

# **From State to Democracy**

**The Anatomy of a Paradigm Shift**

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June 27, 2018

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The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK, Partiya Karkêren Kurdistan) emerged in the mid-1970s as a national liberation movement, largely inspired by the ideas of actually existing [real] socialism. However, throughout the party's development process, the party's founder and leader, Abdullah Öcalan, endeavoured to develop an understanding of socialism and revolution beyond those centred on Russia and China. Through this process, the PKK was transformed from a small ideological group into one of the most effective military and political forces in the Middle East. While the guerrilla struggle that has continued since 1984 is one of the longest-lasting armed uprisings in the world, the PKK's areas of organisation have spread from North Kurdistan to the other parts of Kurdistan (West, South and East) and encompassed the diaspora from Australia to America and from Russia to Europe. By the end of the 1990, the PKK had become the largest and most dynamic Kurdish movement. While all these developments took place on the basis of the national liberation ideology and understanding of socialism which had been framed during the founding process of the party, from the early 1990s Öcalan was intensifying his efforts to renew its ideological and organisational aims. Öcalan's aim was to develop a new approach, in particular with a radical critique of the understanding of actually existing socialism and openings on the woman question. Although the PKK Congress of 1995 made some significant changes in this respect, a renewal on the scale desired did not take place.

The PKK went through a process of radical regeneration after its leader and founder Abdullah Öcalan was abducted from Kenya in an international conspiracy and handed over to Turkey in 1999. Öcalan, who has been held in solitary confinement on the island of Imrali in the Sea of Marmara since the day he was captured, created a paradigmatic change in the PKK by means of his defence writings submitted to the European Court of Human Rights, which he prepared on the island. Öcalan's only contact with the outside world was the frequently obstructed connection with his lawyers. In the early years he was allowed to see his lawyers once, for two hours a week, later reduced to one hour. He was also permitted to receive visits from close relatives for one hour a month. In these weekly meetings with his lawyers, Öcalan produced two groups of texts that would form the fundamental ideology of the party. The first of these was the text of his defence regarding his trials in Turkey and at the European Court of Human Rights, which was handwritten and passed to his lawyers, becoming a fundamental ideological reference point for the party. The second consisted of notes taken by his lawyers at their meetings. While until 2005 the lawyers were permitted to take notes at the weekly meetings, this was later prevented and lawyers put the conversations into written form after the meetings. These notes that were communicated to the public through Kurdish TV channels, news agencies and newspapers, generally dealt with topical political questions. After years of obstruction, Öcalan's meetings with his lawyers ended in 2011. Since 2014, excepting one visit, Öcalan has not been allowed to meet family members, either.

But the real work that determined the ideological transformation of the PKK took place between 1999 and 2011, based on the texts which constituted Öcalan's defence submissions. These texts may be separated into two groups: Submissions to Turkish courts and those submitted to European courts, that is, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) in Strasbourg and a court in Athens dealing with his removal from Greece. These defence submissions have been published in Kurdish, Turkish and other languages. The first group of submissions consists of two basic texts: The main text submitted to the court on Imrali and the appendices submitted to the Court of Cassation [High Court of Appeals] in 1999 and to a district court in Urfa in 2001. The

titles, as published, of the two texts mentioned above, are: 'Resolution Declaration in the Kurdish Question' and 'Urfa: a symbol of history, sanctity and malediction in the Tigris-Euphrates basin'.

As for the second group of texts submitted to the ECtHR in 2001, the court in Athens in 2003 and the Grand Chamber of the ECtHR in 2004, two books consisting of three volumes. The name of the first book, consisting of two volumes, is 'From the Sumerian Priest State towards the People's Republic I-II (2001). The second book, known as the "Athens Defence", bears the title: 'Free Human Defence' (2003) and 'To Defend a People' (2004). On account of a subsequent case filed at the ECtHR on the grounds there had not been a fair trial, Öcalan prepared a new defence. This work, defined by Öcalan as 'The Problematisation of Capitalist Modernity' was published in Turkish in five volumes between 2009 and 2012.

