

TURKEY VERSUS DEMOCRACY

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Again and Again Turkey: Freedom of Expression Under Attacks

Solidarity Meeting for Imprisoned Journalists, Human Rights Activists

Academics, Publishers, Elected Kurdish Politicians

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Give me an adequate army, with power to provide it with more pay and better food than falls to the lot of average man, and I will undertake within thirty years, to make the majority of the population believe that two and two are three, that water freezes when it gets hot and boils when it gets cold, or any other nonsense that might seem to serve the interest of the state. Of course, even when these beliefs have been generated, people would not put the kettle in the refrigerator when they wanted it to boil [...] No person who did not enthusiastically accept the official doctrine would be allowed to teach or to have any position of power. Only the highest officials, in their cups would whisper to each other what rubbish it all is; then they would laugh and drink again. (*Unpopular Essays*, 1950),

The above Mark Twainesque political satire belongs to arguably ‘the most distinguished philosopher of the 20th century’, Bertrand Russell, the Nobel Prize laureate for literature in 1950. The sarcastic image of ‘boiler freezer’ paradox is exactly what’s happening in many countries governed by the dictates of an industrial military complex. Hence their hypocritical practices in the name of *democracy, freedom, human rights, women’s rights, worker’s rights, people’s rights*, sometimes even *socialism* and what not, are ultimately becoming their antinomies in real life – in other words, the exact opposites of their derailing propaganda. The latter is often camouflaged with post-modernistic neo-con and neo-lib mantras of *modernisation, restructuring, collateral damage, hard and soft power*, and many more alike, all sanitised, nay even sanctified with cynical panache by the tutelage of *Globalisation*.

However, the truth of the matter remains, somehow not forgotten by the oppressed peoples of the world, that all the battle cries of genuine *Freedom* and *Democracy* in the last twenty six centuries or so have been raised mostly as an outcome of the struggle by the oppressed peoples – often the working masses -- whether in Europe, in the Americas, in Africa, in the Middle East, in Turkey, in Asia and in the Far East. Meanwhile the mantra of profit-at-any-cost, proselyted in the capitalist countries, has inflicted a collateral damage upon language itself, whereby once the much admired altruistic politics of *Internationalism* is now brushed aside by the amorphous politics of *Globalisation*.

The Republic of Turkey is now entrusted to bring democracy, religious and racial tolerance and human rights in the troubled Middle East -- onetime its colonised vast enclave. NATO’s Big Boss, the most awesome military power the world has ever witnessed, now supervises this historical paradox, Meanwhile, at the onset of 2012, The Human Rights Watch reported:

Turkey’s laws, prosecutors, judges, and politicians still lag behind [...] Politicians sue their critics for criminal defamation. Courts convict with insufficient consideration for the obligation to protect freedom of expression. A comprehensive review of all existing laws that restrict freedom of expression is overdue. (<http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/wr2012.pdf>).

Emma Sinclair-Webb, the Turkey researcher for Human Rights Watch has observed:

The Turkish laws make no distinction between political activity and terrorism. It is never examined in what kind of activities people are actually involved and whether these qualify them for prosecution. Very many of these cases are based on guilt by association.

(*Constanze Letsch in Diyarbakir*. guardian.co.uk, Wednesday 28 December 2011)

No wonder a Turkish citizen's outburst:

We now live on the assumption that each and every one of us could be arrested at any minute. .
(guardian.co.uk, op. cit.)

All those who are well informed what really is happening in Turkey, tell us a macabre tale of Turkish jails flooded with many thousands of prisoners, including lawyers, advocates, parliamentarians, local mayors, writers, publishers, academics, human rights and political activists, not excluding hundreds of children.

On 10/1/2012, in Strasbourg, The Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Thomas Hammarberg, said:

Long-standing, systemic shortcomings in the administration of justice in Turkey adversely affect the enjoyment of human rights

Moreover, The Human Rights Watch explicitly highlighted a critical issue:

The non-resolution of the Kurdish issue remains the single greatest obstacle to progress on human rights in Turkey. (<http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/wr2012.pdf>).

