

I demand my acquittal

Ayşe Berktaş

On 14 March 2013, Ayşe Berktaş addressed the Court in Silivri, near Istanbul, where she is on trial with more than 200 others. Ayşe has been held in prison since October 2011 (see Spokesman 115 and 119).

Her treatment highlights some of the intense pressures on democratic activists in Turkey, which she explained in addressing the Court.

I am a member of the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP). I became a member of the BDP in December 2009. In March 2010, I was elected to the BDP Province Administration for Istanbul, and in October 2010, I was elected to the BDP Central Women's Council. During my term as part of the province administration, I held a post with the Press Commission, and during my Women's Council membership, I worked as part of the Foreign Affairs Unit.

I grew up learning that opposing injustice and inequality was a virtue. I was advised to study and do research, but never to be a rote learner, and to never quit learning. It was from my mother and father that I learned that people are equal, that discrimination, vanity, and lying are extremely shameful, and that labour and freedom are the loftiest of values. I strove throughout my life to remain dedicated to these values. I became a socialist.

I adopted a position in life based upon the knowledge that injustice is practised not against certain people but against all of us, and to not accept a life condemned to such injustices; to not be at peace with the idea of living my life in passive acceptance of the fact that I live in a society in which inequality, injustice, and wrongdoing exist; and raising consciousness by learning from one another, acknowledging all victimhood to be our shared victimhood, and striving to change the current situation. That is why, today, at the age of 58, I am a member of the BDP.

I have always had a very special relationship with language, with the word, with understanding and explaining. My strong connection to my mother tongue and

my propensity for languages led me to become a translator. I wanted to, in my own small way, be a bridge, and to contribute to the sharing of expression. I know very well the nature of a person's relationship with her mother tongue. I know that a person's mother tongue is her identity, her existence, how vital a person's connection to her mother tongue is, the place of language in one's life, the sources from which it draws, and how it grows and thrives. I know that banning education in the mother tongue and use of the mother tongue in the public sphere means killing that language, and that killing a mother tongue means destroying the memory, identity and culture of a people, and thus destroying a part of this world. This is not ethnic politics.

Languages are the memory of humanity and of the world. To insist upon keeping a mother tongue alive means to insist upon keeping a people alive, keeping humanity and the world alive. And that's why insistence upon testifying in the mother tongue is a just demand. It is the insistence to maintain humanity. It is not, as claimed in this indictment, a stance assumed by a particular organization, which does not stem from human necessity. The BDP stance in this respect is right and correct.

In the last ten to fifteen years, I have been actively engaged with the History Foundation, the Foundation for Women's Human Rights, the Citizens' Initiative for Peace, the Commission for Justice and Truth Regarding Diyarbakır Prison, and the Women's Initiative for Peace. My years at the History Foundation were marked by efforts to overcome the vast rift between official history and real history, and to come to terms with that history. During my time at the Foundation for Women's Human Rights, I strove to contribute to research regarding women's rights, became closely involved with the women's struggle, got to know feminists, and prepared publications; I took part in the Prime Ministry's Human Rights Consultancy Committee as a representative of the Foundation. The work of the Peace Initiative, which came into being in the wake of September 11th, focused upon peace related problems in our country, our region, and the world; the Kurdish issue, the Armenian issue, the Cyprus issue, relations with Greece, the Palestinian issue, the siege of Gaza, the occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, and so on. Prejudices, militarism, nationalism, and militarist policies were being questioned, efforts were being made to devise a language that would offer an alternative to the predominant warmongering policies, to generate dialogue towards peace and solutions, and a space for that dialogue to take place. Panels and meetings were being held.

I took part in the anti-war movement, at both the national and the global

level, in the European and World Social Forums, in anti-war assemblies, that is, committees, in opposition to the warmongering and domination policies and the 'either you're with us or your against us' axis which was being imposed upon the entire world under the guise of the post 9-11 war against terror. We carried out local and global campaigns against the parliamentary vote of March 1st that would have allowed US troops to enter Iraq from Turkey. I am one of the founders and co-ordinators of the World Tribune on Iraq (WTI), which was formed as part of the worldwide anti-war movement in order to put the occupiers of Iraq on trial and to question the international system/institutions which made the occupation possible. For three years this global network conducted serious work and campaigns that earned it respect worldwide.

