

The flower of transformation blooms in Kurdistan

Alternatives for justice and sustainability in a war-torn area

13 SEPTEMBER 2022, ASHISH KOTHARI



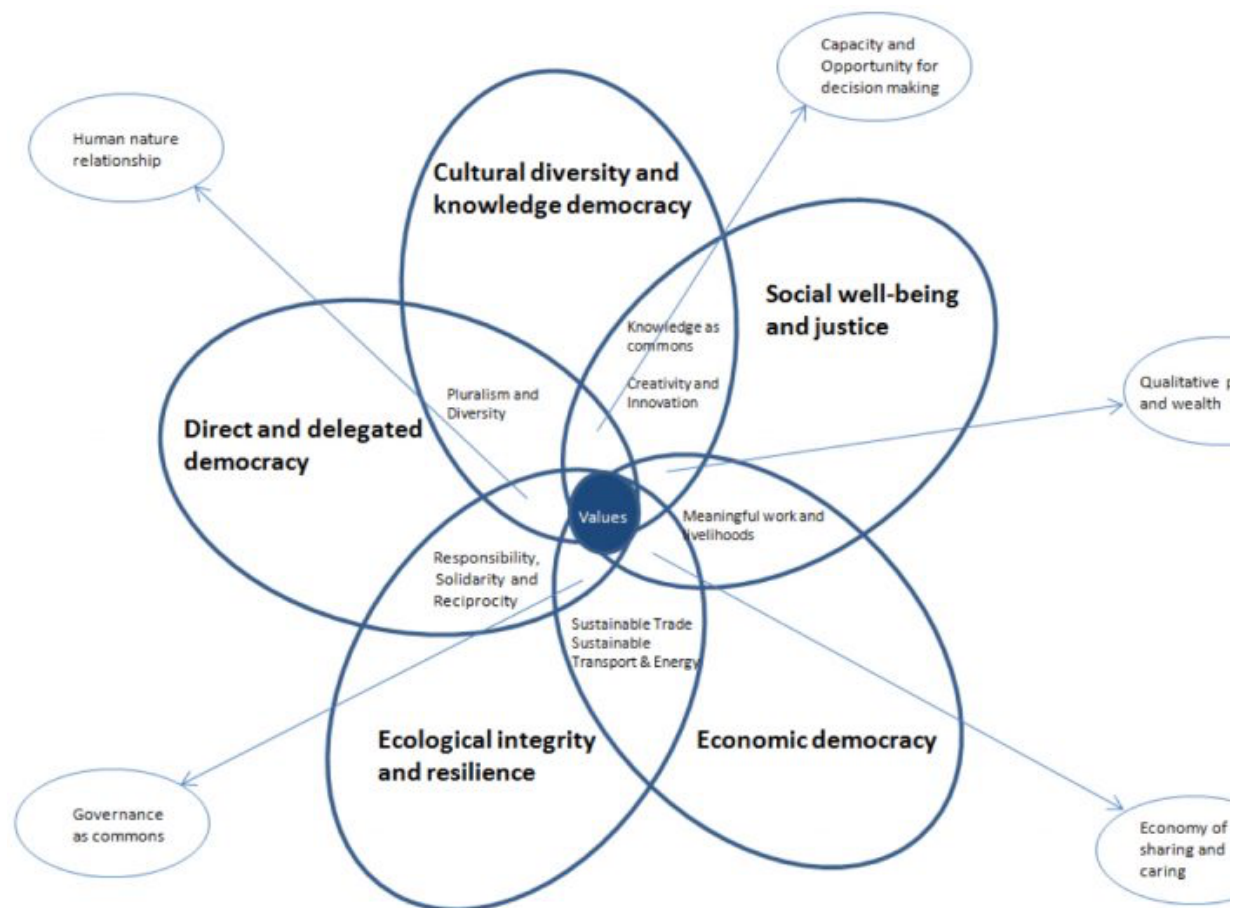
The beautiful and mountainous landscape of Hawraman Uramanat in Kurdistan which is designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO (Photo by Firat News Agency)

Imagine this scenario. Drones are dropping bombs on you, NATO's 2nd biggest army is bearing down on you, a few hundred years of ethnic persecution have tried to wipe out your identity, a militant and religiously fascist organization is killing your men and abducting your women and children to become slaves. Yet in the midst of all this, you are organizing educational camps on women's freedom, ecological living and democracy, and trying to mobilise your communities to practice these ideals. Sounds like a fantasy movie? Indeed – except it is very real, very grounded, and happening right now.

