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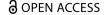
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ABSTRACT

Since the beginning of the Syrian war and Rojava revolution, a new education system has been evolving. Foundational to this education is the ideology of Democratic Nation, which has its roots in the Kurdish political movement from Turkey, and to which radical democracy, women's liberation and ecology are fundamental. In this article, we explore the makeup of Rojava's formal education structures, and demonstrate how education has contributed to the creation of a political community whose sense of nationhood stems from the diversity of peoples in the region, united by their shared democratic values, and opposed to the nationalist Syrian regime and broader expansion of 'capitalist modernity'. We first describe the structure and content of the new education system, and discuss how it has strengthened, and shaped, the political community it engenders. We go on to discuss the implications of its implementation, including the ways in which it both lives up to and contradicts its own ideals, concluding that within the teachings exists the potential for participants to continually reflect and improve. Our analysis of this emancipatory education system contributes to the literature on education and political community.

Introduction

> Education is a revolution by itself in Rojava. The military lost a lot of blood, but here [we are] fighting with pens […] War is a war of education! (Interview 33, with education officials)

Amidst the power struggles of the Syrian war, the Rojava revolution came to fruition, leading to the self-declared 'Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria' (hereafter, Rojava) in 2012.[1] Much of the international attention on Rojava has focused on the efforts of its defence forces fighting the Islamic State (IS). Our interest, however, is in the role of ideology, propagated through education, in strengthening and shaping this new political community. Informed by our interest in Rojava as a promising alternative to the dominant and oftentimes oppressive political communities that surround it and which characterise our current global

context, we came to view the revolution as part of a 'war of education', involving internal re-education and ideological opposition to the status quo.

The guiding ideology of the revolution originates from the teachings of Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned figurehead of the dominant Kurdish political movement from Turkey. Öcalan advocates for a 'Democratic Nation', a society based on the pillars of radical democracy, women's liberation (which is central to *jineolojî*, or women's science) and ecological principles. He contextualises the history of the Kurdish struggle within 'the collaborationist matrix of capitalism, patriarchy, and the nation-state' (Dirik 2017, 76). Democratic Nation, then, lays the foundations for a pluralistic and democratic political community that challenges the broader capitalist and imperialist forces, and in which not only Kurds but people of any ethnicity and religion are welcome to practise self-rule.

In this article we explore the process of building this new community through education, whilst, in the spirit of solidarity, acknowledging the internal contradictions that exist. We begin with the theoretical background and justification for this research before outlining our methods, followed by the context of our case. We then discuss our findings on the structure and content of the education system, the centrality of Democratic Nation to this and vice versa, and the rise in support for both the education system and the wider revolution. We also discuss the success of education, in terms of the practical implementation of Democratic Nation both aligning with and contradicting its ethos. We conclude that education functions as an effective tool to build this political community: one which, although imperfect and in some ways exclusionary, is nonetheless reconfiguring nationhood to reflect the diversity of peoples in the region, strengthened by their shared belief in a Democratic Nation.

Theoretical background and justification for research

Our understanding of Rojava as a political community, and the function of ideology and education within it, is embedded in and contributes to a scholarly shift from a narrow focus on nation-states to a broader study of a variety of political communities (with Barış (2020, 2021), Dirik (2017, 2018, 2022) and Lund and Eilenberg (2017) being particularly relevant).

Characteristic of this shift is the desire to understand how 'groups at the margins of the nation-state system' (Dirik 2022, 27) engage in nation-building in ways that oftentimes challenge and redefine nationalist and capitalist conceptualisations of identity, meaning, citizenship and other forms of belonging. While this shift can entail a focus on non-state 'public authorities' who establish control in ways that can mirror the nation-state (Lund and Eilenberg 2017), some scholars writing about the Kurdish context in Turkey and Syria, including Barış, describe how 'although engaged in nation-building, the dominant Kurdish political movement does not pursue state-building' (2021, 2). Instead, Barış understands the model of political community aspired to in Rojava as distinct from, and a direct challenge to, nationalism and the nation-state system (2020, 10; 2021, 8) because it 'sets local assemblies as the ultimate authority' (2021, 9). Similar to Lund and Eilenberg, who describe how, like states, control over resources and property is also important for non-state 'public authorities' (2017, 3), Barış acknowledges that control over natural resources is relevant for the Kurdish movement (2020, 11; 2021, 30). However, differentiating it from models based on centralised authority and homogeneous identities and histories, Barış describes how in Rojava, with its

local assemblies, belonging is based on residency; hence, he characterises the Kurdish movement's model as a 'residential political community' (2021, 22), unique because of its 'anti-statist form and communitarian spirit' (2021, 22). In this context, the replacement of 'representative political participation with a mixture of direct democracy and delegation of power' (2021, 9) and 'rejection of the state' (Akkaya and Jongerden 2012, 1) is understood as radical democracy.[2]

Within these political communities, solidarity between pluralistic groups in an area is strengthened by shared 'ethico-political values' (Barış 2020, 9), in this case encapsulated by the ideology of Democratic Nation. Furthermore, Dirik describes how, whilst protecting oppressed identities, cultures and languages, the movement in Rojava simultaneously seeks to 'dissociate the idea of the nation from ethnic or culturalist ideas in favour of […] nationhood based on shared democratic cultures' (2022, 33). In this sense, while this desire to foster a sense of belonging and community through ideology has commonalities with nation-states (Forrest 1988) and other non-state groups (Sanín and Wood 2014), it is differentiated by its acceptance of plural identities. Dirik further distinguishes between the process of developing this sense of nationhood through the 'state through coercion and law' versus through 'education and active citizenship' (2018, 153), in which the 'decolonisation of the mind from the state's chauvinistic ideology' (2022, 35) leads to democratic cultures being 'internalised and practised by society' (2018, 153).

