

The Pitfalls of Secularism in Turkey: An Interview with Deniz Kandiyoti

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Feminist Dissent (FD): In the case of Turkey, you have previously written that ‘the secular-Islamic divide is of dubious utility from an analytic point of view’. But what is the historical resonance of this divide? Looking back now at the foundational moment of the Kemalist state in 1923, what do you think were the real possibilities then, if any, for an embedded, democratically articulated secularism?

Deniz Kandiyoti (DK): In order to fully understand the specific resonance of the secular-Islamic divide in Turkey it is necessary to look much further back than the foundation of the new Republic in 1923. Different imaginings of citizenship and national belonging were intrinsic to the troubled process of dissolution of the multi-ethnic and multi-confessional Ottoman empire. The *millet* system, which had long governed the relations

of the state with heterogeneous populations ranging from the Balkans to the Arab Middle East, granted relative autonomy to local communities under *shar'ia* legislation that subjected non-Muslims to a discriminatory tax system and different sartorial and residential rules. The Tanzimat reforms of 1839, that were enacted under pressure from imperialist powers in an attempt to modernize and save the failing empire, imposed a new notion of citizenship that granted equal rights to non-Muslim minorities. This amounted to nothing less than an onslaught on the legal and philosophical foundations of the Ottoman state where *shar'ia* rules stipulated differences in the rights and entitlements of members of the *umma* as opposed to non-Muslims.

Following these reforms, fears of further European encroachment on Ottoman territory grew and the political current of Ottomanism developed in an attempt to unite the Empire under an inclusive notion of citizenship, proclaiming the equality of all Ottomans. The concept was, however, practically still-born as the secessionist movements of the Balkan provinces went on unabated. Pan-Islamism became the favoured state policy during the reign of **Sultan Abdulhamid II** (r. 1876 – 1909) and was based on the premise that all Islamic peoples should unite under the Caliphate as a means of supporting the declining power of the Ottoman ruler. The failure of this policy was dramatically illustrated in the break-away Arab provinces that sought to fight for independence under British tutelage rather than rally behind their Sultan-Caliph. Pan-Turkism, which originated mainly among Russian born emigre intellectuals, was the rallying call to unite the nation around an ethno-national Turkic identity in reaction to the failures of Ottomanism and pan-Islamism. The current of Turkism which was dominant under the rule of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP- aka Young Turks) that deposed **Abdulhamid II**, aimed to rid the country of foreign influences and embark on a policy of “Turkification” of culture, language and the economy. After the dismemberment of the Empire, Anatolian-based Turkism would prevail

with Mustafa Kemal's war of independence starting in 1919 and culminating in the transition to a modern secular republic in 1923.

This genealogy is not only important because of its contemporary avatars but because it places the birth of Turkish secularism in the throes of post-imperial turmoil. Academic treatments of secularism have for a long time remained limited because of their near exclusive focus on republican religious policies (such as the abolition of the Caliphate, and the break with *shar'ia* law) and on Westernizing reforms (namely, the adoption of the Latin alphabet and calendar and changes to the dress codes). These, however, should not be confused with a modern concept of citizenship that positions the state in an equidistant relationship to all its ethnically and religiously diverse citizenry. In fact, the drive towards national homogeneity continued unabated throughout republican history. In demographic terms the percentage of non-Muslims in Turkey declined from around 20 percent in 1914 to 3 per cent in 1927, as a result of war and the exchange of populations with Greece. By the 1950's this ratio had fallen to below 1% and by the 1980s it had further declined to 0.2%.

