

The Show Trial of Abdullah Ocalan in Turkey

What lies behind the behaviour of the PKK leader?

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8 June 1999

"When we were finished with them they were just empty human shells. Nothing was left apart from remorse about what they had done and love for Big Brother." (George Orwell, 1984)

The show trial of Abdullah "Apo" Ocalan, the leader of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), which began on May 31 in front of a Turkish state security court, is assuming increasingly repulsive and bizarre forms.

Ocalan astonished both his supporters and opponents with his remorseful attitude. Although his lawyers continue to be threatened and harassed, resulting in their absence from the court on the fourth day of the trial, the PKK leader made no attempt to question the legitimacy of the trial. Instead he provided extensive testimony.

He assured the court that he had been well treated in the course of his imprisonment and had not been subjected to any form of pressure or torture. He had no special wishes with regard to his imprisonment or trial. He expressly distanced himself from his legal representative in Europe, Brigitte Böhler. The Turkish news agency *Anadolu* quoted Ocalan saying, "This person is not my lawyer and not my representative."

He made an offer of collaboration to the Turkish state. He commended the state's respect for freedom of opinion and political liberty, the only deficit being its failure to recognise the cultural rights and language of the Kurdish People. He accepted that he had to be punished according to Turkish Laws, but called nevertheless for an amnesty for himself and his organisation. He was ready to serve the "democratic republic". He was in a position to bring the PKK fighters out of the mountains within a period of three months. He called upon his men to lay down their arms: "Give up fighting against the democratic state. Let this rebellion be the last of the Kurdish people."

Ocalan described the Turkish soldiers who had fallen in the struggle against the PKK as "martyrs" and conveyed his express apologies to their relatives.

Apo has gone so far as to denounce his own followers. He had opponents inside the PKK. It was quite "possible" that PKK members were involved in dealing drugs, in the murder of civilians and the murder of the Swedish Prime Minister Olaf Palme, but he knew nothing of these things. Since the beginning of the 1990s his main concern had been to make peace with the state. To this end he had declared a halt to hostilities on the part of the PKK in 1993. The cease-fire was broken and fighting resumed not by him, but on the sole initiative of his deputy, Semdin Sakik, recently condemned to death by a Turkish court.

Ocalan also testified against those neighbouring countries of Turkey which supported or are presumed to have supported the PKK. Syria, Iran and Greece supplied the PKK with weapons and the PKK had its

own training camps in Greece and the Greek part of Cyprus, as well as hospital facilities in Iran. The Kurdish leader directed his fire in particular against Greece, which already has an extremely tense relationship with Turkey. According to Apo, Greece was responsible for repeatedly re-igniting the conflict between Turkey and the Kurds. He declared that the Greek prime minister Simitis had ordered his death because, as leader of the separatists, he was too conciliatory.

Ocalan's behaviour in court was like a cold shower for his supporters and defenders. Many supporters of the PKK have risked their own safety and even their lives to protest against the outrageous treatment of their idol. And many who agree neither with the aims nor the methods of the PKK have defended Ocalan in order to protest the brutal methods employed by the Turkish state against the Kurdish minority. They all expected that Ocalan would at least defy the court and denounce the crimes of the Turkish state against the Kurdish people.

He can hardly expect his subservience to save him from the death penalty—quite the opposite. The nationalist Turkish media is wallowing in an orgy of triumphalism. "Traitor and Coward" sneered the popular newspaper *Sabah*, and *Hurriyet* maliciously ran the headline: "He is singing like a blackbird".

It goes without saying that, under circumstances where the Turkish parliament is dominated by raging chauvinism and the fascists of the Grey Wolves (MHP), any meaningful democratic reforms or compromises by the state on the Kurdish question are more remote than ever.

Initial estimates were that the trial would last two months, but now the aim is to quickly bring it to a close. On the fourth day the presiding judge, in a surprise move, advised the defence and prosecution attorneys to prepare their closing statements. According to a lawyer connected to the prosecution the verdict could be given on the 11th of June, just ten days after the start of the trial.

With the Kosovo war, the ruling layers in Turkey sense they have the singular chance to establish themselves as a major regional power in a strategic alliance with the US. The country occupies a key position in relation to the two regions, the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea, which have the largest deposits of oil in the world. The Kurds are in the way. The Turkish government, therefore, can hardly afford to pass up what it sees as a chance to once and for all rid itself, through intimidation and humiliation, of the Kurdish problem. This is the aim of the show trial against Ocalan and, in this respect, his attitude of repentance suits the government perfectly.

How can this behaviour be explained?