The importance of education for the purpose of such nation-building is well researched, with schools known for 'teaching citizenship and political community' as well as being 'themselves important sites of authority', reproducing or reflecting broader political communities (Kiwan, Shanks, and Stack 2021, 95). To understand the goals of education in Rojava and its relation to the model of political community described above, we turned to Alexander's discussion of the difference between education in 'closed societies', which propagate 'amoral (or non-ethical)' ideologies that are 'uniform, monolithic' (2005, 3), and in 'open societies', which propagate 'moral (or ethical)' ideologies and allow for 'the possibility of multiple competing ideologies that foster self-governance and recognise free choice' (2005, 3). Closed societies, which may be understood as nation-states or other systems with centralised governance, may furthermore preference the ways of thinking, speaking, and remembering of the ruling class (most prominently described by Bourdieu and Passeron 1977), centralisation of educational structures (Shenker 2012, 433), and top-down teaching methods characterised by 'indoctrination' and 'rule-conforming behaviour' (Alexander 2005, 7). Contrastingly, open societies may be characterised by representing minority as well as majority views (Mills 2008, 80), decentralisation, and participatory teaching methods which educate students about their own oppression (Shenker 2012, 436) and support critical thinking (Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), with its focus on the necessity of developing critical consciousness, has been a touchstone for radical educators). Like other revolutionary struggles with emancipatory education at their core (for example, see Gandin 2011; Shenker 2012), we found many people within Rojava's education system seeking to develop it as a 'moral' system, encouraging the active citizenship Dirik describes, in contrast to 'amoral' systems, where nationhood is cultivated by an oppressive state, such as the Syrian regime. We analysed our findings – in terms of how the new education system both departs from and in some ways repeats the old – with this framing from our participants in mind, reflective also of Alexander's spectrum. In this way, we can say that we engaged with theory in an iterative-inductive manner (O'Reilly 2016).

Despite the significance with which these themes are discussed by supporters of the revolution, much of the literature about Rojava and the Syrian war still engages primarily with questions other than identity and belonging (Baczko, Dorronsoro, and Quesnay 2017, 11). There is considerable literature, for example, on the system of governance implemented in Rojava (Knapp, Flach, and Ayboğa 2016; Küçük and Özselçuk 2016; Schmidinger 2018), and Kurdish engagement with the broader Syrian conflict (Baczko, Dorronsoro, and Quesnay 2017; Federici 2015). This contributed to our interest in Rojava and is relevant for our analysis. Others, however, highlight an overall neglected aspect of research: what Üstündağ's (2016, 206) participants called the 'mental revolution' in Rojava, supported by Biehl's (2015) descriptions of the early educational institutions, and Dirik's (2022) analysis of the 'consciousness-raising' process of the revolution through its popular academies. Beyond these, research on the education system remains sparse (Dinç 2020; Knapp, Flach, and Ayboğa 2016, 175–84, with some descriptions from Schmidinger 2018). Particularly, literature on schools and universities (and the educational institutions tasked with administering them) is limited to Dinç's (2020) content analysis of the elementary school textbooks written for Kurdish students.

Methods

Our focus, therefore, is on that which resembles formal education in schools, universities and connected institutions in Rojava, as they were in mid-2018 at the time of our fieldwork.[3]

We first visited Kurdish-majority cities known as flashpoints in the struggle between the movement and the Turkish state, and known for their support of Democratic Nation, where we engaged in conversations that informed our research. In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and Rojava, we used a variety of qualitative methods: working with local interpreters and using snowball sampling, we conducted semi-structured individual and group interviews with over 100 people in total. In the KRI, this included refugees who had experienced education under the Syrian regime or in Rojava since the revolution, or both. In Qamişlo, Rojava's largest city, we interviewed students and their families, teachers, and staff from schools and universities (we also visited Kobanî and interviewed university officials there), and from various institutions tasked with administering education, curriculum design, and teacher education. We also interviewed students, teachers, and families who remained involved with the Syrian regime's education system. Additionally, we analysed the new teaching manuals and school textbooks, visited educational institutions, and observed relevant cultural events and classes. We then conducted a thematic analysis of our data using NVivo, categorising it based on codes developed through theory and secondary research, and that emerged from our fieldwork. Finally, besides monitoring educational developments in Rojava, during and after our data collection we have made efforts to discuss our findings with participants; with some responses included throughout.

Conducting research in multiple locations broadened our scope for encountering diverse opinions, including between those who stayed for the revolution and those who left, and enabled us to consider any temporal difference in opinions about the revolution since its inception. We also attempted to speak with not only Kurds but also Arabs and Assyrians, and to understand the educational links between regions of Rojava by visiting Kobanî. However, there were limitations regarding who we could speak to, and we must therefore acknowledge that our findings do not necessarily represent the entire formal education system.

