Far From Separatist or Undemocratic Violence: The 2012 Kurdish Political Prisoners’ Hunger Strike in Turkey
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In the of Fall 2012, in the shadow of the failure of peace talks, mass arrests, and the isolation of Ocalan, Kurdish political prisoners in Turkey undertook an indefinite hunger strike. The hunger strike was deemed ‘blackmail’ by (then) Prime Minister Erdogan and, more surprisingly, an illegitimate act of ‘oppression and force’ by the European Parliament’s Rapporteur on Turkey. While pointedly part of the ongoing struggles in Turkey, these reactions also reveal a wider strain in democratic theory and in reactions to Kurdish struggles in the West: The first sometimes suggests formal democracies cannot accommodate nor require radical protest politics, while the latter continues to interpret Kurdish struggles as ‘separatist’ and ‘violent.’

In this paper, we interrogate these assumptions by drawing on our qualitative interviews with these hunger strikers and their supporters (summer 2014, 2016). We ask: How do the hunger strikers and their supporters explain their extreme bodily protest? Do they view it as part of democratic politics, as a rejection of the state, or as a rejection of Turkey? What were their demands? And, what is their evaluation of the ‘success’ of the hunger strike both then and now?

The hunger strikers’ responses are evaluated in the context of injustice against which it was deployed, by the character of the means that were deployed, and by the demands that were made. On the basis of the interviews, rather than illegitimate deployment of force corrosive of democracy, our argument is the hunger strike was a legitimate act of democratic protest against a questionably democratic state that perpetrates deep-seated injustices against the Kurds, for legal rights and an ‘equal right to coexistence’ within Turkey (rather than separatism), and its demands were and remain crucial to the development of a more pluralistic, egalitarian, and democratic Turkey based on constitutional revision.