

## A Brief History of the Feminist Movements in Turkey

Written by Adam Leake

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

# A Brief History of the Feminist Movements in Turkey

<https://www.e-ir.info/2012/08/29/a-brief-history-of-the-feminist-movements-in-turkey/>

ADAM LEAKE, AUG 29 2012

This essay will seek to address the main cleavages that exist within the feminist movements of Turkey. These cleavages have become most apparent following the second wave of feminism which occurred following the 1980 military coup d'état and are considered to exist in three forms. Arguably the most powerful feminist movement is the one most closely associated with the West and Western movements which, like other feminist movements across the world, adopted the phrase 'personal is political' as they sought to address issues such as domestic abuse. The other movements that exist within Turkey have been called 'Islamist feminism' and 'Kurdish nationalist feminism' and this essay will discuss them further to see the impact they have had and are having, not only on Turkish society, but on the feminist movement as a whole. First however, it is necessary to know the context within which Turkish feminism has developed and for that reason this essay will look at the history of feminism following the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923. Following the brief history and the overview of the main strands of feminism and their differences, this essay will analyse the similarities that exist between the movements. If there are a basic set of shared values, and considering they are all fighting for the rights of women there should be, then perhaps there is a possibility of future unity between the movements which would allow them to achieve greater success in securing women's rights. However, it must be acknowledged that it is difficult to achieve unity if there is not a common understanding of what the rights of women are. This is a major problem that divides the Islamist feminists and the 'secular' feminists and surfaces most prominently in Turkey with the issue of the head scarf in public places. In the final section of the essay, the idea of 'project feminism' will be addressed with relation to both the ruling government party – the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) – and non-governmental organisations. It is necessary to question the extent to which both the AKP and NGOs have helped in the empowerment of women, helping to unify feminists from different backgrounds, or whether they have hindered the progress of feminism in Turkey by using top-down policies and restricting the growth of grass-roots feminism.

—

The founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923 and the state's quest for modernisation was undoubtedly beneficial for the women of Turkey. Diner and Tokaş report that following Kemalist reforms and the adoption of the Swiss civil code, "Turkish women were granted the formal equality with men in divorce, inheritance and custody over children" (2010, p44). However, as the State saw itself as the protector of the fostering Republic, when Nezihe Muhittin, a female rights activist, established a party that concentrated only on women's right to vote in the late 1920s, it was shut down. Presumably, the Kemalist elite thought it was too soon for the new states to cope with multi-party politics. Upon the rejection however, Muhittin was encouraged to establish the Turkish Women's Union (*Türk Kadınlar Birliği*, TKB) and within the framework of this organisation the first wave of feminism in Turkey gained pace. In the 1930s the TKB achieved success and women were granted the right to vote first in the 1930 municipal elections and then in the 1934 general election. However, upon their success, the TKB was seen by the state as no longer necessary and in 1935 the Union was closed down (Diner and Tokaş, 2010). This brought about an end to the first wave of feminism in Turkey, although the first wave of feminism took place decades later than the first wave of feminism in the West, it took place with remarkable speed following the founding of the Republic and demonstrated the Kemalist elite's dedication to modernise and follow in the footsteps of the West.

Just as the first wave of feminism occurred decades after that of the West, the same was also true for the second wave. Emergence of the second wave of feminism is widely believed to have come about in the 1980s, not only after

