Revolutionizing Human Rights: Women and Democracy in Northern Syria

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INTRODUCTION

As the Syrian Civil War enters its eighth year, a radical experiment in self-governance is taking place. Kurdish-led forces in northeastern Syria have taken advantage of civil unrest to secure and establish the quasi-autonomous region of Rojava. The Democratic Union Party (PYD), a left-wing, predominantly Kurdish political and military entity, dominates Rojava’s political scene.

The PYD follows in the ideological tradition of Abdullah Ocalan, a political prisoner held captive off the coast of Turkey since 1999. A founding member of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) – a Kurdish nationalist organization designated a terrorist entity by Europe and the United States – Ocalan became the foremost political philosopher for Kurdish movements in Turkey and Syria during his time in prison. His model of democratic governance, called “democratic confederalism,” rejects the top-down politics of the nation-state. Instead, it proposes self-governing, small-scale democratic communities that would operate within the boundaries of existing states. Ocalan also promotes women’s empowerment, which he views as the antidote to patriarchy – the underlying cause behind nationalist and capitalist exploitation.

In addition, the PYD draws upon human rights rhetoric. Rojava’s first constitution, the 2014 Charter of the Social Contract, explicitly incorporates the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Top PYD officials frequently reference democratic ideals and women’s empowerment in speeches and interviews.

As an anti-authoritarian movement dedicated to democracy and women’s rights, the PYD have become heroes in the West. Frequently compared to the Republicans of the Spanish Civil War, the PYD

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has committed itself to grassroots democracy in the face of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad’s authoritarianism and ISIS’ militant theocracy. The Financial Times calls the Rojavan government a “thriving experiment in direct democracy,” a “radical new dispensation,” and “democracy returning to its roots.”

“To sympathetic Western visitors,” observes one New York Times article, Rojava is “a place where the seeds of the Arab Spring [promise] to blossom into utopia.”

Western countries have welcomed the Rojava movement in northern Syria. This begs the question of whether the Kurds’ mobilization of democratic values and human rights rhetoric is merely an opportunistic ploy to curry favor. In fact, human rights have featured in Kurdish nationalist rhetoric for decades. The PYD’s brand has been honed through a distinctly Kurdish tradition of fusing Marxist, anarchist, and liberal human rights frameworks with demands for Kurdish autonomy.

Moreover, the PYD’s move to establish representative political institutions and gender quotas reimagines the theory and practice of human rights. This approach, which has taken root amidst turmoil and in the absence of a strong centralized state power, complements the traditional “Western” conception of human rights as finite sets of protections against a powerful state. This essay will probe the roots of PYD ideology and its significance for human rights theory by analyzing tenets of Abdullah Ocalan’s teachings, PYD legal documents and press statements, and PYD political institutions as they operate on the ground.

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4 Ibid.

5 This essay will not discuss the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq. Despite certain cultural affinities between Syrian and Iraqi Kurds, and despite occasional military cooperation between the two groups in the fight against ISIS, these two sovereign entities are unaffiliated and differ politically. The Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq operates under an oligarchical political system led by the Barzani family, which collaborates with the Turkish government against the PYD’s sister organization, the PKK. The PYD aligns itself with the PKK and is committed to a decentralized model of democratic governance.
ROJAVA AND THE KURDS

Although northern Syria is home to many ethnic groups, including Arabs, Syriacs, Chechens, Circassians, Armenians, Turkmen, and others, Kurds comprise the majority, and have been the driving force behind the creation of Rojava. The Kurds, spread across the borders of Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq, are the world’s largest stateless nation. In Syria, the Baathist regime has persecuted Syrian Kurds since its rise to power in 1963. The regime stripped Kurdish constituents of their lands, citizenship, and basic cultural rights. In the 1960s, the Syrian government pursued an “Arab Cordon” policy, seizing land in the province of Jazira in the northeast and transferring ownership to Arab tribes. At the same time, Kurds were driven out of their lands in the southern desert of Al-Raad, and many other Kurdish villages fell victim to further Arabization policies. As late as 2008, Syrian Decree 49 restricted Kurdish Syrians from building, renting, and buying property through stringent permit requirements. Through these initiatives, Kurds were pushed into metropolitan areas as part of a campaign to break up their cultural and geographic cohesion.

