



INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY FOR
THIRD-SECTOR RESEARCH



"Facing Crises: Challenges and Opportunities Confronting the Third Sector and Civil Society"

Kadir Has University

Istanbul, Turkey

July 7-10, 2010

Ninth International Conference of the International Society for Third Sector Research (ISTR)

The Third Sector in Turkey

The history of civil society in the geography that we call Turkey today is a rather long one. More than 35,000 foundations were established and operational throughout the Ottoman Era and over the centuries, foundations shared responsibility with the central Ottoman administration for such important services as education, health, religion, construction of roads, bridges, foundations, canals, palaces, public baths, inns and monuments.¹ In fact, all the services one can expect to have in a civilized society, save defense, were financed, organized, built and maintained by this system. There were also *akhi (ahi)* and the guilds which resembled contemporary syndicates or labor unions. With some of their tasks, one can argue they were not only part of civil society but also early examples of civil society organizations (CSOs).

With the advent of the Turkish Republic in 1923, a series of significant political, cultural, social and economic reforms were implemented under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founder and first President of the Republic of Turkey. In less than half a century, Turkey emerged as a modern and secular nation state. These rapid changes had profound effects on how Turkey understood and framed the work of civil society and its organizations. The Republic inherited about 35,000 "old" foundations from the Ottoman Era, while 4,500 "new" foundations and approximately 80,000 associations were formed according to the new civil code.

Following the declaration of the independent Turkish republic as a modern nation-state, civil society organizations which operated outside, but in a close relation with the state, emerged. In other words, hand in hand with the state, the associational and philanthropic spheres acted as an integral and important component of modernization and development of the country.² The 1960s saw the establishment of "traditional 'charitable' foundations", mainly those established by Turkey's first industrialists to support the state's shortcomings in delivering social services. The 1970s and 1980s were turbulent times both in the political and social senses. Ideological cleavages and violence that subsequently ensued in society led to great restrictions on civil society and civic engagement, giving civil society organizations less space and freedom to

operate.³ The 1990s saw the establishment of a new wave of civil society organizations, working on democratization and development issues with a social justice and human rights perspective. These organizations have come to work on a diverse set of social fields, ranging from education reform, youth, women, children, environment and many more.

The turn of the century has come with some catalyzing events for civil society in Turkey, be it the 1996 Istanbul Habitat meetings that rallied awareness around civil society, the catastrophic 1999 Marmara Earthquakes demonstrating modernization and development completely dependent on state is doomed to fail, the state's legitimacy crisis at economic, political and cultural levels, or the decrease in political party support in society. With the 1999 Helsinki Summit, Turkey became a European Union (EU) candidate country, and in 2001, accepted the Copenhagen Criteria. Since then, governments have been eager to conform to EU demands; legislative reform packages involving amendments concerning civil society have passed; new and vast financial resources for civil society emerged; accompanied by new channels to affect policy making at the national and EU levels.⁴

In short, the new millennium has come hand in hand with a number of factors that created a more enabling environment for civil society and civil society organizations have emerged as critical partners in achieving the country's ambitious development and democratization goals. In recent years, civil society organizations have emerged as political voice, builders of social capital and a professional sector and they are enjoying increased attention in both academic and public discourses in Turkey.

1 Çizakça, Murat. "Economic Dimensions of Foundations in the Ottoman Era" in *Philanthropy in Turkey: Citizens, Foundations and the Pursuit of Social Justice*, TUSEV Publications, 2006.

2 Zurcher, (2004) *Turkey: A Modern History*, London, Tauris, 2004

3 Bikmen, Filiz. "The rich history of philanthropy in Turkey: A paradox of tradition and modernity", in *Philanthropy in Europe: A rich past, a promising future*, Alliance, 2008.

4 Bikmen & Meydanoglu eds. "Civil Society in Turkey: An Era of Transition", *CIVICUS Civil Society Index Country Report for Turkey*, TUSEV Publications, Istanbul, 2006.