

## A Time for the Kurds to Embrace Change

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As we are on the verge of a new system in Kurdistan, together with many changes and challenges to the status quo, it is high time for the Kurdish people and all those who want to work alongside them to find new ways of working which will respond to the changing world in which we live.

This means not only recognising that Kurdish issues are linked to social issues in the region and globally, but also addressing some of the challenges inherent within Kurdish society. We need to look closely, honestly, and critically at some of the practices which are taken for granted in our society, and discard those which prevent us from moving forward in the achievement of our goals; goals which are as varied as the activists whose daily struggle and commitment has contributed so much to the transformation of Kurdish issues in recent years. One of the central problems I am referring to is the ways of working and interacting which have limited the participation of this vast array of interests, and kept these contributions and innovations on the sidelines.

For example, many people today, particularly young people who have grown up and been educated outside Kurdistan, as well as those Kurds who have higher education inside Kurdistan, are eager to apply new methods to addressing the issues facing Kurdistan and the Kurds issues.

They have been introduced to these methods and ideas from diverse sources through their exposure to educational, social and political philosophies of the world, which nonetheless have important implications for Kurdistan.



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However, they face considerable barriers to introducing such ideas into Kurdish movements. Sometimes, their innovations may even be viewed as a threat to the established order of things, resulting in efforts to discredit their work, sincerity, and even their character. It has been said also, on occasion, that such individuals have lost their way, or are not being 'true' to their origins. I would say that it is sometimes necessary to go a long way from where you are, in order to understand where you come from. Whether that means in geographic, cultural or political terms, there is real value in distance which can provide some sort of critical perspective.

For that matter, we need to challenge the sovereignty in our lives of the very state borders which have denied us our rights for nearly a century. We must do this collectively, with our own movements, drawing freely from the mobility of people, ideas and resources across borders, in a great resistance movement to the power of oppressive systems in our lives. This is the reality of the translational age. We are all cosmopolitan citizens, and should be proud of this. Our cultural identity is as important to us and to the richness of the world's people generally, as any political movement or armed struggle. We must utilise this fully.

The very significance of borders in our lives has changed dramatically in an age of globalisation, and this is an obvious reality for young people who have grown up in the diaspora. They are armed with EU/other passports, which facilitate their movement throughout the various parts of Kurdistan. They should be encouraged at every opportunity to travel, and understand Kurdish life and experience in all its diversity, to break down the barriers which have separated us.

There is much also to be gained by local populations in the time and energy young returnees are willing to invest in Kurdistan. Bringing with them new talents and skills culled from their time abroad, they can in turn create opportunities for their fellows in Kurdistan in the development of capacities and infrastructure. Ultimately, any real or sustainable change must come from within, but only through open dialogue with people from all backgrounds, walks of life and geographic and cultural origins can this come about.

Sadly, such free movement and efforts to bring about change are often viewed with suspicion. I myself have been subject to this, as Anthropologist and Visual ethnographer I have tried to work with my countrymen in Kurdistan and Europe to development projects ([www.kameelahmady.com](http://www.kameelahmady.com)) which will meet their needs. Some view this, and my movement back and

forth between the UK and various parts of Kurdistan, as well my student activism, as ‘suspect’. Of course there are many like-minded individuals who have encouraged my work and supported such developments for the Kurdish people. I feel fortunate to have had their input and solidarity in all the pursuits I have undertaken to advance the cause of the Kurdish people. But unfortunately, the intellectual elite are a long way from the mindset of the majority of individuals. What can be done to bridge this divide? How can we help educated people to use their skills to help the population as a whole, and encourage the population to understand what we are trying to achieve?

In part, this means acknowledging the Kurdish cause as deeply interconnected with the causes of other oppressed and marginalised people the world over. It also means acknowledging the ways in which Kurdish movements have helped to maintain oppressive systems historically, and the ways in which we all remain part of the bigger picture of global politics and social movements. Criticism of others, and the often negative ‘rumours’ which circulate these criticisms, are not enough; action is required. I would say to young Kurds now, those with a passion to pursue and a desire to improve the lives of their people, that it is necessary to learn about the situations and lives of other people in order to understand your own, and how to make it better.

