Peace and Beyond: Women’s Activist Alliances under Turkey’s “Regime of Emergency”

Nisa Göksel
University of Notre Dame

The March 8 celebrations in Diyarbakır, the political and social center of Turkey’s Kurdistan region, usually witness the participation of a great number of women from various national and transnational groups. This was the case in 2013, when the Kurdish women’s movement played a leading role in organizing the event, inviting many feminist organizations, women’s groups, and independent feminists from Turkey, the Middle East, and Europe. On that day, the Kurdish women’s movement made “Peace” the dominant theme of the event in Diyarbakır, a reference to the upcoming “peace talks” between the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP), or the Justice and Development Party, and the Kurdish guerilla organization, Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan (PKK), or the Kurdistan Workers’ Party.

Armed conflicts have been erupting between the Turkish army and the PKK since 1984. Following intense violence in the 1990s, “peace talks”—also referred to as the resolution process or the peace process—began in 2013. At the beginning of this process, Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the Kurdish movement, sent a letter to be read at the Newroz (spring equinox) celebrations in Diyarbakır, a highly political Kurdish platform. The letter hailed a new era, stating that “politics [now] gains prominence over weapons.” Following this, PKK guerrillas began to withdraw from the borders of Turkey. Although Turkey ultimately took no concrete steps in the name of a peace settlement, the peace talks marked a crucial turning point during which women built alliances around peace activism, and saw the flourishing of women’s solidarity networks including both Kurdish and non-Kurdish groups.

Based on my personal interactions and ethnographic observations, this essay traces a set of events between March 8, 2013 and March 8, 2017, highlighting the dramatic transformations in these four years following the peace talks, which gave way to war and violence, the occupation of Kurdish cities by military forces, and the arrest of many Kurdish women activists and politicians. The essay asks: how did the peace process and its termination affect alliances among women’s activist groups and their confrontations with the Turkish state? In assessing this question, I aim to delineate a landscape for understanding changes in the larger political climate in Turkey and their impact on the formation of activist alliances among women.
“Old” Conflicts, New Solidarities

The current alliances between the Kurdish women’s movement and feminist and women’s organizations in Turkey have a long history of contention and disagreement that dates back to the early 1990s. These disagreements are rooted in Kurdish women’s experiences of war and violence stemming from the hegemonic status of imagined Turkish nationhood. Feminists from Turkey ask Kurdish women why they follow Abdullah Öcalan, a man, and why they ally themselves with Kurdish men. Kurdish women ask why feminists have long failed to acknowledge their suffering and marginalization and why they emphasize feminism as the only option for conducting women’s politics. These questions were the basis of many major debates in the 1990s, with Kurdish women focusing on their claim to be an autonomous women’s movement and seeking acknowledgment from other women’s and feminist groups. At the same time, while some Kurdish women activists define themselves as feminists, the Kurdish women’s movement has often criticized feminism as a bourgeois ideology and a “minority movement,” rather than a popular one. These disagreements persisted in the years between 2013 to 2017, but they also evolved. They thus did not prevent feminist and women’s organizations from engaging in new conversations and forming new solidarities around peace.

In the midst of these long-standing disagreements, the Kurdish women’s movement began to play a significant role in the dissemination and practice of activism for peace and democracy in
the 2000s, when the Kurdish movement shifted its political goal from establishing a nation-state to building democratic politics. In 2003, Kurdish women activists established their autonomous organization, the Demokratik Özgür Kadın Hareketi (DÖKH), or Democratic Free Women's Movement, later renamed the Kongreya Jinen Azad (KJA), or Free Women's Congress.9