## A Brief History of the Feminist Movements in Turkey

Written by Adam Leake

the 1980 military coup d'état but as a result of it (Diner and Tokaş 2010; Ayata and Tütüncü 2008; Arat 2008). Ayata and Tütüncü believe that "when the military regime harshly suppressed left-wing movements, women found a niche to express their feminist concerns" (2008, pp367-368) due to the vacuum left when many of the male activists were imprisoned. During the 1980s, the feminist movement gained momentum as it followed in the footsteps of the global second wave as it sought to bring domestic abuse into the public light by declaring that 'personal is political' (Diner and Tokaş, 2010). The year of 1987 saw the first mass feminist demonstration of Turkey take place in Istanbul. About 3000 women took to the streets to protest against a judge's decision not to grant a woman divorce on the grounds of domestic abuse because he deemed the beatings necessary in order to keep control of the woman (Diner and Tokaş, 2010). It was also during the 1980s, and arguably also a result of the military coup, that there was resurgence in Islam. This resurgence gave rise to what has become one of the most debated topics in Turkey – the wearing of the veil in public institutions. It is within this context that Islamic feminism developed. Just as the resurgence of Islam gave birth to the concept of the Islamist feminist, the rise of Kurdish Nationalism gave birth to the notion of the Kurdish nationalist feminist. The splintering of the feminist movement and the development of alternative feminist groups in the 1990s is seen as some as the third wave of feminism in Turkey (Diner and Tokaş, 2010). The three main strands of feminism will now be looked at in more detail.

The main strand of feminism to emerge following the 1980 coup was what has been termed Kemalist or secularist feminists although many commentators drop any prefix at all and refer to them simply as feminists. To understand the values of the feminists in Turkey one simply has to look to the West. As mentioned above, the main issue that the feminist movement concentrated on was domestic violence. As the movement gathered momentum, various organisations and campaigns were established. One such campaign was the 'Purple needle campaign' which sought to raise awareness and bring an end to violence and sexual abuse of women on public transport through the means of protest, conferences and parliamentary lobbying (Diner and Tokaş, 2010). Diner and Tokaş also report that during the 1980s and 1990s the rise of the feminist movement was exemplified by the publication of over 100 women's magazines and periodicals and with the establishment of women's organisations and the opening of women's studies departments at a number of major universities (2010, p46). The wide range of organisations and periodicals that were established demonstrates the heterogeneous nature of the feminist movement. Despite, or perhaps because of the lack of a central organising body, the movement was able to achieve relative success into the 1990s which, some may argue, is seen in the establishment of "a division that was in charge of improving the rights and status of women in society" (Diner and Tokaş, 2010, p47) within the Prime Ministry. The movement has also broadened the range of issues in the pursuit of equal rights for women and "although violence against women remained the top issue, the focus of feminists changed from issues such as domestic division of labour... to issues such as women's involvement in politics and elimination of discriminatory laws" (Marshall, 2005, p106) which shows the diversifying nature of the feminist movement.

Given the circumstances during which the second wave of the feminist movement emerged, it is not surprising that there was soon a rising movement of Islamic feminism. Many commentators argue that it was the military Coup of 1980 that helped the rise of political Islam. Toprak, states that "*as paradoxical as it seems, it was the military after the 1980 coup that helped strengthen political Islamism*" (2005, p179) as it sought to use the religion to battle Communist sentiments. At a time of growing feminist feeling amongst women, some may argue that it was inevitable that a feminist movement would emerge out of the newly strengthened Islamists. According to Mojab, many Islamic feminists "*treat Islam as the only authentic, indigenous road to gender equality and justice* (Mojab, 2001, p130)." However, critics argue that the very term 'Islamic feminist' is an oxymoron, because you cannot be a feminist and defend such a male dominated institution. Diner and Tokaş put forward that in the 1990s a new breed of critical Islamist feminist intellectuals appeared and questioned the position of women within Islam. They challenged the male dominated religion and question women's role within the Islamic community and the male dominated interpretation of the Koran. As well as women's role within Islam, Islamic feminists also turned their attention to the role of Islamic women within the public sector. Could it be possible for them to express their religion through the wearing of the headscarf and still take up positions such as judges, Members of Parliament or even president? The issue of the headscarf is on that will be returned to later in the essay as it is important in displaying the complexity of the cleavages within the feminist movements of Turkey.