On the same day of the above in Strasbourg, January 10, a letter was addressed in Washington, USA, to the bipartisan leaderships of the Congressional committees overseeing the State Department and Pentagon. In their joint letter, the Kurdish, Hellenic and Armenian American leaders, the signatories, called upon key Congressional leaders to demand that the

Obama Administration investigate whether Turkey violated US arms export laws by using American-supplied weaponry in a December 28, 2011 air strike that killed 35 Kurdish boys and young men along the Turkey-Iraq border [...] Press accounts, in the Associated Press, Economist, Boston Globe, Radio Free Europe, and elsewhere, have reported that this attack was conducted by US-supplied F-16s, guided by aerial drone intelligence. <http://asbarez.com/100229/kurdish-greek-and-armenian-americans-call-for-u-s-inquiry-into-turkish-airstrike/>

In **JADALIYYA** website of Dec 27, 2011, we read:

Since 2009, [as many as 7748 people](#) have been taken under custody [...] Among the recent victims of the Erdoğan government's assault on public dissent are [Professor Büsra Ersanlı](#) of Marmara University, and [Ragıp Zarakolu](#), a founding member of the Human Rights Association and the former chair of the "Writers in Prison Committee" of the International PEN organization in Turkey, both taken into custody on 28 October 2011 [...] Earlier in October 2011, [Ayşe Berktaş](#) (Hacimirzaoglu)—a renowned translator, researcher, and global peace and justice activist—was taken by the police from her home in Istanbul at five o'clock in the morning and subsequently arrested. She still remains imprisoned for the foreseeable future.

Ayşe Berktaş was an active campaigner for the World Tribunal on Iraq, the concluding session of which was convened in Istanbul in 2005, where it was declared that **"The invasion and occupation of Iraq was and is illegal."** The tragicomic irony of it all is that since October 2011, Ayşe herself is imprisoned in her own country and capital city, Istanbul. Here is her unequivocal impression about the political situation she is the victim of in Turkey – written at Bakerköy Women's Prison:

We need to speak up and make it clear that what we currently face is a situation very similar to that of the Hitler regime that preceded World War II [...] The Turkish state has created a false image of itself in Europe and throughout the world as an 'advocate of democracy'. Drawing strength from this, it applies enormous pressure and oppressive measures against all manner of oppositions to further an aggressive measures against all manner of opposition in the country. In addition, it is currently involved in preparations to further an aggressive, expansionist agenda in the Middle East.
(<http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/3787/letter-from-istanbul-bakirkoy-wome>)

Mr. Selahattin DEMIRTAS and Ms. Gültan KISANAK, the leaders of BDP (Peace and Democracy Party) did not mince their words in their appeal, on January 13, 2012, when they depicted in a nutshell the sorrowful situation in their homeland, valiantly pronouncing the following:

These operations are transformed to political genocide against Kurds. [...] We heartily call the international public opinion, all the associate organizations and pro-democracy institutions to take up position against AKP Government's political massacres and totalitarian ideology.

When perused and absorbed all the above in contemporary politics, we begin to appreciate in full how well John Seeley, the Scottish historian had envisaged the reciprocal interlock of history and politics, therewith affirming, and proverbially so, that “**History is past politics, and politics present history.**”

(The Growth of British Policy. 1895)

To grasp well the motives why outspoken intellectuals and human rights activists are incarcerated, including the intellectual with suave character, writer and publisher Ragip Zarakolu, who is now one of the latest victims of the oppressive Article 301 of the Turkish penal code, we have to appreciate the historical background of oppression, the oppressive rulers' and their governments' terror of the truthful word.

The truthful word is indeed the main target of every anti-democratic authority anywhere, and in all ages. What Shakespeare portrayed about the censorship of *Art* is surely relevant of *Truth* too, because “**Art [and Truth] made tongue-tied by authority**” gratifies the vanity of the grotesque actors of power politics. No wonder when censorship -- in essence a bureaucratic vandalism -- eventually fails, the oppressor decides to physically eliminate the author who acts with intellectual dignity to enliven the awareness of reality.

Once upon a time there lived one of the great poets of the East, named Sarmad, thought to be on a par with Khayyam and Hafez. Sarmad's outspoken verses of social and moral criticism angered the supreme authority of the Mogul Empire, Shah Aurengzeb. The latter had deposed and imprisoned his own father, Shah Jahan of the Taj Mahal renown. Ruling over 150 million people, counting nearly one fourth of the entire world population in the 17th century, Aurengzeb was unable to confront let alone accept the truth uttered by his own poet laureate, Sarmad. Failing to silence him, the Shah ordered the beheading of the poet in 1661. (R. Abrahamian. *From the History of Armenian – Indian Friendship*. In *S. Armenia*. Journal, no. 8, 1985. p. 13) Aurengzeb's own biographer, Ali Khan Razi, wrote down Sarmad's last verses. Here they are (from the Armenian rendition in the op. cit journal).