Welcome to one of the least reported and understood war zones in the world, as also one of the least known and appreciated initiatives for just, sustainable, equitable living. This is Kurdistan, a large area inhabited by the Kurdish ethnic community along with many others (Armenians, Yazidis, Arabs, Christians), in the intersection of what is today known as Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran. Since the 1970s, the Kurds have resisted persecution and massacre by the nation-state regimes they live in, and organized hundreds of their settlements to practice their own version of freedom and democracy.

[In March 2022](#), I wrote about the Flower of Transformation, encompassing the following five petals, part of a [framework on radical alternatives](#) emerging from grounded initiatives in India and elsewhere (see Figure below):

- a. Ecological integrity and resilience, including the conservation of nature and natural diversity, maintenance of ecological functions, respect for ecological limits (local to global), and ecological ethics in all human actions.
- b. Social well-being and justice, including fulfilling lives (physically, socially, culturally, and spiritually), equity between communities and individuals, communal and ethnic harmony; and erasure of hierarchies and divisions based on faith, gender, caste, class, ethnicity, ability, and other such attributes.
- c. Direct and delegated democracy, with decision-making starting in spaces enabling every person to participate meaningfully, and building from this to larger levels of governance by downwardly accountable institutions; and all this respectful of the needs and rights of those currently marginalised.
- d. Economic democracy, in which local communities and individuals have control over the means of production, distribution, exchange, and markets, based on the principle of localization for basic needs and trade built on this; central to this would be the replacement of private property by the commons.
- e. Cultural diversity and knowledge democracy, with multiple co-existing knowledge systems in the commons, respect for a diversity of ways of living, ideas and ideologies, and encouragement for creativity and innovation.



The flower is blooming in the Kurdish soil

Each of the above spheres can be illustrated by grounded initiatives in Kurdistan. Elaboration of and more dimensions than what I can cover below, can be found on various websites such as that of the [Academy of Democratic Modernity](https://www.meer.com/en/70676-the-flower-of-transformation-blooms-in-kurdistan).

Radical democracy

The Kurdish freedom movement has been attempting to assert complete regional autonomy from nation-states they are contained in, and direct, radical democracy or democratic confederalism for the communes and settlements that are encompassed in these regions.

Looking at the experience of the Russian state, and many others where revolutionary parties came to power but failed in creating a truly democratic society, the Kurdish freedom movement transitioned rapidly from an ideology of demanding a socialist Kurdish 'state', to one of radical politics located in people and communes. This ideology of radical democracy has been promoted by the movement's prime ideologue, Abdullah Öcalan, a founder and President of the Kurdish Workers' Party (Partiya Karkêren Kurdistan, PKK) from 1978. As a voracious and perceptive reader of the history of movements around the world, Öcalan came to the conclusion that real freedom lies in people being political actors in the full sense of the word, not allowing politicians and bureaucrats to rule them. In 1999, Öcalan was abducted by NATO powers in collusion with the Turkish state, and has since then been incarcerated on an island (mostly in solitary confinement) in shocking violation of international law and human rights. Yet he has managed to communicate to the Kurdish people some of the most radical thoughts on what freedom means, especially the need for women's liberation (to which I will return below), and given to the world an [astonishingly prolific](#) set of revolutionary thoughts and proposals.

Öcalan's ideas on politics, power and democracy can at first sight be bewilderingly complex. He promotes *democratic modernity* instead of *capitalist modernity*; the latter, according to him, continues to enslave humanity and the rest of nature, while the former can lead to real freedom for both. He realises that the term 'modernity' is contested, given that it has been the colonising project of the western industrial nations for a few centuries, erasing thousands of traditional ways of being and knowing. But he is using it to denote that the movement for a people-centred politics is contemporary as much as it is historical. Opposed to the homogenising tendencies of capitalist modernity, it respects processes that are "pluralistic, probabilistic, open to alternatives, multicultural, ecological and feminist".

Centred on this basic ideology, he then propounds the need for *democratic nation*, where the peoples who identify themselves as part of a nation (not to be equated to the nation-state, but rather as a common democratic consciousness based on the principle of "unity in diversity"), with their own free will and their own ethnic, religious and other identities, are fully part of decision making. Such peoples and nations can practice *democratic confederalism*, in which self-governing communes will federate over larger regions, without sacrificing the autonomy of each of these communes. Through these, one moves to *democratic society* or *democratic socialism* (which, Öcalan is at pains to point out, is very different from the state socialism practiced in Russia, China, and others since they have been based very much on the centralisation of power in the hands of the nation-state).