Context

Kurds and other minorities in the region of the Tigris-Euphrates river system have long faced oppression from their respective nation-states. At the disintegration of the Ottoman empire in 1920, colonial powers divided Kurdish-inhabited lands among Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. The supposed threat that ethnic and religious minorities pose to national unity has resulted in repressive policies of assimilation from these nation-states (Gunter 2014, 1–2).

In Syria, Arab nationalism is cemented in the national constitution (Carnegie Middle East Center 2012), and manifests in many areas of public life, contrary to the country's great ethnolinguistic and religious diversity, which includes Arab, Kurdish, Assyrian, Circassian, Armenian, Turkmen and Chechen identities (Schmidinger 2018, 13–30). Kurds and other minorities who do not fit the Syrian-Arab ideal have thus often been mistreated, and their identities and political activism suppressed (2018, 65) – since 1962, for example, the regime has stripped over 300,000 Kurds of citizenship (Gunter 2014, 19), and under the Assad dynasty, speaking Kurmancî (the local Kurdish dialect) in public was forbidden. Furthermore, farmers in Cizîrê (one of the most fertile areas of Syria) were forced into wheat monocropping, and thus dependency on the regime for food and the bread market (Knapp, Flach, and Ayboğa 2016, 192). Suppression of minorities is paralleled in the Syrian regime's education system, with its Arab-nationalist narrative (Masud 2018, 80–83).

Responses to political oppression have varied across each nation-state; of relevance here are the anti-nationalist efforts of the dominant Kurdish political movement from Turkey, central to which is the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), founded in 1978 by Öcalan and his comrades. The PKK originally engaged in armed struggle for Marxist-Leninist national liberation (Dirik 2018, 146–151), with some former members attributing authoritarian tendencies to the party leadership (Marcus 2007, 131–151). However, from the 1990s, there was a shift in the movement's ideology. Although Turkey captured and imprisoned Öcalan in 1999, his prison writings continued to contribute to the evolution of the movement, the efforts of which were turning towards the non-state social paradigm of 'Democratic Confederalism', a radical democratic system of governance inspired in part by the work of Murray Bookchin (Barış 2021, 14), and with the ideological framework of Democratic Nation, later elaborated in Öcalan's *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilisation*.[4] At the core of the ideology is a historical narrative that reaches back to the Stone Age, particularly focusing on Neolithic societies in south-eastern Anatolia, and describing the subsequent evolution from the earliest states to what Öcalan terms 'capitalist modernity', characterised by environmental destruction, patriarchal domination, and the suppression of traditional knowledge (Üstündağ 2016, 198). This contextualises and justifies the contemporary struggle for Democratic Nation in opposition to these civilisational forces (Akkaya and Jongerden 2012, 5–7), whereby in defiance of political oppression, identity and freedom are reclaimed through ecology, jineolojî and pluralism; Öcalan envisages this framework as not only 'limited to these countries, but rather extend[ing] across the entire Middle East' (Öcalan 2017b, 37).

An early consequence of the movement's paradigm shift was the formation of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in 2003 (Knapp and Jongerden 2016, 93), which aimed to further Democratic Nation in Syria. From the mid-2000s, initially in Turkey, people began implementing Democratic Nation in their communities (Guneser 2021), but with heavy state repression of such projects it wasn't until the Syrian war that the opportunity came to take this much further. The war left several power vacuums across Syria, and non-state actors

emerged to fill the gaps, including IS and, in 2012, Rojava's Autonomous Administration (of which the PYD is a significant part), which became the de facto authority across the regions of Cizîrê, Kobanî, Efrîn,[5] Minbic, Tabqa, Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor (Baczko, Dorronsoro, and Quesnay 2017, 168; Andrea Wolf Institute 2020, 5). By 2014, the principles of Democratic Nation were officially enshrined in Rojava's 'Social Contract', which outlines the pillars of the ideology and emphasises 'the society's multicultural (ethnic as well as religious) character' (Knapp, Flach, and Ayboğa 2016, 112).

In practice, the political community in Rojava is governed by a dual power structure, owing to its complex context. This structure comprises, on the one hand, the Autonomous Administration, which resembles 'a government, replete with ministries, parliament, and higher courts' (Graeber 2016, xvii), and on the other, the local assemblies of the bottom-up council system of Democratic Confederalism. From early 2014, the most important level of political organisation within this system has been the commune (Knapp and Jongerden 2016, 98), within which people come together at the village or street level to engage in dialogue about local politics, and then elect a coordinating body to represent the commune at the neighbourhood level. Each neighbourhood elects representatives to the third level, the district, which encompasses a city and surrounding villages, and the next level is the overall people's council, which also incorporates civil society organisations. Across these levels there are specific commissions for women, defence, economics, politics, civil society, free society, justice, and ideology, with parallel structures controlled by the women's movement (Egret and Anderson 2016, 35).

The complexity of the balance of power between the centralised administration and the grassroots council system means it remains an open question how this will play out in future (Graeber 2016, xx). Adding further to the uncertainty of Rojava's future are the constant attacks and incursions from the Turkish Armed Forces and their proxies, the ever-present threat of IS, and the effects of broader geopolitical interests in the region (Schmidinger 2020, 5–20).