These defence texts were published by the PKK and were accepted by party congresses after 1999 as the official party line. Öcalan generally summarises his stance on the first group of texts submitted to the court on Imrali and then to the Appeal Court in the following way: "[in my defence], I aimed neither for classic Kurdish nationalism, nor for a left-leaning interpretation of it. The era had gone beyond that.' (Öcalan 1999: 10).

In the second group of texts submitted to the ECtHR, Öcalan deepened his theoretical approach. The first of the three volumes engages in a historical analysis of civilisation, commencing with the Middle East, focusing on the Sumerians as 'the earliest state-based society'. Although later on in the book Öcalan deals with other societies and periods, his main focus is to analyse the state as humanity's 'Original Sin'. This is startling, for he is a political leader of a society that is described as 'the most numerous people in the world without a state'. Nevertheless, Öcalan maintained his critique of the state, adding the experiments in socialism, saying that liberation cannot be achieved by constructing a state, and advocating instead that democracy should be strengthened. Like his first defence submissions, this was accepted as a new manifesto, entitled the Democratic Society Manifesto, at the PKK's eighth congress in 2002 (Serxwebûn, 2002).

In the second volume submitted to the ECtHR, Öcalan dealt in detail with Kurdish society, history and, in particular, with the PKK's role. While positioning Kurdish society in the history of civilisation, Öcalan presents it as a natural society or community vis-a-vis societies with states. He attributes this naturalness to the existence of deep Neolithic culture assumed to have continued long in Kurdish tribes. According to Öcalan, class (state) societies and modernisation have brought ruin to the Kurds, the PKK becoming the centre of the last resistance to this process. Within this framework Öcalan endeavoured to show the limits and congestion point of the PKK. The ideological-political restrictions of the Cold War continued to condition the PKK even ten years after this war had ended. With this study, Öcalan aimed to assess PKK history and to address its past mistakes.

In defence submissions to the court in Athens and the Grand Chamber of the ECtHR Öcalan transformed his theoretical ideas into a radical democracy conceptualisation. This idea of radical democracy was developed in the context of three connected projects: a democratic republic, democratic autonomy and democratic confederalism. These three political projects function as a 'strategic determinant'. In other words, they are ideas and instruments by means of which the Kurds' political demands are redefined and rearranged. This idea of radical democracy is radical because of its efforts to develop the concept of democracy beyond the nation and state.

The concept of a democratic republic envisages a reform in the Republic of Turkey in which citizenship is separated from nationalism. In this way, democracy will return to 'the understanding of democracy in early modern epochs' and to its radical transformatory power. In fact, democ-

racy was formulated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century on the basis of citizens' rights and that everyone would govern everyone. However, throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries with the dominant modernist understanding radical democracy lost its content and gained a cultural meaning. This vein, which emerged in modern thought, considered cultural homogeneity to be necessary for the modern state and deemed the nationalist form of this to be indispensable. This 'national' condition of modernity is exclusive and intolerant; it does not permit any alternative to those who do not possess the 'correct' cultural characteristics apart from assimilation (real or superficial) or migration. Other options for the state in this context in addition to assimilation are displacement, ethnic cleansing or genocide. In Turkey, Kemalism was formulated from the cultural viewpoint as a modernisation project, resulting in harsh policies of assimilation towards the Kurds. Öcalan, in proposing a democratic republic, advocates democracy in the context of citizens rights.

The idea of democratic confederalism – in subsequent defence submissions it was developed together with the idea of democratic autonomy – is defined as a model of “democratic self-government” (Öcalan, 2008: 32). Öcalan's radical democracy is intrinsic to the concept of democratic confederalism which he borrowed from Murray Bookchin. Bookchin, who called his ideology communalism, proposed a radical new politics. He recognised ‘the origins of democracy in tribal and village communities’ and eventually arrived at the Libertarian Municipalism project. In this project, Bookchin envisaged the setting up of local democratic structures such as “communal assemblies, town meetings and neighbourhood councils”. As for preventing the danger of this project being depleted or utilised for solely local aims, Bookchin proposed the principle of confederalism. By this he meant ‘a web consisting of administrative councils directly elected by democratic meetings of members or delegates of the people in villages, towns and even in the neighbourhoods of large cities.’

