

A BRIEF HISTORY OF WOMEN IN TURKISH POLITICS

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with women's position in Turkish politics from the Ottoman Empire period to present. Turkey became an independent republic in 1923, but Turkish women officially entered into political life since 1930 and they have different social as well as political rights. Despite having different rights women are facing lots of challenges and difficulties to enter into politics. This paper deals with women's position in Turkish society and polity from the earlier time to present and how they had been treated in that time and their role also. The paper elaborates the political participation of women in Turkey and their different role in the political spheres. It discusses the national politics of Turkey and women's position in Turkish national politics. After the rise of political Islam in Turkey, women's representation in Turkish national politics has increased dramatically. Especially in the AK Party ruling era since 2002 women are the most beneficiaries in social as well as political spheres. It also talks different challenges of Turkish women in the political spheres and also provided different suggestions for the improvement of women's political representation in Turkish national politics.

KEYWORDS: Women, Political Participation, Turkey, Political Parties, Ottoman Empire

INTRODUCTION

Turkey is a democratic country which has 80 million of the population and almost half of them are women. The country has a great history of the Ottoman Empire and it became an independent democratic republic since 1923, under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. Turkey recognized the full rights of citizenship to women in 1934, before many European countries. In March 1930, the Turkish government allowed women to participate in the municipal elections, and 5 women were elected in the municipal election of 1930. In 1934, Turkish government allowed women to contest in the national elections, and for the first time in the 5th Grand National Assembly elections of 1935, 18 women Deputies entered into Turkish Grand National Assembly (TGNA). Since then, women became a part of Turkish political life and their engagement in the politics became visible. It was the great achievement of the Ataturk, who introduced modernity and secularism in Turkey; as a result, Turkey became the most developed country in the entire West Asian region. The country has experienced different military coups many times such as in 1960, 1971, 1980, 1993, 1997, and also in 2016. Though recently the military coup took place, despite that people's participation in politics is very much consistent there. Women's participation and their enrichment in the electoral procedure is a significant marker of the ripeness and efficacy of democracy in any country. Before republic women were not very much visible in Turkish political life. After the establishment of the republic and different reforms, Turkish women came to political life.

But till 1980s women's representation to Turkish Grand National Assembly was very low. Different scholar argued that political Islam came to increase women's position in Turkish politics.

WOMEN IN TURKISH POLITICAL LIFE

The Ottoman Period

Ottoman Empire was structurally monarchial, where women's role was very much limited in the sphere of society, polity, and economy till the Tanzimat¹. Women's participation became visible from the Tanzimat era. After the establishment of constitutional monarchy in 1876, women got the chance to enter into public places. In the time of practicing constitutional monarchy, modernization has been determinant not only in political structure but also in all areas of society; education, law, economy, and social life have begun to change in every direction. From that time women's position began to change in all the sphere of society. Women got the chance to communicate openly and also entered into public places. Women were granted the right to work as paid workers in 1897 and as a state employee in 1913. During the constitutional period, there was a demand for women's rights (social, economic and political), made especially by women from educated families and had been voiced through various association.

In the "Young Turks Movement" era of 1908 and the "Committee of Union and Progress" (CUP), women also participated in these committees. Different data shows that women also took part in the Turkish war of independence. Halide Edip, one of the Turkish famous novelists who worked in the Headquarter of the Nationalist Forces and also mobilized women socially and politically for participating war of independence. Halide Edip praised particularly the Anatolian peasant women for their hard-working and their contributions to the Turkish war of independence.² Various women associations worked hardly with revolutionary forces for Turkish independence. That time, various women organization established in Turkey for women's overall development. Some of them were Ottoman Women Progressive Society, Ottoman Women Compassion Cemiyet-i-Hayriyesi, Teali-i-Vatani Osmani Hanimlar Society, Teali-i-Nisvan etc. Teali-i-Nisvan Society was founded by Halide Edip after the 1908 revolution, which aimed was to improve women's status. In that war, men were engaged in the military and women got the chance to enter into the administration of the state.