Democratic Nation-building through education

Some of our participants explained that the provision of security and services played a role in increasing support for the Autonomous Administration (interviews 5, 20, 35). However, the majority felt that the 'war of education', as it was described, was primarily to thank for the strength and emancipatory nature of the political community, with one student describing it as essential to 'build our country and society' (interview 30). As explained by a middle school teacher, even if 'on the military side, you build your forces, and become strong […] [if] you don't have enough education […] this project will be destroyed soon, and you cannot succeed […] in the revolution' (interview 27). Winning this war has involved overhauling the Syrian regime's education system to reflect Democratic Nation, and community outreach. With this in mind, we begin this section with an overview of our findings, gathered from multiple interviews, about the structure and content of the education system at the time of our fieldwork. We then discuss the key curriculum themes of oppression and self-defence, and their links to the pillars of Democratic Nation, showing the extent to which Democratic Nation is promulgated through education. Demonstrative of the impact of this education,

we discuss finding increasingly high levels of support for both the education system itself and the political community it engenders.

Overview of the education system

Since its informal beginnings, a Board of Education and Teaching in each region has been tasked with administering the education system, and a specific institute to design the curriculum has been established in Amûdê (interview 19). To begin with, only Kurmancî classes were integrated into the existing school curriculum, reflective of the power struggles between the Syrian regime and the Autonomous Administration. Teachers described how over time and with increasing control, 'level by level we change the course', until, by 2019, the school curriculum would wholly reflect the Democratic Nation ideology (interview 25).

School curriculum designers focused on changing non-scientific subjects, beginning with the removal of a nationalist subject, and the introduction of new subjects aligned with Democratic Nation (see Table 1), although there were also some changes to scientific and technical subjects, as we will elaborate on below. The number of schools under the Democratic Nation banner has also risen over time: by mid-2018, there were some 300,000 students in over 3000 schools in the Cizîrê region alone, and around 20,000 teachers had been trained. Comparatively, the number of regime schools decreased, such that by mid-2018 there were only 58 remaining Syrian regime schools in the region.

A teacher education programme is taught at specific institutes, established early in the revolution by community members with Kurdish language skills. Various academies have also been established, along with two universities, the first of which is also involved with teacher education. Rojava University, founded in 2016, consists of seven faculties split over three campuses: agriculture, Kurdish literature, and fine art at one Qamişlo campus; education and science (including mathematics, natural sciences, geography, history, pedagogy, and information technology), and jineolojî at a second; and petrochemistry and engineering at a third campus in Rimêlan. By mid-2018, it had approximately 150 teachers and 750 undergraduate students enrolled, with plans for master's degrees to be introduced. A second university in Kobanî was founded in 2017, with 45 students enrolled in two colleges. Initially chemistry, physics, and mathematics were offered in the first college, and Kurdish language and literature in the second, although the officials there planned to add biology, English, French, and geography in 2018, and were expecting an intake of some 500 students.[6]

Oppression and self-defence

Aligned with the emancipatory education discussed in our theoretical background, the new education system teaches youth about the history of oppression of Kurds and other minorities, the current threats to Rojava, and in light of this, how to reclaim local identity and encourage emancipatory ideals.

A participant from the KRI described how 'Syria is like a puzzle – everyone takes their pieces. The Syrian regime takes Eastern Ghouta, Turkey takes Efrîn' (interview 4). Expressed throughout our interviews in Rojava was the sentiment that, besides the historical threats to Kurds and other minorities, there are surrounding states and groups 'who don't like our system […] They want to destroy it' (interview 21). Participants described how these threats

Table 1. Subjects in the new curriculum of the Rojava education system (for Kurdish students; Arab and Assyrian students learn in Arabic and Syriac, respectively).

	Elementary school; students age 6–11						Middle school; age 12–15			Secondary school; age 16–18		
	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Year 7	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10	Year 11	Year 12
Mathematics	←											→
Society and life	←					→						
				Natural sciences →								
										Biology		
										Chemistry		
										Physics		
					Social science/humanities →							
							Culture and ethics/moral					
							Geography					
							History					
										Jineolojî		
										Sociology		
										Philosophy		
Language	Kurdish →											
	Arabic →											
	Syriac →											
						English →						
										Kurdish language		
										Kurdish literature		
										Kurdish grammar		
Art and music	←											→
Sport	←											→

extend to the new education system, with one teacher in training describing how 'the enemy [is] trying to control the mind of society and control the education system' (interview 30).[7] Reflective of a belief in the necessity to educate students about their own oppression (as identified in the theoretical background), these themes are discussed openly, and related symbolism features in educational institutions, including posters and artworks that condemn the Turkish and Syrian regimes, and, although less frequently, IS.

Furthermore, the new education system was often described in opposition to the Syrian regime's education system; all of our participants expressed a belief that it was oppressive, and consistent with the education of 'closed societies'. Education officials, teachers, and students alike spoke of the regime inculcating subservience to the ruling elite, with 'only one line of thoughts' allowed: 'just one language, one party, one politics' (interview 19). A teacher described that this came at the expense of Kurdish and other identities: 'we don't have our language, our culture … so we were lost people' (interview 25). As one student explained, the idea of a singular Syrian Arab Republic was bolstered by only discussing history and geography from its point of view: 'It's all about nationalism – all of the history and geography is lying' (interview 8), the regime having 'hidden' significant historical events and sites of minorities (interview 21). Our participants explained this was reinforced through an atmosphere of fear, with hierarchical teacher–student relations, whereby teaching was done 'by force, by power' (interview 26), with harsh discipline, including 'beating students' (interview 19), and teaching methods focused on rules. Similarly, Western education was described as 'depending on rules, not morals', to the detriment of community (interview 32).