The conflict in Syria has changed the fortune of Syrianc Kurds, providing opportunities to seize control in formerly Kurdish territories. While the Assad regime focuses its military wrath on the northwest region of the country, the northeast, including the Jazira province, has been spared aerial strikes. Previously majority-Arab areas, including Tal Abyad and Manbij, are now under Kurdish control. Northern Syria, renamed Rojava, is governed by the PYD-led Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM) council. This government includes six parties: the PYD, the Kurdish Leftist Party, the Liberal Unity Party, the National Community Party of Syrian Kurds, the Kurdish Unity Party in Syria, the Democratic Union Party, and the Democratic Party of Syria. This arrangement was applauded by the US and other Western powers as a means of containing Islamic State (ISIS) expansion into Western territories.

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9 Ibid.
and the Peace and Democracy Party of Syrian Kurds. Rojava is comprised of three cantons: Afrin in the west and Jazira and Kobane in the east, separated by a bloc of Turkish-controlled territory.

ABDULLAH OCALAN

Abdullah Ocalan is one of the founding members of the PKK. Captured in Nairobi, Kenya in 1999 in a covert operation involving Turkish and American intelligence, he is currently serving out a life sentence on the island of Imrali off the coast of Istanbul. He is the undisputed leader of the PKK and PYD democratic confederalist movements and a key figure in Kurdish nationalism, although he now renounces all aspirations to build an independent Kurdish state. Ocalan was heavily influenced by American communist-turned-eco-anarchist Murray Bookchin, a native of New York City active until his death in 2006. Ocalan advocates a three-part nationalist platform predicated on feminism, ecology, and democracy. He opposes patriarchy, capitalism, nationalism, and all other forms of hierarchical exploitation.

In November 1978, Abdullah Ocalan gathered two dozen Kurdish revolutionaries in the town of Fis in southeastern Turkey. This cohort would become the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). At the time, the PKK were Marxists who used violence to destabilize Turkish administration in the predominantly Kurdish areas of southeastern Turkey. In 1980, Ocalan fled to Syria under the protection of Hafez al-Assad. Ocalan led the PKK remotely from Syria until he was expelled in 1998 under pressure from the Turkish government. He then escaped to Europe and embarked on his fateful trip to Kenya.

In prison, Ocalan began reading vast quantities political theory. He absorbed Michel Foucault’s *Society Must Be Defended* and Benedict Anderson’s masterpiece on nationalism *Imagined Communities*,
among others. Eventually, one of Ocalan’s followers sent him the work of Murray Bookchin, whose ideas transformed Ocalan’s political outlook. Where he had once advocated the construction of an independent Kurdish nation-state, he came to believe in an alternative model consisting of small, self-governing communities formed within the boundaries of existing states. Where he had previously been a Marxist, he renounced the belief that capitalist exploitation was the root of all social evils. Instead, all hierarchical relationships – including the traditional relationship between men and women – were to blame. Ocalan’s newfound beliefs came to form the basis of his two most famous contributions to political theory: “jineoloji” (the “science of women,” his distinctive brand of feminism) and “democratic confederalism.”

Abdullah Ocalan’s influence on the PYD government in Rojava cannot be overstated. His image adorns government buildings, classrooms, community centers, police stations, and the patches on soldiers’ chests. His works are read and studied by students, soldiers, and refugees alike. In 2011, Saleh Muslim, former co-chair of the PYD, admitted to following directives issued by Ocalan from his island prison. “There is a reason that we apply [Ocalan’s] philosophy and ideology to Syria,” he told an interviewer. “It offers the best solution to Kurdish problems.”

RIGHTS

The PYD has committed itself to upholding a long list of rights. Of these, two classes have dominated international media: women’s empowerment, loosely interpreted as women’s rights, and democracy, or so-called “democratic rights.” This essay aims to verify that Rojavan commitment to

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15 Enzinna, “A Dream of Secular Utopia.”
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
human rights is sincere and substantive. This section aims to demonstrate that women’s rights and democratic rights are key themes in Rojava’s legal framework.

The PYD’s 2014 Charter of the Social Contract, revised in 2016 by the Rojava-Northern Syria Democratic Federal System Constituent Assembly, operates as Rojava’s constitution. It enshrines human rights in two ways: by listing rights explicitly, and by incorporating important United Nations charters. These include the UDHR, the ICCPR, and the ICESCR. In addition, representatives of the PYD have frequently alluded to rights in statements to the press.

