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## **Division, Persecution and Rearrangement - The AKP's Controversial Relationship with Turkish Civil Society**

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### **Abstract**

Turkish culture has always valued foundations, such as mosques, schools, public baths, free kitchens, and hospitals. However, much of this structure was abolished by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk after the proclamation of the republic in 1923. Turkish civil society was slowly reorganized following Western examples and had a second heyday under Turgut Ozal's liberal economic policy and media market liberalization. However, after the Justice and Development Party came to power in 2002, civil society in Turkey was significantly rearranged. This article discusses the conflicts and current situation of Turkish civil society, including the campaign against Amnesty International and the Open Society Foundation. Sources include renowned Turkish journalists and abundant literature in Turkish and English.

**Keywords:** Civil society, NGOs, Turkey, AKP, polarization

### **Introduction and historical background**

In Turkey and before that in the Ottoman Empire, civil society has always been of great importance, especially foundations having centuries-long history. The proclamation of the republic in 1923 is also a serious rupture in this regard, as the founder of the state, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, pushed traditional civil society into the background and abolished the structures that had behind them fraternal communities associated with the Islamic religion. In the initial, one-party period of the republic, therefore, the non-governmental

sphere slowly and hardly regenerated. In many cases, Western, European, or even American examples were used as the basis for the new organizations. Ideologically, too, liberal models and mindsets had a significant influence on reorganizing Turkish citizenship. Successive military coups have also failed to strengthen Turkish civil society during the multi-party era of the republic. The very well-known organizations, foundations and associations were mostly established or strengthened in the 1980s, a period that can be called the heroic age of Turkish civil courage. Following the 1980 military coup, a new constitution was adopted in Turkey. In addition to his liberal economic policy, Turgut Ozal, who came to power in the 1983 elections, became known for his conservative social policy. In this right-wing political mood, the new democratic system, which was gaining momentum, was able to provide a good environment for the rapid development of Turkish NGOs. One of the marked elements of the liberal economic policy was the privatization and the support of private enterprises, this line also prevailed in the field of media, and a number of private TV and radio stations were established. The resulting pluralistic media market has had a beneficial effect on private initiatives and the civil sphere. (Burak, 2021:64)

By the early 1990s, a thriving civil society could be found in Turkey. The fact that Turkey's foreign policy has also become more and more active has been a great boost for the organizations that focus mostly on charitable activities. Turkish aid organizations first showed their strength in the Balkan war and then became characteristic participants in charitable work in conflict zones around the world. In addition to foreign charitable activities, two domestic events also made a positive contribution to the development of Turkish NGOs in the 1990s. In 1996, an international meeting called the Global Habitat Conference was held in Istanbul, where Turkish civil activists were able to show their power to the world for the first time. And during the horrific 1999 earthquake in the eastern basin of the Marmara Sea, Turkish charities worked in a great way with non-governmental groups from abroad. These two events have put Turkish civil society on the world map. (Burak, 2021:65) The Turkish civil society has also benefited from the country's Euro-Atlantic integration. The 1999 Helsinki Summit and the so-called Copenhagen criteria to join the European Union point to the democratization and Europeanisation of Turkey. In the spirit of this democratization, the legal framework for civil organizations was also facilitated by Turkish legislation at the turn of the millennium. (Diez et al, 2005:7)

The Justice and Development Party (AKP), which came to power in 2002, took over at a time when politics could already build well on a stable civil society. These conservative, moderate Islamist civil society organizations have already played a role in the success of large-scale victories of moderate Islamists of the AKP. During the nearly two decades of governance of the

AKP, a politically based divide has been consolidated in Turkish society, of which the civil sphere is no exception. AKP governments are counting on their loyal civilian partners not only to mobilize the electorate, but also to address serious social challenges such as the care for and integration of Syrian refugees, or the media coverage of the coronavirus, vaccination campaigns or the care for quarantined people. The AKP has significantly reshaped Turkish civil society. They declared some of the once loyal organizations enemies because they saw in them the perpetrators of the July 15, 2016 coup attempt. And at the ideological and political level, rival groups are increasingly opposed by the administration of Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

During the rule of the AKP, self-government was also characterized by a relative democratic deficit. Local charities were pushed into the power vacuum that sometimes appeared at the local level as early as the 2000s, and a lot of work was taken over from municipalities and village notary offices by the NGOs. At the same time, the AKP was able to successfully reframe the interpretation of this situation to the small town and village population by telling that all these services are done by the government, the government provided the opportunity for associations and foundations. As so many people in the countryside accepted this element of government communication, civil activism was able to increase the popularity of the ruling party even if it was precisely the political inertia that caused the situation that private individuals had to activate themselves. (Metin, 2011:195)

The best example of such a division and rearrangement of civil society is how fiercely Erdogan and the AKP government have been acting against civil society actors they do not like since 2016.