Unfortunately, I was unable to complete my work on the Commission for Justice and Truth Regarding Diyarbakır Prison, in which I met with individuals who had spent time in Diyarbakır Prison between 1980 and 1984, listening to and recording their first-hand accounts in order to reveal the truth about what happened, get society to face up to the truth about Diyarbakır Prison, and discuss how justice might be sought through rectification. During the first phase of this initiative, we conducted interviews with former prisoners. The work we conducted, staying in Diyarbakır, Urfa, and Batman, helped me to face upfront in a very real and concrete way the reality of Kurdish existence in our country. I will never forget the words of those people who shared their experiences with us, words like,

'We're glad you're here, but it's been a long time coming, hasn't it? Why has it taken you so long?' 'We never would have suffered such tyranny if you in the West had only listened to us, if you only had raised your voices in vociferous protest'; 'How is it that our voices haven't been heard, how is it that no one came to ask us about what happened over here, and to listen to what we had to say, how is it that no furore was raised against these atrocities?'

Their words will always remain with me. I was in Diyarbakır for *Newroz* in 2008. I witnessed a people flooding the city square, a people who knew what they wanted, who refused to be intimidated by threats as they confidently stood up for their rights, who had surpassed the threshold of fear, a proud, determined, calm people, their serenity welled to giant proportions inside them. I joined the Women's Initiative for Peace, which was comprised of Kurdish and Turkish women who came together under the banner 'We have something to say about peace, and the power to make it happen'.

Together we strove to understand and to explain what war and war policies meant for women. We strove to invent a language for peace that went beyond mere slogans, and to discuss how war policies, which fed off nationalism, racism, and militarism, meant unbridled sexism, violence, and rape for women, including all women of Turkey, Kurdish, Turkish, Armenian, and Arab alike, and to propagate the demand for a peaceful, democratic solution. Feminist women, socialist women, revolutionary Kurdish women engaged in the struggle for women's liberation; all of us together strove to get to know one another, to understand one another, to define the struggle that we absolutely had to undertake together.

The year 2009 was a difficult one. It was a tangle of one-sided ceasefires, military operations, and arrests. Because the mainstream media ignored the election rallies preceding the local elections and the tangible excitement of *Newroz*, the DTP's (Democratic Society Party, the predecessor to the BDP) success in local elections came as a shock to those in the Western provinces. Some 2,000 Kurdish politicians were held during arrests that began following the ceasefire, and continued for months. On the one hand, efforts to arrive at peace continued, and there was a rising expectation that a solution might be reached at any moment, while on the other hand, operations and arrests continued unabated. Meanwhile, bones were being uncovered everywhere, and more bones were being sought in the Botaş wells. That's when the Peace Group arrived. Within a few days, joy at the prospect of peace and a resolution to the conflict met with a response of indignant insult and outrage, provocation of hatred, and lynching, which then began to take on an organized form. Joy was replaced by tension, lynchings, attacks, and racist terror. First Ahmet Türk, and then a DTP convoy in Izmir, were attacked. Lynch mobs descended upon Taksim and Tarlabası, and petitions calling for executions were compiled at tables set up in city squares. This mentality, with legitimacy bestowed upon it by nationalism, which led to assaults upon Kurds and Kurdish politics, was on the verge of social dominance; an atmosphere that this was born of a very natural consensus was being created. And then the idea of closing down the DTP came to the fore, and quickly to fruition. It was at this point that I responded positively when a group of intellectuals were called upon to become members of the BDP, in opposition to drawing a 'red line' around Kurds and democratic Kurdish politics, to oppression, tyranny, the normalization of enmity, and isolation policies. In order to contribute to peace and democratization, and in the belief that the Kurdish people's demands for equality, democracy, freedom, and identity were not only issues that concerned the Kurds, but also issues at the heart of the

democratization of Turkey itself, I joined the BDP.

