

Gender Equality or Legal Pluralism? An Ostensible Puzzle in Syrian Rojava's Legal System

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§ 1. *Introduction*¹

The current Autonomous Administration of the Syrian North-East (AANES) came as a result of the confederal revolution in the Syrian civil war. It developed at first in the Kurdish areas (Rojava) advocating the national liberation of the Kurdish people and promoting a parallel process of reform (Schmidinger 2018: 149-154).

The Movement for a Democratic Society (Tej Dem) was founded by the predominantly Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) in 2011. In July 2012 it took control of a number of Syrian cities, largely populated by Kurdish-speaking residents. The People's and Women's Protection Units (YPG-YPJ), the armed wings of the PYD, drove out almost completely the government forces from the area, although most of administrative institutions of the state have not been dissolved ever since. Deprived of political authority, they were flanked by new decision-making bodies, bearing the function of political leaderships in the subsequent reforming process (Ayboga-Flach-Knapp 2016: 104-109).

These bodies were initially the people's councils promoted by the Pyd during the 2011 popular uprising. A complex system of representation emerged from their structure, branching out from assemblies and commissions of neighborhood and village Communes to city, district and cantonal councils made up of the lower bodies' delegates. The Tej Dem resulted as the union of such representatives with the political parties adhering to the process. In 2013 it instituted a parallel governing structure aimed at outlining, with declared diplomatic purposes, a de facto regional institution. This structure consists of legislative, executive and judicial councils forming what was declared in 2014 as the Autonomous Administration of Rojava. The declaration was accompanied with the publication of a sort of fundamental law called the Social Contract of the Autonomous Regions (SCAR; Bianchi 2016).

The liberation of Arab-majority territories from the presence of the Islamic State (IS) in 2015 led to the creation of an assembly (the Syrian Democratic Congress, SDC) aimed at better representing the linguistic identities of northern Syria. In 2016 the SDC declared the autonomy of a larger Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS) by publishing a second Social Contract (SCDF; Marinelli 2016).

¹ This paper has been submitted to the Syrian Studies Association Bulletin on July 31st, 2021. It is currently under peer-review.

Following the liberation from IS of more territories, the broader AANES was established in 2018. A Document of Understanding signed by the newly appointed General Council followed in 2019 and a third Social Contract has been announced for the end of 2021 (RIC 2021; Abdullatif 2021).

The aim of this article is to investigate how the notion of pluralism is understood by the autonomous institutions. To this end we will illustrate some aspects of the confederal legal system and its legislative production, focusing on the relevant realm of Family Law. The sources for this study are legal documents obtained online or by AANES authorities, primary and secondary scientific literature, journalistic sources and interviews collected in situ and online by the author between 2016 and 2021. For the sake of brevity the autonomous institutions will be named Autonomous Regions (AR) independently of their historical denominations at different times.

§ 2. *Uniformity and Pluralism: the Syrian state*

The principles contained in the laws enacted by the AR portray a will to at least partially influence, in perspective, the spirit of a possible new Syrian constitution (SCAR, Title I, § Art. 9). This should be written through a dialogue initiated (but at present unproductive: Szuba 2019) with the government. The AR's goal is indeed not independence, but the integration of the new institutional system into the national legal framework, imagined as transformed by domestic and international developments toward a more federalist and democratic direction. That is why the Social Contracts lack a supremacy clause, not strictly qualifying as proper fundamental laws. The future relationship with the republic of the confederal armed forces remains also deliberately undetermined and the definition of their role is postponed to the conclusion of agreements with state forces (SCAR, Title II, § Art. 15; see more broadly SCDF, Title IV, § Art. 71).

Despite the political will to reach a peaceful compromise with the regime, the content and the political orientation of AANES' provisions are far different from those embodied in the Syrian system. An outstanding insistence on liberal principles, on the idea of the rule of law and on linguistic freedom is striking, with emphasis on political rights of women and youth. The Contracts provide for unrestricted adoption of all international Human Rights conventions (SCAR, Title II, § Art. 20; Title III, § Art. 21; SCDF, Preamble), which the Syrian state has ratified selectively and with reservations (Maktabi 2010: 566-568; 2013).

The formal legal differences between the Syrian state system and AR's may not prove exhaustive for a thorough juristic comparison. Albeit differently, both realities retain a revolutionary conception of the role of a vanguard party (the Baath for the state, the Pyd for the AR) that might produce in distinct institutional arrangements opaque pluralities of juridical sources. This, beside the ongoing condition of war, may provoke discrepancies between the official legal provisions and the substantial application of the law. There is, however, substantial empirical evidence of a significant correspondence between the legal formulations of the AR and a large number of socially implemented procedures and rules (Goodman 2016; Cudi 2016; Cemgil-Hoffman 2016; Clark 2016: 108-110; Daniel-Laurent 2016: 133-135; Grasso 2018).

