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Discursive Construction of Population Politics: Parliamentary Debates on Declining Fertility Rates in Turkey

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Abstract

In assessing how politicians generate population politics through parliamentary debates, I am interested in the discursive construction of such debates. Political debates are important contexts, influencing, and also being influenced by larger cultural processes drawing the boundaries of citizenship. This article carries out

comparative and multi-method analyses of normative, religious and communicative dimensions of the population politics unfolding in the Turkish parliament. Through the analysis of parliamentary debates between 2008–2016 on the issue of population politics, I study how the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) addresses the population in order to stop the decline of fertility rates and promote higher fertility rates. I argue that the politicians of AKP affect public reasoning by circulating discourses such as slogans or public declarations while simultaneously postponing agendas for significant policy change. I further show that the oppositional parties' debates in the parliament likewise enable political ideas to be disseminated and political discourses to be part of the public sentiments.

Keywords: Population politics, anti-gender, right-wing populism, discursive governance

Introduction

Reproduction is the product of a relationship between states and their citizens where the interest of the former often conflicts with the choices of women and families regarding individual reproduction. As Gail Kligman (1998:3) argues, modern states declare rights to the control of diverse reproductive concerns like contraception, abortion and adoption. Such official discourse in return creates certain biopolitics where women's roles in society rely on childbearing and mothering, where their bodies become dependent on heterosexuality, reproduction and family structures (Erhart 2013). As such the function of women's bodies and their sexualities are sanctioned through institutionalized state policies. Ruth Miller states that «[i]f we place sexual and reproductive legislation at the centre of citizenship formation... it is the womb that has become the predominant bio-political space» (2007:27). Similarly, Thomas Lemke asserts that the objects of biopolitics are not singular human beings, but their biological features measured and aggregated on the level of populations (2011:5).

By referring to such biopolitics via statistics and demography, the state aims to control and govern societies through women's bodies as a form of population politics. Despite the population growth in Turkey, there is a noteworthy emphasis on population stagnation and growth by the Justice and Development Party¹ (AKP) (Korkut and Eslen-Ziya 2016). The current political discourse can be said to be dominated by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's pro-family politics. As a result, policy measures to criminalize abortion as well as economic and social issues relating to family planning both intervene and define population development in contemporary Turkey. In assessing how politicians generate population politics, I am interested in their discursive construction in political debates, and specifically how these population politics are generated and put to work through public and political discourses.

Political debates constitute important contexts, influencing, and at the same time being influenced by, larger cultural processes demarcating the boundaries of citizenship. Through a systematic analysis of parliamentary debates, this paper will tackle the questions: How are declining population numbers presented in parliamentary debates? And how are different political parties positioned in this debate?

Right-wing populism, anti-gender and population politics

Anti-gender mobilization is the movement against «gender theory» and «genderism», and «gender ideology». Scholars studying anti-gender politics define the latter as an empty signifier (Grzebalska, Kováts and Pető 2015; Grzebalska and Pető 2018; Pető 2015). The rise of right-wing populism hand-in-hand with the anti-gender movement is reinforced through nationalism, while fostering conservative backlash in the form of a binary gender regime, familialism, pronatalism, and anti-feminism. Furthermore, the anti-gender mobilization is «propagated for a naturalist gender order and proposed regulation of abortion and reproductive rights as a cure to the alleged democratization of society» (Unal 2021:67). Populist instrumentalization of «gender ideology», heated debates on concerns around population stagnation, loss of tradition and family values as well as moral panic over the future of children (Kourou 2020:1) has been brought forth through anti-gender mobilization (Grzebalska, Kováts and Pető 2015; Pető 2015).

