

Nationalism and Women's Autonomy in Turkey

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I. Introduction

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has gradually transitioned into an authoritarian leader. This has only compounded in the face of the 2013 Gezi protests, 2016 failed coup and its subsequent purges. Invoking an expanded mandate to strengthen his grip on the State, Mr. Erdoğan's response to the coup attempt has included a roundup of dissidents, academics, and journalists as well as a reliance on right-wing nationalism. There has been broad discussion on Mr. Erdoğan's transition from a pro-Western, moderate Islamist during the founding days of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), to the man leading today's domestic crackdown. However, this discourse has focused primarily on his personal consolidation of power and suppression of academics and journalists. Outside sporadic newspaper coverage on key speeches, events, and tragedies, there has been little written on the impact of President Erdoğan's growing authoritarianism on the women of Turkey. Today, women in Turkey are nominally equal before the law, but women's equality is far from realized. Further, progress by women's groups, such as the prohibition of sex with minors under the age of 15, has been rolled back under the leadership of Mr. Erdoğan. His embrace of right-wing nationalism and Islamic populism has substantially impacted women's role in society, providing a case study of the intersection of Turkish nationalism and gender roles.

The use of gender roles and women's autonomy within a nationalist and populist movement is not unique to Turkey, the position of women has long been tied to concepts of nationalism and national identity. Within this paradigm women are often assigned a limited role as mothers of the nation, both biologically and symbolically, creating a passive yet crucial role in which women's bodies are instrumentalized. This paper will explore this relationship within the frame of current Turkish politics, focusing specifically on the effacing of autonomy by right-wing nationalism in Turkey. The paper will seek to answer the question: How has President Erdoğan's brand of right-wing nationalism affected women's autonomy over their bodies — in terms of violence against women and reproductive rights — and their role in society? It will first provide context, briefly detailing both the

academic discussion surrounding gender and nationalism and the current political climate in which populist politics are flourishing. It will then demonstrate how President Erdoğan's administration has had a negative impact on women by encouraging women's subscription to traditional gender norms and roles, before concluding with a summary of the findings.

II. Context

This examination of gender and nationalism in Turkey fits within both the broad academic discussion regarding women and right-wing nationalism and today's larger re-nationalization movement. The relationship between gender and nationalist ideologies is well studied and reveals the importance of women to the creation of national identity or origin. Scholars draw distinction between nationalist ideologies, illustrating that those identities that are based on citizenship rights over cultural or ethnic identity tend to be much more inclusive of women and minorities alike. In relation to right-wing nationalism, specifically, scholars Nickie Charles and Helen Hintjens argue, "right-wing nationalist ideologies most certainly include women but define their 'place' in very specific ways," (Charles & Hintjens, 1998:6). They highlight the consequences of these ideologies, stating that they are, "dangerous for women because maintaining a particular cultural identity involves the control of women's reproductive capacity and a curtailment of their autonomy" (Charles & Hintjens, 1998:6). In this context, the building of a central state is also the building of a hierarchal sexual order and gendered division of labor; "sexual order becomes a synonym for civilisation," (Benton, 1998:32). This can be seen in Turkey, as President Erdoğan's increasingly authoritarian stance has resulted in growing hostility toward Turkish women who move outside their accepted places.

Today, the growth of right-wing nationalist politics, encouraged by resentment of globalization and a subsequent tide of populism, has demonstrated the fragility of women's progress across the Western world as conservative groups have touted traditional values and gender roles. This trend toward re-nationalization has been seen in the United States, Poland, Germany, and France among others, and though their individual contexts differ from those of Turkey, the impact on women is often similar. Utilizing religion,

culture, a fear of lost identity and privilege, and us vs. them rhetoric, these movements elevate dominant national groups while marginalizing women. At the heart of these movements is the underlying belief – often glossed over by the media – that holds there is a biological order of sex that cannot be overturned, and which defines the social order (Kofman, 1998:92-93). Indeed, in Turkey, Mr. Erdoğan has repeatedly spoken of a natural sexual order that assigns women a secondary role.

