Title
Women's Participation Issue and Analysis of Woman Organization Structure in Turkey: A Comparison of KA.DER (Association for Supporting and Training Women Candidates) and Türk Kadınlar Birliği (Turkish Women Union)

Permalink
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Publication Date
2009-02-01
Introduction:

The main aim of this paper is to examine the extent of Women’s participation in politics from woman organizations perspective. That is to say, to inquire how Women organizations struggle with representation inequality, and to lay out the different ways of their struggle.

In order to analyze this, two Turkish woman organizations—which have activities and practices towards empowerment of women in political participation—will be examined. The first case study is Turkish Women Union that advocates and implements the demand of women's political and social rights. The other case is KA.DER (Association for Supporting and Training Women Candidates), was established in the purpose of increasing women participation in all elected area and also making governments to be aware of gender equality.

The important difference of these two woman organizations is that, Türk Kadınlar Birliği had carried gender blindness perspective; on the contrary, KA.DER takes into account gender inequality and deals with the gender mainstreaming. In this study, the possible meanings of differences and similarities of these two woman organizations in respect to the Turkish women movement in political area will be scrutinized.

Turkish Women Union:

History of women movement inevitably shows parallelism with the changes in Turkish political history. In this sense, the emergence of woman movements, not surprisingly coincidences with process of Ottoman modernization which let many radical changes in social and public life. In this process, rebound of European and American feminist movements in 18. Century -which had reached Ottoman territory- and Ottoman modernization process itself
caused to be broken long term silence of women in public life. Ottoman women started to be organized in public spheres such as magazines and associations. The primary agenda of Ottomans women movements consisted of equality in education, empowerment the position of women in domestic life and participation in working life. In this context, political rights claims or political participation was considered as a secondary issue for this movement. As for Turkish Women Union was the very product of cultural heritage of the women activation and struggle in the late Ottoman History. However, the difference Turkish Women Union from Ottoman women movement is to enter the political rights demands of women into the picture. They were in the opinion that the foundation of new republic created suitable condition for Turkish women who had an idea on struggle for the political rights. With this purpose, just after establishment of Turkish Republic in 1923, a group of women -led by Nezihe Muhiddin- tried to set up the "Kadınlar Halk Fırkası" (People's Party of Women), however, it was prohibited to establish this women’s political party by the current government. The reason of prohibition of Kadınlar Halk Fırkası’s establishment was not clearly declared. But the reason was twofold; theoretically, the KHF’s programme covers women rights very extensively and there was a strong possibility to be advocated by such an organized women group in practice. But in 1924, the very same group, taking a “political maneuver,” transformed themselves into a union. Also, they added a statement “the union is not related with the politics” in article third in their guideline. In the expense of repeat, although this transformation can be seen as a back step in the struggle process; in that times this was the only solution against the legally prohibition of the establishment and maintaining struggle. After the process of establishment, the union gained 400 women supporters who were well-educated and lived in Istanbul. Approach of its members towards to women issue has been showing large diversity from charity to the political right claim. Initially, these women began to comprehend the problems of education and lower participation of working
life, and focused on elevating the status of women in public life. With this purpose, they engaged with charity activities such as aiding to the orphan children and poor women, encouragement to usage of domestic goods, organizing conferences about women social and legal rights, giving courses such as language and driver's license. In addition, Union had declarations on changing of “Law of Domestic Relations” in favor of women, acceptance of civil code and plural marriage. The year 1927 is very decisive date for the union’s history. Because in annual congress they decided to put on their guideline social and political rights of Turkish women. Consequently, union returned the issue on political rights of Turkish women with special reference to gain right to vote and to be elected. To this end, in 1927 general election, the union attempted to nominate a woman candidate. I have to underline that these women began to force the boundaries of political imagination that is possible in those times. Needless to say that when we consider the political atmosphere in newly established republic, these women have already known that women candidate is not acceptable. But this was a very effective instrument for bringing up the political rights of women. This attempt generated large scale discussion in public opinion. Due to this attempt was not supported; they decided to nominate a man candidate, who would support women rights in parliament. Unfortunately, union’s these two attempts couldn’t be received support by the press and the government. Furthermore, debates on elections within the union created diversity of opinion that would let to rupture in the close future. While a group of women claimed that nominating a woman candidate is not appropriate way to struggle and must be waited to have right to vote and to be elected, and also Turkish society wasn’t ready for this kind of change, on the contrary, the other group that was led by Nezihe Muhiddin insisted on this issue and declared several times that union had made every kind of activity for achieving social and political rights. Despite of warning for giving up this insistence, Nezihe Muhiddin did not step back. This decided stance of her paved the way to accusation for corruption in the Union. Under the support of
governorship; some members of the union met an emergency congress and delegate a new administrative council. Thereby, she banished from union. With a new administrative council the union embraced similar assumption with government, which was women’s political rights to be gained in the course of time and also the period was not proper for women’s political rights. As a result union shelved the political rights for a while. Putting political rights on agenda again coincided with just before 1930’s local elections. In that period Union began to some activities that underlined the importance of women participation in local election and organize some conferences on capabilities of women in business of governing a city and right to vote and be elected. On 3rd April before the 1930’s elections, the government gave to women’s right to be elected and to vote for local municipality elections. After this period, the union’s activities was reduced to only making rural women conscious of woman rights and to attending conferences in western. As for on 5th December 1934, Turkey government gave women right to vote and to be elected. One year later, the union dissolved itself with a reason achieved to reach the all purposes. In theoretical level, providing equality between men and women in terms of political rights also made possible to put pressure on the union in the direction of dissolution.