For instance, while Turkey has strong pro-family politics at the moment, in Spain the anti-gender mobilization has focused on restricting women's reproductive rights and opposing LGBTIQ rights, abortion, and divorce. Likewise in Poland, anti-gender opposition has mainly been targeting abortion and the inclusion of sexuality education in schools' curricula. Reactions against same-sex marriages have also been evident in Croatia, France, and Slovenia along with delaying ratification of the Istanbul Convention. Created by the Council of Europe on 11 May 2011,² the Istanbul Convention constitutes the most comprehensive international policy for preventing and combating all forms of violence against women, and it has become a central site of contestation about gender quality in many countries across Europe. The struggles and political discussions around the Istanbul Convention are significant as they reflect an anti-feminism in which gender serves as a «symbolic glue» and «where the demonization of 'gender ideology' has become a key rhetorical tool in the construction of a new conception of 'common sense' for a wide audience» (Grzebalska, Kováts and Pető 2017:2). In other words, gender serves as a means for agenda setting for far-right political forces (Pető 2015). As the anti-gender movement is a global phenomenon, we can observe how it already shapes political sentiments and value systems across Europe. Given that the Istanbul Convention was designed and signed in Turkey, it is particularly interesting to focus on the Turkish case where I study how discussions around issues related to population politics connected to gender and women's bodily rights are framed discursively while simultaneously postponing agendas for significant policy change.

Understanding population politics in Turkey

As Feride Acar and Gülbanu Altunok state, since «coming to power, the AKP governments have effectively surmounted neoliberal transformation processes and also acted as notable defenders of a conservative, religion-inspired and essentially patriarchal value system» (2013:14). The AKP conservatism has included the encouragement of family as the most important institution serving as the core of the social order. As Ayşe Buğra argues, for AKP family is seen as the solution to «social problems and other attendant risks of modernization and economic crises» (2007:35). In line with this notion the AKP has adopted a pro-natalist approach to strengthening the traditional family institution (Buğra 2012). This approach includes implicit and explicit support for more children, as well as pro-natal

policies (i.e., covering parental leave as well as family benefits). In return, this has created a major backlash on gender equality policies and their implementation. This has been evident in public discourses and policy debates in the areas of reproduction, sexuality, and the institution of the family (Acar and Altunok 2013; Korkut and Eslen-Ziya 2016).

One example of such implicit state discourse is Erdoğan's frequent statements that having three children is necessary to overcome the adverse effect of the stagnation and decrease in Turkey's population growth rate over the years. Here, Erdoğan's pro-family discourse resonates with anti-feminist backlash discourse fuelled with anti-abortion statements. The anti-abortion discourse is, for instance, voiced with political declarations, and the «analogy between abortion and an air strike by the Turkish military that killed 34 civilians in Uludere, on the Iraqi border on December 2011», has been one of the implicit discourses uttered by Erdoğan (Eslen-Ziya and Erhart 2015:475). One example is the following speech from 2012 when Erdoğan was asserting that abortion is murder, and thus unacceptable. He also stated that caesarean births are designed to hold back Turkey's economic growth:

I am a Prime Minister who opposes caesarean births, and I know all this is being done on purpose. I know these are steps taken to prevent this country's population from growing further. I see abortion as murder, and I call upon those circles and members of the media who oppose my comments... I say every abortion is Uludere ... we are preparing the abortion legislation and we will pass it (*Hürriyet Newspaper* 2012 cited in Eslen-Ziya and Erhart 2015:8).

These statements concerning abortion and caesarean births were also supported by the General Directorate of Religious Affairs³ (Diyanet) as well as AKP statesmen. A more recent testimony of Erdoğan was made in May 2016, where he warned Muslim families against birth control. In order to «multiply our descendants», he declared, Muslims need to reject contraception and have more children. In the same speech, Erdoğan also claimed that a woman who rejects motherhood is «deficient» and «incomplete» (bbc.com 2016). In addition to these pro-birth political declarations, «natural» birth and breastfeeding have been encouraged through public service broadcasting. Likewise, provincial clinics have since 2016 performed strict monitoring through pre- and postnatal processes and employed couples are encouraged to take longer maternity leave. Laws for the protection of women employees and increasing monetary incentives for every additional child have been promised by AKP. However, it is important to note that except for the monetary incentive for every additional child, other incentives have remained on the discursive level. As I have argued with Umut Korkut:

...the governance of population politics relies on slogans and lacks substantive policy, the AKP government can delay fundamental policy reforms in maternity or parental leave, childcare, and a family-friendly working environment but introduce short-cut solutions such as extending free IVF treatment to couples and increasing financial assistance to civil servants with three or more children (Korkut and Eslen-Ziya 2016:10).