III. Argument

President Erdoğan's conservative AKP party has embraced a brand of nationalism that pushes against the secular history of the Turkish Republic and encourages a homogenous national identity. Mr. Erdoğan himself has a long history in Turkish politics. Before establishing himself as the most powerful politician in the country, in the 1980s and 1990s Mr. Erdoğan became known as an "unorthodox Islamist" for both embracing Islam in politics but also casting

later, in 2001, Mr. Erdoğan led a group in the founding of the Justice and Development Party, known by its Turkish acronym, AKP. Though politically aligned with a pro-European stance, since his rise to power as Prime Minister in 2003 Mr. Erdoğan has attempted to build a new Turkish identity. Trying "to preserve a conservative social order... He believed that he could harness Sunni Islam, a creed shared by a majority of Turkey's citizens, as a unifying force," (Karaveli, 2016:122). In part, it was this vision, the increase in conservative social policies, and the homogenization of the new Turkish identity – based more on the legacy of the Ottoman Empire than Kemal Atatürk – which drove Gezi protesters against the government in 2013. Unrelentingly, President Erdoğan stayed the course, instituting a large crackdown of dissidents and continuing to drift toward authoritarianism. This has been further compounded by the failed July 2016 coup, which saw an outpouring of support for Mr. Erdoğan's democratically elected government and has furthered "the AKP's transformation toward a more

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aside some norms (Karaveli, 2016:122). This includes the role of women. During his 1989 mayoral campaign, Mr. Erdoğan made a point to involve women, both those who wore headscarves and those who did not, in campaign activities and the Welfare Party (Karaveli, 2016:122). Yet those views changed once he was elected. As mayor of Istanbul in 1994, he declared that he was in favor of imposing Sharia (Karaveli, 2016:122). He was imprisoned in 1999, under a secular government, for inciting the people to religious hatred after reading a poem at a political rally that equated nationalism with Islam (Aslaneli, 1999).

After his release, he realigned his politics toward a moderate-Islamist, pro-Western stance, casting aside calls for the imposition of Sharia law. Two years

hegemonic, nationalist and populist Islamism than was already underway," (Killinc, 2016). Yet, by utilizing tools such as religion and culture to develop a sense of conservative nationalism, Mr. Erdoğan has further oppressed women in Turkish society.

In recent years, President Erdoğan's embrace and encouragement of right-wing nationalism and Islamic populism has resulted in an erosion of women's autonomy – both physically, in terms of violence against women and reproductive rights, and socially, in terms of women's place in society. However, it was not always clear that Mr. Erdoğan would be an antagonist to gender equality. Early in his rule, there was great potential for Mr. Erdoğan to be an ally of the women's movement. He, controversially, re-introduced the veil into public spaces, previously

banned under Turkey's stance of militant secularism. Further, the attempt to integrate into the European Union sparked legislative reforms in support of Western-style women's equality and rights. Notable among these developments was confirming values such as equality within the family, governmental responsibility to implement equal rights, and the confirmation that The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) would take precedence over national law (European Parliament, 2012). These improvements, however, seem to be in writing only.

clear that the demonstrations were about the culture of violence, not only this single brutal crime. Women chanted slogans such as "'Özgecan is not our lament but our rebellion,'" and placed their discontent squarely on the government (Kandiyoti, 2015). Activists argued that Mr. Erdoğan and the AKP have not only ignored the issue of violence against women, but have also contributed to it by creating "a climate in which gendered violence can flourish (Zaino, 2015).