Since the establishment of the DÖKH, Kurdish women activists have formed new political alliances and solidarities with various national and transnational women's and feminist groups. One of these common platforms is the Barış İçin Kadın Girişimi (BİKG), or the Women for Peace Initiative, which brought together women from across Turkey beginning in 2009.10 Members of BİKG were part of the founding in 2015 of Kadın Özgürlük Meclisi (KÖM), or the Women's Freedom Council, which joined the Kurdish women's movement and feminists and academics from Turkey. Many feminist activists in Istanbul at this time participated in peace activism, and feminism had become a way of conducting peace politics. However, members of the BİKG from various political, ethnic, religious, and social backgrounds continued to have “old” disagreements over certain issues such as the role of feminism in their activism. They even disagreed over the meaning of peace, yet they were united by an affective bond that they believed could be formed only among women. While they lacked ideological commonality, they agreed on the urgent need for peace and the seriousness of the effects of war. The BİKG worked to convince other women's groups of the necessity of peace, and helped them see how to make the realities of war visible in various settings.

I participated in the production of the BİKG’s 2013 Report on the Resolution Process (Çözüm Süreci Raporu). The report is based on observations by the BİKG members (myself included) on the peace talks, as well as on conversations with other activist and political groups. The first observation made in the report is that the peace process did not take place within an official legal framework. The two structures with official status established between January 2013 and January 2014—the Akil İnsanlar, or Committee of Wise People, a civil society initiative, and a commission formed within parliament—were both temporary and lacked a legal basis for continuation. The report also notes the underrepresentation of women in the resolution process, as in the presence of only twelve women among the sixty-three members of the Committee of Wise People. As the report describes, men’s perspectives dominated the committee’s analysis. The report contrasts this situation with the role women played on the committee organized by the Kurdish party Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi (BDP), or the Peace and Democracy Party, and later the Halkların Demokratik Partisi (HDP), or Peoples’ Democratic Party, in the communication between Öcalan, the PKK, and the Koma Civakên Kurdistan, or the Kurdistan Union of Communities.

My observations suggest that women in Turkey and Kurdistan were not hopeful about the prospects for the peace process. A Kurdish woman activist in Diyarbakkıır told me that she was afraid that the peace process was a process of silence, and that silence usually ends with an “immense blow.” Many women were braced for what the silence of weapons would bring about, and this process was indeed terminated with an intense military assault in the summer of 2015. Even prior to this “blow,” women activists saw the peace talks as a failed process precisely because of the dim future prospects for women and the increasing authoritarianism and violence of the AKP government.

Rising Authoritarianism and the “New” Regime of Emergency

After 2013, the revolutionary struggle against ISIS incited in Syrian Kurdistan (Rojava) under the leadership of the Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG), or People’s Protection Units, became a source of inspiration for many, particularly for Kurds in Turkey, in large part because of the feminist features of the resistance and the participation of a great number of women in the war against ISIS. Yet hope quickly dissipated as the Turkish military bombed the Kandil region, the headquarters of the PKK guerrilla forces, following the Turkish national elections in June 2015. The shift in the Turkish state’s relation to the peace process was a response to the expanding Kurdish influence in Rojava, on the one hand, and the national election results of June 2015, on the other, since the HDP had achieved 80 seats in parliament.
The AKP refused to accept the June election results, and in the summer of 2015 many co-mayors of municipalities in the Kurdistan region declared “democratic autonomy” in protest. This led to an escalation in military attacks, attacks on Kurdish cities, the declaration of states of emergency in the region and of highly restrictive twenty-four-hour curfews, the arrest of the co-mayors of the Kurdish cities, and the government appointment of unelected bureaucrats called kayyum (trustees) to govern these municipalities, as well as other measures. Many people, including women and children, were burned alive or killed in the conflicts. Others were forced to migrate and left dispossessed. The declaration of emergency rule (olağanüstü hal, or OHAL) was not a new experience for Kurds living in the region. Indeed, from the peak of the war in the late 1980s to 2002, the region was ruled by emergency regimes. However, in the current situation, the state of emergency has turned into a more extensive “regime of emergency” marked by protracted conditions of war. The current regime of emergency began in the Kurdistan region and extended to the whole of Turkey after the failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016, leading to the rising authoritarianism of the AKP government.