We need to expose ourselves to new and diverse ways of seeing the world and solving its problems in order to develop the skills which will see us through this dynamic time in history. We need to learn from one another. The limitations placed on our participation by politically oriented movements, in which there is little room for cultural or social work that does not adhere to the standards of the parties in power, have alienated many young idealists. Activists have been known to experience high rates of burn out as a result (see, for example, Pattison and Tavsanoglu, 2003). We are losing much of our potential through our narrow definitions of activism and Kurdish politics.

We must now embrace change. Kurds must also realise that the problems that have plagued them are problems shared by people the world over; that they are emblematic of the 20th century vagaries of imperialism, colonisation, and the birth of the nation-state. We must realise that addressing social problems globally, amongst all the peoples of the world, will in turn address and benefit the Kurdish people. This will not be an easy challenge. It will require us to develop and draw on new skills which cater to the problems and challenges of the contemporary world, in all its complexity and fluidity. We need to enter this new era with open minds and hearts. It is

exactly because of this that we need all the energy, enthusiasm, and innovation of young people with fresh perspectives and ideas to contribute. At exactly a time when we should be welcoming such innovations for the good of our people, we all too often cast them aside or draw their intentions into question, even engaging in ‘character assassinations’.

Those who are most influential within the Kurdish movements up until now have been unfailingly active, and we all owe them much in the progress they have made. However, we face a problem in our leadership, both politically and at the community level, in the diaspora. The ‘usual suspects’ of community and political activism, comfortable with the privilege their positions of power have given them, are reluctant to relinquish this in part to new generations with different methods. Many community members are equally unhappy with the idea of new blood, for they have become accustomed to the familiarity of these faces, and trust is established on this basis alone. Neither can it be said unquestioningly that the Kurds in diaspora, though they have a geographical advantage, are inevitably more ‘advanced’ or open-minded than their counterparts in Kurdistan itself. We in the diaspora have as much to learn from as we do to teach to Kurdistan and our origins.

In truth, we must also be patient in challenging for change, and understand the origins of such suspicions, gossip, and lack of trust within the population. As we are all well aware, there are long-standing issues with accusations of the political powers-that-be taking sides with the various state powers in order to forward their own interests. People have felt betrayed by their leadership in the past, and this has extended down to arenas beyond the political spectrum. It is therefore important to be understanding with those who may be mistrustful, because this has roots in historical experience. There are political, cultural, historical and religious dimensions to these fears, which have in turn prevented positive work with our people by those with a genuine interest in Kurdish issues. This has extended as far as the arena of scientific research of benefit to the Kurds, as outlined by Paris based social scientist Hamit Bozarslan (2006). Traditionally, our own political developments have been mechanical in nature, and tended to reproduce in all levels the very structures which they were criticising. This has resulted in a culture of fear due to the instability and often oppressive natures of power relations within the region, in which we must admit our own Kurdish leaders, have at times actively participated. This status quo is now hard pressed to face positive challenges to its working style, challenges which can be effective in bringing about change in a more inclusive way. But trailblazers are always placed in a position to defend their actions against a

small minded and often privileged social structure. The Kurds have suffered for long enough from a fear of criticising their own ways and the social systems which have contributed to the problems our people now face. Other societies have been forced to find their way forward, into reconstruction, through positive criticism which can in turn generate change for the better. I believe this, along with a recognition of contemporary global realities, is necessary for us to progress. That is why I, and others like me, will proudly carry on with the work we have been doing, and strongly believe will bring about positive change, regardless of the gossip and criticism we may face.

We should all welcome the support and collaboration of those who wish to use their creative talents to face these new challenges and the uncertainty ahead, but who have a positive vision for the future, and the skills and enthusiasm to bring it about. We can begin by finding positive ways to work alongside established political structures and the majority of our people, and in dialogue with them. There are many aspects of the political systems in the Middle East which are increasingly outmoded. Together we can achieve a more modern political system for the 21st century; one which will respect and draw on the strengths of civil society and the NGO sector, and not rely exclusively on totalitarian political structures. We must not respond to aggression with yet more aggression, however justified we may feel it to be. Such developments can stand up to face the negative aspects of political life in the region from which we have all suffered. What are the ruling powers afraid of? They are afraid of education; of bright, young, new ideas; of development work which can work collectively with political leadership and civil society to bring about the changes we have been awaiting through all our struggles. Rather than turning our backs on innovations because we may view them as a threat, we should work to incorporate these into new social and political structures for the betterment of society; not only for the Kurds, but for all those in the region and beyond.

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