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The Trials of Pinar Selek

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Pinar Selek, Turkish feminist and antimilitarist writer and activist, framed on a charge of terrorism, has been the subject of an unresolved legal process for twelve years. On 9 February 2011 she was acquitted for the third time in an Istanbul court. Next day the prosecution appealed for the third time to the Supreme Court to over-rule the finding. This is not justice but judicial bullying.

The experiences of Pinar Selek at the hands of the Turkish judicial system defy understanding. I have just returned from the February 9 hearing of her case in the Istanbul Court. The charge against her is implication in a deadly bomb explosion. The sentence called for is a life term in solitary. I attended the hearing as a representative of War Resisters International, one of a score of international 'observers', including several Members of the European Parliament and a representative of Human Rights Watch.

We joined Pinar's supporters, friends and relatives in the tightly packed public gallery. We watched as the presiding judge heard a cursory presentation of old evidence, retired to deliberate for fifteen minutes, and returned to pronounce the few words necessary to acquit Pinar. There was singing and dancing outside the court as we celebrated the removal of the threat hanging over Pinar. We phoned her in her exile in Germany and said "Come home and join the party tonight, Pinar!" Fortunately, wisely, she hesitated to do so. Twenty-four hours later we were confounded and dismayed to hear that the prosecution had appealed to the Supreme Court for a retrial.

<http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L299xH281/pinar-57a2a.jpg>

So what is this all about? In 1998, Pinar, then a young feminist sociologist, seeking to understand the motivations of both sides in the enduring armed conflict between the Kurdish minority and the Turkish state, carried out a research project that involved interviewing members of the PKK, the Kurdistan Workers' Party. On return she was apprehended by the Turkish security services and, when she refused to reveal the names of her informants, was severely tortured.

A little while before this, an explosion in the Istanbul Spice Bazaar had caused a number of deaths and injuries. Pinar, now conveniently in the hands of the state on account of her research, was a handy suspect 'bomber'. In the twelve years since that fateful explosion she has been subject to continuous unresolved prosecution. She has been imprisoned for two and a half of those years. During periods of relative freedom, after acquittals and before re-prosecutions, she has founded and been active in a feminist antimilitarist organization, Amargi. Amargi women activists have in turn been at the core of her support group. Recently Pinar, aged 40, has been living the life of an exile in Germany, supported by a grant from International PEN, the worldwide association of writers. She is the editor of Amargi Journal and respected for her many analytical articles and books, the most recent of which is a critique of militarized masculinity.

In a succession of court hearings, no credible evidence has ever been produced to suggest that the explosion in the Spice Bazaar was caused by a bomb. On the contrary, the material facts point to a gas leak. The only link between Pinar and the explosion that, for a while, seemed credible, was a confession by a man who named her as his partner in this 'crime'. At his trial, however, he retracted his statement, which had been obtained under torture. The truth was that he did not even know Pinar. He was acquitted. Pinar however continued to be suspect.

She has been tried twice in the Istanbul local court (in 2006 and 2008) and each time acquitted. On both occasions the prosecution has refused to accept this verdict and appealed to the Supreme Court which has found Pinar guilty of the charges against her and called on the Istanbul Court to re-open the case. The hearing of February 9 was the third

occasion the matter has come before the Istanbul Court. February 10 was the third occasion the prosecution has batted the ball back to the higher judiciary in what has become a game of ping-pong that would be a joke were it not so malign. This is not any recognizable judicial process but rather a sustained harassment. In short - bullying.

Poignancy is added to this case by the fact that Pinar Selek's leading advocate is her father, a respected lawyer. Besides, Pinar's sister decided to study law in order to pursue justice in the case. She has had ample time in these years to qualify and practise law. I found it very moving to see both family members in court last week, not only reviewing the evidence for the defence but also telling the judge, from their own bitter knowledge, of the psychological trauma being inflicted on Pinar.

The media paid full attention to the court hearing. All the international observers including myself made short statements to the assembled journalists. The case was headlined in the Turkish evening TV news programmes and the newspapers the following day. For twenty-four hours we were hopeful that the knowledge that the world was watching them would be an added prompt to the Turkish judiciary to finally deliver the justice it purports to uphold. But no. The only explanation of its bizarre behaviour is that the trials of Pinar Selek, like several other recent and current cases before the Turkish courts, are in fact designed by the Turkish state for a political purpose - to be an object lesson to anyone who thinks of stepping out of line.

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