In President Erdoğan's remarks on Aslan's horrific murder, he made promises to tackle violence, but

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Violence Against Women

Violence against women is endemic in Turkey's current system. From January through September 2016, 272 women were killed (Hurriyet, 2016). This includes all murders, and while analysts predict that domestic violence is responsible for significant percentage, that data is unavailable. High rates of femicide has been a pattern under Mr. Erdoğan's leadership; in 2013, 237 women were murdered, in 2014, 281, and in 2015, 303 (Hurriyet, 2016). Though President Erdoğan claimed to make domestic violence a top priority, stating it was a "bleeding wound," on Turkey, little has been done to combat it (Afanasieva, 2015). At times, it has appeared as if there could be an opportunity, albeit from tragic circumstance, to realistically respond to the heinous rates of gender-based violence. In 2015, Özgecan Aslan, age 20 and a college student, was murdered on her way home while trying to fend off rape. The brutal details of the case – she was "bludgeoned with an iron pipe and stabbed multiple times" before being burned and disposed of – called the nation to attention with horror (Zaino, 2015). Rallies broke out around the country, with numbers in the thousands. A widespread social media movement emerged under the hashtag #sendeanlat, #tellyourstory, where women shared their own stories of abuse and/or sexual harassment (Uras, 2015). It was

at the same time confirmed women's second-class status, condemning violence against women on the grounds that "men are the custodians of women" and thus have a duty to protect them (Kandiyoti, 2015). This perception of women as passive beings in need of shelter and protection only furthers societal norms of men possessing women, of the need to segregate women to keep them safe. President Erdoğan's use of this rhetoric plays into the Islamic populism that he has embraced and it continues to embolden those who undervalue and abuse women. Women's rights groups are justly angered by his comments, but despite the passion of the activists and the promises of Mr. Erdoğan, little tangible steps were taken to curb violence against women.

Again in 2016 an opportunity for action seemed possible. In August, Hande Kader, a 22-year-old transgender woman and sex worker, was raped, murdered, and burned in Istanbul (Shafak, 2016). She was a well-known activist and her death sent shockwaves through the LGBTQ+ and broader progressive community. This incident increased visibility of the violence faced by trans women specifically, and through protests and the #speakoutforhandekader social media campaign, has started a new surge of discussion on violence against women (Ertan, 2016). It is striking that both high profile cases included

a burning of the victim, but there has not been significant study to document if this is part of a larger trend. Though a meeting occurred between activists and parliamentary representatives shortly after the murder to discuss action, in part due to the attempted coup a month earlier, the government has thus far had little response.

Violence against women in Turkey is not limited to horrific front-page murders. Women also experience high-rates of domestic violence, sexual assault and

Such attempts to restrict women to the private sphere is common in right-wing nationalist ideologies as it reinforces the division of sexual power and national labor, encouraging motherhood and the passing on of untarnished cultural values to the next generation. Today in Turkey, this sentiment is observed with the government turning a blind eye to domestic violence and other private sphere crimes, in order to 'protect' the family unit, national bloodline and culture. The continued tolerance in violence against women can no longer be attributed to individual in-

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rape, and child marriages and honor killings occur frequently. To make matters worse, 37.6 percent of Turkish men stated that values such as honor, decency, and discipline make violence against women a necessity, while 34 percent said it is "occasionally necessary," and 28 specified that violence is a tool that can be used to discipline women (Hurriyet, 2013). While legally women have equal rights to men, these types of violent behaviors are further legitimized by the State's rhetoric and policies. Among the AKP's initial successes was a 2005 law, which made sex with minors under the age of 15 illegal, finally classifying it as rape (Tremblay, 2016). This was a boon for children and women's rights as well as advocates fighting against child marriage law; however, in August 2016 the Constitutional Court annulled the provision that labeled all sex with children under 15 as sexual abuse (Anadolu, 2016). Further, in November, the AKP proposed a law that would allow men charged with statutory rape to be pardoned as long as they have either married or agreed to marry their victim (Tremblay, 2016). The proposal has been pulled due to outrage from women's groups who argued that this would perpetuate child marriages; however, the intention of the legislation – to keep women within the private sphere and under the domain of their male custodians – is clear.

idents but rather an institutionalized discrimination and undervaluing of women that, in part, stems from the promotion of a socially conservative, right-wing nationalist identity. Violence against women is "the casualty of a system that was seen to have cheapened women's lives in the process of spinning out a polarizing populist discourse targeting women" (Kandiyoti, 2015).