The Preface or Preamble of the Charter of the Social Contract pledges to establish “equality without discrimination on the basis of race, religion, creed, doctrine or gender” and to “ensure the rights of women and children.” In addition, Article 27 states that “women have the inviolable right to participate in political, social, economic and cultural life.” Article 28 states that “women have the right to organize themselves, and eliminate all forms of discrimination on grounds of gender.” Finally, Article 87 establishes that “the proportion of the representation of both genders in all institutions, administrations, and bodies is of at least 40%.”

These legal provisions reflect a two-part understanding of women’s liberation: first, as the need to combat discrimination, and second, as a matter of representation in government. The former is familiar to students of “Western” human rights frameworks, which typically emphasize the rights of the individual against the powers of the state. The second is more radical. By linking women’s liberation to representation in government, the Charter of the Social Contract reimagines the meaning of human rights. Here, decision-making power is a key element of emancipation. The ability to safeguard one’s own interests and develop the laws by which one is governed – not simply in theory, but in practice – is a right protected by law. This stance is supported by PYD public statements. In 2016, Asya Abdullah, former co-Chair of the PYD, declared that, “I want young people, especially young women, to participate and be

active in our political movement.”

“The hallmark of a free and democratic life is a free woman,” she said in her keynote speech at the Rojava New World Embassy in Oslo in November of that year.

In addition to listing rights explicitly, the Charter for the Social Contract incorporates international covenants. In Article 20, the Charter states that international conventions for human rights form an “essential part” of the Rojavan government. Article 22 invokes the UDHR, ICCPR, and ICESCR specifically. Consequently, these documents and their contents must be considered integral parts of the Charter of the Social Contract.

The Preamble to the UDHR declares that the member states of the United Nations believe in the “equal rights of men and women.” In principle, this resembles the Preamble to the PYD’s Charter of the Social Contract. Article 3 of the ICCPR and Article 3 of the ICESCR, which state that men and women shall have equal ability to exercise civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights are strikingly similar to Article 27 of the Charter, which ensures women’s full access to political, social, economic and cultural life.

It is possible that the authors of the PYD, and even Abdullah Ocalan himself, were influenced by these iconic UN documents, and as a result, decided to include certain of their provisions in the Charter. However, this does not explain why the original documents should then be incorporated into the Rojavan constitution. This redundancy suggests that women’s rights found their way into PYD rhetoric via other channels – namely, through Abdullah Ocalan – and that international covenants were integrated into the

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final Charter in an attempt to gain the sympathies of an international audience, or perhaps to demonstrate a willingness to comply with international standards of human rights. This strategic decision to reach out to international human rights civil society does not necessarily undermine the authenticity of the PYD’s commitment to women’s rights. However, it places special onus on the PYD’s real policies and actions to demonstrate the party’s commitment to women’s rights.

Basic principles of popular sovereignty also appear in the Charter. Article 2(a) states that “people are the source of authorities and the sovereignty exercised through institutions and elected assemblies.” Article 2(b) states that people’s councils and administrative bodies derive their legitimacy from “the democratic principle.” The Preface of the Charter states the PYD’s democratic confederalist position with more precision, affirming that “the areas of the democratic self-management do not accept the concept of state nationalism, military and religious.” These provisions coexist with more technical articles establishing legislative councils, executive councils, judicial councils, elections, and a Supreme Constitutional Court. Taken together, these clauses signal the PYD’s commitment to democracy.

In addition, Asya Abdullah’s male counterpart, former co-chair Saleh Muslim, has emphasized the importance of democratic rights in public statements. “We aim for a decentralized, democratic Syria, where all peoples enjoy freedom and democratic rights according to universal treaties and conventions,” he told the Washington Kurdish Institute in 2015. “We are part of the Kurdish people struggling for our existence and democratic rights against states that rule over Kurdistan, including Syria and Iran.”

Clearly, the PYD government in northern Syria is committed to direct democracy – at least in theory.

In contrast, the UDHR, ICCPR, and ICESCR are nearly silent on the subject of democracy. In Article 29, Clause 2, the UDHR determines that “everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law [...] meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society.” This implies that constituents are entitled to some form of democratic government, but does not mandate it. Articles 14, 21, and 22 of the ICCPR, and Articles 4 and 8 of the ICESCR, refer to the needs of a “democratic society” without explicitly stating that members of the United Nations must

28 “Interview with Mr. Salih Muslim,” Washington Kurdish Institute.
be democratic. Meanwhile, Article 21 of the Rojavan constitution links its democratic project to the fulfillment of human rights by declaring that “self-management ensures the human rights.” This is clearly a higher standard than that expressed in the UDHR, the ICCPR, and the ICESCR. The inclusion of these UN documents contributes very little to the PYD’s formal stance on the subject of democracy.