THE REPUBLICAN PERIOD SINCE 1923 TO PRESENT

On 29 October 1923 with the declaration of Republic, a new turn was introduced and Turkey has brought speed to the movement of modernization. Turkish society had arisen to secular westernized state, from an Islamic authoritarian background.³ The most fundamental changes had led by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in the context of women's rights. With the enactment of laws in that period, women have been given some social, economic and political rights. The status of men and women has brought to equal under Kemalist leadership. Ataturk completely abolished the institution

¹ Tanzimat, a series of reform promulgated in the Ottoman Empire between 1839 and 1876 under the reigns of the sultans Abdulmecid 1 and Abdulaziz. These reforms, heavily influenced by European ideas, were intended to effectuate a fundamental change of the empire from the old system based on theocratic principles to that of a modern state.

² Celia Kerslake, eds., *Turkish Engagement with Modernity: Conflict and Change in the 20th Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 49.

³ Yesim Arat, *The Patriarchal Paradox: Women Politicians in Turkey* (London: Dickson University Press, 1989), 1.

of the ancestor and established modern institutions for the new state.⁴ In 1923, for the first time, women had taken the step to become a Deputy of Turkish Grand National Assembly under the leadership of Nezihe Muhittin Hanım, and a political party was formed only for women named “Women’s People Party” before the establishment of Republican Peoples Party (CHP).⁵ The purpose of the party was to ensure women’s economic, social and political rights. But there were some exceptions that the Turkish electoral law of 1909 did not allow women to contest in elections. In this frame, the party converted to “Turkish Women’s Union”.

In 1924, a new constitution was being drafted and the new constitution declared women’s right to vote and election to offices. But the government did not provide the political rights to women until 1930. Another important development related to women’s right was in 1926, the Swiss Civil Code was introduced by the Turkish government and women were the most important beneficiary of it. In 1927 the Turkish Women’s Union sent a letter to the Assembly for their political rights. After three years, later on, March 1930, Turkish municipality law allows women the right to vote and to stand in the municipality elections. After getting the right to vote, Turkish Women Union organized a big celebratory rally in Beyazıt Square in Istanbul and a march to Taksim from Istanbul.⁶ It was the beginning step where women officially entered into Turkish political life. These were the women who were elected from the Republican Peoples Party (CHP) in the municipal election of 1930 as Latif Benkir, Rana Sani Yaver, Refika Hulusi Behcet and Safiye Hanımlar were elected to the Municipal Assembly and Nakiye Hanım was elected to the Permanent Councilor in the Assembly.

Another landmark related to women’s political right was that in 1933, Article 20 and 25 of the Village Act were amended by the Turkish government and women got the right to elect as Village Headwoman.⁷ The Turkish government announced that women can be elected as the village headman and delegates. That time Mrs. Gul Esin who won the elections approximately 500 votes in the village of Demirder of Aydin in China, became the first Village Head women in the Republic. The third important landmark related to women’s right was that in 1934 Turkish Prime Minister İsmet İnönü’s government passed a resolution related to the amendment of the constitution and electoral law. And finally Article 10 and 11 of the Turkish constitution was amended and it gave the women the right to vote and contest in Parliamentary elections.

For the first time in Turkish history, women entered into Turkish Grand National Assembly in the Fifth Parliamentary elections held on 8 February 1935 and 17 women were elected as Deputy from various provinces.⁸ In 1936 one vacant deputy was recruited, who was a female teacher by profession. Out of 399 deputies of the Turkish Grand National Assembly, only 18 deputies were female and the percentage of female representation was only 4.5 percent.⁹ Sabiha Gökçül Erbay became the first Chairwoman of the Assembly.

⁴ Ibid.,

⁵ Pinar Savas Yauvzcehre, “The Representation of Women in Turkish Local Governments.” *European Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 4, no 2 (2016): 210-129.

⁶ Hale Karaarslan, Kadınin secme secilme hakki: 82 yıl sonra Türkiye’de kadın, *INDİEO* 135, <https://indigodergisi.com/2016/12/kadinin-secme-secilme-hakki> (December, 2016), (Women’s Right to Vote: woman in Turkey after 82 years, Translated from Turkish).