### **Growing conflicts between the Turkish government and civil society**

AKP governments and Recep Tayyip Erdogan have repeatedly testified that they will use all their political clout to make certain NGOs and activists impossible. One of the most striking such cases occurred in 2017, when the Turkish delegation left one of the meetings of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) because a representative of the Journalists and Writers Foundation had the floor. According to the Turkish government, this organization is clearly linked to the religious leader Fetullah Gulen, whom the AKP cabinet associates with the 2016 coup attempt and whose community has been declared a terrorist organization by the name of FETO. The President of the Republic of Turkey sought to veto the participation of civil society activists close to Gulen at the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in September 2018. (Tamklin, 2018)

Contrary to the fierce action of the AKP and Erdogan, Western and primarily American policymakers have already raised their voices in January 2018. U.S. Sens. Roger Wicker and Ben Cardin wrote to Assistant Secretary

of State Wess Mitchell, asking the U.S. government to call on Erdogan to exercise restraint and do everything possible to get all NGOs that need it involved in the work of the OSCE. At the same time, Turkey has also found some allies that shared Ankara's position. Kyrgyzstan and Azerbaijan stood by the Turks not only for kinship and common strategic, geopolitical goals, but because Gulen's network also gained serious influence in their countries and became dangerous for the government. In this political context, Western actors feared Erdogan and did not necessarily dare to openly conflict with him because they feared that following a diplomatic blow, the Turkish government would impose severe restrictions on NGOs in Turkey. (Tamklin, 2018)

„Earlier studies note that the strong state has always been suspicious, if not hostile, towards civil society because it allowed the masses from the periphery to voice discontent and mobilize against the state authority.” (Yabanci, 2019:289) The NGOs attacked by the Turkish government and Erdogan, whatever their peripheral situation in Turkish society, have a perceptible mobilization force due to their international background, so they can somewhat counterbalance the rigor of the political system and leadership.

At the end of 2020, Erdogan and the AKP saw the heightened threat of terrorism as a good excuse to further tighten regulations restricting the lives of NGOs. On December 27, 2020, the Turkish Grand National Assembly passed a law called Preventing Financing of Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction, which provides extraordinary additional rights to the Minister of the Interior, who oversees foundations and associations. One paragraph, for example, states that if a foundation becomes involved in a suspicion of terrorist support, the interior minister can replace its leadership by government people who can act as quasi-trustees and have substantially free control over the organization's assets. (Unker, 2020)

Opposition parties and prominent NGOs such as the Human Rights Association, Amnesty International Turkey and the Federation of Women Associations of Turkey have drawn attention after the vote on the above law to the fact that since terrorist support is a very broad concept in Turkish law, very many organizations may disappear, their assets may be wasted. For example, Ozturk Turkdogan from the Human Rights Association explained that about 300,000 Turkish citizens are prosecuted under the Turkish Penal Code every year on charges of supporting terrorism, so it is very easy to get any Turkish NGO to be accused of cooperating with a terrorist organization. This is all the more true as Turkey has indeed been fighting an ideologically very colorful enemy for decades, with a number of active terrorist groups operating in Turkey, ranging from extremist Islamists (ISIS) to Kurdish separatists (PKK) to far-left militants (DHKP-C), and they also have some social base, too. At the same time, it is clear that this legislation was created

only to make the government-critical civil sphere even more impossible and to transfer its assets to pro-government organizations. (Unker, 2020)

According to the opposition and government-critical civic groups, the law targets a well-defined group of civic organizations and activists. Women's rights activist Canan Gullu, for example, believes those most at risk are those who operate in Turkey as part of some liberal-oriented international networks. According to Gullu, groups fighting for refugee rights or supporting the LGBTQ community may even be stigmatized and discribed as traitors. Organizations working on gender equality are also plagued by Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, which in any case makes certain social groups more vulnerable. (Unker, 2020)

The new regulation also raises the risk of an increase in atrocities, arrests and imprisonment against prominent civilian leaders. This was already the situation in the pre-2020 period, for example in the case of Taner Kilic and Osman Kavala.

