

Research Project Report “Comparing women’s movements in  
different cities in Turkey”

V. On the relationship between women’s movement(s) and the  
authoritarian neo-liberal regime in Turkey

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## **V. On the relationship between women’s movement(s) and the authoritarian neo-liberal regime in Turkey**

### **Introduction**

Turkey has been passing through another dark age of its political history. In this period, while secular middle classes, Alevis, leftists and definitely most of the Kurdish population have been feeling under real threat in different ways, feminist activists have also turned into a political target of the new power block. By considering this political context as the historical framework of the research on “Women’s movements in Turkey”, this paper aims to explore the question of how to analyse women’s movement(s) within this general socio-political context of Turkey; what we should concern about while conducting a research on such topic that as had been done by this team who work at the Faculty of Education, Intercultural Education Unit, Bremen University. In other words, the particular focus of my discussion here would be the relationship between the present political context with the issues concerning women’s movement(s) in Turkey. Within this framework, I want to question the effects of neoliberal regimes on our political life and on our feminist politics. I shall also remark on how to read the inner dynamics and diversity within women’s movement(s) from a political perspective which is sensitive to the present political crisis in Turkey.

### **Part 1: A study of women’s movements in Turkey is not only a study of women’s movements in Turkey**

Today authoritarianism is increasingly becoming powerful in the political sphere under the leadership of the neoconservative party called AKP (Justice and Development Party) in Turkey. Although, it is important not to ignore that such right-wing regimes and ideologies are getting stronger not only in Turkey but also in many other places including Europe and America. Thus it seems that the present political tendency towards the right is not something that we can explain with the rise of Islamist fundamentalism or radical Islamism in the Middle East. Here in this paper, political resonance that occurs between different geographies would be analysed with respect to the global hegemony of neoliberalism. Therefore, all the

arguments I will follow here would be part of a narrative that is peculiar not only to Turkey but a part of a general tendency towards more radical right at the global level.

We all know that the world has been undergoing a great transformation for the last thirty years in particular. It is the period when the belief in socialism or at least the monolithic “top-down” state intervention-style socialism has been redundant. Welfare-oriented models, which had previously dominated the political landscape, have also been increasingly dismantled. In respect to all these, the decreasing relevance of the Keynesian welfare model; the decline of the nation-state and thus the weight of state intervention are all important issues that have been already addressed in more than a million times in academic works like this.

It was all assumed that there is no alternative to what was described as “a dynamic market economy”. With this comes a general acceptance of the inevitable capitalist globalisation that has mutated into a new type of economy that privileges information technology, individual skills, and entrepreneur culture, flexibility for both labour and business, the global liquidity of the capital, etc. By the right-wing intellectuals or so-called neoconservatives these trendy concepts, which were coming from the repertoire of liberalism, were all articulated with the ideas like the “small but strong state”, returning back to the notions of tradition, family, and religion, etc. In accordance with this, the notion of social democracy has been redescribed. Politicians started to become unapologetic about the large measure of pragmatism in the way they implemented their policies and visions. Under the impact of the new type of pragmatism, the vision of politics wants to be moved beyond traditional political conflicts. One of the main aims of the ruling elites had become to harmonise opposing standpoints like left and right. With this recognition, ideological principles have been replaced with “non-ideologically contaminated decision making.” Such a view reflects the desire to leave ideology behind and to build a rational and technocratic government which is overwhelmed with new governing techniques and with disciplinary and control measures based on force.

We can follow this neoliberal view of politics from AKP’s politics based on “service notion” which states that elected politicians should be in the service of people and should not involve into unnecessary and meaningless political-ideological debates and oppositions. Naturally,

