



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

Research Report

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***The History of Human Rights in Turkey:
The Changes in Discourse and Practices within Cycles of Politics***

Topic of research:

The project involves the study of human rights discourse and practices in Turkey since the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. It attempts to identify how domestic and international events shaped the human rights discourse and practices at various junctures, as the country vacillated between identity and class politics.

Relevance and contribution to the academic field:

The project is interdisciplinary in nature and will contribute to the fields of Political Science, Human Rights, Turkish Studies, and International Relations.

Despite the universal appeal of the concept of human rights, the universality of rights articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and subsequent international human rights treaties has been contested, and human rights continue to be violated all around the world. A significant challenge to the universal applicability of human rights is posed by cultural relativists who perceive the current conceptualization of human rights

in international documents as a Western product, a tool used by Western powers to interfere into the affairs of other states, and as a design of cultural imperialism.

Turkey's complex history presents a challenging subject for the study of human rights. The modern Turkish state has tried to join "the West," both politically and culturally, and participated in both the global and regional human rights regimes, led by the United Nations and the European Union, respectively. As an early member of the United Nations and signatory of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Republic pledged to promote human rights at home and abroad. In 1953, it became a party to the European Convention of Human Rights. Despite these commitments, however, the promotion of human rights has been inconsistent, yielding a human rights record that is troublesome and vexing.

The project involves reexamining the history of the Republic of Turkey and assorting the articulation of human rights by different groups, the state responses to the "rights demands," and the influence of the international structure and actors on the country's human rights discourse. Studying the changes in the human rights discourse over time, along with the government's approach and human rights practices, allows us to substantiate the nature and strength of the relationship between discourse and practices. Juxtaposing the changes in discourse and practices with major domestic and international events further adds to our understanding of the conditions that contribute to the development of a human rights culture and advancement of human rights.

The main thesis of the project holds that the human rights discourse in Turkey has been a volatile one; the emphasis placed on different types of rights changed as the country fluctuated between identity and class politics in response to the changes in the international political system and the power struggle among domestic forces. While identity politics characterized the early years of the Republic and lasted until the end of the one-party rule in 1945, class politics prevailed during the multiparty era and most of the Cold War years. The military coup of 1980 ushered in a new round of identity politics that has been dominated by the struggle for gender equality, religious freedom, and Kurdish nationalism. Through the case study of Turkey, the project attempts to answer a theoretical question: Which type of politics, identity or class, is more likely to produce a human rights culture that is conducive to the improvement of human rights practices?

Research methodology and sites:

Since the study covers a long period, from the early 1920s to the present, and involves a set of complex questions, I have employed an eclectic methodological approach. Although the project is essentially an archival study, visits to some human rights organizations (e.g., The Association of Human Rights, Women's Centers (KA-MER), and Flying Broom) and interviews with government officials and members of the parliament who work on human rights issues were incorporated into the research activities.

However, the seven-month long fieldwork for the most part comprised locating and analyzing the programs of political parties that were represented in the parliament during the 1920-2003 period, as well as those that played a significant role in influencing the political discourse even if they had no representation in the parliament. The information was gathered by using the sources available mainly at the library of the parliament (the Turkish Grand National Assembly), the library of the Institute of Public Administration in Turkey and the Middle East, the National Library, and the State Archives, all located in Ankara. Supplementary material and statistical information -- budgetary allocations, state services and their utilization (e.g., numbers of schools, enrollments statistics), census data (e.g., literacy rates, percent of population with access to clean water), statistics on crimes and imprisonments, political protests and demonstrations, and human rights violations (e.g., banned/closed parties, presses, associations; reported cases of torture, detentions, and political imprisonments) -- were gathered by using the libraries of the Middle-East Technical University and Bilkent University, in Ankara, and Boğaziçi University, in Istanbul. The primary sources for the statistical data, however, have been the State Statistical Institute and the State Planning Agency.