### **Prosecution of the Turkish branch of Amnesty International**

Since 2016, two of the political and legal attacks on Turkish civil society have reached the stimulus threshold of the international community. In the so-called Buyukada lawsuit, the Turkish section of Amnesty International (AI) is being acted upon by the Turkish authorities. Buyukada, or "Big Island," is one of Istanbul's elegant neighborhoods, located in the Sea of Marmara, and is a part of the Princess Islands, which can be reached in about an hour's boat ride from the city's Asian center. The gathering, which took place in one of the hotels on the island, was carried out in 2017 by the Turkish branch of the international NGO, but the meeting was knocked down by special police units following an anonymous report. Eleven activists, including foreign nationals, were detained during the raid. Among those arrested were Taner Kilic, honorary president of the AI organization in Turkey, and almost the entire leadership of the group. Kilic and his associates were accused of collaborating with FETO, who planned the coup attempt according to the government, but at the same time, the accusations were already quite weak. Turkish and international publics were really shocked by the news that Kilic had been sentenced by the court to 6 years and 3 months in prison in July 2020, but the organization's actual leaders, including President Idil Eser, had also been sentenced to two years in the first instance. (Simsek, 2020)

Andrew Gardner, an international expert at Amnesty International, wrote on Twitter against the charges and the court verdict that he cannot accept them. Gardner called the Turkish authorities' procedure outrageous and absurd. He expressed his view that repression was continuing in Turkey, but also added that AI would not stop fighting for human rights and would do

everything in its power to secure the release of their Turkish staff.(Simsek, 2020) Gardner's statement was also reinforced by the fact that Amnesty International had been campaigning in the Buyukada case for three years at the time. An international signature-gathering action was conducted and an English-language document was prepared in which the allegations against Taner Kilic and AI were itemized.

Nothing proves better that politically motivated, created accusations were made against the defendants in the Buyukada lawsuit than the fact that in June 2021, a decision of the Turkish Constitutional Court invalidated the charges fabricated by the prosecution against AI's Turkish director, Idil Eser. This Supreme Judicial Forum has also ruled that Eser and one of his direct colleagues, Ozlem Dalkiran, are each required to pay 40,000 Turkish lira damages by the Turkish state. In essence, it turned out that everything that was brought against the Turkish Amnesty should be perfectly legal in a democratic system. The meeting itself took place in a hotel that is open to the public, meaning that the meeting can in no way be called a secret meeting. It is also absurd that AI leaders were set up as foreign spies by the Turkish political elite, the media and the prosecution, because although they could have done so, they did not consult in secret and there was nothing that was contrary to Turkish law. (Tahincioglu, 2021)

The decision of the Constitutional Court also ruled that AI leaders did not commit any crime by maintaining contact with Taner Kilic. In fact, Kilic downloaded an app on his cell phone called ByLock in 2014 that enabled him to send encrypted messages, which was really popular among Fetullah Gulen's followers. The prosecution could not prove against Kilic himself that he had used this app in connection with the coup attempt, and the court ruled that it was not a sin in itself to meet someone with ByLock on their device. (Tahincioglu, 2021)

If one looks for the political reasons behind the harassment of Amnesty International in Turkey, it can clearly be seen that the AKP and Recep Tayyip Erdogan were probably infuriated by the AI campaign in which they sought to take action against the use of tear gas. During the suppression of the 2016 coup attempt and the ensuing state of emergency, Turkish law enforcement agencies deployed very large amounts of tear gas against oppositionists and government critics. Seeing this, Amnesty International was embarking on international sensitization and has even tried to put pressure on the South Korean government not to sell tear gas to the Turks. The Turkish government may have thought that with the international network behind it, AI was trying to obstruct the work of Turkish internal affairs agencies and colluding with FETO. (Tahincioglu, 2021)

