

The Kurdish Female Politicians in Turkey and Their Areas of Interest

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Abstract

This article focuses on the female deputies of the pro-Kurdish BDP (Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi, The Peace and Democracy Party). The activities of the Kurdish female deputies were studied through Hürriyet (Liberty), a Turkish national newspaper with one of the largest circulations. Within the period ranging from a month before the last national election of June 2011 to the end of October 2013, Gültan Kışanak, Aysel Tuğluk, Sebahat Tuncel and Emine Ayna are the female deputies of the BDP that appear in Hürriyet most often. These female politicians generally follow their party's line, and they support both the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) and its jailed leader Abdullah Öcalan. They criticize the conservative-democratic AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, The Justice and Development Party) and its single-party government. They perceive "democratic autonomy" of Kurds as a "woman's project". The female deputies of the pro-Kurdish BDP embrace both their Kurdish and their female identity.

Key words - BDP; Turkey; Kurd; gender politics

Introduction

This article is on the political involvement of Kurdish women, with a particular focus on the activities of the deputies most prominent in the Turkish media. In the academic literature, works focusing on the political involvement of Kurdish women in Turkey are few. This article intends therefore to fill a gap in the literature with a particular focus on the female deputies of the pro-Kurdish BDP (Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi, The Peace and Democracy Party).

First-wave feminism hit Turkey in the early 20th century, and women fought for their civic and political rights. Second-wave feminism hit Turkey in the 1980s, and women fought against problems such as conjugal violence and their misrepresentation in the media. Third-wave feminism took place in the 1990s (Diner & Toktas, 2010). Ramifications inside the feminist movement emerged. Kurdish nationalist women and Islamist women appeared in the public sphere and criticized “mainstream feminists for being ethno-centric and exclusionary of other identities” (Diner & Toktas, 2010). Kurdish women had already worked in the leftist movements of the 1970s as “genderless militants” or “sisters”. However, from the 1980s onwards, they had a different political stand. They first embraced their Kurdish ethnic identity and then their Kurdish female identity. These women seem to suffer from both ethnic and gender limitations and confront a “dual oppression” (Çaha, 2011).

Before addressing the Kurdish women’s movement and the current female Kurdish deputies in more detail, it would be appropriate to discuss what “the Kurdish issue” means in the Turkish political framework.

The Kurdish Issue In Turkey

When the Republic was founded, Turkey adopted a “cultural unity policy” and perceived ethnic elements as “threats to territorial integrity and political unity” (Efeğil, 2011). “The Kemalist modernization project (...) aimed to create an ethnically, linguistically and culturally homogeneous nation and nation-state out of the remnants of the Ottoman Empire, which was a multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic and multi-cultural entity” (Yüksel, 2006). This approach eventually created a problem. There were eighteen Kurdish rebellions between 1924 and 1938. In 1984, the PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party) was established and started its “terrorist” attacks (Çelik, 2010). This armed conflict had a destructive effect on Turkey’s economy and caused more than 40,000 deaths in the 30-year fight (Çağlayan, 2013).

At the beginning of the 1990s, some state officials accepted “the Kurdish reality”, and Turkey, an official candidate for joining the European Union ever since the Helsinki Summit (1999), started to adopt many reforms in order to fulfill the Kurdish demands. Also, the conservative democratic AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, The Justice and Development Party), that had formed a single party government ever since 2002, has worked on the solution-seeking process particularly since 2009-2010. The AKP government first “announced a Kurdish opening”, then “redubbed the initiative as a ‘Democratic Opening’” (Casier, Jongerden & Walker, 2013). Some people welcomed this effort for peace wholeheartedly, whereas others accused the AKP of working against the unity of the country.

As for the pro-Kurdish political parties, they appeared in the political arena in the 1990s. However, the Constitutional Court abolished seven pro-Kurdish parties between 1993 and 2009. It considered that those parties were involved in terrorist activities and worked against the unity of the country (Milliyet, December 11, 2009). The BDP is the pro-Kurdish party in Turkey since 2008. Its members constituted 6,64 percent of the Parliament according to the 2011 national election data (Sabah, June 13, 2011). The BDP claims to work for “democratic rights” in general and underlines Turkey’s need for a new political structure: one that would embrace both cultural and social

diversity. Within the context of democratization, the party fights against the patriarchal mentality and also supports women's political participation (BDP, 2008).