Öcalan was influenced by these ideas and from the principle of confederalism developed a similar understanding. In parallel to his historical analysis of civilisation based on a critique of the state, Öcalan also emphasises the failures of actually existing socialism and national liberation movements. According to Öcalan both of these fell into the trap of the idea of establishing a state. Instead of this, Öcalan dwells on the still existing influences of the communal values of Neolithic society, which have not been entirely eradicated by the development of a hierarchic society based on the state. These communal values may be summarised as socialisation based on social gender, a life in harmony with nature, and a society based on collectivism and solidarism. These constitute the basis of Öcalan's understanding of democracy taking the form of democratic confederalism.

Democratic confederalism based on these values is organised on four levels. At the lowest level are communes in villages and districts. These communes are linked to each other on a town, city and regional level. Then there are the social categories such as women and youth. Another level of organisation emerges in the cultural sphere in the framework of different ethnic/religious/cultural identities. The fourth and final level is that of civil society organisations. Democratic confederalism will organise society through assemblies at the village/district, city and regional level, organising the whole of society in this way from the bottom to the top. In other words, the idea of democratic confederalism is defined as a model of ‘democratic self-government’. According to Öcalan, “this project is based on the self-government of local communities; organised in open assemblies, town assemblies, local parliaments and broader congresses. The agents of this kind of self-government are the citizens themselves, not state officials.”

From this viewpoint Öcalan constantly emphasises that the confederal structure of this project has absolutely nothing to do with the ‘community of ruling member states’. On the contrary,

democratic confederalism aims to consolidate and deepen democracy based on communities. In addition to this, there is a need to reshape judicial and political processes and the political structure in the country. Consequently, the model of organising the people beyond the state is to define their relationship with the existing state or authority. Öcalan proposes a democratic republic as the form of government in this regard. It will be possible to find a resolution to the Kurdish question with this form of government. Öcalan subsequently developed the concept of democratic autonomy as a form of relationship. Democratic confederalism is at the same time a match to democratic autonomy as regards the people's economic, cultural and social position. Democratic autonomy expresses the form of relationship with the state and its officials. As regards Turkey, an alternative of a democratic, political resolution of the Kurdish question is offered and this resolution necessitates the constitutional recognition of the Kurdish national identity. However, this recognition is not proposed by the PKK as a way of drawing a separating line between the Kurds' democratic confederal system and the Turkish state. Instead, an inclusive relationship is envisaged, expressed thus: "Democratic autonomy is a concept that defines the relationship with the state ... it may be realised within a unitary state or in a federal system."

However, this inclusive relationship does not exclude a kind of 'unity' between Kurds dispersed in various countries in the Middle East. Since Öcalan has proposed the setting up of self-governing bodies everywhere in Kurdistan and wherever Kurds live, democratic confederalism is deemed to be the main mechanism for the uniting of Kurdistan and the Kurds. According to Öcalan the Kurdish liberation movement should endeavour to establish such a self-governing system.

In this way, since 2005 the PKK and all organisations linked to it have been restructured based on the project called the KCK (Union of Communities of Kurdistan – Koma Civakên Kurdistan). The KCK is a society-based organisation created as an alternative to the state. It aims to organise itself from below in the form of assemblies. "The KCK is a movement that wages a struggle to form its own democracy; it neither sees existing nation states as a model, nor does it see them as an obstacle."

The main aim in the KCK Constitution is defined as a struggle for the spreading of radical democracy based on the democratic organisation of the people and its decision-making authority. The KCK constitution sets forth a new instrument that surpasses the state mindset in social relations. In this respect, democratic confederalism, which constitutes the fundamental idea of KCK organising, is valid everywhere the Kurds live. This includes Iraq, where Kurds live within a federal state structure with constitutional rights, including self-government. In the project there are two key factors: an understanding of democracy as people's power, not a form of government and for the state and nation to be left outside this understanding. 'Democratic confederalism is the organisation of the people, in every non-state sphere of life. The development of democracy in every field of society and life. It corresponds with the shrinking of the existing state worldwide and the tendency for society to organise outside of the state to arrange its own life. ... Even if the state obstructs it, the Kurdish Freedom Movement will exercise its legitimate right to organise democratically to the end. It will definitely not abandon this goal, saying: "The state is putting obstacles in place".'

