

The Commune



The communes that formed the backbone of the self-governing structure in Rojava in 2011 recall those of the early Soviet era in 1917 Russia, parts of 19th century Paris, or revolutionary Spanish communes in the 1930s.

The communes in most, if not all, of these historic cases attempted to usurp the power from the centrist powers at the top, and move the decision-making to the workplace, the council, and/or the citizen-delegate level, if summarised simplistically. These self-organisation structures had to become a counterweight to totalitarian regimes of any colour, and open the path to direct democracy, according to Öcalan.

The communes, made up of around 100 household representatives, were instrumental in taking the first political and self-defence steps in Rojava. The network of communes in Rojava, as well as their internal make up, laid the groundwork for legislative elections. They also made possible the selection of representatives to Mala Gel (People's Houses) and Mala Jinan (Women's Houses), which were usually based in Assad government buildings.

The mobilisation and creation of this new web of communes was happening simultaneously across all areas of the cities and villages in the region. Alongside the Kurds in Rojava, Arabs, Assyrians, Turkmens, Chechens, Yazidis, and other ethnic minorities were to take part.

Finally, these local direct-democracy bodies – whose responsibilities shifted many times in reaction to the war with ISIS or Turkey's incursions into northern Syria – had to spread across Rojava and, in this way, enable citizen-led governance to take shape.

However, the consolidation of Rojava's governing structures that would move political decision-making away from the communes did not begin until 2014.

"The fact remains that council modes of organisation are not immune to centralisation, manipulation and perversion," wrote Murray Bookchin, one of Rojava's ideologues. "At best, they can be the stepping stone to decentralised society – at worst, they can easily be integrated into hierarchical forms of social organisation."

It is unclear whether the communes were subverted and incorporated into hierarchical structures. However, it is clear that the role of the commune as a revolutionary enabler no longer exists.

As to the reason why, the majority of interviewed activists and people on all tiers of the self-administration point to the war with ISIS, which led to the brain drain and outright massacre of Rojava's revolutionaries.

Others, however, point to the overarching role of the ruling party and its links to the PKK, and the ongoing war with Turkey.

Read more: <http://rojava-story.herokuapp.com/#/chapter/2>