Another campaign by Amnesty International that has received an interesting political response, was linked to the 2013 events in Gezi Park. In

that year, local patriots, environmentalists and oppositionists were protesting in defense of a popular promenade in the European part of Istanbul, they were the ones who were first hit by serious physical violence on the streets since the AKP came to power in 2002. The first crisis during Erdogan's leadership was this protracted series of protests, during which a certain H. Y. fell victim to police brutality. AI, along with two Turkish human rights NGOs, launched a campaign to explore the H. Y. case. By implication, the AKP and Erdogan may have been disturbed that civil activists were upset by such an old case, believed to be closed, that could put another focus on the AKP's first inconveniences. Officially, the court here did not complain that Amnesty was dealing with the H. Y. case, but that, based on an email, it was suspected that members of the organization were hiding important information from the authorities. They also wanted to weigh in on the fact that AI has an underground activity, were foreign agents and maybe even co-operating with FETO. (Tahincioglu, 2021) The events in the Gezi Park are a splash in the eyes of Erdogan and the AKP because it was the point in recent Turkish history that opposition-affiliated organizations sought a path towards each other and built a rudimentary network of action. After June 2013, political resistance subsided, but forms of cooperation emerged between left-wing and liberal NGOs, and that seriously disturbed the Islamists of the AKP. (Yalcin, 2015:90)

### **Osman Kavala's prosecution**

The case of Osman Kavala's harassment by the Turkish authorities is also noticeably well linked to the 2013 events in Gezi Park. Kavala, a philanthropist who has been well known for a decade, has supported a number of issues with which he has been able to win the dislike of the AKP, but still only came to the forefront in 2013. As in the previous story, there was a well-defined international network, Amnesty International, so behind Kavala appears the George Soros-branded Open Society Foundation, whose Kavala led its subsidiary in Turkey. The ongoing proceedings against Kavala show that Erdogan tries to reframe the events, and demonstrate that Soros -just like Gulen in 2016- tried to overthrow him in 2013. (Farooq, 2021)

Typically, Kavala was left free to operate for years. Moreover, he was not arrested immediately after the 2016 coup attempt, but only in October 2017. He was then detained for two years without even a real indictment being filed against him. Finally, in 2020, this civil activist was also released for a time. After he was arrested again, his case was merged with other persons' trial, so now he will be forced to stand in front of the court with 51 people. Kavala's case begins to resemble an extremely complex conspiracy theory, where neither Kavala but George Soros is the protagonist. Like other political leaders, such as Viktor Orban of Hungary, Erdogan likes to philosophize about

Soros in his speeches and calls him the head of an international network that seeks to destabilize the global political status quo. (Farooq, 2021)

Kavala's case is receiving extraordinary attention from the international public, and Erdogan is also ready to engage in diplomatic conflicts in order to continue to crack down on his critical civil activists and networks. Erdogan has also expressed concerns about this process, including the European Union and the Council of Europe, of which Turkey is a member. (Farooq, 2021) Some Western countries, the 7 member states of the European Union, the United States, Canada and New Zealand have decided to try to make Erdogan aware of their own displeasure in a louder voice than European bodies. On October 18, 2021, the ambassadors of the 10 countries drafted a call asking the Turkish government to release Osman Kavala. Unspoken, this letter contained the threat that if Erdogan would not release Kavala, these countries could sever diplomatic relations with Turkey. The Turkish head of state, then returning from Africa, remarked quite haughtily that his country did not even need the "luxury" to agree with Western critics on this matter. He then threatened to ask the Foreign Minister to expel the 10 signatories from the country. Eventually, Erdogan was forced to back down, as the expulsion of Western diplomats could have put the Turkish leader in an extremely difficult position in terms of world politics and diplomacy. This is because a few days after the incident, an Erdogan-Biden summit was planned, before which it would have looked very unfortunate to ban the US ambassador from Turkey. (Sayin, 2021)

Kavala's release was not only promoted by the Western political elite and diplomatic corps because he was George Soros's Turkish man, but also because there were no objective legal arguments in favor of arresting and convicting the civilian activist. As early as November 2017, during the pre-trial detention proceedings, the Turkish court clarified that in the case of Kavala, there was no tangible evidence that he himself had been violent or had supported the violent takeover in either 2013 or 2016. The court also ruled that Kavala's detention was also against international law, as it was contrary to Turkey's commitments, the European Convention on Human Rights, which Turkey had also signed. (Turkut, 2020:291)

Experts well versed in the case agree that Kavala's detention is a preemptive blow on the part of the Turkish judiciary, and there is a clear political will behind it. They want to silence Kavala and the other outspoken civil activists like him. It can be very uncomfortable for the Turkish government that NGOs with an international background to start to analyze the human rights record of the Republic of Turkey. If violations leak from within the country, it can be detrimental to AKP policy in both ways. On the one hand, it is destroying Turkey's international reputation and, on the other, it can erode the AKP's already weakening electoral base. (Turkut, 2020:292)



