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The Polarized Terrain of Women's Organizations in Turkey under Authoritarian Pressure

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The Third Wave democratic transitions in central and eastern Europe and Latin America have created high expectations among the scholarly community and international donors alike about the democratizing potential of civil society in authoritarian regimes (Rosenblum and Post 2002; Diamond 1999).¹ This perspective, however, is not unchallenged. Critical studies caution that civil society is not essentially a democratizing force. Autocrats often “extend their tentacles” to coopt various groups in civil society and “fine-tune” societal demands by silencing organized grassroots dissent (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007, 1292).

In this chapter, I examine how the societal and political conditions of competitive authoritarian regimes (CA)² shape interest group ecologies.³ The chapter demonstrates that civil society and the mobilization of interest groups therein is different in CA regimes compared to both consolidated autocracies and liberal democracies. There is a unique set of conditions affecting interest communities in these regimes. Pockets of civic resistance, relative competitiveness of the oppositional groups, political pressure in the form of cooptation and selective repression contour interest groups' organizational forms and entry and exit terms. I examine Turkey under the rule of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) (2002–present) as an illustrative case.⁴ Specifically, I focus on advocacy in the area of gender politics by highlighting the role of women's organizations that legitimize or challenge the AKP's authoritarian gender politics.

In contrast to the other chapters in this section, I find a surprisingly dense interest community. This is due to the more competitive nature of

Turkey's variety of authoritarianism. Like the preceding chapters, however, I note that interest communities are on average less diverse under authoritarian conditions and that group competition and cooperation varies depending on groups' stance vis-à-vis the regime. Similar to the Cambodian case, I also observe virtual organizing and informalization as adaptive responses to selective repression.

Specifically, the case of women's organizations in Turkey reveals three lessons concerning interest communities in CA regimes, lessons that suggest CA regimes are not simply mid-points between consolidated autocracies and liberal democracies. First, contrary to expectations outlined in the book's introduction, the ecology of interest groups is dense, with high numbers of organizations and protests mobilized for politically and socially salient issues. This is mostly because civil society is highly polarized along partisan/ideological lines between government-oriented and oppositional groups. This stark polarization shapes interest groups' organizational morphology, action repertoires, and their relations with the government and the grassroots. The ability to affect governments' public discourses and policies depends on the goals and resources of interest groups, which are commensurate with their organic links and ideological proximity to the incumbents. Organizations with such links or allegiance to the government engage in "inside lobbying"⁵ and can communicate with ministries and public authorities directly. They also have access to state resources and other favors to expand their organizational presence. In return, they take a compliant position or at best display only "consentful contention," taking a public stance that seems subtly contentious but remains consensual in motivation (Cheskin and March 2015).

Second, quite different from consolidated autocracies, interest groups in CA regimes have more options than just cooptation or atomized scattered contention. The street remains a "natural habitat" for oppositional groups, unlike in full autocracies (White 2015). They can turn to mobilizing public opinion through what I term "tactful contention." This encompasses (a) outside lobbying repertoires such as mass protests, disruptive actions, legal activism, or public awareness campaigns, spanning local, regional, national, and online arenas, and (b) the informalization of organizational structures. Tactful contention is a survival strategy adopted by oppositional groups. While the regime's nature allows a certain degree of openness to oppositional activities and contention, CA regimes are also highly unpredictable and arbitrary in terms of the repression targeting such activity. Repression can be selective, aiming only at some groups considered to be exceedingly visible or vocal at one

time. Moreover, this repression ebbs and flows, shifts to new groups depending on political developments (e.g., upcoming elections, the international context, the political opposition, etc.) and the priorities of the incumbents (Yabancı 2019).

As the empirical discussion shows, tactful contention may provide an effective antidote to the selective repression targeting formally organized interest groups (NGOs, associations, etc.), especially in the aftermath of the 2016 botched coup. Women's organizations in Turkey have turned away from the formal and professionalized morphology to informal, decentralized, or less professionalized structures, such as local groups and loose networks of a civic nature. This organizational form allows them to maneuver within the authoritarian structures by adopting the tactful contention repertoire and seeking broader grassroots cooperation. This argument mirrors findings presented in the preceding chapter on Cambodia, in the sense that informalization creates opportunities to maintain organizational relevance through outside lobbying. As a result, in CA regimes, drawing boundaries between organized interest groups and social movement organizations can be difficult.

Finally, polarization creates unique patterns of cooperation and competition between interest groups, effectively dividing policy space into two separate group ecologies. The case of women's organizations in Turkey shows that partisan polarization often cuts across previous cleavages, such as the religious versus secular divide in Turkey. It initiates new cooperation that did not exist prior to the AKP rule. Also, however, polarization has created an intensive competition between the government-oriented and oppositional groups over how to shape public opinion.

The findings are based on original fieldwork and twenty in-depth semistructured interviews conducted with activists and representatives of ten women's organizations in Istanbul and Ankara and participant observation in the events organized by both government-oriented and autonomous organizations. Data collection took place during three field trips in 2018 and 2019. Interviews and observations are supported by documentary analysis of various publications by women's organizations as well as social media posts from their official accounts and news coverage. The chapter proceeds with a theoretic breakdown of the role of civil society and interest groups in nondemocratic contexts. Then the empirical section focuses on the wide panoply of organized women's groups in Turkey, all of which have diverse and sometimes conflicting aims and roles, some legitimizing the regime, others promoting resistance or voicing and organizing dissent. The conclu-

sion reflects on the wider relevance of these findings for our understanding of interest group ecologies in nondemocracies.