The armed conflict, its emergence and its results, as well as aspects related to the identity politics and peace-seeking solutions make the Kurdish issue an interesting topic of research for academicians. The following section summarizes academic studies on the Kurdish women's movement.

Academic Literature on the Kurdish Women's Movement

Most of the academic literature focuses on the Kurdish issue in general, problems of the armed conflict and peaceful co-existence possibilities (Yeğen, 2010; Gunter, 2014; Uslu, 2007; Cengiz & Hoffmann, 2013). There are also several works focusing only on women. To give a few examples, Nerina Weiss worked on the life stories of four Kurdish women, their experience in the pro-Kurdish party, the PKK, and at home. Weiss emphasized the gender strategies adopted by those women living in Eastern Turkey (Weiss, 2010). Ömer Çaha worked on the discourse analysis of journals published by Kurdish feminists. Çaha argued that Kurdish women were excluded "from a general and essentialist understanding of women" (Çaha, 2011). Çağla Diner and Şule Toktaş compared the Kemalist, Islamist and Kurdish women's movements. They argued that "mainstream Turkish feminism has been influenced and has evolved with the rise of Kurdish nationalism and Islamic revivalism" (Diner & Toktas, 2010). Ceyda Kuloğlu-Karşlı worked mainly on the "conflict-induced internal displacement in Turkey" and its impact on Kurdish women. She argued that Kurdish women learned Turkish, learned how to read and write dealing with their problems (Kuloğlu-Karşlı, 2013).

Among the researchers who wrote on the aspects related to politics and Kurdish women are Şebnem Cansun, Martin Van Bruinessen and Handan Çağlayan. Şebnem Cansun worked on the pro-Kurdish BDP's "approach to the gender question" and argued that the BDP placed women's problems at the top of its priorities, right after the Kurdish issue (Cansun, 2013). Martin Van Bruinessen worked on Kurdish female political leaders. He started with Adela Khanum who lived in the era of the Ottoman Empire, and he then highlighted several Kurdish women including a present-day politician Leyla Zana. Van Bruinessen argued that even though the Kurdish society is highly male-dominated, women in Kurdish society are able to take high ranking political and military positions (Van Bruinessen, 2001).

Handan Çağlayan has several publications on the subject. She defended a political science Ph.D. thesis on "the Kurdish identity from a feminist perspective" in 2006 (Çağlayan, 2012). According to Çağlayan, Kurdish women could not sufficiently "benefit from the fruits of modernization". Kurdish women did not have access to education and employment opportunities, because of the official language policies and their "linguistic capital" (Çağlayan, 2008). As for political visibility, it was only in the 1990s that Kurdish women appeared in street marches and that "a large number of women went to the mountains to join armed groups" (Çağlayan, 2008).

According to Çağlayan, the Kurdish female politician Leyla Zana who - as an elected deputy - attempted to speak Kurdish in the national Parliament and was thus sent to prison, has a symbolic place for Kurds (Çağlayan, 2008). Çağlayan also discusses the approach of the former pro-Kurdish parties (HEP, DEP, HADEP, DEHAP) in general and argues that women's emancipation got a place among the prioritized issues of democratization in the 1990s with the DEHAP (Demokratik Halk Partisi, Democratic People's Party) (Çağlayan, 2007). Çağlayan also draws attention to the practice of a 40 percent gender quota and the qualifications of the female deputies in the DTP (Demokratik Toplum Partisi, Democratic Society Party) and the BDP (Çağlayan, 2013). According to Çağlayan, Kurdish female deputies are elected, not because of the support they receive from the party chair, but because of their own former party experience and the approval of the Women's Assembly within the

party. Yet, female deputies are not necessarily college graduates or members of the socio-economically upper class. They are rather like ordinary women in the society. Furthermore, the practice of the co-chair system (consisting of a man and a woman) in the pro-Kurdish party lets women have as much say as men in the party's group meetings at the Parliament (Çağlayan, 2013).

Previous research has focused on general issues regarding the political involvement of Kurdish women. The present study instead examines the interest areas of deputies through a research based on a news search.

The Present Study

This article intends to fill in the gap in the literature with a particular focus on the declarations made by the Kurdish female deputies. The declarations of the deputies are found in *Hürriyet* (Liberty), a daily national newspaper in Turkey with one the largest circulations. *Hürriyet* was founded in 1948 and has a daily circulation of approximately 390,000. It is known as the *amiral gemi* (flagship), one of the leading national newspapers of the Turkish media. It has a liberal approach, and its columnists come from a large spectrum of political backgrounds.

