

7. Gender Politics under Autocratization and Two Decades of Women's Movement in Turkey

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Abstract:

This chapter addresses gender, populism, and religion's relationship through the case study of Turkey under the Justice and Development (AKP) rule. The chapter first examines the incremental evolution of the gendered aspects of the AKP's populist and authoritarian rule, focusing on how the AKP 'sacralized' women with familial roles by utilizing religious tropes and rendered gender as an essential category of populist polarization between 'venerated women' as mothers, sisters, and wives and 'repudiated feminists', liberals, leftists and political dissenters. The second part examines two major actors that diffuse the AKP's gender policy in line with religious-nationalist discourse and populist political strategy: 1) the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyamet) and 2) government-oriented women's organizations. Finally, the chapter turns to the contestations of this gendered polarization strategy by examining grassroots anti-populist responses. The discussion raises two arguments. First, despite populist polarization that targets women's bodies and socio-economic participation, activists have created a tactical and inventive repertoire of legal activism, local-level deliberation and self-help, contentious action against legislative impositions, and social media campaigns and feminist blogging. Second, joint efforts of secular and religious feminists have created a culture of solidarity challenging the 'secular-Muslim polarization' through emergent norms and political frames developed in the course of collective mobilization.

Introduction

This chapter addresses gender, populism, and religion's relationship within the framework of Turkey's gradual democratic breakdown during the rule of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) (2002-present). Non-democracies are known for their complex attitudes towards women's rights and gender equality. Several autocratic regimes promote so-called 'state feminism' and women-friendly policies (Tripp, 2013). Some strive to indicate modernity through such policies while others seek to boost economic growth by allowing women's participation in the labor force (Htun, 2003; Salhi, 2009; Sater, 2007). Others introduce women-friendly legislation and allow the election of female lawmakers in order to gain international praise and access to international financial aid (Bardall, 2019; Bush, 2011). Most importantly, autocratic regimes are interested in securing women's loyalty by providing them with limited political and economic rights. According to Donno and Kreft (2019, p. 721), autocratic regimes are particularly adept at securing women's allegiance through "hierarchical and encompassing regime-affiliated associations". Such party or state-organized women's organizations can mobilize voters during elections and act as propaganda machines (Lorch & Bunk, 2017). Overall, nondemocracies often seek consent and legitimation from women identifying them as an important part of their constituency.

However, to build legitimacy and gain the consent of women, undemocratic rulers need to undermine alternative discourses and mobilizations in favor of women's rights and emancipation, and gender equality. In doing so, they promote traditional discourses on gender framed through religious-nationalist references to gender equality. As Doğangün (2020, p. 258) argues, "the masculinist restoration of the traditional gender order represents autocratic leaders' ambitions to ensure political stability, security, and legitimacy by promoting traditional values." Moreover, right-wing populist and nationalist actors promote nationalist, pro-natal, and xenophobic ideas in the name of women's rights. The idea of gender hierarchy between men and women informs these populist-autocratic rulers' public discourse, law, and policies across the world (Korolczuk, 2020; Kourou, 2020; Norocel, 2015).

Turkey's recent 'anti-gender' turn cannot be evaluated independent of the widespread populist/authoritarian backlash against women's rights and gender equality, which reached its apogee with Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention by presidential decree¹. The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its leader and current president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan have intensively promoted nationalist and pro-natal gender policies. The AKP is also among the longest-ruling contemporary right-wing populist political actors (2002-present) (Baykan, 2018; Dinçşahin, 2012; Yabancı, 2016). Populism morally valorizes 'the people' as a homogenous and organic community and promotes a discretionary exclusion of some groups – ethnic, religious, racial, or gender minorities and non-citizens – from the people's category (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013). In this sense, it is a polarizing political strategy that builds an agenda based on an allegedly incessant antagonism between 'the people' and 'the elites and enemies' (Aslanidis, 2015; Kaltwasser, 2012; Mudde, 2004). Polarization between the people and others promotes undemocratic anti-pluralism sooner or later. Namely, those who do not fit into 'the desired people' category would be marginalized and denied rights and social services (Arditi, 2007; Müller, 2014). Moreover, populist actors nominate themselves as the true and only representatives of the people. This claim leads to a denial of the legitimacy of competing political actors. If populists are already in power, they utilize state resources and institutions to delegitimize opposition and unlevel the playing field for competitors.

As a splinter party out of the long-standing tradition of political Islam in Turkey, the AKP was elected in 2002 with a claim to represent 'the people' namely, the conservative masses against the secular elite establishment. The AKP's populist stance was initially considered corrective to Turkey's defective democracy because the AKP declared its aim to facilitate the representation and participation of peripheral constituencies against the secular establishment². However, the AKP has incrementally monopolized institutions starting from the 2010 constitutional changes. Its populism has moved towards an exclusionary type, defining dissidents and opposition as enemies and outsiders (Yabancı, 2020). Following the 2016 coup attempt and the establishment of the current presidential system with unlimited powers in 2017, Turkey went through a regime change from a parliamentary democracy to an unchecked executive presidential system.