⁷ Ibid.,

⁸ Information adapted from the following source: <http://www.ysk.gov.tr>

⁹ Ibid.,

Table 1: List of Female Deputies to Turkish Grand National Assembly during 1935-2018

Serial Number	Year of Election	Total Number of Deputies	Number of Female Deputies	Percentage of Female Deputies
1	1935	399	18	4.5
2	1939	429	16	3.7
3	1943	445	16	3.5
4	1946	445	9	1.9
5	1950	487	3	0.6
6	1954	541	4	0.7
7	1957	610	8	1.3
8	1961	450	3	0.7
9	1965	450	8	1.8
10	1969	450	5	1.11
11	1973	450	6	1.3
12	1977	450	4	0.9
13	1983	399	12	3
14	1987	450	6	1.3
15	1991	450	8	1.8
26	1995	550	13	2.4
17	1999	550	23	4.2
18	2002	550	24	4.4
19	2007	550	50	9.1
20	2011	550	79	14.4
21	2015	550	97	17.82
22	2015	550	81	14.91
23	2018	600	103	17.17

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)

The table mentioned women's political representation rate since they get chance to become a deputy in the Turkish Grand National Assembly from 1935 to 2018 Parliamentary elections. From the table, it is seen that still, women's representation in the political field is not satisfactory. Many scholars argued that women's representation rate in other social sphere is relatively more than the political sphere. Women's political representation increased considerably after the 1980s when political Islamist Movement came into existed in Turkey. It can be argued that political Islam played a dominant role in mobilizing women toward the political field. Many feminists scholar argued that after the establishment of the Ottoman Empire, Women's rights started decreasing in society.¹⁰ But the important point here is that Turkey granted political rights to its women citizen before many European countries did, why women's representation in the political field is very less? Even women are the half of Turkish populations. Many scholars blamed that the core reason was the dominant patriarchal system.

Prof. Yesim Arat, in her book "The Patriarchal Paradox", argued that patriarchy also works in women's political life as for political participation and other matters related to elections. From the ancient time, a mindset of society has developed that politics is a male realm.¹¹ Male is the dominant position in the sphere of society, polity and economy and women's perfect place is home.¹² From the tables, it is seen that in the one-party era (1923-45), women's political representation at the national level was less than 5 percent. In 1935-46 total 50 women represented the Grand National

¹⁰ Karaarslan , Kadinin secme secilme hakki: 82 yil sonra Turkiye'de kadin.

¹¹ Arat, *The Patriarchal Paradox*, 42.

¹² Ibid., 43.

Assembly. Women's representation largely declined in the multiparty system (1946-1960) and the military dominant era (1960-70s).¹³ In 1946-77 the number of women representatives towards the Turkish Parliament was only 46. In these term women representation in national politics was less than 2 percent. An important development held after the 1980s, the rise of political Islam and side by side the influence of feminist's movement which ultimately changed the scenario of women's socio-political life. Justice and Development Party (AKP) an Islamism political party entered in Turkish political life on August 2001.¹⁴ After entering into politics, the party gained support from different sections of society and finally formed a national government in the Turkish Grand National Assembly by the election of 2002. In 2002 election women parliamentarian was only 4.4 percent. And a new era has started in Turkish politics; it can be say the AKP era. Women's representation in Turkish national politics has dramatically changed in the AKP era. In the Turkish Parliamentary election of June 2018, women's representation has increased to 17.17 percent in 2018 against 4.4 percent in 2002 and 103 women were elected out of 600 deputies. Women got elected from different political parties of Turkey. The name of political parties and their number of parliamentarians are mentions below:

