

Interview with Eren Keskin for the Magazine of Amnesty UK, mid-November 2016

1. Can you tell us briefly about your background? Where were you born and where did you grow up? What type of family environment did you grow up in? What was your education like?

My father is Kurdish and he is from Sivas, and my mother is originally Circassian, from Istanbul. I am from an educated family. My father is a university graduate. My grandmother is a chemical engineer and she was one of the first women university graduates at that time. One of my grandfathers is a lawyer, the other is an architect. So overall, I grew up in a forward-thinking and educated family. Bearing in mind the times, I had an independent childhood.

In my high school years, I had left wing views and took part in organisations with similar ideas. At university, I gained a place at law school. In that period, the September 12 1982 military coup took place. Our school was under fascist occupation: Revolutionary, progressive and democratic students were prevented from coming into the school by nationalist students. I therefore could not go to the university very much during my first year. But later on, the environment at school became more liberated and we started to go. I graduated from the school with high grades.

2. Can you tell us how your passion for human rights started? Why have you decided to be active outside the courts - for instance to take part in the [Turkish] Human Rights Association (IHD)?

During those years, I started thinking that political opposition organisations also had militarist structures and that women were not that free in these political organisations. In the early days of my career as a lawyer, I got to know the work of the Human Rights Association. I felt closer to the Human Rights Association than to politics and I felt more suited to the human rights struggle. Because there are less hierarchical relationships, women are relatively free, and no one imposes organisational identity on anyone in the field of human rights.. I began to take on political cases and I started to help tortured people. I continued my struggle within the Human Rights Association.

3. How did you decide to become a lawyer?

I had thought about being a lawyer as a child. However my thoughts became more definite after the execution of those like Deniz Gezmiş . In my early teens, I was very much affected by the trial and execution of those three young people and their being declared as traitors because of their views. My whole family was affected by this and then I decided I definitely wanted to become a lawyer at that time. I identified with being a lawyer so much so that my friends used to call me “the lawyer” at the secondary and high school.

4. At the beginning of your career as a lawyer, which fundamental human rights violations were your priorities?

I started practicing law immediately after the 12 September military coup. The Human Rights Association was the first non-governmental organisation established after the 12 September military coup. For this reason, when we first started there were many detained people and the Human Rights Association was dealing with the rights of those in detention... the torture they experienced, prison conditions and fair trial concerns...

The problem grew even further at the same time as the beginning of the armed struggle of the Kurdish movement. The Kurdish issue had become more visible, and huge human rights violations started to occur in the region. Then we started a campaign for a democratic solution to the Kurdish problem. However, the Human Rights Association is not an association that only deals with prisons, leftists and Kurds. Our struggle was for human rights in all their aspects, including the dismissal of employees, women subjected to domestic violence and child labour. Of course, our work environment in general was an environment in which everyone was afraid to say so much as one word. The Kurdish issue was the biggest problem of the '90s and we witnessed enormous human rights violations. Even to this day, anything written about the issue relies on IHD reports.

5. Identifying human rights violations led to numerous attempts to silence you. Among these there were prosecutions, imprisonments, death threats and attempted murder. Are these what a human rights lawyer often experiences? Or do you think you were targeted specifically because you were active and voiced your opposition?

In those years, there were no institutions visiting Kurdistan, apart from the IHD. We investigated the burning of villages, state-sanctioned "Kontrgerilla" killings and enforced disappearances, meaning that we were all under enormous pressure. I also had my fair share of pressure. Many of our friends were killed; both organisers and members of the Human Rights Association, as well as a large number of journalists, were killed. During this time, we worked in great despair and great solitude. Some people would not even want to come near us, as people were scared of being arraigned. This was the kind of environment we worked in. For this reason, we all suffered and felt oppressed. I was subjected to an armed attack twice, in 1994 and 2001, and I was lucky that I did not die, but many of our friends have died. In 1995 I was imprisoned and barred from my profession for a year [just] for writing the word "Kurdistan" in an article. Although it was constantly repressed, our struggle still continues.

I think states like Turkey, which have a militarist and totalitarian infrastructure, always prefer to have an armed group in opposition to them.

This is because, when in conflict with an armed opposition, there can always be things which the government uses to justify their actions. But I think our human rights struggle puts the government in a difficult position. They don't have many answers for us. People talk about human right violations knowing that they are risking their lives, pointing out wrong doings and violations. The [Turkish] state is extremely uncomfortable with this.

6. How does the situation and the pressure that you are under affect you and your family? Can you give us examples? Have you ever thought of giving up defending human rights and living a quiet life? How do you stand all this?