This autocratic turn substantiated by populism also reverberated in the area of gender policy of the AKP in the form of increasing manifestation of nationalist, heteropatriarchal, and family-oriented discourse and policies. This chapter posits that the AKP's gender policy cannot be understood without examining the intricate links between religion, nationalism, and populism. It is structured

in three main parts. The first part considers the ideological and discursive roots and legitimation of the AKP's populist-autocratic gender policy. Through a longitudinal approach, this section accounts for how the AKP 'sacralized' women with familial roles by utilizing religious and nationalist tropes. Over the last two decades, women's rights and gender relations have been framed through references to 'Islamic civilization' whose more liberal interpretations have been gradually marginalized. Gender has become an essential category of polarization between 'the venerated women' and 'feminists'. The second part examines two major actors that diffuse the AKP's gender policy in line with religious-nationalist discourse and populist political strategy: 1) the Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyamet*) and 2) government-oriented women's organizations. The third part attends to the contestations of the AKP's gender politics through the lens of diverse grassroots responses. This section shows that despite the repression targeting civic mobilization, women have advanced anti-populist and anti-authoritarian voices. A reinvigorated women's movement emerged through the collective efforts of young secular and Muslim feminist activists, especially in the aftermath of the 2013 Gezi protests as a response to populist authoritarianism. This movement has become one of the most creative and sustained efforts of anti-authoritarian resistance in Turkey. Women have created a tactical and inventive repertoire of 1) legal activism, 2) local-level deliberation and self-help, 3) demonstrations against legislative impositions, and 4) social media campaigns and feminist blogging. These efforts have generated a 'culture of solidarity' between secular and Muslim feminists challenging, through emergent norms and collective action, the secular-Muslim polarization that the AKP relies on for political gains.

Ideological Constructions of Anti-Feminism and Heteropatriarchy through Gender Discourse

The first period of the AKP government (2002-2007) bred close relations between Turkey and the European Union (EU). The prospect of EU membership resulted in a two-fold impact. First, the so-called 'democratization packages' facilitated harmonization with the EU in different fields, including gender equality. Second, the AKP also consulted civil society organizations, including Islamist women appealing for the lifting of the headscarf ban. The AKP allied with actors within women's movement³ united in the common epistemic field of the critique of the Kemalist modernization project which promoted the liberation of women within the limits permitted by the state (Kandiyoti, 1987, p. 320). As a result, during the early stages of the AKP rule, women's rights have been improved through legal changes on paper, such as Turkey's prompt approval of the Istanbul Convention in 2011.

The motivation of alliance with women's organizations for the AKP was embedded in the headscarf ban. Since the imposition of the ban via the 1982 Dress and Appearance Regulation issued by the Council of Higher Education, the 'headscarf issue' has become a matter of political confrontation between more conservative/religious and secular-Kemalist segments of society. During the 1990s, female students were expelled from campuses; teachers and officials were fired. In response, university students mobilized to defend the right to wear headscarf and created a novel political engagement and civic activism (Arik, 2012; Korteweg & Yurdakul, 2014; Turam, 2008). When the AKP came to power with a promise of representing previously excluded groups, various components of the women's movement successfully lobbied the government for greater visibility, participation, and for normalizing the headscarf. These components included neoconservative women, progressive-libertarian, Islamic and Kurdish women that have different claims for

women's rights and liberation from patriarchy in all its public and private manifestations. At that time, the AKP incorporated into the party ranks some Muslim feminists who had earlier mobilized against the headscarf ban (Aksoy, 2015). As a result, Islamic-feminist political approaches penetrated the party's policies and circulated within state agencies (Ayata & Tütüncü, 2008).

An illustrative example of women's movements' impact on government policies is the successful campaign against the plan to re-criminalize adultery (Ilkcaracan, 2008). In 2004, the AKP attempted to include adultery in the reformed criminal code. Women's organizations carried out a campaign voicing its potential adverse effects on constitutional rights and gender equality. Eventually, the AKP dropped it from the agenda. In the early 2000s, the same women's organizations were also able to lobby the parliamentarians for gender policy reform (Aldikacti-Marshall, 2009). Thanks to these efforts, in 2011 Turkey actively contributed to the drafting of the Istanbul Convention, and new national law (Law 6284) was issued to implement the Convention in the following year.

However, the government's approach has become more majoritarian and increasingly undemocratic after the 2011 elections. As a consequence, the AKP has turned against the earlier autonomy and influence of the women's movement (Çağatay, 2018). It sought to co-opt women who were mobilized earlier for the headscarf issue and claimed to be the only true and rightful representative of pious-conservative women (Yabancı, 2016). The AKP was partially successful in these attempts at appealing to pious-conservative women by resorting to a discourse on the position of women in Islam. The AKP demonized the term feminism and gender equality, a concept that carries negative connotations for conservative-religious groups in Turkey. The party representatives, especially Erdoğan, emphasized the complementarity of men and women based on natural physiological differences as a result of 'God's creation'. Accordingly, motherhood has been promoted as the foremost duty and the ultimate sacred status that Islam endows upon women (Diken, 2014). Not surprisingly, in line with the changing discourse of the government, the media-seized and controlled by pro-AKP business circles- came at the forefront of promoting these discourses through popular culture. TV series and reality have intensified popular afternoon shows and TV series to promote an image of chaste mothers and wives, specific physical appearances and behavior -such as modesty, honor, mercy, patience, and tolerance- in line with the Islamic faith (Maritato, 2020). These 'desired' qualities for women have contributed to drawing the borders of the populist 'us versus others' politics. Religious references have also been widely used to legitimate nationalist nostalgia for 'the eternal strong nation' which is to be built on women's familial roles. Erdoğan's following words are illustrative of how gender has been instrumentally used to strengthen populist and polarizing dichotomies:

“Our religion granted women a position: motherhood. Islam laid heaven under mothers' feet. However, you cannot express this to the feminists who deny motherhood. Those who understand [the importance of motherhood in Islam] are sufficient for us; we move on with them” (cited in Yabancı, 2021).

