



The "Kiyafetime karisma" protest in Kadikoy, Istanbul on July 29, 2017.

PHOTO: NESLIHAN\_TURAN

# Criminalization of women's mobilization & the punishing of gender studies

While anti-democratic, anti-women, and anti-feminist movements are on the rise everywhere, they have become urgent matters in some parts of the world. Authoritarian regimes with fascist tendencies are restructuring the lives of women and sexual minorities by both changing laws and removing other historical gains from everyday lives that had been established through the longstanding struggles of these groups. Turkey presents a strong case in this sense with its emergency rule that came into effect after the July 2016 coup attempt and that has lasted for the past two years and has continued with the recent regime change. The country went through a referendum (in April 2017) and national parliamentary elections (in June 2018), both under the emergency rule. The former changed the Constitution and increased the power of the President turning Turkey from a parliamentary to a presidential republic. The latter put the 2017 referendum into force by re-electing Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as the president. As the leader of the governing party AKP, Erdoğan has been in power for the last 16 years, first as the prime minister and then as the president. Not hesitating to say “women and men should not be treated equally because it goes against the laws of nature” and emphasizing the importance of family and the role of motherhood at every opportunity, Erdoğan and his governments have been trying to eliminate the laws that empower women and to install new policies that would change women’s lives in every respect such as labor, education, and personal freedoms.

**THE EMERGENCY RULE** of the last two years has created useful cases to understand what the authoritarian government in Turkey, and perhaps those in other places, are trying to do in terms of women’s mobilization and gender studies at the universities. Celebrations of March 8 have been turned into a battleground to intimidate women’s mobilization through violent police interventions in peaceful and colorful celebrations of International Women’s Day. In addition, it has become increasingly difficult to engage in wom-

en’s, gender, and LGBTI studies due to the changing nature of universities and related departments. However, these attempts have not been without resistance.

**THIS PRESENTATION INTENDS** to show the criminalization of women’s mobilization and the punishing of women’s/gender studies in the universities, as well as the resistance demonstrated through several cases over the last few years in Turkey. Female activists and feminists are generally

**“FEMALE ACTIVISTS AND FEMINISTS ARE GENERALLY PERCEIVED AS A THREAT BY PATRIARCHAL STATES EVERYWHERE.”**

perceived as a threat by patriarchal states everywhere. This has become increasingly the case in Turkey as AKP governments of the last 16 years have been implementing or strengthening anti-women, anti-feminist, and anti-LGBTI policies and legitimizing practices and attitudes in line with its views regarding women and sexual minorities. Emphasizing family and motherhood at every chance, AKP governments have been trying to confine women to traditional gender roles while ignoring altogether the existence of sexual minorities. Thus, women who are out, either celebrating March 8 or protesting patriarchal policies or resisting against anti-feminism/anti-fascism, represent bad examples in the eyes of the state. Therefore, any such movements are subject to suppression by law enforcement agencies, especially over the last few years.

**THE AKP CAME** to power amidst claims for a more transparent and democratic state and society, and its first years gave such a feeling to some parts of society at least for a while. However, the AKP governments increasingly embraced authoritarian policies and practices and later adopted even more violent ones when faced with the

prospect of losing power with the 2015 elections that witnessed the success of the unofficial political alliance of the Kurds and the Turkish left following the Gezi uprising of 2013. However, the AKP’s revenge came with a big price for both the Kurds and the Left in the following months and years. The applications of the Emergency Rule in the aftermath of the failed coup attempt in 2016 should be considered part of this lasting revenge as well as the outcome of the AKP’s fear of losing power.

Therefore, using force during women’s rallies is part of silencing all opposition in the country in parallel with the fear of losing power. The involvement of law enforcement in women’s rallies has been more obvious and stronger in certain cities, especially in Kocaeli along with Ankara, the capital of Turkey, and Mersin, a relatively left-leaning town in the southern part of the country. İstanbul and İzmir present somewhat different examples as the first and second largest cities in the country. My presentation is based on the facts that mostly took place in Kocaeli, which is an industrial town near İstanbul with a large working-class population and thus a relatively strong labor-movement history, though this has not been very visible in the last decades. It is probably safe to say that this labor history has created a relatively strong tradition of democratic mass organization in the city, which gives rise to organized resistance against anti-democratic practices and thus draws attention from the state and the local law enforcement agencies. Women’s rallies should also be perceived in this sense along with the general atmosphere in the country.

