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## Accession to the European Union: Civil Society in Democratizing Turkey

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## 6

## ACCESSION TO THE EUROPEAN UNION: CIVIL SOCIETY IN DEMOCRATIZING TURKEY

**Michaela Solo**

Civil society is a space in which the state and society interact through voluntary citizen participation in organizations representing a myriad of interests, purposes and values. Since Turkey was accepted as a candidate for membership to the European Union, Turkish civil society has been both an active actor in the process of accession and an object for examining the status of the political, economic, social and cultural transformation necessary for Turkey to achieve membership. While civil society is not one of the thirty-five chapters of the *acquis communautaire*, or total body of EU law, that Turkey must successfully complete negotiations with the European Commission to accede to the EU, its ongoing development is vital for diffusing support and information related to Europeanization. The purpose of this research paper is to look at the question to what extent has civil society been a mechanism for democratization throughout Turkey's bid for membership to the European Union? Examining the role of bottom-up initiative, its relationship to other internal agents and interactions with external forces is important for determining the opportunities for improvement and prospects for becoming a member of the EU. While Turkey's accession is a major controversy and Turkish culture is believed to not fit with European values, one norm European Union members can identify with is building an efficient civil society to create a space for trust in democracy.

The concept of civil society is complex and there is little consensus on its definition. It also has different names such as third-sector actors, voluntary organizations and non-governmental organizations. The European Economic and Social Committee's (1999) definition is useful for understanding how comprehensive civil society is: "Civil society organizations can be defined in abstract terms as the sum of all organizational structures whose members have objectives and responsibilities that are of general interest and who also act as mediators between the public authorities and citizens." Civil society includes trade unions and employers organizations, organizations representing social and economic players, non-governmental organizations which bring people together in common cause, human rights organizations, registered charities, professional associations, grassroots organizations, religious communities, youth organizations, family associations and all organizations through

which citizens participate in local and municipal life.

### **CIVIL SOCIETY AND DEMOCRACY IN TURKEY**

Turkey's civil society has traditionally been portrayed as weak, passive, and controlled or channeled by the state through corporatist structures (Kubicek, 2005). The bureaucratic-authoritarian nature of the Turkish republic and a long era of slow political development left Turkish civil society organizations (CSOs) dilapidated and "generally unable to solve their own problems, let alone being able to help the process of Turkey's democratization" (Arabaci, 2008, p. 77). The Turkish public had been depoliticized by the power of the military and as a result, was indifferent to CSOs or even clashed ideologically. As citizens, they expected benefits from the state and did not put anything back. This comes from the political culture that inherited the concept of the *devlet baba*, or "father-state" being an all-powerful organization that solves society's problems.

Democracy in Turkey has also been regarded as having deficits: "If a democracy is viewed as a system in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote, then Turkey qualifies as a democracy. However, this is a minimalist definition, and many would contend that democracies depend upon other factors in order to function and be consolidated" (Kubicek, 2002, p. 2). These factors that Turkey's minimalist democracy has had difficulties with include a restrained military, protection of fundamental rights and freedoms, rule of law, measures of accountability, public support for democratic values and institutions, and civil society.

The problems with Turkish democracy, along with its economic situation, poor relations with Greece, and other differences, is why the EU predecessor, the European Community, refused to accept Turkey's 1987 application for formal membership in 1989. Again, in 1997, the European Commission report, *Agenda 2000* "declared that Turkey was far from being a candidate state" (LaGro and Jorhensen, 2007, p.7) Finally, since the European Council recognized Turkey as a candidate for membership at the Helsinki Summit in 1999, "Turkish state and society have been transformed by a political avalanche of democratization" (Kubicek, 2005, p. 363).

The general consensus is that Turkey's democracy and civil society has both come a long way and has a long way to go. Since civil society goes hand-in-hand with democratization, further examination of the role Turkey's civil society has played in democratization internally is necessary to see how credible Turkey's candidacy is in fitting into the EU's criteria for membership. Additionally, influences to the extent of democratization in the Turkish experience such as civil society's history in Turkey, its relationship to the European Union, the case of the Turkish Industrialists' and Businessmen Association (TUSIAD), Islamic organizations and women's associations provide a view of prospects for Turkey's future.