AKP’s social policy was very much flavoured with conservative principles and ideas, but still, in respect to its pragmatism and anti-political politics of AKP, the project echoes very much like Bill Clinton’s, Gerhard Schröder’s and Tony Blair’s rhetorics which were once called the third way. This technocratic view of the state is something we had been hearing since the time of Margaret Thatcher in England, Ronald Reagan in the United States of America and Turgut Özal in Turkey. Their rhetorics were all based on one fundamental argument that is what Francis Fukuyama has proposed once: what we are witnessing is the triumph of one specific ideology in fact. His premise is quite simple; after years of evolution, revolution and war, the “forces of freedom have finally defeated those of dictatorship.” The combination of “market economics” and “representative democracy” is the best we can do. In other words, the principles that were defended for their use as a cure against dictatorships could also be turning into reasons to start political wars in different geographies and to increase forceful battles against those who want to change these principles in different directions. In fact it was not very clear whether economic libertarianism was a strong tool and arm against the battle of authoritarianism. In fact, there were others who claimed that economic liberalism was getting on well with the authoritarian state which is in an authoritarian sense and in terms of military/police measures (Hall, 1998 and Jessop, 2007).

Furthermore, the question should be posed, can’t we imagine something beyond this simple formula of Fukuyama which is based on two basic principles called “market economics” and “representative democracy”. These aforementioned principles define also the present authoritarian regime of Turkey. One might, therefore, ask further, do we really have to abandon the term politics from our agendas and vocabularies? Can’t we imagine new forms of democracies that are capable of going beyond what we are forced to accept as the real democracy by the new right minded governments at the present? What is the new basis of alternative politics in the World of 2000s? In order to search for alternatives and for potentials leading us to other options than the one proposed by neoliberals, we need to look at our societies and our political movements in detail. This also require us to use new political lenses as opposed to what Giddens, Fukuyama, Huntington and others suggest. This is because there is a need to accept that politics has gone through deep transformation but this does not mean that we should totally refuse the idea. There is a strong need to rewrite history that we all went through for the last three decades from an alternative perspective,

without falling into the trap of nostalgia for the good days of leftists and even feminists in the years bygone. We need to understand our seemingly chaotic world from a different perspective which would show us existing capacities for changing the world to a better place. We need to develop an alternative discourse of democracy which goes beyond the limits that neoliberals and neoconservatives put for the definition of democracy. This does not mean that politics has ended but it means that politics require us to renew our concepts in order to be able to make us feel that “yes there are other alternatives and some potentials”.

I believe the research that had been carried out by this very dedicated group of academics and researchers would help us in our search for such potentials and alternatives that exist at least in Turkey. But since there is an important resonance between politics in Turkey and other parts of the world, a research on women’s movements in Turkey does not concern those who are involved in feminist politics only in Turkey. I also believe also that research like this one would also provide some clues about divergent counter strategies of challenging the hegemony of neoliberal regimes in the world.

## **Part 2: Deficits of the new social movements paradigm**

One important theoretical challenge against neoliberal views and approach came from the new social movements paradigm. According to this approach, parallel to the decline of traditional working-class solidarity expressed through the trade union movement and on the basis of the criticism of the old nation-state formation, what we have witnessed in the last thirty years is the rise of new political identities which resulted in more flexible and heterogeneous societies and social movements. Since the years after the second world war, Western European political agendas, which were characterised by the welfare state system and industrial development, have been occupied with issues of “economic development”, “welfare distribution” and “security”. These were the main issues that underline liberal-democratic welfare society consensus, in which the social, economic and political systems of the Western societies were constructed on. However, this consensus had been resolved since the second world war. Hence, based on the three main issues of the old political consensus, the parameters of social conflicts shifted to a new basis which put the centrality of the

capital-labour conflict into question. Instead, what has begun to be seen as important was the concept of “identity” as we all have read the literature on new social movements written by authors like Touraine, Cohen, Arato, Melucci, Offe and many others. They consider women’s movement as part of this new type of political collective action focusing on the quality of life issues rather than economic redistribution.