Within the new education system a desire to be 'far from rules, far from capitalist system' (interview 30) is described. The 'rules'-based system is contrasted with Democratic Nation's emphasis on morals, with students learning and being graded on 'many things about our morals' (interview 26). In a teaching manual for educational goals, the new schools are described as 'a real area for consolidating ethical values', including the emancipatory values of 'equality, democracy, freedom'. Shaped in response to the uncertainty and oppression described above, the new education system emphasises self-defence and agency. As one participant (somewhat resentfully) described in conversation, 'war is our nationality'; throughout the education system there are references to war heroes and resistance to oppression. For example, in a teaching manual about teaching methods, a suggestion is included for students to 'write about one of the heroes who resisted terrorism and fascism, such as martyr Areen or martyr Abu Leila'. Related symbolism is also common in educational institutions, with photographs and shrines of martyrs, activists and Öcalan.

Extending these themes, the importance of reclaiming local identity and the representation of minorities is emphasised. This is clear in the content of several school subjects, the significance of which was explained by a Kurdish teacher: 'we can feel we are Kurds, because we are speaking our language, we can read [about] our culture' (interview 25). Rather than teaching 'the history of regimes and states', a curriculum designer highlighted the importance of teaching students that they 'also […] have historical places' (interview 21). Students expressed enthusiasm about learning 'about our geography, about our land' (interview 24), and in a subject on culture and ethics, Kurdish students learn 'about culture of Kurdish people, about their […] way of life, way of food, agriculture' (interview 26). Even for less overtly politicised subjects, like English, curriculum designers described that 'the English language books before were […] about culture of England, not about the culture of this

area. So, we are trying to make books in the English language, but with the culture of our area' (interview 21). Thus, English textbooks include chapters such as 'Getting to Rojava', 'Active mind', and 'Today's world problems'. The importance of reclaiming agricultural heritage is also taught, challenging the regime's historical control over food production and resources. Rojava University is also developing courses 'in agriculture […] because our organisation and society need [these] specialisations to improve our revolution' (interview 20).

Pluralism, jineolojî, ecology

When justifying the need for the new education system in Rojava, our participants often referenced the oppression of Kurds and other minorities and the history of suppression of egalitarian values, as interwoven with the historical narrative described in Öcalan's writings.

In educational resources, for example in the middle school history textbooks, we found a simplified version of the narrative that divides history into 'natural society' (the Stone Age), and 'society with the state'. Curriculum designers described a desire to return to the values of their ancestors: 'we want to benefit from their values, culture, in our life today' (interview 21), and echoed Öcalan's assertions that the capitalist nation-state is the root cause of division, stating that

> there is no real problem between nations and different religions. For example, in our cities, we remember we live together. Kurds, Muslims, Arabs, Jews, Christians, their shops were mixed with each other, all of them living together. But […] when the capitalism becomes strong […] it makes this problem between these components. (interview 21)

Öcalan's framework is understood by our participants to have broad appeal, precisely because it explicitly presents an antidote to these problems, by describing how such an ethno-religiously diverse community could live in harmony. As we return to below in the section on representation, our participants advocate for an education system 'built on multi-language, and multi-cultures, and multi-society' (interview 18), which attempts to 'remove sensitive[ities] between components and make equality' (interview 21), reflecting the broader residential and democratic political community described by Barış (2020, 2021). Further, in the subject on culture and ethics, students described learning about 'how different nations can live together in the system of Democratic Nation' (interview 30), and being graded on 'how to deal with others' (interview 26).

Democratic Nation is further embedded in the curriculum in other implicit ways. For example, when describing the region's geography, teachers refrain from using the names of states, so as not to 'divide it politically' (interview 21). Rather, they focus on discussing 'these components, these nations who are living here' (interview 19). As education officials told us, 'Because we are living in the same area, and we are neighbours in the same city […] of course we need to understand [each other]' (interview 19). As such, whilst Kurds focus on Kurdish identity, as described by Dinç (2020, 1006–1007), the curriculum more broadly teaches Arab and Assyrian identity as well (each focusing on their culture but also learning about the others). Similarly, a history of religions is taught, so as to be accessible to all, regardless of religious affiliation (interview 19).

Reflecting the Democratic Nation belief that in the Neolithic period 'man and woman were equal, working together […] They have respect [for] nature' (interview 21), but in more recent history 'woman is not [equal] to the man' (interview 19), women's liberation is also

seen as fundamental to the education system. In addition to Rojava University's jineolojî faculty, it is woven into school subjects such as 'society and life', and secondary school students have also taken a subject on jineolojî since 2019. Similarly, building on the agricultural focus mentioned, environmental conservation is emphasised, including in the English textbooks already mentioned, with chapters on 'Keeping the environment clean'. A key quality of a successful teacher is described thus in a teaching manual on the subject: 'loves the natural environment and protects it from damage and pollution'.