Nondemocratic Regimes and Interest Group Communities

Authoritarian regimes oftentimes resort to nominally democratic institutions. They organize elections, create legislatures, and allow “loyal” opposition parties to stabilize the regime (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007). This “culture of control” also extends beyond the formal institutions and “penetrat[es] [into] the associational sphere” (Riley 2005, 289). They can also tolerate surprisingly high numbers of interest groups as long as they are coopted and put under strict control to serve the regime’s legitimation needs (Gerschewski 2013). Loyal interest groups prevent potential mass mobilization by channeling grievances and providing preferred venues to articulate demands before they reach a critical level of dissent that could threaten the regime (Lewis 2013, 328). Women’s organizations in authoritarian regimes are a good example. Government-organized⁶ women’s associations are particularly adept at securing women’s loyalty through mobilizing their votes during elections (Donno and Kreft 2019; Lorch and Bunk 2017). They also communicate the regime’s ideological goals to women and distribute services or patronage only to “deserving” women (Tripp 2013; Zheng 2005).

Several studies have shed light on the reasons behind the widespread cooptation and capture of civil society in nondemocracies. Most often, interest groups do not have the resources to remain viable if they challenge the regime. They can only survive through close collaboration with the incumbents (Teets 2014). Therefore they seek to maximize their gains and adapt to the regime’s rules knowing that antisystemic attitudes would not work (Aarts and Cavatorta 2013; Mertha 2009). Second, the top echelons of organizations often have a vested interest in the perseverance of corrupt regime structures, so they align their goals with the regime (Rivetti 2017; Wischermann et al. 2018). Third, resisting cooptation and maintaining an oppositional stance would mean institutional death for interest groups. Authoritarian incumbents repress “horizontal voices” that are able to produce counterdiscourses to the regime (Lewis 2013) and potential spaces where citizens can express “their grievances about the authorities to each other” (Glasius 2018, 185). Those who are able to resist cooptation “mobilize without masses” or without large-scale contention by channeling discontent into atomized individual action to minimize risks

(Fu 2017; Bayat 2009). Since cooptation and repression are so ubiquitous under fully consolidated autocracies, some authors have depicted a grim and static picture of interest group mobilization in nondemocratic systems (e.g., Chaichian 2016).

However, nondemocracies appear in many shades. Interest communities in CA regimes remain understudied compared to consolidated autocracies. Competitive authoritarian (CA) regimes have distinct characteristics. They are not faulty democracies or fully consolidated autocracies in the making, but they present a unique regime type (Levitsky and Way 2010). Nominally democratic institutions—such as elections—are in place and regulate access to power to some extent, but fair elections and other democratic procedures are violated extensively. Still, the opposition has the occasional chance of being elected, but only if they mobilize the grassroots effectively. Moreover, CA regimes still need a consolidated majority and require public approval for their policies to retain the seal of democratic legitimacy. This feature of CA regimes drives their distinct strategies toward civil society with the goal of keeping the society mobilized on their side.

On the one hand, only certain interest groups are empowered financially and politically, which encourages voluntary cooptation as a means to access benefits. Through empowered government-oriented interest groups, CA regimes convert contention “into the less threatening realm of social or officially sanctioned contention” (Cheskin and March 2015, 262). A good case in point are government-oriented youth organizations in Russia and Turkey. They are cultivated to serve the incumbents by absorbing dissatisfied youngsters, indoctrinating them with nationalism, and preventing them from joining antigovernment groups (Hemment 2012; Yabancı 2021a). These interest groups also act as policy entrepreneurs and brokers between the government and the group they seek to rally (Kulmala and Tarasenko 2016). They deliver services in areas where the neoliberal state has withdrawn, which improves the regime’s performance legitimacy (Yabancı 2021a). Oftentimes, due to their links to social groups, they also offer “feedback mechanisms” that provide the incumbents with information about any emerging social demands and sources of discontent (Giersdorf and Croissant 2011).

On the other hand, CA regimes do not (or cannot) totally eliminate horizontal voices and organized dissent. As they seek to coopt civil society for their own purposes, they make themselves exposed to “a civil society dilemma” (Yabancı 2019). Namely, they avoid eliminating the civic space totally as they also benefit from it; but they cannot eliminate the chance

that oppositional forces might well utilize civic space. In fact, with no meaningful access to the monopolized executive and legislative, oppositional activism is concentrated in civil society and seeks to mobilize the grassroots for alternative participation and cooperation across political and ideological divides (Ortmann 2012). Yet CA regimes continue to target oppositional activity in civil society through selective repression that tends to be more violent than consolidated autocracies (Fein 1995, Pier-skalla 2010). As Hegre et.al. (2002: 33) argue, these regimes “are partly open yet somewhat repressive, a combination that invites protest, rebellion, and other forms of civil violence.”

In short, CA regimes are expected to host a dense and variegated interest group ecology and witness more protests in the form of public and large-scale contention than both consolidated autocracies and liberal democracies. Yet civil society is also likely to become segregated and polarized alongside the “recognized” and “criminal” ones due to the regime’s capacity to impose selective repression on oppositional groups while careening government-oriented groups simultaneously. The next section assesses these hypotheses by examining interest group ecology and mobilizational dynamics of different women’s organizations in Turkey, with a special focus on their relations with the regime.

