

"It was women who made the color of the referendum purple and its spirit NO!"

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Nil Mutluer

The secondary position to which women were relegated was endorsed, not silently and privately, but publicly and vocally, by high-profile dignitaries of the AKP, including Erdogan himself. This helped violence.



Women hold placards (with 3 languages, Turkish, Kurdish and Armenian) reading "stop the weapons", "Women want peace" and "we don't want any war in Sur-Cizre-Silopi", during a march on Istiklal avenue in Istanbul, Turkey, to mark International Women's Day on March 8, 2016. Depo Photos/ Press Association. All rights reserved. The title is not mine. It is the title of an article published on March 17, 2017, just a day after the referendum, in *Şûjin*, a feminist e-journal produced mainly by Kurdish women.

Thanks to some last-minute procedural manipulations by the governing party, AKP, the YES votes won with a very slight margin, 51.1% to 48.9% and this result has officially changed the political structure of the country from a parliamentary to a presidential system.

The campaign period for the referendum, as well as the referendum itself proceeded under an eight month long "state of emergency." This means to say under heavy police pressure and mass-media censorship, which Erdogan and his AKP callously used to muffle dissenting voices pursuing a NO vote and to amplify pro-Erdogan voices calling for a YES vote.

Yet it was still possible to run an effective NO campaign and the *Şûjin* article highlights the very prominent role that women from all over the country, from the southeastern Kurdish, to western provinces, played in defying the governmental attempts to boost the YES. Significantly, women and LGBTI individuals from various backgrounds acted in concert, and it was their concerted actions that upset the plans of Erdogan and the AKP to win the referendum with a landslide majority of over 60%. Significantly, women and LGBTI individuals from various backgrounds acted in concert, and it was their concerted actions that upset the plans of Erdogan and the AKP.

It was not surprising that women were the animating forces of the NO campaign, because what was at stake for them in the constitutional change from a parliamentary to a presidential system, was and still is nothing less than a

huge backlash in the rights that they had won through their active struggles in the last 40 years.

Why? Because the constitutional change effectively abolishes the separation between executive, legislative, and judicial powers, and introduces the president as the sole authority in running all branches of the government. And who is the president now? Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who very recently resumed his position as leader of the governing AKP and is also the most likely candidate to win the presidential elections of 2019 with full powers.

When it comes to describing Erdogan's and AKP's policies towards women in the last decade, "egalitarian" is hardly a word that comes to mind; "anti-feminist" and "sexist" are more likely to fit the bill.

AKP's vocally sexualized women

What the AKP and Erdogan tried to do was seek control of the whole population by regulating and disciplining women's bodies. Now, this technique of societal control is not an invention of the AKP. It has been in use since the foundation of the Republic. It was the Kemalist state which first sought to introduce and instill new national values through the construction of an image of the modern, secular, Turkish, woman, in binary opposition to other women, from Islamic, Kurdish or other ethnic or religious backgrounds.

The Kemalist state did not, however, position women only as model citizens embodying the new republic's values. It also positioned them as mothers charged with the task of reproducing and raising new generations of republican citizens. Moreover the Kemalist state also expected women to support, if not fight alongside the men in times of war, so they were charged with cultivating and instilling in their sons militaristic values as well.

It was because of these vital tasks assigned to women that women's sexuality was subjected to governmental control from very early on. The reasoning went as follows: the nation's honour depends upon woman's honour, and since the state had an active duty to protect the nation, it had to regulate and discipline the bodies of its mothers. That was how women's bodies were turned into instruments of societal control. The nation's honour depends upon woman's honour, and since the state had an active duty to protect the nation, it had to regulate and discipline the bodies of its mothers.

The practice of chastity controls in public schools and hostels which has driven many, many women to committing suicide until it was finally stopped in the 1990s, was but one example of such violent disciplining mechanisms over women's bodies. Such practices of social control were not, however, publicly trumpeted as official state policy, rather they were silently but consistently practiced with the approval, complicity, and in the full knowledge of men from all sections of society.

Neoliberalism foreshadowed

When the AKP first came to power, it turned to the EU as a potential ally against the military and Kemalist state bureaucracy and in its endeavor to accede to the EU, it did not resist the insistent demands of the women's movement to grant women an equal status in the family, and to abolish penal remission in cases of honor killings.

