

The protagonist in human rights – the enduring struggle of Mr. Demirtaş

Selahattin Demirtaş was born on 10th of April, 1973, in the ancient part of Diyarbakır, Sur district, recognized as a world heritage by UNESCO. He was grown up in Sur which is still subjected to enforced destructions carried out by the government following armed clashes which took place the year before. He is the second of seven children raised by a working-class father and a housewife mother. His mother, Sadiye Demirtaş put ceaseless efforts in order to make all her children receive education which she was not allowed to have, as a girl. Childhood and teenage years of Demirtaş were spent under persistent martial law regime in Diyarbakır introduced just after 1980 military coup, followed by gross human rights violations peaked in the 1990s. Narratives of his close relatives subjected to rights violations during military junta have played a crucial role in making him grasp the environment in which he was growing up. Mr. Demirtaş was only 18 when he participated at the funeral ceremony of Vedat Aydın, Former Chair of Human Rights Association of Diyarbakır Branch and Chair of pro-Kurdish Party in Diyarbakır, who was kidnapped by state-sponsored paramilitary forces on 5 July 1991 and killed two days later. With other thousands of people, Mr. Demirtaş saw paramilitaries and the police raking the crowd, killing 8 and injuring hundred others. Being a witness to this massacre was the first incident which diverted him to dedicate his life to advocacy for human rights.

After a successful high school education, Selahattin Demirtaş took the university entrance exam and started his college education in İzmir - Dokuz Eylül University in the Department of Maritime Commerce and Management. He moved to İzmir, a city in western Turkey, where he was detained with his elder brother in a police operation targeting university students. He was released but his brother was arrested. Mr. Demirtaş witnessed that his brother and friends were tortured and ill-treated. These events forced him to drop his university education in İzmir without finishing his degree. He returned to Diyarbakır and worked with his father in his small plumber's shop. The fact that for a long time his family could not find a lawyer for his arrested brother because of the heavy pressures on the lawyers became another source of motivation for Selahattin Demirtaş's choice to actively continue human rights advocacy and becoming a lawyer.

After returning to Diyarbakır in 1993, Mr. Demirtaş was unfairly detained again. Though he was taken into custody in front of the hundreds of people, the police authorities refused that he was in custody for 15 days. In a period when the forced disappearances have become a daily routine, his family waited him in front of the Diyarbakır State Security Court every day until his release. Mr. Demirtaş who witnessed torture and ill-treatment for 15 days started to get prepared for university exams again and enrolled to the Faculty of Law in Ankara University. During his undergrad years, he continued to work as a plumber to cover his education costs.

Upon graduation from the Law Faculty, he returned to Diyarbakır where he voluntarily worked for the Diyarbakır Bar Association's Prison Commission. In this capacity he took actively part in monitoring prisons in the Kurdish region and in preparing the reports on the human rights violations. In 1998, on the one hand, he was actively participating into the works of Human Rights Association (İHD) in Diyarbakır and the cities around it; and on the other hand, the law firm that he founded started to hear the cases of the victims' families free of charge. During this period, he managed the process of preparing regular (monthly, quarterly and annual) reports for the international public opinion. Demirtaş always states that the most influential event in these years was the forced disappearances of Silopi HADEP (pro-Kurdish party of that period) District Chairman Serdar Tanis and his deputy Ebubekir Deniz in 2001. He recalls that on his way back to Diyarbakır after the futile researches in Silopi and Şırnak, he was driving his car slowly due to fear of finding their bodies by the wayside.

In 2004, he became the chair of Human Rights Association (İHD) in Diyarbakır. He took important steps for the institutionalization of the İHD and in systematization of documenting human rights violations. From the reception of victims by the administration of the İHD to the process of registration and of giving accurate legal information as well as institutionalization of monitoring the legal processes, he played an important role in developing the institutional capacity of the İHD. As the part of a campaign launched for diffusion of human rights awareness in the Kurdish cities, he ensured the print and distribution of

brochures in Kurdish language which was then banned. In addition to these activities, he has been deeply involved in activities to identify graves of victims murdered in extra-judicial killings in the 1990s at a time when conflicts in the Kurdish region have been relatively de-escalated.

Mr. Demirtaş has always kept his belief that the struggle for human rights should be carried out independently of political structures. In the name of the İHD, he appealed to the PKK to release Çoşkun Kırandı, a captured soldier who had become nation-wide public concern in 2006. Upon the application of captured soldier's family to the İHD, he directed the mediation process on behalf of the İHD in order to protect Kırandı's right to live. As a result of a mediation initiative, during which the İHD team has overcome many life-threatening situations, private Kırandı was handed over to his family.

After he has taken part in the İHD team for 7 years on the cases of evacuated villages, human rights violations and mass graves; he decided to assume political responsibility because he believed that if the Kurdish issue was not resolved through political channels, continuous rights violations could not be prevented. In the first year of his political career in which he started to create a peaceful solution to the Kurdish issue, he stood as one of the 'Thousand Hope Candidates' and got elected as an MP for Diyarbakır on July 22, 2007. The election of Mr. Demirtaş and his friends into the Turkish Grand National Assembly is considered as an important event in the history of Kurdish politics. As '*Thousand Hope Candidates*' the Kurdish deputies who were united under the DTP (Demokratik Toplum Partisi, Democratic Society Party) could set up a group in the parliament for the first time. Selahattin Demirtaş was elected as the deputy chair of his party's group at the age of 34.

The DTP was closed down by the Constitutional Court in December 2009 and the DTP MPs moved to the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP). The BDP held its first congress in 2010 and Selahattin Demirtaş and Gültan Kışanak were elected co-chairs of the party. Mr. Demirtaş contested the 2011 elections as part of the joint 'Labor, Democracy and Freedom' list endorsed by the BDP and different democratic political organizations, this time from Hakkari. He was re-elected to the parliament. He took an active role in the process of peaceful solution to the Kurdish question which started in 2013 and terminated by the government in 2015.

On June 22, 2014 Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ were elected as the co-chairs of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) – a new initiative originating from a three-year-old coalition of the BDP and various different political parties. For the 2014 presidential elections of Turkey, Selahattin Demirtaş contested against two other candidates and got 9.77% of the votes which was a success. In the June 2015 Turkish general election, the party's first campaign in a general election, the HDP got 13.12% of the vote and 79 out of 550 seats. It was the first time a Kurdish party could pass the 10% electoral threshold which has been (and still is) the highest in the world. After this election, the negotiation process was definitely stopped by the government which then turned into a full-blown war policy, making Turkey enter a new phase of severe human rights violations.

Parliamentary immunities were abolished by adding a provisional clause to the Constitution on May 20, 2016, and on November 4, 2016; Selahattin Demirtaş, along with 11 HDP deputies, was taken into custody. Since November 5, he is incarcerated in Edirne F Type Prison, and on January 18 2017, Turkish prosecutors announced they were seeking a 142-year prison sentence for Mr. Demirtaş.

Selahattin Demirtaş is married to Başak Demirtaş and is the father of two girls, Delal and Dilda.