I was engaged in politics but, at my age, I had no plans to become an active part of a political party structure, because hierarchical and bureaucratic structures did not agree with me. But in that atmosphere of isolation and aggression, to me it seemed important to become actively a part of the BDP and to continue in my efforts to break down walls and convey the issues at hand from there.

In the BDP, I was met with love, respect, and warmth. I had taken a small step in the name of friendship, and the other party members attributed great importance to this action on my part. It was as a part of the BDP that I truly came to know the Kurdish people and democratic Kurdish politics, which I had thus far supported from a distance and to which I had lent my support at the ballot box in elections. And what I encountered was not a classical hierarchical party structure, but a structure which attributed importance to being democratic, to arriving at decisions by means of debate, to self-criticism and criticism, and which constantly sought to improve itself in these regards, a party structure in which the shaping influence of the people and the constituency were tangent, and which sought to become horizontal rather than a rigid, vertical chain of command.

The BDP is a party which advocates a peaceful, democratic solution to the Kurdish issue, with firm determination and belief in its cause. It is a party that is completely open to suggestions and criticism, and which makes its decisions based not upon orders and commands, but by means of debate amongst its members and directors, who act in solidarity to arrive at mutually agreed decisions. Once I became part of the BDP, which, in its quest for organizational models aiming at direct democracy and participation, comprises an extremely valuable accumulation of experience for Turkish politics, I soon found that my initial hesitation was unfounded.

I asked my friend who was Party Co-Head of the Province. Excepting four, all the 60 BDP province directors, including the co-head of our province, belong to the BDP Province Executive Committee. Most of our friends from the BDP General Headquarters Party Assembly responsible for Istanbul, and all our district directors, had been arrested.

In order to claim that people who were members of the BDP and active in the legal organs of the party, were using the party as a front, and were actually members of an illegal organization and carrying out activities not of the BDP but of that organization, it is necessary to put forth concrete evidence as to such membership, and evidence that members had conducted activities that were not in keeping with the aims, views,

initiatives, programme and charter of the BDP, but rather fell outside the bounds of these.

That is not what is done in this indictment. Rather, work carried out under the umbrella of the BDP, and within the framework of the party programme and charter, have been put forth as evidence of membership in a covert organization.

The concrete evidence included in my file shows the work I have carried out as a member of the BDP and as part of my duties as a party member, that I share the same stance as the BDP when it comes to the Kurdish issue and democratization, that I have read and conducted research on the topic of democratic autonomy, that I have kept up with relevant news, commentary and statements, and that I am in favour of a peaceful democratic solution to the Kurdish issue; it shows this, and nothing more.

The BDP Women's Assembly has been among those to feel the effects of the prosecutor's eagerness to label anything and everything that includes the word 'Assembly' as KCK (Kurdish Communities Union, see *Spokesman 119*). Yet the BDP women's assemblies (at the township, district, province, and central headquarter levels) are legal organs, which are part of the BDP charter (Articles 19, 27, 39, 68), and which are regulated by by-laws. The three meetings presented as evidence in the indictment are all meetings for the establishment of BDP district women's assemblies, held in January 2011, by the BDP Istanbul Province Women's Assembly. At the meeting of the BDP General Women's Assembly, held on 28 December 2010, the results of which were announced to the press, it was decided that 'the establishment of women's assemblies in 14 provinces shall be completed by 30 January 2011. The fact that participation in these official meetings held at BDP district buildings with members of parliament in attendance, meetings which moreover resulted in the issuing of official decisions and circulars, would be admitted as evidence is especially revealing as to the state of the indictment in question. My participation in these meetings as a representative of the General Headquarters and in the company of our members of parliament is natural, legal, and proper.