Being born as a critic of the Marxist theory of revolution, which failed explaining why it was not the working class but new middle-class students who revolt against the system in the 1960s, New Social Movements theories depart from the macro-level structural analysis of the new type of collective actions which were ignored by classical Marxist analysis, however, it repeated the same mistake. Downing, for instance, argues that “for the New Social Movements school, only certain social movements are normally in focus, such as environmentalism, feminism, or gay and lesbian identity assertion. They typically have zero to say about such “Third World” phenomena as the 20th century antiapartheid movement inside and outside South Africa or the social explosions that rocked Argentina in the first years of this decade and Indonesia in the final years of the previous one.” (Downing, 2008: 43). There are also others that need to be analysed from a different perspective; the global justice movement, which has dominated the scene in the late 1990s and early 2000s, then more recently the Indignados in Spain as well as elsewhere in Europe and the various “Occupy” movements in the United States. All these protests seem to gather people not only from the middle classes as the New Social Movements Theory would argue, but from different social strata. Picardo carries these criticisms further and addresses to another blind point of the same theory that concerns the lack of analysis of contemporary right-wing social movements including religiously oriented ones. So like Marxism which marginalizes movements not based on the working class, the New Social Movements school also marginalizes those that are not European, not leftist, not identity centered and not based on only middle classes. For Downing, this comes from the problem that this paradigm is too much concerned with the macro structural analysis of the social transformation that has been experienced by European societies. For him, the term social movement is used almost as interchangeably to macroscopic social change.

I honestly also think that this research that had been carried out by this research team from

Bremen University would also give us a chance to discuss these problems and find ways of going beyond the limits of the New Social Movements Paradigm, since it looks at a particular geo-political location called Turkey and is based on an analytical perspective which is very sensitive to different parameters of diversity within women’s movements in Turkey.

Part 3: Diversity Within Each Movement and Alliances Among Movements in their Struggle Against Neoliberal, Neoconservative and Authoritarian Governmentality and for Radicalisation of Democracy

At this point, I will want to address another problem which I think is relevant for those who would analyse alternative social movements for their potentials. This is also intimately related to the problem that I raised in the second part. As we know, the politics in Turkey has been reshaped in the vein of neoliberalism since the 1980s and we need to read this project of AKP within the context of recently evolved postmodern/late modern post-politics of neoliberalism. Obviously, the political history of neoliberalism has evolved on the basis of inherited state structure and state tradition. But it is also true that there are important differences between the state formation and political regime of the 1940s with that of the 2010s. For that reason, I honestly also think it is important to be very careful and precise about how to use such generalising concepts as “Turkish state tradition” or “Fascist regime of Turkey”. Furthermore, I believe it is even more preferable to understand the peculiarities of the present power relations, which make present regime ever more hegemonic than any other in the history of Turkey. Such analysis would help all dissidents including feminist activists to come with better arguments and criticism against the present mode of government. This will also help us to find out new strategies that work better in resolving hegemony of neoliberalism. Such analysis is important also for a better understanding of the diversity within women’s movements in Turkey, which is the subject of this research since it helps us not only to better contextualise what we are analysing but also to understand the inner dynamics and tension that exist among and within women’s movements.

For instance, what kinds of differences are there between the Kemalist state and AKP’s neoliberal state strategy? Is there a total continuity between the 1940s, 1990s, and 2010s in an ideological and structural sense and in respect to the dominant modes of governmentality?. In contrast to the previous regimes, AKP has taken civil society as the basis

of its hegemony. It is the time where civil society are expanding under the impact of new social movements. The neoliberal strategy of putting social responsibilities on the shoulders of NGOs instead of the state has also been influential on this development. Based on the Islamist identity movement that gave rise in the 1980s, AKP emerged as a strong voice against the previously hegemonic nationalist projects of the left with respect to their cultural elitism and state-centered approach. Within this context, asserting the claim of being beyond the classical political division between the left and the right, AKP relies on the neoliberal rationality. Based on the neoliberal service notion and the pragmatic state strategy of the AKP’s populist governmentality seems deeply different from ethnic nationalist, modernist, principlist and state centered populist governmentality of the Kemalist regime. It is the neoliberal economism of the AKP, that articulates conservative Islamist and authoritarian aspects of its politics with liberal, pragmatic, and technocratic ones. Although political instruments (nationalism, state apparatuses, etc) which are often in use are the same and in the context of political crisis their political elites tend to rely on the same “state rational”, these two political projects should be considered as different.

