

Pro-Islamic Parties, Gender and Social Class in Turkey

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Introduction

The women's rights discourse has marked the beginning of the 21st century in the world and in Turkey. At the same time, religion has taken on a more energetic role in politics. How do religion, politics, gender and social class interact in Turkey and shape women's political participation? The objective of this paper is to answer this broad question by analyzing the trends of Islamic/Islamist¹ women's participation in party politics, gender and social class in Turkey. Islamic women's political participation is increasing not only in the pro-Islamic parties but also in a number of political parties in Turkey. The two specific questions that this paper addresses are: what variations exist

in the forms of political participation of Islamic and Islamist women? And what social and political variables explain the variations?

The paper is largely based on field work on women's political activities and Islam conducted in 1998 and in 2002 and 2003.² Through the use of a number of research methods, including interviews, participant observation, and a survey of relevant documents, the paper describes the types of activities undertaken by the Islamic women members of the political parties. Analyzing the research data, the paper establishes a relation between variations in the forms of Islamic women's political participation, their socio-economic background and their party's gender policy.

1. For conceptual clarification, it is necessary to make a distinction between Islam as a religion and Islamism as a political ideology and between a Muslim, an Islamist and Islamic woman. A Muslim woman professing Islamic faith can be a pious person practising religion or a sole believer who does not faithfully follow the observances. However, for an Islamic woman a strong religious identification and organizing life in accordance with Islamic values are important. "Islamism", on the other hand, indicates a political consciousness rather than a religious one. An Islamist is not only an ordinary pious Muslim who follows religious observances as part of religion; she/he politicizes Islam and, therefore, rejects the idea of religion being limited to belief, prayer, ritual worship, and private consciousness. The Islamist rejects the separation of state and religion on the grounds that Islam is both state and religion. Therefore, the Islamist is very likely to consider the necessity of a gradual progress towards the ideal Islamic state and may be willing to undertake any type of action that is justified in terms of "Islamic" morals.

2. The interview and documentary data were collected from two sources in Istanbul and Ankara in the year 1998 and, later, in the years 2002 and 2003. First, the researcher conducted interviews with the Islamist women members of the Islamist parties. In 1998, women respondents were selected from the now defunct Virtue Party which replaced the Welfare Party (Refah, or RP), and the Greater Unity Party (BBP), and the two centre-right parties: the True Path Party and the Motherland Party. Five women from each political party were interviewed, along with the heads of the women's commissions, and the non-Islamic women members. A 2002 follow-up study entailed interviews with women members of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi, or AKP) and the Saadet (Happiness) Party, both founded after the closure of the Virtue Party. Secondly, the researcher studied the gender policy of the political parties selected by analyzing their party programme and speeches of the leaders.

Conceptually, the study is structured by analytical categories adapted from Vicky Randall that define the major forms of political participation: “conventional” and “less conventional” forms of political participation.³ Conventional formal institutionalized forms of political participation and action include the following constitutional political activities: voting; activity in electoral campaigns; being a member of a political party or interest group; performing institutionalized political action by working in party organs and by becoming a deputy; involvement in “communal activity”, meaning citizen contact with government officials on matters of general interest and “particularized contacts” or citizen contacts with government officials on matters of concern to a specific individual or group.⁴ Not all political systems and social groups provide the avenues of political participation within the context of formal institutionalized politics and, consequently, create a need for the less conventional forms of participation which include ad hoc participation, or forms of “participation in political campaigns that are short-lived, throwing up makeshift organizations and tending to rely on direct tactics such as pickets, squats and self-help projects.”⁵ The less conventional forms of political participation also include political actions within the context of an underground political movement: urban guerrilla movement, revolutionary movements and all types of anti-regime activities. They

are not necessarily always constitutional with many activities organized outside the constitutional framework, and even “terrorist” politics.