The meeting in question was part of an initiative carried out to ensure that women themselves have equal say in decision-making and equal representation in politics. Every woman who is a member of the BDP is a member of the Women's Council. The BDP Women's Council is the largest, most widespread political party-affiliated women's organization in Turkey. This is due to its persistent efforts when it comes to women's issues, women's freedom, and women's politics. Through its struggle to combat

discrimination, violence, 'honour' killings, harassment and rape, child marriage, exchanging of brides (*berdel*), bride price, and polygamy, its efforts to raise awareness of the negative effects upon women of phenomena such as unemployment, poverty, migration, and war, and to develop policies to combat these; and its efforts in the areas of education in the mother tongue, participation in politics, equal representation, peace, constitution, decentralization, direct democracy, and the development of non-hierarchical participatory government models that give women a greater voice, it strives towards greater freedom for women, and greater freedom of life itself, and thus to eliminate the conditions which inhibit us from achieving these goals. It struggles against the patriarchal system and mentality. I consider the accusation that the BDP Women's Council, which has made the aforementioned efforts towards achieving its vision, as put forth in the indictment in a dismissive, hyper-masculine language, claiming that that the council has done anything other than strive towards solving women's problems and furthering the cause of women's freedom, as nothing short of defamation. As someone who has dedicated years to the women's struggle, I want to express just how exciting, and how exhilarating it is to encounter a political party women's initiative that so sincerely, and with such great determination, attributes importance to women's politics and women's issues, and dedicates itself to its own transformation in this respect.

Another piece of evidence included in the indictment is the press statement issued in front of Bakırköy Prison by the Freedom for Hediye Aksoy Platform, the Society for Solidarity with Families of Prisoners (TUAD), and the Progressive Lawyers Association (ÇHD), following the verbal and physical assault on Hediye Aksoy, a cancer patient being taken to the hospital for treatment, in the prison ring vehicle at the hands of non-political prisoners, and the incidents that occurred in prison thereafter. I took part in issuing the press statement due to my involvement in the Freedom for Hediye Aksoy Platform. This platform was formed by many women who were also part of the BDP Women's Council and their supporters, when it was discovered that convicted prisoner Hediye Aksoy, who is one hundred per cent blind, had cancer. A circular was issued by the BDP Women's Council regarding the intention to carry out a campaign about Hediye Aksoy.

Furthermore, the fact that my trips abroad, and my participation in international meetings connected to the aforementioned World Tribunal on Iraq, having to do with human rights, peace, and women's issues, should be included in my file as 'having been deemed part of PKK-KCK activities', is unacceptable.

Esteemed Members of the Court,

I believe that, when issues become, by all appearances, irreparably knotted, and when the will to achieve resolution is lost, or no resolution appears feasible, it is necessary to lay aside all prejudices, stereotypes, cliché words and mentalities, and to reconsider the matters at hand calmly and thoroughly; to make serious efforts to listen, read, understand, and hear, without resorting to a categorization of ‘this is so-and-so’s idea, that’s so-and-so’s idea’, and without labelling or excluding. Each word whose conveyance or expression is obstructed/limited, every potential creator of active engagement whose participation in the pool is obstructed, limits the possibility for satisfying, immediate resolution.

A security-centred politics or solution is the equivalent of solution by means of obliterating what we call the Kurdish issue, but which in truth is essentially an issue of democracy arising from the refusal of this people’s right to ‘exist’, and the fact that the Kurdish people’s demand for equality, democracy, and freedom has yet to be constitutionally guaranteed. It therefore means the obliteration of democracy, as well as the demand for its resolution, and of those who voice this demand. This is the path of resolution adopted in this indictment.

There is, however, an alternative: a peace-centred resolution, an approach whereby the injustices and inequalities, which have caused this crisis and these conflicts, are defined and resolved. This is the path to which the BDP remains dedicated. And it is the path that I have chosen, as well.

I live my life according to the choices I have laid out for you here. The accusations included in this indictment question my existence, my being on this earth, as much as they question the BDP. I can’t accept this. I renounce the accusations, and demand my acquittal.