Turkey’s Government-Oriented Women’s Organizations

During the early stages of AKP rule, several women’s organizations successfully lobbied for gender policy reform or prevented legislation against gender equality (Aldikacti-Marshall 2009). There were even gains in women’s rights thanks to some legal changes and Turkey’s prompt approval of the Istanbul Convention in 2012.⁷ Since the AKP’s authoritarian practices have escalated in the aftermath of the 2013 Gezi demonstrations,⁸ gender policy has been increasingly shaped by a nationalist-conservative approach. Like in many nondemocratic regimes where gender relations are frequently enshrined in “authoritarian legitimation strategies” (Lorch and Bunk 2016), in Turkey too, official political discourse promotes traditional gender hierarchies between men and women and marginalizes LGBTQ community (Doğangün 2020). Public policies conceive women and gender relations through family and social policy perspectives, encouraging women to prioritize caretaking and parenting roles (Güneş-Ayata and Doğangün 2017). The AKP’s revivalist and populist discourse depicts motherhood as a service to “the glorious nation in the making.”

Women are expected to maintain the social unity and educate healthy future generations with traditional values and national pride (Yabancı 2021c; Doğangün 2020). Several top-level government representatives, including President Erdoğan, have openly endorsed traditional social roles for women, promoting certain appearances and behaviors that align with the image of “sacred and chaste mothers and wives.” On several occasions, government officials called “birth control a ‘conspiracy against the nation,’ condemned abortion, encouraged marriage at a younger age, and stigmatized divorce,” labeling women engaging in these unapproved acts as indecent and outsiders (Yabancı 2021c).

In order to strengthen and spread this nationalist-conservative gender discourse, the AKP has supported a group of government-oriented women’s organizations. The most renowned organization is the Women and Democracy Association (KADEM). It was established in 2013 by a group of women close to the AKP. Erdoğan’s daughter serves as the deputy chair of the organization and has extensive involvement in the day-to-day activities of the organization. It is a membership-based civil society organization engaged in advocacy, lobbying, projects, and training events on women’s rights. Within a few years, KADEM opened forty-seven offices across the country and was granted “public benefit status” by the Council of Ministers in 2016, allowing the association to collect tax-free private and anonymous donations (KADEM 2017d). Although KADEM dominates the sector of government-oriented women’s organizations, it often teams up with other similar-minded interest groups, such as Istanbul Women’s Organizations Platform (GIKAP/IKADDER) that incorporates fifty-one women’s NGOs, Hazar Education and Culture Association, Association for Women’s Right against Discrimination (AK-DER), Family Platform, and now defunct Foundation for the Education and Solidarity of Female Health Professionals (KASAV). These organizations were established in the 1980s and 1990s by networks of conservative women who objected to the legislation known as “headscarf ban” in Turkey. With the AKP and the annulment of the headscarf ban, they have redefined their goals and aligned behind KADEM.

Government-oriented women’s organizations pursue several goals and operate on multiple scales. Since KADEM was established, it has sought to strengthen the AKP’s traditionalist gender discourse. To this end, KADEM and partner organizations fiercely criticize feminism and gender equality as “Western” concepts alien to “the unique” Turkish-Islamic traditions (Çağatay 2019). Accordingly, feminism and gender equality should be abandoned for rejecting natural differences between men and women and

for “masculinizing” women (Yabancı 2016). KADEM has coined the term “gender justice” as an allegedly superior alternative. KADEM’s gender justice principle promotes the “God-given” and “different liabilities between men and women” and rejects the existence of sexual minorities (Ayдын Yılmaz 2015, 108–13; KADEM 2020b). In practice, the gender justice concept haphazardly brings Islamic principles and themes from the Quran together with cherry-picked features of postcolonial feminist theory, and it has been widely criticized due to its inconsistencies and ambiguities (Yabancı 2016; Diner 2018).

Yet KADEM has employed a range of advocacy strategies to popularize the gender justice concept. For instance, it seeks to create a body of literature on “gender justice” through its own academic journal and expert reports. It has also organized six international conferences on gender justice that have been extensively covered in the pro-AKP media. Additionally, government-oriented women’s organizations have sought to mobilize public opinion in line with the AKP’s gender discourse. They often form a counter-bloc to feminist women’s organizations to promote the AKP’s controversial public policies regarding gender equality and women’s rights. One case in point is the legislative change giving religious authorities (muftis) the right to perform marriages. In Turkey, civil law does not recognize religious marriages, which is considered a legal protection for women against abusive marriages. In 2017, the AKP introduced a legislative change giving religious authorities the right to perform civil marriages, while maintaining the nonrecognition of religious marriages on paper (Arat 2021). The proposal received backlash from feminist organizations that considered the proposal a cynical twist to allow and encourage religious marriages through the back door. The legislative change was also criticized for being against the constitutional principle of secularism that could potentially lead to misuse by allowing multiple marriages or forced/underage marriages in rural areas (author’s interview, Respondent 1).