### **MILESTONES FOR TURKEY'S CIVIL SOCIETY**

Turkey is the only democratic secular state among the Muslim countries with a dynamic civil society (Sener, 2009). However, the Turkish Republic inherited from its predecessor, the Ottoman Empire, a strong state tradition that has created obstacles for free association. The dominant center dating back to the Ottoman Empire has been continually suspicious about civil society. Despite this tradition, civil society and NGOs began to rise in Turkey as a consequence of the transition to the multiparty system in 1946. This major step toward democratization influenced civil society as well. Although the period between

1950 and 1980 was tumultuous since it included three coups, the number of associations had exceeded 17,000 by 1960, over eight times the amount of organizations in 1945. The final military rule in 1980 especially impeded the development of civic culture because it tried to de-politicize society and shift the political attitudes of citizens to prevent political polarization and fragmentation. Furthermore, the 1982 Constitution restricted the formation of CSOs by complicating the legal basis for their existence.

Despite this, opposition from Europe to the military intervention gave leeway for the importance of civil society to increase. The end of the Cold War “also had important repercussions on discussions of civil society, as elsewhere, because this disintegration showed that strong state with a command economy neither provides material wealth nor freedom for citizens” (Sener, p. 3). The 1990s and era of globalization had a profound effect on Turkey’s democracy and civil society because liberalization and individualism expanded. In 1993, the law banning private radio and television stations was eliminated and the subsequent growth of the media has been important in the sense that the media makes government and civil service more transparent and accountable to citizens.

The 1990s also included crucial milestones for civil society such as the Marmara Earthquake and the Helsinki Summit. The natural and political disaster of the earthquake broke the traditional image of the state because CSOs and citizens filled the void of the government by effectively uniting to provide necessary services and disaster relief. Groups that organized, including the Civil Coordination Center and the Search and Rescue Association, “became media stars, and their heroics stood in stark contrast to the performance of state organs” (Kubicek, 2002, p. 38). The other milestone in December of 1999, when Turkey was accepted as a candidate for membership at the Helsinki Summit, gave Turkey’s CSOs and democracy a partnership with the EU that has resulted in an avalanche of change. The EU also serves as an external force of pressure on the Turkish government to introduce this change: “However, this pressure creates something of a paradox in the strong-state tradition in Turkey. This is because the Turkish political elite perceives EU as a badge of modernity and civilization but does not necessarily see membership as entailing the construction of a fully democratic and liberal society” (Keyman and Icduygu, 2005, p. 98). Turkish civil society, on the other hand, has the opposite effect of the Turkish political elite. While the politicians see EU membership as “a badge of modernity,” the civil society that has flourished in Turkey is a badge of modernity in itself because it has adopted the modern concept into civic life against difficult odds. While the government has been a “reluctant democratizer” (Kubicek, 2005, p. 362), Turkish CSOs have filled that void by providing the support from below that is essential for consolidating reform. CSOs have been leaders in grassroots democratization in part by utilizing EU resources and interacting with EU institutions.

### THE EU AND TURKEY’S CIVIL SOCIETY

As a result of Turkey’s candidacy for membership to the European Union, the government advanced a National Program for the Adoption of the *Acquis* in 2000 and nine subsequent reform, or “harmonization” packages by the end of 2004. Before the Helsinki Summit, reform efforts had been superficial, but after the EU gave Turkey the token of candidacy and the prospect of membership and “modernity,” substantial reforms occurred. Reforms that were specifically relevant for civil society as an object include narrowing the basis for which the state could restrict the freedom of rights and liberties, more liberal provisions for freedom of assembly, and a new Associations Law. The Associations Law

eliminated previous restrictions on who could establish an association, types of associations such as those on the basis of race, ethnicity, or minority group, signs and slogans associations could use, and having relations with foreign organizations.

The reforms went far enough for the EU to open accession talks in December of 2004. The European Commission recommended a three-pillar strategy on Turkey's progress including fulfilling the Copenhagen Criteria, implementing the *acquis communautaire*, and building a dialogue to bring together EU member states and Turkey. The EU has made a real effort to engage CSOs in order to achieve these goals. As citizens of a candidate country, Turks can apply to a number of EU programs for grants, exchanges, and training. The NGO sector is in close contact with their counterparts in Brussels, the *de facto* capital of the EU, and member state capitals. The EU gave over 3 billion euro in assistance between 2000 and 2006 to be used for institution-building, regional development, and investment in regulatory infrastructure. CSOs can play a role in "supporting initiatives aimed at the consolidation and further development of democratic practices, the rule of law, human rights, equality for women and men and the protection of minorities" (Kubicek, 2005, p. 368). The EU's Civil Society Development Program helps get Turkish CSOs involved in seminars, conferences, and partnerships with Europeans. It also oversees programs in Greek-Turkish civic dialogue, trade union dialogue, police professionalism, and local civic initiatives.