Table 2: List of Women Deputies of TGNA and Name of their Political Parties

Year of Election	Total Women Deputies	Party Name and Number of its Women Deputies				
1946	9	CHP 9				
1950	3	CHP 1	DP 1	IND 1		
1954	4	DP 4				
1957	8	CHP 1	DP 7			
1961	3	CKMP 1	AP 2			
1965	8	CHP 3	AP 3	YTP 1	TIP 1	
1969	5	CHP 2	AP 2	MP1		
1973	6	CHP 3	AP 2	DP 1		
1977	4	CHP2	AP 2			
1983	12	HP 4	ANAP 5	MDP 3		
1987	6	ANAP 2	SHP 4			
1991	8	DYP 2	ANAP 4	SHP 2		
1995	13	CHP 2	ANAP 2	DYP 7	DSP 2	
1999	23	FP 2	ANAP 2	DYP 4	DSP 12	MHP 3
2002	24	CHP 11	AKP 13			
2007	50	CHP 10	AKP 30	MHP 2	IND 8	
2011	79	CHP 19	AKP 46	MHP 3	BDP 9	IND 2
2015	97	CHP 20	AKP 41	MHP 4	HDP 32	
2015	81	CHP 21	AKP 34	MHP 3	HDP 23	
2018	103	CHP 19	AKP 52	MHP 5	HDP 24	IYI 3

Source: Association for Support and Training Women Candidates (KA-DER)

Note: The names of political parties of the table are mention below-

CHP- Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (Republican Peoples Party), DP- Demokrat Partisi (Democrat Party), CKMP- Cumhuriyetçi Köylü Millet Partisi (Republican Peasants' Nation Party) AP- Adalet Partisi (Justice Party), YTR- Yeni Türkiye Partisi (New Turkey Party), TLP- Türkiye İsci Partisi (Workers Party of Turkey), MP- Millet Partisi (Nation Party), ANAP- Anavatan Partisi (Motherland Party), MDP- Milliyetçi Demokrasi Partisi (Nationalist Democracy Party) SHP- Sosyaldemokrat Halk Partisi (Social Democrat Peoples Party), DYP- Doğru Yol Partisi (True Path Party), DSP- Demokratik Sol Partisi (Democratic Left Party), FP- Felicity Party, MHP-Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (Nationalist

¹³ Ibid., 60.

¹⁴ Information adapted from the following source: <http://www.akparti.org.tr>

Movement Party), AKP- Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi (Justice and Development Party), HDP- Halkların Demokratik Partisi (Peoples Democratic Party).

WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN TURKISH POLITICAL PARTIES

In Turkey, different data shows that after the establishment of republic women also got the chance to lead political parties. From Republican time to present, 11 women were the Chairwomen of different political parties of Turkey. Their name, party name, and durations are mentioned in the following table.

Table 3: List of Chair Women of Turkish Political Parties and their Leadership Year

Sl. No	Name of Political Parties	Chairwoman	Leadership Year
1	Workers Party of Turkey	Behice Boran	1970-1980
2	National Women's Party of Turkey	Mubeccel Goktuna	1972-1981
3	Democratic Left Party	Rahsan Ecevit	1985-1987
4	True Path Party	Tansu Ciller	1993-2002
5	Motherland Party	Nesrin Nas	2003-2004
6	Socialist Democracy Party	Filiz Kocali	2004-Present
7	Peace and Democracy Party	Gultan Kisanak	2011-2014
8	Peoples Democratic Party	Figen Yuksekdog	2012-Present
9	Anatolia Party	Emine Ulker Tarhan	2014-Present
10	Women's Party	Fatma Benelyazgin	2014-Present
11	Good Party	Meral Aksener	2017-Present

Source: Turkish Grand National Assembly (TBMM)

HINDRANCES OF WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN TURKEY

Women's participation in political life may seem problematic in the eye of the world. In terms of Turkey, we find that women's representation in the political field is very low. Many scholars have done research on that area and finally, they provided the different arguments. We can briefly summarize the reasons why women are underrepresented in the political life of Turkey:

- Social and Cultural structure of Turkey is the main obstacles to women's political participation. It is seen that the Turkish Society is deeply religious and male-dominated from the early time. Male dominated system is still working in Turkey even though Turkey is engaging with modernity.
- In Turkey, the important factor that suppresses women's political participation is the lack of material resources available to women. Politics is about money, power, and strong social networks. It is almost impossible to contest any election without enough finance. Because women are less compact within powerful political and economic networks.
- Turkish society is deeply religious orientated society. Religious women did not want to participate openly in politics. Religious orientation came up as a very potential determinant in limiting the women from the politics. In religiously oriented society priest are the dominant positions. They did not want that woman to participate in politics openly.