KA. DER:

As I just mention above, with the given rights to vote and to be elected, the union has lost the legitimate ground of existence in the eyes of current press and government. If such is the case, why after 62 years, did women need an organization that aims at increasing in the women participation in political area such as KA. DER? We have to take a short look at occasion of women in political area during this 62-years period. Within this period, according to election years participation of women in parliament as fallows: In 1935 the number of women parliamentarian was 18, percentage was %4.6; in 1943 the number was 16, percentage was %3.7; In 1950 the number was 3 percentage was %0.6; in 1957 the number was 7,
percentage was %1.1; in 1965 the number was 8, percentage was %1.8; in 1973 the number was 6, percentage was %1.3; In 1991 the number was 8, percentage was %1.8; in 1999 the number was 22, percentage was %4.0; in 2002 the number was 24, percentage was %4.4; In 2007 the number was 50 percentage was %9.1”dir. As can be seen, while, in the election just after given to women political rights, the percentage of women in the parliament was %4.6, in 1950 election, this rate decreased to %1 and had not risen to %4 percent until 1999 election - where KA.DER conducted campaign of elections. The most important factor of this decrease in 1950 was transformation from the single party election system to the democratic multiple one in Turkey. Due to the fact that in single party period women who were Turkish modernization and westernization symbol, lost this role. In this period, modernization and westernization symbols were market economy, democratic regime and industrialization. Furthermore, common idea was that it is not necessary to support women’ participation in political area because of easily existence of them in every platform of public life. In addition to this, because of dominant political climate of Turkey until 80’s, the woman movements declined. In this period we could not mention women organizations, which brought up women issues solely. As for after 80’s, in parallel with rapidly liberalizations in political, social and economic life of Turkey, small scale feminist organizations appeared. These feminist organizations followed the line of western feminisms, which became visible at the end of 60’s. At the same time, they were same women who had placed within left wing political parties and some radical leftist organizations in 70’s in Turkey. The doubt related with the formal politics and belief in fundamental change that only came after the transformation in private sphere resulted in specifically not to be active on representation equality issue. That meant, they especially advocated “politics outside of the politics.” They started to organize feminist groups that mainly based on the transformation of private sphere and also focused on
gender, exploitation of domestic labor, violence, honor killings and harassment toward women aimed to transform the private sphere.