It took a new generation of scholars to acknowledge that Turkish nationalism rested on a bedrock of social amnesia about the violent history of relations with minorities such as Armenians who were massacred in 1915, pogroms of Greeks, Syrians and Assyrians, discrimination against the heterodox Alevis and the constant repression of Kurdish populations. Behind the veneer of a civic state lay the reality of a majoritarianism that made claims to national belonging co-terminous with being Turkish, Muslim and Sunni. This made a particular blend of Turkish nationalism and Islamism (with a hefty dose of neo-Ottoman nostalgia under the AKP- the ruling Justice and Development Party) the default mode of Turkish politics and a phenomenal roadblock to democratic rule and pluralism. Moreover, after a history of almost seven decades of parliamentary democracy, albeit interrupted by military coups, Turkey

experienced regime change in 2018 with a transition to an executive presidency that institutionalizes one-man, personalistic rule. Thus the promises of a republican civic state, of successive democratic openings from the transition to multi-party democracy to the democratizing reforms of the EU accession process, have received repeated blows. The question is whether this damage has become irreparable.

FD: How does the historical context you have recounted in your work explain the power of Erdogan as an authoritarian populist leader? How does it deepen the quandary of democracy in secular states with religious politics?

DK: Again, it is first necessary to unpack the notion of the secular state. Keeping the historical context in mind helps us to discern that the entanglements of the republican state with Islamic actors are far from new. After Turkey's accession to NATO in 1952 and during the Cold War years Islam was being promoted as an antidote to communism and an infrastructure of associations, newspapers and publishing houses was systematically put in place. Since the transition to multi-party politics in 1946, the accommodations between the leaders of religious communities – such as the prominent *Nakşibendi* and *Nurcu* orders – and secular political parties, who vied for electoral support from their followers, tended to stop short of more radical demands for constitutional and legal de-secularisation. This changed, however, when political Islam entered electoral politics during and after the 1970s, through a succession of political parties led by Necmettin Erbakan and his *Milli Görüş* (National Vision) ideology, partly inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood. The state's vacillations between accommodation and repression of Islamic actors increasingly shaped the political field.

Ironically, it was the so-called Kemalist military, the self-appointed guardians of secularism, who set the stage for the expansion of Islamic

civic activity and encouraged the public expression of Islam after the 12 September 1980 military coup. They made an official transition from secularism to religion-based nationalism by endorsing the so-called Turkish-Islam Synthesis (TIS) promoted by the right-wing think-tank, Intellectuals' Hearth, in order to 'nationalize' Islam and manufacture public consent for the consolidation of military power. The 1982 Constitution passed under their watch made religious education compulsory, the Directorate of Religious Affairs increased its power and reach and publicly-funded religious education received new impetus.

The AKP, which is an off-shoot of the *Milli Görüş*, came to power in 2002. It broke with its parent constituency in significant ways, most notably in its strong commitment to harmonization reforms and EU membership. This enthusiastic pro-EU stance was without doubt related to the fact that it offered a window of opportunity to broaden the political, economic and cultural spaces that had shrunk as a result of the so-called 28 February 1997 process, an intervention short of a coup that gave the Turkish armed forces even greater scope in influencing the public policy process. The EU democratization reforms were seized upon by the ruling party as an opportunity to finally eliminate the grip of the military on politics and to provide Islamic actors with more autonomy by transmuted religiously based political and social demands (such as the freedom to wear the headscarf) into democracy-based claims framed in the language of human rights and multiculturalism.

Until 2007 the AKP still faced stiff opposition from the military including threats of closure for its alleged 'anti-secular activities'. It took measures to consolidate the regime. When it first came to power in 2002 the party lacked its own technical cadres. The process of eviscerating secular track education whilst supporting publicly funded religious schools ('Imam Hatip' schools) as a source of loyal cadres was slow. The AKP chose to enter into an ill-fated alliance with one of the best established *cemaats*, the

Fethullah Gülen movement, that was particularly active in the field of education both at home and abroad. The technically competent graduates of Gülen schools served as a ready-made reservoir of brainpower for the regime. There was also a meeting of minds between the *cemaat* and the party on the question of educating a new 'pious generation'.