Wolfgang Koydl in the *Süddeutschen Zeitung* sees "the wretched performance of a man who is just out to save his own skin". Ocalan, according to Koydl, was always "a coward attached to the finer things

in life.” This merely echoes the line of the nationalist Turkish press—slandering a prisoner who is unable to defend himself. The real reasons for Ocalan's behaviour are more varied and complex.

In the first place all reports from the courtroom, including those in the form of television pictures, must be examined extremely carefully. Even though the Turkish judiciary has made certain concessions in deference to world public opinion, the trial on the prison island of Imrali remains a grotesque caricature of a fair and public trial.

Ocalan sits in a glass cage separated from his lawyers, most of whom have resigned from the case in protest against their unceasing harassment. The news coverage of the trial is limited. Only 20 foreign correspondents per day are allowed to attend; pro-Kurdish newspapers are excluded. Pictures can only be transmitted by the Turkish state television channel TRT, which shows the film in short clips after editing. That the images transmitted have been carefully selected and censored goes without saying.

Secondly—notwithstanding many historical and political differences—the appearance of Ocalan calls to mind the confessions delivered during the Moscow Trials of 1936-37. Ocalan appears, so concedes Koydl in his report, “frightened and clearly emaciated... [His] words to the tribunal are faltering, as if he were required to remember a text by heart.”

There can be little doubt that Ocalan, who was isolated for nearly 100 days in the hands of his tormentors, has been carefully “prepared” for the trial. As experts know, solitary confinement affects the will and consciousness of a prisoner dramatically. At the same time, it is very likely that he has been subjected to drugs. The pictures of the strange tottering man, transmitted immediately after his arrest, can hardly be interpreted in a different way. And since Stalin, the medical world has made substantial progress in the development of consciousness-altering drugs.

Nevertheless, psychological and physical torture alone can explain Ocalan's behaviour no more exhaustively than they could explain the fantastic and hardly believable confessions which Stalin extracted from his victims 60 years ago. At that time the demoralisation of the accused, who had made compromises for years and manoeuvred themselves into a hopeless dead end, played a much more important role.

From this standpoint there is a direct connection between Ocalan's conduct and the failure of the political perspective of the PKK. This is confirmed by the fact that the PKK leadership has guardedly supported Ocalan's offer of collaboration with the Turkish state.

According to a report from the news agency DEM, which is close to the PKK, the leadership has acknowledged this offer as a “mature, respectable and responsible step”. The initiative of Ocalan was that “worthy of a great fighter”. The PKK leadership threatened, however, to continue with the armed struggle should the state reject the offer. Notwithstanding such official statements, the PKK itself is apparently split on the question of Ocalan's offer of collaboration.

The original perspective of the PKK, to secure its own state for the Kurds through the armed struggle, was always dependent on the support, or at least tolerance, of regional powers such as Syria, Iran and, for a time, Iraq. So long as relations in the region were stamped by the east-west conflict, the PKK had a certain amount of room for manoeuvre.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Gulf War and the growing influence of US imperialism in the region, the movement became increasingly isolated. Three one-sided cease fires—1993, 1995 and 1998—and the public relinquishment of the demand for an

independent Kurdish state amounted to admissions that the PKK was not in a position to win militarily.

While other national movements such as the PLO and the ANC dumped their anti-imperialist rhetoric and made their pilgrimages to Washington, the PKK was unable to take this path. The US regarded Turkey as an irreplaceable pillar on the eastern flank of NATO. It was not prepared to jeopardise its good relations with the Turkish military on account of the Kurds.

For this reason the PKK made increasingly desperate appeals to the EU and, in particular, its “left” governments to exert pressure on Turkey. With the refusal of the European governments to even accept Ocalan as a defendant in court, and his subsequent abduction from the Greek embassy in Nairobi in the middle of February, it became painfully evident that this political path had failed.

A week after Ocalan's capture, one of his companions recalled for *Der Spiegel* magazine the time they spent in the embassy: “We pleaded with Ocalan not to go. But Ocalan said, ‘The house is surrounded, I do not have the right to die, I am not master of my own will.’ The Greek ambassador said, ‘If you really do not want to leave the residence, then you can stay.’ Ocalan left because he knew there was no other choice. From the first day in Kenya he said, ‘We are the hands of the C.I.A.’... As we arrived at the airport, Ocalan's car was standing with its doors open to his plane, and then our car drove off, taking us in another direction. At that moment we knew it was all over.”

All that remains for the PKK is the search for peace at any price with the Turkish state. That is the political logic of Ocalan's tragic behaviour in court.

This does not change the character of the trial. It is a political trial to enable the Turkish state to wash its hands of the blood shed in its persecution of the Kurds, while at the same time strengthening its apparatus for future struggles with the working class—Kurdish and Turkish. It is a caricature of a legal process. It must be decisively rejected and the conviction and execution of Ocalan opposed.



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