AKP was also different from its conservative predecessors, despite their common political background, political vocabularies and group of voters. For instance, unlike its predecessors like the Welfare Party (“Refah Partisi” in Turkish) and the Virtue Party (“Fazilet Partisi” in Turkish), which were against the European Union membership of Turkey and more critical of the market economy and defended a more statist approach (İnsel, 2003: 3), AKP, at the onset of its rule, supported the European Union membership negotiation process of Turkey and introduced reform packages for adopting the EU *acquis* (Kahraman, 2007: 139-143). Abandoning their predecessors’ intense anti-secularist and anti-market but state founded rhetorics, they went on to emphasise a pragmatic service-based politics at home, focusing on economic growth, political stability, good governance and better provision of social services. Another distinction of the AKP’s politics from the preceding parties coming from their conservative background is related to their understanding of the so-called “woman’s issue”. AKP leaders emphasised the need for policies to remedy gender inequality in Turkish society at the beginning of its rule. Initially, AKP had been very reformative and had used lots of arguments connected to feminist agendas including various women’s rights issues and policies. So AKP regime, like the other postmodern or post-political regimes in the world, was



very pragmatic in making use of the concepts that had been already adopted from agendas of feminist politics. At least it was very well aware of women’s rights issues which it articulated into its own political discourse. Neoconservative ideologists and think tank groups of AKP adapted some of these policy issues as their everyday mantra, which helped them not only to appeal to the social masses and lower-class women’s groups in Turkey but also in their battle against feminist activist groups. In fact, since the period of Özal’s Mother Land Party of the 1980s and 1990s, and more in the period of the AKP, women’s rights and gender inequality had been on the agenda of neoliberals and neoconservatives, who came with the claim of solving the problems of women in Turkey from a new perspective that is an alternative to the feminist one.

Within this process, AKP’s elites proposed an alternative approach against to the definition of gender equality as “the enjoyment of the same rights” by women and men which have been the formal approach adopted by the Turkish state since the 1920s. Having been based on many legal and institutional arrangements that had been adopted to bring this goal to reality since the early years, the notion of gender equality is understood as the ‘sameness’ of the sexes. As opposed to this understanding that has conventionally required the provision of formal equality (equal legal rights, equal conditions, equal wages etc.) to women and men, AKP reconceptualized the notion of gender equality in relation to the need for the recognition of sexual ‘differences’. Reconceptualising “sex” as nature or spiritual difference (fitrat) in capabilities and contributions, the new understanding of the notion of “gender equality” is rested on ensuring equal valuation of the different contributions made by women and men. This biologically determinist and understanding of sex/gender defines femininity in relation to women’s social roles as mother and wife, which are conceived as natural and ontological features of what womanhood is. It is in this context that Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the Turkish president, who serves as the symbol of the AKP once declared as “he did not believe in equality between women and men but rather supported equality of opportunity”. While having been fed by religious values, this new discourse of “equality through difference” speeded up the process of the expansion of social rights and spheres which are reserved only for women. One example for AKP’s pragmatist understanding of social welfare and conservative approach to women’s rights issue is its social policy related to needy women who have lost their husbands and are taking care of their children by themselves. AKP

government deemed these women to be eligible for a payment, on the condition that they are not remarried or are in a de facto union. While the provision of such benefits falls in line with the usual functioning of a welfare state, in the Turkish context, the rationale of the policy appears to incorporate a strong community-based moral dimension.

This is basically related to the fact that, as being a product of the period of identity politics which has risen after the late 1970s, AKP had also emerged as a political project which is critical about the Kemalist state ideology of the past years for being “elitist”, “narrow minded”, “antidemocratic”, “state centred”, “non-liberal”, “antipopulist”, “bureaucratic”, etc. On this basis, they had continuously articulated such concepts like democracy, freedom, justice, right, liberty into their discourses, while they transformed their meanings and relieved them of anything which connotes anti systemic politics. In this process, for instance, the issue of right was reinterpreted in a very pragmatic way which brought some reforms into being in the ways that the state institutions carry out their services. While AKP had been intensifying the process of privatisation to a huge level (Islam’s marriage with neoliberalism), the privatisation of welfare and public services have all taken place under the banner of ‘increasing efficiency and profitability’. The government policies of AKP had explicitly outlined its neoliberal programme, which redefined development as participation into the world market.

