Creating hope despite the destruction: Akbelen forest resistance against the expansion of a coal mine

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İkizköy-Akbelen forest is at the target of YK Energy company who aims to expand its coal mine territory since 2019. While İkizköy villagers kept watch in the tent for more than 738 days to avert an illegal logging in the forest, they also filed six lawsuits against the company (İkizkoydireniyor.net 2023). Despite these struggles of determined villagers, loggers accompanied by the gendarme came into the forest in July 2023 and razed thousands of trees in ten days. However, villagers did not give up the fight to prevent the mine expansion and protect their soil, water basin and nearby olive trees. Nejla Işık, a spokesman of the villagers is elected as the chief of the village (mukhtar) in the last local elections in March 2024.

Except the essay of Christensen and Christensen (2024) there isn't much study on this case. In a forthcoming book on environmental justice in Turkey that I am editing, there is a study (Kafalı, 2024) which analyzes the media discursive legitimation strategies on Akbelen protests. In Turkey, a country ruled by neoliberal authoritarian government (Tansel, 2018), Christensen and Christensen (2024) emphasize the need to read environmental activism - including the Gezi protests and the Akbelen resistance- as a kind of environmental communication "that cares for both the environment and the democratic rights". To describe this activism, they refer to Pezzulo's (2017) definition of environmental communication as "care discipline".

Regarding the possibilities of "care" in Akbelen protests, a justice perspective may serve as a powerful tool. Roosavall (2017) states that one of the political responsibilities of journalism is to monitor and question the actions of political actors who are expected to produce economic policies that prioritize vulnerable groups recognized in the solution processes (distributive justice) while informing and mobilizing public on these issues. She also reminds the necessity of following the solidarity with different social groups, which may help to create hope as well.

Accordingly, this study aims to analyze the diverse ways of communication constructed by activists, the most followed photo-journalists and artists in different timespans. Following what Carvalho (2008) refers as "critical discourse moments" such as the powerful and frustrated times of the resistance, the study will explore the high and low tides of the hope as well as the divergence and convergence of the narratives among different social actors.

The posts of three journalists received impressions up to 250 K for a single photo/video. Along with these photo-journalists, the official account of İkizköy villagers, of a woman activist who shared regular posts from the forest and a graphic artist who designed banners and other visual-textual content for the protests will be analyzed by attempting to answer the following questions: How do they construct the 'hope in the darkness' (Solnitt, 2016) and the hope in peaceful times to mobilize people into the struggle? While constructing the language of the hope, what type of justice do they reclaim? How they describe the solidarity?

Figure. 1: Selen Çatalyürekli @selen_catayurekli July 26, 2023

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