The high point of the AKP-Gülenist alliance surfaced during a wave of prosecutions starting in 2007 against the military and their perceived civilian associates (journalists, politicians and academics) for allegedly plotting a coup to overthrow the government. The court cases which followed targeted senior military personnel and resulted in a comprehensive purge of largely Kemalist/secularist cadres from the armed forces.

For a long time, recruitment into the civil service, public administration, the judiciary, the diplomatic service, the military and the universities still went through competitive and largely meritocratic examination systems. For the first time in 2010 it transpired that examination questions for the civil service had been 'stolen' and leaked to members of the Gülen community, who achieved suspiciously high scores. Similar allegations followed in relation to military colleges with mounting evidence this trend may have started much earlier. It was Gülenist officers who were promoted to fill the ranks of those culled during these trials who turned up in front-line positions during the failed coup of 15 July 2016 that resulted in the most extensive purges in republican history. Erstwhile allies were now designated as a terrorist organization.

In brief, the politics of Islamization had become inseparable from the embedding of unaccountable, non-democratic actors into the body politic, eroding the very basis for democratic representation. Any vestige of media freedom and the independence of the judiciary had evaporated. Furthermore, the power of the leader could no longer securely depend on

the popular vote. The AKP has been struggling to achieve a parliamentary majority since 2015 and has to rely on an alliance of convenience with the ultra-nationalist party, the MHP, that opposes any dialogue on the Kurdish question and backs geopolitical belligerence in Syria, Libya and the eastern Mediterranean. A politics of polarization that demonizes all opposition as treason has become the regime's weapon of choice.

FD: Was the initial problem that secularism was perceived and entrenched as an elite project? What about subaltern secular traditions and ways of life? Has there been a vibrant 'secularism of the street', as you have termed it?

DK: The master narrative about the Turkish republic was that its top-down secularism was an elite project that oppressed the believing, Muslim masses. However, nearly two decades into AKP rule and after systematic attempts to Islamize education and the public sphere, the discourse of Muslim injury sounds entirely hollow, especially in view of the new crony capitalist elites cultivated by the regime. That this discourse had lost its past purchase became quite evident when the AKP lost the local elections in 2019 in all the major cities (Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, Adana and Mersin among them) despite making crude attempts to rally the faithful and after forcing a re-run of the Istanbul election which only resulted in increasing the votes of the opposition.

Another narrative that lost its appeal was the equation being made between the secular state and the so-called 'deep state', whereby real power was alleged to lie with non-elected actors in the security apparatus and the military. The AKP, in contrast, was supposed to represent the popular will and any detractors could be denounced as 'putschists'. The fallout of the AKP- Gülen alliance and the failed coup of July 2016 unmasked a 'deep state' of *cemaats* that had infiltrated the nerve centres of the state (in the military, the police and the judiciary). The existence of

paramilitaries, some with mafia-like connections, primed to serve as praetorian guards for the regime also indicated that holding on to power by whatever means might be on the agenda.

However, despite its anachronism the charge of elitism is still worth addressing provided that we disentangle the terms modernization, Westernization and secularism from one another. The process of Ottoman modernization started long before any notion of a secular state appeared on the agenda. Initially confined to the military and bureaucratic fields, Western material culture, fashions and new modes of urban living started making inroads into Ottoman daily life. Although this was not a colonial encounter *per se*, the imperial domination of Western powers in the twilight of the Empire created new cleavages among the winners and losers of changing orders. These were represented in the *Tanzimat*-era novel and later as an opposition between the affluent classes frequenting the European and Levantine quarters of the city and the popular classes inhabiting traditional neighbourhoods permeated by a Muslim *habitus*. On the other hand, much like their peers in the Middle East and South Asia, local reformers in Turkey used the West as a template to critique local customs they saw as outdated and stultifying, such as arranged marriages or veiling. This was quite similar to other colonial and post-colonial encounters where idioms of progress vs. cultural authenticity were circulating freely and where culture had also become a marker of class. The specific sense in which I used the term 'secularism of the street' is to refer to forms of popular resistance that only developed after Islamic parties moved to the centre of Turkish politics in the 1990s and attempted to police the everyday habits and life worlds of citizens, such as bringing restrictions to public drinking. It could be argued that a form of imperial cosmopolitanism tolerant of different modes of life predated the secular republic. But the self-conscious articulation of discontent with forms of top-down Islamic controls was new. It would be facile to assume this discontent was a defence of secularism *per se*. What animated citizens was