Thus, on the basis of all these socio-political and historical dynamics, one can argue that analysing AKP’s neoliberal regime by emphasizing only on its conservative or religious ruling mentality or by reducing its political project to its neoliberal economic policies is not valuable. For instance, Brown views American current predicament in terms of a neoliberal political rationality that emerges as governmentality or “a mode of governance encompassing but not limited to the state, and one that produces subjects, forms of citizenship and behaviour, and a new organization of the social.” (Brown, 2003: 37) On the basis of this argument, Brown goes further by stating that neoliberal rationality does concern neither only neoconservatism nor neoliberal economic policies. As a political rationality, it goes far beyond the market as well as the state. She states that “neoliberalism carries a social analysis that, when deployed as a form of governmentality, reaches from the soul of the citizen-subject to education policy to practices of empire.” (Brown, 2003: 39)

In a similar manner, AKP regime can also be analysed with respect to its neoliberal rationality, which concerns not only neoliberal economic policies nor neoconservative policies but their tag mode of coexistence that requires an analysis of the moral regulatory mode of governance. Here religion provides the necessary language and symbols that would function as proofs of the validity and reliability of the political vision (Petchesky, 1984: 245). For Dirlik, the consequences of religion in state power open the way to the biopolitical colonization of everyday life. Interestingly, the most significant aspect of such practice is the regulation of women’s bodies, which is also the greatest source of controversy globally (Dirlik, 2012: 241). Embedded in the neoliberal rationality, AKP’s project is constructed on a discourse which not only falls into an antifeminist and antisocial welfare backlashes but also provides counter alternatives to the leftist discourse of social welfare and feminist discourse of gender equality. In other words, it did not totally dismiss women’s rights issue as well as issue of social democracy as mentioned above. Today many women’s NGO’s (it is problematic to call them as NGOs since they have undeclared connections with the government) was established with the support of AKP. It is also true that global funding organisations like EU or BM pursue some programmes for the governments to support the expansion of civil society organisations. These women-specific NGOs do also have a position within women’s movements in Turkey. Whether we can call them as a movement in itself is a question that we need to be posed. Though it is obvious that they have an impact on the formation of women’s movements in Turkey.

This seemingly inconsistent and eclectic politics of AKP can be seen as a good example or a product of the post-political culture of postmodernism. It is an outcome of the interaction between different forms of identity politics that have been dominant since the 1980s in Turkey. It should also be remembered that this seemingly conflictual politics of the AKP has evolved within the socio-political context of the emergence and interactions between identity movements in Turkey. All these identity movements, including conservative religious ones emerged as a response to the previously dominant Kemalist modernist project in Turkey. In this respect, they all shared a common climate of political crisis of the old social consensus based on the notions of the nation state and national economy. Therefore, they had developed in parallels as well as in tension with each other and exchange some ideas, concepts and problems. Therefore, today the new right governments use the vocabularies of

the alternative social movements as well as conservative ones. Thus, AKP’s political agenda has also informed with identity politics and civil society. As it gets involved in women’s politics, it splits the civil society into two on the line of politics of lifestyle. For all these reasons, it is not enough to consider differences among women’s movements only in respect to social identities without considering their diverse understanding of democracy and relation to the persistent power of dominant neoliberal governments.

Today AKP’s neoliberal, neoconservative and authoritarian attacks has started to be felt by the larger sections of society, including Kurdish and Alevites more clearly than ever before. The political crisis and war have been increasing ever since then in Kurdish cities for the last couple of years. Even at the present moment when AKP embraced more aggressive policies against the larger sections of the society and gradually began to harden and manage to monopolize the political power with all the relevant institutions, it very much devotes itself to the idea of democracy (for instance as opposed to the forces which attempted the last coup de Etat attempt on 15th of July 2016) and manages to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the important section of society. Therefore, I believe, there is a need to question the main dynamics of women’s movement(s) in Turkey in respect to the different understanding of what democracy is.