**HOWEVER, ANOTHER** important aspect should also be considered in terms of the strong visibility of activist women in these towns: these activists have been the driving force on many occasions explicitly or implicitly, thus alarming the state and law enforcement. The power of the women’s movement could be seen during women’s rallies through the attention drawn from the surrounding crowd and women joining the rallies from the sidewalks. This is partly because, along with various historical reasons such as the overall success of



the women's movement over the last few decades in Turkey, as one can see from the night walk, women's rallies are full of color, voices, and laughter. In addition, they are not only about some intellectual concerns, but also about everyday matters of every woman such as child care, housework, domestic violence, and the ever-increasing murder rate of women, the latter being a burning issue in the country.<sup>1</sup> Obviously, the characteristics of the activist women and their rallies are all against the governing power's desire for a subservient woman and its policies that are in line with that desire.

When I thought about this presentation, I got together with a group of women in town who had been taking part in various women's rallies. Throughout our conversation, they all agreed on one thing, which confirmed my individual perception. All of the women said that they (those in power) are afraid of us.

A teacher active in my union, the Education and Science Workers' Union, even said: "The state perceives us as the most threatening of all". A lawyer drew attention to the legal dimension by mentioning gender justice, a concept the AKP prefers over gender equality: "I want to explain this because it is very important to understand the AKP government's gender policies and practices and the responses given by feminists."

**THE AKP IS SPREADING** its agenda not only directly with its statements and messages, but also indirectly through its



Academics for peace in the UK, France, Germany, Switzerland, and North America are supporting their Turkish colleagues.

government-organized NGOs (in other words, GONGOs). (I guess we can refer to Gramsci and Althusser and some others here, but we do not have time for that; so I will stick with the facts.) These organizations are not independent civil society organizations, and instead they are established to disseminate the government's views with the president's sons and daughters on their boards.<sup>2</sup> KADEM (Woman and Democracy Association) plays an important role in this sense. KADEM prefers to use gender justice instead of gender equality claiming that equality between men and women is against human rights because women's primary responsibility should be taking care of

the family's needs. KADEM's founding president Sare Aydın Yılmaz considers the use of gender justice instead of equality as a new direction in the women's movement.<sup>3</sup> Using religious references, such as *fitrat* (creation) and *takva* (takwa: god-fearing behavior), KADEM's current president openly emphasizes the different natures of men and women, and thus their different responsibilities that lead to a natural division of labor in both the private and public spheres.<sup>4</sup> It is notable that both of these women hold PhDs and have academic backgrounds. This is the degree of gender blindness the governing power in Turkey has been promoting not only through its direct policies and practices, but also through its GONGOs and intellectuals. With this agenda, the AKP governments have no choice other than trying to prevent women from revealing this anti-democratic, anti-feminist, anti-women rhetoric and its implementations loudly in the streets by portraying feminists and activist women as disturbing and as anti-religion, anti-family, etc.

## Indictment

Over 40 women and 4 men are standing trial in Kocaeli based on the March 8 celebrations of the last two years. A little note on the men: because the women's celebrations are not open to men, these men were observers from the sidewalks and were involved in the events following the violent police intervention. Two of these men are colleagues of mine, also dismissed, and another is a graduate

**DERYA KESKIN** received her PhD in Development Studies from Marmara University in Istanbul, Turkey, and an MA from the Ohio State University in Columbus, USA. She worked as an assistant professor of Labor Sociology in the Department of Labor Economics and Industrial Relations at Kocaeli University, Turkey from January 2012 to September 2016. She was dismissed from her position through a governmental decree issued under the State of Emergency for signing a petition titled "We will not be a party to this crime," also known as the *Peace Petition* which was a call directed

to the State to end the civil deaths in the southeastern part of the country and to restart the peace process. Her work has been published in journals related to education, labor and the Middle East. Her research interests include women's labor, gender and social policy, religion and women, migration, higher education, academic work and problems in social research. She continues her work within the Kocaeli Academy for Solidarity as the founding member with the other *Peace Signatories* also dismissed from Kocaeli University for the same reason.



PHOTO: MARK LOWEN/BBC

student of mine, while the fourth is a true passer-by. I don't know him, but I was happy to hear what he said during the court hearings (which is another story).

