

PEN NORWAY

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Gezi defendant Hakan Altınay:

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how to stay decent in an unjust world”**

Illustration: Zula



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Gezi Davası
Zula

Mahteme öncesi mahkeme heyeti ve sanıklar bekleniyor

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PEN Norway followed all the hearings of the Gezi trial, in which 16 defendants, including Hakan Altınay were tried for “seeking to overthrow the government by force and violence”.

On April 25, 2022, Hakan Altınay and the other defendants present at the hearing were sentenced to 18 years imprisonment and arrested in the courtroom. Already under pre-trial detention, Osman Kavala was sentenced to aggravated life imprisonment. PEN Norway was a first-hand witness to this shocking abuse of the judicial system and is currently conducting a series of interviews with each imprisoned Gezi defendant.

First, can we ask about your prison conditions? How are you? How is your health?

The physical conditions aren't very bad. I share a cell with Can and Tayfun who are also part of the same trial. We have 3 beds, 3 chairs and a table. We purchased a small TV, a mini fridge, and a device to brew tea. The food is OK, as we purchase additional items from the prison store. We have a small courtyard where we do some exercise. Prison guards are decent, we get to see our family members for 60 minutes per week, which is the highlight of the week. The real challenge is less to do with physical set up and more to do with how best to comprehend and respond to, profound injustice.

We were struck by your versatility when we read your working history in your resume. Apart from your political science education at Boğaziçi University and the New School you studied social anthropology in Oslo. As well as this, there are jobs such as blacksmith apprentice and commis chef.. What effect do you think living in all these unique geographies and having these different professional experiences has had on you?

I am 54 and life has turned out to be far more interesting and rewarding than I could have imagined when I was, say, 14. I was able to travel extensively, pursue diverse and ever changing interests. What I had to write was deemed interesting enough to be translated into languages ranging from Chinese to Icelandic. Gracias a la vida, as the song goes.

Norway was important in all this. I have been fortunate to have met some wonderful people, some of whom are still part of my life.

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Conversations around kitchen tables at Elverum, Majorstuen and Sogn Studentby by are part of me, as are my social anthropology studies at Blindern. Anthropology's perseverance to understand is very precious in today's world where our indignation muscles are quick, but curiosity muscles have atrophied.

"The whole thing would put Kafka to shame!"

We published our work on the indictment(s) of the Gezi trial in 2020, and we have personally attended almost every hearing of the Gezi trial from abroad. What do you think are the most absurd, unacceptable points of this long judicial harassment?

I am glad you observed the trial process yourself, as it is not easy to reconstruct the absurdity of the whole thing for people who do not have their own direct experiences to rely on. As you note, all of us were acquitted by the unanimous decision of the judges in 2019. During the most recent retrial, not a single piece of new evidence was presented, no new witnesses testified, and unbelievably, not a single question was asked by the prosecutor or the judges. At the end, one judge said he saw no evidence was committed, but two judges were able to sentence us to 18-years in jail as well as an aggravated life sentence. This is simply surreal. The whole thing would put Kafka to shame.

"Two judges were able to play with their phones throughout the trial and then convict us"

We know that you were previously acquitted in this trial. Can you tell us how it feels to face a retrial after your acquittal? Is there anything we can learn from this reckless hostile attitude? If so, what is it?

I have recently been thinking about how we listen and the miracles involved in simple but wholesome conversations. What strikes me the most in the most recent trial process is how the judges were able to shut themselves to everything we said. I am willing to bet that if we had 100 random people from the street, we would not find two people who would be willing to convict us. Yet two judges were able to play with their phones throughout the trial and then convict us. I did not think such cross inhumanity was possible. Apparently, it is.

For us, you are part of a group of people who have become symbols of democracy and human rights in Turkey. You have stood up for the right to assemble and demonstrate, for freedom of thought and expression, for democracy and the right to peaceful demonstration. How do you explain the government's fear of these fundamental human rights and freedoms? Or in another words, why do you think fundamental rights and freedoms are under constant attack in Turkey?

Rights as things we are ready to defend even for our foes is not an easy temperament to achieve. I do not mean to argue that there is no progress, but it is slow. We should also note that the July 15 coup attempt has shaken Turkey more severely than our European friends care to appreciate. When insecure, countries, governments do unwise things.