AKP even passed a law to fight violence against women. But the tenor of AKP's approach to women soon changed and nothing marks this change better than Erdogan's public speeches in which he urged women, whom he referred to as his "sisters" (*bacilarim*), to make at least three babies. This, he thought, was necessary for the continuing survival of the Turkish nation! A change in the name of the Ministry of State Responsible of Women to the Ministry of Family and Social Services was a further symbolic but significant turning point, for it foreshadowed the neoliberal social policies soon to be implemented by successive AKP governments which effectively reduce women's contributions to the economy to domestic caregiving.

Accompanying this change in tenor, was a marked increase in violence against women and including murder. Even though there was a law to combat violence against women, courts consistently failed to apply it, state agencies

consistently failed to implement preventive measures, and the number of women's shelters has never reached sufficient levels to host an ever-increasing number of victims. The emergency hotline established for the victims of violence against women was even turned into a hotline for social counseling! At the same time AKP dignitaries publicly censured women for such "misbehaviors" as "laughing out loud" or for wearing what they considered to be "immodest" clothes. The cumulative effect of all of this was a positioning of women as second class citizens charged with the task of domestic caregiving and who can be beaten or even murdered with impunity! Such practices of social control... were silently but consistently practiced with the approval, complicity, and in the full knowledge of men from all sections of society.

As stated earlier, this method of instilling a new set of societal values by regulating and disciplining women's labor, women's image and women's sexuality was not new. The Kemalist state too used similar methods. There was one significant difference however. This time the secondary position to which women were relegated was endorsed, not silently and privately, but publicly and vocally, by high-profile dignitaries of the AKP, including Erdogan himself. And this helped violence and not only violence against women, but violence as such to become normalized in public perception.

Honour of the nation

In the AKP era women's sexuality was also used as a discursive instrument to shift the focus of public debates, to manipulate public perception, or to mobilize AKP and/or Erdogan supporters, against political opponents. The prime example of this is the so-called Kabatas incident, in which a young, headscarved women walking with her baby daughter in a push-chair, was said to have been assaulted and pissed on by a bunch of drunken men in black bandannas coming from Gezi protests, wearing only leather trousers and leather gloves. The story was first published in one of the pro-governmental newspapers, and Erdogan used it in a number of public speeches to construct the image of the victimized ideal citizen of his new Turkey, in binary opposition to the alcohol-consuming, sexually-uncontrollable secular men of the republican era. Even though the story was later proven to be bogus, Erdogan continued to refer to it to express his sympathy with his "headscarved sister" (*başörtülü bacım*) and to manifest his loathing for the secular Gezi protestors, positioning himself thus as the protector of the honour of the nation.

Then there was the case of the Roboski massacre of December 27, 2011, where the Turkish air force bombed and killed 34 civilian Kurdish border traders. Far from any public apology, the government did not even bother to offer an official explanation. But six months later, when public protests over the incident demanding an explanation were at their peak, Erdogan introduced a draft bill to ban abortion. In a public speech at a UN demography conference he declared that "each abortion, is an Uludere" which is the Turkified name of Roboski. The message was clear: in what Erdogan is fond of calling the 'New Turkey' women's bodies were as controllable by the state, as Kurdish lives were expendable.

Thanks to the adamant opposition of the women's movement, as well as of a number of Muslim women and men who opposed the bill for different reasons, the draft bill was withdrawn, and the attempt to legally ban abortion was stopped. Yet, Erdogan's approach nonetheless won the day, for his speeches encouraged a *de facto* ban on abortion in public hospitals, which to this day consistently refuse to perform abortions on demand. His speeches encouraged a *de facto* ban on abortion in public hospitals, which to this day consistently refuse to perform abortions on demand.

In one sense, this linking of the fates which Erdogan apparently deems appropriate for second-class citizens in what he is fond of calling the 'New Turkey' – namely women and the Kurds –gave early notice of the spike in political violence which started with the recent war against the Kurds in the summer of 2015, leading henceforth to the internalization of a sexist form of nationalism in public discourses.

Gendering the State of Emergency

Even though the State of Emergency was declared officially on July 20, 2016, the persecution of those who opposed Erdogan and the AKP started much earlier, right after the Gezi protests. In 2014 the crackdown on the opposition was tightened with a series of legal changes in the laws regulating public communications and the operations of internal security and intelligence agencies. Finally, the state of emergency declared after the 2016 coup attempt provided the legal basis for effectively banning all opposition.