**Dark was it all
All around me
When from deep slumber
I opened my eyes anew
I saw the entire world
Engulfed in darkness
Thus tired of it all
I closed my eyes anew.**

Sarmad was not a revolutionary poet. No matter. When his words truthfully reflected the reality of the world he was living in, that frightened the hell out of the oppressor, the most potent ruler of 17th c. Mogul Empire.

During the first quarter of the 20th c., a revolutionary leader in the Middle East founded a new Republic -- Turkey. Albeit, the founder potentate was unable to face the truth uttered by a revolutionary poet, Nazim Hikmet, the poet laureate of the Turkish people. On June 1st, 1933, Mustafa Kemal, the President of the new Republic, ordered the poet's arrest and sent him to prison to face the death penalty. Why? The poet himself had the answer:

**They want to slaughter my songs
And quench the blazing flame of my wrath.**

Sentenced in 1938 to 28 years imprisonment, the poet was kept in Bursa prison in 1942, the year Nazi Germany's Fuhrer restored to Turkey, as a gesture of good will, the ashes of Talaat Pasha. Mind you, it was Talaat, the Young Turk's Interior Minister, who had telegraphed the genocidal order to the Governor of Aleppo, on September 16, 1915, saying:

The Government has decided to exterminate, to the last man, all the Armenians in Turkey [...] Their existence must be ended, no matter how harsh the means employed may be, without any consideration

whatever for age, sex and conscience. (*The Memoirs of Naim Bay*, p. 16, in E.K.Sarkisian and R.G.Sahakian, *Vital Issuers in Modern Armenian History*, translated and edited by E. B. Chrakian, Massachusetts. Armenian Studies, 1965, p. 38).

Talaat Pasha was, in fact, articulating his government's ongoing actions.

On April 24, 1915, in Istanbul, around 300 Armenian intellectuals, of all professions, were arrested and deported, and soon nearly all of them were butchered. Until mid May, 1915, the Armenian civic population was practically depleted of its intellectuals; 196 writers, 575 musicians, 336 doctors, 176 teachers and college professors, 160 lawyers, 62 architects, 64 actors...all arrested, deported, disappeared for good... (Levon Vartan, *Chronology of the Armenian Fifteen 1915-1923*, in Armenian. Beirut: Atlas 1975, p. 72-73. From A. N. Mnatsakanian, in *Houshamatian Metz Yegherni= Liber Memoriam*, Beirut, Zartonk 1965, p. 35)

The culminating act of the genocidal scheme was thus set in motion. Having also depleted the Armenian nation of its able-bodied male population by conscripting Armenians before the First World War broke out, Talaat's Young Turk government ordered out what remained of the Armenian population of Asia Minor -- the elderly, the women and the children -- southward towards the deserts of Northern Syria. Vandalism, rape, extortion, sadistic torture, starvation, murder raids and all ad infinitum. The rest is the scream of humanity at its most infernal...

Let me confess, both of my parents, who dared outlive the Genocide of 1915, never entertained any sentiment of hatred towards the Turkish people. And I feel serenely proud of that ethical heritage.

Lo and behold, Ataturk's Turkish Republic is now honouring the remains of Talaat Pasha, as the 'fallen hero', on the Hill of Liberty in Istanbul. Perhaps it is hoped, ideally with NATO's blessing, to enshrine, in the mausoleum, the remains of other 'Young Turk heroes'... After all, on his 50th birthday, in 1939, a year after Ataturk's death, speaking to some Turkish generals, Hitler had eulogised, in memory of the first President of the Republic of Turkey who once was a Young Turk comrade, by saying: "**Ataturk has two great students in this world--Mussolini and me.**" (Lenox, G. (ed.) (2001) *Fire, Snow and Honey – Voices from Kurdistan*. Halstead Press, New South Wales, p 479. Quoted in Fernandes, D. *The Kurdish and Armenian Genocides*. p. 63 footnote 78).