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During the verdict hearing, we witnessed that your lawyer Tora Pekin's defense time was restricted. Mr. Pekin and others in the courtroom reacted to this situation. How did you feel at that moment?

That was indeed a surreal moment. The indictment is thousands of pages and wants us to receive an aggravated life sentence, but the chief judge thinks 48 minutes is too much for my defense. This is unheard of in Turkish court rooms. I should mention that the President of the Union of Turkish Bar Associations describes our trial as Turkey's Dreyfus Case. President of İstanbul Bar Association has called this case the worst case he has witnessed in the last 40 years. Former Presidents of the Republic, Sezer and Gül, also had very damning things to say about the verdict.

"My son, Ege, is in the hands of his very capable mother"

In an interview your wife gave after your arrest, we read that she tried to explain this injustice to your 2-year-old son Ege as a mistake and that Ege came to visit you. How would you like to tell Ege and all children about Gezi and this trial? How are you able to stand so firm and strong while dealing with all these processes and events?

My son, Ege, is my weak point. I am paralyzed with the thought of him needing me and me not being able to be there for him. Fortunately, he is in the hands of his very capable mother, and is surrounded by a lot of love. I don't know whether there is a good or appropriate age for children to discover there is injustice and evil in the world. It is clear that 2 years old is too early. To be a decent person in a just world is a fine achievement but what is more critical is how to stay decent in an unjust world. One thing that clearly helps is other decent people who are willing to do the right thing, even if it means a personal cost to themselves. Ege is now surrounded by many such people. I hope this experience will be a source of strength for him in the future.

"International civil society organizations do a fabulous job of documenting injustice"

What else can international NGOs do to support you?

I am grateful to PEN Norway for taking an interest in our ordeal, traveling to İstanbul to observe the trial and for bearing witness. I am equally grateful to Amnesty International for the "prisoner of conscience" label.

I also need to describe a challenge, without, I hope sounding ungrateful: Research, such as the one from Different Conversations Lab at Columbia University, suggests that we do not heed any criticism unless we first receive three positive messages from that party. International civil society organizations do a fabulous job of documenting injustice, but I wonder what can be done to establish goodwill. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other canonical texts talk about spirit of brotherhood. The French revolution had fraternity along with liberty and equality but somehow those sensibilities fell through the cracks. I personally believe in those values, as well as their indispensability if our critiques are to be heeded.



Gezi brought together several groups who viewed each other with suspicion

Are you still proud of the Gezi resistance? Can you explain to the world what you think the Gezi resistance has left for today and the future?

My cellmate, Tayfun, describes Gezi as 'camaraderie from below'. Gezi indeed brought together several groups who viewed each other with suspicion. Others described Gezi as a commitment to listen generously and to understand. When a police chief died, falling off a cliff as he chased the demonstrators, protestors returned to the scene with signs that said "Your loss is our loss. Your pain is our pain". This was a remarkable act of magnanimity. Gezi as an experiment in building bridges and civic bond is very important, indeed.

“ For the last 10 years, I have taught university undergraduates, as well as 25-35 years old participants at our European School of Politics. I think of them less as students per se but more as people I have the privilege of thinking with. The next piece I plan to write is about bearing witness and virtues include in speaking the truth.

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We have learned that you can have ten books at a time in prison. What books are you reading now? What books are on top on your wish list?

We are allowed to keep 10 books per person in the cell. My reading list is fairly eclectic. This week it is Ömer Hayyam, Ursula Le Guin, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Abdulrazak Gurnah. Next week includes Antonio Damasio and Viktor Frankl.

If you wanted to convey a message to your students about all this, what would it be?

For the last 10 years, I have taught university undergraduates, as well as 25-35 years old participants at our European School of Politics. I think of them less as students per se but more as people I have the privilege of thinking with. The next piece I plan to write is about bearing witness and virtues include in speaking the truth. The cases I have in mind to make my argument are that of the Arawaks and of Gorbachev. Both can be presented as failures because they did the right thing, but I want to challenge that assesment and tease out the role of people who bore witness in both cases. What would be very nice is to share my draft thinking with my students and receive their inputs.

Thank you for your interest you have taken in our ordeal. Your solidarity means a great deal. Please convey my best regards to our friends in Norway.■