### **Concluding remarks**

So, we can once again ask our conclusive questions. What is the new dynamics that can be addressed in our analysis of women’s movements? What are the main parameters of the diversity that exists among women’s movements? Can we define their distinctions only on the basis of their strategic articulation of different identities? What about the differences in terms of their distinct political standpoints and approaches to the concepts of democracy, secularism, right, equality? Are they same in respect to their relation to the neoliberal rationality of the government? What if there are distinctions within the same women’s movements in line with their distinct definitions of democracy? Do women’s movements recognise the peculiar and complex character of the present neoliberal rationality of AKP regime deep enough and in the same way? Are they all able to develop alternative critiques

against biopolitical governance techniques of AKP’s neoliberalism? Do we need to go beyond feminism or be postfeminist in order to be able to struggle against this post-ideological or postmodern right-wing regimes? Or do we need to be post-political and ignore all political differences between diverged women’s groups? How can one place for instance devoted Muslim women’s groups, who are deeply overwhelmed with neoliberal and neoconservative values and principles of AKP, into our analysis and our categorisation? Or is it possible to see all Muslim women’s activists as equal parts of the same movement? Are we still in the age of identity politics? What is the place of the notion of intersectionality in this debate? What should we do with the so-called old fashion socialist vocabularies politics like equality and equality?

As one might know, this research that has been conducted by the research team at the Bremen University is very sensitive towards diversity that exists within both the society, politics and women’s movements in Turkey. Any discerning mind might have noticed how they carried out this research while keeping the principle of setting up over homogenising and generalising categorisations. In fact, the aim of this research is to find out this plurality and diversity that exist within “women’s movement” in Turkey. For that reason, they have developed the notion “women’s movements” in the plural, instead of a singular form. The aim of this research is to find out and make more visible the lines that divide women’s groups into different movements on the basis of their distinct identities and their complex modes of articulations. These are the lines that they take into consideration while they set up political alliances as well as distinctions among themselves. So, the research mainly aims to see the way how these lines create tensions as well as resonance among distinct women’s groups. In all these respects, we hope this research would bring about new tools and concepts that can help us to come to the point of having a better understanding of the complexity of existing political conflicts and potentials within women’s movements.

So, reflecting on the vocabulary of this research and research questions, one can say that this research does not aim to find out the differentiation within one women’s movement on their distinct political standpoints. This might be another research project which might be conducted in the future on the basis of this existing one. My humble suggestion, in this respect, is that if we are not going to get stuck on the myth of post-politics, we need to make

a careful analysis of the diversity among/within women’s movements beyond their differentiation on the basis of their distinct identities (i.e. identities that they articulate with gender). Together with this, what is important to take into consideration is their distinct political standpoints which are determined according to how different groups within the same movement relate themselves to such political concepts as democracy, equality, freedom, justice, etc. As Norberto Bobbio stresses, new social movements that would initially indicate that the left/right axis is dead, have an increasing tendency to fracture into left and right versions. Thus, for instance, green politics may have ‘left’ and ‘right’ forms. Or right wing conservative parties and their affiliated women’s groups might have their own gender politics as opposed to those which are oriented towards the leftist views and ideologies.

Departing from this general picture, it seems problematic to insist on making feminist politics beyond and outside such ideological and political differences and only taking identity politics as the basis of understanding the dynamics of diversification between women’s movements in Turkey. If we don’t want to fall into the trap of liberal discourse of post-political politics, we need to accept the fact that identities do not spontaneously produce ready-made political subject positions. As I mentioned above, there are neoconservative versions of new social movements which require being analysed as Pichardo points at. There is a need for political projects which are constructed on the basis of identity issues and to provide alternative world views and values to people to live with. So despite the fact that what we call left and right values and principles had all gone through important transformations in their interaction with new political and social challenges, they still exist in new forms and with new meanings. This conceptual transformation also requires being analysed in detail. Such an analysis would help us to understand the capabilities of these movements to create alternative models of democracies which are capable of dismantling the existing neoliberal consensus and propose a new one. Here we might need to look at the discussions on the concepts like radical democracy as Laclau, Mouffe, and Butler suggest or alternative politics as Rancier propose. In the same way, it is difficult to search for a basis of new political alliances among women’s groups or movements simply on the basis of identity. In other words being women seems not enough common base for doing politics together. So we should keep in mind that it might be important but not enough condition for constructing political alliances for feminist activists to get together.

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