Lecture by Martin van Bruinessen The Kurdish movement: issues, organization, mobilization

Some observations about the Kurdish people appeared in a previous issue (see On the Waterfront *6, pp. 12-15). We are therefore pleased to have found a specialist to enlighten us about modern Kurdish history. Martin van Bruinessen (1946) took a degree in theoretical physics and mathematics at Utrecht University in 1971. He later studied social anthropology, which had previously been his minor subject. In 1974-76 he spent two years conducting field research on social organization and social change among the Kurds in the Kurdish areas of Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria. This field research, supplemented by archival investigation, resulted in a PhD thesis* (Agha, Shaikh and State: On the Social and Political Organization of Kurdistan)*, which he defended at Utrecht University (1978).*

Between 1978 and 1981, he travelled extensively in Turkey, Iran (on which he published several articles), and Afghanistan (where he worked on a village development project). During this period (especially in 1979 and 1980), he did research on Ottoman history and published a single major source on Kurdish society in the 17th century: Evliya Çelebi's Seyahatname *(1988).*

Since 1982 Bruinessen has concentrated on Indonesia as a second area of research. Altogether, he has spent nine years conducting research and teaching there about various aspects of Indonesian Islam. Between his periods of residence in Indonesia, he returned several times to the Middle East on short research visits, focusing on Kurdish and Turkish politics and religious movements. In his most recent research, he deals with shifting ethnic and religious identities in Turkey and developments in the Kurdish movement. Bruinessen has taught Kurdish and Turkish studies at the Department of Arabic, Persian, and Turkish Languages and Cultures at Utrecht University since 1994.

In the early 1970s, when I became interested in the Kurds, the Kurdish movement for autonomy or independence was not regarded as one of the progressive liberation movements worthy of solidarity and support from the European left. Hardly known at all, it was perceived as a form of tribal resistance against modernizing regimes, led by feudal or tribal elites exploiting poor peasants and unwilling to surrender privileges and therefore not really a social movement. In the late 1950s, under the populist regime of Abdulkarim Qassem that supported such actions, landless Kurdish peasants in Iraq had briefly occupied the land of big Kurdish landlords. Once fighting broke out between the Iraqi military and Kurdish partisans (1961), however, little was heard of intra-Kurdish class conflict anymore, and some of the landlords became prominent Kurdish nationalists. The official Iraqi view of the emergence of Kurdish nationalism as a counter-revolutionary reaction appeared convincing. Remarkably, however, another well-known Kurdish landlord whose land was invaded in a region controlled by the government and not by the Kurdish movement held onto his land by joining the Iraqi Communist Party.

The IISH did not hold any materials on the Kurds in those days, nor was much about the Kurds to be found at any other library or archive in Western Europe. A small solidarity committee in Amsterdam, the International Society Kurdistan (ISK), maintained a newspaper clipping archive and library and published a newsletter. Similar but even smaller (i.e. one-person) committees existed in Paris and Berlin, and a Kurdish student union had a few dozen members throughout various countries in Eastern and Western Europe. None of these individuals or groups belonged to the progressive solidarity movements. The few political contacts tended to be with conservative circles. Likewise, the Kurds of Iraq formed alliances that did not endear them to European progressives. The most prominent leader of the Iraqi Kurds, Mulla Mustafa Barzani, relied heavily on the support of the Iranian Shah regime and from 1972 onward received covert CIA support in his struggle against the Arab "socialist" Ba'th regime. In March 1975, however, the Shah and Saddam Hussein reached an agreement, after which support to the Kurds was suddenly terminated. The Iraqi army destroyed much of the Kurdish resistance, and some 50,000 Iraqi Kurds fled to Iran. Having turned into an international humanitarian catastrophe, the Kurdish case began to elicit sympathy. This was reinforced when information was disclosed to the press about the covert CIA operation and the way the US failed to protect the Kurds once the Shah cut his profitable deal with Iraq. Hundreds of educated Iraqi Kurds – only a small fraction of all refugees in Iran – were granted political asylum in Western European countries. They worked hard to build a Kurdish lobby in Europe, establishing contacts with journalists and politicians and attempting to organize the far greater numbers of Kurdish immigrant workers from Turkey.