Those who are now facing trial had been detained after the police interventions on both days and were released in the morning hours. I was not among the detainees thanks to my graduate student who pulled me away from the crowd during the 2017 incident, apparently just in time, but instead he was detained and is now facing trial. I was among a big crowd waiting outside until the morning hours for the release of the detainees. Thirty-six women and four men were detained and are now standing trial for the 2017 incident, while the other six women are being tried for the 2018 celebrations.

I am not going to go into details about the legal process and the initial hearings that took place in July. Since the Emergency Rule was established in July 2016 following the failed coup attempt, universities have been witnessing a tremendous purge in Turkey. In line with the government's views, most of the university administrations around the country have been trying to get rid of critical voices. Using the failed coup as the pretext and the opportunities provided by the emergency decrees, the state dismissed thousands of university staff, mostly academics. While most of these dismissals have been allegedly affiliated with the Gulen movement, though without fair trials, around 500 of the dismissed academics are the signatories of the peace petition.

**IT IS IMPORTANT** to emphasize that the majority of the Academics for Peace are women who either engage in women's and gender studies or who provide courses on related subjects in their departments or who conduct unrelated research and courses but with gender awareness. Therefore, it is safe to say that the impact of the dismissals of female academics for peace is far greater than their number. While this impact is most visible in Ankara University, it will take time to establish the extent of the damage, if possible at all, in other universities around the country.

Ankara University lost over 100 academics via emergency decrees, and the

Department of Women's Studies is one of the units most affected.

The current situation is that academics have been dismissed and students have been left without advisors or proper courses, some leaving the graduate programs altogether. In addition, even those who stayed behind in the universities cannot be expected to be as eager as before when considering the circumstances in the universities that are increasingly becoming institutions to disseminate AKP's ideology and views similar to GONGOs.

## **“THIRTY-SIX WOMEN AND FOUR MEN WERE DETAINED AND ARE NOW STANDING TRIAL FOR THE 2017 INCIDENT.”**

**I WANT TO** tell you about a first-hand account of this nature. An MA advisee of mine who is here with me now had a quite hard time during the last couple of years at the university I was dismissed from. She was about to start writing her thesis when I had to leave the university, over two years ago. She wanted to work on sex workers and their organizations as her thesis subject, and I had only encouraged her and was not there when she was writing. She had a hard time getting her research subject accepted despite her official advisor's overall positive approach in the process. The Institute of Social Sciences, which oversees all thesis and dissertation processes in related programs, rejected her title. When she wanted to start interviews, she could not obtain permission from law enforcement to visit sex workers in official brothels, so she had to limit her interviews with those working in the streets. Even so, she has been subjected to investigation for visiting brothels; I know, it does not make any sense. In the end, she had to agree to another title and remove certain parts in her text to make it acceptable as advised by her official advisors.

I have been her unofficial advisor throughout this process; however, I tried my best not to confuse her too much by acting like the primary advisor because I wanted her to finish and not give up. Though I did not mind my ambiguous position during this time, I felt helpless witnessing the hardship my student went through and not being able to help her enough. In fact, she even kept some of that hardship to herself in order to protect me from more distress, as I found out later and thus felt even worse.

Now some good news. She passed her thesis examination just last week. The whole thing took her longer than usual; however, I am so glad that she finished it and did not give up. Moreover, she asked me if she could defend her thesis one more time in front of a jury consisting of dismissed KODA academics emphasizing that it is more important for her to defend her thesis in front of KODA members and to pass the KODA examination. We happily agreed, even though we are not really keen on exams at KODA and we won't be able to give her any diploma.

I will stop here with this good news. ✖

**Derya Keskin**

Kocaeli Academy for Solidarity

Note: This letter is based on a draft paper presented via Skype at the workshop titled Women and 'The People' (part I) on September 25, 2018 at the Centre for Baltic and East European Studies (CBEES), Södertörn University, Stockholm, Sweden.

## references

- 1 409 women were murdered in 2017, a 25% increase from the previous year. <https://www.amerikaninnesi.com/a/turkiye-de-kadin-cinayetleri-2017-de-yuzde-25-artti/4187800.html>.
- 2 Jessica Leigh Doyle, "State control of civil society organizations: the case of Turkey," *Democratization*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (2017), 244–264.
- 3 Sare Aydın Yılmaz, "A New Momentum: Gender Justice in the Women's Movement," *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (Winter 2015), 108–9.
- 4 <https://www.istekadinlar.com/kadin-orgutleri/kadem-in-yeni-baskani-drsaliha-okur-gumrukuoglu-oldu-h2359.html>.