Since the archives of *Hürriyet* are open only to its own workers and not to the public, the daily national newspapers were accessed at Atatürk Halk Kütüphanesi (Atatürk Public Library) in the Taksim district of İstanbul. Then, Excel charts were produced according to the names of the deputies that appear most frequently and the topics those deputies discussed most often. As for the dates of the research, news ranging from the beginning of May 2011 to the end of October 2013 has been taken into consideration. The last national election in Turkey took place in June 2011. Starting this research one month ahead of time, the intention was to see the context in which the national election was developing. The research had to end at the end of October 2013, because the bookbinding of the newspapers takes several months, and as of March 2014, the last volume of *Hürriyet* found at the Taksim Library was from October 2013.

The Female Deputies Of The Bdp Appearing In Hürriyet And Their Areas Of Interest

Eleven out of the thirty-six deputies of the BDP are women (Zaman, June 13, 2011). The female deputies of the BDP that appear in *Hürriyet* most frequently are Gültan Kışanak, Aysel Tuğluk, Sebahat Tuncel and Emine Ayna. Gültan Kışanak (born in 1961) is a journalist and a deputy from Diyarbakır. She is the current co-chair of the party. Aysel Tuğluk (born in 1965) is a lawyer and a deputy from Van. She was the first co-chair of the DTP (Çağlayan, 2013). Sebahat Tuncel (born in 1975) is a graduate of a map-and-land-surveying vocational college. Emine Ayna (born in 1968) is a high school graduate and a former co-chair of the party. All of the women are single except Gültan Kışanak, who is married with a child.

All four women named above have a prison experience. Gültan Kışanak was in prison at the age of 19. She later declared that it was because of the "painful experience she endured in prison that [she] decided to become a journalist and to enter politics". She claimed that she was physically, verbally, and psychologically abused in prison and that "the Diyarbakır prison was a breaking point in the Kurdish issue (...) that led Kurds to distance themselves from the state" (Bozkurt, December 19, 2012). Aysel Tuğluk had a prison experience for "making propaganda for a separatist terrorist organization" (Çelik, March 25, 2011). Sebahat Tuncel is an exception: she was put in prison for nine months for "alleged membership in the Kurdish guerrilla movement". Then, she got released, because she was elected deputy, and therefore benefited from an automatic immunity from prosecution according to law (Hacaloglu, August 3, 2007). Tuncel is also publicly known for having "slapped a police chief during a demonstration" in the province of Şırnak in 2011 (*Hürriyet*, March 22, 2011). Emine Ayna is amongst the members of the "radical wing" within the party (Bozkurt, March 5, 2009). She was sentenced to jail for having made "propaganda for an illegal organization" (*English Bianet*, June 17, 2011).

Within the research period, Gültan Kışanak, the present co-chair of the party, is the person who appears most often in the daily. This is not surprising, since she is the person at the highest level of the party hierarchy and gives her speeches on behalf of the party.

**Table 1: Declarations Of The Bdp's Female Deputies In Hürriyet
Between May 1, 2011 – October 31, 2013**

Name of the politician	Number of news items	Support of Abdullah Öcalan	Support of the PKK	Criticism of the AKP government/ Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan	Gender issues
Gültan Kışanak	32	8	4	6	3
Aysel Tuğluk	8	1	4	1	1
Sebahat Tuncel	7		4		1
Emine Ayna	2			1	1
Total	49	9	12	8	6

The chart above shows a striking point: Kurdish female politicians embrace the PKK and its jailed co-founder and leader Abdullah Öcalan. For instance, according to Gültan Kışanak, Kurdish people name Öcalan halk önderi (people's leader) and want him to be free (Hürriyet, October 3, 2012). Kışanak believes that Öcalan is not an ordinary person. Therefore, the governmental approach towards Öcalan is also "the approach towards peace, negotiation and a democratic future" (Hürriyet, October 18, 2012). Kışanak thinks that Kurdish people miss Öcalan and that if they insist "on their determined and combative stand this craving will end soon" (Öztürk, February 11, 2013). She declares that Öcalan is accepted as an interlocutor and that the dialogue process has started (Bozarslan & Sunar, March 4, 2013). Öcalan will be the road-map provider for "an honorable solution" (Dalmaz & Kara, March 19, 2013). Also, Kışanak demands "legal guarantee" for Öcalan, because the current laws perceive Öcalan as "the leader of an illegal organization" and if a public prosecutor proceeds against Öcalan, this will create a problem (Aslan, March 26, 2013).

