

A revolution of life

Jonas Staal in conversation with Salih Muslim¹

In your lecture today you made clear that the battle in Rojava is not just about fighting against the Islamic State; it is also a fight for a specific political idea: the model of democratic autonomy. What exactly is this model of democratic autonomy that lies at the heart of the Rojava Revolution?

The reason we are under attack is because of the democratic model we are establishing in our region. Many local forces and governments do not like to see these alternative democratic models being developed in Rojava. They are afraid of our system. We have created, in the middle of the civil war in Syria, three autonomous cantons in the Rojava region that function by democratic rule. Together with the ethnic and religious minorities of the region – Arabs, Turkmen, Assyrians, Armenians, Christians and Kurds – we have written a collective political structure for these autonomous cantons: our Social Contract². We have established a people's council with 101 representatives from all cooperatives, committees, and assemblies running each of our cantons. And we have established a model of co-presidency – each political entity always has both a female and a male chair – and a quota of a minimum of forty percent gender representation of each gender, in order to enforce gender equality throughout all forms of public life and political representation. We have, in essence, developed

1 | This interview took place after a lecture by Muslim in Amsterdam, on November 10, 2014. It was first published on Tenk.cc.

2 | The Social Contract was republished in Dilar Dirik, Renée In der Maur and Jonas Staal (eds.). Stateless Democracy. Utrecht: BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, 2015. The Social Contract can be found at: <https://civiroglu.net/the-constitution-of-the-rojava-cantons/>

a democracy without the state. That is a unique alternative in a region plagued by the internally conflicted Free Syrian Army, the Assad regime and the self-proclaimed Islamic State.

Another way of referring to this concept of democratic confederalism, or democratic autonomy, is *radical democracy*, where people are mobilised to organise themselves and to defend themselves by means of people's armies like the People's Protection Units (YPG) and Women's Protection Units (YPJ).³ We are practicing this model of self-rule and self-organisation without the state as we speak. Other people will speak of self-rule in theory, but for us, this search for self-rule is our daily revolution. Women, men, all strands of our society are now organised. The reason why Kobanî still stands is because we have built these structures⁴.

In your lecture, the words “democracy,” “freedom,” and “humanity” came up very often. Could you explain what you regard as the fundamental difference between capitalist democracy and what you have just described as democratic autonomy?

Everyone knows how capitalist democracy plays for the votes; it is a play of elections. In many places, parliamentary elections are just about propaganda; they only address the direct self-interest of a voter. Democratic autonomy is about the long term. It is about people understanding and exercising their rights. To get society to become politicised is the core of building democratic autonomy. In Europe, you will find a society that is not politicised. Political parties are only about persuasion and individual benefits, not about actual emancipation and politicisation. Real democracy is based on a politicised society. If you go now to Kobanî, and you meet the fighters of the YPG and the YPJ, you will find that they know exactly why they are fighting and what they are fighting for. They are not there

3 | The model of democratic confederalism is explained by Abdullah Öcalan in, among others, Abdullah Öcalan. *Democratic Confederalism*. London: International Initiative “Freedom for Abdullah Ocalan-Peace in Kurdistan,” 2011.

4 | At the time of this interview, the Women's and People's Protection Units (YPJ and YPG) were defending Kobanî against the invasion by IS that started in September 2014. At the end of October, only 20 percent of the city was under the control of the YPJ and YPG, yet in November, they slowly started to gain more terrain. Kobanî was liberated by the YPJ and YPG on January 27, 2015.

for money or interests. They are there for elementary values, which they practice at the same time. There is no difference between what they do and what they represent.

So how does one politicise a society to that level of political consciousness?

You have to educate – twenty-four hours a day – to learn how to discuss, to learn how to decide collectively. You have to reject the idea that you have to wait for some leader to come and tell the people what to do and instead learn to exercise self-rule as a collective practice. When dealing with daily matters that concern us all, they have to be explained, criticised and shared collectively. From the geopolitics of the region to basic humanitarian values, these matters are discussed communally. There has to be collective education so we know who we are, why we are facing certain enemies and what it is we are fighting for.

In a community that is at war and facing humanitarian crisis, who is the educator?

The peoples themselves educate each other. When you put ten people together and ask them for a solution to a problem or propose to them a question, they collectively look for an answer. I believe, in this way, they will find the right one. This collective discussion will make them politicised.

What you are describing as the heart of democratic autonomy is in essence the model of the assembly.

Yes, we have assemblies, committees; we have every possible structure to exercise self-rule throughout all strands of our society.

What do you consider the conditions for such a democratic experiment to be able to take place?

It is a long-term process. I myself have been involved in this movement for decades, in this fight – I have been in jail; I have been tortured. So the people of my community also know why I do what I do. I am not there to collect money or to benefit personally. At the time, the reason the

Syrian government captured and tortured me was that I was educating the people. And I am just one person; so many friends have gone through the same. Many have become martyrs as they died as a result of the torture of the regime. Democratic autonomy is not an idea to be realised in one day; it is an approach, a process that takes explaining, education – it is a revolution that takes a lifelong commitment.

There are many students, intellectuals and artists who are looking to Rojava, who are looking to Kobanî, and who recognise that, in a way, the promise of stateless internationalism has found its way back in our time. What do you say to these people who are not in Rojava but who see its revolution as a horizon. What can they do?

Well, go to Kobanî. Meet the people and listen to them, understand how they have brought their political model about. Speak to the YPG, the YPJ, and learn what they are doing – ask them questions, meet their society. In the near future, the conditions will allow you to go, and you can learn about the model of democratic autonomy that was defended in the worst imaginable conditions, with threats to life, with a lack of food and water. Go and speak to the people and you will understand how and why they did it. And what our society looks like as a result of it.

Do you believe that democratic autonomy could be a model enacted on a global level?

I believe that the democratic administration that we have established is one that everyone feels they are sharing in, so yes, that is a model for the world. There were many prejudices about our revolution, but when people from outside visited and sat down with our communities, they started to believe that democratic autonomy was the right thing. We had people joining our revolution even from Damascus. Everyone can come and see for themselves that our revolution is being fought and realised every day. It is a revolution of life, and as such, our struggle is a struggle for humanity.