Focusing on both the *discourse* and *practices* of human rights, the project has relied upon both qualitative and quantitative data. 95 programs for 51 political parties and 59 government programs were analyzed for their manifest and latent content. The language of the documents was studied to identify the implicit and explicit references to human rights and the context in which the human rights terminology is used. The human rights terms were codified and the frequency of the reference to each human rights term was tallied; the compilation of the data on party programs in the form of an SPSS file has been completed, and the same process for the data on government programs is in progress.

Once completed, the data set will be analyzed, by employing governments/cabinets as the units of analysis, in order to (1) identify the patterns of change in discourse and practices and (2) assess the correlations between the discourse, practices, and events. The data from successive administrative periods will be contrasted to differentiate changes, continuities, and lagged impacts or correlations. The quantitative data combined with qualitative analysis is expected to answer the following questions: Did specific rights dominate the discourse in different cycles of politics? Which rights were supported by the state? What was the nature and effectiveness of the state support (e.g., legal protection, allocation of resources, creation of offices and agencies, etc.)? Which rights claims were framed as security threats, discredited, and repressed? To what extent the human rights discourse in party programs was reflected in government programs and policies? What was the relationship among different human rights-oriented advocacy groups and organizations – collaboration or competition? How did the state respond to rival advocacy groups? What has been the approach of foreign advocacy groups and states? Were there any external pressures on or support for the government or domestic advocacy groups?

Preliminary findings:

Given the comprehensive scope of the project (e.g., covering nearly a century, including all human rights issues, and using a wide range of sources), the completion of the data set and analyses will require some more time, and concrete findings and conclusions are not likely to be reached any time soon. Nevertheless, some preliminary findings can be stated as propositions to be verified by more careful and systematic analyses of the data.

1. Governments and political parties in Turkey have been responsive to the international developments in regard to human rights and incorporated/increased human rights *terminology* in their respective programs when the international community stressed human rights issues.
2. Opposition parties and groups have been more willing to formulate issues in human rights terms than the governing parties and governments.
3. The employment of human rights discourse in political debates, party programs and government programs does not necessarily result in an improvement in human rights policies and practices.
4. The “legal recognition” of rights in the Constitution and other laws has been seldom followed by proper implementation/enforcement; consequently, the rights have not enjoyed legal protection.
5. The public and government references to and promotion of women’s rights tend to be higher at periods of identity politics, and there has been a steady advancement of the women’s rights discourse in the post-1980 period.
6. Social and economic rights:
 - a. The one-party rule during first decades of the Republic was more committed to and successful in fulfilling some social and economic rights, despite the lack of their recognition in the political discourse.
 - b. The rhetoric of social and economic rights was employed more frequently when class politics dominated in the 1950-1980 period.
 - c. Despite the overall increase in the human rights references in the post-1980 period, social and economic rights have declined both in discourse and practices.
7. The European Union has been more effective in advancing human rights discourse and influencing the Turkish government’s human rights policies than the United Nations, the United States, and the major international human rights organizations.

Policy Implications:

Although the project in question has not been designed as a policy project and the data codification and analysis are not complete, we can devise some tentative policy guidelines for the foreign policy community in the United States, on the basis of some preliminary findings.

Turkey's relationship with the European Union shows that the Turkish governments have been more willing to address human rights violations and adjust the laws when the change is expected to yield some concrete rewards in the form of economic and political gains. This observation implies that the promotion of human rights in developing countries calls for a foreign policy approach that emphasizes the combination of criticism and rewards, instead of tolerating violations by the allies or threatening the states with poor human rights records with various sanctions. This alternative policy formulation would include the following steps: (1) recognizing the human rights violations and shortcomings in the country in question; (2) demanding changes and improvements in human rights policies; (3) providing assistance to help achieving improvements; and (4) rewarding the progress in forms that are responsive to the public needs and expectations (as opposed to a form that would benefit only the current government).