Reproductive Rights

President Erdoğan's assault on women's reproductive autonomy is rooted in his nationalist agenda and fits within the broader academic discussion of gender and nationalism. As mothers of the nation both figuratively and literally, women hold the national bloodline and are the embodiment of cultural values, virtue, and chastity. In right-wing nationalist states, women's role as procreator of the nation and beacon of integrity creates a dichotomy in which "their femaleness must be possessed by the nation, by men who are the nation's ordained mundane representatives (viz., husbands)" (Benton, 1998:33). This desire for national control over women's reproductive health is seen in President Erdoğan's Turkey where rhetoric is focused on how 'good' Turkish and Muslim families reproduce,

and on protecting the Turkish bloodline.

In 2012, while still Prime Minister, Mr. Erdoğan sparked outrage by calling abortion “an act of murder and an insidious plan to reduce the Turkish population,” likening each abortion to an airstrike on the civilian population (Arsu, 2012). Further, Mr. Erdoğan claimed abortions were inherently against Turkish values stating that “our only goal is to elevate this country above the levels of developed civilizations, for which we need a young and dynamic population,” (Arsu, 2012). In the same speech, he argued for limits on cesareans; subsequently legislation was passed that permit cesareans only under medical emergency or to a woman with intense fear of natural birth (Letsch, 2012). Though the legislation allows for medical considerations, it once again reveals the intent of Mr. Erdoğan to limit women’s autonomy over their bodies in pursuit of nationalist goals. In 2014, as president, Mr. Erdoğan went even further, calling birth control treason that aimed to undermine the Turkish population (Taylor, 2014). This “political rather than moral reasoning,” demonstrates how motherhood has been elevated by the nation to encompass the female national purpose (Taylor, 2014). President Erdoğan’s obsession with national reproduction is similar to that of many right-wing nationalist ideologies in that he hopes not only to confine women to the private sphere, but also to counter-balance demographic

8, 2016, President Erdoğan made a speech stating “a woman is above all else a mother,” and that “you cannot free women by destroying the notion of family,” (Agence France-Presse, 2016). His consistent harking on ‘traditional family values,’ such as the importance of motherhood and evils of birth control and abortion is not only to clearly articulate and coerce his vision of Turkey’s national identity, but also to bolster his support among the conservative, religious, often rural, working-class on which his backing depends. President Erdoğan’s rhetoric on reproductive rights, in which he also calls for Turkish women to have at least three children, has resulted in a drastic decrease in abortion services. Research has shown that despite legislation that defines the legality of abortions, “only 7.8 percent of state hospitals provide abortion services no-questions-asked... while 78 percent provide abortions only when there is a medical necessity for it,” (Alphan, 2016). In the large cities of Ankara, Istanbul and Izmir, it’s reported that only nine hospitals perform abortions in line with legislative rules (Alphan, 2016). These developments, a result of Mr. Erdoğan’s embrace of Islamic populism, are troubling in a country that has historically valued its secularism and personal freedoms. Turkey’s legalization of abortion in 1983 was second only to Tunisia in the greater Middle East and North Africa region. The current erosion of rights creates bad precedent in terms of the sustainability of women’s rights throughout the Islamic

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shift, be it real or perceived. In the case of Turkey, this demographic shift also relates to Kurdish minorities, leading to fears of weakened privilege or loss of identity among Turkish nationalists (Taylor, 2014).

Mr. Erdoğan’s focus on reproductive rights has continued despite strong opposition from women’s organizations. On International Women’s Day, March

world (Cavallo, 2015). President Erdoğan’s nationalist rhetoric has pushed reproductive health policies that are dangerous for women and has demonstrated to the entire country that for women, “national motherhood was the one true source of national belonging” (Benton, 1998:33).

