

Gender Equality and Protest in Turkey

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Protests, particularly concerning gender equality issues and the right to speech, have become common over the years. In the last week of August, protests captured the attention of Turkey as protestors held a place on every street corner regarding rumors that the parliament was planning to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention. Social responsibility initiatives, gender equality platforms, private institutions, and numerous other organizations are constantly striving to maintain Turkey's commitment to the convention. Even municipalities took action against the decision, raising awareness of the significance of the convention and placed billboards in city centers to inform people about the content of it. So what is the Istanbul Convention, and why has its fate divided the country of Turkey so deeply?

The Istanbul Convention (officially the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence), is the world's first binding measure to combat violence against women. Signed by all Member States of the European Union along with the 47 members of the Council of Europe on May 11 of 2011, including Turkey, the agreement aims to protect human rights and ensure gender equality. If summarized, convention clauses include:

1. Establishing state responsibility to prevent all forms of violence.
2. Ensuring the punishment of criminals, as well as ensuring the prevention of violence, is the state's responsibility.
3. Assuring safety for those exposed to violence and removing their perpetrators from their houses for victims' safety.

4. Working in coordination with civil society platforms for the tackling of the issue.
5. Including materials that question gender stereotypes into national curriculums and school materials.

Given the strong language and goals of the document, convention clauses have appeared as controversial for some signatory states, including Turkey. In particular, some leading groups in Turkey have objected against the convention as they perceive it to be “antithetical to ‘Turkish family values’.” However, women and other supporters are arguing that the convention does not establish any risks for the conventional family structure of the Turkish family unless people support a structure with a hierarchical perception of the supremacy of men. Striving for economic equity among genders and the right to life for all individuals, women are continuing their fight in a multitude of forms: by organizing protests, distributing flyers, raising awareness through social media, and legal challenges. Their claim is not superficial; the number of women killed—which reached 299 women by October 2020—by their male lovers, relatives, or rapists is shocking. Inspired by these tragedies, protestors commemorate the victims of femicides by preventing future victimization.

Being aware of the critical nature of the convention for their rights, women solidarity associations and university communities planned protests in several cities in Turkey. Not only women but also men attended these protests and demonstrated their stance in the question of human rights-related conventions; nevertheless, women constituted the majority. Moreover, left-wing politicians were present during the protests, and gave speeches against the abolishment of the convention and criticized the approach of the current government concerning the policies that are related to human rights and violence. However, the debate on the issues of domestic violence, women’s, and LGBT rights are not wholly political. Rather, they are of human rights: President Erdogan’s own daughter is a staunch supporter of the convention. However, even though the protesters did not resort to violence, police interventions were brutal. The irony of violence toward women protestors fighting for women’s rights is painful. For instance, the number of women arrested by the police reached 14 in İzmir. Women

reacted to these arrests by stating “There is no withdrawal from our fight” on media channels and by starting hashtags on their social media accounts.

All in all, the question of women’s rights, and human rights more broadly, poses divides to the country and the government as never seen before.

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