## **Changes in the landscape of Turkish civil society organizations**

The membership of Turkish NGOs is low. It is common for the Turkish people to be reluctant to take part in such initiatives even today. Among other things, because they are afraid of retaliation such as that has befallen on the leaders of Amnesty International and the Open Society Foundation in Turkey. According to an international survey conducted between 2010 and 2014, Turks are among the most socially inactive peoples. 12% of the population is a member of an association or cooperates with foundations. Of the 65 countries studied, Turkey ranks 55th. (Sahin and Akboga, 2019:415)

Compared to the size of the country, civil society has still not reached its ideal size, but it can be said that its role in Turkish society is becoming increasingly important. According to a summary compiled by the Turkish Foundation for Life (Yasama Dair Vakfi) back in 2015, there were a total of 126,730 NGOs in Turkey that has more than 80 million inhabitants. Out of these organizations 108,712 were associations and 4,968 opted for the more traditional form of foundation. (Cicek, 2017:23) Following the 2016 coup attempt, their number declined, as many organizations were banned during the state of emergency, but new ones have since been created, often at the initiative of the government to replace the disbanded organizations. Five years after the Foundation for Life's investigation, in 2020, the Turkish Interior Ministry reported that there were 120,668 NGOs in the country, of which 5,774 were foundations. (Dogan and Genc, 2020: 129) This means that in five years there has been a slight decrease in the total number of organizations, but there is a significant increase in the number of foundations. In this, too, Islamic traditionalism is actually at work, as Islamic civilization has a millennial tradition of foundations. In the Middle Ages, both mosque and Quran schools functioned as a *vakif*, i.e. as a foundation.

The above detailed prosecution of civil activists and organizations, and other recent events and phenomena tend enormously to modify the situation of these 120.000 Turkish NGOs. A conservative-liberal or a religious-secular confrontation has been well perceived in Turkish society for decades. For some time now, this has been reflected in the system of non-governmental organizations. At the same time, this division has only been strengthened and will be strengthened by the ruling Justice and Development Party, which is doing its utmost to rearrange the terrain and favor civic initiatives close to the government.

It can be observed that Turkish NGOs today are organized along four characteristic strategic principles, and the Turkish state seeks to exploit them for its own purposes in each case. There are organizations that provide primarily charitable services that the state is unable or unwilling to give. For other groups, it is true that they want to introduce innovations into society. The third category includes those for whom the preservation and transmission

of values and traditions is of paramount importance. While the fourth, in the present situation, perhaps the most important, their operating principle is legal protection. (Akinci, 2020:1843-1814)

In the case of the latter group, the ongoing coronavirus epidemic has best shown that the Turkish government not only wants to build on their activities, but also exploits them in its own way. From the advocacy organizations, the political elite has made communication channels that do not represent the interests of different social groups, but mediate and explain government policies and actions to these groups. From a policy perspective, the advantage of advocacy organizations is that they mostly deal with well-defined social groups, including minorities, and disadvantaged people. The AKP government did not seek out these associations and foundations during the epidemic, for example, to assess the needs of immigrant communities composed of millions of individuals in Turkey, but used advocates as a one-way channel to migrants of Syrian and other origins. As a result, 20% of Turkish refugee NGOs were already blowing a retreat during the first wave of the pandemic, and as they did not want to become a government tool, and they withdrew completely from the scene of the fight against COVID-19 in Turkey. (Akinci, 2020:1843-1814)

Turkish NGOs that have ultimately decided to take on the challenges of epidemic management are also reporting extreme pressure. Non-governmental groups received many expectations from two directions at once: society hoped they would operate as skillfully as possible, and the government viewed them as executors of state procedures. In addition to the double pressure, Turkish NGOs, especially associations and foundations working in the charitable sector and human rights defenders, have dwindled their financial resources, a situation exacerbated by the weakening of the Turkish and global economies. Due to financial reasons, about one third of the non-governmental organizations working in pandemic management were forced to liquidate or suspend their operations. This means that in the absence of government or foreign financial support, the Turkish civil sphere finds itself in increasingly difficult conditions. In these circumstances, it is also becoming increasingly difficult to maintain the pluralism and democracy of civil society. (Akinci, 2020:1845) During the COVID-19 pandemic, one Turkish civil umbrella organization, the Third Sector Foundation of Turkey (TUSEV), also conducted a survey of how civil society responded to the challenges posed by the epidemic. Based on the responses to their questionnaires, the situation could have been even more severe in 2020 than mentioned above. 43% of respondents stated that they had to cancel events, trainings and conferences already organized due to their additional costs. At the same time, 83% indicated that they had met with increased demands from the Turkish people, with so many more wanting to use their services. (Dogan and Genc, 2020:136)