As a result, while the democratic republic is a reform project for a state, democratic confederalism and democratic autonomy are beyond the state and comprise a political idea without a state. Consequently, the project of democratic confederalism is linked to the democratic republic.

lic project, and according to Öcalan a free Kurdistan can only come into being in a democratic Middle East (a.g.e. 34–5;).

We mentioned that while following the line of development in Öcalan's thought the central importance of these three interlinked concepts (democratic republic, democratic confederalism and democratic autonomy). In all these projects the concept of democracy has a pivotal importance. The understanding of democracy has evolved into a more radical democracy from the contradiction between the democratic and republican traditions. For the PKK, democracy is the antidote to centralist structure of the Turkish Republic based on the the nation state and the French version of secularism. The most fundamental idea of this approach is: 'Centralisation has killed democracy'.

The main differences between the democratic-republic project and the democratic confederalism/democratic autonomy projects is that the focus of the former is on the definition of the state and citizenship, while the others focus on the development of an alternative to the state and the people constructing their own organisation. The subject we are going to dwell on here is the development of alternatives to the state. Instead of the projects of democratic confederalism and democratic autonomy being seen as potentially contradictory as regards an organisational perspective, it will be more appropriate to consider them together as strategically harmonising. They provide political direction to today's struggle wherever the PKK movement is active.

This paradigm change the PKK movement has gone through in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has made a great contribution to radical political views as regards a radical difference in approach to the three fundamental aspects of politics: the state, class and party and 'non-state politics, political organisation outside of the party and political themes outside the class'. From the point of view of the PKK this implied reforming itself with a series of transformations. In these transformations, the radical changes made by the PKK on a series of fundamental points such as the right to self-determination, nation, national liberation, violence and women are particularly striking.

The principle of self-determination of nations, that was first raised in the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, left its mark on the past century. The forms of self-determination expressed both by US leader Woodrow Wilson, and by the founder of the Soviet Union, Lenin, became a fundamental plank of many people's liberation struggles, and an inalienable part of international law. However, what should not be forgotten is the truth that self-determination is, first and foremost, a principle of action defined as political. Hence, when US President Wilson announced this principle in Congress on 11 February 1918 he openly emphasised that: "Self-determination is not a mere phrase. "It is an imperative principle of action which statesmen will henceforth ignore at their peril."

Therefore, the PKK, the nucleus of which emerged from the first half of the 1970s onwards, addressed the principle of self-determination as an imperative principle of action, as the Kurdish people had been deprived of all fundamental rights and freedoms and condemned in their homeland to a lack of status behind even colonial rule. The territories where the Kurds lived was divided amongst 4 nation states (Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria) in the 1920s and the various colonialist policies imposed by these states spelt ruin for the Kurdish people. Abdullah Öcalan expressed this in the following way:

"As a result, the Kurds' homeland was partitioned and the Kurds were forced to submit by states' policies of denial and the thwarting of their political will. Their social realities were split asunder and they lost their very selves. To meet their economic needs they had to abandon their identity and they were deprived of the legal status and contemporary educational opportunities

to be able to recover their cultural and ideological existence based on their identities. The denial of their identity turned into a question of their being unable to live a free life.” (A. Öcalan, *Kurdish Question and Democratic Nation Solution*, published in Turkish, p.226).

In such an environment the PKK adopted as a guide the right of self-determination of the Kurdish people as a fundamental imperative principle of action. Naturally, its conception and application of this principle was heavily influenced by the ideological, political and social characteristics of the period. Following the Second World War, the national liberation struggles waged in a bi-polar system, first and foremost in Vietnam and Algeria, led to most former colonies achieving independence. This profoundly affected the 1970s world. Abdullah Öcalan later said the following regarding this:

“In that period (1950s to 1970s) when national liberation struggles peaked and most of these struggles resulted in separate states made this an almost sole model. .... In fact, the principle of nations’ right to self-determination was first expressed by US President Wilson after the First World War and was closely linked to hegemonic US policies. Lenin, in order not to fall behind Wilson and to gain the support of oppressed nations and colonised peoples, radicalised the same principle and reduced it to founding an independent state. A race thus began between the two systems.” (The Kurdish Question and the Democratic Nation Solution [Turkish], p. 271–2).

