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Gültan, Kışanak, ed. *The Purple Color of Kurdish Politics: Female Politicians Writing from Prison*. (London: Pluto Press, 2022), 272 pages.

The *Purple Color of Kurdish Politics* follows the stories of 22 female Kurdish politicians detained in Turkish prisons since 2016 because of their alleged affiliation with armed organizations. Thousands of members of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP) were arrested, including mayors, parliamentarians, and even party leaders, under claims that the HDP has strong links to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which the Turkish state considers a terrorist organization. At the same time, critics see such moves as a pretext used to disarm one of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's staunchest opponents. *The Purple Color of Kurdish Politics* brings to light the account of revolutionary Kurds fighting for their rights in Turkey, and the brutal Turkish suppression of those rebel Kurds since the 1970s, through memoirs underlining the entangled relationships of women's rights, colonialism, and politics.

The 22 memoirs introduce English-speaking readers to the personal experiences of Kurdish women who have participated in local and general elections since 1994; their feminist struggle against gender inequality in the public sphere; and, the dominance of patriarchal systems and structures in Kurdish culture, on the one hand, especially concerning the political participation of Kurdish women, and the oppression of Kurds by the Turkish government, on the other. In her memoir "How Will You Find That Many Women?" the lawyer, human rights activist, and politician Aysel Tuğluk stresses this fact. She writes: "The Kurdish women's political struggle was now twofold: the struggle for the freedom of Kurds, whose existence was denied, and the equally urgent struggle for women's liberation" (38). The Turkish-Kurdish political conflict hindered practices of working toward changing the patriarchal culture in Kurdish society and supporting women's rights. For instance, the Turkish government hindered organizing events on women's issues and attacked female activists and women's organizations. In her memoir "They've Turned It into a Women's Municipality," Zeynep Sipçik describes this situation writing: "every time we women organized an event, the Turkish authorities would launch an investiga-

tion, despite the ongoing peace dialogue. Every week they required us to go to the courthouse and give a statement. They were trying to intimidate us” (220).¹

Kurdish Women and Leadership Positions

These personal memoirs attempt to convey the voice of political repression by presenting the suffering of women in prison and the restriction of their activities as politicians, activists, and feminists. Nonetheless, those female activists and politicians also focus on presenting their journeys as inspiring feminist models. Most of those Kurdish female politicians came from modest economic backgrounds and conservative social milieus. These women managed to escape their oppression and marginalization by challenging fears of responsibility and lack of political experience. They nominated themselves as Ministers of Parliament, heads of municipalities, and mayors. In the 2007 parliamentary elections, all Kurdish women candidates won seats by an overwhelming majority, and their representation as Kurds in the municipalities exceeded women’s representation in all other provinces. Aysel Tuğluk (b. 1965) comments on this historic victory for Kurdish women:

In the end, DTP [Democratic Society Party; Turkish: *Demokratik Toplum Partisi*] won 22 seats in the Parliament, eight of them held by women and 14 by men. The public showed that the patriarchal forebodings had been groundless. I was elected MP for Diyarbakır. For the first time since 1994, the Kurdish people’s will would once again be represented in parliament. (38)

Fatma Doğan (b. 1974) was elected co-mayor of Bozova in Urfa province in 2014, a district known for its conservative rural culture. Fatima Doğan comes from a conservative religious background, and only her husband and uncle supported her. Nevertheless, Doğan succeeded in realizing her dream and the dream of her region. In her own words:

“I got 12,800 votes, defeating the AKP [Justice and Development Party; Turkish: *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*] candidate by 1,100 votes. Remarkably, Bozova people were so jubilant that they streamed into the courthouse and refused to leave. Their dream had come true—80 years of fear had been broken. In the first two or three months, visitors flooded the town hall” (100).

