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Wait Diyarbakir: Account of Kurdish Struggle Told by Mehdi Zana

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An independent candidate, Mehdi Zana was elected by popular vote as the first Kurdish mayor of a major city during the 1977 elections in Turkey. Surprised by the election results, the Turkish government resolved to thwart this experiment, which it judged as dangerous by its popularity. “On September 12, 1980, under the pretext of restoring law and order,” writes Mehdi Zana, “the army provoked another coup with its customary brutality. Parliament was dissolved, and the political parties, associations, and unions were banned. Members of Parliament, ministers, heads of political parties, unions, municipal governments, academics, and journalists—in brief, all elements deemed undesirable and harmful to the ideal Kemalist Republic—were arrested.” On September 24, twelve days after the coup, Mehdi Zana was arrested and jailed. After serving eleven years in the notorious Turkish military prison in Diyarakir, Mehdi Zana was released in 1991 following a conditional amnesty, only to be sentenced again in 1994 to four more years of imprisonment for his testimony to the European Parliament Human Rights Sub-Committee and in 1997 to ten more months for publishing a poetry book. His wife, Leyla Zana—a Noble Peace Prize candidate and winner of Sakharov Prize for Freedom—was one of the six Kurdish deputies in Turkey who were charged with “separatism” and were arrested in March 1994. She spent 10 years in Ankara Prison. Leyla was elected once again in 2011 and currently serves as a member of the Turkish Parliament. Father of two children, Mehdi Zana continues his work as a peace activist from his home in Sweden, where he lives in exile.

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