Within this context, the female deputies of the BDP embrace the PKK both figuratively and literally. In August 2012, PKK militants stopped BDP deputies along a highway in the Şemdinli district of the south-eastern province of Hakkari. This encounter consisted of a chat and hugs. According to Aysel Tuğluk, "this encounter was not illegal, and it was an extremely natural and real situation". Tuğluk mentioned their happiness with that encounter, how much "it was important for them to listen to [the PKK militants], learning about the conditions under which they were putting up a fight" (Hürriyet, September 11, 2012). In 2011, Sebahat Tuncel gave a ride to the airport to a person apprehended for being a PKK member. Tuncel argued that she had just given a ride to a member of her party (Hürriyet, November 15, 2011). Furthermore, Tuncel got herself a prison sentence for being a member of the PKK (Usta & Armutçu, September 19, 2012).

The female deputies also embrace gender issues, but their gender approach goes hand in hand with the party's general approach toward the PKK and the concept of "democratic autonomy". For instance, according to Sebahat Tuncel, the female PKK militant Zilan, who died in 1996 as a suicide bomber, fought against the patriarchal system. There are thousands of women fighters / martyrs in the Kurdish emancipation history. Sebahat Tuncel thinks that women should love each other so that they can fight the patriarchal dominant class (Yavuz, July 2, 2011). Both Aysel Tuğluk and Gültan Kışanak perceived the assassination of three female PKK members in Paris not only as an attack to the peace process, but also as a particular attack against women and women's liberation struggle (Konuralp & Balıkcı, January 18, 2013; Hürriyet, March 5, 2013). Emine Ayna invites all women in Turkey, and not only the Kurds, to construct "the democratic autonomy", because "democratic

autonomy is a woman's project" (Dörtkardeş, July 19, 2011). Gültan Kışanak declares that the BDP is preoccupied with women's rights (Hürriyet, November 27, 2012).

The female deputies, and mostly the party co-chair Gültan Kışanak, criticize the AKP government for several issues. For instance, according to Kışanak, the AKP tries to cover up the Uludere issue, the killing of thirty-four Kurdish smugglers initially suspected to be PKK militants (Hürriyet, November 27, 2012). Kışanak accuses the AKP government of not doing what it should on the peace project (Hürriyet, September 29, 2013), Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan of not approaching the democratization issue seriously (Hürriyet, October 3, 2012), changing the country's political agenda at his own will (Hürriyet, November 27, 2012) and using limitless governmental power over people (Hürriyet, June 26, 2013). Emine Ayna accuses Tayyip Erdoğan of "ignoring the rightful demands of the Kurdish people and insisting on war". She argues that Erdoğan's declarations result in attacks on the BDP buildings and lynching of the Kurds living in the metropolises (Dörtkardeş, July 19, 2011).

To sum up, the female deputies of the BDP embrace both their Kurdish and female identity. They do not hesitate to criticize the AKP government and Prime Minister Erdoğan.

Conclusion

This study shows that Gültan Kışanak, Aysel Tuğluk, Sebahat Tuncel and Emine Ayna are the female deputies of the BDP, the pro-Kurdish party, that appear in the media most frequently. Amongst those, the co-chair of the party Gültan Kışanak is, not surprisingly, the one who speaks the most on behalf of the party. These four female deputies have all prison experience because of their political stance. The female deputies of the BDP adopt the party's general approach and support both the PKK and its jailed leader Abdullah Öcalan. Although some people might perceive the PKK militants as terrorists, the female deputies of the BDP embrace them both figuratively and literally. According to them, Kurds owe their current, relatively relaxed political position to the "guerrilla fighters". In addition, they applaud the female PKK members for their particular courage in fighting the patriarchal dimension of their society. They criticize the AKP government, its chairman and the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan for several reasons, ranging from ignoring Kurdish demands to changing the country's political agenda at his own will and using limitless governmental power. As for their gender approach, these women perceive "the democratic autonomy project" of Kurds as a "woman's project". This approach highlights the link between the Kurdish identity and female identity. Both Kurds and women suffer from oppression, and they argue that they need to change the existing system in order to reach their autonomy. The female Kurdish deputies are visible in the media, and they embrace both their Kurdish and female identity.

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