primarily an anti-authoritarian impulse which found full blown expression in the Gezi protests of summer 2013. In sociological terms decades of changes in consumption and leisure patterns, in family structures and lifestyles meant that the generation that had grown up under AKP rule (sometimes referred to as the 'Gezi generation') was alienated by the heavy-handed social engineering of the government which coupled with corruption, rampant favouritism and disregard for the environment darkened their futures. Despite heavy investment in religious education numerous public opinion polls suggest that Turkey's youth is becoming increasingly individualistic and secularized.

Whether Turkey has evolved into a 'post-Islamist' society in the sense understood by political sociologists, such as Asef Bayat, is a matter of debate. What remains certain is that it has outgrown both the type of secularism that had become a debased currency at the hands of the military and the era of political Islam which has been waning not just in Turkey but more globally. The AKP dream of a Muslim world dominated by Muslim Brotherhood- style regimes across the Middle East and North Africa with Turkey acting as 'Big Brother' has been shattered. Indeed, prior to the 'Arab uprisings' of 2011 and in their immediate aftermath, Turkey's standing as a Muslim democracy and staunch defender of Palestinian rights made it a model to emulate in the Arab world. Muslim Brotherhood-inspired parties, such as Ennahda in Tunisia, presented themselves as the democratic alternative to autocratic and dynastic regimes and explicitly pointed to the example of Turkey. The rapid unravelling of the so-called "Turkish model" after the debacle of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Gezi protests of the summer of 2013 represented a turning point that pushed the regime to intensify its authoritarianism further. As Turkey became the centre of the Muslim Brotherhood in exile, it also became increasingly diplomatically isolated, retaining only Qatar as its main Gulf ally, Somalia and a faction in the Libyan conflict. The geo-politics of the civil wars in Syria and Libya meant that Turkey found itself on opposite

sides of these conflicts with not only Saudi Arabia, UEA and Egypt but with erstwhile allies such as members of NATO and the EU and Russia which is a nominal ally in the tripartite (Turkey-Iran-Russia) Astana accord on Syria. This isolation has been further aggravated by Turkey's belligerent response to oil and gas exploration in the eastern Mediterranean that consolidated a bloc of nations with common interests (Egypt, Israel, Cyprus, Greece and France). Most importantly, Turkey's regime change through shift to one-man rule, its disregard for freedom of the press and politicization of the judiciary invalidated all its former claims to democratic governance. Now buffeted between the demands of an ultra-nationalist camp and the pressures of an Islamic fundamentalist flank the government is veering between inconsistent and self-defeating policies.

FD: What sorts of policies?

DK: Some of the best illustrations of policy zig zags may be found in relation to gender and women's rights. Like many other countries jumping on the women's rights bandwagon for geopolitical advantage, Turkey made the most of the legal advances of the early 2000s during the first term of the AKP (2002-2007) when EU accession was still high on the policy agenda. Women's NGOs played a key role in pushing through a [new Civil Code](#) in 2001 and a reformed penal code in 2004 and had an active role in advocacy and policy formulation and in the representation of Turkey in international fora. However, systematic attempts at clawing back existing rights started with Erdoğan's declaration in 2010 that he did not believe in gender equality, referring to divinely ordained biological differences. This was followed by pro-natalist family policies, an attempted ban on abortion and assaults on the provisions of the reformed penal code of 2004. The Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*) started operating in tandem with the Ministry of Family and Social Policies with an enhanced mandate and an enlarged budget, aiming to refashion gender relations and family life.