What upsets me most is my family being upset. But my family have always believed that what I do is right and stood by me. Their opinion is similar to mine and this has always been a comforting factor to me. But, of course, every adverse situation I experienced affected them too. Recently, in August 2016, my home was raided because of the closure of Özgür Gündem newspaper, as I was a voluntary editor-in-chief of the paper. My 85-year-old mother was confronted with policemen wearing snow masks and was so

scared that she could not speak at all for 15 days. Of course, I was very upset that this happened to my mother because of me. But on the other hand, many mothers experience the funerals of their children, and there are people experiencing a lot more oppression than us.

The question that we are frequently asked is: 'Do you never get fed up or say "let me just be comfortable"? I've genuinely never felt anything like that. Besides, I would not be in this field if I felt this way. After a while, this becomes a way of life. I think the same thing applies to anyone working in the field of human rights, you cannot imagine any other life.

7. Where were you when you heard the news of the attempted coup?

- How did you hear about it?

- What was your first reaction?

I was at home at the time. I thought everywhere was being bombed. Planes were passing over us. Frankly, I thought that anything could happen in Turkey but I was not expecting a coup attempt of this kind to happen. Everyone was happy as an attempted coup was stopped, but after that we had a real "coup" [the word in Turkish for coup is also a hit or strike]. What is happening after the coup is that the situation is making people say "perhaps if the coup had been successful, we wouldn't be experiencing anything so different than now". The state of emergency was declared after the military coup and terrible human rights violations started. So the government got into a disagreement with the group that they were working with about the governance of the country, and they declared a state of emergency against them. In reality though, this was declared against all the opposition. At present, so many people have been arrested, so many journalists are imprisoned, so many TV channels, newspapers have been closed down. They haven't left any opposition voice. We lived through the 1980 coup, and now so many years have passed...what is happening now is inexplicable.

I have never experienced such a hopeless time for the defence of human rights.

Really we are all in a very bad state. Before, there was a judiciary that we weren't happy with, we called it a judiciary that was biased in favour of militarism, but even then different opinions were allowed within it. There were all kinds of judges, prosecutors, but now everything is uniform. All judges and prosecutors are like Tayyip Erdoğan. We have no trust in the justice system or in anything. Everyone is wondering, 'What might happen to me tomorrow?' and I feel like that as well. We really do live in a very desperate time.

8. What do you think the government wants to achieve with its strong response [against] the coup?

A political genocide is taking place. For example, yesterday, the co-mayors of Diyarbakir were detained. Maybe tomorrow MPs will be detained, but obviously, this type of politics fuels civil wars. I think Tayyip Erdoğan is aware that he is not supported in any way by international forces. Therefore, he is aiming to strengthen his internal power. There are many who are extremely sympathetic to this, a population that is increasingly, becoming more nationalist, even racist and bigoted, and he relies on the power of this population. Therefore, we, the Kurds, and in general all critical voices, are under a major attack. His anger and international isolation are important elements.

Because he is extremely worried about a state of Kurdistan being established. The Kurdish movement is being legitimised by international forces, which makes him very uncomfortable.

When all this comes together, it is a case of increasing authoritarianism. I think we are in a period of a 'one-man' mentality, in other words, one man is disregarding everyone, everything and all kinds of thought in order to build his own power.

9. How does this affect you and your colleagues- for example journalists? Why is the media important, and why do you think the media is targeted?

The only reason the journalists are targeted is because the media is the only gateway to the public. People hear about what is happening by reading newspapers and watching television. When we look at all the media that has been closed and is not part of the Fethullah Gülen operation: Özgür Gündem, IMC TV, and even a children's TV channel broadcasting in Kurdish have all been shut down...

I think the reason for all this is the human rights violations in the [Kurdish] region. The current human rights violations exceed the level of violations which took place even in the 1990s. Cities were destroyed and no one knows about it. People were burned to death, but no one is aware of this. The only media channels which could broadcast those incidents were Kurdish media and social media. Access to these channels was blocked. No one here could access them through the internet.

In the name of combating a terrorist organisation, they closed all these media organisations. They have confiscated and transferred all their belongings to the treasury with no order from any court whatsoever. They do all this through decrees and there is no right of appeal. They say there is a state of emergency; you cannot make a legal appeal. Even though the European Convention on Human Rights is suspended, torture and the absolute prohibition of the right to live cannot be subject to this suspension or suspended in any way, but in practice [everything] is on hold for the moment.

10. What do you think the most important human rights issues in Turkey are today? Is anything changing? [If so] What is changing?