The PKK approached self-determination within the framework of the understanding of actually existing socialism at that time, advocating the model of founding a state. However, from the early 1990s onwards Öcalan’s questioning and criticising of, firstly, the understanding of actually-existing socialism, and, later, of the nation state ideology in the early years of the new millennium, demonstrated a radical renewal of the PKK’s approach. Today, self-determination for the PKK is still an imperative principle of action, but the way to implement this is not to establish a state, but to implement the principle of self-government at every level. The understanding of democratic autonomy constitutes the fundamental framework of this self-government. The results of this line, which is based on the Kurds’ determining their own destiny on the basis of the principle of self-government without inclining to establish a separate state, wherever they live, first and foremost in Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria, have clearly emerged with the developments in Iraq and Syria, in the heart of the Middle East.

Consequently, the PKK has reversed Lenin’s argument that “it would be erroneous to bring a different interpretation to the right to self-determination apart from the right of a separate state to exist”, saying that it would be equally mistaken to look at the right to self-determination as if it contains no other meaning than that of the right of a separate state to exist. This view is also corroborated in historical analysis of the modern state as a bourgeois project. (Mustafa Karasu, *Radical Democracy*, 2009).

Again, linked to this, the PKK’s concept of nation has also been radically renewed. In the mid-1970s, when the PKK was being formed, most socialist and national liberation movements were under the influence of nation state ideology with the most rigid definition of nation expressed by Stalin. Stalin’s famous, ‘nations have a common language, territory, economic life and culture’ was also the starting point for the PKK. With the new paradigm Öcalan openly criticised this, developing the democratic nation definition:

“First of all it is necessary to point out that there is not only one definition of nation. When a nation state is founded the most general definition is state-nation. If the uniting element is the economy, then it is possible to call this market-nation ...A generalisation that a nation comprises shared language, culture, market and history cannot be made, that is, it is not possible to abso-



utilise a single understanding of nation. This understanding of nation that was also adopted by actually existing socialism is contrary to the democratic nation. This definition, which was developed by Stalin in particular for the Soviet Union, was one of the main reasons for the collapse of the Soviet Union. As long as this definition of nation, which is absolutised by capitalist modernity, is not transcended, the resolution of national questions will continue to be in an impasse. The fact that national questions are still continuing with utmost gravity after three hundred years is closely linked to this deficient and absolute definition.” (2012, p.432).

According to Öcalan: ‘As for the democratic nation, it is a mutual society established by the free will of free individuals and communities. The uniting force in the democratic nation is the free will of the individuals and groups that decide to be in the same nation,’ adding: ‘The definition of democratic nation expresses a joint life in solidarity of pluralist, free and equal citizens not tied to rigid political boundaries, a single language, religion or an interpretation of history. A democratic society can only be realised through such a model of nation..’ (p.432).

The approach to violence, the strategic and tactical utilisation of which was always a significant cornerstone in the PKK’s struggle, has also gone through radical change. At the outset the PKK’s approach to violence, ‘the midwife of a new society’, was a classic Marxist one. In the protracted process of uprising, violence, in the form of guerrilla warfare, was a fundamental tactic of the struggle. In time violence even took on a Fanonist significance, gaining an existential character and the role of social and individual liberator. However, in the new paradigm the PKK does not envisage a role for violence beyond the framework of legitimate self defence. (Legitimate Defence Strategy, 2004).

## **The most severe form of dominance**

Today, both the state and its capitalist modernity version, the nation state, are being seriously questioned. It is acknowledged that the nation state does not benefit humanity and peoples, and even contains within it a genocidal character that prepares the ground for the disappearance of different cultures and identities. In the circumstances of the nation state capitalism’s rule of maximum profit and capitalist modernity, just as it led to the pain of the First and Second World Wars, has committed as many crimes against humanity as have been committed throughout the history of humanity. The most open evidence of this is the disappearance, or being brought to the verge of disappearance, of ethnic and faith groups that lived in the Middle East until 200 years ago. The Armenian and Assyrian-Syriac peoples have been decimated as a result of this mentality. The Kurds have also been brought to the brink of destruction under the dominance of nation states. Alevis, Yazidis, Druze and other faith groups have been driven out of their homelands as a result of this understanding. The same has happened to the Circassian peoples who were expelled from the Caucasus mountains.