The new gender policy has actually been built on ethno-nationalist and religious-traditional values and pro-natal body politics. For instance, the current party program states that the AKP “prioritizes women's issues not because they constitute half of the population but because they are primarily responsible for raising healthy individuals and generations” (AKP, n.d.). Such discourse on women constructs an irreconcilable division between 'us' and 'others'. In the first category, there is the 'traditional Turkish family' comprising three generations (the elderly, the parents, and the

children), values, and the nation. All are centered around the mother and the wife or ‘the decent women’ to nurture the family, the nation, and traditional values through her reproductive capacity and domestic role. In the category of ‘the others’, there is the ‘Western’ nuclear family, feminist women’s organizations, women from dissident circles or opposition parties, and gender equality demands (Kocamaner, 2019; Maritato, 2020; Yabanci, 2021).

The change in the AKP’s earlier approach neither took place overnight nor was it predestined. There are contextual, ideological, and global dimensions that dynamically interacted and created the shift in the AKP’s approach from a more inclusive stance to an anti-gender conservative populist stance. First, the contingent factors in Turkey played a role. The AKP had a fragile position within the Turkish political context when it came to power in 2002. It was challenged by the strong military and the Kemalist-secular establishment. Hence, the AKP initially sought to gain the support of a wide coalition of actors including democratic and progressive constituency and organizations. To do so, it has downplayed its conservative ideological-political stance and collaborated with progressive forces -including women’s organizations- because the party saw them as strong allies against the undemocratic pressures from the establishment. These collaborations were also an opportunity to establish close relations with the EU.

However, once the AKP consolidated its power and became dominant within Turkey’s party system, majoritarian, and autocratic practices replaced its earlier commitment to democratic and pluralistic reforms. The AKP united and rallied the right-wing voters in Turkey with a comfortable margin and no longer needed the support of progressive civil society. Instead, it started to use conservative gender policy and discourse as an essential area of struggle for establishing a new conservative cultural hegemony built on tradition. The rulers started to promote heteronormative body politics to ‘invigorate social unity and homogeneity’ that appeal to conservative, Islamist, and nationalist constituencies (Güneş-Ayata & Doğangün, 2017). Several top-level government representatives, including President Erdoğan, openly endorsed women’s social role in the service of a nationalist imagination of ‘a healthy nation’. Meanwhile, the government considered ‘birth control a conspiracy against the nation’, condemned abortion, encouraged marriage at a younger age, and stigmatized divorce, labeled women engaging in these unapproved acts indecent and as outsiders (Yabanci, 2021, 2023). The EU has also lost its credibility in terms of Turkey’s membership prospects due to the increasing divisions among the member states against Turkey’s membership that also draws upon nationalist and cultural-religious claims.

Second, the global economic pressure of growth is also a factor that allowed the AKP to promote the sanctity of tradition, faith, and family values by putting them in the service of neoliberal policies. Even ideologically conservative political forces do not want to exclude half of the population from participation in the labor force. The result is often the global commodification and precarization of women’s labor. Not surprisingly, in Turkey, new policies concerning women and gender relations have become increasingly conceived through family and social policy perspectives (Coşar & Yeğenoğlu, 2011). The AKP has encouraged women to prioritize caretaking and parenting roles. Part-time careers for women under temporary and insecure contracts have been promoted as a good option for married women and mothers so that they can engage in the job market without foregoing their familial duties. Meanwhile, cash transfers and other incentives have been introduced to encourage women - including women of retirement age - to undertake childcare and elderly care. All these policies have been legitimized with references to the

protection of the ‘traditional’ three-generation Turkish family against ‘the degenerative influences’ of foreign visions. These policies conform to the AKP’s neoliberalism and market-orientation in the sense that they benefit from women’s skills in the professional job market as well as in unpaid domestic work but pay them only part of the time.

Third, the change in the AKP’s attitude is also linked to the global rise of anti-gender and patriarchal political agenda. This political agenda travels and diffuses across the world. Autocrats and populists have learned from each other, not only how to promote and frame certain discourses and policies but also how to suppress counter-movements. The emphasis on traditions and families centered on the role of sacred and dutiful women follow very similar patterns in politically and historically diverse contexts. One can find anti-feminism as a discourse and political agenda in northern Europe (such as the Finns Party in Finland) where gender equality is considered among the best in the world (Kantola & Lombardo, 2019) as well as in Western Europe (Germany's AfD or the Netherland's PVV) (Gilloz et al., 2017). Countries where masculinity has deeply shaped social codes like Russia, India (Chacko, 2020; Edenborg, 2021), and Poland, the incumbents have capitalized on a strong church and religious-nationalist identity (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Gwiazda, 2020). These anti-gender populist-autocratic agendas and actors have formed ‘discourse coalitions’ despite their divergent political, ideological, and geographical spans (see Edenborg, 2021 on discourse coalitions argument).

Overall, there is a complex set of factors that allowed and motivated the AKP to end its (involuntary) alliance with women’s organizations in the second half of its two-decade rule. The next section will turn to analyze two important actors that have diffused and implemented the AKP-led anti-feminist and anti-gender discourse in Turkey.