And Nazim Hikmet continued to be imprisoned even in 1948, the year of the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights**, and also, most tellingly, of **The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide**. The Turkish people's poet, the comrade-in-Arms and in-Lettres of Aragon, Mayakovski and Pablo Neruda, continued writing twelve volumes of verses, considered among the best in world literature, while in prison for nearly one third of his entire life. The poet warned his beloved people:

**Your own hands hold this world
Oh my working people
They feed you lies
While you are starving to death.**

Nazim Hikmet's voice rang loud and clear in mid 20th century.

What is happening now in the 21st century is that an outspoken admirer of the poet Hikmet is raising his voice in support of the national minorities of his homeland, Turkey. In fact, just a month ago Ragip Zarakolu, while in prison, called for the parliamentary acknowledgment of the Genocide of the Armenians, by sending a letter to the Turkish Parliament, courageously arguing that:

Yes, Turkey must face its history. It is not only an obligation towards the victims but also a duty for securing healthy way of thinking for the society. The acknowledgement of the genocide will not belittle Turkey but will strengthen it. (<http://norkhosq.net/2012/02/04/imprisoned-ragip-zarakolu-nominated-for-nobel-peace-prize/>)

Zarakolu is certainly in tune with the Preamble of the Verdict of the prestigious **Permanent Peoples' Tribunal** of April 16th, 1984, which concluded thus:

Indeed, acknowledging genocide itself is a fundamental means of struggling against genocide. The acknowledgement is itself an affirmation of the right of a people under international law to a safeguarded existence.

The recent upheaval in the corridors of power in Turkey regarding the French Senate's new bill, is unwittingly highlighting the terror bound anxiety of the Turkish State vis-à-vis its history made forcefully and officially dormant regarding the multiple acts of genocide against its various minorities, namely Armenians, Assyrians, Kurds and Pontic Greeks, the millennial old original inhabitants of Anatolia.

It is worth noting that the text of the French Senate's bill is generic in character with no mention of any particular genocide:

It covers war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide. [...] The law is meant to stop all negations of genocides, which are recognized by France. [...] The wording of the law is not of French origin. The text was recommended by the European Union to all EU member states.

(<http://www.keghart.com/Premature-Celebration>)

The French parliament had already recognised both the Genocide of the Armenians and that of the Jews (Holocaust), back in 1990 (Gaysot Law). At the time in 1990, the law to criminalize the denial of Holocaust had no mention at all of any other genocide. The generic text of the new 2012 bill of the French Senate has created an upheaval in the heart of the official Turkish policy of denial, the absence of any specific genocide in the said bill notwithstanding. The spectre of multiple genocides in the land of Anatolia is surely haunting the denier psyche.

With admirable tenacity, Ragip Zarakolu is denouncing, among others, the fascistic styled article 301, as if remembering what John Milton, the revolutionary republican poet, had once declared: **“They who have put out the peoples eyes, reproach them of their blindness.”** (*Apology*, 1648)

Here is what the Canadian Action wrote recently on the Kurdish Conflict in Turkey:

Since 1993, over four thousand Kurdish villages have been destroyed and more than seventeen thousand killings of innocent Kurds have been carried out by The Turkish Special Forces. Following the March 29, 2010 municipal elections, fifteen hundred politicians, intellectuals, elected representatives, mayors and human rights activists have been jailed to date. As unacceptable as it is, hundreds of Kurdish children have been killed by The Turkish Security Forces since 1993 and today, about three thousand Kurdish children (aged 6 to 17) are in jail.

What the Canadian Action describes is nothing less than a latter-day enactment of the new Republic's genocidal massacre in Dersim between 1937-1938, when the Turkish army, its land and air force, annihilated 80 thousand mostly Alevi Kurds, including women, children and the elderly.

It is obvious, and sadly so, that the Turkish government relentlessly continues its undeclared war, yet again, against its own citizens, but failing, nevertheless, to “put out the people's eyes”, particularly in this case, the Kurdish people's eyes, or, for that matter, the Turkish people's eyes too, as I tend to believe, having met personally the humanist and courageous Turkish intellectual, Ragip Zarakolu, here in London, sharing with him a platform at the House of Commons in memory of Hrant Dink, Zarakolu's comrade-in-letters, assassinated by a fascist thug in 2007. (Few days after Hrant Dink's murder, Ayşe Berktaş reminded us--in her letter addressed to the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation-- that Hrant Dink also was a staunch supporter of the World Tribunal on Iraq).

