

Popup Champagne or Popup Tear Gas

When Macaroni and Soap Does not Buy Votes

Report on Turkey's National Election, June 2011

Kurdistan justice and Peace Academy election monitoring delegation arrived in Diyarbakir, Turkey a week before the June 12, 2011, Election Day.

In Diyarbakir we met at the BDP (Peace and Democracy Party) headquarters for a briefing. BDP had invited several delegations from NGOs and personalities from European countries, as well as China, Australia, Canada, Russia, Azerbaijan and few countries. .

BDP had not been able to nominate any candidates because of the constitution threshold requiring a party to get at least 10 percent of the vote to be eligible to contest Parliamentary elections, but instead had supported independent candidates.

We spent the first day observing the city of Diyarbakir and the general election campaign. I had visited Diyarbakir and Southeast Turkey few times before, but this time, Diyarbakir was in a celebratory mood. Everywhere in the city, just as in any western style democracies, we could see banners, signs, posters, on walls and decorated busses supporting various candidates and parties.

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The AKP (Prime Minister Erdogan's Justice and Development Party)—a conservative and business oriented party had spent the most of the advertisements especially in and around Mosques. One of the themes of AKP's campaign was the fear of the return of the PKK(Kurdish Worker's Party) rebels by slogans such as "vote for BDP is equal to vote for PKK".

In one rally I heard Mr. Erdogan had used the religious card by accusing the BDP and Kurds to have preformed Azan (calling for prayer in Islam) in Kurdish Language (the present constitution of Turkey bans using Kurdish language in public). He also, accused the BDP of supporting atheists – by claiming that "These are followers of Abdollah Ojalan (The imprisoned Kurdish leader), and reminded people that for Kurds Ojalan is their prophet".

I believe AKP's tactic of using Islamic card to scare people away from voting for the BDP candidates did not quite work well. Rather, playing this Islamic card had made other non Kurdish parties especially intellectuals and progressive groups concerned. In my earlier visit to Turkey in February, I had heard similar concerns from Turkish scholars and intellectuals.

As we saw later that Kurdish independent candidates gained three seats from Istanbul.

BDP was supporting the pro-Kurdish rights Islamic candidate, Altan Tan who is popular with Muslim communities in Diyarbakir and gave a few speeches at the Friday Prayer. Our delegation spent one day with Altan Tan rally where he delivered his speech at the Cultural Hall in Sur city of the Diyarbakir province.

The frequent and noisy over flight by the Turkish Air Force jets over Diyarbakir was quite disturbing. During an afternoon visit to an outdoor café, I found it impossible to hold a conversation for more five minutes without being interrupted by the ominous sounds of military jets maneuvering overhead. I asked my friend if that was an everyday occurrence, she said no, but this frequent flying of jets has been part of election. One friend told me that the jets are bombing Qandil mountain areas, the hiding place of the PKK(the Kurdish Worker Party).

After receiving briefing from the BDP, next day we visited Silvan/ Mia Farqin (Kurdish name)—a region in Diyarbakir Province about 70 kilometers away from Diyarbakir.

The candidate for the region was Leyla Zana a former parliamentarian and the recipient of the Andre Sakharov's Human Rights Prize.¹

Few days before election we spent most of our time observing Layla's campaign in progress in Silvan area. What we saw was quite clean she was campaigning house to house, village by village and visited every shop and store in Silvan Region. The people of the area were very excited to see her—they were mesmerized by her presence. Women embraced and kissed her on the cheeks twice (as is customary in the area), men shook hands, and some even tried to kiss her hands as sign of gratitude. Many old men who remembered her legendary status, told her that she did not need to campaign in their village, because they would have voted for her anyway. Leyla's response was, "She had missed the people and the area as she was in prison for years."

On June 10, the campaign of Leyla Zana reached its climax. So many People-women, men, children were following her, that by the evening the crowds were estimated to be more than 100,000.

