

Turkey: A Conservative Road

Duygu Atlas

From the moment that it first rose to power in 2002, speculation about the Justice and Development Party (AKP)'s "true intentions" have never ceased. Some believe them to be nothing less than the dismantling of the secular Kemalist republic, and replacing it with political Islam. Others counter that the party only represents a new trend in Turkish politics, and that the AKP resembles most closely the Christian democratic parties of Europe.

In recent months, this debate has gained a new urgency, thanks to Prime Minister Recep Erdoğan's controversial statements, including his addition of "one religion" to the classic Turkish nationalist refrain of "one nation, one flag, one language," and his declaration that "we want to raise a religious generation." The new education reform known as 4+4+4, which increases compulsory schooling from eight to twelve years, is also seen by secularists fearing Erdoğan's intentions as a means to promote Islamist teachings by allowing children to pursue a religious education at a younger age.

For many in Turkey, the latest example of the government's shift towards more conservative mores, at the expense of liberal democratic norms, has been the discussion on banning abortion, which has placed women and their reproductive rights at the center of a fierce debate. The issue became the focus of public discussion during the height of a controversy over the Uludere incident last December, in which 34 Kurdish villagers, small-scale smugglers mistaken as armed men of the banned Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), were killed by a Turkish military

air strike at the Turkish-Iraqi border. Attempting to ward off speculation regarding the behavior of the Turkish forces, Erdoğan sought to effectively divert attention from Uludere, declaring “I see abortion as murder, and I call upon those circles and members of the media who oppose my comments: You live and breathe Uludere. I say every abortion is an Uludere.”¹ He continued by stating that both abortion and caesarean deliveries were part of a “secret plot” to slow Turkey’s growth.

The health ministry promptly acted on the prime minister’s call for restrictive legislation on abortion and announced that the ministry had completed a report on the issue to be presented to the cabinet. Minister of Health Recep Akdağ also explained the government’s stance on the issue stating that abortion cannot be resorted to as a form of family planning and that women’s rights were “unrelated” to abortion.² Erdoğan’s remarks were soon followed by a string of other statements from AKP officials. Minister of Health Recep Akdağ outraged many women with his suggestion that women who have been raped should not have abortions and that babies born out of incidents of rape would become wards of the state. Parliament’s Human Rights Committee chairman Ayhan Sefer Üstün offered his support to minister Akdağ, using rape victims in Bosnia during the war in the 1990s to bolster his case. “Bosnian women were raped, but gave birth,” Üstün said. “If they were all killed in their mother’s womb, a bigger crime than what those rapists did would have been committed.”³ Ankara Mayor Melih Gökçek said in a television interview that a mother who considered abortion should “kill her herself instead and not let the child bear the brunt of her mistake.” Anti-abortion polemics were continued by Turkey’s head of Religious Affairs Mehmet Görmez, who issued a *fatwa* claiming that abortion was not permissible in Islam and amounted to murder. Taking his stance further, Görmez also claimed that women had no right to make the decision of not giving birth solely on the grounds that it was their body in question.

The reaction to the government’s plans to curb abortion was immediate. Women’s rights organizations and other NGOs, as well as women from all sectors of the society, took to the streets in protest. In one of many protests around the country, approximately 3,000 women accompanied by their male companions, gathered in Kadıköy district of Istanbul. The protests brought the security forces and women face to face and at times resulted in detentions. Twenty-seven women in Ankara who

were staging a protest in front of the Ministry of Family and Social Policies, and four women in Istanbul protesting in front of the prime minister's office were detained by the police.⁴ These detentions further exacerbated the feeling among women that the government was executing a one-sided policy without lending an ear to women themselves.

The protests, whose central slogan has been "*Benim Bedenim, Benim Kararım*" ("My Body, My Choice") have gathered momentum in the social media sphere. The *Benim Kararım* ("My Choice") website and its Facebook page continue to be a platform for opponents of the anti-abortion campaign, who post pictures of themselves either with "My Body, My Choice" written on their bodies or holding placards with other slogans such as "Take your hands off my body" and "Do not do politics over my body." In addition, a number of online signature campaigns such as "Say No to Abortion Ban" and "It is Our Call to the Public: Do Not Remain Unresponsive to the Abortion Debate" (*Kamuoyuna Çağrımızdır: Kürtaj Tartışmasına Tepkisiz Kalma*) have reached a total of approximately 72,000 signatures.

While the government sought to portray its efforts as part of a global debate between "pro-life" and "pro-choice" camps, critics charged that opening this issue to discussion marked a regression in women's rights that have already been secured. Presently, abortions are legal in Turkey until the 10th week of pregnancy and in cases of medical necessity until the 24th week. They argue that the only discussion should be around improving the already problematic window of ten weeks to twelve, as most women do not even realize that they are pregnant until after the fourth week.

The debate also carries the risk of stigmatizing women who live differently or make non-traditional choices. In a country where sex, especially pre-marital sex, is still taboo and female virginity is highly valued, critics argue that putting the spotlight on women, who are already forced to closet their sexual behavior, will only increase the social pressure and restraints on them. A recent incident serves as a warning as to what may lay in store for women: a healthcare center run by the Health Ministry reportedly sent a text message to the father of an unmarried girl notifying him of her pregnancy.

Thirdly, the abortion debate is seen by secularists as another one of the AKP's attempts at reshaping Turkish society according to its own conservative values. It is increasingly argued that the AKP has created a “religious and non-religious” divide in the society and that one has to meet a certain conservative criteria in order to benefit from the “advanced democracy” that the party vehemently advocates. Within this religious-conservative framework, women, in particular, feel the pressure as the AKP's conservative mindset is often reflected in its policy preferences which place a high premium on a woman's role as child-bearer. In addition to the recent abortion debate, it should be noted that Prime Minister Erdoğan has been calling on women for years to have at least three children in order keep the population young.

So far, women's rights groups have succeeded in generating considerable support in favor of keeping abortion legal. Following the furious response from women's advocacy groups, the government's current inclination is not to ban abortion entirely, and it seems, at least for the time being, to have stopped at limiting the number of Caesarean sections performed in the country. However, such discussions carry particular weight as Turkey prepares to rewrite its constitution. They raise serious questions about how well the AKP will perform in the future regarding Turkey's sensitive issues, ranging from women's rights to the treatment of minorities. These issues will eventually determine whether Turkey will be a democracy in the full sense of the term or fall short of it.

Duygu Atlas is a master's student in Middle Eastern history at Tel Aviv University and a research assistant at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies.

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¹"Erdoğan: Her Kürtaj Bır Uludere'dir," Radikal, 26 May 2012, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/Radikal.aspx?aType=RadikalDetayV3&ArticleID=1089189>.

² "Kürtaj Raporu Hazır, Pazartesi Bakanlar Kurulu'nda," Milliyet, 21 June 2012, <http://siyaset.milliyet.com.tr/kurtaj-raporu-hazir-pazartesi-bakanlar-kurulu-da/siyaset/siyasetdetay/21.06.2012/1556815/default.htm>.

³ "Bosna'da Tecavüz Edilen Kadın Doğurdu Ama!" Bianet, 1 June 2012, <http://www.bianet.org/bianet/insan-haklari/138786-bosnada-tecavuz-edilen-kadin-dogurdu-ama>

⁴ "Kürtaj Protestosuna Gözaltı," Radikal, 1 June 2012, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/Radikal.aspx?aType=RadikalDetayV3&ArticleID=1089792&CategoryID=77>.