As far as the idea of pluralism is concerned, the legislative production of the AR displays a conception diametrically opposed to that of the state. The Baathist system inherits, even in the name of the republic – and states yet in the Preamble of the Constitution – a notion of national community as a segment of a transcendent Arab nation. In terms of sources of law a somewhat crucial position is assigned to divine revelation, in particular to the Sunni interpretative schools of the Islamic jurisprudence or *Fiqh* (Syrian Constitution: Title I, § Art. 3; LPS, § Art. 305; see Berger 1997: 116-119; Diab Esq 2009). The Syrian nation is thus defined politically by an attempt at ideological standardization of the country's de facto linguistic and religious plurality: two predominant demographic, cultural connotations - the Arabic language and Sunni Islam - are superimposed on the identity of the entire population (Galletti 2006: 83 ff.).

On the other hand, the Syrian legal system qualifies for a partial recognition of Syria's cultural plurality. Such a balance between uniformity and pluralism is formulated according to the criterion of a contrast between 'public' and 'private' spheres of life. The private sphere is not to be understood as individual, being rather linked to kinship structures (Maktabi 2010: 559-560). In the contemporary Syrian Arab Republic, legal uniformity is affirmed in the public sphere (Constitution, Civil Code, Criminal Code) but juxtaposed with legal pluralism as far as Family Law is concerned (Rabo 2005).

The most recent codification of Family law is the Law of Personal Status (LPS) promulgated in 1953 and amended in 1975, 2003, 2006, 2010 (Anderson 1955; Berger 1997; Eijk 2013). The text regulates both family law and bequest, crucial matters in relation to the rapports between genders and generations. The code apply to all citizens legal solutions drawn from islamic (Sunni) schools of *fiqh*, with a predominance of the Hanafi school (LPS, §§ Art. 1-305). A specific section circumscribes areas of legislative and judicial autonomy for three specific (religious) communities: Druze Muslims, Christians and Jews (§§ Art. 306-308).

§ 4. *Uniformity and pluralism: the Autonomous Regions*

The changes introduced by the confederal movement are inspired by an inverted conception of the relationship between plurality and standardization. Quotas for political representation have been established at the political-institutional level for the different language communities residing in the region (Orkan 2021; Koç 2021). In schools previously excluded minority languages (Kurdish and Assyrian) have gradually become part of the teaching curriculum alongside Arabic (Raperin 2016; Stefani 2019; Dinc 2020). The idea of 'democratic nation' theorized by the Pkk leader and Kurdish essayist Abdullah Öcalan conceives each national fabric as culturally non-uniform and enriched when its immanent variety is valued instead of being denied (Öcalan 2016).

These reforms assert thus a pluralist logic in general political terms and at the highest level, breaking explicitly with the statist superimposition of Syrian national identity and Arab, Sunni or even Muslim identity. This linguistic, pedagogical and religious pluralism ought not to be confused, however, with the notion of legal pluralism. The constitutive laws of the AR enshrine the right to formally protected active participation of representatives of the different communities, but do not mention statutory legislative autonomies based on religious or linguistic affiliation, especially not so in family matters.

The aim of a formally regulated plural political participation is in fact to make previously conflictual social behaviors more uniform, at least in sharing or accepting principles of pluralism in language and linguistic education (SCAR, Title I, § Art. 9). The very forms of administrative, economic and judicial self-regulation ensured to the seven administrative Regions of AANES are tempered by universal constraints established by the dictate of the Social Contract. Even the administrative autonomy and self-regulation protected by the Communes, whose creation and existence predates the legislative organs and the Contracts themselves, is bound by the respect of the fundamental provisions (see SCAR, Title IX, § Art. 93).

The non-legal declination of the pluralistic ideology of the AR is to be mostly appreciated in the reassessment of the supposed counterposition between 'private' and 'public' spheres of society. That very counterposition is challenged, indeed, by the theoretical elaboration of Kongra Star, the revolutionary movement of the women's organizations and Communes (Tank 2017; Shahvisi 2018; Kongra Star 2020). It conceives the family as a «small state» capable of determining the political supremacy of adult men over women and young people (Zilan 2017; Ferreira-Santiago 2018: 489-491). This elaboration does not fail to leave its mark on the legal formulation of democratic autonomy, insofar as we find in the Contracts a distinction between ethnic-linguistic or religious identities on one side (under the concept of 'communities' or 'components': SCAR, §§ Art. 3, 6, 9, 14, 32; SCDF, Preamble, §§ Art. 8, 16, 33, 50, 54, 55, 58, 63, 65, 69, 70, 74, 75) and generational or gender groups on the other (falling under the notion of 'social segments': SCAR, §§ Art. 17, 27, 28, 47, 95; SCDF, Preamble, §§ Art. 7, 20, 50, 56, 58, 61, 68-70, 80).

The social segments are named «youth» and «women». Women and youth acquire at their turn, in the Contracts, the right to quotas of institutional representation, to the creation of autonomous institutions and to the protection of their political, social and economic rights, including those established by international conventions. These rights are not necessarily compatible, among others, with existing statist, religious or customary laws regulating family life and inheritance laws in Syria (Maktabi 2010; Eijk 2014). That is why the confederal institutions, albeit animated by continuous reference to cultural pluralism and administrative self-regulation, came to abolish the pluralistic provisions guaranteed in Family law by the Syrian republic and by the whole Islamic tradition.

