

Turkish cinema great Kadir Inanir (1949-2026)

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Kadir Inanir, one of Turkish cinema’s best-known actors, died in Istanbul on the evening of June 26, at the age of 77, of multiple organ failure caused by advanced-stage lung cancer. He was hospitalized in mid-May with pneumonia and treated in intensive care for weeks.

The actor’s death plunged millions into mourning. He was buried in Istanbul on June 28 in a ceremony attended by large crowds.

Although Inanir began his career as a handsome leading man in melodramas, he became one of the most widely popular representatives of a generation of artists who—shaped by the political atmosphere and social struggles of the 1970s—turned toward the oppressed and the working masses.

In Türkiye, as throughout the world, the late 1960s and the 1970s were marked by the rise of mass struggles of the working class and the radicalization of youth. Workers in factories and workplaces, students in the universities and poor peasants in the countryside mobilized behind social and democratic demands and against imperialist aggression. The political influence of various radical-left organizations—linked to Stalinism, Maoism and Castroism—was growing, although these rested more on the urban and rural poor than on the working class.

Kadir Inanir was very much a child of these turbulent years. He was born on April 15, 1949, in the Fatsa district of Ordu, a city on the Black Sea, the youngest child of a large, poor family. He was educated as a boarder at Istanbul’s Haydarpa?a High School. A few years earlier, leaders of the youth movement known as the “’68 generation”—among them Deniz Gezmi? and Mahir Çayan—had graduated from the same school.

Gezmi?, Hüseyin ?nan and Yusuf Aslan, founders of the People’s Liberation Army of Türkiye (THKO), were captured after the military memorandum of March 12, 1971, and hanged on May 6, 1972. Çayan, a founder of the People’s Liberation Party-Front of Türkiye (THKP-C), and his comrades—demanding that these executions be halted—kidnapped three technicians working at NATO’s Ünye Radar Station, one Canadian and two British. They were massacred on March 30, 1972, when the army launched a heavily armed assault on the house in K?z?ldere where they had been surrounded.

In these years, when Inanir took his first steps as an actor, Türkiye was being shaken by the class struggle. On June 15–16, 1970, more than 100,000 workers launched a revolt that paralyzed Istanbul and Kocaeli against a law targeting D?SK, the militant trade-union confederation founded in 1967 through a movement from below. Attending university during these turbulent years, Inanir graduated from the Istanbul School of Journalism in 1973.

During the 1970s, as Inanir became a household name, the class struggle continued to escalate. In 1977, in the Taksim Square massacre that went down in history as “Bloody May Day,” weapons were fired at hundreds of thousands of workers. Dozens of working people were killed, and the perpetrators were never found or brought to trial.

Inanir’s home district of Fatsa, meanwhile, became the stage for one of

the most striking left-wing local experiences of the period. The Revolutionary Path (Devrimci Yol) movement, which came out of the THKP-C tradition, had grown in influence in the region. Fikri Sönmez, widely known as Terzi Fikri (“Fikri the Tailor”), was elected mayor as an independent candidate at the end of 1979 and began to govern the district through people’s committees. This nine-month experiment was crushed on July 11, 1980—two months before the NATO-backed coup of September 12, 1980—by a “Point Operation” carried out with assault boats and tank units. Sönmez died in 1985 in the prison where he had been tortured.

This political and social atmosphere directly shaped the worldview of many artists and intellectuals like Inanir.

From handsome leading man to socially committed cinema

Inanir entered the big screen as a tall, handsome leading man adored by young women. In 1970, he played his first lead role in *Kara Gözüm*, directed by At?f Y?lmaz, appearing opposite celebrated actress Türkan ?oray. The pair shared the lead in many films; his ?lyas in *Selvi Boylum Al Yazmal?m* (*The Girl with the Red Scarf*, 1978) was etched into the memory of millions.

What set Inanir apart from many of the melodrama stars of the era, however, was that the characters he portrayed increasingly came to carry a social weight. He became identified with figures who rebelled against injustice, took the side of the oppressed and fought for justice.