I have observed numerous effects of this regime of emergency on women. First of all, the AKP’s emergency regime has targeted many Kurdish women activists and organizations. Twenty female co-mayors had been arrested as of November 25, 2016, and twenty-eight female co-mayors had been removed from their positions. Under emergency rule, many women’s organizations, particularly Kurdish women’s organizations, have been closed down. The authoritarianism of the
AKP regime affects not only women’s political activism but also ordinary women and their daily existence. The everyday violence that women encounter in various settings both domestically and in public spaces has increased. According to a news report prepared by the women’s newspaper Şûjin, in the first six months of 2017, under emergency rule, 208 women were murdered.\(^{21}\) While the AKP’s implementation of emergency rule strengthens its authoritarianism, each day women are murdered, beaten, and sexually harassed for various reasons, most frequently for not complying with the “moral and political” obligations the state places on them.

In times of crisis, women’s movements face the option of embracing depoliticization, “moderation,” or “radicality.”\(^{22}\) Yet, when authoritarian regimes marginalize women and their political demands and mobilizations, there is no place for moderation. In Turkey, women’s movements must be either pro-state or anti-state. The Kurdish women’s movement already had a critical, non-state understanding of politics with respect to its experience of state violence and war, but feminist groups from Turkey have also become more radical in the sense of taking a more non-institutional position, since the AKP has closed down all formal institutions established by women and has prosecuted their members. These groups thus have the transformative and subversive potential to engage “the world in radical, ethically new ways.”\(^{23}\) At this stage, women’s activism has turned into a search for new political methods for ethically and affectively creating engagements among women that can resist violence and war and overcome the differences dividing women’s movements.

As of the summer of 2017, at the time of my writing this article, the emergency regime remains in place. Many women agree: the current regime of war and violence threatens women in general, as well as Kurds and politically oppositional groups. Against this regime of war and violence, March 8, 2017 in Turkey constituted a ground for women’s transnational solidarity against authoritarianism and polarization around the world. On that day, women parliamentarians from the HDP participated in the International Women’s Strike by taking a one-day break from Parliament and by stating: “We know that the world is in crisis now, but we refuse to be the victims of this crisis.”

During the night march of March 8, 2017, in Istanbul, virtually on the eve of a presidential referendum calling for a less democratic presidential system, thousands of women, feminists, and Kurdish women’s movement activists came together and marched through Istiklal Street in the downtown Taksim area. Women in Istanbul shouted the slogans, “Leave the housework, stop the world!” and “Our solidarity is our weapon,” echoing the slogans used globally in the International Women’s Strike. The demonstration featured not just these slogans, but also banners saying “NO,” held by thousands of women at the march. This demonstration constituted a collective “NO” to the regime of emergency and authoritarianism, to the presidential system, and finally to the state’s intervention in women’s bodies and lives in Turkey. Ultimately, the April referendum resulted in a controversial “yes” vote, consolidating the rising authoritarianism and the emergency regime. Women have now been left with no choice other than that of strengthening anti-state coalitions and solidarities. Now, women’s slogan has become:

*Freedom will come with the resistance of women!*  
*Against male state violence, for our lives: We resist no matter what!*
About the Author

Nisa Göksel earned her Ph.D. in sociology from Northwestern University. She is currently Visiting Research Fellow at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame. She is working on a book manuscript about the political mobilization of Kurdish women around peace, democracy, and women’s freedom.

Notes

1 Gross explains the notion of an emergency regime in light of September 11, 2001 by focusing on the global war on terror and its production of an “alternative system of justice.” Gross, “What ‘Emergency’ Regime,” 74. He suggests that “this alternate system of justice, rather than forming an exceptional ‘emergency’ regime, may be more accurately understood if we see it as an emerging new normality” (Ibid.). This emergency regime, as he points out, complicates “the relationship between normalcy and exception” (Ibid., 75).

