

Eren Keskin - Battling for Human Rights and the Right to Her Own Life

As Americans, we often have trouble correctly prioritizing what matters. We sometimes mistake hatred for passion and allow our differences in beliefs to divide us from friends and family. We also take for granted that at any time of any day, generally speaking, we can say what we wish about who we want on both social media platforms and in general conversations and are allowed to do so, living under the protection of our right to freedom of speech.

Should we witness an act of violence, we are quick to call it out and shift blame. We talk openly about issue with which we do not agree, slam politicians and local government for their shortcomings and turn images and videos into viral exposures of wrong doings. However, what if none of this was allowed? What if your opinions, your thoughts and your passions not only were considered verbal taboo, but were also illegal, subjecting you to fines, jail time and even physical or sexual torture? If that were the case, would you still fight? Would you still protest? Would you still fill the spaces of every Facebook and Twitter page with a testament to your personal beliefs? Would you be able see the truth through the forest of lies and fight for what really matters instead of what only matters to you? These are questions that Eren Keskin, lawyer and activist for human rights in Turkey, is forced to ask herself every day. Her story began by shutting out what she was being told she could do about the vicious world in which she lived and instead listening to her heart and using her head to make a difference.

Eren Keskin was born April 24, 1959 in Bursa, Turkey to a well-educated family of chemical engineers, attorneys and architects. From a young age she was taught that her mind was her greatest weapon, and she spent her high school years and early 20's educating herself on Turkish laws and human rights. After hearing about violent Turkish executions, Keskin's passion for law grew and she knew that she was destined to be a Human Rights attorney. That dream came true in 1980 during the Turkish military coup when she also became a member of the Human Rights Association (IHD) of Turkey. The Kurdish movement during this time created a need to silence those fighting for human rights, and many of Keskin's colleagues were tortured, raped and killed for expressing their thoughts and opinions about their government.

Despite setbacks and threats, Keskin continued to fight, working with other female attorneys to form the Legal Aid Bureau against Sexual Harassment and Rape in Detention - a project that provides legal assistance to women who suffered rape and sexual torture while in custody. She also continued to take on cases of human rights violations and speak out publically, documenting the details of such cases.

Over the past 20+ years, she has received death threats and has been forced to serve prison time for reporting sexual harassment against Kurdish women by Turkish soldiers. She has even faced charges for simply referring to the word "Kurdistan" in articles she's written. "Kurdistan," for those who are unaware, is not a threat or in any way an act of character defamation by our journalistic standards. It is a word that simply refers to southeastern Turkey (Northern Kurdistan), northern Iraq (Southern Kurdistan), northwestern Iran (Eastern Kurdistan) and northern Syria (Rojava or Western Kurdistan). However, in Turkey, publically

referring to “Kurdistan” when speaking or writing about a human rights offense is punishable, and considered to be a far more serious crime than even that of killing the innocent.

Keskin’s latest conviction was under Article 301 of the Penal Code, ‘Denigration of the Turkish Nation.’ She received this conviction after responding to the killing of Ugur Kaymaz, a 12 year old boy, and his father Ahmet Kahmaz during an Army operation in 2004, in the province of Mardi, Turkey. At a 2005 public meeting on human rights in Western Turkey, Keskin delivered a speech in which she stated, “The state is capable of slaughtering a 12 year old child. That is the savage framework of the state. Turkey has got to account for it. Turkey’s history is a dirty history.”

Although she claims that her statement was protected by her right to freedom of expression, the Turkish government is not in agreement and Keskin is currently battling for her freedom and quite possibly her life.

Her involvement in this case and cases like this has forced Keskin to face 143 separate trials, the possibility of 10 years in prison and a fine of up to 800 thousand Turkish lira (about \$213 thousand US dollars). In addition, she too has faced the brutality of armed assaults and death threats from the Turkish government, all for no other reason than her refusal to give up on others and to never stop fighting for human rights. If Keskin is lucky enough to survive without jail time, she still faces a possible permanent withdraw of attorney license, a punishment that she temporarily endured in 2002.

Keskin is currently ‘a Prisoner of Conscience’ case for Amnesty International, and her freedom is fought for daily through letters of appeal, petitions and lobbying in her defense. Yet even with all of the support she is receiving, there has yet to be a positive outcome. It will take larger numbers to truly fight this case; numbers that will hopefully stem from the readers of this article.

Human rights should not be a gift that is bestowed upon the lucky or the well to do, it is a basic freedom we should all share. A freedom to speak out when we see wrong doing, to speak up when we are being treated unfairly and to step forward and fight for those who are unable to fight for themselves.

If you would like to be a part of the fight for Eren Keskin’s freedom, you can do so the following ways:

- Contact your local chapter of Amnesty International
- Tweet or email your support for Eren to:
 - The Turkish Minister of Justice (Minister Abdulhamit Gul)
 - @bybekirbozdog (Twitter)
 - ozelkalem@adalet.gov.tr (email)
 - The Chair of Parliamentary Human Rights Commission (Mr. Mustafa Yeneroglu)
 - @myeneroglu (Twitter)

- insanhaklarikom@tbmm.gov.tr (email)

If we fight together, in unity, we can make a difference. No matter our disparities of opinion, race, gender, religion or sexual orientation - we are all human. We all deserve the same basic rights, and we all need to be a part of preserving those rights in every part of the world.