

Turkey: women's work is in the home?

Key Points

- The domination of Turkish politics at the hands of the AKP since 2002 has generated fears that the party's policy preferences are having a lasting impact on the country.
- One area where the AKP's critics detect damaging socio-political consequences is the role of Turkish women in the workforce.
- In this regard, the AKP is in danger of giving further reason to those in the EU who are keen to block Ankara's membership aspirations.

Critics of Turkey's ruling party fear that its conservatism is going too far and, among other things, leading to the exclusion of women in the workforce. *Soner Cagaptay* and *Rueya Perincek* assess the implications of this, both domestically and with regard to the country's accession to the European Union

Turkey's experience of government under the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi: AKP) since 2002 provides a case with which to study the interaction between democracy and Islamist politics in Muslim countries. Under the AKP, Turkish women's share in the workforce has declined and today women do not feature at top government executive levels.

The AKP is rooted in **Turkey's** historical Islamist opposition; specifically the Welfare Party (Refah Partisi: RP) which was shut down in 1998 by the country's Constitutional Court for violating the secular and democratic principles in the Turkish constitution. The AKP was born out of the RP, with RP cadres bringing that party's organisational and financial network to the AKP. The AKP rejects the Islamist epitaph, describing itself as a conservative and democratic movement. Conservative as it might be, to its critics the AKP does not appear to be a democratic movement. Negative trends in women's empowerment in **Turkey** since 2002, as noted in the Jerusalem Post on 15 October 2009, demonstrate that the AKP does not practise democracy as a "system of laws that engender liberal egalitarianism".

Historically, Turkish women have served as chief justice, prime minister and as ministers of the interior and foreign affairs. Thirty per cent of **Turkey's** doctors and 33 per cent of its lawyers are women. Yet under the AKP, women have been largely excluded from top decision-making positions in government.

One factor driving this change is that the AKP appears to believe that a woman's role is to be a mother. On 8 March 2008, International Women's Day, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan stated: "All women should have at least three children." While it is true that the number of women in the Turkish parliament has increased since 2002, it is also true that in **Turkey's** parliamentary democracy, the government controls the legislative process. Here, women are lacking from the upper echelons of Turkish bureaucracy.

Women in power

A report by the Turkish Prime Minister's Office of Personnel shows there are only two women (Nimet Cubukcu and Selma Aliye Kavaf) in the 26-minister cabinet. Aliye Kavaf is responsible for education, and Cubukcu is in charge of women's affairs. Moreover, there are no women among the 25 under-secretaries (mustesar) appointed by the AKP. Of the 85 deputy under-secretaries (mustesar yardimcisi), only three are women, representing just 3.5 per cent of all bureaucrats at this level.

The figures demonstrate a dearth of women in executive positions under the AKP. According to a report by IRIS, an Ankara-based women's rights group, of the 139 director-generals in the country responsible for running government agencies or departments, only eight are women, representing 5.7 per cent of officials at this level. There is only one woman among the 254 regional directors of ministries, representing 0.4 per cent of officials at this level; and only 22 of the 942 provincial directors (2.3 per cent) appointed by the AKP are women.

A study of specific ministries illustrates an even bleaker picture for women in Turkish bureaucracy. In the powerful Ministry of the Interior, of the 11 top officials (under-secretary, deputy under-secretaries, advisers and counsellors) none are women. Likewise, there are no women among the 28 top bureaucrats in the Ministry of Finance. Although 40 per cent of all teachers in **Turkey** are women, there are no women among the 27 top officials in the Ministry of Education. The ministries of agriculture, environment, energy, transportation, public works, and health also lack female appointees to the more than 35 executive posts (including advisers, director-generals, counsellors, legal counsellors, under-secretaries and deputy under-secretaries) despite the fact that 35 per cent of all engineers and 30 per cent of all doctors in **Turkey** are women.

Although 33 per cent of all lawyers in **Turkey** are women, there are no women among the nine top bureaucrats in the Justice Ministry. This is especially surprising given the large number of women jurists. For example, in the high courts, which are independent of the government, 49 per cent of the members of Council of State, 20 per cent of the members of the Court of Appeals, and two of the 13 judges sitting in the Turkish Supreme Court (15 per cent of the body's membership) are women.

The Ministry of Culture, headed by Ertugrul Günay, a former leftist politician who has joined the AKP, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), which retains autonomy to hire and promote bureaucrats, have women in executive positions. Thanks to the MFA's autonomy, 30 per cent of advisers and 59 per cent of legal counsellors within the ministry are women, and women constitute 28 per cent of Turkish diplomats overseas. The high courts and the MFA present comparative cases of women's empowerment, demonstrating the potential reaches of women's representation in bureaucracy and power when they do not face government discrimination.

Power dropping

The AKP's apparent choice to bypass women in employment has not been without consequences. Women's employment is dropping throughout [Turkey](#). A study by the Turkish Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association shows that the percentage of women in the workforce dropped from 29 per cent in 2000 to 22 per cent in 2008. Furthermore, as a result of the AKP's economic policies, the Turkish economy created an average 1.1 per cent increase in employment annually between 2003 and 2007. However, women's employment dropped by 0.8 per cent, while men's employment increased by 1.8 per cent, according to research conducted by the Turkish Federation of Entrepreneurs and Business World.

According to World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report published in 2009, which measures women's empowerment using criteria such as economic participation, political empowerment and educational attainment, Turkish women lost power between 2006 and 2008, with their empowerment score dropping by 0.0022 points. In 2008-09, that number dropped by 0.0025 points, rendering [Turkey](#) as the country with the biggest gender gap among all upper-middle income countries.

Union with Europe

The AKP's social vision is seemingly based not religion, but on a prescribed form of social conservatism that the party deems a requirement for Turkish society. Therefore, it is not religiosity that is on the rise in [Turkey](#). Rather, government-incentivised social conservatism is emergent in [Turkey](#). Indications of social conservatism, such as disdain for women in the workforce, as well as disdain for alcohol and preference for women wearing headscarves, are used as benchmarks to obtain government appointments and promotions.

According to the AKP's critics, social conservatism is not the problem, and a conservative [Turkey](#) can be an EU member. The problem is that a government-led project of this type is judged to be incompatible with the idea of a liberal democracy. Since [Turkey](#) started accession talks with the EU in 2005, the country has ostensibly progressed in terms of the EU process. In reality, however, [Turkey](#) is arguably regressing from liberal European norms, such as gender equality. [Turkey](#)'s EU accession has long faced objections from EU member countries, including [France](#). This feared erosion of liberal European values in [Turkey](#) under the AKP suggests that [Turkey](#)'s EU membership faces not only the French hurdle, but also an AKP hurdle. A country in which women are not empowered cannot hope to join the EU, and this is bad news for [Turkey](#)'s EU membership prospects.

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- *Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, 21 September 2009