

Speaking Freely

Ayşe Berktaş

On 20 December 2013, Ayşe was released on bail after more than two years' incarceration. This was not expected, but all the more welcome for that. Readers of The Spokesman have been writing to Ayşe in prison in Turkey, and we will continue to report developments. Meanwhile, her trial continues. She is due back in court together with hundreds of other activists in the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), which draws its support largely from the Kurdish community. A few days after her release, Ayşe gave this interview to Ekin Karaca of Bianet news.



Ayşe Berktaş

Bianet: Were you expecting to be released at Friday's hearing?

Ayşe: I was expecting the court would release a few people. But I had no idea who these people would be.

What did you feel when you were arrested in October 2011? Did you think that you would be released soon? Did you imagine that you would be gaoled for this long?

I wasn't expecting to be detained at all. When they did, though, I wasn't expecting to be released soon. When they detained everyone and we were transferred to police headquarters, on 3 October 2011, I knew that it was going to take a long time to be released.

What do you think about the charges you face?

It takes a long time to know what you are charged with. You only know that you are charged with being a KCK [Kurdish Communities Union] member in the beginning. We learned about the case details and so-called evidence after six months. Until then, we didn't know anything. Our lawyers had no idea either.

When I heard the charges, I didn't think how long it would all take. I was furious. I thought how absurd it was. It was a political operation. However, the indictment was so absurd that you realized anybody could accuse anyone of anything.

There are always political operations and there are always political attacks. But this was far worse and inappropriate. It makes one ponder. It could happen to anybody. They can charge anyone with being a member of such and such organisation. They can just pick you up out of nowhere. Everybody should know that whatever happened to us could have happened to anybody.

How do you see the public response to the arrests?

I don't think the public has any idea what has happened so far. People only know about the general things. In order to grasp what is beneath the surface, one needs to know a bit about the matter. For example, the indictment describes Dicle News Agency as 'the news organ of the terrorist organization'. What kind of an absurdity is that? Then you must close it down. It considers the one who does the bombing with those who bought the timer and nails of the bomb. It can be understood, but who is going to prove that nails were purchased for a bomb? They don't have such problems.

This case has details and these details have very weird aspects. For example, I have been abroad several times. The indictment claims I was travelling abroad on PKK [Kurdistan Workers' Party] activities since 1998. There are also many strange things happening in the court.

Such as?

Two hearings ago, a defendant submitted a motion about charges of which he was previously convicted. 'This shows that you are inclined to crime,' the court responded. 'This is why they added that to your file.'

The worst-case scenario is when you are captured for being a member

of a secret organisation. Then they consider all your legal activities as illegal. One defendant said he was forced to prove the whiteness of white. I think he was right.

What did you experience in prison? Even though you received a lot of support messages from Turkey and worldwide, did you ever feel lonely and desperate?

No, I was never desperate. I received countless letters from people I know and don't know. This touches you, of course. Feeling alone is a strange feeling. Even though you know that you are not alone, you can sometimes feel that way.

How was your typical prison day?

We got up at 7.30 in the morning. We had a watcher at all times and we would rotate that. The watcher would go early in the morning and buy the bread, then prepare the breakfast, make tea, and wake others. As we were having breakfast, guards would come and count everybody in the cell. We never had to declare ourselves; they would come and count everyone.

Some watch the morning news and others listen to programmes on *Açık Radyo* and *Özgür Radyo*. We always feel the lack of internet. After 9am, our solitary hours begin. While some would walk around the courtyard, others would just read. This would continue until lunch at noon. Then there are solitary hours again. We would have dinner at 8pm while watching the evening news. After 10pm, there is a solitary hour again. Sometimes we watched a nice movie on TV and other times we would chat about what was going on in our lives.

How many were you?

The cells are for 24 people but sometimes the number rose to 35. It was a matter of new arrivals and departures. Sometimes it went down to 15 or 16. There were mothers, there were university students, and there were women from party assemblies.

During your imprisonment, a process has been launched on the Kurdish problem. How do you see that?

There are obviously issues. These issues are raised not only by the BDP,

but also by the Qandil authorities and Öcalan himself. There is a high demand that this issue must be resolved by democratic means. This process has raised expectations of such means and people have, in large part, appropriated the process. People started to say that there is a Kurdish problem and that it must be resolved.

Even though there is pressure from the people, the process doesn't unfold very well. For instance, one of the basic issues is enlargement of democratic politics. They say the guns will fall silent and people will do politics. However, people are not allowed to do politics. If you only mean to decrease the electoral limits by doing politics, this is not the main issue. This means that negative aspects will remain, but guns will keep silent. Why don't we call these guns 'armed rebellion movement' instead of terrorism? The Justice Minister claims they would abolish the Anti-Terror Act when the guns become silent.

We are out now, but it is very possible that we might be gaoled on the same charges. The Anti-Terror Act must be abolished. Otherwise, democratic politics are impossible because, under the Act, they can consider anything legal as illegal.

I think Gezi Park showed people's determination not to continue with this injustice. However, we need to demonstrate this in every aspect of life. If we think that democracy is not only about showing up at elections every five years or so, we need to create a public pressure. Instead of submitting official inquiries, we need to create this pressure by strengthening public opposition. It is us who will push the government to take a further step. This is what democratic struggle is all about ...

How do you read the rejection of release for BDP Members of Parliament despite the constitutional court verdict for Balbay?

The rejection made me wonder whether Kurdish deputies are people with a mandate in Turkey. It is as if Turkey's 8th region is like the prisons; there are parallel lives here. It was the same situation, but two different decisions were issued for gaoled deputies. And they recklessly said that the deputies didn't make a personal application. So both the European Court of Human Rights and Supreme Court decisions are personal. Is this a prank?