Actors of the AKP’s Gender Policy

Kandiyoti argues that for populist and autocratic incumbents, “the proof of women's loyalty does not lie in voting behavior 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 homemakers, and those who realize that only the deserving will be protected” (Kandiyoti, 2014). The AKP desires to ensure that women are persuaded about the nationalist-religious claims and voluntarily participate in implementing the policies of care and control. Towards this end, it has employed the Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*) and civil society organizations, particularly a special sector of government-oriented women’s organizations, to reify and disseminate the familial gender order and to convince women to absorb the message and cooperate.

The Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet)

The Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*) is a state agency established in 1924 with the intent to manage and control religion. *Diyanet*’s responsibilities includes the hiring of religious officers, the supervision of the activities carried out in mosques, and the development of a Turkish ‘true’ understanding of Islamic knowledge that is a standardized Sunni Hanafi⁴ interpretation of Islam. Over the years, the institution’s mission has evolved to undertake the task of the diffusion of morality (since the 1960s) and the protection of state integrity (since the 1980s) (Gözyaydın, 2008).

Under the AKP rule, Diyanet has further expanded both in terms of the number of religious services and the personnel (Lord, 2018; Öztürk, 2016). During the presidency of Ali Bardakoğlu (2003-2010), Diyanet enrolled female personnel to reach women and then provided them with religious knowledge. The institution significantly increased the number of women employed as preachers, vice-muftis, and Qur'an teachers in Turkish mosques (Maritato, 2018; Tütüncü, 2010). While Diyanet employed 2696 women in 2004, this figure rose to 11,041 in 2010 (Maritato, 2020, p. 102). This 'feminization' of a male-dominated institution had two interconnected consequences. First, issues related to women's rights and gender equality in Islam have become intensively debated within religious hierarchies. Second, a managed women's participation in the religious public realm has become possible (Arat, 2016; Maritato, 2022).

Moreover, Diyanet launched projects and published on women's rights and the prevention of violence against women and sought cooperation with pious women engaged in civil society organizations and activists⁵. In 2008, the project 'The Role of Religious Officers in the Fight against Violence against Women' (*Kadına Yönelik Şiddetle Mücadelede Din Görevlilerinin Katkısının Sağlanması*) was carried out in cooperation with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). The project trained female preachers on what Islam commands regarding domestic violence and what kind of response preachers may give to assist victims of violence. In 2010, in line with this project, Diyanet also promoted a campaign 'Stop Violence against Women' (*Kadına Şiddete Son*). For this project, it organized publications and seminars for both male and female personnel. Female officers autonomously promoted projects to invite women into mosques, making mosques places for women (Maritato, 2017).

The institution's activities expanded in scope and scale and, under the presidency of Mehmet Görmez (2010-2017). Its workforce exponentially grew, reaching a peak of 121,845 in 2012 (Maritato, 2020, p. 102). Although in 2018 17,833 women were enrolled by Diyanet, the increase in the number of women employees should be carefully assessed to avoid rapid conclusions. The pioneering group of women who had worked during Bardakoğlu's presidency was progressively marginalized from the institution and the newly appointed ones were compliant without calling into question patriarchal principles. Hence, Diyanet increasingly has turned out to be an extremely useful tool to promote and propagate a religious conservative 'gender climate' (Güneş-Ayata & Doğangün 2017). The activities organized for women have been tuned in line with the government's discourse on the protection of the "traditional Turkish family" (Maritato, 2020, p. 4).

This turn from 'women's rights in Islam' to 'women in the family' was visible in the titles of projects and the content of publication by Diyanet since 2011. For instance, in 2012, the above-mentioned 2010 campaign name changed from 'Stop Violence against Women' (*Kadına Şiddete Son*) to 'Stop Violence in the Family' (*Aile İçi Şiddete Son*). In 2013, Diyanet's project with the UNFPA focused more generally on domestic violence toward 'women and children' prioritizing a family perspective rather than women. The project's name was also altered to 'The Role of Religious Officers in Preventing Violence against Women and in Protecting the Family' (*Ailenin Korunması ve Kadına Yönelik Şiddetin Önlenmesinde Din Görevlilerinin Katkısının Sağlanması*). These changes resonated with the government's narrative on the family as a sacred space to be strengthened to counter 'external menaces' such as gender equality, civil rights for the LGBTQ+ community, divorce, and abortion.

Women religious officers have been on the frontline to propagate this new vision in sermons, religious seminars, and Qur'an exegeses sessions conducted in mosques (Kocamaner, 2019). Diyanet established Family Guidance and Consultation Bureaus (*Aile İrşat ve Rehberlik Büroları*, AIRB) in 2003 (Maritato, 2015). These offices are now located in all Turkish provinces and provide religious counseling and moral support upon appointment on issues pertaining to family and/or women's personal issues. The personnel employed in Family Bureaus is mostly composed of women preachers who also organize ad hoc seminars on family-related issues in mosques and beyond. The role of the family and women within the family have become a core topic of these seminars that Diyanet promotes all over the country. Since the 2010s, by virtue of protocols signed with the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Health, Diyanet also sends women preachers to prisons, hospitals, reformatories, orphanages, and shelters for women victims of violence (Maritato, 2015; 2020).