Gaining support

All of this being said, encouraging people to join the new education system, and thereby accept the broader model of political community, has not come without difficulty. It has partly been achieved through extensive community outreach and dialogue; we heard stories of the education system gaining the support of families who had initially opposed it. As one teacher described,

> Before now, many families don't believe in our project. They send their family, their children to regime schools, because it was recognised and official. Now […] after several years, and more experience, and what we did on the ground, people day-by-day believe in our project and send their children to our schools. (interview 25)

When we spoke with students about the opinions of the wider community, they too shared the view that there is opposition to the new system as 'some families resist this new change'. For such families, 'we are trying to talk to them, trying to explain to them what we have here, which kind of education and system we are teaching here […] [so] many families have changed and decided to bring their children here' (interview 26).

Whilst the number of educational institutions, students and teachers in the new system has grown over time, whether this represents genuine acceptance by all, or, for some, resignation as alternate options dwindled, will be returned to in the following sections. However, it is significant that for those within the new education system, it has shaped how they envisage the future not only of Rojava, but of the region more broadly, with potential positive implications for local and regional politics. For example, students described their desire for the revolution to 'succeed', with one explaining this is because in 'this new system we see there are nice morals. Our future is in this new system'. Another, contrasting the monolingual Syrian-Arab-nationalist education system of the regime with the new system, emphasised that 'now all things are different', with the new community welcoming everyone: 'coloured by language and culture, it is open for all' (interview 26). Education officials explained that 'our system will be an example for all countries in the Middle East', moving beyond the oppressive and divisive systems of the surrounding political communities 'because […] it's not radical Islamic like ISIS, not dictatorship […] it is a democratic system' (interview 19).

Democratic Nation-building through education?

The Democratic Nation ideology is ubiquitous in Rojava's education system and has shaped and strengthened Rojava as a pluralistic and democratic political community. Here we draw on our data to discuss the practical implementation of Democratic Nation in education, and,

as outlined above, how this lives up to and contradicts its emancipatory ethos and the development of active citizenship. Our discussion correlates loosely with the spectrum described in the education literature mentioned, and concludes with some implications of the contradictions we highlight.

Representation

People within the new education system were keen to highlight efforts towards representation and participation for women and for the region's different ethnolinguistic and religious groups, thus moving beyond the privileging of elite perspectives that characterises oppressive education systems. From our research, it is evident that this is not just rhetoric. Besides the curriculum changes already mentioned, there are practical ways that representation is enacted, including the approach to languages. We were told how everyone 'should have their education and courses [in] their language: Kurmancî, Arabic, and Syriac' (interview 19), with school textbooks now also available in these languages. From the fourth school year, students also begin studying the two other main languages of the region. Although some students described the transition (from learning in Arabic in the regime schools to learning in Kurmancî) as difficult, everyone we spoke to within the new system was positive about this change; in an elementary school class, most students enthused that Kurmancî was their favourite subject. In universities, the language of instruction is chosen depending on the students in the class. Similarly, regarding religion, university students expressed confidence in their religious freedom, giving us an example: 'I am Muslim, I can pray here […] Everyone is welcome to do anything' (interview 23).

The region's diversity is further reflected in quotas for positions of responsibility in all educational institutions (interview 19). Similarly, in line with jineolojî, there are gender quotas. This is not merely superficial; during interviews we observed respect and accommodation in interactions between women and men, and between representatives of different ethnic or religious groups, who spoke equally of their gratitude for this. As an Assyrian official explained, 'we have representatives of all [Assyrian] people in all organisations […] it was our dream, and now it's achieved' (interview 19). However, in schools we only managed to meet with Kurdish students, and thus, our data are too limited to draw conclusions about the experiences of Arab or Assyrian students in the new system. In the schools we visited, we were told that the Arab students who previously studied there had all left – some for the KRI, and others for Syrian regime schools.

Decentralisation

Decentralisation being a feature of emancipatory education systems, with parallels to the broader democratic goals of Rojava, we sought to understand what efforts are being made to this end. We found that education officials are at least suggested by members of the community, if not directly elected to their positions (interview 19). Officials try to involve teachers and students in decision-making processes, to ensure they 'are having good relations' (interview 20). In universities, we were told by students and teachers that they engage in discussion with the university officials through regular meetings, and all tasks (such as cleaning) are equally divided. As one student described, 'all are responsible for the university

[…] and we are at all times in discussion, not one [person] decides' (interview 30). The example of student participation in the creation of the evaluation system was given: 'they said, "What do you want to add to it? What do you want to remove?" […] and we make this system together'. As another student told us, 'of course they are taking our opinion' (interview 30). The equivalent in schools is a weekly meeting for students, where they are 'collecting their ideas, their criticisms' (interview 27), and an elected student from each class then meets with the school administration.

However, there are examples that contradict these efforts, demonstrating an imbalance between education officials, and teachers and other members of the community, including the issue of international opportunities and certification. A common complaint was that the new education system was not certified, with one teacher asking 'when our children finish, which kind of certificate will they get? How will they work?' (interview 25). As one student in the KRI explained, 'if [students] get a certificate from those schools, [they] cannot work in Hewlêr, or Europe. Certificate is valid only under [Autonomous Administration] control' (interview 14).[8] Education officials stated that their priority was to keep students in Rojava 'to improve our system here, our revolution' (interview 19). Contrary to the officials' assumptions, however, some students we spoke to saw international opportunities as something that could benefit Rojava. When we shared such feedback, one official conceded that whilst it is difficult in a 'war situation' to attain international recognition, 'we want to do that in the future' (interview 35). Nevertheless, they also told us they had turned down offers for students to study abroad (including from the Netherlands), and it was clear that they could make decisions without consulting students. Such dynamics suggest the structure of formal education is more akin to the Autonomous Administration than the council system, in that it reflects a centralised approach.