Although the AKP government also discussed the implementation of new pre-natal policies in the past decade, such as the banning of abortion, they never implemented legislation. Nevertheless, when these legal measures are not introduced, discourses turn into regulatory frameworks (Korkut and

Eslen-Ziya 2016). Here, abortion regulation can serve as an explanatory case. Abortion became politicized in 2012 when Erdoğan claimed it was a major inhibitor of population growth. Though abortion is legal in Turkey (up to 10 weeks, or 20 weeks for rape victims and those with life-threatening medical conditions), Çağla Diner (2013) has shown that public hospitals would not carry out abortions unless there were health complications during pregnancy. Hence, public hospitals have followed Erdoğan's anti-abortion discourse, despite abortion not being illegal in Turkey (Pehlivanlı-Kadayıfci, Eslen-Ziya and Korkut 2020). Another striking example is the Turkish Gynecologists and Obstetrics Federation which, by removing the code for abortion from the online hospital entry forms at public hospitals, have made it practically impossible for women to access abortion and hence declassifying abortion as a medical practice at its hospitals.

These examples clearly display how the political discourse on population growth is put to work at the community level in public speeches or slogans by Erdoğan and his party members as well as governmental institutions such as the Diyanet. In the following sections, I will show how the political discourse on population politics is set within the parliamentary debates that simultaneously serve as the product and producer of discursive population politics. As we have seen, discourse plays an important role in the production and reproduction of attitudes and values, and public discourse is shaped through everyday interactions, television, books, social media, news reports in the press as well as politicians' slogans and speeches. As Korkut et al. argue, «political discourses can act as normative mechanisms by constructing realities socially in the political space as well as influence the public sphere by using intentionally selected metaphors» (2016:18).

Discursive governance (Korkut et al. 2016) is a norm-based governance that applies deliberately chosen slogans in «political discourse for dissemination of ideas to further the interests of political authorities» (Pehlivanlı-Kadayıfci, Eslen-Ziya and Korkut 2020:244). In this form of governance carefully chosen narratives and metaphors in political language are used to construct a certain environment for distribution of notions. Once these narratives are circulated, they are powerful enough to affect public reasoning and individual choices. In other words, once the ideas discursively spread, the political discourse becomes a part of public sentiment. This constitutes a particular type of governance where normative mechanisms through political discourses are shared in the public sphere without policy constraints.

Because discursive governance through procedures, discourses, and slogans allows for a faster rate of dissemination of ideas and exchange of texts, it leads to relatively rapid changes without the need for institutional changes. This is evident, for instance, in the changing perspectives of health care officials in Turkey, where contraception services are blocked and abortion has become unthinkable for patients and doctors (Pehlivanlı-Kadayıfci, Eslen-Ziya and Korkut 2020). Thus, by utilizing discursive governance analysis (Korkut and Eslen-Ziya 2016), in the following I will show how the ruling party AKP disseminates its population politics in slogans rather than through political debate in the parliament and the implementation of actual policies.

The Grand National Assembly of Turkey: Debates on population politics in the Turkish Parliament

In the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, there are 550 members of parliament (deputies) who are elected for a four-year term, from 85 electoral districts which represent the 81 administrative provinces of Turkey. However, due to their large populations Istanbul is divided into three electoral districts while Ankara and İzmir are divided into two. To qualify for representation in parliament a party must win at least 10 percent of the national vote. In the 2002 general elections, due to this threshold, only two parties won seats in the legislature and three in the 2007 general elections. In the 2002 general elections, AKP won an absolute majority of the seats which led to the formation of a single-party government with the Republican People's Party (CHP) being the only oppositional party in parliament. During the 2007 general elections, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) joined AKP and CHP in parliament. After the general elections in June 2015, the unsuccessful attempts to form a coalition government resulted in re-elections in November 2015. This time the general elections resulted in AKP losing its parliamentary majority, leading to the formation of four parliamentary groups: AKP, with the highest number of seats, followed by CHP, The People's Democratic Party (HDP) and MHP (see Table 1 for more details).

Table 1. Parliament seat distribution after 2007, 2011, 2015 (June/Nov) general elections (<http://www.ysk.gov.tr/>).

