

## **Discussing Abortion in Turkey: Really, what is going on?**

By Deniz Akin, June 2012

Reading the recent Turkish news has become a great challenge for the citizens of Turkey. During the last week, the government passed a law banning strikes in aviation sector, the world wide famous pianist Fazil Say is accused of insulting Islam with his tweets (He is facing up to 18 months in prison if convicted) and finally, the news have been flavored with the sensational statements of the prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan who named abortion as a 'murder' giving the signals of government's agenda on curbing the women's right to abortion, which is currently legal up to 10 weeks from conception.

Week 22 in Turkey, undoubtedly, feared thousand of people about the prospective backlash on the labor's rights, women's rights and freedom of speech. In this short essay, I'll focus on one part of the story, discussing the transformation of women's position in Turkey.

### **Overview of the prevailing politics in Turkey**

It is crucial to take a quick look at the ruling party in the Turkish government to highlight the continuing political debates in Turkey. Currently, the Turkish state is ruled by the Justice and Development Party (JDP) which is usually described as "a pragmatic conservative and Islam sensitive party"<sup>1</sup>. JDP is in power since 2003. Since the day JDP came into power, it has been holding a in-between position between the Eastern and the Western neighbours. Diplomatically, Erdogan's ruling party is situated on the axis of Turkey-Iran-US, "the tantalizing 'power triangle' of the 21st century"<sup>2</sup>, trying to maintain solidarity with the armed polarization of the East and the West. JDP has also been proposing reforms in relation to Turkey's membership to EU, embracing a Islamic democratic discourse bringing sensitive issues back to discussion, such as the use of veil in the public sector, gambling the strong secularistic roots of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Republic. JDP attempted to remove the ban of the use of headscarf in the public sector. Each proposition concerning the issue attracted immense opposition both from the parliament. Eventually, the ruling party could not succeed in removing the ban of headscarf, they did however, informally permit headscarfs in some receptions that the parliament hosts event though the use of headscarf is permitted under the roof of the The Grand National Assembly of Turkey<sup>3</sup>.

### **Drafting a New Constitution**

Probably what has been central to the JDP's political agenda is writing on the country's first fully civilian constitution. After winning a referendum on constitutional changes last year, a parliamentary committee is currently working on the drafting which is expected to be completed by the end of the year. Regarding the topic what has been in many people's mind is the fact that whether Turkey is going through a deepening democracy or drifting to the edge of a more polarized society. There is a wing, including the European Union, that applauds the preparation of a new constitution, arguing that it is a great opportunity for the country to (re)address the rights of the minorities. There is, however, suspicious voices increasing on the other side claiming that JDP will use its majority in the parliament to approve a new

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<sup>1</sup> Cizre, U. (2008). *Secular and Islamic Politics in Turkey: The making of the Justice and Development Party*: Routledge.

<sup>2</sup> In his book *Reset: Iran, Turkey and America's Future*, Stephen Kinzer, New York Times reporter, uses this definition regarding the power triangle of the three countries.

<sup>3</sup> Read more about the issue on [http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail\\_getNewsById.action?load=detay&newsId=278409&link=278409](http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail_getNewsById.action?load=detay&newsId=278409&link=278409) (retrieved, 04.06.2012).

constitution that curbs the secular articles of the old constitution. Especially The Republican People's Party, which was established by modern Turkey's founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, keep repeating the necessity of preserving the first articles of the current constitution, which defined Turkey as a secular republic.

### **Backlash on Women's Rights?**

Nowadays the word 'backlash' is often pronounced concerning the women's rights in Turkey. It is probably because the country has strong roots concerning the citizenship rights of women as women were given their citizenship rights much earlier than many European countries. Swiss Civil Code was adopted in 1926. This Code guaranteed all Turkey's citizens equal right before the law, regardless of their, language, religion, race and gender. Since then there has been equality between men and women regarding the issues of divorce, marriage, inheritance and witnessing in trials. Swiss civil code also guaranteed state marriage as the only officially marriage. Women's suffrage was introduced in 1934. It is, however, argued by most of the Turkish gender scholars that none of these reforms were able to mobilise women and challenged the traditional norms and values about gender and sexuality.

