

An interview with Sezgin Tanrikulu

“Kurds are losing their faith in democratic solutions”

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Sezgin Tanrikulu, the head of the Diyarbakır Bar Association, says a considerable part of the Kurdish population sees armed struggle as legitimate because they think they are excluded from the democratic process.

According to Tanrikulu, it is possible to change this understanding by taking democratic steps. He and the representatives of 17 civil society organizations from eastern and southeastern Anatolia met with President Abdullah Gül and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to share their views on economic and democratic solutions to Turkey's Kurdish question last week. At the meeting with Erdoğan, he and Tanrikulu exchanged harsh words on the subject of education in Kurdish. In an interview with Sunday's Zaman Tanrikulu explains the situation in eastern and southeastern Anatolia and his concerns about the possibility of local Turkish-Kurdish clashes.

At your meeting with Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan you had a discussion about “mother tongue” education. What do you mean by that?

There are different points about it. “Education in one's mother tongue” means using the language in all levels of education. But “mother tongue education” means simply to teach this language. Although I defend the right of “education in one's mother tongue,” under the given circumstances, Turkey can only reach a consensus on “mother tongue education.” But the problem is that now, in Turkey there is categorical objection to all mother tongues except Turkish. The prime minister says only minorities have the right to mother tongue education. [According to law, only non-Muslims are considered minorities in Turkey.]

What is the situation in Turkey now, and what do you want, exactly?

Turkey opened the way for mother tongue education, but only in private courses. Most of these courses have been closed, anyway, because the regulations were restrictive. They were open only for people older than 15, and finding teachers was very difficult. Mother tongue education should be done in all public schools. There should be elective courses in the public schools. We are also asking for the establishment of Kurdish departments and institutions at the universities. Also, all the obstacles and restrictions on broadcasting in languages other than Turkish should be removed. Regarding the broadcasting, there are no legal obstacles, actually. The law indicates that this kind of broadcasting is allowed. But the regulations of the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK) say that it is done only by the TRT. We opened a court case against this regulation with the Council of State, but our application was rejected on the basis that we didn't have a right to open such a case.

What exactly happened in the discussion between you and the prime minister?

He said the problem only has an economic aspect. He told us that Kurds can be presidents, prime ministers and deputies. I told him that there is a cultural aspect to the problem, too, and that not just Kurds but anyone in Turkey who feels different should be able to learn, broadcast and get services in his language. Then the prime minister told me that I was wrong and that there is nowhere in the world where this is possible and he gave the example of Germany. But I told him that in Germany it is possible to learn Turkish in schools. He said that in Sweden Turks can learn Turkish only in private courses. I replied by

saying that in Sweden it is even possible to learn the Laz language. Then he told me that I was lying, so I left the meeting.

When you are talking about providing public services in the mother tongue, are you suggesting official languages other than Turkish?

There is no discussion about that, and there is no reason for that. There is only one official language of the Turkish Republic, and it is Turkish. The situation of the Diyarbakır Sur Municipality is very dramatic. Their council made a decision to provide some services in Kurdish. The mayor has a court case against him because he published some fliers in Kurdish. This is absurd. If this is a crime, then English-language publications from the Ministry of Culture is a crime, too. The Interior Ministry did an investigation and claimed that the municipality was being used as a political place, so the mayor and the city council were removed from the office by the Council of State. Turkey should not have to deal with these kinds of things anymore.

You mention that there is a categorical rejection of the Kurdish language, but if we consider the demands of Kurds, where can there be consensus?

Actually it is not that difficult. There are some steps that have to be taken on the cultural level. I mentioned the ones related to Kurdish. There is a fear on the part of the state and the government: What will we do if everybody wants the same accommodations? If we start, will it take us to chaos? But there is no reason for this. If the people get their rights, why should they ask for more? Kurds are losing their faith in democratic solutions, and there are a considerable number of people who think that the armed struggle is legitimate. We should look for ways to change this situation.

On one side, there is an understanding that is rejecting everything. On the other side, there is another understanding that thinks the armed struggle is legitimate. Why is a third way not emerging?

Kurds do not have a dialogue amongst themselves. There is a lack of tolerance. Also, under the circumstances it is not possible. Neither the state nor the organization [the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)] want this. There are only civil society organizations but, of course, by nature they cannot have the same spirit as a political party. But, yes, there is a vacuum; so far it is being filled with civil society organizations, and I think they are getting stronger.