PARTY	NUMBER OF PARLIAMENTARIANS			
	22-Jul-07	12-Jun-11	07-Jun-15	01-Nov-15
JUSTICE AND DEVELOPMENT PARTY (AKP)	341	327	258	317
REPUBLICAN PEOPLE'S PARTY (CHP)	112	135	132	134
PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC PARTY (HDP)	(as independents)		80	59
NATIONALIST MOVEMENT PARTY (MHP)	70	53	80	40
INDEPENDENTS	26	35	0	0
TOTAL	549	550	550	550

CHP is one of the oldest political parties in Turkey. It is a major centre left social democratic political party which defines itself as faithful to the founding principles of the Republic. The party has a pro-European vision and supports feminist movements and women's and LGBTIQ rights. According to Sencer Ayata and Ayşe-Güneş Ayata, CHP has a gender equality project where they work for «participation and formal equality in public life» and «adopted of contemporary feminist ideas and practices» (2007:230). Since the 1990s CHP's main emphasis has been on secularism where Islamization of public life is seen as a threat to the Republic as well as to gender equality and women's rights in Turkey (Ayata and Ayata 2007). CHP's mission has been one of the main sources of clash with the ruling AKP party.

Nevertheless, as Zeynep Kaya and Matthew Whiting argue, the conflict between HDP and AKP has been «on the nature of democracy in Turkey... where HDP offers an 'alternative vision of radical democracy'» (2018:92). According to Rosa Burç (2018), this is a way to empower women in the process. MHP – the far right and nationalist political party – has, according to Fulya Şen, «touched less on women's structural issues» (2021:2456). In their analysis of political party policies, Şen shows that gender equality is emphasized more by the political parties CHP and HDP and less by AKP and

MHP.

Method

The parliamentary debates (2008–2016) have been accessed by using Internet search engines of the Turkish parliament which are accessible to everyone.⁴ The year 2008 is chosen since it was around this time that the then Prime Minister Erdoğan started to use the «three children» slogan more frequently. The data collection was completed in 2016. A systematic investigation of the data tracing the usage of the «three children» slogan in politicians' discourse has been done in order to assess its frequency. I selected the politicians' statements from the database of parliamentary debates. The saved minutes have been merged and converted to a plain text file. Furthermore, within this text document containing all the published meeting minutes, I performed text searches for certain keywords. Paragraphs containing these keywords *three children*, *birth rate*, *abortion*, *woman*, *woman* and *mother*, *woman* and *ethics*, *child* and *economy* are extracted to facilitate easy processing. I also brought together general keywords such as *children* and *economy*, *birth rate* and *economy*, and *women* and *morality*. Then, the available web articles where the keywords appear were collected and I then decided upon their relevance for the research. For this an inductive research method has been adapted to allow the text to elaborate on the framing of the concept of population decline in the parliamentary debates, rather than adopting specific stakes beforehand to analyse the data. Keyword ratio in total number of parliamentary debates (2008–2016) is presented in the following Table 2.

Table 2. Keyword ratio in total number of parliamentary debates at the parliament (2008–2016)

Total number of parliamentary debates:	1,131,055	%
Three children:	259	0.023%
Children and economy:	836	0.074%
Birth rate:	23	0.002%
Women:	14,905	1.318%
Women and ethics:	124	0.011%
Women and mother:	575	0.051%
Abortion:	164	0.014%

Findings: Parliamentary debates and the discursive construction of population politics After the examination of the database content, I selected more than three parliamentary debated items regarding the population issue: *three children*, *abortion*, *birth rate*. Less than 10 percent of articles qualified for inclusion. Most of the excluded articles did not relate to population politics or simply repeated the discourse already seen in another source. From this dataset, I also separated debates on possible policy changes in *parental leave*, *labour market regulations*, *family-friendly work environment*, *abortion*, as well as the source of these debates. In the following section I present the parliamentary debates around these above stated topics as presented by the deputies. The quotes will be provided along with their names, as well as which party they are representing via their party initials (i.e., CHP, MHP, AKP and /or HDP).

