

Ayşe Berktaş

An update

Abi Rhodes

As readers of *The Spokesman* will know, Ayşe Berktaş Hacimirzaoglu is an old friend of the Russell Foundation (see *Spokesman* 120, 119, 115). She is a prominent campaigner for women's rights and for peace in Turkey and internationally, as well as a celebrated writer and translator. It is two years since she was first arrested, along with hundreds of other activists, on bogus terrorism charges. Since October 2011, she has been held in pre-trial detention, mostly in Bakırköy Women's Prison in Istanbul. As we go to press, she is due to appear in court again. Requests for bail at previous appearances have been refused.

During her incarceration, Ayşe has received several notable international awards. In March 2013, on the tenth anniversary of the invasion of Iraq, the Brussels Awards for Resistance and Solidarity were announced by the BRussels Tribunal on Iraq. The prize for solidarity was given to Ayşe, one of the founders and co-ordinators of the World Tribunal on Iraq, which held 24 sessions worldwide, culminating in Istanbul in 2005.

In September 2013, Professor Richard Falk, the UN Special Rapporteur on Palestinian Human Rights, made himself available to present the award in person to Ayşe in prison. At the last minute, the Turkish Ministry of Justice refused permission, so the award was presented, *in absentia*, at the office of PEN Turkey, and this received some limited attention from the media. Founded in 1921, PEN promotes writers' freedom from persecution, and freedom of expression around the world. So it is fitting that PEN International have taken up Ayşe's case with great energy.

Abi Rhodes is on the editorial board of The Spokesman.

Ayşe was arrested on 3 October, 2011 when police raided her home at 5:00am, even though no arrest or search warrant had been issued. A number of raids against Istanbul-based pro-Kurdish intellectuals were conducted under the guise of an anti-terror investigation, which centred on the alleged urban wing of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), known as KCK. According to reports from PEN International, Turkish prosecutors have used this investigation as a means to 'pursue those with ideological sympathies for and affiliations to Turkey's pro-Kurdish political party, the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP)'.¹

PEN International have noted that anti-terror legislation has long been used by the authorities in Turkey as a way to justify the incarceration of many writers, publishers, journalists, academics and politicians. The authorities use an alleged link between peaceful civilians and armed PKK militants as an argument with which they can detain those who speak out for the BDP. According to PEN, the basis for this allegation appears to 'stem solely from the fact that they share a joint ideological interest in pursuing greater rights for Turkey's Kurdish citizens'.

Ayşe is a Turkish BDP member and is one of thousands of peaceful Kurdish and pro-Kurdish civilians in Turkey who have no link to any acts of violence that have been categorised as terrorist activity in the KCK investigation. However, on the basis of this 'investigation', Ayşe has been charged with 'leadership of an armed organisation' under Article 314/1 of the Turkish Penal Code and 'leadership of a terrorist organisation' under Article 5/1 of the Anti-Terror Law.

According to the prosecutors in this 'anti-terror' investigation, the evidence against Ayşe relates to the work she conducted in connection with the World Tribunal on Iraq, which involved extensive travel, and the meetings and demonstrations she attended on behalf of the BDP. And it is for this reason that Ayşe is being held in pre-trial detention on what PEN International describes as trumped-up charges of 'membership of a terrorist organisation' and 'making propaganda for a terrorist organisation'.

PEN International is calling for the immediate release of all of the journalists, writers and activists, including Ayşe, who have been detained.

For further information about PEN's campaign please contact Ann Harrison at International PEN Writers in Prison Committee, Brownlow House, 50/51 High Holborn, London WC1V 6ER

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Ayşe welcomes letters whilst in prison. Please write to:

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Kogus B-7
Bakirköy-Istanbul
Turkey*

Note

1 <http://www.pen-international.org/newsitems/turkey-writer-translator-and-activist-ayse-berktay-and-translator-deniz-zarakolu-are-set-to-remain-in-pre-trial-detention-two-years-on-from-their-arrest/>