Nonetheless, Turkey was among the first signatories of the Council of Europe's 2011 Istanbul Convention to combat violence against women. It came into effect August 1, 2014. and Law no. 6284 that protects women against violence was passed through parliament with the full blessing of the AKP. Yet, five years later the Istanbul Convention became the topic of a heated debate among Islamist and conservative circles who claimed it would destroy the family and undermine 'national' values. After president Erdoğan reportedly announced in a meeting that it could be "annulled" anger reached boiling point. Turkey's government had signally failed to live up to its promises to tackle domestic violence as evidenced by soaring rates of femicide (at least 474 women were killed last year at the hands of men and male relatives, marking the highest number in a decade) and cases of rape, mutilation and battery were often treated leniently. The idea that the country might abandon the treaty altogether fuelled outrage and led to protests across the country.

The assault against the Istanbul Convention was masterminded by emboldened members of ultra-conservative *cemaats* and a fundamentalist party which, though totally negligible in electoral terms, represented a threat of competition for the AKP's pious base. Things came to a head when the AKP's own cadres became the target of these attacks and when an Islamist columnist used a sexual slur to refer to female members who supported the agreement. The Women and Democracy Association (KADEM) an officially approved GONGO founded on March 8, 2013, featuring Erdoğan's younger daughter on its executive board, was also castigated by conservative critics. In a 16-point rebuttal, outlining the merits of the Istanbul Convention, KADEM vigorously refuted all the charges, including the notion that it legitimized homosexuality. This rift inside governing circles escalated when the women's branch of the Justice and Development Party made a criminal complaint against the Islamist columnist in question. Erdoğan condemned the insult and called for unity

in his party. The decision on the issue was delayed as the president navigated competing interests.

In contrast, the conversion of the iconic Hagia Sophia church from a museum to a mosque had met with little opposition. This was an issue that had been pushed for years by Islamist constituencies, some openly advocating a return to *shar'ia* law. As late as 2019, the president had been reluctant to act on this question, warning that such a move would have incalculable costs for mosques and believers abroad and in terms of foreign relations. Yet amidst a pandemic and a deepening economic crisis this move was deployed as a trump card to rally the masses and to stage an assertion of national sovereignty. It is the emphasis on sovereignty that cowed the opposition into acquiescence. In the case of the Istanbul Convention, however, Erdoğan might have overplayed his hand by pandering to its critics, creating an unexpected backlash among women, uniting Muslim women joined and their secular sisters in a shared opposition. This was no trivial matter since the AKP is greatly reliant on its female voter base that according to past polls supported the party and the leader to an even greater extent than men.

FD: How do you explain the AKP's appeal to women?

DK: For women of the elite who were beneficiaries of state largesse with positions in the media, in business or in NGOs, loyalty was understandable. Ironically, these were also the women who were prepared to break ranks when their rights were at stake, as demonstrated by the ongoing struggle over the Istanbul Convention.

The story is somewhat different for women of popular classes. One of the principal pillars of the AKPs electoral success had been the improvement of the economic conditions of the poorer strata through the expansion of welfare entitlements (these made up 0.5 percent of G DP in 2002 and rose

to 1.5 percent of GDP by 2013). There is a gendered pattern to welfare distribution with women making up the majority of aid recipients since they are targeted as mothers and as carers of the elderly, sick and disabled. Moreover, women are not just passive consumers of benefits but active participants in daily interfaces with public bodies at the local level that provide them and their children with health services, educational support and other outreach activities. For women of the popular classes, especially those of rural extraction, this creates a new sense of “citizenship through entitlement”. What is more although the funding for these activities come from taxpayers' money, sometimes augmented by charitable giving, the beneficiaries are persuaded that they result from party largesse- a belief no doubt cemented by the distribution of in-kind help for winter fuel and basic foodstuffs from party coffers especially during election periods. That is why the electoral loss of the most important metropolitan municipalities was such a bitter blow to the regime since it lost one of its main channels of political patronage through the distribution of funds, services and jobs. However, the proof of women's loyalty does not lie in voting behaviour only but in their demonstration that they are among the worthy who have absorbed the party's message about their god-given vocation as mothers and home makers and those who realize that only the deserving will be protected. I would remind those who think that the price of protection is too high that trading acquiescence and loyalty against protection and security is the oldest deal with patriarchal power in all its forms. This also explains the fury at the soaring levels of violence against women and the apparent impunity of perpetrators which gives the lie to promises of protection and dignity.