2 March 8 is celebrated as International Women’s Day in Turkey by feminist and women’s groups, organizations, Kurdish women activists, LGBTQ+ people and groups, women from leftist political parties, and independent women and feminists.

3 Note that these peace negotiations date back to the 2009 Oslo talks between Turkish intelligence and the PKK, with the goal of a peace settlement in Turkey. In December 2012, the Prime Minister at the time, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, openly declared that peace talks were ongoing between Turkish intelligence and PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan. Thus began the “peace” or “resolution” process.

4 For further information on the “Kurdish opening,” “democratic opening,” or “peace process,” see Casier, et al., “Turkey’s Kurdish Movement”; Güneş, “Unblocking the Impasse”; Çiçek, “Elimination or Integration”; and Hakyemez, “Turkey’s Failed Peace.”

5 Newroz, March 21, has been accepted as the “symbol of the ideology of resistance” by the Kurds. For further information, see Aydın, Mobilizing the Kurds.

6 The umbrella term “feminist and women’s groups from Turkey” includes many organizations, but two of the most visible, organized, and politically active feminist groups have been the Sosyalist Feminist Kolektif (SFK), or Socialist Feminist Collective, active from 2008 to 2015, and the Women for Peace Initiative, active from 2009 to the present. When I refer to feminist groups here, I base my observations on encounters with feminist women in
Istanbul, most of whom were members of these organizations. I do not suggest that feminism is a homogenous
category, given that feminist groups in Turkey include women from a variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds.

For a detailed discussion of the debates between Kurdish women’s groups and feminist movements in Turkey, see
Istanbul Amargi Feminizm Tartışmaları, and Sirman, “When Antigone Is a Man.”

This critique is based on the attempt by the Kurdish women’s movement to develop the field of “jineology,” or the
science of women, as an alternative to a feminism based on minority identities.

Within months of the completion of my fieldwork, the DÖKH became the KJA. The latter was short-lived,
however: the Turkish government closed down the KJA and many affiliated Kurdish women’s organizations in
2016 under emergency rule. Many members were charged with terrorism and accused of being affiliated with the
PKK.

My observations of and interactions with Kurdish women and feminist groups were limited to Istanbul and
Diyarbakır.

Barış İçin Kadın Girişimi, Çözüm Süreci Raporu.

Ibid.

For detailed information on the curfews in the Kurdish cities, see the fact sheets compiled by the Türkiye İnsan
Hakları Vakfı (TİHV), or the Human Rights Foundation in Turkey, at http://en.tihv.org.tr/curfews-in-turkey-
within-the-last-2-years-since-16-august-2015/.

The most recently formed Kurdish political parties, the BDP and later the HDP, won increased support
among Kurdish and Turkish populations at national and local levels, as municipal and national election results
demonstrated.

The Kurdish women’s movement considered the system of co-mayorship shared between a man and a woman to be
an important step towards women’s freedom, and women co-mayors had played a key role in local politics.

Democratic autonomy was one of the central demands of the Kurdish movement during the peace process.
The basic components of democratic autonomy can be defined as follows: (1) the democratization of Kurdish
politics; (2) the creation of an alternative political model through the decentralization of state politics; (3) the
reinforcement of local politics vis-à-vis the nation-state; and (4) the formation of a “democratic nation” and self-
governance.


See Sirman, “Discussing Violence.”

For further gendered analyses of the failed coup attempt, see Akınerdem, “Are There Women”; Korkman,

Güneydoğu Anadolu Bölgesi Belediyeler Birliği, Yerel Yönetimlerde.

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women’s news agency was closed down by the Kanun Hâkiminde Kararname, or Decree-Law of the State of
Emergency. A detailed analysis of the effect of emergency rule on women’s lives can also be found in the HDP
report, Women’s Rights Violations in Turkey, which was presented by the HDP parliamentarian Filiz Kerestecioğlu
at a meeting of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. See Peoples’ Democratic Party, Women’s
Rights Violations.

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