This redundancy once again suggests that parts of the 2014 Charter are intended to court international favor. This suspicion is further supported by Article 96, which states that “this contract should be published in the media.” The artfulness of PYD political strategy, however, does not necessarily compromise the integrity of its constitution.

WOMEN’S RIGHTS

In order to verify the sincerity of the PYD’s commitment to women’s rights, it is important to recall the time-honored roots of this principle in PYD rhetoric and activism. The PYD’s devotion to gender equality stems from a long history of PKK women’s activism and the political theory of Abdullah Ocalan, whose work draws inspiration from theories of rights and oppression lifted from Marxist feminism. Hence Ocalan’s “jineoloji” or “science of women,” a word derived from the Kurdish word “jin” for “women.”

In the New York Times profile “A Dream of Secular Utopia in ISIS’ Backyard,” journalist Wes Enzinna meets an Iraqi Yazidi student in the Rojavan capital of Qamishlo named Sami Saeed Mirza. While living in a refugee camp, Mirza studied Ocalan’s feminist manifesto “Liberating Life.” This text contains many of Ocalan’s key ideas surrounding feminism, exploitation, and democracy.

Much like Karl Marx and Friedrich Engel’s theory of primitive communism, the treatise “Liberating Life: Woman’s Revolution” begins by describing governance in ancient societies. According to Ocalan’s history, prior to 3000 B.C.E. humans lived in “matricentric” societies led by women, whose leadership style and innate emotional intelligence embraced communal living, avoided the accumulation

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29 Enzinna, “A Dream of Secular Utopia.”
of surplus, cared for the natural environment, and avoided structures of hierarchical domination. Around this time, however, humanity experienced the first “sexual rupture.” At approximately 2000 B.C.E., Sumerian society shifted away from a matricentric model towards a warlike patriarchal structure reliant upon the domination of others. The first to be dominated were women, whose “organic, natural, and egalitarian society” constituted a threat to the new order.\(^{30}\) This paved the way for the exploitation of children and men, and then for the construction of the state as a way to ensure the longevity of structures of domination. This phenomenon, which Ocalan calls “housewifisation,” eventually led to the rise of capitalism. “The male monopoly over the life and world of woman,” Ocalan writes, “is not unlike the monopoly chain that capital maintains over society […] it may be more accurate to call women the oldest colonised people who have never become a nation.”\(^{31}\)

Ocalan continues in a Marxist feminist vein when he writes that the family unit is state oppression reproduced on a micro scale, with the state personified in the patriarch. He further declares that women’s unpaid labor as housewives is the fundamental basis of capitalist accumulation. Finally, he critiques “real socialism” for treating the question of women’s rights as a subordinate issue that will be resolved as a consequence of economic liberation. “Women may also be regarded as an oppressed class and nation or an oppressed gender,” Ocalan writes. “Therefore, women’s liberation must assume a key strategic role in the democratic struggle for freedom in Kurdistan.”\(^{32}\) This intersectional approach to class struggle and women’s plight arises principally from the doctrine of Marxist feminism. Ocalan’s unique contribution is the association between these two elements and democracy.

Ocalan’s ideas have historically been put into practice by the Syrian Kurdish women of the PKK. Thousands of women participated in grassroots organizing in the 1980s and 1990s.\(^{33}\) In the 1990s, women went from house to house to convince housewives to join the movement. They did educational work and held women’s assemblies. Many women from what is now Rojava went to southeastern Turkey to join the

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\(^{31}\) Ibid., 77-78.


PKK women’s army, the Free Women’s Union of Kurdistan (YAJK).\textsuperscript{34} In addition, between 2004 and 2012, women were key grassroots organizers. At this time, male activists were targeted for arrest, so the responsibility to do education outreach and hold congresses fell to women.\textsuperscript{35} Women’s active participation in the Kurdish national movement strengthened PKK (and later PYD) feminist ideology, laying the groundwork for women’s participation in Rojavan political and military institutions in the present.

