

VOICES FROM THE SOUTH



THE
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Rojava: An experiment for a future democratic and peaceful Syria?

In the northern parts of Syria, the autonomous region known as Rojava (also known as the Democratic Administration of North Syria) has emerged as an experiment in peace, co-operation, and progressive political change in the Middle East. Since their declaration of their autonomy in 2014, the inhabitants of Rojava (primarily Kurds, along with Arabs, Assyrians, Armenians and Yezidis living in the area) are in the process of building a society based on gender equality, economic cooperation, and grassroots based direct democracy. The opening lines of their “Social Contract” and charter reads: “In pursuit of freedom, justice, dignity and democracy and led by principles of equality and environmental sustainability, the Charter proclaims a new social contract, based upon mutual and peaceful coexistence and understanding between all strands of society.”

In this month’s “Voices from the South”, Ms. Sinam Mohammed, Foreign Representative for the Democratic Self-Rule Administration of Rojava, details this democratic society movement that is unfolding in northern Syria - a movement that consists of 50% female and 50% male leadership. The text partially consists of excerpts from her speech at the plenary on “Systemic Alternatives across borders - Thinking backwards from Utopia,” which was held at the EDGE Funders Alliance conference in Barcelona in April 2017.

Founded in 1985, the Karibu Foundation is an independent foundation that supports voices from the Global South that provide alternatives to the dominant paradigms of power, distribution, and development.

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By Sinam Mohammed

I would like to start by giving you a presentation of what has happened in Syria. When the “People’s Spring” (the term I prefer to use over the “Arab Spring”, as the people of Syria are not all Arab) began in 2011,

the so-called “opposition” wanted to just tear down the dictator Assad regime, and replace it with themselves. We could get a new centralised strong system, only with different people.

In the North of Syria, however, as a Kurdish people, we began a movement – the “Democratic Society Movement” – which I was the co-founder and co-president of this movement in 2011. We believed in

a different way, and we had a different strategy. Our strategy is to make a better life society. To democratize the society. To change the mentality of a democratic society.

We started first to organize our own Kurdish people and society. As you know, if any organization or movement is not well organized, it will not be a real movement. We started to mobilize and organize our society and our people. From the villages to the cities, we started to organize them in different ways around education, women, economy, defense. We built our own defensive units – some could be described as both women units and people protection units. These units were ready to protect our society and our people.

Yet in northern Syria, we are multi-national and multi-religious society. We started with the Kurdish

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society, but we realized that we have been living together with people of other national and religious identities for over 1000 years. We have to also share with them in protection and in building a new society. If you are our neighbours living peacefully, then we should live peacefully together.

From this belief, we started to get in contact with all the minorities, nations, religious groups living in our area. This way, we could build with each other a “Social Contract” – a new constitution for the people. All of us - Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Arameans, Turkmen, Armenians - came together to agree upon this social contract.

The Social Contract is so special for many reasons. First, it is written in three official languages. This is the first time in the history of Syria that the different peoples have their languages officially acknowledged: Arabic, Kurdish, and Aramaic. Second, it places focus on equal genders. Women have the rights to equal participation in all fields of life: political, social, economic, cultural, and more. Third, the social contract secured a freedom of faith. And fourth, it noted that all the people have equal rights.

We also built three cantons who approved the Social Contract: namely Afrin Canton, Jazira Canton and Kobani Canton. Each canton has local governments and council. Legislative councils, executive council, judicial council. Each of these councils are being led by all groups together without differentiation.

All national or religious groups are represented with 50% women in all institutions. In our parliament, we have 50% of both genders. In each institution, we have 50% women sharing responsibilities. And then we also have co-presidencies. Man and women sharing the co-president. We always had to hear about “Mr. President, Mr. President, Mr. President.” But in Rojava, we hear “Mrs. and Mr. President”.

All cantons are aiming to build what we call ‘real democracy’. Not a false one, but built from the bottom to the top. This means we start at the grassroots level, and build councils of the people. Each council consists of sufficient number of elected members according to the population. 60% of the representative are directly elected by people, and 40% are elected by components, groups, social segments. The councils of the village, neighborhood, town, region, and district are formed by representative who are democratically elected within their residence boundary, by ethnic religion, cultural, groups social segments or communes.

In Syria, we know that the bonds between the various peoples and religions have been damaged and fighting continues. To rebuild the social fabric of the nation, people must unite across various lines. Administrations and regions should be created similar to the region of Rojava and northern Syria as a way forward for the whole country. In northern Syria, the citizens from various background have agreed to rule themselves, and they hope for the experiment can be implemented in the rest of the country.

Mrs. Sinam Mohamad (born in Damascus, Syria) is the Foreign Representative for the Democratic Self-Rule Administration of Rojava, located in the liberated areas of north- and northeastern Syrian Kurdistan. She has previously served as the Co-President of the People’s Council of Rojava, the main political body of Rojava that was founded in 2011 during the Syrian revolution. Sinam is also a member of the Kurdish Supreme Committee in Rojava, part of the leadership of the Democratic Society Movement (known as Tev-Dem in Kurdish), and is involved in the administration of the Star Union of Women (a Rojava organization that advocates for women’s rights). She holds a degree in English Literature from the University of Aleppo.

Photo credit:
Page 1: Design of the new parliament and surrounding park in the autonomous region of Rojava (Source: New World Summit, 2015)
Page 2: Sinam Mohamed speaks at the EDGE Funders Alliance Conference in Barcelona in April 2017. Photo: T. Hanger