On the contrary, KADEM and partner organizations took an affirmative stance. Through press statements, government-oriented women’s organizations argued that the legislative change would promote individual freedoms by giving them the right to choose and would eventually increase the number of civil marriages in rural areas (KADEM 2017a). Twitter and Instagram have also been actively utilized by KADEM to compete with critical arguments to shape the public opinion. Eventually, what is known as mufti marriages law was accepted in Parliament. For other controversial legislation, similar campaigns were undertaken to “warm up the public” to the proposed changes. One interviewee from an oppositional wom-

en's organization claimed that the process of drafting and passing laws concerning women is completely artificial. No decision at the Ministry of Family and Social Policy is taken without the involvement and approval of KADEM, which is "often aware of an upcoming draft law and start[s] campaigns to mold the public opinion in advance" (author's interview, Respondent 20). This statement has been confirmed by several other women's organizations. While it was difficult for them to give concrete details to what extent KADEM can change the government's position during the proposal stage, they have argued that KADEM and other organizations have access to inside lobbying to negotiate behind the scenes.

Government-oriented women's organizations do not always unconditionally support the AKP's public policies, especially if the issue is highly controversial. Instead, they seek to mollify the stiff public opinion by distorting the facts in order to divert public attention to minor issues. The draft law on sexual assault is such an example. Since 2016, the AKP has introduced three different versions of a draft that grants acquittals from charges of sexual assault of underage in cases where the perpetrator marries the victim (Karaca 2018). In practice, the proposal stands little chance to gain widespread public support. Sexual assault of minors remains a taboo topic even among the AKP's conservative-religious constituency. Feminist organizations also argue that the draft law would force underage women to marry rapists to dispel the societal shame in rural areas. For this reason, government-oriented women's organizations have avoided supporting the proposals openly. Instead, they have drawn public attention to the "unjust suffering of some married couples" under the existing act. Under the current law, courts order a prison sentence for the adult partner (always a man) for marrying an underage woman, considering it without qualification or excuse as sexual assault of a minor. KADEM has claimed that marriages that include a minor partner can take place consensually. In such cases, the organization claimed, traditional family union is threatened due to the imprisonment of men. KADEM has argued that the government actually seeks to prevent unfair imprisonments and protect the traditional family values, not to allow or encourage sexual assault of minors (KADEM 2020a). But the facts differ from what KADEM promotes in its public campaigns. The Turkish Federation of Women's Associations has noted that the total number of such consensual marriages that includes one minor party is merely 264. In contrast, according to the Ministry of Justice statistics, between 2010 and 2018 there were more than 150,000 court cases about the sexual assault and harassment of minors (Evrensel 2019).

KADEM's restrained engagement with controversial legislative proposals that are directly related to women's rights and gender equality represent what Cheskin and March (2005) call "consentful contention." KADEM's consentful contention presents a subtle criticism of the government, while seeking to ease the potential public reaction by offering a justificatory coating and even gradually preparing the grounds for legal changes. Consentful contention is mostly employed when the policy at hand is highly controversial for society in general and when autonomous and oppositional women's organizations have an organized reaction and have managed to rally public opposition. In such cases, government-oriented women's organizations would often seek to divide public opinion by presenting a reserved warning to the government and drawing attention to minor issues to ease mass public reaction, at least from the AKP's support base.

When asked about the importance of a common position and cooperation among women's organizations to protect the gains and rights of women, the head of a government-oriented organization responded that disagreement is normal among interest groups and that they themselves seek "an ideology-free approach" from their partners. When I demanded a clarification about what an ideology-free approach would be, she stated that "women's problems should not be used as a political tool to attack the government" (author's interview, Respondent 13). Clear from this statement is that a criticism of the government's initiatives is considered ideologically loaded and rejected by government-oriented women's organizations.

Exceptionally, KADEM initially played a role in saving the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention in behind-the-closed-door dealings with the government. In 2020, the AKP launched a discussion about the convention indicating an intent to withdraw and implement alternative national legislation in its place. By summer, social media was inundated by misleading information about the Istanbul Convention that it aims to "dissolve the family and normalize homosexuality." Conservative intellectuals, some AKP lawmakers, and progovernment newspapers joined the campaign against the Convention. In the midst of feminist organizations' protests, KADEM followed a silent strategy of negotiating with the government and on a few occasions gave interviews and released public statements to correct distorted information about the convention. KADEM's supportive stance on the Istanbul Convention, albeit its firm rejection of LGBTQ rights, eventually played a large role in shelving the AKP's plans to withdraw from the convention. It is important to note, however, that

KADEM did not collaborate with other women's organizations that held an oppositional stance or organized public protests. It pursued an alternative strategy of direct lobbying and avoided criticizing the government's plan in public, practicing again a strategy of consensual contention and behind-the-closed-door persuasion. Eventually, this strategy was insufficient to save the convention. In 2021, Erdoğan issued a presidential decree, without any consultation or due procedure, announcing Turkey's withdrawal from an international convention, making Turkey both the first country to sign the Istanbul Convention in 2012, thanks to the lobbying work of women's organizations, and also the first country to withdraw from it in 2021. Although KADEM had denied false allegations about the Istanbul Convention earlier, following the government's decision to withdraw, it acquiesced to blame the Council of Europe for not addressing "the increasing concerns and confusion that the Convention created". It promoted the argument circulated by Islamist-conservative organizations that the Convention was instrumentalized by 'gender ideologists' to "encourage LGBT among teens and children", and supported the AKP's promise of a national campaign to fight violence against women and preserve the family.

