

SYRIA

Kurds fight for self-determination amid civil war

Salih Muslim is co-president of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), a Syria-based Kurdish party fighting for self-determination. The PYD is a sister party of the left-wing Turkish-based Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). The party is the ruling force in the Kurdish areas of Syria and took over three enclaves with Kurdish majorities in 2012.

The PYD is part of the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change (NBC), an alliance of left-wing opposition groups including the PYD, 12 smaller (mainly Arabic) parties and independent political activists. It has the position of negotiating with the ruling regime of Bashar al-Assad.

This position is strongly criticised by other parts of the Syrian opposition, in particular Islamic groups that accuse it of being a front for the regime. The NBC favours non-violent resistance against the regime. It also strongly opposes any international military intervention.

In an interview with Austria-based political scientist *Thomas Schmidinger*, Salih Muslim speaks about the project of Kurdish self-rule in Syria amid the civil war between the Assad regime and opposition. A longer version can be read at Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal.

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What does your party fight for?

We struggle for democratic self-rule within Syria, which is a specific sort of autonomy. We want democratic rights and a constitutional recognition of the Kurds.

We do not want to split from Syria and we do not want a Kurdish nation state. We also presented that concept to the NBC and the Arab parties there agreed with us on that.

But you know, nothing is settled and if you talk about autonomy each country has different forms of autonomies and federal systems. There are different models and we will see what model works best for Syria.

We want to rule ourselves. The name is not important, but it should be according to human rights and democracy.

We have managed self-rule for more than one year now and we still have a lot of difficulties. We are under pressure from a lot of different forces. It is also a problem that everybody says that the "PYD is doing this and that", but we are not ruling alone.

Until now there are no democratically legitimised structures in the region of Kurdish self-rule. Will there be elections soon?



Syrian Kurds protest last year for self-determination in the face of the Syrian civil war.

We really do not want to rule alone and we are preparing for elections in the areas of our control. We want other parties to join us. In fact both Kurdish councils, the Kurdish National Council [an alliance of most of the non-PYD Kurdish parties of Syria, some with close relations to the Kurdish parties in Iraq] and the People's Council of West Kurdistan [the PYD's self-rule structures] agreed to do it that way.

There is a committee for the preparation of elections. The electoral law should be ready soon. So we hope that we can vote soon.

In the past months there have been heavy conflicts between your party and some other Kurdish parties, especially the Azadi Party and the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria (the sister party of the ruling party in Iraqi Kurdistan). Will these parties take part in elections?

Some parties cooperate with us, but these two parties don't. They are welcome to run in the elections, but until now they refuse to.

They always attack and criticise us. They say the militias of the PYD are doing this and that, but they do not realise that these are not our militias. They are the Kurdish militias.

Yes, our party founded the Asiash [Kurdish security forces] and the People's Defence Forces [YPG, Kurdish army] because we realised it was needed. But that does not mean they are forces of our political party. We want a single armed force of the Kurds and we reject the idea of party militias.

In November, you officially declared self-rule of the Kurds

in Syria. How did the regime react?

There were different reactions from the side of the regime. But let me also talk about the opposition. Both the regime and many parts of the so-called opposition accuse us of being separatists. Both do not want to give us our right to self-rule. So we have to fight for it against both the regime and the armed opposition.

From the start, we coordinated with the secular left-wing opposition. We established the NBC and we want to cooperate with these opposition forces who accept our demands, but not with the Islamists and other anti-democratic forces.

Could you imagine Assad staying in power?

We have always said Assad has to leave. This is still our position. We want a negotiated peace but we can't imagine that he stays in power.

We really need an end of the regime and a new democratic start. But it is not only a personal question of Assad. The problem is not the person, but the regime.

Now there are many Alawis who fear that they could become victims of vengeance if Assad leaves. So it is a much larger problem now. So we have to negotiate to stop the bloodshed and change the system.

Could the idea of a regional self-rule also be a model for other minorities in Syria, the Alawis for example?

The Alawis are a different case because they are a religious and not an ethnic group. But

the model of self-rule could be a model for the whole Middle East. Decentralised self-rule could be model for all of us.

About 500,000 internally displaced persons from all over Syria are at the moment in Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan). What is the situation for these IDPs from regions destroyed by the civil war?

The lack of diesel fuel has been solved. People are using diesel for heat and last winter they did not have any. But concerning food and other important supplies, the situation is still very problematic. It is already difficult for people living in our areas and it is much harder for the refugees.

There is still no international help at all. The big NGOs are not present at all and the International Red Cross is cooperating with the Syrian Red Crescent. But the Syrian Red Crescent is an Arab organisation cooperating with the regime, not with us.

The regime did not completely withdraw from Rojava. It still controls the Qamishli airport. If the Syrian Red Crescent has anything to offer, they are working with the officials from the regime, not us.

In the past few months, the regime's presence in the capital, Rojava, has definitely become stronger. On November 14, supporters of Assad's Baath Party held a protest in Qamishli and shouted their slogan: "We sacrifice our blood and our soul for you Bashar." The regime's security forces have returned. They have arrested several Kurdish activists. Who controls the capital, the Kurds or the regime?

As I told you, the regime never disappeared. The situation in the city of Qamishli is very complex. As well as the airport, some Arab districts of the city are under regime control.

There is an Arab tribe in Qamishli called Tai, with about 35,000 members, who are all still supporting the regime. In their parts of the town, the regime is still present. We do not control their districts. The Baath Party rally was in their quarter.

Our main goal is to prevent ethnic conflict. We believe in the brotherhood between peoples. We don't want fights between Kurds and Arabs. And because we don't want to fight with the Tai tribe, the situation in Qamishli is complicated.

We wish to prevent a situation like in Sere Kaniye, where we had a war in that city. To prevent that, we have to find a form of co-existence with the Arab tribes.

The situation in al-Hasaka is even more difficult. We control the Kurdish quarters, a part of the Arab quarter is controlled by the regime and a part by the Islamist opposition. In such a situation, we can only try to prevent fighting inside the cities.

In Qamishli and in most of the towns of the east of Syrian Kurdistan there are also many Syrian-Aramaic and Armenian Christians. Who controls their quarters?

The Christians are on our side. Their quarters are defended by our soldiers. There are also Christians fighting with us. In Rojava, there is no conflict between Muslim Kurds and Christians.

What about other Kurdish parties? In the past few months, some of the other Kurdish groups criticised the PYD for installing an authoritarian regime and for cooperating with Assad.

These are the same accusations we hear from Turkey and the Islamist groups. I want to insist that the Asiash and the YPG are not the armed forces of our party, but of the Kurdish self-rule.

Our enemies always present stories that it is the fault of our party if somebody gets arrested. If some criminal gets arrested, they always accuse the PYD of kidnapping him. So many of these stories are told by Kurdish parties who are cooperating with Turkey or with Massoud Barzani [president of the Kurdistan region of Iraq].

If these parties organise peaceful protests, and if they give the Asiash the information in advance where they want to demonstrate, we assure you that they definitely have the right for peaceful protests. ■