

TODAY'S ZAMAN

Sex and power in Turkey

Sahin Alpay Today's Zaman
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Foreign researchers and observers are sometimes more successful than local ones in diagnosing Turkey's realities in an objective and sound manner. Perhaps one of the best examples of this was the research report titled "Islamic Calvinists: Change and Conservatism in Central Anatolia" published by the European Stability Initiative (ESI). That report shattered once more the myth that Islam is not compatible with capitalism, and thus economic development. ESI -- a nonprofit research and policy institute based in Berlin, Brussels and Istanbul -- recently published an equally significant report, titled "Sex and Power in Turkey: Feminism, Islam and the Maturing of Turkish Democracy." This report shatters the myth that the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) rule in Turkey is threatening women's rights and freedoms.

The basic conclusions of the report are the following: If Turkey achieved the first important advances in the field of women's rights during the single-party rule period under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the second and more significant advances were made in the period after 2001. In the single-party rule period polygamy was banned and women acquired voting and election rights, but legal inequality between men and women remained mostly intact throughout the 20th century. With the reforms adopted from 2001 and onwards, however, women acquired equal rights with men in respect to marriage, divorce and property. The new penal code treats women's sexuality for the first time not as a family honor issue but as an issue of individual rights. Constitutional amendments require that the state takes measures to achieve equality between men and women. Family courts have been instituted, employment laws have been amended in favor of women, and measures to stop violence against women and to improve the education of girls have been adopted.

Most of these reforms were achieved by the AK Party government, which came to power in 2002, in cooperation with civil society organizations and the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP). With these re-

forms led by the AK Party, which is accused by some circles of being Islamist and having a hidden agenda to put Turkey under an Iran-type regime, Turkey has for the first time in its history left behind "patriarchal society." On this point the report explicitly states the following: "There are some who fear that Turkey may be turning its back on its secular traditions. Some of the loudest voices come from Kemalist women, who insist that the rise of 'political Islam' represents an acute threat to the rights and freedoms of Turkish women. There have even been calls for restrictions to Turkish democracy, to protect women's rights. Yet such an 'authoritarian feminism' is out of touch with the reality of contemporary Turkey and the achievements of recent years."

The ESI report notes that despite the legal achievements of recent years, achieving equality between men and women remains a major challenge for Turkey. In this context it quotes the findings of a research report by the World Economic Forum published in November 2006 which indicates that Turkey, in respect to equality between men and women, unfortunately ranks 105th (behind Tunisia, Ethiopia and Algeria) among 115 nations covered in the study. It emphasizes also that the most effective measures to improve this situation are to spread education among women living in the rural areas, and to remove institutional and social obstacles to women's participation in the labor force.

The report, in response to those who use the inequality between the sexes argument to claim that Turkey has a foreign culture which has no place in the EU, states that male domination was a part also of the European culture in the not so distant past. For example, in Spain until 1975 women were obliged to seek the permission of their husbands in order to seek gainful employment, to purchase property and even to travel. But only after one generation, Spain today has been able to achieve 11th place in the ranking of nations in terms of equality between men and women. Why shouldn't it be possible for Turkey to achieve similar progress?