One of the important findings of my research is that the analyses of debates dealing with population politics such as *population decline*, *birth*, *mortality*, *more children* and *aging population* revealed a high number of discussions from the oppositional parties. The responses from

this political elite and the Turkish deputies' perceptions, presented in this article, can be categorized as a reaction to the AKP government's preferred discourse on gender and population, as well as a response to President Erdoğan. Most importantly, the analyses reveal that the population discourse is not presented or re-presented by the ruling party (AKP) in the parliament, but instead it is disseminated, defined and constructed in the public debates addressed to the general audience. For example, Erdoğan's statements on abortion and caesarean births as well as his speeches urging women to have three children, followed by Diyanet's and the Ministry of Health's statements on abortion, are all made in the wider public arena and never introduced to the parliament.

In other words, politicians – and in this case the ruling party – circulate slogans within the public arena to bring their ideas into public discussions (Korkut and Eslen-Ziya 2016). These ideas are transmitted to the population via the news media. While the slogans serve to bolster a pro-birth regime without endorsing actual policies that materially support reproduction, it seems as if these issues are brought to the parliament primarily by the oppositional parties. Hence, it is the oppositional parties who continue debating these issues in the parliament, and paradoxically turn these discourses into an «institutional» and «official» format. One can argue that the ideas which are transferred to the public via certain slogans, or public declarations and utterances start carrying weight once they enter the parliament. These discussions, I argue, not only become «official»; they become formative of an identity, a position. One identity denotes being part of AKP and hence accepting pro-birth discourses of the government, another identity denotes being in the opposition and rejecting the AKP's proposal to ban abortion, three-children discourse as well as the limitations on caesarean births. Hence, I argue that such ideas are already loaded with politics, but once they enter parliament and get discussed by the oppositional parties they are further politicized within an institutional framework. As both pro-population and oppositional narratives become common for the public, these political discourses then become part of public sentiments, where reactions to these discourses leads to polarization of people.

Discursive governance as a form of social engineering relies on implicit and explicit mechanisms (Korkut et al. 2016). It refers to:

implicit mechanisms of governance resting on narratives, leitmotifs, and strategic metaphors in political language to interpose ideas in order to affect political and social representations within the public sphere in accordance with the wishes of political authorities (Korkut and Eslen-Ziya 2016:2).

These implicit mechanisms have been embedded in the pro-natalist discourse in Turkey since 2008. The particular political declarations presented in this discourse create narratives within which they set for gender roles and expectations for action. Moreover, «discourse re-creates and transforms the actors that come to recognize and identify themselves as the subjects of its signifying practices» (Korkut et al. 2016). In other words, discursive mechanisms that impose ideas in the public sphere, construct discursive governance.

From this interpretation, political ideas discursively spread and become part of public sentiments and attitudes. As I will also show, these generate discursive population politics in the long run. Discursive governance of pro-

natalist politics refers to norm-based mechanisms of governance that employ narratives and intentionally selected slogans in political discourse to socially construct an amenable environment for dissemination of ideas to further the interests of political authorities. Such ideas can be broadly and rapidly circulated through contemporary communication technologies, helping a government in power to create discursive realities within the public sphere without policy limitations. In this respect, pro-natalist state discourse in Turkey constitutes an example of how politicians circulate discourses and create political polarization through public declarations without creating agendas for significant policy change.

The analyses of parliamentary debates in this paper reflect political declarations of the opposing party that are opposite to the discourse set by the ruling party. In return, this creates two main groups of discourse promoters (Pehlivanlı-Kadayıfci, Eslen-Ziya and Korkut 2020): those who follow the discourse presented by the ruling party and hence come to favour the political ideology behind pro-natalist discourse, and those who identify themselves as the opponents of AKP and come to openly reject the population discourse because of their contrasting ideological stance. In other words, the context of discourse delivery and the patterns of information available for the target receiver affect the relevance of these signals (Vaughan 2002:33). The rejection of the pro-natalist idea also indicates that this particular discourse is pre-accepted, and functions to favour the dominant political view. Hence, the ruling party administers its population politics without even bringing the population debate to the parliament. Further, through the reaction and the arguments created in the parliament by the oppositional party, the opposition fosters the stance of the ruling party on pro-natalist discourse.