To sum up, Diyanet has progressively become a key actor that disseminates and diffuses the AKP's gender policy by way of an organized institutional structure through mosques and female preachers. It has also expanded its organizational reach through projects and collaborations with ministries and international partners. Diyanet, an official state institution, has assumed a partisan role because the AKP captured state institutions and bureaucratic appointments during its gradual autocratic power grab.

Pro-Government Women's Organizations

The shift in Diyanet's priorities to family was concomitant with a thriving pro-government sector within civil society. The major case in point is the Women's and Democracy Association (KADEM). KADEM has organic ties to the AKP through Erdoğan's daughter who serves as the deputy chair of the organization. KADEM was established in 2013 and expanded across the country with more than 40 offices. It carries out advocacy, lobbying, various projects, and training events related to women and family. KADEM often teams up with similar-minded groups, such as Istanbul Women's Organizations Platform (GIKAP/IKADDER), Hazar Education and Culture Association, Association for Women's Right against Discrimination (AK-DER), and other smaller organizations (Yabancı, 2016).

Pro-government women's organizations have provided the AKP with additional human and organizational resources to reach out to women towards convincing them about the conservative, nationalist gender policy. First, these organizations have sought to promote the AKP's gender perspective by criticizing the 'Western' type of feminism with a focus on women's emancipation and the concept of gender equality (including LGBTQ+ groups) as alien and unsuitable for the 'distinct' Turkish-Islamic traditions. Accordingly, many feminist women's organizations in Turkey are driven by Kemalist-secular privileges and ignore "diverse identities of women" (implying religious and conservative women). They also reject "the natural differences between men and women", and seek to 'masculinize' women and thereby, "detach women from their female identity" (Yabancı, 2016, p. 605). Instead of gender equality, KADEM has promoted an allegedly superior alternative: gender justice. According to the previous chair of the organization who is now an AKP lawmaker,

“as a modern concept, [gender] equality provides standard monotypes grounded in the Western culture ... [Gender justice] highlights the different features and characteristics of men and women by nature and acknowledges different liabilities between men and women attributed to society and culture. Women and men are not equal but equivalent” (Aydın Yılmaz, 2015, pp. 108–113).

In practice, the concept of gender justice melds Islamic principles and Qur’anic verses, some ideas borrowed from the post-colonial feminist theory, and the Vatican’s views on gender (Ilkcaracan, 2015). In fact, in the gender justice debate, there is no place for sexual minorities. Government-oriented women’s organizations have denied homosexuality as an attitude prohibited in Islam (KADEM, 2020). Gender (i.e. society-imposed roles) and sex (i.e. biological differences) concepts have been confounded to claim biological differences between men and women come from ‘god-given’ nature and cannot be challenged by feminism (Diner, 2018). Accordingly, differences exist because of ‘creation’, but Islam gives women a higher status by ‘honoring’ them with motherhood. These organizations have also promoted that gender justice is an ‘authentic and native’ approach to understand and improve gender relations in Turkey because it considers ‘authentic’ rural Anatolian women contrary to the alienated and assimilated feminists that represent urban ‘privileged or elite’ women.

Towards disseminating the gender justice concept as an alternative to gender equality, KADEM has sought to create a body of literature on gender justice through its own allegedly peer-reviewed journal and expert reports. By 2022, it has already organized six annual conferences on gender justice which were given extensive coverage in the media to circulate the gender justice concept to broader audiences. Similar to Diyanet, government-oriented women’s organizations have also carried out several projects. These projects have often targeted disadvantaged women in precarious situations and offered concrete benefits to their lives such as vocational training, support for parents with drug-addicted children, integration programs for refugee women and aid for the poor. State institutions, such as AFAD (Presidency Disaster and Emergency Management), the Ministry of Education, and İŞKUR (Turkish Employment Agency), have financed or co-financed these projects. KADEM has also collaborated with AKP municipalities for projects on several occasions. Through these projects, government-oriented groups have established a firm grassroots presence to promote familial orientation among women. These grassroots links with women through the intermediary of non-partisan but co-opted organizations give a boost to the implementation of the AKP’s gender outlook.

Pro-government women’s organizations and Diyanet have been the two major actors diffusing and disseminating the government’s conservative and polarizing gender discourse. Thanks to their active engagement with women across the country, they have established a close link between everyday life and the exercise of populist-autocratic power (Yabancı, 2023). It is through Diyanet’s and women’s organizations’ routine practices and everyday presence that women experience the populist autocratic rule. However, there is more to this story than discursive reproduction of conservative gender policy.

Contestations of the Gender Discourse

Despite the attempts to impose an anti-gender discourse based on familial roles of women and body politics, the feminist movement in Turkey has been reinvigorated, despite autocratic pressure. Contestations of the AKP's gender discourse have created one of the most resilient social movements thanks to the collective efforts, especially in the aftermath of the 2013 Gezi protests. New networks, associations, and organizations have emerged at local (district, university), regional and national levels as a response to surging violence targeting women and impunity surrounding gender-based crimes as well as against anti-gender discourse and policies promoted by the AKP.

