



“Scent of a woman”

Women as a crucial factor in the upcoming Turkish elections



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Summary

- The female vote is one of the decisive factors in the 14 May elections.
- The government coalition now includes parties with highly problematic views on women and women’s rights.
- Housewives comprise the AKP’s female stronghold, but the tide is changing.
- Women in Turkey are unhappy, anxious and pessimistic.

WOMEN'S ISSUES HAVE EMERGED as one of the critical points in the Turkish elections coming up on May 14th, and the female vote as one of the decisive factors that will shape Turkey's political and social future.

While polls suggest that the percentage of female voters who will support the AKP has significantly decreased, the opposition also seems to have understood the importance of the female vote, and especially the support of housewives and young conservative women, who remain AKP strongholds.

Women at the heart of the pre-elections Alliances

Women's issues, as well as the fragility of women's status in contemporary Turkey, seem to have reached a new peak during the current electoral campaign, mainly because of the radical and highly problematic positions on women held by the new members of the People's Alliance: the Islamist New Welfare Party (Yeni Refah Partisi, YRP) and the Islamist Free Cause Party (Hür Dava Partisi, HÜDA PAR).

Since the abrupt decision by the current Turkish government to withdraw Turkey from the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention on violence against women in July 2021, women's issues have acquired a new impetus in Turkey, with female activism becoming more pronounced.

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Recently, a significant number of commentators have highlighted the dangers of these positions, as well as the importance of the stakes concerning women's rights and status in view of the upcoming elections.

T24's Gökçer Tahincioğlu argues that *"the actions and opinions of the AKP-MHP-BBP alliance that abolished the Istanbul Convention are known. Now two more parties have been added to it. When you look at the party programs of the Yeniden Refah Party (YRP), which wants the law preventing violence (against women) to be abolished, and HÜDA PAR, which wants imam marriage to be legalized and adultery to be made a crime, you can see the developments that could await Turkey and women in particular"*¹.

Indeed, the YRP's official political program includes positions about "the nature of women" that legitimately raise concerns for the future of the position of women in Turkey:

"A woman is not just an individual who brings children into the world and takes care of them at home. A woman is an individual who takes responsibility in every aspect of life, in accordance with her nature, so as to make the world a beautiful world in which her child and other children can live".

"Positive female role models will be highlighted in the media, artistic, cultural and social activities. Values such as morality, chastity, mercy, sacrifice, compassion, nobility and productivity will be promoted and strengthened among women through female role models"².

¹ <https://t24.com.tr/yazarlar/gokcer-tahincioglu-yuzlesme/kadinin-fitrati-ve-kadinlari-bekleyen-tehlike,39359>

² <https://yenidenrefahpartisi.org.tr/page/parti-programi/14>

HÜDA PAR's program includes equally challenging positions, openly militating for the legitimacy of imam marriages, which were banned in 1926, and the criminalization of adultery.

"The religiously binding imam marriage, which is both established in society and fundamentally related to the beliefs of society, should be decriminalized and this form of marriage should be given official status.

It is an absolute fact that adultery is considered *haram* and an act of great immorality by the overwhelming majority in our society, and that it corrupts society, corrupts morals, causes the generation to mix, and disrupts the environment of peace and tranquility. Therefore, for the sake of society and the generation, adultery, which was decriminalized as a result of the impositions of the secular understanding, must be redefined as a crime. Because the prohibition of adultery is a human right: the security of one's generation must be protected³.

However, like the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, the demand to amend Law 6284 sparked tensions within the AKP. While the vast majority of male AKP members remained silent, AKP Group Deputy Chairperson Özlem Zengin said: "It is an important issue for us, and 6284 is our red line."

During the negotiations between these two parties and the People's Alliance, women's issues were high on the agenda and both the YRP and HÜDA PAR attempted to win concessions on these issues.

Notoriously, the YRP's Fatih Erbakan sought to persuade the People's Alliance that Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention should be voted for by the Turkish Grand National Assembly and that Law No. 6284 on the Protection of the Family and Prevention of Violence against Women should be amended.

Both issues relate more to the YRP's sensibilities concerning homosexuality, but essentially they also impact on women's rights and status.