Government-oriented women's organizations also directly engage with women through country-wide projects, promoting parenting and familial roles for women such as vocational training, support for parents with drug-addicted children, integration programs for women refugees, and aid for people living in poverty (author's interviews, Respondent 13 and 14 KADEM 2017e, 2017c). Fieldwork interviews revealed that these organizations have vast financial resources. Personal contacts are often used to raise funds and secure authorizations for projects (author's interviews, Respondent 13 and 14). These projects are financed by ministries, AKP municipalities, and state institutions such as AFAD (Presidency Disaster and Emergency Management) and İŞKUR (Turkish Employment Agency) (KADEM 2017b, 2017f). Thanks to these projects, government-oriented groups have been able to establish grassroots presence. This active presence across the country has been praised by all interviewees, who claim that they represent not the well-off, educated, urban feminists, but the majority of women with traditional values and daily concerns in rural Turkey.

Even more striking is the financial support that some government-oriented women's organizations have received from the EU. For instance, KADEM's two largest projects to date, "Women on the move project" (KADEM 2016) and "Women's Civil Network in Politics" (KADEM 2014),

were financed as a part of the EU-Turkey Civil Society Dialogue. The EU funding has allowed the organization to establish partnerships in EU member states. The representative of the EU delegation in Ankara argued that when evaluating funding applications, the European Commission “does not classify interest groups as government-oriented and other in Turkey.” Instead, it chooses projects with measurable and feasible goals (author’s interview Respondent 15). Surprisingly, during the interview, the EU representative was reluctant to discuss whether such a technocratic approach would ignore the organic links between some interest groups and the AKP and might undermine the EU’s own principles. Given that the EU is the largest international donor for Turkey’s civil society, this attitude—if it continues—might also force repressed and deprived oppositional interest groups to compete with well-resourced government-oriented organizations for international funding in the long run.

Resistance and Coalition Building among Oppositional Women’s Organizations

Following the 2016 failed coup, formal interest groups took a large blow. Hundreds of associations were closed through executive decrees, and their representatives and activists were put under pretrial detention (for a review, see Yabancı 2019). Despite repression, the AKP’s attempts to control women’s lives and bodies have been challenged by dissenting civil networks. These networks have emerged out of young, educated, and urban women’s efforts. Unlike government-oriented organizations, they value independence from both political authorities and international donors. Their agenda is quite the opposite of the groups close to the AKP. They seek to prevent legislative changes or new policies that would undermine women’s rights, while promoting gender equality and awareness about discrimination and violence at the public level.

Women’s Councils (Kadın Meclisleri) and “We will stop femicides” (Kadın Cinayetlerini Durduracağız Platformu: KCDP) are the two most prominent groups in terms of their organizational reach and membership. They place the surging violence targeting women and impunity surrounding gender-based crimes at the heart of their organizational goals (author’s interview, Respondent 12). In recent years, young Muslim feminists have also mobilized against the AKP’s gender politics. “Initiative for Muslims Against Violence Targeting Women (KŞKMİ)” is a loose network established by women who openly identify as Muslims. In 2018, a group of

Muslim feminists also decided to establish an official association named “Havle.” Together with secular feminist groups, Muslim feminists mobilize against the nationalist and patriarchal gender politics of the AKP. They argue that there is also a need for support from conservative/Islamist circles in order to address the AKP’s core constituency directly (author’s interview, Respondent 10). Moreover, Muslim feminists also challenge the widespread utilization of Islamic references to justify violence and discrimination against women. They argue that Islam does not create an ontological gender hierarchy. Instead, it is the centuries-long masculine interpretation of religious texts that has created gendered social codes and justified the secondary role of women in dominantly Muslim societies (author’s interviews, Respondents 4, 9, and 10). In this sense, Muslim feminist groups agree with the secular feminists on the roots of violence. Yet their framing is different, with explicit references to religion. As one representative argued, “the problem is entirely related to masculinity”. Yet they are familiar with how the conservatives and Islamists utilize religious references to justify masculinity and patriarchy, and strive to counter masculinity also with references from Islam (KŞKMİ 2016).

These autonomous women’s organizations have achieved an impressive resonance and visibility among women in recent years, even though they are excluded by the government from the policy-making processes. Their choice for tactful contention plays a considerable role in building internal strength and resilience. There are two discrete factors behind tactful contention: the choice of organizational form and the ensuing action repertoire.

Organizational form refers to their grassroots, flexible, and horizontal networks. During the interviews, respondents frequently referred to their autonomy from the government by emphasizing their connectedness to the grassroots. This organizational strategy is also considered a panacea to “NGOization,” which is often perceived as cooptation by incumbents or international donors and means losing touch with the core support base. A representative stated that “we do not call ourselves simply an NGO. Registering as a formal association was only for legal reasons so that we can get involved in court cases to support the victims of domestic and gender-based violence.” This statement was meant to counter a possible mistaken belief that the organization registered as an NGO only to get donor funds for projects (author’s interview, Respondent 11). Other activists emphasized that to be able to remain autonomous from governmental pressure and determine their own agendas, their organization remains a loose network and relies on crowdfunding. Financial independence allows

them to be accountable only to women who collectively contribute to the organization (author's interviews, Respondents 9 and 19). This way, they claim, they "can engage in public truth-telling" (author's interview, Respondents 4). This strategy of loose organizational form has become a wise choice as many NGOs faced closure and confiscation of property in the post-2016 coup period.