The new feminist women's movement has arisen out of the efforts of young women in their mid-20s and 30s. *Kadın Meclisleri* (Women's Councils) and *Kadın Cinayetlerini Durduracağız Platformu* (We will stop femicides-KCDP) are the two most prominent organizations in terms of organizational reach and membership. Established in 2010, KCDP is a formal association and engages in rights activism and raising awareness about the exponentially rising violence targeting women and femicides. Representatives define the KCDP's goal as "an organization for women's struggle with masculine authority and society". Women's Councils is not a formal association but a grassroots practice or a network open to women from all socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. There are other numerous small and mid-size networks and associations working towards similar goals across Turkey prioritizing women's emancipation, campaigns to defend democratic rights, women belonging to minority groups, and incorporating LGBTQ+ rights (a quick Twitter search would yield hundreds of networks, local initiatives, collectives and platforms spread across Turkey with open public profiles. There are many more informal self-help groups and networks without an official title.

In recent years, Muslim feminists have also scaled up mobilization. As discussed earlier, during the 1990s, the headscarf ban was imposed on Muslim women forcing them to become increasingly vocal for rights. Once the headscarf debate was lifted during the AKP government in 2013, Muslim women -for example, organized around Capital City Women's Platform (*Başkent Kadın Platformu*)- have turned to new areas in search of salient issues and picked a daunting goal of improving women's rights and gender equality from within Islam. Between 2003 and 2010, some Muslim feminist theologians mobilized through these networks and urged Diyanet to directly define its official position against child marriages, polygamy, and violence against women. They encouraged a 'female' reading and interpretation of religious texts as well as the introduction of women's rights and gender equality within Diyanet's agenda. Some of their claims were initially put into practice. For example, a Friday prayer (Hutbe) in March 2006 was delivered on the role of woman as "daughter, spouse, and mother". The content of the text sparked some debate as it reaffirmed the equality of men and women before god and condemned the discursive association between women and dishonor (BirGün, 2006). Furthermore, they urged female religious officers to be both aware of their potential role as intermediaries between the state and the victims of violence and discrimination. They encouraged them to cooperate with other actors such as lawyers and psychologists.

More recently, a younger generation of Muslim feminists have come forward to challenge the use of Islamic references to justify violence and discrimination against women (Unal, 2022). Learning from the Muslim feminist mobilizations in Malaysia, Egypt, and the broader Middle East as well as in Europe, they have argued that Islam does not create an ontological gender hierarchy. Instead, as their reasoning goes, the centuries-long masculine interpretation of religious texts has created

gendered social codes and justified the secondary role of women in Islamic societies. These younger Muslim feminists have gone further than the previous generation and opened up to new topics and sought autonomy both from *Diyanet* and from the earlier Muslim feminists. As a result, new networks have emerged, such as Muslims against Violence targeting Women (*Kadına Şiddete Karşı Müslümanlar İnisiyatifi*) and *Havle* Association. This younger generation of Muslim feminists have also objected to the AKP's tacit or overt attempt at co-opting Muslim women's activism, the continuous instrumentalization of the long-gone headscarf ban for autocratic policy-making, and the exploitation of unpaid domestic labor of women. For instance, defying the image of Muslim women as obedient and agentless persons, another initiative - *Kadınlar Camilerde* (literally, 'Women in Mosques') - has launched a specific campaign by a group of pious Muslim women in October 2017. Reclaiming the space of the mosque, the group has sparked a heated debate by actively campaigning to provide women with equal and improved access to mosques to be able to pray without being confined to small and dilapidated spaces.

Having been locked out of direct lobbying to influence the government's policies and discourses, these self-sustaining women's movements from secular and religious corners of society have turned to 'outside lobbying', the streets, and the public (Yabancı, 2023). Their mobilizational repertoire has allowed them to create political opportunities even under hostile conditions to shape and change public opinion. Despite populist polarization between 'acceptable women' and 'feminists or indecent women' framed through religious and nationalist principles, activists have used different sites (streets, media, courts) and scales (national, local, and transnational). They have created a tactical and inventive repertoire combining contentious action through protests as well as litigation, democratic innovations, social media campaigns, and feminist blogging.

For instance, given increasing figures of domestic violence, sexual harassment, and femicide cases in recent years, women have developed a capacity for fast mobilization on the street. In fact, women's organizations have become one of the major civic oppositional groups in Turkey. The movement was able to capitalize on mass mobilization and grassroots support even during the two-year-long state of emergency measures following the 2016 coup attempt during which partial and total bans on freedom of assembly were imposed.

Protests are used for multiple purposes: to object to a legislative measure concerning women, to raise awareness about violence and femicides, or to show solidarity following a particular case of violence or femicide. To date, the largest protests have gathered thousands of women at a time and can be organized simultaneously across several cities. It is important to mention that although secular and Muslim women choose to mobilize under separate organizations, they have built networks across one of the most polarizing socio-political cleavages in Turkey, the religious versus secular divide. Young Muslim feminists have participated in some protests with their distinct symbols, slogans, and banners to criticize Islam's instrumentalization in justifying domestic violence: 'Prophet never harmed a woman', 'Praise God, I am against domestic violence', 'Instead of keeping silent, I take refuge in God and speak up against harassment, rape, and violence' (Yabancı, 2023). The choice of using Islamic framing is deliberate to drive the attention of conservative-pious groups.

Women have progressively expanded their protests beyond femicides, sexual harassment, marriage, or abortions and started to incorporate intersectional issues. In the past, women's

networks organized demonstrations and public campaigns against the economic crisis, the constitutional referendum in 2017 that dismantled the parliamentary system, and the recent boom in inflation in 2021-2022. They also mobilized demonstrations in support of diverse issues including environmental justice and refugee women. These expanded activisms on a broader range of issues show that new women's movement see the gender struggle as a part of a broader and longer battle with inequalities and injustices.