As we can see, after the Turkish Women Union, KA.DER is the first organization that advocate women’ political equality and put this issue on the women agenda strongly. Established in 1997, KA.DER describes itself an organization which aims to increase the representation of women in all elected and appointed positions, within decision-making bodies. The primary goal of KA.DER was to achieve the increase the ratio of women parliamentarian to %10 percent (this ratio correspondence to 1999 general election). Although KA.DER could not able to achieve the goal, the main affect of KA.DER’s campaigns was seen in the important increase in women participation to the parliament. For the first time in several years, ratio increased to %4 percent. As for in 2007 election ratio was 9.1 percent. According to me, this also proves that the association successfully contributes to increasing in women participation in parliament. KA.DER describes itself as an organization that highlights woman’s view-point and women sensitivity rather than as a feminist organization. It is interesting to note that the approach of KA.DER against political parties is to be objective and to stand at the equal distance. For KA.DER, goal of politics “In order to achieve humanly life in modern societies, is to train people who has different skills and capability to benefit from world’s boons”. In addition, according to KA.DER we can define the political ideology of association as minimal but consistent and democratic ideology which answers the demands of women and allows construction of women platform in parliament. That is to say, it can be qualified as a democratic approach that is sensitive to gender equality. As opposed to Turkish Women Union, KA.DER does not aim to establish a women party. Because, it claims that allocation of risk and luck of women to different political parties is an effective method. In that sense, as association mentions that, the association supports candidates not the political party. Sponsored candidates must accept KA.DER’s principles. Very well, what are these
principles and extent of them: Possessing woman’s view-point; deceiving in wanting to end all forms of discrimination and violence towards women; being respectful of human rights, within the confines of a fully functioning democracy, based on the rule of law. As we can understand from all these criteria, the definition of their duty is not only increasing in quantity of women representative in the parliament and in this way providing equality between men and women but also take under the observation of the women parliamentarians’ activities after elected in parliaments. In addition, for them women representatives have to make women policies in parliament. In order to achieve their goals, KA.DER draws the outline of their activities such as calling women for participation of politics more actively, lobbying activities in the name of the candidates, supporting to participation of women in all positions of political parties, to be organized in the election districts widespread, giving education to women candidates on the political matters and raising gender equality on societal level. Lastly, quota allocation is one of the main demands of KA.DER. They claims that political parties must allocate a ratio of 30 percent in local and general election and this implementation must be under constitutional guarantee. Quota implementation is, for KA.DER, in the charge of the government in order to be achieved equality between men and women. What makes KA.DER important is that conceptualization of gender inequality that belongs to private domain bounds to with public domain issues. This position of KA.DER is strongly related with European Union equality policies and integration process of Turkey to European Union. I want to point out that woman issues became criteria of democratization with Turkey’s integration process to E.U. In addition, KA.DER’s projects are supported by E.U. financially. Especially, we can see influences of concept “Gender Mainstreaming - which emerged European Union equality policies – carries similarities with on KA.DER activities. For creating state policies which are sensitive to gender equality their suggestions for include founding a “Turkish Grand National Assembly Gender Equality Permanent
Commission”, making up for 5 years “Turkey Women Policies Action Schedule”, making “Equality Picture Laws” and establishing “Board of Gender Equality”. KA.DER also describes measures—which must be taken at the governmental level - against the gender inequality such as violence against the women, education inequality, for struggling women’s poverty, unequal opportunity in the employing process. These policies carry strong similarities with CEDAW’s decisions and solutions for women issues.

**Conclusion:**

At this point, we can make a very short comprehension. On the one hand, KADER consider women participation to political in the context of individual rights and democratic representation, on the other hand, with the influences of Kemalist nationalism Turkish Women Union takes into the account women participation as necessities for modernization and progress. In addition, Turkish Women Union evaluated as an opportunity in order to serve Turkish nation. Eventually both women organization understand the women issues as a part of the modernism and developing. They engaged with modern and western codes. Because, they emerged at the periods that women issues became a symbol of modern state. That is to say that we can see Turkish Women Union as result of modern nation state perception. On the other hand we can see the KA.DER as a product of liberal understanding. Common point both women organization’s case is being against the Islamic life, which women can not be free in it. In clearly, as you know Ottoman Empire was ruled by Islamic Laws. Conversely, Turkish Republic ruptured itself from Ottoman tradition entirely and was established as a secular state. At that time, women’s became a symbol of modern secular state. In women’s case, Turkish Women Union also evaluated women’s inequality in social and political life as a result of Islamic laws. Furthermore, in the period - which KA.DER was established- secularism and Islamic reaction conflicts and polarization took place in Turkey’s public life. Related with this context, one of personal qualities sought by KA.DER for supporting women candidates is:
“To believe firmly in the principles of secular republic…” In this sense, we can think KA.DER as a response against danger of Islamic reaction.

The other important case is about these two women organization, KA.DER claims that women must be taking place in the parliament for women and for creating gender equality. On the contrary, Turkish Women Union described duty of women to contribute development of country. For them country’s benefits was more important than women’s benefits. Lastly, I want to note that, during single party period where initializing polices against whole civil organizations -which is placed among the state and society-is very strong, the resistance of Turkish Women Union against central power structure is valuable. On the other hand, KA.DER has an important occasion to create gender equality sensibility at the governmental level.

NOTES:

1 Zihnioğlu, Y. (2003), *Kadınsız İnkılap*, Metis Yayınları
2 Ibid., p. 153, İstanbul, p. 149
4 Ibid, p. 25, 26
7 Bora, Aksu, “Bir Yapabilirlik Olarak KA.DER”, 90’larda Türkiye’de Feminizm, İletişim Yayınları, p. 111
8 Kadın sorunlarına Çözüm Arayışı Kurultayı, Siyasette ve Karar Alma süreçlerinde Kadın Çalışma Grubu s. 3, [www.ka-der.org.tr](http://www.ka-der.org.tr)
9 Kadınları Siyasete Taşımak İçin Kurulmuş Bir Dernek: KA-DER, 19, Kadın Eserleri Kütüphanesi ve Bilgi Merkezi, KA-DER Arşivi, Dosya No: 273-5/417, p. 4
10 Guideline of KA-DER, Article: 2
11 Guideline of KA-DER, Article: 2