The examples of this trend were often screen adaptations of social-realist literature. In *Selvi Boylum Al Yazmal?m*, adapted from Chingiz Aitmatov, he played the truck driver ?lyas; the film treats the choice between love and labor with the simplicity of a folk poem. In *Y?lanlar?n Öcü* (*Revenge of the Snakes*, 1985), directed by ?erif Gören from Fakir Baykurt’s novel, he portrayed Kara Bayram, a poor peasant resisting in the struggle over land and power in his village—a role for which he was named Best Actor at the 1986 Golden Orange festival. Ömer Kavur’s *Ah Güzel ?stanbul* (*Oh, Beautiful Istanbul*, 1981) told the story of rural-to-urban migrants trying to gain a foothold in the big city. *Kat?rc?lar* (*Muleteers*, 1987) depicted the struggle for survival of the poor along the borders.

Inanir’s strongest acting roles drew above all on prison literature. The unforgettable convict figures he portrayed were based on the writings of left-wing authors who had passed through the prisons of the Turkish state. In Orhan Kemal’s *72. Ko?u?* (*Ward 72*, 1987), he played the Captain, who shares in the struggle of the poor for dignity in a prison during the Second World War. He also appeared in *Kar?lar Ko?u?u* (*Women’s Ward*, 1989), adapted from Kemal Tahir’s novel.

The role with which he identified most, however, was the rebellious

convict who rises up against the rule of the ward's kingpin, the prison administration and oppression, in *Tatar Ramazan* (1990) and *Tatar Ramazan: Sürgünde (Tatar Ramazan in Exile, 1992)*, adapted from Kerim Korcan's 1969 novel; his line "I will break up this game" became the cry of all the oppressed.

This was no coincidence: Kemal, Tahir and Korcan were writers who spent years in prison as a result of the trials against the then-illegal Communist Party of Türkiye. This social-realist generation in particular had brought the country's workers, peasants, poor and prisoners into literature. Under the conditions of political and cultural reaction that followed the 1980 military coup, Inanir gave the characters they had created a contemporary meaning.

Appearing in only a handful of projects from the second half of the 1990s onward, Inanir played his final film role in *Kapı (The Door, 2019)*, portraying Yakup, a master door-maker searching for his roots and the door of his lost home. The film tells the story of an Assyrian family that had migrated from Mardin to Berlin after their sons fell victim to an "unsolved" murder. Although the film leaves the matter vague, the late 1980s and especially the first half of the 1990s witnessed a great many "unsolved" murders in the cities and villages, as part of the state's war against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Like the region's Kurdish villages, Assyrian villages were emptied too. In a report issued in 2000, the Human Rights Association (HDHD) asserted that a total of 1,964 people—80 percent of them in the Southeastern Anatolia Region—had fallen victim to "unsolved" political murders.

The types Inanir portrayed—the landless peasant, the poor urban migrant, the prisoner—were real social characters. He said that in his films he had always depicted "the people of these lands and their suffering," and that an artist "cannot close his eyes to the suffering of his people."

Although he always played leading roles, Inanir also supported the struggle of cinema workers. He was a member of the Cinema Workers' Union (Sine-Sen). He took part in protests against censorship, and together with Tarık Akan, who pursued a similar acting career, he fought—not only on screen but behind it—for the unionization, social security, humane working conditions and copyright of everyone working in cinema, from actors to set crews. One year after the 1977 Taksim massacre, on May Day 1978, he stood in the front ranks alongside artists such as Akan, Kemal Sunal and Fatma Girik.

The Man from the North: a clear stance against the coup

The coup of September 12, 1980, drove like a steamroller over Türkiye's workers' movement and the left. Hundreds of thousands of people were detained and tortured, political parties and trade unions were shut down and gallows were erected. The US- and NATO-backed coup was a violent class assault aimed at crushing the powerful workers' movement of the 1970s and forcibly imposing a "free market" restructuring of the economy.