The PYD’s present-day understanding of women’s emancipation is fundamentally structural and political. This is evinced by policies ensuring women’s representation at every level of security and government. The PYD has instituted a system of “co-governance” or hevserok by which every political office falls to one man and one woman equal in power and authority.\textsuperscript{36} The Charter of the Social Contract stipulates that all “institutions, administrations and bodies” must be at minimum 40% female.\textsuperscript{37} In practice, however, women’s level of participation in PYD institutions is often much higher than 40%.

According to Revolution in Rojava: Democratic Autonomy and Women’s Liberation in Syrian Kurdistan:

In Afrin, 65 percent of the civil society, political, and military institutions consist of women […] In the 44 municipal institutions, 55 percent of the workers are women. In the agricultural sector, it’s 56 percent, and in the Kurdish-language institutes and in the teachers’ union, the proportion of women is 70 percent.\textsuperscript{38}

There are also councils reserved specifically for women in every district in the cantons and in Syrian cities with large Kurdish populations.\textsuperscript{39} These focus on domestic violence, forced marriage, and women’s health and economic programs, among other issues. In many cases, they may overrule their mixed-sex counterparts.\textsuperscript{40}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{34} Knapp, Revolution in Rojava, 63.
  \item \textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{36} Knapp, Revolution in Rojava, 69.
  \item \textsuperscript{37} “Under Kurdish Rule,” Human Rights Watch.
  \item \textsuperscript{38} Knapp, Revolution in Rojava, 69.
  \item \textsuperscript{39} Knapp, Revolution in Rojava, 67.
\end{itemize}
Every woman involved in the PYD-led TEV-DEM government is also a member of Kongreya Star, Rojava’s umbrella women’s movement, founded originally in 2005 under the name Yekitiya Star. Kongreya Star’s higher-level committees manage education, public health, the economy, community dispute resolution, and citizen’s defense. Women have spearheaded the formation of countless organizations dedicated to promoting women’s welfare, including Women’s Education and Research Centers, the Young Women’s Movement, the Syrian Women’s Association, the Kurdish Women’s Press Association (RAJIN), and the Foundation of Free Women in Rojava.

In addition, Rojava’s security forces feature strong female representation. There are three women’s defense forces in Rojava: the Women’s Protection Units (YPJ) of the army, which fight ISIS and other external enemies; the Asayisha Jin or Women’s Police, which deals with cases of sexual assault and rape; and civil defense forces attached to communes, which handle neighborhood safety, including cases of domestic violence against women. In addition, women serve in the Asayish or regular elected police.

The PYD style of women’s emancipation differs markedly from the United Nations model. The PYD emphasizes emancipation through women’s empowerment, recognizing that formal equality is of little use if it does not result in women’s practical ability to determine their own fate and the fate of their community through participation in the democratic process. In contrast, the UN model as set down in the UDHR, the ICCPR, the ICESCR, and even the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) emphasizes formal equality and anti-discrimination.

This distinction is clear in the organizations’ different approaches to women’s representation in government. As noted earlier, the PYD Charter of the Social Contract and PYD practice ensure that women constitute at least 40% of every legislative body and are represented alongside a male counterpart at every level of government. In contrast, Articles 7 and 8 of CEDAW merely entitle women to the right

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41 Knapp, *Revolution in Rojava*, 64.
42 Tax, “The Rojava Model.”
43 Knapp, *Revolution in Rojava*, 64-75.
44 Tax, “The Rojava Model.”
45 Enzinna, “A Dream of Secular Utopia.”
to vote, the right to hold elected office, to participate in NGOs, and to represent their government at the international level. These rights enshrine equality under the law without challenging patriarchal systems of dominance that limit women’s willingness and ability to participate in their state’s political life. The primary difference between the PYD and the UN is that the UN merely challenges discrimination. The PYD challenges the underlying system preventing women from achieving agency, which is patriarchy.