### **Talking about abortion**

During his speech at JDP's women's branches on 26th May, Prime minister Erdogan likened abortion to Uludere incident, a botched airstrike which resulted in the death of 34 civilians who were mistaken for terrorists. His absurd comparison between abortion and an airstrike killing civilians shocked thousands. Erdogan continued his speech giving the signals that his party is working on a draft that will curb the right to abortion. Statistics from 2008 demonstrates that 10 percent of the pregnancies are terminated through abortion in Turkey which is a lower rate than most of the European countries where the abortion rate is around 30 percent<sup>4</sup>.

Erdogan's proposition about the restriction of abortion rights in Turkey gained immense support from his party members. The majority of Ankara backed him saying that a woman who is considering about abortion should "kill her herself instead and not let the child bear the brunt of her mistake". In addition to this, the country's head of Religious Affairs Directorate has weighed in on the country's abortion debate saying that "mother does not have possession rights over the baby, she cannot leave or kill the baby for arbitrary reasons"<sup>5</sup>. Since then, diverse protests have been organized all around the country, especially in the big cities of Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir. There are two points that scholars, intellectuals, students, doctors underline concerning the issue. On the one hand, the attention is taken to the economically vulnerable groups of women who would not be able to afford having an abortion abroad and seeking underground, unhygienic, illegal ways of terminating their pregnancy. On the other, the attention is taken to the ideological concerns behind the government's agenda on women's rights. The latter is more about the freedom of women as a human being who has autonomy on their own body.

On 3rd of June, there were thousands taking over the streets of Istanbul protesting against the government's plan on abortion, shouting "Bring it on. Bring the state, father, police, police stick. We'll uprising, we'll uprising for our liberation". (video available: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jun/03/turkish-women-rally-abortion-ban>).

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-18297760>, retrieved 04.06.2012

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/imam-blesses-abortion-ban.aspx?pageID=238&nID=22382&NewsCatID=338>

There is also an online campaign launched, named “ Benim Kararım= My decision”. It is a blog where people are posting their painted body photos saying “ my body, my decision” or “my girlfriend’s, my sister’s body, her decision, non of your business”<sup>6</sup>.

### **Secularism vs Religion**

The dichotomic understanding of secularism and religion in Turkey is one of the main cause of the tension that lays at the heart of Turkey’s current socio-cultural and political transformation. Undoubtedly, women have a very sensitive location within the current related debates. Any analysis of this changing position of women in Turkey should transcend the secular/religious dichotomy, but take regulatory mechanisms of the country into consideration as Parla suggests in her article<sup>7</sup>. Here, our focal point emerges as the regulation of female body. When we overcome the biased lenses of secularism/religion opposition, female body appears to be an instrument upon which the ideals of liberals and conservatives sculpt their agenda. The wing that has been forcing unveiling at the universities, is as coercive as those who are willing to limit abortion rights. One probably sees the female body as the only representation of modernization, while the other sees the female body as an engine that provides the requirements of a growing economy that is in need of a younger population, a stronger militaristic force. A true emancipation of women is to be sought beyond all the meanings that is ascribed to the female body, and should be encouraged by the large participation of a unitary but still diverse groups of women. This understanding would liberate women as an autonomous individual from all the religious, nationalist, secularist patterns. It is, however, not an easy task in a time when the women’s movement in Turkey is already fragmented. On top of all, prospective regulations like a ban on abortion will cause more distance among different groups of women, making a unitary women’s solidarity even more difficult.

Further Reading:

Cizre, U. (2008). *Secular and Islamic Politics in Turkey: The making of the Justice and Development Party*: Routledge.

Göle, N. (1997). Secularism and Islamism in Turkey: The Making of Elites and Counter-Elites. *Middle East Journal* 51(1), 46-58

Parla, A. (2001). The ‘Honor’ of the State: Virginty Examinations in Turkey. *Feminist Studies* 27(1), 65-89.

Saktanber, A. (2002). *Living Islam: Women, Religion and the Politicization of Culture in Turkey*. London: I.B.Tauris.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://benimkararim.org/> , photos that are posted from different regions of Turkey can be watched here.

<sup>7</sup> Parla, A. (2001). The ‘Honor’ of the State: Virginty Examinations in Turkey. *Feminist Studies* 27(1), 65-89.