Participatory education

Building on the goal of decentralisation, democratisation of education through teaching methods and participation in curriculum design was also discussed. Generally, students we spoke to in Rojava's education system were positive about the participatory atmosphere engendered by these changes, which were described in contrast to the Syrian regime's education system. Firstly, the collective efforts to reform the evaluation system mentioned – with various methods now used, including interviews, presentations, and short tests and papers, and consideration of morals – were frequently (and always positively) referenced. 'In the past, just one time you were evaluated, but now we are evaluated daily […] it is not easy, but in the end, it is for our benefit', one student told us (interview 30). The holistic approach to evaluation extends to university admissions, with courses open to everyone with a high school certificate. Demonstrating also how barriers to education on the basis of gender are being addressed, two middle-aged mothers told us how they previously had to give up further study and careers to raise children. Now, as one explained, 'the door was open for all, like me, as a mother […] it was very like my dreams because from the past I wanted to have a university certificate' (interview 30).

The teaching manual on 'general education methods' critiques the lack of critical thinking or engagement in 'research, investigation, and creativity' in the Syrian regime's education system. Rather, an educational official told us, 'Students should understand what we are explaining […] not just to memorise' (interview 21). To this end, a broader range of teaching

methods are now also used. For example, related to agriculture, students learn 'about the area's plants […] how to grow them. So, in practice we do that in the fields' (interview 23). We saw this in our visits to a university greenhouse and related facilities, representative of the ideology's ecological pillar in practice. Dialogue and discussion were also described as important, including to counteract the regime's domineering teaching style – 'here is different, we are discussing with each other like a friend' (interview 27) – which was evident at times in the classes we attended. Whilst the classes were, however, still predominantly lecture-style and thus not very participatory, it is notable that students (as well as teachers) can provide feedback in dedicated sessions at the conclusion of each class. After one class, students complained that there should have been more discussion. We cannot say what the long-term outcome of this feedback was, but in an interview with university students, they provided the example of a lecturer whose teaching style had been demotivating and unengaging, 'not an active teacher'; but who, upon receiving feedback, improved, 'so he changed his self, his method' (interview 23). In addition, there is a process to escalate complaints with school or university administrations, for issues that are otherwise unresolved (interview 20).

However, we found there are limits to the discussion or feedback tolerated, particularly around questions of ideology in curriculum design – arguably with similarities to the ways in which ideology is propagated by oppressive education systems. Positively, although education is similar across Rojava, there are some differences in the ways it has been implemented across universities and regions. In universities, officials told us that faculties and teachers have the freedom to design their curriculum 'up to the needs of their faculty', because 'in university it is not right to have a specific curriculum' (interview 20). In schools, there is some opportunity for students, teachers and families to influence the curriculum (interviews 25, 30), with curriculum designers collecting comments and feedback, and considering whether to make attendant changes when preparing future editions of textbooks (interview 21). For example, one teacher said of the elementary school mathematics course, 'it was hard for their level, so we asked the committee […] to change [it]' (interview 25). However, we only heard about such practical changes, whilst feedback that questioned Democratic Nation or the way it was implemented seemed controversial; curriculum design officials told us that 'if [people] want to change our way of education, maybe we cannot accept' (interview 21).

Whilst they told us they refrained from referencing Öcalan in an effort not to idolise him, his ideas are nonetheless implicit throughout the curriculum, and the lack of access to alternate sources or ways of thinking presents challenges for the critical thinking and free choice essential to emancipatory education. For example, in Rojava University's library, we found very few non-technical books that were not either by or about Öcalan and his ideas, and regardless of their merit, the implementation of his ideas would arguably mean acknowledging that they can be questioned. When we spoke further with officials about these concerns, one responded that 'When you read Öcalan's books, he mentions […] from which man, or which history book he got his thoughts, so you can go back to these history books and confirm what he said' (interview 35), but they stopped short of encouraging critical engagement with his books or the sources he mentions, or offering alternative perspectives.[9] They conceded that if they received similar feedback in future, they would address it, but from our research it is unclear where the line between acceptable and unacceptable feedback would be drawn.

Discriminatory implications

Contrary to the Democratic Nation ideology, and educators' intentions for emancipatory education, there are some discriminatory implications of the contradictions we have highlighted. For students who disagree with Democratic Nation, or for non-Arab students who might want the educational language of instruction to be Arabic, their options in Rojava are limited (and, as mentioned, we were unable to solicit the opinions of non-Kurdish school students, many of whom were either not attending the new schools, or had left Rojava). Those we interviewed in the KRI were critical of the switch to Kurmancî for Kurdish students because of the difficulties of a sudden transition, and the lack of external opportunities already described. Further concerns were raised about the politicisation of Rojava's education system. For example, a refugee in the KRI with experience in Rojava's education system complained that 'instead of teaching maths, [they would] explain about [Öcalan]' and was afraid of receiving worse grades if they did not 'agree with' Öcalan (interview 13). Multiple families expressed concerns about school-aged people being forced to join Rojava's defence forces, with one describing how they are 'forcing young people to join' (interview 5). From our interviews with refugees in the KRI, it was evident that their concerns about the new education system and fears of conscription contributed to their decision to leave Rojava. For those who remained, we heard repeatedly that the remaining regime schools are crowded and under-resourced, which can be explained at least partly by the takeover of the schools in the revolution.