Second, episodic protests are often supported by 'off-street' actions. One case in point is the practice of mini-publics or grassroots initiatives where "a diverse body of citizens is selected randomly to reason together about an issue of public concern" (Smith & Setälä, 2018, p. 302). Women have institutionalized the practice of direct deliberation through mini-publics by establishing city, district, and university meetings. Participation in mini-publics depends on the target and design but can range from two dozen attendees, to hundreds. This practice bring together a diverse group of concerned women on a predetermined theme and have been successful in sustaining grassroots debates and civic participation to challenge formal channels of policy-making. Through these gatherings, women converse about diverse issues such as a particular case of discrimination in payment at a specific workplace or a case of sexual abuse at a university. The aim is to seek self-help and to focus solely on finding resilient solutions to gendered social and cultural life in Turkey. By 2019, mini-publics have been conducted in 19 districts in Istanbul and 25 cities across Turkey.

Moreover, litigation has also become an oft-used mobilization medium for women. The legal framework in Turkey criminalizes gender-based violence and aims to take necessary preventive measures against violence. However, the implementation suffers from widespread discretion by judges and prosecutors who often grant remission based on 'good conduct' during the trial or 'unjust provocation' by victims. To prevent remissions, voluntary activist-lawyers organized through women's networks have taken on court hundreds of cases offering legal assistance to victims or their families. For instance, for each femicide case, We will Stop Femicides Platform has run a public campaign and publicizes an up-to-date list of upcoming court hearings on its webpage. According to the activists, when victims have legal backing from women's organizations, the security forces, prosecutors and judges feel pressure to implement Law 6284⁶.

These public campaigns for raising awareness and mobilizing protests have been fostered with the help of digital activism. Social media platforms have provided the means to spread the news about an upcoming protest, a draft law by the government regarding women, or a new case of femicide. Moreover, they have helped to disseminate the news about campaigns also beyond the national borders with the intent to reach out for international solidarity and create pressure on security forces or authorities. Indeed, combining online and street mobilization is a more effective strategy. In 2012, 'Say No to Abortion Ban' campaign combined women's protests with online efforts to inform women through social media and led to the withdrawal of the proposal criminalizing abortion.

Finally, women's groups have also utilized digital activism to generate a distinct public space through blogging. For instance, *Reçel* provides a voice for self-identified Muslim and Muslim feminist women while *Çatlak Zemin* and *5Harfliler* do not classify themselves but appeal more to secular women. None of these blogs started with a clear purpose except for creating a common

space for sharing everyday life and intimate experiences away from the masculine gaze (Cantek & Bora, 2015). Anonymous blogging, in fact, gets the message out through jokes, satire, gossip, euphemisms, and other fugitive expressions. Women do not wait for 'the right moment' to emerge like protests or toleration by political authorities. However, published pieces triggered extensive discussion in the comments section creating virtual public spaces of women's solidarity. Such public spaces, thanks to the protection that anonymity provided, have turned individual and everyday matters into politicized discussions on patriarchy, gendered repression, and discrimination. Over time, topics covered in women's blogs have become more political covering dismissed academics, conscientious objection, refugees, the Kurdish issue, changing perceptions of Islam, and hate speech. Even Reçel has overcome early reservations and started openly discussing sexuality, birth control, and abortion.

These blogs have generated counter-publics against masculine, nationalist, religious, and populist state and social codes. In this sense, anonymous blogging has embodied what Scott calls 'hidden transcripts' of contestation (Scott, 1990). Given the risk of persecution and police or judicial harassment targeting activist communities, some women prefer to voice their opposition through the shield of anonymity.

To sum up, the AKP's gender policy has reinvigorated women's mobilization in Turkey strengthening its pluralism in terms of both the demands voiced as well as their repertoire. The efforts of secular and Muslim feminists have developed a culture of solidarity and mutual understanding in challenging the staunch 'secular-Muslim polarization' in Turkey through common political frames against masculinity and violence and an emergent shared normative framework developed in the course of collective action.

Conclusions

This chapter examined the relationship between populism, religion, and gender politics in Turkey under the Justice and Development Party (AKP). The case of AKP shows that populism is not only corrosive to democracy but also to gender equality. The constant reproduction of the 'people versus the others' dichotomy requires demographic policing and surveillance of women's reproductive capacities, domestic care roles, and social positions (see Mostov, 2021). The empirical discussion provided insights into the long-term evolution of the gendered aspects of the AKP's populist authoritarian rule and its possible explanations as a complex interaction between domestic-contextual and global developments. In the early 2000s, different women's movements in Turkey were able to lobby state institutions. This was in line with the EU-Turkey accession negotiations which included a request for a normalization of the state and civil society relationship. It was also related to the AKP's political struggle to overcome the suspicious Kemalist-secular establishment by creating an alliance with democratic pluralistic actors. At that time, the government enhanced cooperation between state institutions and women's movements which resulted in a common effort to shape, sign and codify the Istanbul Convention in 2011.