Feminism From Below

The success of Kurdish female politicians resulted from their organized work in forming broad networks of women. The memoirs narrate that those activists and feminists adopted traditional methods to deliver their messages and gain women’s support and trust. Raising and relying on gender awareness from below, those female politicians went to places where women gathered, like beauty salons, and even knocked on doors to introduce Kurdish women to their feminist political agenda. In addition, those female politicians organized activities dealing with social and political problems such as domestic violence, child

marriage, widespread illiteracy, marginalization of qualified women, and lack of institutional transparency. Furthermore, to enhance the pro-gender equality culture and improve living conditions for Kurdish women in marginalized areas, these memoirs narrate how the female Kurdish politicians built roads and green spaces and turned many neglected old places into cultural centers. These places were meant to serve as meeting places for networking and the exchange of views among women. Kurdish women's solidarity in achieving a social and political culture that supports women's rights is uniquely revealed in the story of Sebahat Tuncel's election (b. 1975). In "From Prison to Parliament," Sebahat Tuncel recounts how she was nominated as an independent candidate within the Thousand Hopes coalition for the parliamentary elections from her prison cell. After winning a seat in Istanbul with 93,000 votes, she was released in July 2007.

Kurdish female politicians have succeeded in establishing a new political system in Turkey. There is now a co-chair and co-mayor in most Turkish municipalities. This "co" position was intended to support an egalitarian social culture and to establish a political principle that supports democracy and collective decision-making. The principle of co-chairing was implemented *de-facto* for nine years in the Kurdish political parties DTP (The Democratic Society Party; Turkish: *Demokratik Toplum Partisi*), and later in BDP (The Peace and Democracy Party; Turkish: *Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi*). In 2014, the Turkish Law on Political Parties was amended to add a clause making co-chairing legal in all political parties. This amendment to the law, which resulted mainly from women's struggle and determination, encouraged female Kurdish politicians to push to expand the scope of joint presidency of local government. The idea was that the party could nominate two candidates, one man and one woman, with one becoming co-mayor if they were elected.

After the mass arrest of Kurdish politicians in 2016, "the AKP government removed the co-mayors from their positions and appointed *kayyum*s—so-called 'trustees'—to replace democratically elected mayors and run local government in their place" (22). Moreover, all of the training and cultural centers established by those female Turkish-Kurdish politicians while in office were closed. Journalist, politician, and feminist Gültan Kışanak comments bitterly on women's detention: "In 1980 only two women councilors had been imprisoned, but now in 2017 Turkish prisons were full of women MPs, co-mayors, and city councilors" (xiv). Although Gültan Kışanak's words indicate the constant political repression of Kurdish women activists, they underline their strong resistance and growing feminist awareness against their repression and marginalization. Thus, *The Purple Color of Kurdish Politics* employs the strategy of "double critique" in which these Kurdish women challenge not only the hegemony of patriarchal culture in the Middle East but also emphasize their resistance and rejection of the orientalist view of Muslim women as victimized, subordinate women. Kışanak maintains that "By sharing these stories of our experiences in the women's liberation struggle—the tough setbacks as well as the sweet victories—we seek to leave our mark on history" (xv).

Overall, *The Purple Color of Kurdish Politics* is not a call for the self-determination of Kurdistan; instead, these memoirs advocate for plurality and Kurdish rights in Turkey. The book reveals a rich political history of the emergence of Kurdish women as political actors despite attempts to silence and marginalize them. It also documents the radical transformations of traditional political norms, structures, and practices from the 1990s until today. The memoirs are not only descriptions of the political electoral system in Turkey but also struggles against a male-dominated capitalist (and socialist) social culture. These female activists endeavoured to consolidate a different social and political culture based on their self-awareness and willingness to break stereotypes and work towards receiving societal and institutional support to reach leadership positions. Thus, *The Purple Color of Kurdish Politics* is essential reading because it provides role models for ambitious women who aim to challenge the stereotyped construction of gendered leadership and women's role in contemporary male-dominated societies.

Biography

Amany Abdelrazek-Alsiefy holds a PhD in English from Freie Universität Berlin, Germany (2022). Her research interests include gender studies, postcolonial literature, secularization, and fashion theories, focusing on women from the Middle East and North Africa. She has contributed scholarly articles and book reviews to various publications in Arabic and English. Currently, she is preparing her postdoctoral research entitled "Gender, Colour and Modernity in Egyptian and Sudanese Women's Writing."

Notes

1. Zeynep Sipçik (b. 1986) was elected co-mayor of Dargeçit district, in Mardin province, on 30 March 2014, with 62% of the vote. She was arrested on 28 March 2016. She is currently in Sincan Prison.