A clear manifestation of this foreclosure of and intolerance towards alternatives came a few weeks after our fieldwork, when the Autonomous Administration ordered the closure of some remaining schools in the Assyrian communities, partly because these schools refused to adopt the new curriculum, disagreeing with the forceful imposition of Democratic Nation. The Autonomous Administration also arrested a prominent Assyrian journalist for reporting on the closures and attendant protests. A statement by the Assyrian Democratic Organisation describes that this is 'in contrast to the [Autonomous] administration's stated goal for the unity of the country, and contradicts the democratic claims that it boasts' (Assyrian Policy Institute 2018). Such acts contradict the hopes of our participants for a democratic future characterised by pluralism and tolerance, and may make it more difficult to expand the system of Democratic Nation as they desire.

Conclusion

Those within Rojava's education system see it as the type of moral education that characterises 'open societies', and essential to the development of a revolutionary political community. In a diverse region where, prior to and throughout the war, people have faced oppression based on their ethno-religious identities, uniting people with the ideology of Democratic Nation through a simultaneous focus on pluralism and shared democratic cultures has proven fundamental to the appeal of the new education system and the strength of the community. Consistent with what we heard from our participants, the education system promulgates Democratic Nation clearly and effectively, with support for it growing over time. In many ways the education system embodies its teachings, reflecting the broader democratic goal to foster active citizens, as opposed to state-enforced nationhood. The impact of the implementation of Democratic Nation through education on the political

community is evident: our participants themselves argued that the broader revolution in Rojava has gained support because of this education system, which has influenced how those within it imagine the region's future. Education officials told us of their hope that the system will be an inspiration for the Middle East; indeed, its democratic teachings offer hope for all those invested in an alternative to the current neoliberal-imperialist world order.

However, we also found examples suggesting that those who disagree with the Democratic Nation ideology (or its implementation) will find it less democratic. Whilst the ethics or morals employed in the education system and broader revolution appear neutral, and particularly in a context of war, hold great appeal to many, they are rooted in a particular historical narrative, originating from a specific movement, which is cause for concern for some. Analysing the roots of the contradictions we have highlighted is beyond the scope of this article, but possible explanations include the inherent tensions in the dual power structure, the hierarchical history of the PKK (Barış 2021, 186), and the 'difficulty of translating ideology and ideas into everyday practice' (Al-Ali and Tas 2021, 13).

Since our time in Rojava, those within the new education system have faced further challenges, including from the growing Turkish threat and the COVID-19 pandemic, both of which have led to school closures at varying points. However, it has also further expanded and developed, including the establishment of Şerq University in Raqqa, and the strengthening of some international academic connections. As Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami write, the Autonomous Administration's legacy of authoritarianism 'may in the end be dissolved by the ideas spread under its name' (2018, 76); we are of the view that within the teachings of the new education system exists the possibility to continually reflect and improve. Indeed, we interviewed students who were eager to work on aligning the education system even more closely with the pillars of Democratic Nation, and who, through their dedication, feel 'sure that the future will be bright for us' (interview 26).

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Disclosure statement

Notes on contributors

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Notes

1. The name 'Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria' was officially adopted in 2018.
2. Akkaya and Jongerden (2012) provide a detailed account of the evolution and conceptualisation of radical democracy within the Kurdish political movement.
3. We acknowledge the ethical challenges of conducting research in conflict settings such as Rojava. Our fieldwork was approved by and undertaken whilst we were researching at the University of Copenhagen. We had the approval of local authorities for our research in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Rojava, where we conducted our interviews. We were mindful to obtain informed consent and minimise risks where possible, for example by conducting interviews privately, ensuring anonymity of our participants and implementing data security measures.
4. Originally published in Turkish, the *Demokratik Uygarlik Manifestosu* is Öcalan's five-volume magnum opus, the manuscripts of which were hand-written in prison. Three volumes have been translated into English so far (Öcalan 2015, 2017a, 2020).
5. Since March 2018, however, Efrîn has been occupied by the Turkish Armed Forces and the so-called Syrian National Army, or Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army.
6. A third university (Zanîngeha Şerq) was opened in Raqqa in 2021 (ANF News 2021).
7. Indeed, since the invasion of Efrîn, schools previously organised under the Democratic Nation banner have been taken over by the Turkish-backed occupying forces.
8. Graduating from a Syrian regime school also does not guarantee a student will not face difficulties abroad. However, people we spoke to were still unhappy that the possibility of obtaining an internationally recognised school certificate had been removed or made difficult; some students attempted to navigate this by studying in both systems simultaneously, but this was a huge workload and not always possible.
9. Öcalan is also notoriously difficult to follow for his lack of orderly referencing. Whilst the conditions of his solitary confinement presumably account for this, to suggest that students can verify his arguments through references he makes in his books is arguably unrealistic.

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