Women's Role in Society

President Erdoğan's rhetoric has penetrated the entirety of Turkish society, calling into question the value and role of women. This is seen in the education sector with the 2012 4+4+4 reforms. The reforms extended compulsory schooling from eight years to 12, which is more in line with standards of European democracies. However, it has some caveats that display nation-

decline in labor force participation is representative of women's status in Turkey under Mr. Erdoğan's leadership, as Islamic populism and right-wing nationalism have replaced the once secular culture.

The Women's Movement

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alist and gendered undertones (Sabral, 2012). As part of the new curriculum, "students have to take an oath every morning which ends by saying 'How happy is he who can say I am a Turk,'" overlooking both women and minorities in Turkish society (Sabral, 2012). A key critique to the reforms is that it will preserve, and to an extent increase, child marriage due to an exception that allows married students to leave schooling prior to completing their twelfth year (Akyol, 2014). This exception legitimizes early marriage and continues to show Turkish society that the government prioritizes the education of its boys over its girls. According to the 2015 United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Human Development Report, 39 percent of women over the age of 25 have at least some secondary education, while for men it is 60 percent (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2015).

These numbers replicate themselves in the workforce, where only 29.4 percent of women participate, compared to 70.8 percent of men (UNDP, 2015). Though women have not historically played a large role in the labor force, since Mr. Erdoğan assumed the presidency in 2014, Turkey has declined in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report from 125 to 130, out of 142 and 144 countries respectively (World Economic Forum, 2016). This is no surprise given President Erdoğan's statement that a woman who chooses career over motherhood is a "half person," (Bruton, 2016). The

en's movement has not stood idly by. In the Gezi protests, women held a prominent role, arguing for an end to violence and the realization of their rights. Women were highly visible, taking part in movements such as the 'kiss protest,' against the government's attempt to regulate cultural values and norms (Associated Press, 2013). The women's movement was weakened post-Gezi, and even more so since the failed July 2016 coup, but is still established and remains relatively organized. Women's organizations have organized protests around the murders of Aslan and Kader in a plea to address violence against women, and individual women have also taken a stand. At Özgecan Aslan's funeral, women caused controversy by standing on the front line despite imams asking them to take 'their place.' Additionally, they carried the coffin to and from prayer against Islamic tradition (Doğan News Network, 2015).

While many women resent President Erdoğan's rhetoric, which states that feminists have "no relation to our religion and our civilization," and for weakening their autonomy, many women support him (Kandiyoti, 2015). For some women this limited view of women's role in the nation is preferable, it provides "a distinct role as women...the female part of the organic, homogeneous nation," (Benton, 1998:33). The women in support of Mr. Erdoğan and the AKP are just as

organized and better resourced than the more liberal nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) pushing for reproductive rights and gender equality. In fact, Sumeyye Erdoğan, one of the president's daughters, sits on the board of the conservative NGO, the Women and Democracy Association (Arsu, 2014). Much like the rest of the Turkish population, women are divided on their view of President Erdoğan and his pursuit of a socially conservative, Islamic influenced, right wing national identity.

IV. Conclusion

The standing of women in Turkish society has declined under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's leadership. As he has become more aligned with Islamic populism and right-wing nationalism the consequences have increased. Women, though equal in law, are repeatedly treated as secondary citizens, a reality demonstrated by the high levels of gender-based violence, erosion of reproductive rights, and rhetoric of their president. In adamantly stating "you cannot make men and women equal... that is against creation. Their natures are different. Their dispositions are different," Mr. Erdoğan reveals his belief of women's limited role in society (Tuysuz, 2016). This view of women merged with nationalist sentiment has driven the instrumentalization of women's bodies for the Turkish state, and women outside of their assigned place in the private sphere serve as a threat to the pious Turkish society that Mr. Erdoğan is trying to cultivate. Looking ahead, it is improbable that his approach toward women will evolve unless it becomes a political liability. While it's likely that he will continue to make promises to address key issues such as violence, given that Mr. Erdoğan's support stems from religious conservatives and nationalists, it is unlikely that any tangible efforts will be made to address the standing of women in Turkish society.

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