The relative weakening of the Turkish humanitarian civil sector is a serious loss for Turkish society as a whole and is also having a negative impact on the AKP government itself. As already mentioned, the rise of the Turkish civil sphere has been seriously helped by the emergence of Turkish charitable foundations in various conflict zones around the world since the first half of the 1990s. At first they were very active in the Balkan war, later in the Middle East, Africa and other parts of the world. Seeing these successes, the Turkish political leadership has also placed a number of international projects in the government structure within a government development agency, the Turkish Cooperation and Development Agency (TIKA). Charitable and other assistance has become an important export and has contributed to the rapid improvement of Turkey's international image. AKP governments, with TIKA coordinating civic initiatives, had even more significant goals. In 2017, for example, the head of the organization, Serdar Cam, said that TIKA is also good at decentralizing an overly Western-centered global world. (Altunisik, 2019:2)

Building on the activism of charitable NGOs and the professionalism of TIKA, AKP governments are working to build a specific Turkish model in the field of humanitarian diplomacy. The AKP's policy in this regard is entirely in line with the party's ideology. It was already clear that even before the events in Gezi Park, it supported two groups in this regard: religious foundations and small and medium-sized businesses run by well-known Muslims. Abroad, with the help of these actors, they are not looking for government partners, but for local leaders and civic actors. As Turkish NGOs seem to be cooperating in this system with their foreign partners, they can portray these actions in a way that they have no political overtones and do not serve the Turkish government's foreign policy goals. (Altunisik, 2019:3)

If one looks at the workings of TIKA and its affiliated NGOs, which are loyal to the Turkish government and mostly tied to Islamic culture, one can clearly see that this Turkish model is, indeed, an ideological one. TIKA's annual report for 2017 also states that the main motive for the organization's actions abroad is to promote the Ottoman and Islamic compassion approach. The otherwise secular Republic of Turkey carries out religious propaganda and activities aimed at converting non-Muslims in a perceptible way abroad. TIKA and the Turkish Islamic NGOs are involved in identity building on two levels. On the one hand, they seek to strengthen the world's Muslim population in their faith and to promote Islam among non-Muslims through charitable actions. On the other hand, they also cover Turkey as they are consolidating the self-consciousness of the Turks as a Muslim nation. (Altunisik, 2019:4)

## **Methodology**

The purpose of this article is to provide a comprehensive overview of the state of civil society in Turkey, with a focus on the challenges facing civil society organizations in the country. To achieve this goal, a literature review was conducted that drew on a variety of sources, including academic articles, reports, and news articles.

The review takes a qualitative approach, using a thematic analysis to identify the key issues discussed in the literature. The themes that emerged from the analysis were organized into three main sections: the case of Osman Kavala, changes in the landscape of Turkish civil society organizations, and the polarization of Turkish civil society.

The first section of the article provides an overview of the case of Osman Kavala, a prominent civil activist who has been targeted by Turkish authorities. The section examines the circumstances surrounding his detention, and the broader political context that led to his arrest. It also discusses the international response to Kavala's detention, and the ways in which civil society organizations have mobilized to advocate for his release.

The second section of the article examines changes in the landscape of Turkish civil society organizations. It discusses the decline in membership of Turkish NGOs, and the reasons behind this trend. The section also explores the challenges that civil society organizations have faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, including financial pressures and difficulties in carrying out their work.

The third section of the article discusses the polarization of Turkish civil society, and the challenges facing civil society organizations that are critical of the Turkish government. It examines the ways in which the Turkish government has sought to co-opt civil society organizations, and the impact that this has had on the overall health of civil society in the country. The section also explores the ways in which civil society organizations have responded to these challenges, including through advocacy and resistance.