The mayor of the town asked Leyla to address the crowd. . Her slogan was Peace, Democracy, justice and asking the Prime Minister Erodogan to fulfill his promises of changing the

¹ Leyla Zana

"We are the kind of people who, when we trust someone, really give them a chance," she tells the crowd in Hazro.

"Mr prime minister, we gave you eight years, and you wasted it. You have lost your chance."

constitution.”The evening began with celebration, dance, and slogans such as long live Leyla, and long live Apo (Abdollah Ojalan—the imprisoned PKK leader) and ended with fire crackers.²

On afternoon June 11, all delegates were called to a press conference and an advisory speech by the co- presidency of the BDP. The BDP provided all delegations with a print out copy of rules and regulations of the election.

On Election Day –June 12, we went to Silvan Region again, accompanied by the Mayor. We visited all villages, and polling places. In general what we saw was quite amazing, every man, woman dressed in their best attire came from everywhere to polling stations.

In general the election was clean and fairly orderly. Plastic boxes were used to prevent fraud, and finger prints for the illiterate, and IDs for others were used as proof of citizenship.

However, I should mention few incidents--in one polling place there was a Turkish judge who was angry--ordering officials and the Mayor to stop us from observing poles and a few policemen lingering outside polling stations being unhelpful - including one talking on the phone in breach of the 15-Meters rule on the second floor of a school (based on ruling procedure police could not come to within 15 meters of the voting boxes).).

In few villages we saw Turkish armed military presence—some villagers said it was for protection, but few thought it was for intimidation. In one particular polling place – a village where the local people called it Male Alike, with few houses, we saw a Turkish military tank. See the attached photo.

Women in this village were excited to see our women delegates so they invited us in for tea and drink. Through conversation with them I found out that they were concerned about the presence of a military tank in their small village. They were intimidated and for several old women the presence of military tank brought back the memory of civil war in the area. One said she lost three members of her family to war, another very young woman said her husband has been in prison for eight years—and a few similar stories. The women were amazingly clean, well dressed with their white lacy scarves, smiling, and excited to vote for Leyla Zana.³

Another incident we heard was about the village of Payaham in the Kulp Region where Agha or the landlord of the village did not allow villagers to vote for any party but AKP.

Also, we heard that in few other villages that Turkish parties had attempted to bribe villagers by promising macaroni and soap in exchange for their votes. But, Kurdish villagers had rejected them. I was astonished by this suggestion. Our group survey revealed that some Turks, consider Kurds as poor, hungry and dirty, so they could easily be bought by macaroni and soap.

² Apo in Kurdish Kirmanji means uncle or wise man—this is a title for Abdollah Ojalan.

³ In Mali Alike village, most women were illiterates and did not understand Turkish Language. I asked about their families and how many children they had, they had from 7 -9 and even one had 15 children from one mother. This village had no clinic and the closest clinic to them was about 100 kilometers.

Based on my observation, linguistic barrier was major problem for Kurdish speaking people in the rural areas. Many women I spoke with were not only illiterate; but also, could not speak or understand Turkish language. Therefore, the translators at the polling stations had to be educated and bilingual and be trustworthy.

The voting stations were closed on 5 pm , so we returned to Diyarbakir. Most delegations returned to the BDP headquarter to watch the election outcome at around 7:PM. I took a Taxi to go to the BDP office, but by 7 PM the crowd of more than 200,000 people had gathered around the headquarter building and had blocked the road. I had to walk through the crowd to reach the office.

At the office I was watching the crowd from the third floor window. Although election results had not been announced yet, people were celebrating the fact that they had been able to vote peacefully for the first time. They were holding banners, carrying flags and few held pictures of Abdollah Ojalan, some playing tambourines and drums; many had yellow, green, red scarves representing Kurdish flag. The crowd became larger and larger, several blocks were closed, all balconies and roofs in the neighborhood were packed with people. People started dancing, singing, playing music and making fire crackers. The delegates were rested and everyone was in celebratory mood, and perhaps some European delegates were expecting to see champagne popping, when at about 9 PM the Turkish police threw tear gas inside the crowd and threw several Gas bombs into the building smashing several windows. I was watching the crowd through the window when I sensed the strong smell of gas for few seconds I could not breath, and the broken glass shards injured my face slightly.⁴

Everyone in the office panicked, they closed windows and turned off the lights. We were hiding under desks and every where possible, afraid that military would attack us.