The declaration of the state of emergency gave Erdogan the legal pretext to run the country single-handedly through executive decrees. In this period the situation of women went from bad to worse. Male-dominated violence became normalized and women faced more restrictions in social and everyday life. Moreover HDP's success in the June 7, 2015 elections (they passed the 10% threshold, as a result of which the AKP lost its absolute majority in the parliament), led the AKP to harden its Kurdish policy. When the PKK responded to AKP's call, violence in Turkey took the form of an openly sexist, nationalist militarism. When the PKK responded to AKP's call, violence in Turkey took the form of an openly sexist, nationalist militarism.

Violence against women has continued at an increasing pace during the state of emergency. [1] After the normalization of violence against women, came steps towards the normalization of violence against children. Under the state of emergency, the AKP tried to pass a law on the sexual abuse of minors which stipulated that if a perpetrator married his victim and if the marriage lasted at least five years without problems, then he would be acquitted of his crime!

Obviously the proposed bill attracted a huge public reaction and the women's movement was in the lead of the protests. The bill was eventually withdrawn from the agenda of the Parliament on the day when it was due for a vote, because apparently even some of the AKP MPs could not bring themselves to give an assenting vote and decided to give the meeting a pass.

Yet this did not prevent the *de facto* implementation of what the proposed bill stipulated, for in many cases the judges released perpetrators on the condition that they marry their victims. Courts still give mitigated sentences to the perpetrators of violence against women, including murderers of women. And it is a common occurrence in Turkey that newspapers report every single day at least one case of violence against women, and one woman's murder.

Fighting back

The state of emergency has also harmed the public mechanisms for fighting against discrimination against women. Women's social, political and economic activities in the public sphere has been severely restricted under the state of emergency. A number of non-governmental organizations in the area of woman and children were closed down for their alleged association with terrorist organizations, and a large number of employees of such establishments were detained and arrested.

Media channels that regularly give voice to feminist voices, like IMC and *Hayatin Sesi*, or women's new agencies like *Jinha* have been closed down by executive decrees. While AKP's neoliberal policies determine women's main area of economic activity as maternal care-giving, during the state of emergency the [numbers of the unemployed have skyrocketed](#) to around 500,000, of which 343,000 were women.

While human rights abuses and political persecution was wreaking havoc in Turkey in general, the situation of Kurds was even worse, for they found themselves in the middle of a dirty war. And as in any war, women and children were the main victims. The security forces did not refrain from killing civilians, including women and children, and entire neighborhoods and even towns were literally eradicated from the face of the earth. Women militants were killed, stripped and their naked bodies were dragged along city streets – apparently in a show of sexist defiance by the security forces.

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show of sexist defiance by the security forces. Security officers published their photos from the bedrooms of the homes they raided, with sexist messages of defiance and abuse written on mirrors. Yes, such sights of violence and abuse have never been absent from the conflict zones of Kurdish provinces in the last 30 years. But what was different this time was the way that such abuses were publicly exhibited with uninhibited and unapologetic clarity. It was as if such sights have become the most normal everyday things in life!

The gender of the streets

This, then, is the background, against which women "turned the color of the referendum purple, and its spirit to NO."

The existence of the women's movement in Turkey is not new. It goes back to the last decades of the Ottoman Era. And even though the state's control mechanisms have significantly curbed their sphere of activity in the republican era, it was women who first found the courage to engage in organized street protests after the coup of 1980.

Women have been one of the most active groups, and in fact, perhaps, the most active group in demanding their rights in the public sphere, in organizing large mass-demonstrations, and in struggling for legal changes. In the 1990s, they became a formidable group of organized plurality comprising women from diverse ideological and ethnic backgrounds, including, Kemalists, Muslims, Kurds, socialists and LGBTI women capable of triggering legal changes.

Even though the movement shrinks or expands as its internal debates among diverse identities evolve, it is a movement that never loses its vitality. It is a movement that gave the Gezi protests their purple and rainbow color. As such, it is not only an identity movement, but also a form of issue-based activism. A movement that has both limits and resilience, open both to collective and individual participation.

It was thanks to these qualities that feminist women, or, in fact, all women who want to participate in secular life freely and equally are excluded as are others from Erdogan's new Turkey. Yet, the very plurality within the women's movement itself, and the experience and resilience of years of struggle, enabled women from diverse backgrounds to meet once again on the streets before the referendum. What they were opposing was not merely Erdogan's presidential ambitions. Their NO spelt a NO to male domination, discrimination, violence and militarism.



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