Closer look at the parliamentary debates: The role of the Opposition

In this section, I analyse reactions from the oppositional parties, the Republican People's Party (CHP) and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), over the period of 2008–2016 to three of the population discourses (birth rate/three children/abortion), propagated by the ruling AKP outside the parliament. The analysis of the parliamentary debates on *birth-rate* in 2012 reflects the oppositional parties' major arguments against the government's population politics (especially three-children rhetoric) in general and the government's inclination to ban caesarean births and abortion. The analysis reveals that statements made by Erdoğan outside the parliamentary realm received a response by the oppositional party deputies within the parliament.

As an example, the involvement of Diyanet in the abortion discussions was criticized heavily by the opposition parties. The following quote by Bülent Tezcan, a politician from CHP, clearly criticizes the statement of Erdoğan to ban abortion, and it was followed by supporting statements of Diyanet. According to Tezcan, this is an interference of religion with Turkish politics, which he refers to as «fatwa-supported laws». Fatwas in Islam are a formal ruling or interpretation on a point of Islamic law given by a qualified legal scholar; and Tezcan criticized this as he believed that fatwas should not be given a place in secular democracies like Turkey:

Esteemed friends, unfortunately in Turkey we are entering into the process of making laws with the support of fatwas like we want to justify these

doubts [referring to the criticism opposition parties have been making on the involvement of Diyanet and Islam into law and order]. Yesterday, Diyanet started to publish fatwa regarding abortion. Esteemed prime minister says: 'You will make a regulation regarding abortion.' One day later Diyanet publishes a fatwa regarding abortion.⁵

Similarly, Gürkut Acar, another politician from CHP, criticized the involvement of Diyanet and its fatwa that says abortion is unacceptable in Islam. He further condemned AKP's Health Minister Recep Akdağ's statement that law should prevent abortions as much as possible and that the «state will take care of babies born out of rape» (hurriyet.com 2012). Minister Akdağ was heavily criticised at the parliamentary debates and the government was accused of seeking to undermine women's rights and legitimising rape.

Seyrettin Yılmaz, a member of MHP likewise, considered the AKP's debates on caesarean births, three children and abortion as the government's efforts to try to change the agenda with what he called fake agendas. For him this was a mere effort of the government to redirect the attention away from the military operations in Lice, a town in the Diyarbakir province of Turkey:

AKP government continues to produce fake agendas. The country was busy dealing with fake agenda items like abortion, caesarean births while yesterday two of our soldiers became martyrs in Lice. We are in a period where we have given 21 of our soldiers to the ground.⁶

Similarly, a few days prior, Özcan Yeniçeri (MHP), had also invited the government to drop issues like abortion and caesarean births and focus on real problems facing civilians:

I am inviting the government to shudder and realize, and to focus on the real problems of the public leaving aside the topics like abortion, caesarean births, having three children which they have no business to deal with.⁷

It is worth noting that the issue of caesarean births was already discussed in 2008, where Sacid Yıldız, a member of CHP, stated that it must be the doctors who should decide whether to use caesarean births or not. He also emphasized that the way the political elite talk about the doctors in general will affect how the patients react to them, referring to the high level of violence against doctors by patient relatives:

...lately he [Erdoğan] mentions «caesarean birth ratio in Turkey is very high, natural birth is very low» in different speeches. This is important; I mean this creates an important pressure on the doctors. They want to increase the natural birth, and do not prioritize caesarean births but this is a sad thing.⁸

In 2012 this question was touched upon again, this time by Muharrem Işık, also a member of CHP, who considered the AKP's statements as a violation of the rights of physicians:

What we will do here is certainly not to blame the physicians. The physician decides when the abortion should be made, and the physician decides how to perform the caesarean births. Knowing this, I think it would be much better if we talked to our physicians more respectfully, considering the violence these days.⁹

While I have found time to do so I also want to talk about the abortion and caesarean section, which are related to my profession, Distinguished members of parliament, abortion and caesarean section are performed depending on the medical indications, not arbitrarily like «I threw a coin, and decide to do it.»¹⁰

This emphasis not to create pressure on or to incite violence against doctors, but to leave decisions about caesarean sections to the doctor and the patient has also been evident in abortion arguments. For instance, Muharrem Işık continued by emphasizing that:

Of course, after the caesarean birth discussions abortion has also come to the agenda. Abortion is not a topic that everyone is willing to talk about. Abortion has both medical and social indications. Here the doctors know this very well and they tell their patients how it needs to be done. Besides one needs to know the reasons leading to abortion – I said there are social indications – if a patient comes and insists on having this, that also needs to be investigated as well.¹¹

The attention to the underlying social conditions of reproductive politics can also be found in debates about the three children politics before and after 2012. In 2008 Aytuğ Atıcı from CHP argued that the conditions for raising children should be improved, and in 2014 Selcuk Ayhan, also from CHP, pointed out the discrepancy of pressuring women to have more children while a lack of protective health services was the cause of failed pregnancies.

Instead of consulting our citizens to «have at least three children» we should work to provide the environment to raise our children well, to train our children well, that will create job opportunities.¹²

You are saying «bear at least three children» Okay! But when I look further, I see that Turkey is among the first OECD country that has high rates of failed pregnancies. This means, you are telling mothers to «get pregnant» but due to your inability to provide protective health services, these mothers lose their babies. That's why we need to be careful!¹³

Hence, the oppositional parties' have not only criticised the three-children emphasis of President Erdoğan and the possibilities of banning abortion and caesarean births; they also talked about the importance of trusting the doctors in such vital decisions, improving health services and changing the social and material conditions for raising children.

The question of reproduction and AKP's notion of gender roles has been raised by members of parliament on many occasions. One example is a debate from 2010, where Canan Aritman and Ayşe Jale Ağırba, two feminist members of CHP, both referred to the discourses about fertility, reproduction and family in Turkey that encourage population growth, yet lack women's voices. As Canan Aritman stated:

There are 155 governors in our country but not one of them is a woman. Our woman mayor ratio is not even 1 percent, it is 9 out of a thousand. In the national parliament the woman ratio is 9 percent, and only 4 percent in local parliaments. I wonder if you know that there are no woman members in county general parliaments in 36 of our 81 counties. This does not suit well to Turkey of the 21st century. Why is there such a severe gender inequality? Why are the women subject to such heavy violence? Why is this violence increasing? Here the answer to these questions is in these facts.

But still unfortunately our prime minister tells the women to just «bear three children». He says I don't believe in woman-man equality, come on! He just wants you to go home and bear three children, stay within the gendered role!¹⁴

Similarly, Ayşe Jale Ağırbaş argued that the ruling AKP was emphasizing women's care-giver roles within the family and identifying womanhood exclusively with reproduction and motherhood.



Esteemed Prime Minister by calling women on the 8th of March to bear three children... [this is] in line with the conservative ideology encouraging woman to take care of their family members. These are statements in which the thought «A woman's place is her home» is prominent in gender-based division of work.¹⁵



All the debates which I have presented, show the oppositional parties' reaction to the efforts of Erdoğan and the AKP government to discursively cast women as mothers, sisters and wives flagging their intention to implement policies accordingly. While many of these policy signals only resulted in limited formal institutionalization of a new population politics, I argue that a discursive space is being created by the government where the oppositional politicians' reactions serve to intensify its ideational factor, causing further polarization between the party in power and its opposition, and generating discursive governance through population politics.

Discussion: Furthering polarization in Turkey

In the Turkish case, populism and anti-gender sentiments interact in complex ways. This became more evident after AKP's third election success in 2011, where they introduced a more abstractly defined, discursive and operational space that it named the «new Turkey» (Korkut and Eslen-Ziya 2017). The «new Turkey» was a slogan referring to the new social and political order and set of norms and values (Cindoğlu and Ünal 2016). In the «new Turkey» gender politics were shaped with a religious-nativist nationalist and right-wing authoritarianism where patriarchal values were reinforced. Women were re-defined within the family institution; motherhood was elevated, and their bodies and sexualities were subjected to state surveillance. Women were assigned the role of mothers to save the Turkish nation through procreation. Gender equality was replaced with familism, and feminists and LGBTIQ people were seen as betrayals of the Turkish nation. Such gender backlash took place alongside major setbacks with restrictions on the media as well as the imprisonment of, initially, journalists and later civil activists and academics. This in return resulted in major polarization between AKP supporters and the rest of the population.