But, the crowd was not giving in until the mayor of the city of Sur begged people to leave the area--he promised them a huge celebration the next day at the largest open space of the city. So the people were scattered and let the ambulances come to carry the injured people. Later we found out about 18 people were injured and were taken to hospital.

The next day celebration began around 4 PM. All elected parliamentarians and mayors of few towns, many city officials and BDP leaders gathered in a bus with music and singing patriotic songs went to the place they had promised to celebrate. There the crowd became larger and larger they were about one million. See attached photo.

Each elected candidate spoke to the crowd and appreciated their votes. Few spoke in Turkish but Leyla and two others addressed the crowd in Kurdish. When Leyla Zana began addressing people the crowd became exuberated—they began throwing flowers and red, green, yellow silk scarves to Leyla. She was excited, humbled, appreciative, and thanked Kurds and Turks for this

peaceful and free election - she began by saying “Thank you many many times--my duty has began to work for you and you are on the top of my head”. She repeated her slogan addressing the Prime Minister saying, "We are the kind of people who, when we trust someone, really give them a chance." She referred to the promise that Mr. Erdogan had given to change the constitution. And a new deal for the Kurds, a promise of improvements in the freedom to speak their own language.

The bus left the area after two hours, but people remained there and celebrated for several hours.

The outcome of election was great for both parties-- AKP and BDP. AKP, Prime Minister Erdogan's ruling party was the big winner in the election, taking almost 50 percent of the vote to give it an impressive mandate in its third straight term in power. But, it was short of the two third majorities to be able it to change the constitution as he had promised to replace the constitution written in 1982 under the military rule. But, Prime Minister Erdogan , said in a victory speech on Sunday 12 that he would work with other political parties and NGOs for more laws to boost democracy and freedom.

Also, strong gains made by Kurdish rights candidates, a total of 36 candidates backed by the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party won seats, a gain of more than 50%(they had only 22 members) from the previous election. Among the 36 elected candidates 11 of them were women and three elected were from Istanbul Province. Six Kurdish elected candidates were in prison during election.⁵

Independent candidates running for the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party attracted more than 60 percent of the votes in at least three mainly Kurdish **provinces in the southeast and won large protest votes in some Turkish cities, such as Istanbul.**

Kurds, who make up around 20 percent of the population of 74 million, are making more forceful demands for autonomy and the right to education in the Kurdish language. They also want the 10 percent electoral barrier lowered.

Imprisoned Kurdish rebel leader Abdullah Ocalan, whose Kurdistan Workers' Party has led a 27-year-old insurgency, has threatened more attacks unless Erdogan's government negotiates an end to the conflict that has killed tens of thousands of people.

Finally, we believe BDP has conducted a unique, clean, high standard democratic election as it should be in the 21st century. And we congratulate Turkey for the steps it has taken towards a democratic society.

Leyla Zana' short Bio.

Born in 1961, close to Hazro, she was married to her cousin Mehdi Zana at the age of 14, in a typical Kurdish family arrangement. He was a Kurdish activist who was elected mayor of Diyarbakir in 1978, but was jailed and brutally tortured following the military coup in 1980.

Mrs Zana, who had two children and only one year of schooling, became a leading campaigner for Kurdish prisoners, and in 1991 she was elected the first Kurdish woman MP.

While taking the oath of loyalty in parliament, she added a phrase in the Kurdish language, promising to struggle for greater democracy. For that she was prosecuted and jailed for 15 years.

In prison she was twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, and awarded the Andrei Sakharov prize for human rights. Her conviction was overturned in 2004.

She is a passionate advocate of peace in the Kurdish region, yet like all the candidates backed by the BDP, she makes no attempt to distance herself from the armed and banned insurgent movement, the PKK, and its leader Abdullah Ocalan.