- Another important factor in the context of Turkey is the women's Lack of interest in politics. "International Social Survey Program" conducted a survey related to women's political representation and finally came to the conclusion that majority of Turkish women has not interested to enter into politics. But they are interested to know the political news.
- In Turkey, we also find that different problems arising from political parties which is an obstacle for women's participation in political life. Within the political party, women are not an independent decision maker. The political parties' executive bodies make all decision for women.

SUGGESTION OF INCREASING WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN TURKISH POLITICS

Different data shows that women also involved in Turkish national as well as local levels of decision-making processes, but their representation in politics is still very low. After studying different data related to Turkish politics, and also from governments report we can underline the following steps for the strengthening of women's representation in Turkish political life:

- The turkish government should provide quota system reservation for women in both national and local levels of elections. Political parties are an important position to implement quota in the context of women. Data shows that many political parties of Turkey have the quota for women, but it is not working properly.
- The turkish government, political parties, and other civil society organizations should organize informative programs to increase women's political participation.
- Establishment of women wing and women committees within the political party is also an important step for strengthening women's political representation. In the context of Turkey, almost many political parties have women wing, but their wings are not working rightly. So they should make more policies for women.
- Research shows that providing skills-based training, specifically on campaign-related topics, is beneficial for women candidates. So the Turkish government and political parties should take these kinds of activities.
- Turkish political parties should provide financial incentives and aid to women candidates during campaigns of elections.

CONCLUSIONS

So from the above discussion, it can be say that women's participation in Turkish politics has increasing day by day. But the important point here is that women's participation in the decision-making process is very low. After the emergence of political Islam and different feminist movement in turkey since 1980s women's representation in Turkish national politics is increasing. The evolution of the Turkish political system can be divided into different stages. These are the one-party dominant era of 1923 to 1946. In the one-party ruling period women's representation to TGNA was less than 5 percent. Then the next stage was the multiparty era of 1950 to 1970s. In the multiparty period, women's representation in national politics was less than 2 percent. The 3rd stage was the Military dominant era of the 1980s. In this era, women's representation to TGNA was less than 3 percent. Again in 2001, a new era has started in Turkish politics it can be called the AK Party era. In this era, women's representation in Turkish national politics has increased to 17.17 percent in 2018.

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The segregated history of women does not directly overlap the current mainstream political trajectory and requires a new agenda. From this viewpoint, conservative women's history could roughly be divided into three periods, namely: marginalization, victimization and the contemporary era. State-led feminism The marginalization period refers to the early years of the republic, which was a period of state-led feminism in Turkey. Nationalist and secularist discourse dominated their religious counterparts, and Turkish citizenship was defined by the new regime along with new roles for women. "We, as women involved in the new feminist movement in Turkey, pondered the conditions of womanhood and the mechanisms that sustain male dominance. We scrutinized and questioned everything that had been taught to us, including Turkish history. As a member of a feminist group, I was compelled to search for similar women's groups in Turkish history." The process of women's legal and social emancipation in Turkey has its roots in the Ottoman Empire of the 19th century. Thus, the Turkish women's movement is as old as the women's movements in other Mediterranean or European countries such as Greece in Turkish society. Turkey is an interesting example, from the aspect of the position of women, because it is a country which is influenced by all the contradictions of globalization and traditions. First of all, the great majority of the population in Turkey is Moslem. The acceptance of women's issues as an independent political and planning problem was discussed for the first time in the Fifth Five Year Development Plan (1985-1990), and "the General Directorate for the Status and Problems of Women" was established as a national mechanism in 1990. Although the number of women taking an active role in politics has increased in recent years, the number of women are still considerably less than men. These samples of history indicate that the women of those times enjoyed an exalted social position. They did not hide behind veils, nor kept themselves away from certain tasks done by men. They were in constant company of their husbands or relatives at homes, tents, wagons or horseback. This text was part of the seminar "Turkish Women, a brief historical survey" kindly given by Ayse Cebesoy Sarialp at the Turkish-American University Association & Universities Cultural and Educational Foundation for the IWI (International Women of Istanbul) members in Istanbul.