According to Fuat Keyman, «every election AK Party won resulted in increasing polarization in terms of secularism, ethnicity and religion... as Erdoğan and the AKP have become stronger, polarization widened and deepened» (2014:29). This ideology also comprised anti-feminist and anti-gender discourses. In this respect, political declarations – such as those presented in this paper – create narratives within which they set norms for gender roles and expectations for action.

Conclusion

In this article the term *discursive governance* (Korkut et al. 2016) has been used to refer to the embedded mechanisms of governance where

narratives and carefully chosen metaphors in political language are used to socially construct a certain environment for distribution of notions. Such notions can be broadly and rapidly circulated through innumerable means, such as the mass media. I have examined in more detail the ways in which politicians from parties in opposition to the ruling AKP speak about population politics within the Turkish parliament. My goal was to analyse their discourses on issues related to children, population and reproduction. It is my proposal that the Turkish case constitutes an example of how the AKP affects public reasoning by promoting discourses such as «slogans or public declarations while simultaneously postponing agendas for significant policy change» (Korkut et al. 2016). In this case, while discursive governance was taking place through Erdoğan's encounters with the public (in wedding ceremonies, or women's day celebrations), there were no policy debates in the parliament following the discussions by the ruling AKP, and the discussions were not even brought to the parliamentary debates for legislation.

My analysis has demonstrated that only oppositional party politicians speak about issues related to three children, population and reproduction within the Turkish parliament and not the party in power. I further argue that these debates carried forward by the oppositional parties enable political ideas to be disseminated and political discourses to be part of the public sentiment only to create further polarization between AKP supporters and supporters of the opposition parties. This constitutes an important finding that supports my argument; as stated above, politicians in power affect public reasoning by circulating popular discourses that serve to postpone agendas for policy change.

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- 1 AKP is the conservative political party continuously in power in Turkey since 2003. It is supported by orthodox Muslims, and ideologically backed with the conservative tradition: Ottoman nostalgia and Islamic identity.
- 2 <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/rms/090000168008482e> accessed on 10.02.2021.
- 3 Diyanet – the Directorate of Religious Affairs <https://www.diyamet.gov.tr/tr-TR> accessed on 10.02.2021. Diyanet is an official state institution established in 1924, after the establishment of the Turkish Republic. As specified by law, the duties of the Diyanet include to execute the works concerning the beliefs, worship, and ethics of Islam, enlighten the public about their religion, and administer the sacred worshipping places. For more information about the role of Diyanet in Turkish politics see Korkut and Eslen-Ziya (2017).
- 4 https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/develop/owa/tutanak_sd.son_tutanak accessed on 01.03.2021.
- 5 Stated on 6th of June 2012 by Bülent Tezcan, MP from CHP.
- 6 Stated on 5th June 2012 by Seyfettin Yılmaz, MP from MHP.
- 7 Stated on 30th May 2012 by Özcan Yençeri MP from MHP.
- 8 Stated on 3rd December 2008 by Sacid Yıldız, MP from CHP.
- 9 Stated on 30th May 2012 by Muharrem Işık, MP from CHP.
- 10 Stated on 30th May 2012 by Muharrem Işık, MP from CHP.
- 11 Stated on 30th May 2012 by Muharrem Işık, MP from CHP.
- 12 Stated on 26th March 2008 by Seluk Ayham, MP from CHP.
- 13 Stated on 16th October 2014, Aytuğ Atıcı, MP from CHP.
- 14 Stated on 25th November 2010, by Canna Arıtman, MP from CHP.
- 15 Stated on 1st December 2010, by A. Jale Ağırbaş, MP from CHP.

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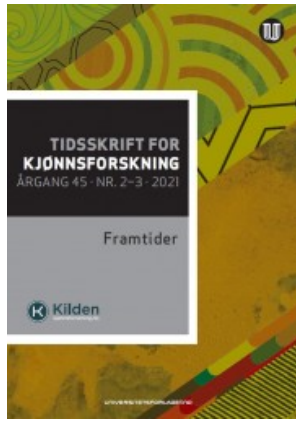


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