FD: You seem to refer here to a type of ‘patriarchal bargain’, one of the conceptual contributions you’re best known for. Do you consider the situation in post-Arab Spring ME points to new forms of patriarchal bargaining?

DK: I most certainly do, which is why I no longer use the term patriarchy to designate novel forms of enforcement of male dominance and forms of resistance to it. I prefer the term *masculinist restoration*. Let me explain why.

For a long time violence against women was primarily apprehended through the lens of domestic violence. Indeed, most abused women tended to know their assailants whose offences were routinely covered up to avoid dishonour and shame while states generally upheld kin prerogatives over the control of women in law or in practice. However, new barriers were breached by reactions to popular uprisings starting with the Arab spring in 2011. The public revulsion felt in Egypt when female demonstrators were subjected to forced virginity tests in police custody or when they became targets of organized mass sexual molestation during demonstrations turned the spotlight on the political nature of violence as never before. Participation in public collective action clearly exposes women to new types of retribution and brutality. Equally telling are instances of violence that occur in anonymous public spaces, are perpetrated by strangers, and have a deceptively random and spontaneous character. Amalgamating the wave of femicides in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, the gang rape on a bus in New Delhi that created a public furore, forms of systematic attacks on women during and after the popular uprisings of the Arab spring and attacks of women on buses, streets and parks regularly reported in Turkey as emanating from an undefined concept of patriarchy does us a disservice. Both these manifestations of violence, and the societal reactions to them, break the mould of silence and dissimulation that were the hallmarks of patriarchy in its more traditional guise. Gender-based violence has now firmly entered the public domain eliciting storms of protest, debates, demonstrations, petitions, blogs, advocacy and solidarity campaigns. I therefore proposed the term masculinist restoration to denote a break with the past and identify a phase when patriarchy is no longer secure and requires higher levels of

coercion and the deployment of more varied ideological state apparatuses to ensure its reproduction.

In this perspective, new patterns of violence against women can no longer be explained with reference to some assumed routine functioning of patriarchy but point to its threatened demise at a point in time when notions of male dominance and female subordination are no longer securely hegemonic. Whether at street level or at the level of governance the bid to maintain power may be reduced to its crudest coercive means and appeals to orthodoxy in Bourdieu's sense since the taken-for-granted fabric of patriarchal acquiescence is frayed and punctured by daily breaches of the gender order. Likewise, anti-patriarchal resistance takes overtly political forms at a time when misogyny and homophobia emerge as key ingredients of rising populist authoritarian regimes everywhere, from Bolsonaro's Brasil to Erdogan's Turkey, from Putin's Russia to Orban's Hungary. It would be fair to say that there was hardly a time when the politics of gender was more clearly indexed to struggles for democracy.

FD: What contribution did the turn to neo-liberalism make to the longstanding divide between religion and secularism in Turkey? How did it contribute specifically to the waning of the secular project?