The second factor of tactful contention allows autonomous women's organizations to pursue a flexible and multidimensional action repertoire as an alternative to advocacy and direct lobbying and allows them to mobilize in large numbers. The following sections analyze this tactful contention repertoire.

Grassroots Mobilization: Forums and Street Protests

Women's Councils have initiated an exemplary case of effective grassroots mobilization of multiple spatiality, despite the restrictions on the freedoms of assembly and association. Local assemblies have been set in nineteen districts in Istanbul and twenty-five cities across Turkey (author's interview, Respondent 16). These forums aim to bring women from various educational and socioeconomic backgrounds to discuss issues related to gender discrimination and violence. Through localized gatherings, women converse about diverse issues from a particular case of discrimination in payment at a specific workplace to a case of sexual abuse at a university. As one activist mentioned, women participate in forums regardless of their partisan or ideological affiliations and focus solely on finding resilient solutions to specific problems (author's interview, Respondent 12). These forums have created an unprecedented form of grassroots direct participation in Turkey and encouraged more women to voice their demands, learn about their legal rights, and discuss long-term solutions for inequality and forms of violence targeting women.

Another major form of collective action that the autonomous women's groups have successfully mobilized is street demonstrations despite police violence and protest bans in the aftermath of 2016 coup attempt. Besides the annual feminist night demonstration on every International Women's Day (March 8), protests and street campaigns have mobilized thousands of participants against the government's controversial legal initiatives, impunity concerning particular cases of femicides, and even against the 2017 constitutional referendum that marked Turkey's regime change from parliamentary to uncontrolled presidential system (Yüksel 2017). Although secular and Muslim women choose to mobilize under separate organiza-

tions, they have built networks of solidarity and trust across the religious versus secular cleavage through collective street protests. During these protests and marches, Muslim feminists used distinct banners tactfully avoiding the use of feminist jargon and addressing conservative/religious audiences, such as “Prophet never harmed a woman,” “Praise God, I am against domestic violence,” “Instead of keeping silent, I take refuge in God and speak up against harassment, rape and violence.” They often appeared next to LGBTQ-friendly and feminist banners that challenge patriarchy and “slut-shaming.”

Women’s persistence in maintaining street action even under the state of emergency and in light of protest bans has transformed contemporary advocacy in Turkey. Historically, protests and contentious action are often associated with the Kurdish movement, especially since street politics was brutally crushed after the 1980 coup. Interest groups became highly professionalized, technocratic, and project-driven, and run by a few connected individuals following the 1980s. Widespread use of protests by this new generation of women’s organizations has widened the societal base of contentious politics in Turkey beyond the Kurdish movement. As one activist put it, “women’s protests and press statements in public places have become an area of resistance on its own that the government cannot crush” (author’s interview, Respondent 18). Women’s protests have also assumed a symbolic meaning of cherishing and extending the pluralist spirit of Gezi demonstrations (see footnote 8).

Legal Activism and Public Awareness Campaigns

In addition to street action, women’s organizations also engage in legal activism to ensure the full implementation of the Istanbul Convention and the ensuing Law 6284 that was issued in 2012 to criminalize all forms of gender-based violence. But the implementation suffers from widespread discretion by judges and prosecutors, who often grant remission during trials based on “good conduct” or “unjust provocation” by victims. To prevent remissions, volunteer activist-lawyers organize through the KCDP to offer legal assistance to victims or their families during the trials. When women have legal backing from these organizations, the security forces, prosecutors, and judges feel increased pressure to implement Law 6284, and the perpetrators often end up receiving the full penalty set out in Law 6284 (author’s interview, Respondent 11).

Women’s organizations support legal activism with public campaigns

about femicides. KCDP has been documenting and mapping femicides across the country since 2008. The organization relies on open digital sources to list country-wide femicide cases. Lately, their documentation has become the only reliable source on the number of femicides in the country, which is not only essential for legal redress but also to publicize impunity and the AKP's failure to implement the Istanbul Convention, and to create a collective memory for women's movement. KCDP also publicizes all the upcoming court hearings on its web page to increase public awareness for individual cases. According to one activist from the group, when people hear stories of murdered women, they become visible to the public conscience. Another activist argues that such actions make feminism a social and everyday phenomenon. They do not necessarily label these actions as feminism. By appealing to the grassroots and public conscience, their efforts seek to rally social support even from conservative segments by following or participating in the court hearings (author's interview, Respondent 11).

One of the visible gains of legal activism and public awareness campaigns has been the change in the perception of gender-based crimes in the media. Up until a few years ago, femicides in Turkey were covered with biased language in the media, which whitewashed murders through stories of jealousy or economic or mental issues (author's interview, Respondent 18). The term femicide has now been adopted thanks to the efforts of women's organizations. During the fieldwork interviews, I was told that this is exactly what these women's organizations seek, indicating a strong element of tactfulness in their contentious action given that they do not have access to direct lobbying to change policy outcomes. When they rally the public against violence and femicide cases, they seek justice for the victims, but they also hope to change the media and public perceptions about violence and discrimination and, ergo, increase the number of women who actively claim their rights from authorities.