Law No. 6284, adopted by the Turkish Grand National Assembly on March 8, 2012 and published in the Official Gazette on March 20, 2012, contains provisions on the protection of women, children, family members and victims of unilateral stalking who have been--or are at risk of being--subjected to violence, and on the prevention of violence against them.

These requests were included in a more wide-ranging package of 30 YRP demands and, according to Fatih Erbakan's statement after his meeting with President and AKP Chairman Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, "We reached a compromise on the issues we sought"⁴.

However, like the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, the demand to amend Law 6284 sparked tensions within the AKP. While the vast majority of male AKP members remained silent, AKP Group Deputy Chairperson Özlem Zengin said: "It is an important issue for us, and 6284 is our red line."

Nevertheless, Özlem Zengin, speaking on the A Haber news channel following her "red line" statement, said she did not want to talk about the issue anymore and that she had been targeted and "received threatening messages".

Zengin also said that she was "left alone and tired" and added, "I feel sad when I evaluate the situation our community is in"⁵.

³ <https://t24.com.tr/yazarlar/gokcer-tahincioglu-yuzlesme/kadinin-fitrati-ve-kadinlari-bekleyen-tehlike,39359>

⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/cn03j6225exo>

⁵ <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/cn03j6225exo>

Despite presidential spokesperson Ibrahim Kalin's statement that it is not possible to amend the law on the "protection of the family and prevention of violence against women", and that "there can never be any compromise on the prevention of violence against women", commentators, activists and opposition politicians remain highly skeptical about the People's Alliance and AKP positions on these issues.

As T24's Mehmet Y. Yilmaz wrote, one of the most important issues concerning Law 6284, and one on which Ibrahim Kalin seems to have left the door to negotiations open, is the issue of "permanent alimony" (spousal maintenance support)⁶.

While the rights and status of women seem to be threatened by a strain of radical conservatism within the People's Alliance, the Nation's Alliance's presidential candidate, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, chose to address women's fears and expectations directly, indicating the critical importance both of what was at stake for women's rights and of the female vote in the upcoming elections.

Yilmaz argues that "permanent alimony" in the case of divorce seems dangerous to conservative men, because it provides financial security for women who do not want to submit to physical or verbal violence. They know that a woman who will be deprived of the protection provided by alimony may choose to remain silent and submit to violence. When she asks herself how she will provide for her children and whether she will be able to keep a roof over her head, she will be terrified and say "I'd better shut up and stay where I am!". This is why they keep asking for a discussion on alimony and seeking its abolition"⁷.

While the rights and status of women seem to be threatened by a strain of radical conservatism within the People's Alliance, the Nation's Alliance's presidential candidate, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, chose to address women's fears and expectations directly, indicating the critical importance both of what was at stake for women's rights and of the female vote in the upcoming elections.

In the video he shared with the message "When women stand shoulder to shoulder, no one can get through,"⁸ Kılıçdaroğlu said:

"These days, everywhere we go, women quietly come up to me. They ask questions about the election. They are very, very worried.

Headscarves, no headscarves, single women, married women, mothers... Believe me, it makes no difference. They all have the same concerns. They cannot understand how basic women's rights can be voted on in an election. They are horrified that their rights are being offered to radical elements as an election carrot.

Women already have a huge burden on their backs. They are trying to take care of the children, the elderly, the sick, the household chores - everything. And most housewives have no security in this country (...).

Tonight I would like to address women: Turkey has exhausted you. I know that. Especially young conservative women. They bombarded you with propaganda: 'If Mr. Kemal comes, you will lose everything you've won'. They did it for months, they did it for days. They constantly lied, slandered and defamed (...).

⁶ (<https://t24.com.tr/yazarlar/mehmet-y-yilmaz/akp-li-kadinlar-gozlerinizi-dort-acin,39358>)

⁷ <https://t24.com.tr/yazarlar/mehmet-y-yilmaz/akp-li-kadinlar-gozlerinizi-dort-acin,39358>

⁸ <https://serbestiyet.com/featured/kilicdaroglu-kadinlara-seslendi-bay-kemal-asla-ama-asla-kazanimlarinizi-kaybetmenize-izin-vermez-123430/>

So, I would like to underline these truths: Mr. Kemal will never, ever allow everything you have won to be lost. Mr. Kemal will never, ever negotiate with the rights of women and children".

Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's message is indicative of the importance of women's issues and the female vote in the upcoming elections and highlights the especial significance of housewives and young conservative voters, in particular.

Women's vote, housewives and changing trends

According to KONDA, housewives are one of the crucial groups that will decide the outcome of the elections (Interview conducted with KONDA by the author). Turkey's 15 million housewives (out of a total electorate of approximately 60 million) are Erdoğan's strongest stronghold.

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Turkey's 15 million housewives (out of a total electorate of approximately 60 million) are Erdoğan's strongest stronghold. This is because they are older relative to other groups of women, educated to a lower level, and more conservative. Around 30% of them remain undecided, but KONDA estimates that a very large majority of them will eventually vote for the AKP and Erdoğan.

Reaching these two groups has emerged as one of the major electoral challenges for the opposition, hence Kılıçdaroğlu's message to both housewives and conservative young women.

According to a thorough survey on different voter profiles conducted by the Toplumsal Etki Araştırmaları Merkezi (TEAM) in 2020, housewives are indeed the largest socio-economic group within AKP voters, with 45.1% of Turkey's housewives voting for the party in the 2018 elections. Of those, 88.2% would vote for the AKP again in 2020, which is the highest percentage of all the socio-economic groups represented within supporters of the AKP. However, the percentage of housewives who would vote for the AKP in 2020 had fallen slightly to 41.9%.⁹

Turning to the MHP, 9.3% of housewives voted for the party in 2018, while the percentage who would vote for the party again in 2020 had dropped to 8.9%.

Only 16.2% of housewives voted for the CHP in the 2018 elections, while only 17.7% of housewives would vote for the party in 2020.

Just 8% of housewives voted for the HDP in 2018, with percentage who would vote for the party again in 2020 increasing slightly to 8.2%.

Almost the same percentage of housewives (8.4%) voted for İYİ in 2018, with the percentage who would vote for the party again in 2020 dropping slightly to 8.1%.

The female vote is very important for both the AKP and CHP, since more women than men vote for both parties.

⁹ <http://www.teamarastirma.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/TEAM-Seçmen-Eğilimleri-Araştırmaları-2020.pdf>

The AKP was the party with the highest rate of women voters by far in the 2018 elections with 36.8% (and 35.2% of the male vote). However, according to the TEAM survey, this rate had dropped to 33.8% in 2020.

The CHP received the vote of 21.2% of women (and 17.2% of men). In the 2020 poll, its share of the women's vote increased to 23.9%.

While 10.2% of men voted for the MHP in 2018, the party received only 8.5% of the female vote. This dropped to 8% in 2020.

Almost the same rates are recorded for the HDP, with 8.8% of women voting for the party in 2018 and 10.9% of men. Meral Aksener's IYI received a slightly higher share of the female vote, at 8.7%, than the male vote, at 8.2%.

These figures indicate that both the AKP and the CHP have the capacity to appeal to women through their different narratives of women's role and identity in modern Turkey, while the other parties are more limited in their appeal to women voters.

In addition, as the 2020 TEAM survey indicates, keeping their women voters is emerging as a big challenge for the AKP, while the CHP seems to have the potential to attract women voters.

According to a Gezici Research survey conducted in July 2020, the percentage of women voters aged 50-64 who voted for the AKP fell from 53.8% in the 2018 elections to 45.5% in 2020¹⁰.

In the 2018 elections, 58% of housewives aged 18-75 voted for the AKP's Tayyip Erdoğan, but this rate had dropped to 48% by 2020.

According to the same survey, 54% of the women who voted for the AKP were dissatisfied with their lives.

This trend is confirmed by different and more recent surveys.

According to a survey conducted by Sosyo Politik Saha Araştırmaları Merkezi between 23 December 2022 and 2 January 2023¹¹, while 34% of women had voted for the AKP in 2018, the percentage of women who would do the same in January 2023 had dropped to 28.9%. Similarly, the CHP's female vote rate increased from 19% in 2018 to 24.1% who would do so again in January 2023.