DK: I have already recounted some of the many influences (including the military coup of 1980) that expedited the rise of Islamic actors in Turkey. However, these would not in themselves have provided the boost created by the neo-liberal turn that started with the structural adjustment policies of the 1980s. These entrenched a new capitalist elite, also called 'green capital'. Hitherto, state patronage had been key to the development of the secular big business community in Turkey while religiously conservative smaller entrepreneurs lacked the social capital and political connections to be included in these networks. This changed with the shift from state-led development to an export-oriented market economy which provided

a favourable environment for the development of medium-scale provincial enterprises (dubbed “Anatolian tigers”). Under Turgut Özal’s premiership, the political economy of the 1980s led to a more thorough embedding of Islamic actors in the business world by providing access to alternative channels of finance, to the mobilisation of savings and markets and of the consolidation of the growth of Islamic capital. Processes of market reform involving deregulation and privatisation also affected the educational domain, providing fertile ground for the proliferation of new actors such as the Fethullah Gülen community’s networks of schools, tutorial colleges and monitored student residences. I alluded to the consequences of the fateful alliance between the AKP and the Gülen *cemaat* earlier. It is important to pay attention to how processes of privatization and deregulation contributed to these entanglements.

Initially, the rapid rates of growth stimulated by market reforms raised hopes for a mode of governance that combined a market economy with democratic representation under an Islamic-leaning government that was mindful of EU rules and regulations. However, the regime rapidly morphed into a crony capitalism dominated by an AKP-affiliated elite syphoning off state resources into sectors like construction, public infrastructure and energy to the detriment of the economy as a whole. The structural problems of the economy culminated in a major economic and financial crisis, now aggravated by the effects of the pandemic. The regime’s waning popularity made it more beholden to ultra-nationalists and to religious *cemaats* with their base of more religiously hard-line supporters. While the former push hard-line policies on relations with the Kurdish minority, the latter promote conservatism in the realm of gender and family relations and de-secularization policies.

FD: Lastly, we would like to ask you what kind of secular feminist movement exists in Turkey, and what is happening with issues such as sexual rights?

DK: There is a robust women's movement in Turkey which predates the republic. Starting initially among urban elites it diversified and expanded into a mass movement with a stubborn presence on the streets and the ability to mobilize across political persuasions on certain key issues (as my discussion of the Istanbul Convention illustrates). With a Civil Code adopted in 1926 that breaks with *shar'ia* law and women being granted the vote in 1934 the republican regime had opened up an arena for state-sponsored 'feminism'. However, while these reforms accorded women equal rights *de jure* some of the fundamental cultural premises underlying gender relations and sexuality remained untouched.

The vanguard of second wave feminism in the 1980s consisted of secular women who had benefited from the educational and employment opportunities afforded by the Kemalist reforms. Many were members of the Turkish left. The break of feminists from movements on the left bore striking resemblances to second wave feminisms in Europe and the United States which were the earlier products of the students' movements of the late 1960s. From then on, we would see both continuities with the earlier Kemalist project in renewed efforts to deepen legal reforms alongside important new departures in the recognition of previously taboo issues such as body politics, gender-based violence and sexualities

Until the 1980s ideological divergences between mainstream Kemalist women, socialist feminists and a budding radical feminist movement could be discerned through their varied platforms, activities and sometimes short-lived publications. After the 1990s women's activism took a turn towards identity politics against the background of, on the one hand, the mobilization of Muslim women against the headscarf ban, and, on the other, the demands for national recognition and autonomy of Turkey's Kurds. This new conjuncture placed secular, Islamic and Kurdish women of various persuasions in complex relationships of conflict, dialogue, and co-operation with one another.

The late 1990s and early 2000s were periods of great ferment and considerable achievement for the women's movement. Whereas there were only 10 registered women's organizations between the years 1973 and 1982, these rose to 64 between 1983 and 1992 and by 2004 there were over 350 women's organizations. Enabling international conjunctures (such as the EU accession process) also created new opportunity structures for women's collective action and opened up spaces for solidarity and coalition building in the 2000s. Networking and advocacy efforts by coalitions of women's NGOs delivered major legislative changes with the Civil Code in 2001 and the Penal Code in 2004. Sexual liberties platforms and NGOs advocating LGBTQ rights also joined these coalitions although these remained fragile as sexual liberties remained a divisive issue. Yet Turkey occupied a relatively liberal space for a long time, as evidenced by the yearly Pride marches in Istanbul where gays from all over the Middle East converged.

