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Turkey: Kurdish politicians under continuing pressure

'I have appealed for peace and dialogue. My crime has been to use a Kurdish phrase for the friendship of Kurds and Turks and their coexistence during my oath of loyalty in parliament.'
Leyla Zana

Human rights violations against the Kurdish minority continue to be violated, Amnesty International said today, calling for the immediate and unconditional release of four members of parliament detained six years ago for peaceful expression of their beliefs.

At their inauguration as members of parliament in 1991, Leyla Zana and Hatip Dicle made brief statements in Kurdish, a language not recognized in Turkey. Leyla Zana wore the traditional Kurdish colours of red, yellow and green in her headband and Orhan Doğan and Hatip Dicle wore handkerchiefs in their breast pockets in the same colours.

After taking the oath of loyalty in Turkish as required, Leyla Zana added in Kurdish: *'I have completed this formality under duress. I shall struggle so that the Kurdish and Turkish peoples may live peacefully together in a democratic framework.'* Pandemonium broke out in the parliamentary chamber amid accusations of treason and separatism.

Immediately thereafter a case was constructed against the deputies. It presented their speeches and writings calling for a peaceful solution to the Kurdish question as evidence of membership of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). It also drew on evidence by a subsequently discredited witness, statements made by informers and others allegedly extracted under torture.

Initially the deputies were protected by parliamentary immunity but this was later lifted and their prosecution commenced in March 1994. Their trial fell far short of international standards and they were convicted on 8 December 1994 of membership of an illegal armed organization, the PKK and sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment.

Officials from legal Kurdish parties have encountered official harassment on a routine basis because of their opposition to state policy towards the Kurdish minority. Local party offices are regularly raided by the police, and officials, members and sympathizers are frequently detained and have been tortured, have "disappeared" or have been killed.

The practice of opening trials to silence and restrict legal Kurdish political activity continues. On 24 February, in the latest of a long series of trials against officials from the legal pro-Kurdish People's Democracy Party (HADEP), 18 senior HADEP officials, including the chairman and his predecessor, were sentenced to terms of imprisonment for "aiding and abetting" the PKK. Such a sentence also means that the officials are banned from political activity.

Earlier that same week on 19 and 20 February, three HADEP mayors in southeast Turkey, including Feridun Çelik, the mayor of the regional capital Diyarbakır, were snatched in broad daylight from their official duties and detained incommunicado at Diyarbakır Gendarmerie Headquarters. On 24 February they too were charged with “aiding and abetting” the PKK and committed to prison. The charges were partly based on statements allegedly made by Ramazan Tekin, deputy Mayor of Diyarbakır, who was tortured in January.

The three mayors were released from prison on 28 February and will face trial over the coming months. An order by the Minister of the Interior that they be removed from their posts as mayors was withdrawn following their release, but they have been banned from leaving the country. Amnesty International is calling for all allegations of torture and ill-treatment to be investigated. The organization may adopt them as prisoners of conscience if they are imprisoned.

Background

Kurds in Turkey are estimated to number at least 12 to 15 million. They are not recognized as an ethnic minority, and because ethno-lingual diversity is perceived as a threat to a homogeneous and unitarian nation state, their language has long been suppressed and officially denied. It is against this background that Kurds, those who defend their rights and those who attempt to represent them politically, have been exposed to grave human rights violations.

Freedom of expression, particularly with regard to the sensitive Kurdish question, has long been of concern to Amnesty International. The political establishment of Turkey views any discussion of minority rights for its Kurdish population, education in Kurdish or regional autonomy as little short of treachery and has gone to extreme lengths to silence political dissent on Kurdish issues.

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