Kurdish society has gone the furthest down this road [in Rojava](#) (the part of Kurdistan contained within Syria), and significant progress was also made in the [Bakur region](#) (currently occupied by Turkey) till repeated attacks by the Turkish state caused major setbacks in the last few years.

Both democratic modernity and confederalism are based on a nuanced understanding of power and politics. In the original Turkish words used by Öcalan, there is a clear distinction between *iktidarci yönetim* (power over others) and *demokratik yönetim* (democratic politics, or power to rule oneself – or what Hannah Arendt referred to as 'power with'). Politics is the "art of

freedom”, and therefore there is a need for everyone to be politicised; and for politics to be based on *moral* life, i.e. customs and rules that society establishes for conducting daily life, and “respect and commitment to the community and communal life”.

In many ways, Kurdish attempts at creating a democratic society are similar to other struggles for autonomy and self-determination, such as that of the Zapatista in Mexico and Indigenous nations in several parts of the world.

Socio-cultural justice and equality

The Kurdish movement is centred around the liberation of women from millennia of enslavement in various forms of patriarchy and masculinity. According to Öcalan, the state is a manifestation of patriarchy, and the family is a ‘man’s small state’, so women’s freedom has to be from the smallest unit of society to the largest.

Given the intensely patriarchal character of Kurdish (and other neighbouring ethnic) communities in the region, this has been one of the most difficult struggles for the movement. Starting with small acts of rebellion by individuals or groups of women, spurred by their increasing involvement in the rebellion against nation-state imposition including as armed guerrillas (more on this below), and vociferously advocated by Öcalan, the pillar of patriarchy (or masculinity) has been systematically eroded. Rules and norms set by the movement, such as having a co-chair woman and man for each governing, economic, and socio-cultural institution, have also helped. Perhaps most important has been the promotion of *jineoloji*, the ‘science of women’s freedom’, an idea initially proposed by Öcalan but subsequently developed into a sophisticated, deep social science and way of life/understanding/being by many others in the women’s movement, through a series of [Jineoloji Academies and other activities](#).

The history of [Kurdish women's movement](#) and its many achievements have fascinating lessons for the whole world. Yet the struggle is far from over; women regularly face continuing dimensions of male domination. What helps is having forums where such behaviour can be brought up in an atmosphere of learning rather than confrontation, such as the *tekml* (I return to this below). A few thousand years of sexist oppression is going to take time to overcome, to move towards a situation of what Öcalan, using a phrase likely to shock polite society, terms ‘killing the dominant man’. This also includes transformations in how traditional society has viewed same-sex relations, or multiple genders and sexualities; and moving towards forms of companionship called *hevjiyana azadi* (free-life together).

Gender is not the only dimension of the socio-cultural transformation in Kurdistan. One of the most challenging issues faced by radical democracy everywhere is tension between different ethnic or national identities. In Kurdistan, the Kurds are only one of multiple ethnicities, which include Yezidis, Christians, Armenians, and Arabs. In some areas the Kurds are in the majority, in others, not. But even in the former, the movement has tried to give equal voice and space to all ethnicities, for instance in relevant decision-making institutions, in the use of languages in gatherings and educational institutions, and even in the armed guerrilla units.

A unique process that has helped in continuously and regularly bringing up conflicts and tensions, or what could be considered iniquitous and exploitative behaviour, is *tekml*. This is an institutionalised forum for criticism and self-criticism, held at various levels of social mobilisation, in PKK and other political institutions, and in the guerrilla units. The tone for this was apparently set by Öcalan and his comrades like Haki Karer, Kemal Pir, Sakine Cansiz, in the early years of the Kurdish resistance; they insisted that everyone including themselves be subjected to this. Having been involved in an organisation and some networking initiatives where such processes of feedback and openness have been attempted, I can testify to how hard it is to ensure a spirit of comradeship while criticising someone else, to be open to criticism

oneself, and to be self-critical. And yet the Kurdish movement appears to have been doing this well, even in the midst of one of the most brutal conditions of war and conflict, as noted by several external observers who have spent time in Kurdistan.