Inanir's stance against this coup was unequivocal. In the documentary *The Man from the North (Kuzeyden Gelen Adam, 2025)*, directed by Hüseyin Karabey about the actor's life, he criticized the September 12 regime and junta leader Kenan Evren without mincing words. Inanir characterized the coup as a massacre carried out hand in hand by "international forces" and their local collaborators in order to create a depoliticized society. He described Evren, who led the junta, as "a damned wretch."

The junta also subjected the cinema to the harshest censorship. Many of the films Inanir acted in during this period—Erif Gören's *Tomruk (The Log, 1982)* and *Sen Türkülerini Söyle (Sing Your Songs, 1986)*, Ömer

Kavur's *Amansız Yol (The Merciless Road, 1985)* and *Suçumuz ?nsan Olmak (Our Crime Is to Be Human, 1986)*, adapted from Oktay Akbal's novel—were rejected by the censorship boards or cut. The Tatar Ramazan character, appearing in prison films in the late 1980s and early 1990s, was interpreted as a cinematic protest against the oppressive regime.

That this stance remained unaltered was evident once again at his funeral. At the ceremony at Harbiye's Muhsin Ertu?rul Stage, when Evren's image appeared on screen during the screening of the documentary, the audience booed, and a person who tried to defend Evren was removed from the hall amid the outcry.

The Kurdish question and the "Wise People"

Inanir's most controversial political stance of the recent period was his participation in the Committee of Wise People, formed in 2013 within the framework of the "solution process" pursued by the government of then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on the Kurdish question. On the committee, which comprised 63 people divided among seven regions, Inanir took on the task of explaining the process to the public, traveling from city to city and issuing calls for "peace."

That "solution process"—the forerunner of the Ankara-PKK negotiations now revived—was in reality not a search for "peace and democratization," but the product of an effort to align the interests of Ankara and the Kurdish movement under conditions of escalating imperialist aggression and war in the Middle East. This extremely fragile accommodation collapsed in 2015, above all under the weight of developments bound up with the war for regime change in Syria, and gave way once again to a bloody war.

Like many intellectuals and artists, Inanir approached this process within a liberal framework of peace, democracy and human rights—a framework whose disappointment was inevitable. Despite this political illusion, Inanir was nonetheless able to take a stance on the Kurdish question that did not succumb to Turkish chauvinism. In a 2024 interview with *T24*, he said he wanted to make a film about Hakan Arslan, who was killed during the curfew in Diyarbakır's Sur district after the collapse of the "solution process," and whose bones were delivered to his father in a plastic bag seven years later.

Inanir nonetheless maintained his illusions about a resolution of the Kurdish question. In the same interview, asked, "If Erdoğan set out again today for a 'solution'... and invited you as well to support him, would you go again?" he replied: "I would walk at the very front, so long as it is called 'peace.' We have no choice; we have no other option."

These illusions were closely bound up with the political and social atmosphere that developed after the September 1980 coup and deepened with the dissolution of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy in 1991. Under conditions in which the workers' movement had been driven back by state repression and the betrayals of the trade-union bureaucracy, and in which a middle-class left politics—substituting identity politics and an empty "democratization" for the rhetoric of class struggle and socialism—grew ever more dominant, intellectuals who sincerely desired "peace" and "justice" found themselves turning toward the options offered by bourgeois politics: social democracy, identity politics, national reconciliation.

After Inanir's death, a broad spectrum—from officials of the state to the imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan—issued messages of condolence. Yet whatever this tableau of mourning, or his own political orientation, might suggest, none of it diminishes the enduring value of Inanir's art. He brought to the screen the poor of Anatolia, the oppressed and their dignified anger. The characters he portrayed became figures that bore

witness to different periods of Türkiye's history and in which millions found a part of themselves.

The portraits of oppressed people that Inanir created on screen, and their refusal to bow to injustice, will be remembered with respect by the workers, youth and intellectuals who take up the struggle for a world based on social equality. The peace and democratization he longed for all his life, however, will become possible only through the revolutionary socialist unity of Turkish and Kurdish workers with their class brothers and sisters across the Middle East and the world, against their own ruling classes and the imperialist powers standing behind them.



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