Changes in the Forms of Female Party Political Activities

In Turkey, the republican and pro-left parties had encouraged women to join party ranks following the foundation of the Republic in 1923.⁶ During the one-party period (1923-1946), the female parliamentary representation was four percent in 1934. There were 18 female members of the Grand National Assembly. The majority of them (16 out of 18) “were urban, three with middle school diplomas, one with high school education, while the rest had higher education except for a disabled soldier’s peasant wife, who had previously been elected village head. She was personally chosen by Atatürk to become one of these new members of Parliament.”⁷ With the transition to competitive party politics, the proportion of female representation dropped to three percent in the 1940s and to 1.8 percent in the 1950s, as the centre-right conservative parties eschewed listing female candidates.⁸

In the 1960s and 1970s, the centre-right parties and ultra-nationalist National Action Party did not provide means and channels for female participation in party politics. Likewise,

3. Vicky Randall, *Women and Politics: An International Perspective*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1987, pp. 50-60.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

6. For more information on women’s political participation in Turkey, see Sirin Tekeli, *Women In Modern Turkish Society*, London, Zed Books, 1991; Yesim Arat, *Patriarchal Paradox: Women in Politics in Turkey*, Cranbury (NJ), Associated University Press, 1984.

7. For the profile of women in the parliament of 1934, see Voices of Atatürk: “The Contribution of Turkish Women to the Modernisation of Turkey”, The Atatürk Society of America, 1995. Available at www.ataturksociety.org/asa/voa/judy.html.

8. For the proportion of female parliamentary representation in 1930-1950, and the decrease in the number of women in the parliament with the transition to a multi-party system, see Burcak Keskin, 1997, “Political Participation Pattern of Turkish Women”, *MERIA Journal*, vol. 1, no. 4, December 1997.



the pro-Islamic National Salvation Party, founded in 1973, did not have any vision and room for female activism in the party.

This was to change in the early 1980s. First, the Motherland Party, founded in 1983, invited women to be active at grassroots level and to join the party ranks as actors in decision-making organs. Many upper-middle class professional women took part in decision-making organs and they gained seats in the parliamentary assembly and in the executive organ after the Motherland won elections in 1983. On the other hand, numerous women from the lower

middle classes, who were the first or second generation in the city, undertook various activities at grassroots party politics.

The late 1980s saw the political mobilization of a large number of women from the middle and lower middle class Islamist, as well as of the centre-right and pro-Kurdish political parties. Since then their number has been increasing, with many more newly urbanized women joining political parties and civil society associations. However, the level of women's participation in interest groups⁹ and in institutionalized party politics and their numbers in the decision-making organs are often lower than those of men. They also form a lower proportion of total membership than men. This particularly applied to Islamist and ultra-nationalist parties that resisted female representation in the higher ranks and in parliament until the 1999 elections.¹⁰ Not only gender policies of political parties vary with differences in party typology and ideology. Studies also show that the women members of the Islamist/ultra-nationalist parties, the leftist/social democratic parties, and the centre-right parties differ significantly in the po-

9. The representation of women in the decision-making organs of the associations, the unions, syndicates, the bar associations, and of various chambers of professions is lower than that of men in Turkey. See Bianet's survey of female representation in the associations. Available at www.bianet.org.

10. The female representation in the parliament and local governments is lower. The 1999 general and local elections held on the same day (April 18th) led to the increase in female representation both in the parliament and in the local governments. Their number in the parliament rose from 1.8 percent in 1991 to 4.18 percent (23) in 1999 and their representation in the local governments also increased and reached 0.55 percent. But there were no women mayors of cities, only women mayors of districts and sub-districts. There was a further increase in female parliamentary representation after the November 3rd, 2002 general elections and it reached 4.4 percent. In the Turkish Grand National Assembly, out of a total number of 550 seats, women occupy 24 seats (13 AKP and 11 People's Republican Party). There are differences in the level of female parliamentary representation across the political parties. Until the 1999 elections, none of the Islamist parties (including the Welfare Party, Greater Unity Party) and Turkish nationalist National Action Party had female representation in the parliament, nor did they list female candidates to contest local elections. However, the centre-right parties, centre-left parties and the Kurdish nationalist parties have always listed female candidates to contest general and local elections, and they have had female parliamentary representation, and even women cabinet members. In the 2002 general elections, almost all the Islamist, pro-Islamic and nationalist parties listed female candidates without putting them in the first top places, as the data on the location of the female candidates in the lists prepared by political parties for the November 2002 general elections showed. However, social democratic parties, the left and centre-right more frequently gave the first top three places to them. Similarly, in the March 2004 local elections the centre-left parties listed a higher number of women candidates compared to the AKP and SP. For comparing the political parties with respect to the number of candidates listed and the number of women mayors, see article entitled "Yerel yönetimde kadının adı yok" (Women Have No Place in Local Governments), *Sabah*, 2nd April 2004.

