

# Turkey: The women's movement fights back

Thursday 22 November 2012, by [BALTA Ecehan](#) (Date first published: 20 November 2012).

Feminism, as a modern social movement, is not a new political phenomenon for in Turkey. At the end of the Ottoman Empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> century women began organising themselves as feminists and published dozens of newspapers and journals, organised demonstrations like their sisters did in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe for their political and social rights.

They fought to increase women's access to education and paid work, to abolish polygamy, and the peçe, an Islamic veil. The first women's association in Turkey, The Ottoman Welfare Organisation of Women was founded in 1908 and became partially involved in the Young Turks Movement which was a driving force in the founding of the Turkish Republic. The women's revolution accomplished by the young Turkish Republic was in fact the result of these 50 years of activism by Ottoman women.

The right to vote, which Ottoman and feminists in Turkey had demanded for decades, was finally granted in 1934 by the Republican People's Party CHP under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. But, at the same time "the feminist movement" gradually became integrated into the state, which thus inhibited its practice outside state approved structures. So called "state feminism" established itself as a part of the Kemalist modernisation efforts to copy western societies. From this time onward women in Turkey were portrayed as emancipated and liberated. The discourse of emancipation was used to close down the Turkish Women's Union in 1955, which was the only women's organisation of the period.

As a result, between 1923 and 1980, there was no independent feminist movement. Women had to wait until the 1980 coup d'état to bring feminism back onto the political agenda. The military government crushed the socialist movement. Being left unorganised and having experienced the male dominant political culture of the dissent movements, socialist women organised the contemporary feminist movement in Turkey after 1980 coup. Partly as a result of this legacy, socialist feminism has always been a strong trend within feminist movement.

Since 1983 there have been hundreds of publications and public meetings organised by feminists and these have made a real political impact. Starting from 1989, the feminist movement has been publishing independent journals (such as Feminist, Kaktüs, Pazartesi, Feminist Politika, Amargi etc). Non-hierarchical and independent forms of organisation, consciousness-raising groups, issue-oriented ad hoc committees characterised the movement. The insistence on the "political nature of the personal" is another point of similarity between Western and Turkish feminism. Now there are over 250 Turkish women's groups that organise themselves in the form associations, clubs, lobby groups, and networks.

In the last 30 years the feminist movement in Turkey has gained experience in organising country-wide campaigns. Even though there are many ideological differences between women's groups in Turkey today, feminists come together to work on common issues affecting women's lives, such as state-led virginity controls, violence against women and privatisation of welfare services. The women's movement, in Turkey, has always positioned itself in the ranks of the non-parliamentary opposition. The formation of LGBT movement in the middle of the 1990's further helped the development of feminist politics and identity.

## **Conservatism rising**

One should add the emergence of the Kurdish women's movement to this picture. In the beginning, the movement was mainly centred around the politicisation of motherhood. Through the mothers' movement, the women's movement (Demokratik Özgür Kadın Hareketi - Democratic Liberated Women's Movement) gained legitimacy within the Kurdish movement. The feminist movement and Kurdish women's movement has an impressive history of collaboration, albeit with tensions. These tensions are usually a reflection of the tension between socialist movement and Kurdish opposition.

The rising neoliberal conservatism of the AKP (Justice and Development Party) government is now threatening the basic rights of Turkish women. In the summer of 2012 the AKP government initiated a debate on the abolition of abortion rights. Although there were several collaborations between Islamic feminists and other feminist groups in the 1990s, the veil issue made that kind of collaboration uneasy for both sides. In addition, the Islamist government's attacks to the rights of women hadn't made that relationship easier.

The attack on abortion rights is aimed at both forcing down wages and pushing women out of the labour market. Women's groups organised rallies and demonstrations in cities from the beginning of this discussion and raised their voices against the attempt to ban in defence of their social rights and control over their own bodies. The demands of the movement were for free, secure, easy and accessible abortion and free, wide, secure contraception both for men and women.

The rallies held in June in the three biggest cities were disappointing. This was mainly the result of the contradictory standpoint of feminist movement: There was an intention to incorporate Kemalist and other women into the movement in the one hand, and to urge the Ministry of Family to take action on the other. The first of these aims couldn't be accomplished because of a lack of real effort and the second one was not realistic from the beginning. Despite everything, the government took a step back for now because of the public reaction against the ban. But they successfully put it into the agenda and we can predict that it won't be long before the next attack.

**Ecehan Balta**

---

**P.S.**

\* Translation International Viewpoint. <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/>

\* Ecehan Balta is a member of YeniYol, the Turkish section of the 4<sup>th</sup> International.