In the 1980-1990s, following the growth of the Kurdish Worker's Party (PKK) and the increase of attacks on Turkish

## A Brief History of the Feminist Movements in Turkey

Written by Adam Leake

targets, the Turkish military initiated forced evictions of villages which were thought to harbour PKK sympathisers. According to some estimates, during the 1990s around 3000 villages were evacuated, migrating 3 million people to the West. It was in these circumstances that the Kurdish nationalist feminists became established; out of increased fear, insecurity, and vulnerability and out of increased politicisation of the Kurdish women (Diner and Tokaş, 2010). Some critics may question these women being called feminists. For instance, what is the difference between Kurdish nationalist feminists and female Kurdish nationalists? Advocates of Kurdish nationalist feminism such as the women's group KAMER (who work to raise awareness of gender based discrimination and violence within the context of the Kurdish struggle for greater autonomy), will claim that Kurdish nationalist feminists promote the welfare of women and highlight not only the Kurdish struggle for independence but also the difficult conditions created for women by the conflict between the Turkish military and the PKK. Groups such as KAMER felt that the establishment of Kurdish nationalist feminist groups was necessary because of the nature of the mainstream Turkish feminism. Arat highlights that "the vanguard of feminist activism in Turkey were educated, mostly professional middle-class women" (1998, p119). If this is in fact the case then it is not surprising that Kurdish women, who live in the less affluent south-east of the country, are taking up the struggle to fight for their own cause.

Despite the cleavages in the feminist movement in Turkey, it should not be difficult to find similarities in what they stand for as they all, as feminists, should be in pursuit of increased rights for women. As stated above, the feminist movement that emerged after 1980 was one that fundamentally wanted to see an end to domestic abuse. The cleavages appear however, not so much in the aims of the movements but in the context. For instance, while the mainstream feminist movement wanted to look at issues confronting women in Turkey in general, Kurdish nationalist feminists wanted to bring particular attention to how the conflict between the Kurdish and the Turkish is having a severe impact on Kurdish women. Although Kurdish nationalist feminists are likely to support the feminist movement as a whole, it may be the case that they do not always get the support of mainstream feminists, particularly if the mainstream feminist is also a Turkish nationalist. An example of this is the case Neceka Arat, a feminist and Kemalist academic, opened against Eran Keskin, a Kurdish nationalist feminist who claimed that Turkish securing forces were raping women in the Kurdistan region (Diner and Tokaş, 2010). It seems here that Neceka Arat's nationalist sentiments came before her feminist sentiments.

Despite both reformist Islamist feminists and the mainstream feminists wanting to increase the role of women in the public sector, the issue that divides them once again is the context. Many Islamist feminists fight for the right, not only to participate in the public sector but to express their freedom of religion by wearing their headscarf at the same time. Although the headscarf for mainstream feminists may be "an issue that reveals the backwardness of Islamist ideology" (Marshall, 2005, p110), both orthodox and reformist Islamist women believe "it gives women freedom" (ibid. p111). They feel that it gives them freedom because a women's body is no longer the object of sexual desires. Feminists would argue that the problem in this case is the male dominated society which, for centuries, has portrayed women's bodies as sexual objects. Women should not be forced to cover up because of the image of women men have created. Also in complete contrast to the values of feminists, orthodox Islamists "argue that staying home is best for women because it protects them from being exploited by men in the labour market" (Marshall, 2005, p115). Mainstream feminists would argue against orthodox Islamists being called feminists at all as they continue to accept and work within a religious institution dominated by men. These disputes, not only between Islamist feminists and mainstream feminists but also between reformists Islamists and orthodox Islamists, show the diverse nature of the feminist movement. Marshall notes that this "competition between feminists and Islamists women's groups over who will influence public policy and public opinion regarding the role and status of women in modern Turkish society only adds to the difficulty of creating a coalition" (Marshall, 2005, p118). Over the past decade however, the Turkish Justice and Development Party (AKP) government and various non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have attempted to unite the collective feminist feelings across Turkey in an attempt to increase the rights and participation of women.