litical socialization and recruitment channels, in the world views adopted, and in the political functions carried out.¹¹

Female Political Participation and Islamist/Islamic Women

There is a tradition of female participation in conventional as well as less conventional politics including taking part in urban guerrilla movements, student protests, and in clandestine leftist activities in 1970s Turkey. Ad hoc political activity, which was introduced by the leftist groups in the 1970s and then advanced by Islamic parties in the mid-1980s, included community actions, self-help projects targeting the welfare of slum people and mobilizing them for the cause. The pro-left female actors of ad hoc politics were more frequently urban and modern female university students from the middle classes, who identified themselves as progressive. There were no women among them with Islamic tendencies.

The mid-1980s marked the beginning of Islamic/Islamist women's activism in the "less conventional" Islamist political activities as well as in formal political activities. Until the mid-1980s, the Islamist women did not hold formal memberships in associations or in political parties. Neither did they work in campaigns as actively as they do today. Since the late 1980s, women's involvement in the Islam-

ist movement has grown and taken many forms with increased participation in public life and in conventional party politics, as many of them joined the now defunct Welfare Party. They mobilize people by their effective propaganda activities and fundraising. They also conduct self-help projects with the aim of reaching the disadvantaged and the "oppressed" people.

Until the mid-1980s, the Islamist women did not hold formal memberships in associations or in political parties

Their activities have gone beyond institutionalized party politics, as many actively took part in marches and in the street protests to fight against the perceived injustices. One of the striking examples of their street activism was organizing nationwide demonstrations including sit-in protests, and the nationwide hand-in-hand campaign to resist the headscarf ban in the late 1980s and later from 1997 until today.¹²

From the early 1990s, the female participation in ad hoc political action (e.g., short-lived self-help projects and community actions, etc) and conventional party politics increased with the rise of the Islamist movement and women's increasing participation in the Islamist and pro-Islamist parties, associations and foundations. The Islamic civil society expanded rapidly with the increased number of voluntary associations, foundations and infor-

11. A.S., Veri Arastirma, *Kadinin Sosyal Hayata Katilimi ve Siyasal Mobilizasyonu* (Women's Participation in Political Life and Their Mobilization), Ankara, Kadinin Sosyal Hayatini Arastirma ve Inceleme Dernegi Yayinlari, no. 17, 2000.

12. In the late 1980s, the headscarf became a contentious issue in Turkey. In the 1990s more women began to don the headscarf and long coat. The 1997-1999 resistance by university students against the headscarf ban mobilized a large number of supporters who took part in numerous demonstrations that continued until the victory of the AKP in the November 2002 elections. Tarhan Erdem's nationwide survey showed that almost 70 percent of women in Turkey covered their head. See "Turban Dosyasi", *Milliyet*, May27th-29th, 2003. In 2006, the survey conducted by Ersin Kalaycioglu and Ali Carkoglu showed that 65 percent of the sample supports the idea of lifting the ban on headscarves at universities. See Ersin Kalaycioglu (Isik University) and Ali Carkoglu (Sabanci University) 2006, "Türkiye'de Sosyal Tercihler Arastirmasi" (Social Preferences in Turkey), unpublished research report. The symbolic functions of the headscarf in the power struggle between the Islamists and those holding a secular world view and the fight between a modern and religiously conservative style of life need attention.

mal groupings since the late 1980s.¹³ The large number of civil society organizations is led either by Islamists or by the groups that are organized on the basis of primordial identity, sentiments and ties, such as ethnic, sectarian, regional, religious identities and sentiments.¹⁴

A religiously conservative Sunni woman upholding strong nationalist ideas will tend to support the Greater Unity Party (BBP)

The increased interest of Islamic women in NGO activities motivated many Islamist, ultra-nationalist, and centre-right parties, including the Motherland Party and True Path Party, to welcome Islamic women's political activism, particularly in grassroots politics. The fieldwork data in 1998 and in 2002 revealed a number of patterns in the political preferences of Islamic women. A pious woman with a low level of Islamist tendencies is prone to join a centre-right party. A religiously conservative Sunni woman upholding strong nationalist ideas will tend to support the Greater Unity Party (BBP) when the Islamic component of her ideology has a higher leverage. On the other hand, an Islamic Kurdish-nationalist or a religiously conservative woman from the eastern and south-eastern provinces is more likely to prefer the pro-Kurdish HADEP.¹⁵

