate' we share, albeit only in small part, with the Kurds will help to make others aware of the importance of listening to what the Kurds themselves have to say, to their problems, demands, and suggestions; of the importance of bending an ear to this not inconsiderable portion of the population, certainly too considerable to be ignored, which states loudly and clearly that it imagines another, better future.

It is with these feelings that I convey my greetings, and call upon you to listen to the voices coming from the prisons, and to add your own voices to them.

In the hope that we will be together in days of freedom, which we create all together, with my love and respect,

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