However, during the second decade of the AKP rule, the discourse on women and gender issues shifted to a religious-nationalist agenda to strengthen 'the traditional family'. This was concomitant with the spread of a polarizing discourse that uses gender as an essential category of

polarization between ‘the true people’ abiding by Islamic civilization and others, namely ‘repudiated feminists’ and gender equality supporters that insinuate ‘alien’ and ‘degenerative’ ideas. The AKP indicated that only through a family-oriented gender policy, women would be permitted to become a part of ‘the authentic people’ as dutiful mothers and wives in charge of the family. However, women who do not abide by the role that religion foresees for them – such as feminists, women belonging to minority sexual orientations, and single mothers – have been declared immoral outcasts. In other words, women who do not fit in familial roles have been marginalized and declared alien to national culture and traditions. We argued that the ideological convictions of the AKP as a conservative party with roots in Islamism explain the change in the attitude only partially. Autocratization and neoliberal policies are major factors that have paved the way for the instrumentalization of women’s labor in precarious sectors and unpaid domestic labor hence the marginalization and repression of the critical feminist movement.

We also examined two major players – a group of government-oriented women’s organizations and Diyanet through which the AKP has produced and cemented the alignment between gender politics, populism, nationalism, and religion. Diyanet has diffused the AKP’s religious and nationalist approach to women after significant structural changes were introduced in its organization. This change has silenced more progressive interpretations of Islam and gender relations and promoted voices more compliant with the AKP instead. The government has also pushed a semi-corporatist strategy to create a pro-government and dependent set of women’s organizations. These organizations have collaborated with ministries, AKP municipalities, and state institutions to carry out projects directed toward women and families. Both Diyanet and government-oriented women’s organizations have become resourceful actors engaging in discursive legitimation of the AKP’s family-oriented gender policy.

Our discussion also accounted for multiple contestations of the ideological and institutional structures characterizing the AKP’s populist and religious-nationalist gender policies. The new generation of women’s movement has elaborated and operationalized new spaces of cooperation and assumed an immense capacity to mobilize the grassroots through a diverse repertoire of civic participation, legal activism, public campaigns, and digital activism. While engaging in mobilization, Muslim feminists and secular feminists have denounced populist polarizing perspective of the government. Instead, they have sought to redefine civic participation and civil society through local and national activism organized to contest autocratic policymaking and conservative gender policy.

In light of these considerations, the future of the women’s movement in Turkey hangs in the balance. Turkey’s current populist authoritarian regime pursues a strategy of repression vis-à-vis civil society and social movements. The government criminalizes vociferous women and LGBTQ+ activism and encourages anti-feminist and heteropatriarchal players. One of the recent emanations of this repressive strategy is the demand to close ‘We will Stop Femicides’ (*Kadın Cinayetlerini Durduracağız*) on public security grounds. The group is accused of acting against public morality and “disintegrating the family structure by ignoring the concept of the family under the guise of defending women’s rights” (Michaelson & Narlı, 2022). The AKP also withdrew from the Council of Europe’s Istanbul Convention in July 2021, despite objections from several women’s organizations and political parties. However, the women’s movement with its multiple actors and rich repertoire has become one of the most sustained and organized oppositional actors

in Turkey's recent autocratization trajectory, establishing new links and nurturing a culture of solidarity. This experience and strong grassroots links relentlessly breed the potential to render women one of the key actors of an imminent post-autocratic transition and re-democratization in the post-AKP era.

NOTES

1. Istanbul Convention is an international convention signed by the majority of the member of the Council of Europe. Its official name is Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence.
2. The AKP emerged out of a long tradition of Islamist parties in 2001 and became the single governing party in the 2002 elections following a deep crisis in the economy and party system in Turkey. The AKP, however, renounced Islamism and adopted an anti-establishment and populist discourse to undermine Kemalist and secular-military influence in Turkish politics. In the early 2000s, Turkey showed progress in economic development, democratization, and EU membership (see Cizre, 2008). However, especially since 2010, the AKP maintains autocratic dispositions that progressively escalated. The early attempts at curbing the checks and balances and the independence of the media, the judiciary, and civil society evolved into persecution of political opposition and activists under terrorism charges, the removal of elected representatives by force, closure of civil society organizations under criminal charges but without due court proceedings, and partial or total bans on the constitutionally guaranteed rights such as the freedom of assembly.
3. In this chapter, the term 'women's movement(s) in Turkey' is employed to indicate a movement originating within the boundaries of the Turkish state. The so-called 1980s' second-wave feminism marked a watershed moment for the secular women's movement in Turkey. It problematized Kemalist (state) feminism and its modernizing project as unable to emancipate women from their subaltern condition within the family. Moreover, at that time Muslim and Kurdish women claimed spaces and visibility against a homogenized and uniformized model of womanhood and found niches of cooperation with secular feminists (Arat, 2016). During the 1990s, several conservative women also mobilized against the headscarf ban and for the right to work and education.
4. There are four widely recognized Islamic schools of law for Sunni Islam (Hanafi, Hambali, Maliki, and Shafi'i) and two for Shia Islam (Ja'fari and Zaidi). The Hanafi school of law is followed by the majority of Muslims in Turkey and is the interpretation diffused by the Diyanet personnel in Turkish mosques.
5. Scholars have investigated the engagement of pious Muslim women in platforms and civil society organizations framing them as Islamist women's civil society organizations (Aksoy, 2015) or pro-government organizations (Yabanci, 2016; 2023).
6. Law 6284 to Protect Family and Prevent Violence against Women is a national law dated 8 March 2012 and codifies the rights and responsibilities derived from the Istanbul Convention.

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