The HDP's female vote rate increased from 9.6% in 2018 to 11.2% in 2023, the MHP's decreased from 5.1% to 4.2%, and IYI's increased from 8.4% to 9.9%.

The rate of undecided voters is higher among women than men, at 9.6% compared to 73%, while 23.7% of women did not vote in the 2018 elections.

The AKP was the party with the highest rate of women voters by far in the 2018 elections with 36.8% (and 35.2% of the male vote). However, according to the TEAM survey, this rate had dropped to 33.8% in 2020. The CHP received the vote of 21.2% of women (and 17.2% of men). In the 2020 poll, its share of the women's vote increased to 23.9%.

¹⁰ <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2020/gundem/kadin-seccmenler-akpden-kopuyor-5920046/>

¹¹ https://sahamerkezi.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/ocak_2023_turkiye_geneli_siyasal_gundem_ve_seccmen_egilimi_arastirmasi.pdf

Another survey, by the Sosyal Demokrasi Vakfı (SODEV), published on April 3, 2023 and conducted in December 2022¹² captures the same trends:

While 38.3% of women voted for the AKP and 27.8% for the CHP in the 2018 elections, the survey records a significant shift, with 30% of the women saying in December 2020 that they would vote for CHP and 26.6% for the AKP.

According to the report, the MHP recorded the largest loss of women's votes, with a 72.1% decline, while İYİ also recorded significant losses, shedding 53.2% of its female voters.

Women are unhappy, anxious and pessimistic

According to the same report, 60.3% of women in Turkey are unhappy. This rate is higher among women who vote for opposition parties: 86.8% of the women who vote for the HDP, and 74.1% of the women who vote for the CHP, say they are unhappy. The most unhappy women of all are middle class women, at 65.5%. Among different age groups, the unhappiness rate for young women between 18-24 is higher than for any other age group at 66.4%.

According to the same report, 60.3% of women in Turkey are unhappy. This rate is higher among women who vote for opposition parties: 86.8% of the women who vote for the HDP, and 74.1% of the women who vote for the CHP, say they are unhappy. The most unhappy women of all are middle class women, at 65.5%. Among different age groups, the unhappiness rate for young women between 18-24 is higher than for any other age group at 66.4%.

49.7% of women in Turkey do not work and this could be a major factor in their anxiety and financial uncertainty.

65.8% of women are pessimistic about the future. 92.1% of the women who voted for the HDP, 82.2% of the women who voted for the CHP, and 44% of the women who voted for the AKP are pessimistic about the future. The most hopeless women of all are young women aged 18-24: 72.5% of these young women have a pessimistic view of the future.

The rates of violence against women are high. In answer to the question "Have you ever experienced/heard of any cases of violence against women in your family or neighborhood?", 73% of women responded in the affirmative.

Of these, 69.7% of women who voted for the AKP in 2018, 74.4% of women who voted for the CHP, 76.3% of women who voted for the HDP, 84.8% of İYİ women voters and 72.1% of MHP women voters responded in the affirmative.

The most recent survey was conducted by *Türkiye Raporu* in early March 2023¹³. It records that 51.3% of women said their income did not meet their expenses, while the corresponding rate for men was 47.8%.

In addition, 48.9% of women described themselves as "anxious", 10.4% as "proud", 15.8% as "angry", and 24.9% as hopeful.

¹² https://sodev.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/SODEV_Turkiyede_Toplumsal_Hayatta_ve_Is_Hayatinda_Kadin_Olmak_Arastirmasi-SON-1.pdf

¹³ <https://turkiyeraporu.com>

Conclusion: The female factor in the elections

As highlighted in the first section of this paper, women's issues are now at the very heart of the pre-election debates. The People's Alliance includes parties with frankly patriarchal and sexist positions concerning women and their role, while the Nation Alliance is trying to increase its appeal to women voters.

The AKP seems to be losing its traditional appeal to women voters, though housewives are still one of the party's strongholds. Despite its efforts, the opposition seems to be finding it very difficult to change these allegiances.

The efforts of both Alliances to attract women's vote is indicative not only of the importance of women as a distinct voter group in Turkey, but also of the fundamental differences in views and positions between the two major political opponents in the upcoming elections.