These observers have also noted another fascinating experiment: regular ‘education’ sessions that movement or commune members engage in. In these, lasting a few hours to several days, the fundamentals of the revolution, such as democratic modernity and confederalism, *jineoloji*, the history of colonisation and religious dogmatism in the middle east and elsewhere, radical thoughts and practice from various parts of the world, and other such subjects are presented and dialogued. A passion for reading has also spread, spurred on in part by regular recommendations from Öcalan, even from his confinement when he was able to very occasionally meet his lawyers and family (for the last nearly two years, this too has stopped). The movement is now taking such ‘education’ sessions outside Kurdistan too; a recently set up [Academy of Democratic Modernity](#) has done several in Europe (one of which I was fortunate to be part of in August 2022).

To the extent possible, the movement has also infused the basics of middle east history and culture, local knowledge systems, an understanding of the Kurdistan movement, and the fundamentals of ecological sensitivity into the curricula and pedagogies of formal educational institutions. This (and other aspects such as community health) is severely limited, though, where nation-state imposed educational regimes remain dominant; in many cases continuing a brutal history of imposition of ‘national’ languages such as Turkish (with children being beaten in schools and adults being arrested on the streets, if they spoke Kurdish).

Economic democracy

Encompassed in all the above initiatives is also the ability to claim governance and management rights over resources important for economic survival and security. This could be collective rights to land and sea commons, water, seeds, and biodiversity, or democratic control over industrial or craft-based means of production, or social and solidarity and community economies. Since the Kurdish movement is explicitly against capitalism as also the state, its aim is to transform the economy towards ‘deomocratic communal’ forms. This includes running businesses with a cooperative model in which workers and producers are in control, “grounded in satisfying society’s fundamental needs” rather than what makes for maximum profit. It also aims to be ecologically sustainable in agriculture and manufacturing; Öcalan calls it the replacement of industrialism with ‘eco-industry’. Here too, the feminisation of the economy, emphasising the relations of caring and sharing, is crucial.

A history of colonisation of common lands, forcible displacement of 2.5 million people from their traditional homelands, continued attacks and domination by the nation-states Kurdistan is located in, a legacy of privatisation of agriculture and land, male domination of economic activity, and other such factors are major hindrances to the democratisation of the economy. But the movement is pressing on. Some impressive initiatives are the creation of hundreds of cooperatives running various kinds of operations and businesses, and a unique [women's village](#), Jinwar, where sustainable livelihood options are being promoted. The movement is also keen to learn from successful initiatives at social, solidarity and community economies elsewhere in the world.

Ecological wisdom and resilience

Women’s freedom and democracy are two of the crucial pillars of the Kurdish movement, the third is ecological sensitivity; and all inextricably linked. Recognising that capitalist modernity and the nation-state have played havoc with the earth, and alienated people from the rest of

nature, Öcalan started putting emphasis on this aspect from early on. In this he also relied on traditional middle-eastern society's spiritual and ethical bonds with the rest of nature, noting for instance that "it is remarkable that the Sumerian word for freedom, 'Amargi', means return to mother-nature. Between human being and nature there is a quasi love relationship"; and further that, "this past awareness of nature fostered a mentality that recognized a multitude of sanctities and divinities in nature. We may gain a better understanding of the essence of collective life if we acknowledge that it was based on the metaphysics of sanctity and divinity, stemming from reverence for the mother-woman." The rights of nature are, for the Kurdish movement, to be respected in the same manner as those of humans. People and the planet, not power and profits, are the fulcrum of revolution. The philosophy of *hevîyana azadi* should be extended to not only human-human relations, but relations between humans and other species too.

But, as the movement acknowledges, this is amongst the least developed aspect of the revolution, its practical applications beginning in seriousness only in the 1990s. The history of ecological damage by colonial and nation-state powers in the region, the sustained siege of Kurdistan, the imposition of destructive infrastructural projects, the industrialisation of agriculture, and continued reliance on revenue sources like oil, make the goals of regeneration and sustainability very hard to achieve. Amongst the first [ecological movements](#) of recent times in the region are campaigns against mega-hydro projects like Ilisu on the Tigris river and dams on Munzur river in Dersim.

Campaigns like [Make Rojava Green Again](#) involve large-scale tree-plantation, cleaning water sources, community gardens, and other such activities. The 'women's village' Jinwar,¹ mentioned above, with goals of sustainable self-reliance, is another experiment, from which the movement hopes to learn for other similar initiatives. In many of the municipalities where political parties supported by the Kurdish movement like HDP are ruling, urban greening, public transportation, cleaning waterbodies, decent housing for the poor, and other measures have been seriously attempted. A broad platform, the [Mesopotamia Ecology Movement](#), has aided in both resistance and in taking discussions and action on environment further through provincial and thematic commissions.