§ 5. *The Confederal Reform of Family Law*

One of the key steps in this direction was the promulgation of the Fundamental Provisions and General Principles Regarding Women (GPW), published on October 22, 2014 during the battle of Kobane between the YPG-YPJ and IS (Anf News 2021).

The GPW entail a series of significant breaches with family regulations imposed both by Salafi armed groups participating in the civil war and the state. Among the new principles are: equal distribution of inheritance between male and female children (GPW, § Art. 15; the latter receive half under the LPS or Salafi rule); the ban of polygamy (§ Art. 13); the abolition of *mahr* (the financial contribution offered by the Muslim groom to the bride on the stipulation of the marriage contract) and dowry (the Christian analogue in reverse; § Art. 11); the equal right to terminate the marriage contract for both sexes (§ Art. 14; state's and islamist regulations make it easier for men to divorce in compliance with distinct interpretations of sharia; cfr. Tabet 2005; Lamce 2014; Aluffi Beck Peccoz 2019: 256-260). The GPW also extend the mother's right to custody over her children (§ Art. 25) and equate the value of a woman's testimony in court with that of a man (§ Art. 9; the LPS and islamist regulations make the value of a woman's testimony half than that of a man). They finally abolish the extenuating circumstances granted by the Syrian Penal Code to those who commit femicide under the pretext of «honor killing» (§ Art. 17).

Although the autonomous institutions have yet to struggle to implement these provisions (Mendanlioglu 2020: 280-283; Anha 2021), they apply without distinction to all residents of the Regions of Cizire, Afrin and Euphrates, regardless to the possible membership of an individual to religious denominations or communities (compatibly with territorial losses due to the ongoing military confrontation with Turkey: see Radpey 2020). Such a standardization overcomes the only reserve of legal pluralism allowed by the Syrian State and, as mentioned above, by the Islamic legal tradition, entitling Christians and Jews (though not other communities) to be granted partially autonomous regulations in the family and testamentary spheres.

The universalistic understanding of family regulation by the GPW differs from that of the LPS also in another respect. The GPW rejects the religious connotation of the general section of the state's law (§§ Arts. 1-305). Although equal for all citizens, the general section of LPS is a blatant expression of the aforementioned superimposition of a certain confessional understanding to the whole societal and cultural fabric. It is referred to specific readings of selected religious texts, i.e. Quran and the Sunna. The GPW make no reference to religious sources of the law. Moreover, whereas the religious pluralism formalized by the State occurs through autonomous religious courts, each following its own legislation, the GPW (and the SCDF) entrust the judicial competencies in matters of personal status to the Committees of Justice of the Communes, depriving the religious courts of any formal residual power under the autonomous jurisdiction (SCAR, Title IX, § Art. 92; GPW, § Art. 27; SCDF, Ch. VIII, § Art. 69).

The general and declamatory nature of the GPW, in addition to the foreseeable resistance encountered among part of the population, made their application difficult (Benario 2017). To date the autonomous institutions state to be working for a consensual, peaceful application of the measures thanks to

awareness and education campaigns (Zilan 2017), reporting a greater success in urban Kurdish communities and greater difficulties among Arab communities in the countryside (Pasha 2021).

The action for implementation carried out by Kongra Star has nevertheless equipped itself with repressive instruments to overcome overt resistance. The Syrian civil and penal codes continue to be the reference for the cantonal judicial authorities unless amended by the confederal bodies (SCAR, Title IX, § Art. 88; Sharine 2016; exceptions are restorative and conciliatory judicial practices enacted by the Communes, that have no links with state's legislation; Duman 2017: 86-87). In 2016 articles of the Penal Code related in various ways to family and gender issues were amended (Pasha 2021). The confederal authorities promulgated on April 2nd, 2016 a «Crimes against Family and Public Moral» (PC-A) amended section (Ch. III) of the Penal Code, where twenty-four articles provide for prison sentences and fines for those breaking bans on polygamy (PC-A, § Art. 158), child abduction (§ Art. 175), violence against women (§§ Art. 165, 167, 170, 172-74), incest (§ Art. 164), body mutilations (§ Art. 178), adultery by men (§ Art. 162) and forced marriages (§§ Art. 159-160).

§ 6. Conclusion

The examination of the confederal Family Law reform highlights a tension internal not only to Syria, but to the notion of pluralism itself. Taking into account a plurality of views, interests and values involves the necessary decision on where and how to trace the decisive differentiating lines. The juridical interest of the 'communities' - be they defined in religious or linguistic, customary terms - is not necessarily identical to that referable to 'social segments' possibly construing and pursuing critical assessments of traditional, communitarian understandings of social relationships. When the confederal movement affirms its pluralist orientation in the protection of linguistic diversity and religious minorities, it does not seem to refer to forms of legal pluralism. The equal participation of communities in a plural political process establishing uniform rules in the constitutional, criminal and personal status realms seems to be considered adequate for the task of balancing communitarian, generational and gender rights. Although sensitive to the protection of national and cultural differences, such a conception appears to be equally aimed at strengthening interests stemming from conditions of subalternity transversal to communities and sects.

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