However, despite remaining a signatory to international conventions like CEDAW, the regime elaborated a new conservative discourse which was coupled with institutional changes. The General Directorate of Women's Status and Problems, was abolished in 2011 and replaced by the Ministry of the Family and Social Policies. Women were cast primarily as objects of "protection" alongside children, the disabled and the elderly rather than full-fledged bearers of rights. The Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*) was accorded new and important roles, in co-operation with other ministries, to socialize women into Islamically-sanctioned roles. Gender issues were constantly kept on the agenda by systematic attempts to roll back the gains of the 2001 Civil Code and the 2004 Penal Code, on issues such as child marriage, accepting extenuating circumstance for rapists who marry their victims, divorce and alimony.

Whilst overtly targeting feminist organizations, these top-down policies have also exerted a demobilizing effect on Islamic women's NGOs and had

a crippling effect on Kurdish women's civil society initiatives. The Kurdish women's movement which had been gaining momentum since the 1980s presented conundrums for Turkish women activists across the board. The irony was that the Turkish modernization project that presented itself as the vanguard of women's emancipation during the early years of the republic was now being upstaged by a Kurdish movement which both at the level of rhetoric and in its governance practices appeared to place gender equality at the heart of its political project. The official ideology of the PKK shifted to a position that made the liberation of the Kurdish nation and of its women coterminous. Indeed, you may recall that during the period when Rojava was at the forefront of resistance against ISIS in Northeastern Syria, Kurdish women fighters and forms of democratic governance involving women representatives at all levels received a great deal of publicity in the West. In Turkey, during the period of the now defunct "Kurdish Opening", which started officially in June 2009 and was short lived, both secular and Islamic women's NGOs participated in meetings with their Kurdish counterparts. For instance, the broad-based Women's Initiative for Peace (*Bariş İçin Kadın Girişimi*, or BIKG) which was founded in 2009 acted as a bridge between Turkish and Kurdish feminists. Both secular and Islamic women's NGOs co-operated with ÇATOMs (*Multi-Purpose Community Centres - Çok Amaçlı Toplum Merkezi*), state-sponsored organizations for women that provided Turkish literacy courses, training in health education programmes that included family planning and income generation. These attempts were critiqued by some Kurdish women for having an "assimilationist" bias and independent Kurdish feminist initiatives displayed a range of positions in terms of their willingness to combat patriarchy alongside fighting for the national cause. Nonetheless relations among some sections of Turkish and Kurdish feminist movements matured into more affirmative relationships of both solidarity and coalition-building in the 2000s. These platforms for dialogue were eliminated with the decimation of civil society organizations.

The last International Women's Marches on 8 March, that now also feature some headscarved women, were met with police brutality. The Gay Pride marches were banned altogether and homophobia reached an unprecedented peak. Indeed, one of the allegations made against the Istanbul Convention was that it encouraged homosexuality and destroyed the family. Although KADEM, a government approved women's NGO mounted a spirited defence of the Convention they had earlier been at pains to dissociate themselves from these charges by triggering an anti-Pride campaign on social media denouncing "gay perversity". When it came to the rights of sexual minorities any consensus about core issues relating to women's rights could easily unravel and reveal their utter fragility. This does not prevent some feminist groups in Turkey from castigating one another in terms that are utterly familiar to any UK readership that has been following the bitter debates between radical feminists who have reservations about an overly liberal gender assignment regime and others who denounce them as TERFs. Try to imagine a country where the spectrum of opinion ranges from those who sanction underage marriages and marital rape to feminists who fall out over gender re-assignment practices. These are the sorts of parallel universes and the levels of cacophony you find in Turkey. Sadly, the most conservative platforms are often the ones with the loudest voices, making an insistent bid for legislative changes. The greatest challenge will be to form broad-based political coalitions that cut across gender, religion and ethnicity in defence of pluralism and democratic rights.

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