Digital Activism

In addition to street mobilizations, legal activism, and public awareness campaigns, a distinct form of contention has emerged in the digital space. Communication technology and social media have helped women to build an impressive online mobilization capacity. A case in point is when the government issued proposals for laws regarding sexual assault 2016, women's organizations quickly publicized the proposal by labeling it "the

rape law” in Twitter hashtags. The framing was successful in creating a widespread public outcry and putting pressure on the government to withdraw the proposal.

The use of online mobilization is considered to be an effective form of pressure on authorities when combined with actual protests. As one activist succinctly noted, when thousands of women tweet the same hashtag, the authorities cannot hide a particular case of femicide or sexual abuse (author’s interview, Respondent 19). Indeed, active online public awareness campaigns often precede demonstrations. For instance, in 2012, the “Say No to Abortion Ban” campaign combined online mobilization with protest events and successfully pressured the government to withdraw proposals to criminalize abortion. For instance, in the case of the brutal murder of Pinar Gültekin, the Women’s Councils used social media to quickly organize protests across multiple cities. Eventually, the widespread use of social media and protests for Pinar forced President Erdoğan to take a personal stance by declaring he would personally follow the trial to ensure the murderer would get the utmost penalty under the law. This case is an example of how autonomous women’s organizations can generate influence. Often this means mobilization through multiple channels including digital platforms, litigation, and protests to create public outcry and force authorities to take decisive action.

Women have also created digital informal networks through blogging. Women’s blogs (some of the most known ones are Reçel, Çatlak Zemin, and 5Harfliler) have initially been created to share women’s daily and intimate experiences (Goker 2019). One of them, Reçel, publishes pieces by self-identified Muslim women. According to the editor, the idea of blogging has emerged “naturally” out of a search to “understand each other’s experience” with imposed social roles like sacred motherhood or the [partisan] meaning attached to wearing a headscarf (author’s interview, Respondent 4). Similarly, Çatlak Zemin claims they have started the blog “to create a public space free from male violence where everyday issues can be discussed” (Cantek and Bora 2015). Bloggers often touch on personal or family-related experiences in their writings. Their style is generally humorous, with references to popular culture, and sometimes sarcastically questioning the patriarchal society and religion. Blog contributions, however, often trigger deeper discussions in the comments section, creating virtual public spaces of women’s solidarity. In several ways, blogging has turned everyday concerns into wider discussions on patriarchy, political violence, and discrimination for women. Over time, topics covered in these blogs have also become more political, covering dismissed academ-

ics, conscientious objection, refugees, the Kurdish issue, the changing perceptions of Islam, and hate speech. Even Reçel has overcome early reservations and started to openly discuss issues regarded as taboo by religious communities, such as women's sexuality, birth control, and abortion.

In order to attract a widespread audience, these blogs do not always openly claim or engage with feminism as a part of their tactful contention. Yet it would not be wrong to claim that blogs have indirectly put feminism within the reach of "ordinary" women and men (Amargi 2013). Most importantly, blogging has revealed what had not been previously clear even to women: digital communities have revealed that regardless of being Muslim or secular, being a woman in Turkey means facing shared hardships brought on by gender hierarchies and discrimination under an increasingly nationalist and authoritarian regime.

Conclusion

This chapter has looked into the interest group ecology in competitive authoritarian (CA) regimes by using women's organizations in Turkey as a case study. Due to their unique characteristics, CA regimes have a distinct stance toward interest groups. As these regimes still seek to mobilize society and get public approval for their policies, they do not shut down civil society. Instead, incumbents aim to closely control the patterns of entry and exit into this space. To achieve that, they cultivate government-oriented interest groups, either by supporting the creation of new organizations with organic links or by coopting the existing ones. Meanwhile, they try to limit autonomous groups through selective repression and restrictions on freedoms of speech, association, and assembly. Yet the means of control, what is "allowed" and what is persecuted, tend to often shift due to the volatile political climate. Eventually, CA regimes cannot prevent the oppositional voices from turning to civil society.

In fact, the discussion on women's organizations in Turkey has demonstrated a surprising density of interest communities in CA regimes. Oppositional voices turn to civil society when an issue is considered significant, such as the exponential increase in gender violence and the perceived attack on women's rights in Turkey. Protests as well as other forms of disruptive action are not only within the reach of the oppositional groups but can also be maintained in the long term, despite repression and the risk of physical harm or detention during protests. The competitiveness of civic opposition and the continuing existence of pockets of democratic resis-

tance beyond formal institutions allows for what I term tactful contention. Tactful contention is a response of civic oppositional groups to the volatile political climate. It allows them to sail the shifting political conditions through an effective mixture of various organizational forms, multiple repertoires, and spaces of contention for resilience and for mobilization in the long term.

During the AKP era, some studies argued that women's movement has been weakened vis-à-vis the state (Negron-Gonzales 2016). Yet the discussion has shown that women's organizations have achieved an unprecedented internal strength thanks to tactful contention connected to the grassroots. First, selective repression increases the cost of remaining autonomous or in opposition for interest groups. This spurred the birth of network- or social-movement-like organizational forms, a part of the tactful contention strategy, to evade discretionary closure that hundreds of formal associations faced in the post-2016-coup era. Given the lack of access to policy making and direct lobbying, this strategy also helps to reach out to a wider array of audiences. The composition of these groups, joined by young, urban, and educated women, has also facilitated the network-like organizations.

