

TURKISH DAILY NEWS

Sex matters -II- (The tragedy of Kemalist feminism)

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June 16, 2007

Unlike Mustafa Kemal, who did a lot to improve women's status, his dedicated followers stopped asking for progress and became 'secular conservatives'.

Last weekend I was sitting at one the busiest Starbucks Coffee shops in Istanbul and reading the recent report by the European Stability Initiative (ESI) titled, "Sex And Power In Turkey: Feminism, Islam and The Maturing of Turkish Democracy." Suddenly someone said "Hi!" to me, and I realized that she was the perfect person to do so while reading a study on Turkish feminism. As a young, elegant and articulate Turkish woman, she runs a successful business and lives a perfectly Western life. But at the same time she believes that the U.S. and the EU are cooking up a conspiracy against Turkey, and the country is heading fast toward "shariah rule" because of those evil powers and their internal ally, the incumbent AKP. She is one of those types who would rather see tanks in the streets than a first lady with a headscarf.

When I told her that I was reading a report which shows that Turkey is making great progress in women's rights and the AKP government is helping that, she was first surprised, then defiant, and finally counter-attacking. "Who is financing that report," she asked, "it must be the EU who spreads these lies."

By saying so, she was just confirming to me a crucial point made in the ESI report – that, "Kemalist women... are the out of touch with the reality of contemporary Turkey."

Ottoman feminism and beyond:

To understand why, one needs to look at a bit of history. A standard story in Turkey is that our women were in total darkness before Atatürk, and his reforms gave them all that they needed. But that is a half-truth. Atatürk of course made many important reforms, but there are other facts which one needs to realize in order to get the sex matters right.

One of those facts is the feminist movement in the pre-Atatürk, i.e., Ottoman, era. As the ESI report also notes, Ottoman feminists – such as Ms. Fatma Nesibe, who used to quote from John Stuart Mill and argue for a "feminine revolution" – addressed the gender gap much before the Turkish Republic. In the last decade of the Ottoman Empire, societies emerged with names like Taal-i Nisvan or Müdafaa-i Hukuk-u Nisvan, or "The Advancement of Women" and "The Defense of the Rights of Women."

When Atatürk came to power, he gave many important rights to women, but he did something that would be very harmful in the long term: He closed down these feminist clubs. Why? Well, it was due to the widespread belief at the time that the state should be the master of society and orchestrate it authoritatively. (For the same reason,

Mustafa Kemal also banned Sufi orders and freemason lodges; civil society was considered dangerous or, at best, useless.)

The ESI report nicely catches this fundamental problem in Kemalist feminism. It notes:

"The young Turkish Republic took great pride in promoting a select group of pioneer women through the education system and into public life. The first female doctor (1926), lawyer (1927), judge (1930) and pilot (1932) were held up as symbols of progressive secularism. Kemalism came to serve as feminism for these proud 'daughters of the Republic,' even if its benefits never extended beyond a narrow, urban elite."

What is sad is that these "daughters of the Republic" became an obstacle to feminism. As Şirin Tekeli, one of Turkey's leading feminists, argues, "[they] organized to defend the vested interests based on those rights acquired under the single-party era, rather than to extend them and make them more widespread'."

The Kemalist way or the highway:

That was the genesis of the tragedy of Kemalist feminism. Unlike Mustafa Kemal, who did a lot to improve women's status, his dedicated followers stopped asking for progress and became "secular conservatives." All they needed to do was to stay the course, not to think of new ways and alternatives. "The seemingly bright picture, – Turkey as the most modern, democratic, secular Muslim state that also secures women's rights – is more harmful than outright oppression," argues feminist scholar Meltem Müftüleri Baç. "Because it shakes the ground for women's rights movements by suggesting that they are unnecessary."

Right after that came the "Islamic feminists" to the scene, which their Kemalist counterparts found not only unnecessary but also treacherous. Islamic feminists defended women's rights not at the expense of Islam, but thanks to Islam. It was the tradition of men that oppressed the women of Islam, they argued, not the commandments of God. That was a major blow to the secularists, who claimed that Islam was the problem, and women could be liberated only by suppressing it. (Some ex-Muslim ladies such as Ayan Hirsi Ali make the most blunt version of that argument nowadays in the West. They, too, don't get the fact that you can't force believers to choose between their faith and modernity and expect a pleasant outcome.)

The ESI report explains all these issues in a very clear, persuasive and accessible way. It concludes by noting,

“There is a vocal minority, including some 'authoritarian feminists', who see Turkey's secular traditions as under threat and want the military to step in. Their intense fear of political Islam blinds them to the changes underway in Turkish society, as well as to the achievements of recent years.”

Exactly. That vocal minority – which steadily argues, “the Kemalist way or the highway,” in virtually any issue – blurs Turkey's vision with its unholy scholasticism. Who wouldn't appreciate Atatürk as a great leader who won the war and founded our republic? But he was a mortal and times have changed. Let's move on. We have many things to do in Turkey – and still many women to liberate.