Despite the initiation of female participation in grassroots party politics with growing numbers of women recruited into the Wel-

fare Party (1983-1998), the party excluded women from decision-making organs and from parliamentary representation. It confined them to its women's commission. Nevertheless, women's participation grew in grassroots party politics, in ad hoc actions (constitutional and unconstitutional), and in "less conventional" Islamist political activities (e.g. joining the Islamist student movements).

The Virtue Party (1997-2001), which moderated the Welfare Party's more radical Islamist ideology, brought a change in the profile of its female members. Many non-Islamist women who were distinguished by their non-Islamic outfit, rhetoric and political objectives joined the party and took part in the party's decision-making organs. They gained parliamentary representation following the 1999 general elections. Women in the higher ranks were not selected from among the Islamist women who started their political careers in the informally organized women's commission and played vital roles in grassroots party politics.

With the foundation in 2001 of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) – which further moderated its Islamist tendency and adopted a liberal party programme – Islamic women's participation in grassroots party politics was accompanied by an increase in the number of non-Islamic women in the party's decision-making organs. Despite Islamic women's contribution to grassroots politics in the 2002 election campaign, only modern profes-

13. For the increase in the number of NGOs in the 1990s, see "Türkiye Ekonomik ve Toplumsal Tarih Vakfı", *Sivil Toplum Kuruluşları Rehberi* (Civil Society Guide), İstanbul, 1996, pp.12-14.

14. For the role of primordial ties in Islamist associations and other organizations, see Nilüfer Narlı and Yasar Nari, "Türkiye'de Hemşeri Derneklerinin Siyasete Katılması ve Demokratikleşme Sürecine Etkileri: Bursa Örneği" (The Political Participation of Hemşeri Associations and Democratization in Turkey: A case of Bursa), *Yeni Türkiye* (New Turkey), Year 5, vol. I, no. 29 (1999), September/October, pp. 176-184.

15. The political attitude of Kurdish women was studied when I was comparing the political participation of women in various political parties in Turkey. See Nilüfer Narlı, "The Role of Islamist Women in Political Parties in Turkey", paper presented at "Women in the Global Community", organized by Fulbright, 18th-21st September 2002, İstanbul, Bogazici University.

sional and highly educated women gained parliamentary representation. Meanwhile, in the Saadet Party (SP), which was also founded after the closure of the Virtue Party, the level of female activism and participation in grassroots party politics declined. There was also a decrease in the number of women in the party's decision-making organs. Later, in 2004, SP began to give importance to female political mobilization despite its stronger religious conservatism compared to the AKP.

Variations in the Forms of Political Activities of Islamic Women, Gender and Social Class

The most frequent form of political participation among the Islamic and Islamist women is to join a political party's women's commission. They undertake many activities ranging from campaigning, educating the electorate, joining rallies and sit-in protests to taking part in clandestine activities. They less frequently contest elections. The type of political participation and the types of political roles assumed by the Islamist women interviewed varied from party to party. In the context of the conventional institutionalized party politics, there was not much difference in the political activities the Islamist women undertake. Almost all the Islamist women members of the political parties studied performed the following institutionalized political activities: organizing ward and district meetings, assisting the education and propaganda activities, and organizing seminars, forums, concourses and door-to-door campaigning.

Islamist women members of the Virtue Party, who were often from the newly urbanized lower middle classes, undertook the following grassroots politics activities: working in the electoral campaigns by visiting thousands of homes with food baskets; and explaining to

the people what the party was planning to do in order to restore justice and to restructure Islamic values in Turkey. This was not much different from the political function of the Welfare Party's female members who were often from the lower income families and frequently the first or second generation in the city. Yet, being different from the members of the Virtue Party who had limited access to the decision-making process, the Welfare Party women had been excluded from the party's decision-making organs.