This external support has been especially important in spreading knowledge about the EU, getting local groups to be more active, and influencing elites to be more open to controversial measures such as Kurdish, women's, and human rights. The EU membership goal has also eased the fragmentation between groups. The EU has been a powerful agent for change to Turkey's democracy and civil society, but this is not an entirely externally driven process. Support from below is essential for reform and it is the role of the internal agents, such as CSOs, to ease the implementation problems that go along with this externally induced democratization process.

## **TUSIAD**

The Turkish Industrialists and Businessmen's Association (TUSIAD) is a voluntary interest association representing big business and large conglomerates in Turkey. TUSIAD has been described as "the most vocal force within civil society and possibly the polity at large to push in the direction of the extension of civil and human rights as well as the establishment of a transparent and accountable state" (Turkmen, p. 152) and "very different from other NGOs in Turkey in terms of the social diplomacy it conducts alongside the official diplomacy of the government." (Sener, p. 4) The engagement of TUSIAD in the country's democratization challenges traditional views that businessmen are typically interested in stability: "Whenever considerations relating to stability come into conflict with political pluralism and democratic, they tend to swing in the direction of authoritarian solutions." (Onis and Turem, 2002, p. 439) TUSIAD, on the other hand, has been actively pro-democratization in order to defend its own interests and express a collective concern about the social, economic, and political problems of Turkey as a whole.

Businessmen and industrialists established TUSIAD in 1971 after the '71 coup as a response to Turkey's severe economic and political problem at the time. The strong centralized state tradition inherited by the Ottoman Empire meant that the state dominated over business in the economy. TUSIAD challenged this ideology and was inspired by the structure of Western countries. Throughout the 1970s TUSIAD's primary focus was on

economic considerations and providing solutions to the economic problems of the state. During the 1980s, TUSIAD reacted to the 1980–1983 military government and subsequent regime of restricted democracy by harshly criticizing the government’s economic policies. In the course of TUSIAD’s first decades, the organization’s actions and publications were almost exclusively on economic issues. The 1990s represented a distinct departure from the 70s and 80s by making an explicit agenda for democratization the focal point of its activities.

The 1990s provided two anchors for the shift in TUSIAD’s interests: globalization and the European Union. Globalization helped to shape TUSIAD’s vision because members had a growing belief that the economic benefits of globalization would be available on a large scale only if democratic norms were fully applied in the political sphere (Onis and Turem, p. 444). Also during the time, the EU was increasingly emphasizing the conditions for membership including democracy and human rights. Additionally, as firms internationalized, TUSIAD wanted to legitimize business from the state intervention that is so much a part of Turkey’s political tradition. TUSIAD was dedicated to checking the power of the state and rendering it more accountable and transparent. TUSIAD was creating a good public image for itself both domestically and on a global level.

One way in which TUSIAD highlighted democratic deficiencies of the state was by commissioning reports. Its first such publication was the 1997 volume entitled “Perspectives on Democratization in Turkey.” The report touched on Turkey’s most controversial issues including freedom of expression, Kurdish cultural and language rights, the need to institute civilian control over the military, and state-civil society relations. The document caused considerable uproar and profoundly impacted public opinion. In response to the debate concerning the initial report, TUSIAD released a follow-up in 1999, which continued tackling the problematic aspects of Turkish democracy, especially human rights and civil-military relations. After the EU accepted Turkey as a candidate for membership, TUSIAD released another set of reports in May, June, and September of 2001 called “Perspectives on Democratization in Turkey and the EU Copenhagen Criteria.”

TUSIAD has put considerable effort into developing a partnership with the EU and lobbying for Turkey in Brussels and in EU member states. In 1999, prior to the Helsinki Summit, TUSIAD visited eleven member countries campaigning for Turkey’s candidacy. Similarly, in preparation for meetings in Copenhagen in 2002 and Brussels in 2004, TUSIAD met with ministers and heads of state of almost all of the EU member states. TUSIAD’s interests are represented on the EU level because it is a part of organizations such as the Union of Industrial and Employers’ Confederations of Europe, Union of Mediterranean Confederations of Enterprises, and Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. TUSIAD has several working groups, each in charge of different chapters of the EU *acquis*. TUSIAD also holds several meetings abroad. One such meeting was held in 2006 at the European Parliament and focused on women’s rights in Turkey.