The ISK archive, which has been acquired by the IISH, primarily documents the developments prior to 1975 (though continuing up to 1982) and remains an important source for that period, despite giving the initial impression that very little was published

on the Kurdish movement during that period, and that most of the reporting was rather superficial. Once the Kurdish Diaspora became more organized, writing on the Kurds rose sharply, reflecting the increasing sophistication and broadening support base of the various political movements in Kurdistan itself. Here, however, the ISK collection comes to an end. Silvio van Rooy, founder and president of the ISK, died in 1982 and had been somewhat alienated from his previous Kurdish contacts since 1975.

The Kurdish movement in Iraq of the 1960s and early 1970s was admittedly heavily dominated by the traditional elites and tended to be socially conservative. But anti-establishment currents existed within the same movement as well, as has been true for all Kurdish associations and parties throughout the twentieth century. Until the 1970s, the educated stratum was very small in Kurdish society, and virtually all members belonged to families of tribal chieftains and religious leaders. Kurdish nationalist, populist, and socialist intellectuals shared more or less the same background, were educated in state institutions that also trained Arab, Turkish or Persian elites, and were in many cases employed in the civil service or the military. Such men (only in the 1980s did women start to become significant) were at least theoretically opposed to the tribal and feudal authority relations of traditional Kurdish society but always faced the dilemma that they could not mobilize significant masses of people, unless they had recourse to precisely these relations.

In 1923, soon after the Turkish Republic was established, and it became obvious that this new state was to be based on Turkish nationalism instead of on the common Muslim identity that had united Turks and Kurds during the preceding years, radical Kurdish officers and intellectuals established a clandestine party with a nationalist programme. They initiated preparations for an uprising intended to lead to an independent state but soon found that nationalist propaganda was not intrinsically sufficient to mobilize people. They therefore sought the co-operation of the charismatic religious leader Shaykh Sa'id, who in turn won over many tribal chieftains. By the time the uprising broke out (1925), several of the planners had been arrested, and the shaykh and the chieftains were in control. The uprising resembled a traditional tribal rebellion (though much broader in scope) and was easily suppressed by the Turkish army.

In the Iraqi Kurdish uprising of 1961-1975, nationalist and leftist intellectuals faced the same dilemma. Both the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) had a considerable following among urban intellectuals, and the latter party elaborated its ideology in the course of debates with the ICP on issues such as self-determination of the nation and class analysis. By the early 1960s, the KDP was of a distinctly leftist persuasion and intent on breaking the hold of the tribal and feudal chieftains over much of Kurdistan. To win the support of the predominantly tribal and peasant population, however, the KDP leaders made the charismatic Mulla Mustafa Barzani the party's president, intending for this position to be purely symbolic. Barzani himself had a different conception of his position. Once the actual fighting was in progress, he and his tribal allies gradually marginalized the urban intellectuals. More surprising than the victory of tribal elements over the educated urban stratum in the course of armed confrontation with the central government, perhaps, is the fact that the Kurdish wing of the ICP, which did not take part in the Kurdish rebellion, consistently maintained more cordial relations with Barzani than with the ideologically closer KDP intellectuals.

In Turkey, where approximately half of all Kurds lived, a modern Kurdish movement emerged in the mid 1960s under the dual influence of the Iraqi Kurdish movement and, significantly, the emerging Turkish left. The Labour Party of Turkey (TIP), the country's first Marxist party to contest the elections, discovered almost to its surprise that it received many votes in some of the Kurdish provinces, apparently due to some Alevi Kurdish members with strong tribal and sectarian backing. The TIP became the first party to openly discuss the problems of what was euphemistically called "the East" (i.e. the Kurdish provinces). These were defined as problems of regional underdevelopment, caused in part by the inequalities inherent in capitalist development and, as the party recognized, compounded by decades of deliberate neglect and withholding of investment.