Here is an Appeal just circulated on November 17, 2011, addressed to the Arab World, Europe and International Public Opinion, by the **Armenian Assembly of Europe**:

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan is increasing his pretensions to the role of judge in regional issues. Erdogan reached the peak when he called on the Syrian regime “not to massacre” people, adding that “otherwise history will always remember it as sanguinary [...] Mr. Erdogan has no right to teach morality to others unless he listens to the appeals of the European leaders and comes to terms with the dark pages of Turkish history. [...] Turkey is urged to abolish the notorious medieval Article 301, the latest victim of which became the publicist Zarakolu, who used to voice about the sufferings of national minorities -victims of the Turkish discriminatory policy.

Let us remember how dignified and emphatic the intellectual giant Bertrand Russell was in his Closing Address to the Stockholm Session of the 1967 War Crimes Tribunal on Vietnam. But before quoting from his Address, it's important not to forget the philosopher's twin odysseys in jail, under the 'matriarchy' of 'mother of all parliaments'. In fact he was imprisoned in 1918 as a result of his pacifist stance in support of a conscientious objector. The eighty-nine years old Nobel laureate was imprisoned yet again, in 1961, for his leading role in CND. The peace campaigners all over the world had not forgotten the 1955 [Russell–Einstein Manifesto](#) that called for nuclear disarmament, which was signed by 11 of the most distinguished scientists and intellectuals of the time. Russell's fierce opposition to the Vietnam War was exemplary. He even tore up, in October 1965, his Labour Party Labour card, suspecting the party would send soldiers to support the USA in the Vietnam War. Here is the quote from Russell's 1967 WCTV Closing Address:

The long arduous struggle for decency and for liberation is unending. A Tribunal such as ours will be necessary until the last starving man is fed and a way of life is created which ends exploitation of the many by the few. Wherever men struggle against suffering we must be their voice. We will be judged not by our reputations or our pretences but by our will to act.

It is good to know that such an act had been forged and an international committee was created in Paris, presided over by the poet Tristan Zara, to campaign for the release of the imprisoned writer Nazim Hikmet. The committee succeeded. The poet was freed in 1950. But his odyssey continued. Hikmet tells us about the nature of his odyssey:

**I went to the Forum
I convinced people anew
-Do not kill your brothers
-Do not be killed by your brothers
Down with the war**

I believe Zarakolu and all his comrades-in-letters and all the human rights campaigners imprisoned in Turkey have all gone to that same Forum for that same reason. Their odyssey now continues in prison. Let us rage against this injustice and demand freedom for the Turkish people's humanist intellectual, Ragip Zarakolu, and for all his comrades-in-letters and all the campaigners for human rights who are the victims of the notorious Article 301. The latter's place ought to be surely not in the Turkish Penal Code but in the dustbin of history, I humbly believe.

It was a joy to welcome the news of the formation of the *Committee for Solidarity with Zarakolu*. The good news is that there are already various urgent appeals, such as the *Stop Arbitrary Detentions in Turkey*, *Free Ayşe Berktaş*, and *Human Rights Petition – Release Ragip & Deniz Zarakolu & Büşra Ersanlı from prison immediately*. Let us hope and wish success in all the campaigns to free Zarakolu, Ersanlı, Berktaş and possibly all their comrades –in-letters and in-struggles for humanism and genuine democracy in Turkey.

It is significant indeed that the denier and oppressor share the same camp whereat relying totally on the so-called 'good will' and 'professionalism' of 'courtiers historians' and 'courtiers politicians'. I am neither a 'professional politician' nor a 'professional historian', not to mention a courtier one for that matter. But the avalanche of lies, distortion of facts, manipulation of data plus the human misery all around the world, challenge, and rightly so, our common humanity and human dignity not to deceive at least ourselves. Changing the world is beyond the capacities of any human being. It is the motor power of mankind's humanism that will accomplish such a gigantic task I tend to believe. We are the drops in the ocean of fuel for that motor power. Hence my thanks to you, members of Kurdish Society, Kurdish Studies and Student Organisation at SOAS, for organising this event to enliven that motor power in us all. Let my thanks reach you with my heartfelt verses such as these:

**As you work creatively
Keep healthy, busy and possibly happy
Despite overwhelming tragedy,
Deceit and political travesty
As Truth and Liberty
Will pluck the laurels of Victory
--This too is a lesson of History.**