Since the 1990s and into the 2000s there has been a rise in what has been termed 'project feminism'. This type of feminism is usually led by a combination of NGO-government initiatives, often with the aid of funding from international organisations such as the European Union (EU) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). Project feminism is something that is widely debated among feminists. This is because it is claimed that project is pursued for alternative gains, for example, for the gain of women's votes by governments or for the gain of profit by

## A Brief History of the Feminist Movements in Turkey

Written by Adam Leake

certain NGOs. Feminism should be for the gain of women. Feminists also claim that project feminism leads to a top-down approach to solve the problems faced by women and that the whole project is within the control of the patriarchal system. This is clearly contrary to the “feminist ideal [which] was that women would work together collectively for... emancipation, resisting hierarchical relationships and competitive structures of power” (Diner and Tokaş, 2010, p55). Nevertheless, the advances made by project feminism in Turkey in the last two decades cannot be ignored and when looking at their achievements it is also useful to see how the government has also increased its support for women’s rights.

Given the importance of women in the election victory of the AKP in 2002, with their relentless door-to-door campaigning, it is not surprising that they are high on the list of people the AKP want to keep happy. Ayata and Tütüncü (2008) believe that there has been an increase in the visibility of women in the public sector, especially through the AKP’s use of women’s auxiliaries which acted as the ‘feminist’ voice of the government. The use of these auxiliaries has been useful in the AKP’s attempt to calm the issue of the headscarf and this has been done by placing unveiled women high and viable in the system. For instance, “at the top of the Hierarchy there is Selma Kavaf, an unveiled school teacher” (Ayata and Tütüncü, 2008, p372), however, some may claim that this is done simply to try and decrease the speculation that they are ‘Islamifying’ politics. Despite the use of auxiliaries, critics claim that “even though there has been an increased visibility of women in AKP politics, this has not led to an increased representation of women, or any other kind of structural change” (Ayata and Tütüncü, 2008, p366). In the same way that corporations that damage the environment attempt to ‘green-wash’ the company image with commercials advocating ‘sustainability’ and ‘environmentally friendly policies’, it could be claimed that since the AKP came to power they have taken on a ‘gender-washing’ approach in trying to make the party look more appealing, not just to women but to the international organisations – most notably the EU – who are pushing for increased women’s rights. This can be seen in the rhetoric of the party. Ayata and Tütüncü claim that “underlining women’s shyness, indifference, motherhood and home-orientation, the AKP leadership deems that it is the personal life of women that precludes their political activity and causes the feminine under-representation” (2008, p274). Ayata and Tütüncü criticize the AKP for claiming that these issues are the cause of under-representation when in fact the party promotes the home-orientation of women because it relies on the ‘home-politics’ created by it for votes. Other policies which sound positive include the 2004 amendment to the Turkish Constitution, ensuring “women and men equally enjoy the same rights, and [that] the state is responsible for the implementation of these equal rights” (Ayata and Tütüncü, 2008, p375). Again, despite sounding good, it is simply empty unless followed up with actual action.

Despite claims that the AKP have no real commitment to the feminist cause and that they “have had very little impact on increasing representation” (Ayata and Tütüncü, 2008, p384), there are signs that the party’s increased cooperation with NGOs and international organisations is having a beneficial impact on the feminist movement. The ‘National action plan on gender equality 2008-2013’ (Prime Ministry: General Directorate on the status of women, 2008) which was developed with funding from the European Commission is an example of this which displays some positive signs. Following in the footsteps of the feminist movement in adopting the ‘gender-approach’ to the problems faced by women is clearly a step in the right direction. The gender-approach recognises that the reason for unequal treatment of women, for instance in employment, is not down to sex but down to the roles society has created for the man and for the women. This is particularly important in Turkey where gender stereotyping is rife throughout the Muslim community. Overcoming these gender-stereotypes of the family orientated mother whose job it is to look after the children is a crucial step towards achieving equal status of women in the community. In the action plan a number of issues are addressed including the emphasis on the importance of employment in providing women with economic independence and the importance of encouraging and increasing women’s participation at both the local and national level. In delivering on these issues the Turkish government will work closely with NGOs which “are of great importance for advocacy and lobby towards gender equality (Prime Ministry: General Directorate on the status of women, 2008, p23). Many of these NGOs will be on the Advisory Board for the status of women. Although this top down approach may be criticised by many feminists, the adoption of a system of unity within the feminist movement should be regarded as a good thing. The main challenge to face in the future however is ensuring that this unity is a unity of feminists and not simply the unity of a patriarchal government and system of NGOs which is portraying feminist values but is in fact undermining the whole movement by maintaining a male dominated system; telling women how they can emancipate themselves.