I think since the Republic of Turkey was established, it has always been an empire of fear. We are talking about a state that was founded solely on Sunni Muslim and Turkish identity, and on a mass genocide; a state where nobody talks about these issues. There have always been barriers against freedom of thought and expression, but we tend not to believe that it can still happen in this day and age. Although social media lifted all the limits, we are still prosecuted because of our opinions.

Currently, the worst human rights violation in Turkey in my opinion is the violation of freedom of thought and expression. Because, if you cannot express your opinion about issues, it is not possible to do anything about them. It means that you are nothing. Currently, almost all of us are destroyed. We cannot criticise anything, we cannot talk and we cannot ask questions, we cannot go out on the street and make a press statement, everything is taken from us. Other than that, there are violations of the right

to life, torture, and prison conditions. I do not think saying 'there was a better time period in Turkey' is right because it has always been bad, but there is a difference now- We were being prosecuted because of our views in the '90s. When an investigation opened, we would give our statement, a lawsuit would be filed, we would go to court, the case would continue, we would get a penalty and before the judgment would be finalised we would go to the Supreme Court. When the final verdict was passed on us we would then be sent to prison. But now people are detained when they make go [to the prosecutor] to give their statement. Pre-trial detention is now a sanction. There should not be pre-trial detention in each case. If there is no suspicion of them absconding or tampering with evidence, there should not be pre-trial detention. Despite this, they are detaining everyone. This scares many people, everyone is afraid of being placed in pre-trial detention. I think the biggest difference from before is that obtaining an order for pre-trial detention is extremely easy.

11. How has European Union human rights policy affected Turkey?

There is inadequate internal public support for human rights, therefore we look for support from the outside.

At the beginning, the process of joining the European Union had a positive effect on Turkey because the current president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the government which he led did care about the European Union at the time. But, Tayyip Erdoğan does not currently care about the European Union or America or at least he acts as though none of them affects him. I think that the European Union accession process is extremely important for the democratisation of Turkey. But in the meantime, I think we need to criticise the European Union because Turkey has signed many international agreements with European states but is not fulfilling any of its obligations at the moment. I do not think that sufficient control and democratic pressure have been applied to Turkey.

12. As a human rights defender, what are your most important achievements?

I think the most important achievement has been opening a debate about the issue of militarism, because this issue was never talked about before in Turkey. Major progress has also been made by women human rights defenders within the women's movement. Progress has also been made to counter violence towards women. For example, the movement called Saturday Mothers, which campaigns for those who have gone missing in custody, was initiated by IHD. This movement has been very successful and influential. It showed the whole world that being prosecuted due to one's views is a crime. This is an indication of success on one side, on the other side it is a sign of victimisation. Not everything done against torture achieved the results we expected. This was not because of our failures but because of the barriers we faced.

13. What are the most serious challenges?

First of all, you do not feel free anywhere, even in your own home and on the streets. You are at risk of being killed or attacked at any time. This is because so many threats come through social media and you understand from the threats that you are being followed very closely. I did not feel this unsafe, even in the 90s. We live in very complicated times. The situation is extremely complex and no one knows what they are doing. They turned everyone into a

militant and civilians are being armed. My colleagues' and my biggest concern is this and its effect on the right to life. For example, I cannot go out alone on the streets in the evenings after dark. You just automatically discipline yourself and apply limits to your own life.

14. How can Amnesty International members support human rights defenders in Turkey?

There is always international solidarity from human rights organisations for Turkey and Amnesty International is at the forefront. For instance, they made urgent action calls in the '90s. We saw these as life saviours. We have always found solidarity from Amnesty International very significant, even now. Personally, as a human rights activist I still believe this. Public opinion on human rights is extremely weak in Turkey because people have been oppressed and have a strong belief in the official ideology. There isn't strong internal public support for holding the government to account. Therefore solidarity from international human right organisations is very important for us.

Nowadays, I think the most important barrier is the barrier to freedom of expression. It's important to monitor trials and publish regular reports about them Amnesty International is already doing this but there is maybe a need for more of this as people really are in a very difficult situation. Rather than emptying the prisons they are building new prisons.

There are currently 122 separate prosecutions against me. I'm prohibited from leaving the country, and every week I have to report to a police station. If there is no change in the current law, I will be in prison for life. I have been charged because of articles which are not even written by me but written by others [Eren is being charged for articles written by Ozgur Gundem while she was Editor-in-Chief]. Currently the state has no intention to change the laws. Some convictions would be finalised within 7-8 months at the most. I have 18 cases at the Supreme Court of Appeals. For instance, I have now been given 5 years' imprisonment and this might even be finalised [by the Supreme Court] by tomorrow. I would be in prison when that happens. If all the cases are finalised, I will definitely be in prison at least for 60-70 years although I have not done anything. We are all really in a very difficult situation right now.