TUSIAD takes a leading role in acting as an intermediary between Turkish citizens and the government. It closely monitors executive and legislative processes in the government and parliament. TUSIAD’s working groups publicize its position on draft laws. It lobbies for effective communication channels in the bureaucracy. TUSIAD pressures the government and informs the public by utilizing the media. TUSIAD allies itself with academics, researchers, and experts in the issues its takes on. With its international linkages, well-publicized research, and effective lobbying, TUSIAD is carrying out the crucial function of social diplomacy, which provides transparency to the official diplomacy to the state.

### ISLAMIC ORGANIZATIONS

Just as TUSIAD challenges traditional views that business associations achieve stability by encouraging authoritarian regimes, Islamic organizations in Turkey challenge the argument that Islam and democracy inherently conflict. One of the chief concerns among EU member states is that Turkey clashes with European norms because it is too Islamic. However, one possible antidote to Europe's increasing Islamophobia is that "Turkey stands as the forerunner within the Islamic world in the encounter with modernity and modern political paradigms such as democracy" (Ozler and Ergun, 2008, p. 88) Turkey has considerable work ahead of it in fulfilling the criteria to become a member state of the EU, but Turkey's uniqueness in the Arab world for its more dynamic democracy and civil society potentially serves as a good foreign policy decision for the EU if Europeans let it. Islamic CSOs are helping the accession process by showing that Islam and democracy can exist in harmony and adapting to a modern idea of effective third sector actors.

In the 1990s, when "Turkish civil society became more visible and vocal, often demanding greater political liberalization, Islamic organizations took the lead in inserting themselves into the political life of the country" (Kubicek, 2005, p. 367) Islamic groups also got considerable attention because they participated in disaster relief when the state proved incapable of mobilizing quickly enough. Although Islamic groups had difficulties with restrictions set by the state after it regained some control since the earthquake, the rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to power in the 2002 elections has given Islamic groups, as well as CSOs in general, more leeway to interact between the state and citizens.

Islamic NGOs work to provide goods and services to the poor, emphasize shortcomings of the state to combat poverty, and lobby on issues such as public services and social policies. Islamic thinking and tradition support NGOs as service providers and virtuous groups that help the needy. Deniz Feneri Derneği (The Light House) Association is a powerful Islamic charitable group that has ongoing projects in the areas of food, education, health and shelter and guest houses, public soup-kitchens and free clothing stores and occupational courses. Smaller and regional organizations promote development on a local level and in areas outside of cities that have had less contact with civil society.

These charitable activities increase democratic participation in a context that is familiar to their traditions. Other Islamic groups, including human rights and business associations, are increasing in quantity and sophistication, which may be unexpected for proponents of the argument that Islam is inherently in conflict with democracy and liberal economics. The Association of Human Rights and Solidarity for the Oppressed (MAZLUMDER) is a CSO that takes reference from the "Alliance of Virtuous" which had the Prophet Mohammed as one of its members and required that the oppressed should be supported no matter who he is and the oppressor should be stood against no matter who he is. In addition to this, MAZLUMDER positions its struggle for human rights and freedoms in line with contributions such as the Ten Commandments, Magna Carta, the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of Citizen, the UN Declaration of Human Rights, and the European Convention on Human Rights. MAZLUMDER allies itself with international human rights NGOs to hold meetings, fact collect, write reports, and hold campaigns for human rights issues in Turkey and internationally. The work of MAZLUMDER diffuses knowledge about the concept of human rights and the EU's criteria for human rights.

MUSIAD (The Association of Independent Industrialists and Businessmen), an Islamic-oriented business association, is a pro-EU membership group. It supports the compat-



ibility of EU membership as well as the Islamic-democratic character of Turkey in order to convince the Turkish state to perceive religious rights as an extension of democracy and individual rights, while benefiting from EU resources and trade opportunities within the European market (Onis, 2004, p. 450). This stance also spreads support and information about the EU and prospects for Turkey's democracy.

## **WOMEN'S ASSOCIATIONS**

Women's organizations are defined as groups whose founders and beneficiaries are women. These associations represent indicators for how the politics of gender are taking shape and are actors for improving the well being of women. Women's groups in Turkey have grown tremendously since the 1980s and they represent a diverse set of goals, but three general categories of associations are Islamist, Kemalist, and Feminist (Esim and Cindoglu, 1999).