Overall, this literature review provides a comprehensive overview of the state of civil society in Turkey, and highlights the key challenges facing civil society organizations in the country. By drawing on a range of sources, the article provides a nuanced and detailed analysis of the issues at play, and offers insights into the ways in which civil society organizations are responding to these challenges.

## **Discussions**

This article provides a comprehensive overview of the state of civil society in Turkey, including the challenges and struggles faced by civil activists and organizations. The article highlights the case of Osman Kavala, a well-known philanthropist who has been targeted by the Turkish authorities,

as an example of the ongoing crackdown on critical civil activists and networks. The article also discusses the changes in the landscape of Turkish civil society organizations, including the decline in membership and the increasing importance of NGOs in Turkish society.

One of the most significant challenges facing civil society in Turkey is the polarization of society, which is also reflected in the civil sector. The article notes that there is a significant division within civil society, with some organizations being more critical of the state and government, while others are more loyal to the state and comply with its laws. This division often leads to conflicts and struggles within civil society.

Another challenge is the ease with which the government can control and manipulate NGOs through financial and other subsidies, leading to inequality in the distribution of resources and opportunities for organizations that share the ideology of the ruling party. This inequality has resulted in an Islamist vs. secular dichotomy dominating Turkish civil society.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has also exacerbated the challenges facing civil society organizations in Turkey, including financial constraints and increased demand for their services. Many organizations have been forced to cancel events and even liquidate or suspend their operations due to the pandemic's economic impact. The government has also exploited NGOs' work during the pandemic, using them as communication channels to mediate government policies and actions to specific social groups.

Overall, the article highlights the importance of civil society in Turkish society and the challenges and struggles facing the sector. It also underscores the need for greater support and protection for civil activists and organizations to promote pluralism and democracy in Turkish civil society.

### **Conclusion or dealing with the polarization of the Turkish civil society**

The division of Turkish society is also noticeable in civil society, for the reasons described above. In the literature this schism is found among the secular vs. found among the Turks. It is most often described as a conflict between Islamist positions, but a completely different approach emerges. According to this, Turkish NGOs can also be divided into two groups by differentiating between those who focus on their responsibilities and those who demand complete freedom from the government. In other words, the Turkish civil sphere has a loyal segment that respects the state in all circumstances, passes laws and strives to meet the expectations of the Justice and Development Party. The other group belongs to organizations that are more critical of the state, laws, and government, and want to conform to those they represent or serve. (Keyman et. al, 2017:22)

This division, which manifests itself among non-governmental organizations dependent on the state and fighting with the state, leads to a

significant division within civil society and sometimes induces serious struggles. All major forms of conflict in Turkish society are manifested. Among other things, one can get a good idea of the ethnic conflict within the country. The largest minority, the Kurds is a source of conflict as organizations fighting for the enforcement of their rights, or even the against Kurdish separatism, divide the Turkish civil sphere at least as much as it is customary in politics. (Keyman et. al, 2017:22)

The fragmentation and politicization of Turkish civil society is also characterized by the ease or difficulty with which an organization can obtain tax benefits provided by the state and the likelihood of it benefiting from state subsidies. Before the AKP came to power in 2002, the Human Rights and Freedoms Foundation (IHH), which has a committed Sunni Muslim identity, had never received any state support, nor did it receive the principle of the greatest concession. At the same time, today IHH is one of the government's favorite NGOs, taking advantage of the opportunities to operate a serious infrastructure. Obviously, it must also be acknowledged that they nevertheless do a very valuable charitable work in almost all of the countries of the World. (Keyman, et al., 2017:23)

A survey of NGOs working with women also showed why civil society activists believe Turkish President AKP and Recep Tayyip Erdogan have set up a system of inequality in Turkish civil society. The most frequently voiced reason among opinion leaders is that the Turkish political leadership wants to shape public opinion with the help of NGOs. The second most popular response was that so they desire to drown out opposition voices or validate their interests in eyes of EU. (Doyle, 2018:462)

To sum up what has been described so far, the AKP governments have basically divided the Turkish civil sphere at the level of opportunities. Preserving the secular nature of the republic on paper, the system of financial and other subsidies was reorganized so that it would benefit the organizations that share the ideology of the ruling party. In contrast, all Western-minded liberal organizations that are in sharp contrast to Erdogan's views are severely persecuted. This inequality seems in many cases to be such that an Islamist vs. secular dichotomy dominates Turkish civil society.

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