DEMOCRATIC RIGHTS

Although Abdullah Ocalan never explicitly refers to democratic rights, he does declare that the right to self-determination is “the basis for the establishment of grassroots democracies” in his essay “War and Peace in Kurdistan: Perspectives on a Political Solution to a Social Question.”\(^{46}\) This allows his audience to conceptualize democratic rights as a kind of sovereign right. Ocalan goes on to explain his ideal model of governance, called democratic confederalism. This system is a “non-state democratic nation organization” that “builds on the self-government of local communities.”\(^{47}\) While it does not seek to challenge state borders outright, it may weaken them by establishing “multinational democratic structures.” In this arrangement, self-governance coexists with governance by a state. The role of the state is to be a “general public authority” where the state prerogative is limited.\(^{48}\)

In practice in Rojava, this looks like an intricate, multilayered system of decentralized governance headed by the constitutionally mandated Legislative Council, Executive Council, and Judicial Council; the TEV-DEM government, which is the highest council in a pyramid of community forums; and the two powerful PYD co-chairs, formerly Saleh Muslim and Asya Abdullah, and as of September 2017, Shahoz Hesen and Ayshe Hiso.\(^{49}\)

\(^{46}\) Öcalan, *The political thought of Abdullah Öcalan*, 19.

\(^{47}\) Öcalan, *The political thought of Abdullah Öcalan*, 19.

\(^{48}\) Ibid., 19-20.

The smallest unit in Rojava’s system of governance is the commune. This is an assembly that consists of 30 to upwards of 400 households, comprising one residential street in urban areas or an entire village in the countryside. Each neighborhood has ten to thirty communes which meet monthly or bimonthly. These mixed-gender forums operate parallel to women’s communes, which deal with women-specific problems such as conflicts in the family. The commune is represented in the next level of government, the neighborhood council, by an elected three- or four-person coordinating board consisting of the two co-chairs (one male, one female) and one or two additional representatives. The members of the coordinating board are elected annually or biannually, and are subject to recall if their performance is unsatisfactory. Unlike the commune as a whole, the coordinating board of the commune meets weekly.

Neighborhood councils represent urban neighborhoods or village communities, which typically comprise seven to ten villages. They consist of the coordinating boards from each of the constituent communes. The neighborhood council elects its own coordinating board and a male co-chair, while the neighborhood-level women’s council elects the female co-chair. The neighborhood council also forms committees to address women, defense, economics, politics, civil society, free society, justice, and ideology, respectively. These committees may be subdivided further; for example, the committee on ideology includes a subcommittee on art and culture.

The next highest unit of government is the district, which typically includes one city and seven to twenty surrounding villages. This is the level at which parties and party politics become relevant. The coordinating board of each neighborhood council represents their neighborhood in the district council, which typically consists of 100 to 200 representatives. The same eight subcommittees are formed, and co-

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51 Ibid., 88.
53 Ibid., 89.
54 Knapp, *Revolution in Rojava*, 89.
55 Ibid., 95.
chairs are elected. The coordinating board of a district council is called the TEV-DEM, and consists of 20 to 30 people.\textsuperscript{56}

The highest level of government is the People’s Council of West Kurdistan (MGRK), made up of all the district councils. The coordinating board for MGRK is also called the TEV-DEM, which in 2011 consisted of 33 members and additional activists. These individuals form the eight committees for all of Rojava. MGRK also has two elected co-chairs.

Parallel to the system of communes and councils are the people’s municipalities, which ensure basic services such as trash removal, provision of drinking water, wastewater treatment, supervision and regulation of building construction, city planning, street organization, and traffic flow.\textsuperscript{57} These people’s municipalities are democratically elected and are accountable to the district council. Finally, each canton has a democratic-autonomous administration (DAA) consisting of executive, legislative, and judicial branches.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 90.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 107.
Former PYD co-chair Saleh Muslim’s appeal to the United States on the grounds of shared commitment to “democratic rights” was clearly intended to appeal to American self-image and to harness the power of human rights rhetoric. Yet in Rojava, this rhetoric is not empty. In fact, Muslim’s use of rights language to describe democracy as procedural justice has the potential to revolutionize the field of human rights. Due in large part to their devotion to the teachings of Abdullah Ocalan, pioneers of innovative government in Rojava have developed a unique conception of human rights that has as its base a struggle against systems of oppression rather than against a single authoritarian state.

58 Knapp, Revolution in Rojava, 92.
Both women’s liberation and democracy are structural enterprises. That is, both can be interpreted as attempts to rewrite oppressive power dynamics – either between women and men, or between sovereigns and subjects. By empowering women and establishing democratic institutions as the foundation of a human rights project, the PYD makes a fortifying contribution to the human rights canon. In all cases involving oppressive social power dynamics distinct from a state’s oppression of the people – i.e., in all cases – the PYD and MGRK government’s emphasis on structural solutions outstrips the ability of traditional human rights to liberate and empower all people. This improves upon the traditional “Western” conception of human rights.
WORKS CITED