Religiously conservative women, who were often from the lower middle class, carried the grassroots politics

In contrast with the Saadet Party's lower level of female activism in institutionalized party politics in 2002, the AKP's Islamic and non-Islamic women members' activism was high and diverse. During the election campaigns in the summer of 2002, Islamist and Islamic women, who originated from newly urbanized lower social classes, organized ward and district meetings in the disadvantaged parts of the cities to explain the promises of the party and undertook various logistical activities. The non-Islamist, highly educated, professional women from urban middle classes were more visible in the public and upper class milieu. A new division of tasks and positions emerged in the AKP: religiously conservative women, who were often from the lower middle class, carried the grassroots politics, whilst the non-Islamist professional women of the upper middle class were active in the higher ranks.

Compared to Islamic and Islamist women members' level of participation in institutionalized party politics, which was largely confined to the activities of the women's commission, the Islamist women's activism in less conventional politics was high and diverse. The

field work data suggests three types of political activities. The first included ad hoc political activities and short-lived political campaigns (e.g. protests against the ban on the use of the head cover in public institutions in 1998-2005; sit-in protests; “support Iraq” rallies in 2002-2006; and “help Lebanon” campaigns in 2006).

The second type of activity was executing self-help projects. In line with the party’s policy to meet the needs of the underprivileged, the Virtue Party and the AKP conducted several self-help projects (such as food aid, childcare and care of the elderly, training of needy women and children). Township and neighbourhood associations and community action councils in the economically disadvantaged districts of the big cities and in many Anatolian towns were mobilized to conduct such projects.

The third type was the totality of various semi-legal clandestine political activities. Many Islamist women allegedly did not hesitate to assume unconstitutional action, as long as it served a particular religious or nationalist cause.

Conclusion

The research data reveals that the level of formal education and socio-economic background are important factors in shaping a woman’s political behaviour, particularly her attitude, her political perception and expectations and her preference for a type of role in a political party.

Moreover, the data showed that the political philosophy of a political party and social class of women participating in politics are factors that affect the type of political role undertaken by the female members in conventional and less conventional politics. In mobilising women for less conventional politics, ideologically oriented far-right and Is-

lamist parties were found to be adopting a gender-based division of labour and decision-making. They assigned more secondary and auxiliary roles to the women members when the Islamist women members who often internalized their party’s gender-biased ideology did not object to being excluded from the key decision-making positions. The level of internalizing the gender-biased role ideology varied from individual to individual depending on the level of formal education and social class background. Urban middle class women often value gender equality in participating politics.

The level of formal education and socio-economic background are important factors in shaping a woman’s political behaviour

Macro level socio-economic discrepancies seem to lead to discrimination against disenfranchised Islamist women at the decision-making level and create a division of status based on social class. Contradictory demands are made on women by the Islamist male party members, which created inner conflicts in many Islamist women interviewed. They were happy to serve the Islamist cause but they desired to be included in the formal decision-making mechanism in the early 2000s. In 2006, there are indications of powerful new demands coming from Islamic women that could undermine male dominated party politics if they are well articulated and allied with the feminist demands from various circles. Yet these demands are still too fragile to impose new moral imperatives and values that the political parties may no longer be able to satisfy unless they change their attitudes towards women. Such a likely development is a key for grassroots women to challenge the male-dominated party leadership and discrimination against the disadvantaged women.

Nevertheless, Islamic as well as secular women's demands for political participation is increasing. They are eager to join political parties and associations for larger female political input. There are demands for the application of quotas in listing the female candidates for local and general elections, which was opposed by the ruling AKP in 2006.

New demands coming from Islamic women could undermine male dominated party politics if they are well articulated

The centre-right and left parties and the AKP have responded to demands for larger female political participation and urge gender equality to a certain extent. After distancing itself from Islamist politics and liberalizing its policies, the AKP has adopted a more liberal gender rhetoric and policy, without creating a

significant change in the participation of women in legislative and executive branches. This shows that gender policies change with political changes and alterations in party programmes, as manifested by the change in the AKP's party programme in the direction of moderation of Islamic policy and adopting gender sensitivity. Yet the gravity of its religiously conservative grassroots occasionally urge the AKP to push "customary and patriarchal moral" values to satisfy those resisting change in the status of women. In response to this, women will adopt a combination of Islamic and universal concepts in articulating and justifying their new demands.

This creates creativity as well as a contradiction in the values of Islamic and Islamist women and in the ranks of the AKP at a time when Turkish politics has been going through critical EU harmonization reforms.