# A Brief History of the Feminist Movements in Turkey

Written by Adam Leake

Throughout this essay we have seen the diversity and complexity of the feminist movement within Turkey. At first glance it may appear to be similar to the Western feminist movement – albeit a decade or so behind – with the emergence of the first wave which demanded increased political rights and the second wave which brought the political and personal spheres together, demanding an end to domestic abuse. The coming of what some termed as the third wave of feminism after in the 1990s perhaps marks the difference between the movement in Turkey and the movement elsewhere. The third wave marked the emergence of different stands of feminism. Apart from the mainstream (secular) feminists, there appeared Kurdish nationalist feminists, Islamist feminists and, more recently, project feminism. Although these groups have similar aims, such as the end of violence against women, they seek to address these aims within different contexts – The Kurdish nationalists want particular emphasis on Kurdish women, who they felt were being overlooked, and the Islamists want to address the aims within the religious context. Also, within the Islamist feminist movement there are additional conflicts between the orthodox Islamists who believe that women should not work and should be aided in fulfilling their family duties, and the reformist feminists who seek to show that the inequality in Islam is not due to the instruction of the Koran but due to tradition. In this sense, women should aim to help the community through the pursuit of employment and political representation and what is important to some is that they should be able to express their religion through the donning of the head scarf. The head scarf issue is one that causes a major cleavage between Islamist feminists and mainstream feminists, who believe that rather than emancipating women from sexual desires, the wearing of the head scarf simply shows the acceptance of the male domination in Islam and that women are at fault because it is *their* bodies that have been sexualized. Despite the AKP appearing to try and increase participation of women, they are criticized for not doing enough. Although their involvement with NGOs may be well intentioned, it is highly criticised by some feminists who believe that project feminism simply undermines the feminist cause. This suggests that the feminist movement in Turkey will continue to be highly heterogeneous in the foreseeable future. However, this does not mean it will be any less effective.

## Bibliography:

Arat, Y. 1998. 'Islamists and Political Change in Turkey.' *Political Psychology*. **19**(1) pp117-131.

Arat, Y. 2008. 'Contestation and Collaboration: Women's Struggles for Empowerment in Turkey' IN: R, Kasaba Ed. *The Cambridge History of Turkey Volume 4: Turkey in the Modern World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp388-418.

Ayata, A.G and Tütüncü, F. 2008. 'Party Politics of the AKP (2002-2007) and the Predicaments of Women at the Intersections of Westernist, Islamist and Feminist discourses in Turkey.' *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. **35**(3) pp363-384.

Diner, Ç and Tokaş, Ş. 2010. 'Waves of Feminism in Turkey: Kemalist, Islamist and Kurdish Women's Movements in an era of globalization' *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*. **12**(1) pp41-58.

Marshall, G.A. 2005. 'Ideology, Process and Dialogue: A Comparison of Feminist and Islamist Women's Approaches to the Issues of Head Covering and Work in Turkey.' *Gender and Society*. **19**(1) pp104-120.

Mojab, S. 2001. 'Theorizing the Politics of "Islamic Feminism"' *Feminist Review* **69** pp124-146.

Prime Ministry: General Directorate on the Status of Women. 2008. *National Action Plan on Gender Equality*. [online] [Accessed: January 2012] Available from: <http://www.undp.org.tr/publicationsDocuments/National%20Action%20Plan%20on%20Gender%20Equality.pdf>

Toprak, B. 2005. "Islam and Democracy in Turkey." In: *Turkish Studies* **6**(2) pp167-186.

# **A Brief History of the Feminist Movements in Turkey**

Written by Adam Leake

—

*Written by: Adam Leake*

*Written at: Middle East Technical University*

*Written for: Zerrin Torun*

*Date written: December 2011*