Why do some groups consider violence legitimate?

Because of the policies related to the Kurds. For 20 to 25 years there has been no change in the situation. Over time this led some people to think that if there are no guns, we will be suppressed. This understanding has now become the dominant understanding. I never think that the violence is legitimate, but it has social legitimacy in the region. The state should be aware of this, and it should take steps accordingly. It is very important to create faith in democratic solutions among these people. This will lead to the strengthening of a feeling of belonging. Otherwise, it will be very difficult.

If the state implements such a strategy, who should it talk to about this?

There is no need for a counterpart. The only counterpart is the citizens. The state can say, "I do it for my Kurdish citizens." Then the citizens can turn to those who are thinking that the armed struggle is legitimate and say, "Don't use guns in our name." Once the democratic atmosphere develops, then Kurds can have dialogue among themselves without hypocrisy. Today, all the Kurdish parties are hypocritical. They are not able to share their real agenda with society. It is not possible under the circumstances. Kurds are not able to say what they really want because of the lack of a democratic atmosphere.

There have been many recent developments in Turkey, like the closure case against the AK Party and discussions about the economic situation. But the Kurdish question is not on the agenda that much, is it?

This is exactly why we decided to visit Ankara. Before these developments, the Kurdish question was on the agenda and seriously under discussion but, because of some coincidences — interestingly, every time the Kurdish question is on the agenda these kinds of coincidences always come up — the closure case against the AK Party was opened and the discussions on the Kurdish question were once more postponed. According to us, they should not be postponed. Because to postpone the solution opens wounds that cannot be healed. Think about the Nevruz events. There was nothing in Diyarbakır or İstanbul, but events in Van, Siirt and Hakkari reminded us of the images that we are used to. The women who are beaten up, the children whose arms are twisted and a security official who is saying that he will not shake hands with a deputy; all these things have led to more social indignation. This indignation leads to social disengagement. Everybody is asking if we will go back to the old days. The government has no excuse; these officials are appointed by them. If they were judges or army officers, the government could say, “It is not under my jurisdiction.” But they can easily remove those officials from their posts. I never saw a governor who was removed from his post for this reason. Turkey should give up this kind of understanding. We mentioned this in our meetings, too. The prime minister himself also mentioned that there was no problem in Diyarbakır or Ankara. But he added that in other places the public was holding illegal demonstrations. Even if this is the case, this should not be the attitude toward citizens. In a state of law, the understanding cannot be “If the citizens do this, I will act like this.”

How do you evaluate the recent clashes at Akdeniz University? For some it was a simple crime of passion, while for some it was a Kurdish-Turkish clash.

This is exactly the point where we should be hesitant. This is why we have to find a solution before it is too late, because the prospect of clashes between the two societies is increasing. The feelings of the police and soldiers’ families during the March 28 events [in 2006 after a funeral for some PKK members, there were demonstrations in which 10 people were killed] are on the one side and, on the other side, in İstanbul and Ankara, Kurds are withdrawing into their own ghettos. If it goes on like this, it can turn into Turkish-Kurdish clashes and it would be the end of the country.

For some people it is hard to believe that there are many mixed families. The two societies have been interwoven for years. Do you agree?

Recently I had a chat with a prison guard in Van. He is originally from the Black Sea region. I asked him if he will stay in Van. He told me that his father told him that he does not want anyone in the family who has Kurdish friends. Also, the Kurds who migrated to the west a long time ago have started to buy houses in Diyarbakır because they don’t think that these places are safe for them. This kind of sentiment can turn into clashes. Recently I saw a security official on TV who was saying that the Mediterranean coast had been captured by Kurds. If this is the mentality, there could be clashes — maybe not in general, but local ones.

What could be the possible impact of these events for the upcoming local elections in the region?

One year is a very long time for a country like Turkey, but I can say that among the Kurds who voted for the AK Party in the general elections there has been a huge amount of disappointment. If it goes on like this, it will be difficult for the AK Party to capture the same success in the region. It is true that it is not easy to deal with the Kurdish problem, but the AK Party should take steps on the issue. To be the architect of peace is a very rare opportunity. The AK Party has this chance, but it is not using it properly.

Sources

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