Civil Society, Islam, and Democracy in Turkey: The Case of Civil Society Organizations

Sema Akboga

1University of Virginia, Charlottesville/VA, United States, 2Koc University, Istanbul, Turkey

The relationship between democracy and civil society organizations has been established by many sociologists and political scientists. Externally, voluntary associations allow individuals to express their interests and demands to the government and to protect themselves from abuses of power by political leaders through the amplification of a collective voice, uniting the energies of divergent minds and directing them toward clearly formulated goals (Putnam, 2000). Internally, associations serve to informally educate people about democracy. Associations also develop other democratic attributes such as tolerance, moderation, and respect for opposing viewpoints (Diamond, 1994). However, not all civil society organizations foster democratic values and norms. Civil society, “like other realms, is an arena of power, inequality, struggle, conflict, and cooperation among competing identities and interests” (Alagappa, 2004: p.46). Similarly, Berman (2001), even though she agrees with the argument that participation in civil society organizations can facilitate collective endeavors and create social skills, asserts that civil society organizations may be the places where dissatisfied individuals come together to express their grievances (p.35). In this kind of situation, civil society can serve to further fragment, rather than unite, a society by accentuating and deepening existing cleavages (pp.35-36).

Furthermore, the argument that civil society organizations only foster democratic values does not hold true for all political and historical contexts. Dominant cultural factors including the values, norms, and assumptions about social and political reality determine how civil society organizations “work” in a society. Islam constitutes one of these cultural factors. Some argue that civil society is a modern phenomenon developed in the West, while others suggest that the concept is applicable to Islamic politics. Gellner (1994), for example, conceives secularism as the underlying condition for the existence of civil society, portraying Islam as an obstacle to the development of civil society (p.199). For Gellner, Islam—in its resistance to secularization—“exemplifies a social order which seems to lack much to provide political countervailing institutions or associations, which are atomized without much individualism, and which operates effectively without intellectual pluralism” (p.29). In other words, Islam does not provide a fertile ground for the development of civil society.

Drawing on these theoretical bodies of literature, my research investigates how and to what extent Islamic civil society organizations contribute to the consolidation of democracy in Turkey which is a secular state with a predominantly Muslim population. Beginning in the 1980s, the most formidable participants in Turkish civil society were Islamic civil society organizations. Some of these organizations were founded as a response to the headscarf ban at universities and workplaces and have been working for the removal of this ban, whereas others are more concerned with human rights violations. However, the common characteristic of these organizations, which make them “Islamic” for the purposes of this research, is that they either refer to Islamic values in their discourse or they are the defenders of certain religious freedoms. These organizations constitute a significant difficulty for secular Turkish state, which has emphasized the removal of Islam from public sphere, relegating religion to private life. Indeed, the tension between the secularist center on the one hand and the religiously oriented and more conservative periphery on the other hand has determined the Turkish political history throughout the Republican period. As the Islamic movement became more visible – particularly after the 1980s – in public sphere, this tension has become exacerbated. Drawing on these existing cleavages, my study of Islamic civil society organizations focuses on the following questions:

• How do these organizations define and talk about concepts such as democracy, human rights, civil society, and the state?
• What is the nature of the relationship between these organizations and the state?

• How do they react to issues specific to Turkey such as the headscarf ban, cultural demands of Kurdish community, and the position of the army in Turkish politics (all of which are considered the fault-lines of Turkish democracy)?

• How have they reacted to the various interruptions in democracy between 1980 and the present (a period of intense political and ideological struggle in Turkey)?

To answer these questions, I analyzed a sample of Islamic civil society organizations founded after the 1980s, a period during which the consolidation of democracy became a central issue in Turkey. I used discourse analysis, interviews, and participant observation. I analyzed the discourse of the organizations using public websites, press releases and journals of these organizations. I also conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with the members and the directors of the organizations.

References