Second, tactful contention is strategic, but not reserved, clandestine, or atomized in terms of contentious action. Contrarily, autonomous women's organizations have invented multiple alternative paths to advocacy to influence the public through direct grassroots engagement. They have mastered "outside lobbying" even under hostile regime conditions. They regularly mobilize women on the streets of urban cities, run information campaigns in district markets, engage in court cases for every single femicide case, and actively utilize social media for their goals. Moreover, they have initiated new alliances that have deeper connotations for societal coexistence and sustained opposition in Turkey. Women's mobilization against the AKP's nationalist and conservative gender order also bridges deep historical societal cleavages, such as religious/conservative versus modern/secular. Their tactical choices (i.e., sometimes not mentioning feminism while engaging in feminist acts, the use of outside lobbying, blogging under pseudonyms, grassroots campaigns, etc.) challenge the binaries of women's subordination and emancipation, antifeminism and feminism.

CA regimes, however, are also inventive. Another reason for the dense ecology of interest groups is the impressive increase in government-oriented organizations mobilizing for the same salient issues. In Turkey, women's groups close to the government display formal and professional-

ized structures and have access to direct lobbying through personal links with ministries and local governments. They seek “consentful contention,” that is, presenting subtle, nonirritating criticism and at other times seeking to legitimize and disperse the government’s gender policies by reaching out to women and international audiences.

In CA regimes, the “modes of wielding power are [periodically] reconfigured” when faced with effective bottom-up organizations (Froissart 2014, 220). To reiterate, CA regimes are not midpoints between democracies and autocracies. They have power to build a status quo that contributes to their resilience. This status quo is built partially on their capacity to utilize civil society through a pro-government sector that engages in “consentful contention,” and partially their strategy that calibrates repression selectively to target certain interest groups. Under this status quo, women’s organizations in Turkey find themselves under constant pressure to adapt to the changing conditions of repression for the sake of survival. They divide their limited resources between survival, community building, and influencing public opinion. Moreover, the dense interest group community is polarized between government-oriented and autonomous/oppositional interest groups that compete to shape public opinion.

The book’s concluding chapter theorizes that three factors—access to policy making, the regime’s information demands, and the regime’s need for social control—shape all stages of influence production under autocracy. My study of women’s advocacy in Turkey suggests that variation in policy-making access and social control drives the structure of interest communities. Government-aligned groups enjoy preferential access and are exempt from overt repression. Autonomous ones need to create access through pressure politics and constantly navigate policy red lines and restrictions. Conventional theories of density dependence may not explain group cooperation and competition in such bifurcated interest communities, as groups on either side of the regime cleavage effectively operate in different ecologies. While this chapter has utilized women’s organizations as an in-depth case study of such dynamics, these observations can be extended to other interest groups, such as organizations working on youth, refugees, trade unions, and even diaspora organizations in Turkey. Autonomous/oppositional groups might be pushed to the margins of civil society in the long run as the government-oriented ones grow in terms of financial resources, organizational reach across the country, and even international visibility. Worse, they might be confined to the act of ‘firefighters’ for a very long time, addressing the urgent issues and crises as they keep appearing, rather than mobilizing for a widespread anti-systemic

change to put out ‘the actual fire’. Still, continuous grassroots mobilization and efforts not to give up on tactical contention are the only ways to challenge the status quo that benefits the incumbents. This point also differentiates interest group mobilization in CA regimes from interest group mobilization in long-term consolidated autocracies.

NOTES

1. I use the term civil society to refer to “the social spheres of activism and interaction between the state/rulers and organized societal forces where power relations and ‘hegemony’, i.e. consent and legitimacy, is produced by regime-holders and challenged by counter groups” (Yabancı 2019, 289). This sphere is populated by interest groups that engage in activities of advocacy and lobbying to influence public policies as well as horizontally organized networks and social movements in “varying degrees of formality, autonomy and power” that aim to form public opinion, create salience and mobilize on specific issues (Centre for Civil Society 2004).

2. In CA regimes, political opposition and basic democratic practices exist. Yet “electoral manipulation, unfair media access, abuse of state resources, and varying degrees of harassment and violence skew the playing field in favour of incumbents” (Levitsky and Way 2010, 3).

3. I use the term “interest groups” throughout the chapter to denote voluntary non-profit actors that seek to influence policy outcomes but do not contest elections. See chapter 1 for a discussion of different group labels.

4. In the early 2000s, Turkey was considered as a democratizing country under the impact of EU candidacy. Especially since 2010, autocratic tendencies have progressively escalated, curbing the independence of the media and the judiciary and civil society.

5. Inside lobbying strategies rely on direct interactions with policy makers, whereas outside lobbying is aimed at mobilizing public opinion via news media and public actions. See also the three chapters in the next section of this volume.

6. Government-oriented organizations, known also as GONGOS, are a widespread phenomenon. These organizations are often semiautonomous in terms of membership and activities but highly reliant on the ruling parties or leaders in terms of political goals, ideology, organizational visibility, and resources. For a detailed discussion, see Yabancı 2021a, 2021b.

7. The Istanbul Convention is the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence. <https://rm.coe.int/168008482e>.

8. Gezi protests were triggered by the AKP’s demolishing a green area at the heart of Istanbul, and they quickly escalated into country-wide protests with hundreds of thousands of participants against the government’s authoritarian practices. Many scholars agree that after violently crushing the protests, the AKP has turned to more undemocratic governance.

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Part IV

Strategies

