

TURKISH DAILY NEWS

Sex matters -I- (Toward a post-patriarchal Turkey)

Mustafa Akyol Turkish Daily News
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The recent report by the European Stability Initiative shows that, despite all the alarmists that suggest otherwise, Turkey is making great progress on women's rights and heading towards a 'post-patriarchal' stage.

Do you recall the recent debate in Turkey about "Islamic capitalism?" Well, that was sparked by a 2005 report prepared by the Berlin-based think tank, European Stability Initiative (ESI), and which had the witty title, "Islamic Calvinists: Change and conservatism in Central Anatolia." According to ESI, Turkey's conservative Muslim entrepreneurs were developing a "business ethic," bit similar to that of the early Calvinists, who had spearheaded the flourishing of capitalism in Europe, as the analyses of sociologist Max Weber would later show.

Two years have passed since the Islamic Calvinists report and now ESI is back with an even more thought-provoking study: "Sex And Power In Turkey: Feminism, Islam and The Maturing of Turkish Democracy." This new work is the outcome of 18 months of research carried out by a team of ESI analysts, who interviewed women and men from opposite extremes of Turkey, ranging from the stylish areas of Istanbul such as Kadıköy to the impoverished villages of the eastern city of Van. I think it is a must-read for anyone who wants to understand social change in Turkey and how it affects its women. (Available at www.esiweb.org).

Facts, myths and female bodies:

Before getting into the facts of the ESI report, it is worth noting the myths about this issue. I am sure you must be familiar with the secularism rallies held in Turkey's major cities in the past few months, in which urbane women played an important role with their zeal for preserving their modern way of life. They were, and still are, fearful of seeing Turkey go back to mediaeval darkness, which they thought would be brought about by the conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP) government. And some of them were, and still are, in favor of suppressing Turkish democracy – because democracy brings all those wrong men to power.

But is that a substantiated fear? According to the ESI report, no, it isn't. "Kemalist women" and their "authoritarianism feminism," argues the report, "is out of touch with the reality of contemporary Turkey and the achievements of recent years."

These achievements are actually so profound that they are at least as important as the first major reform era in the history of the Turkish Republic, i.e., the time of Atatürk. "The second major reform era has been the period since 2001," ESI notes, "as a result, for the first time in its history, Turkey has the legal framework of a post-patriarchal society."

Like how? Well, do you remember the controversial affair criminalizing adultery that has been commonly referred to as the best evidence for the AKP's assumed plot to bring about "shariah?" (For more on that, see my May 10, 2007 piece, "Reductio ad Sharium.") The ESI report tells us the real story of that controversy, which was in fact just one little nuisance in a very big picture: the new Penal Code of 2004, which was accepted by the AKP dominated Parliament.

And was that Penal Code a prelude to "shariah?" No, not at all. It was in fact a great leap forward in women's rights. "The [old] Turkish Penal Code, in force from 1926 until 2004," ESI notes, "reflected the belief that women's bodies were the property of men, and that sexual crimes against women were in fact crimes against the honor of the family."

But with the new Penal Code, "some 35 articles concerning women and their rights to sexual autonomy were changed. All references to vague patriarchal constructs such as chastity, morality, shame, public customs or decency had been eliminated. The new Penal Code treats sexual crimes as violations of individual women's rights and not as crimes against society, the family or public morality. It criminalizes rape in marriage, eliminates sentence reductions for honor killings, ends legal discrimination against non-virgin and unmarried women, criminalizes sexual harassment in the workplace and treats sexual assault by members of the security forces as aggravated offences."

These were all made possible by the support of the AKP parliamentarians, who, "to the surprise of many of the [feminist] activists... proved willing to engage with civil society and debate the issues on their merits."

Secularist Jean D'arcs:

But of course legal reforms are not enough to empower Turkey's women and an extensive social progress is needed to minimize the gender gap. The good news is that this is taking place, too. As the ESI report explains, the rise of liberal and Islamic feminist movements and their networks – which are quite different from the top-down Kemalist feminists – has created an important driving force for that. Thanks to the efforts of such groups, effective campaigns have been organized for the education of young girls in rural areas, and shelters have been created for women threatened by domestic violence or honor killings.

And there is also the social change brought by economic progress and integration with the globe, which is dissolving many patriarchal traditions. From 1997 to 2004, for example, the percentage of arranged marriages has fallen from 69 to 54 percent.

So, Turkey is really heading towards a post-patriarchal stage. Good news.

But why, then you might ask, secularist Jean D'arcs thinks that the reality is quite the opposite?

That question deserves a long answer, which deserves another column. Thus, please consider reading my next piece, "Sex matters -II- (The tragedy of Kemalist feminism)", which is coming soon (actually this weekend) to a TDN near you.