Similar to the Islamic groups discussed above, many women's organizations are based on religious values. Islamic family and women's associations are common on the local level and they provide financial help to those in need, scholarships to students, organize seminars, and other services. Umbrella institutions, such as IKADDER, which brings together Islamic women's associations, have increased communication between smaller groups. These charitable activities increase democratic participation in a context that is familiar to their traditions. Another women's Islamist association is Women Rights Organization Against Discrimination, or Ayrımcılığa Karşı Kadın Hareketi (AKDER). Women who were discriminated against as students and professionals founded AKDER in 1999. While the women of AKDER support improving women's rights generally, their main focus and only major publication is on the headscarf issue, which is a state ban on wearing head attire in universities and other public institutions (Kadioglu, 2005). Although there continues to be a perceived conflict between Islam and women's rights, this group and others support solidarity and action within the public sphere.

Kemalist organizations mostly pursue nationalist and secular agendas. One longstanding group, Turkish Women's Union (Türk Kadınlar Birliği), was founded in 1924 to obtain active participation in political and social life. Like many other Kemalist organizations, the Turkish Women's Union provides poverty alleviation, health services, family planning counseling, and education opportunities. One crucial function of the Turkish Women's Union and other organizations is campaigning for the election of women to the parliament known as the Grand National Assembly. In the 2007 election, the proportion of women in parliament grew from 4.2% to 9.1%. This remains a small minority of women, especially in comparison to other nations, but considering Turkey's political and religious culture, this is a significant shift. With a small number of female elected officials, the role of women's CSOs has been crucial for ensuring more substantive representation that addresses gender inequality: "Women in the Turkish parliament, together with a strong women's movement as the voice of feminist perspectives, were critical actors in the substantive representation of women. [...] In the absence of high women's presence in the legislature, a strong women's movement sought alternative ways of making politics work for women and enhance the democratic climate" (Gunes, 2008, 474). Although the female elected officials come from different parties, they often join together to address gender inequalities in Turkey.

Feminist groups deal with gender needs by working on subjects such as domestic violence, discrimination, legal reform, women's empowerment, and raising awareness. One



association that addresses these issues is the Purple Roof Women's Shelter (Mor Cati Kadın Sığınağı). Purple Roof provides victims of domestic violence with refuge, therapy, and programs to help the women gain independence. Similarly, the Foundation to Support Women's Work (Kadın Emegini Degerlendirme Vakfı) assists women in gaining autonomy by providing employment services and quality childcare while they are working. These organizations, although there are not that many of them, make women's needs a priority in a traditional culture that discourages and is suspicious of feminist values. However, since women's rights are a crucial part of fulfilling requirements for accession, these feminist organizations, as well as the other women's associations within the country, instead of externally induced from the EU and pressured from the West, serve Turkey in achieving a more equitable democracy.

## CONCLUSION

Turkish civil society is both an object in the process of democratization and an actor in advancing democracy. Turkey's CSOs experienced changes due to internal and external milestones. The Marmara Earthquake in 1999 was a political disaster for Turkey's government because it was unable to mobilize effectively. CSOs and Turkish citizens successfully worked together to provide disaster relief and got considerable attention for their services. The Helsinki Summit in 1999 was an external force, which gave Turkey the candidacy and began the successful application of political conditionality necessary for reform. For civil society, the Helsinki Summit started the effort of the EU to engage Turkish NGOs by offering resources and increasing dialogue between civic organizations and the Turkish state.

TUSIAD the business association, Islamic groups, and women's organizations are three cases in which Turkish CSOs have contributed to democratization. TUSIAD is one of the most salient and effective proponents of democratization, increasing rights, and joining the European Union. Islamic groups provide services that the state does not always deliver such as poverty alleviation and development. Islamic groups also get citizens to be involved locally and outside of urban areas. Women's associations represent the diversity of women's values, increase action to ensure more equality, and contribute to substantive representation in government. CSOs are crucial to democratization because they increase participation and getting informed about democracy. In Turkey's case, while there is majority support for joining the EU, many do not have knowledge about what the EU is and the changes Turkey must make. Civil society spreads information and opens the door to communication between Brussels, EU member states, and Turkish organizations. Also, increasingly dynamic civil society unpacks Turkey's strong-state tradition through decentralization. While the EU should hold Turkey to the highest standards for fulfilling accession criteria and the Turkish government must be more active in making significant reforms, continuing to support civil society externally and internally is surely a positive way to increase security and democracy for Turkey and the EU alike.

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