Kurdish students, intellectuals, and workers living in Istanbul and Ankara held a series of cultural soirées, where the first Kurdish demands were publicly voiced. Speakers called for economic development and protested the oppressive and violent control of the Kurdish countryside by the Turkish military. The other demand, which rapidly became louder, was for recognition that the Kurds (who were even prohibited from taking names from their culture) constituted a distinct people, with their own language. At the party congress in 1970, the TIP adopted a resolution asserting the existence of the Kurdish people in eastern Turkey and calling for an end to economic discrimination and national oppression. The next year a military coup followed. The TIP was banned because of this resolution; numerous Kurdish activists of various political persuasions received lengthy prison sentences. Once civilian rule was restored, and new parties were established, the legal Turkish left remained cautious and refrained from adopting outspoken positions on the Kurdish issue. Kurdish nationalists organized in separate unions and associations. By the end of the 1970s, almost a dozen different Kurdish political associations and parties existed, most combining nationalism with some form of Marxism. All derived their major support among the educated urban stratum (which was rapidly

expanding in those years), and several were gaining adherents among the rural population of the Kurdish provinces as well.

During the 1970s, the major demand shifted from recognition to national self-determination, and much of the debate between the various Kurdish formations (and with the Turkish left) concerned how to analyse Kurdistan in Marxist terms. Was the dominant mode of production feudal or capitalist? Which was the revolutionary class in Kurdistan? Did a proletariat exist in Kurdistan, and who made up this class? How should the relationship between the Kurdish people and the Turkish state be defined? Most of the Kurdish groups came to describe Kurdistan as an internal colony of the Turkish, Arab, and Persian bourgeois states. The national struggle was at the same time declared a class struggle, as it juxtaposed the Kurdish radicals against the Kurdish "collaborators", who were associated with the feudal or bourgeois stratum. A major dividing line separated pro-Soviet from Maoist groups, and additional rifts emerged within the Maoist groups over China's shifting policies and the ideas of Enver Hoxha. Several groups began to arm themselves and became involved in the increasing political violence of those days.

The most radical of these various Kurdish movements was the PKK, which emerged in 1974 from a major Turkish leftist student movement (whose founders included several non-Kurds). The PKK proclaimed as its aim the liberation of all parts of Kurdistan from colonial oppression and the establishment of an independent, united, socialist Kurdish state. The movement initially sought to recruit a following mainly among the poorer (and relatively uneducated) sections of society and in fact became the only Kurdish party not dominated by members of leading tribal families. (Abdullah Öcalan, the party chairman, prided himself on his humble origins, being born into a non-tribal humble peasant family.) Calling for an anti-colonial struggle, the PKK directed its violence against "collaborators" – notables and chieftains with a stake in the existing political system – and against rival organizations. Later, in the 1980s, it also briefly targeted schoolteachers and told young people to drop out of school to escape ideological indoctrination.

In 1980, another military coup ushered in an era of severe repression, leading to the virtual elimination of most Kurdish and leftist organizations, with their leaders being killed, jailed, or forced into exile. The PKK was the only organization that managed to survive and even grow in these circumstances. Establishing an extensive cross-border network – with guerrilla training by Palestinian and Syrian instructors and base camps in the mountains of northern Iraq and western Iran – it initiated a guerrilla offensive in 1984 with a series of attacks on military and police installations. Continuing its excessive violence toward Kurdish "collaborators", the PKK gradually earned grudging admiration from growing sections of the general Kurdish population by boldly challenging the feared Turkish army. By the early 1990s, the movement had set up its own parallel administration in certain rural regions and urban neighbourhoods and endorsed a range of civil society initiatives by persons previously affiliated with other political currents. The PKK meanwhile abandoned its pursuit of full independence and advocated a negotiated settlement of the conflict. After some promising indirect contacts under President Özal, the Turkish military adopted a radically different approach following Özal's sudden death. A "dirty war", with death squads killing several thousand community leaders and human rights activists and with massive village evacuations upsetting the lives of hundreds of thousands, isolated the PKK from the civilian population and reduced it to guerrilla bands moving from one hideout in the mountains to another. By the end of the decade, increased international pressure on Syria resulted in Öcalan's expulsion from Syria and his ultimate capture and surrender to Turkey.

The events of the 1980s – the war between Iraq and Iran and the coup and guerrilla war in Turkey – resulted in a flood of Kurdish refugees to Europe and the rising political awareness among the second-generation labour migrants already there. By the mid-1980s, the Kurdish Diaspora was fully mobilized and became increasingly involved and influential in the politics of the homeland. The Kurds also became an indelible presence in the European political landscape – as is documented in the IISH collection of Kurdish books, periodicals, and memorabilia.