

The Rojava Revolution and the model of democracy without a state

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At the start of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, Kurdish revolutionaries reclaimed the northern part of Syria, known as Rojava, which means “West” in Kurdish and refers to the western part of Kurdistan. In 2012, the peoples of the region declared a Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava, aimed at bringing about a new political model known as democratic confederalism. This model was described by Kurdish revolutionary Abdullah Öcalan as “democracy without the state,” an ideal based on local self-governance, gender equality, communal economy, secularism, and cultural and religious diversity.

The Rojava Revolution is widely known for its effective resistance against the brutal violence of the Islamic State. The Women’s Protection Units (YPJ) and People’s Protection Units (YPG) – the self-organised people’s armies of Rojava – have proved most successful in liberating land that was under the control of the Islamic State, and subsequently securing the rights and protection of religious and ethnic minorities in the region.

However, the revolution of Rojava is not just a military struggle. It is also a cultural struggle, a struggle to “change mentalities,” as Amina Osse, Deputy Chair of the Committee of Foreign Affairs of Canton Cizîrê in Rojava, puts it. With this change of mentality, Osse refers to the ideological awakening of Rojava through the practice of stateless democracy. The old model of the nation-state, Osse explains, is not capable of representing a diversity of peoples, due to its centralised and homogeneous identitarian

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politics. The nation-state further operates as a vehicle for global capital, privileges, and patriarchal relationships, and stands in conflict with ideals of a sustainable ecological society. In that light, the ultrafundamentalist and hyperpatriarchal Islamic State, which emerged from a history of violent imperialist politics in the region, stands in epic contrast to Rojava's ideal of a non-state democracy, championing women's rights and cultural diversity.

The Rojava Revolution is thus important for reasons that go beyond the enormous sacrifices at the frontlines against the Islamic State. It is also a struggle for a new society and a new democratic ideal. The Rojava Revolution brought about local parliaments, councils, and communes, which form the heart of the project of political self-governance – the heart of the Democratic Self-Administration. The revolution brought about new academies, such as the Women's Star Academy in Rimelan, which developed a new scientific paradigm based on women's perspectives, known as "Jineology." The Movement for Culture and Arts, Tev-Çand, established cultural centres in all of Rojava's villages and cities and organises exhibitions, music events, theatre, film screenings, and the cultural education of children and young adults. Moreover, it brought about the Rojava Film Commune, which is producing the first films by and for Rojavans on their history and revolution.

The democratic self-administration of Rojava and the new world summit

It is the intersection between culture and politics in the Rojava Revolution that brought about the collaboration between the Democratic Self-Administration and the New World Summit, an artistic and political organisation founded in 2012. The New World Summit aims to create temporary parliaments in theatres and art spaces all over the world, where it invites representatives of stateless and blacklisted organisations to speak. The organisation aims to explore the space of art and culture to create new models of democracy that aim for equality between state and non-state actors. Six summits have been organised so far, including in Berlin (2012) and Brussels (2014), and have involved more than forty stateless and blacklisted organisations from around the world.

In 2014, the Democratic Self-Administration invited the New World Summit team to travel to Rojava and witness the development of their

new civil society. It was during this visit that Amina Osse proposed to the New World Summit to contribute to the Rojava Revolution with a project: the creation of a new public parliament in the city of Dêrik in Canton Cezîrê, Rojava. A parliament as a public artwork, a sculpture, and symbol inspired by the Rojava Revolution, which at the same time would operate as a political space for the communes of Rojava to gather. This invitation resulted in a series of different collaborations. The construction of the public parliament began in August 2015, and an international delegation of representatives of stateless political organisations, politicians, academics, journalists, artists, and students travelled to Rojava in October 2015 to witness the achievements of the Rojava Revolution and celebrate the start of construction on the new parliament, which is aimed to be inaugurated early 2017. In January 2016, the Democratic Self-Administration of Rojava and New World Summit collaborated on a temporary parliament in Utrecht, inspired by the ideal of stateless democracy. Currently, a new project is underway in the form of a temporary embassy of Rojava in the City Hall of Oslo – the New World Embassy: Rojava.

To us, this collaboration between the realms of revolutionary politics and art emphasises the importance of cultural struggle within political struggle. Rojava inspires new political movements and artists all over the world to re-imagine the world differently, to confront the major crises in our politics, economy and ecology, to change mentality, and embrace a democratic paradigm that allows for power and resources to be shared by a diversity of peoples. It is not just one new world that Rojava is making possible; Rojava inspires many new worlds in the making, and invites artists and thinkers to contribute their imagination to make these many new worlds a reality, in the same way that the Rojava Revolution has made their new world of stateless democracy a reality for its peoples.

New world summit–Rojava

In 2014, the New World Summit was commissioned by Amina Osse, Deputy Chair of the Committee of Foreign Affairs of Canton Cizîrê, to develop a new parliament for the autonomous region of Rojava.

Amina Osse, Democratic Union Party (PYD) representative Sheruan Hassan, and artist Jonas Staal conceptualised the design as a public parliament – a parliament as a public space surrounded by a newly developed park, symbolising the Rojavan ideal of politics as common

property. The location of the parliament was decided to be the city of Dêrik. The circular space of the parliament can accommodate about two hundred and fifty people, the average size of a local commune in Rojava. The centre of power remains purposely unoccupied, emphasising the egalitarian ideal of stateless democracy as collective self-governance. Around the circular space, arches are constructed on which key concepts of Rojava's Social Contract are written. The roof consists of hand painted fragments of flags representing local political organisations. On October 16–17, 2015, a two-day summit was organised in the local cultural center of Tev-Çand in Dêrik to celebrate the start of construction, where Rojavan representatives spoke side by side with representatives of other state-less movements and progressive political parties from all over the world.