The evils of the nation state are too numerous to count. However, it is not just the nation state of capitalist modernity, all states have become too heavy for humanity to bear. The first social problems began with male domination of women and with those higher hierarchically establishing dominance over other social segments and exploiting them. After all, the state has been defined as an instrument of oppression of the ruling classes in society. This has not diminished, and has turned into the worst form of domination in the present day. The nation state has become the most severe form of domination. The nation state has attained the character of

being a sphere of dominance and exploitation of the entire society, with borders, like the boss of a factory surrounded by walls. While in the past states only represented political domination, in the capitalist epoch they have developed into a totalitarian dominance that seeks to rule the whole of society, and to go as far as dominating the very cells of society.

With the ruling state system intensifying social problems, the state and government have begun to be questioned more. In the past anarchists opposed the state as the origin of all evil, gradually developing ideological, political and paradigmatic solutions on a systematic and historical basis. In the present day the zenith of analysis regarding the state and government are those that have been carried out by Abdullah Öcalan. The most significant difference of Öcalan is the depth he has reached in analysis of women and the state. He has also subjected capitalism and the nation state to comprehensive analysis. Öcalan's analysis of women, in particular, is of great value, as it has deepened all the other analyses and helped it attain its true character.

## **The more democracy there is, the less there is of the state: Democratic Confederal System**

The government and state are in essence a concentration and intensification of power, centralisation. In this respect, they are factors that are opposed to the people. In this respect, there cannot be a state and government that belongs to the people. The government and people should not be confused. A popular government is democracy. That is, not a concentration and intensification of power, with power and possibilities granted to certain circles, but with it going to the base, the local, belonging to the people. Democracy and the state can coexist for a certain time in an accommodation, but the state and democracy are contrary facts. There is a formula and dialectic, i.e., the more state there is, the less democracy. The more democracy, the less state. Even in today's modernist age, with capitalist ruling states, the diminution of the state is discussed.

We are now in an era where one can think of a life without a state, a society without a state, of political, economic, social and cultural life without a state. Humanity has to find a system where it can be free of the state that tyrannises it. We have entered the age where we may think and live without a state. Even if the people may make an accommodation with the state for a while longer, they must achieve a political, social, cultural and economic system which does not have a state. It is not fate to live under a state system, as democracy expresses the transcendence of the state.

Today, the alternative system to the state is a democratic confederal system based on an organised democratic society. The people can govern themselves in a democratic confederal system without being exposed to exploitation and oppression. A democratic system can establish a democratic administration. This may also be called a democratic authority. In this authority there is no oppression or exploitation, but there is the reality of a democratic confederal system and government based on a democratic society. The state belongs to the rulers, while democratic confederalism is the people's system.

States now mean crisis, chaos, ruin and unhappiness for humanity. It is necessary to be free of this calamity. If living under exploitation and oppression is not in the nature of human beings, in that case neither the state nor its flag can represent the people and society.

Öcalan has set forth democratic confederalism based on an organised democratic society as an alternative to the state for all societies, not just the Kurdish people. This is a system that

differences themselves create, unlike a nation state that creates a single identity. All differences can attain freedom with their own identity within the democratic confederal system. In this respect democratic confederalism is the system of free life for all people and communities. We can also call this complete democracy. There cannot be real democracy in any state system. Who can talk of real and complete democracy where there are rulers?

## **Time of the Peoples**

Democratic confederalism is an alternative to the state. If we say the time and age of the peoples has come this means the era of democratic confederalism has arrived. With a state there will be neither democracy, nor socialism. A state cannot be extinguished with a state. A state can only be transcended and extinguished by democratic confederalism. Peoples cannot be liberated by a state and cannot attain real freedom and democratic life. Peoples will be liberated by democratic confederalism.

This is Öcalan's ideological-political line, his paradigm. This is his understanding of democracy, freedom and socialism. Outside of democratic confederalism there cannot be people's government. From this standpoint the peoples cannot defend the state.

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June 27, 2018

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