Interestingly, in the last three decades the guerrilla units of the Kurdish movement have also laid stress on ecological living. This includes putting minimum stress on nature in the mountains they live in, severely restricting tree-felling and hunting to where absolutely necessary, not throwing out any plastic or metal wastes, helping to regenerate ecosystems where degraded in the past, and continuously discussing ecology as part of their 'education' sessions.

Intersectionality and values

Discrimination and marginalisation can be intersectional, e.g. environmentally poor working and living conditions are most pronounced for those who are marginalised in race, caste or class terms, or inadequate access to nutritious food can build on other discriminations against women. And so the responses to these, in many of the above initiatives, are also intersectional or cutting across the five spheres.

In the Kurdish movement, there is a clear and often pre-configured intersectionality. This is most explicit with regard to the gender dimension in each aspect of transformation, political, social, cultural, ecological. According to the Kurds, revolution is not in the future, but is *now*; and it is not piecemeal but holistic, which means simultaneously living it in all its dimensions

as far as possible. They do not want to repeat the mistakes of past revolutionary movements, where a lack of prefiguration or of simultaneous transformations in both external and internal dimensions led to multiple failures, even after the movement took control.

In trying to integrate the radicalisation of political decision-making with socio-cultural transformation, economic democracy, and ecological sanity, movements like the Kurdish one illustrate a [Radical Ecological Democracy](#) or (to use a term arising from the context in India), *eco-swaraj*. They assert local decision-making while also embodying responsibility for other people and for the rest of nature. And they are based on a set of values and norms, many passed down through the ages, such as community living, solidarity, interdependence, and diversity; many are more recent, such as radical democracy, women's freedom and gender equality. The frameworks of democratic society and *jineoloji* incorporate these and other values in ways that are lived every day, not only remaining theoretical constructs. None are perfectly achieved, as Kurdish activists and intellectuals will themselves point out in the tradition of constant self-criticism. But at least sincere attempts are constantly being made, and many are visible in the political, socio-cultural, and economic activities described above.

Perhaps one of the most difficult compromises the movement has had to make is to take to armed resistance. Violence is essentially against its philosophy. For the first many years it tried negotiating with the Turkish state, seeking an autonomous region. But as military aggression along with violent cultural and economic domination by Turkey continued, and both here as elsewhere in Turkistan the Kurds faced a near-extermination situation, the urge for self-defence led the movement to arm itself. This has enabled it to resist further occupation by the nation-states, as also push back the Islamic State (ISIS) forces in some areas. It has however explicitly stated that violence will be used only for self-defence, never as offence, and that it will continue to seek peaceful resolution. It has repeatedly announced unilateral ceasefires, to try such a resolution, but Turkey has not reciprocated or honoured these. Its utterly shameless incarceration of Öcalan, for 23 years now, has also been a stumbling block to a meaningful peace process.

The full blooming of the flower of transformation is going to involve difficult, long-term struggles. But what the Kurdish society is trying to achieve can be called a 'nowtopia' in the making, and many more are visible on the horizon around the world, a veritable [Pluriverse](#) of practices and worldviews. While not in any way belittling the enormous challenges posed to them by the dominant military-industrial-capitalist-statist system, and continuing forms of patriarchy, racism and anthropocentrism, these inspirational pinpricks in the darkness provide hope for a saner, more just world.

To repeat, as the Kurds say, revolution is now. And it is on the foundations of *jîn-jîyan-azaadî* - women, life, freedom!

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1. School in Kobane, named in memory of fallen revolutionary Azad Kobane, where children are taught in the native Kurdish language (Photo by Firat News Agency)
2. A public parliament in the city of Derîk, Cezîre Canton, in Rojava, constructed in 2018 (Photo by Firat News Agency)
3. A mass demonstration in Bakur, Northern Kurdistan (Photo by Firat News Agency)
4. Kurdish women at a celebration of the anniversary of the revolution in Rojava (Photo by Firat News Agency)
5. In the women's village of Jinwar, the women also receive language lessons (Photo by Firat News Agency)
6. A protest march in Rojava (northern Syria), against attacks by the state (Photo by Firat News Agency)

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