Gender Populism: Civilizational Populist Construction of Gender Identities as Existential Cultural Threats

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Bios

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ABSTRACT

In the Islamist version of civilizational populism, the emotional backlash against the rise of secularism, multiculturalism, progressive ideas, and ‘wokeness,’ has been skillfully employed. While for the populists, populist far right and civilizational populists in the West, usually the Muslims are the civilizational other, we argue in this article, in the Islamist civilizational populism, the list of civilizational enemies of the Muslim way of life also includes feminists and LGBTQ+ rights advocates. Gender populism is a relatively new concept that refers to the use of gender symbolism, language, policy measures, and contestation of gender issues by populist actors. It involves the manipulation of gender roles, stereotypes, and traditional values to appeal to the masses and create divisions between “the people” and “the others.” This paper looks at the case study of gender populism in Turkey, where the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has been in power for over two decades. The AKP has used gender populism to redefine Turkish identity, promote conservative Islamism, and marginalize women and the LGBTQ+ community. The paper also discusses how gender populism has been used by the AKP to marginalize political opponents.
INTRODUCTION

In minimal terms, populism is conceived as a unique set of ideas, one that understands politics as a Manichean struggle between a reified will and sovereignty of the morally pure people and a conspiring elite (Hawkins et al., 2018: 15). In addition to this vertical dimension, populism’s horizontal dimension posits the Manichean binary opposition between insiders and outsiders, whereby the outsiders, who may even be citizens, are regarded as foreigners, if not internal enemies, based on their identities. In some cases, these demonized individuals and groups are seen as internal extensions, agents, puppets and pawns of foreign conspiring forces and institutions such as the European Union (EU), “the Jewish lobby,” and extremist Islam. All these are seen as threatening the people's security, identity, and way of life. In these manifestations of populism, the binary is based on not just national differences but an imagined civilizational enmity (Brubaker, 2017). This type of populism has been dubbed as ‘civilizational populism’ (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2022a; 2022b).

Populism is involved in interpretative processes that lead to intense emotions (Salmela & von Scheve, 2017; 2018). It paints the events, in-groups, and out-groups in certain light (such as harmful vs. beneficial) that precipitate sharp emotions in the audience (Brady et al., 2017; Graham et al., 2011). Emanating from structural (national and international) as well as affective foundations, populism has been effective in speaking to the deep emotions of the masses. It mobilizes people against other groups and/or the state by generating feelings of belonging, love, passion, fear, anger and hate (Morrieson, 2017; DeHanans & Shterin, 2018; Yilmaz, 2018; 2021).

In the Islamist version of civilizational populism, the emotional backlash against the rise of secularism, multiculturalism, progressive ideas, and ‘wokeness,’ has been skillfully employed. While for the populists, populist far right and civilizational populists in the West, usually the Muslims are the civilizational other, we argue in this article, in the Islamist civilizational populism, the list of civilizational enemies of the Muslim way of life also includes feminists and LGBTQ+ rights advocates.
Much like the highly contested definitional parameters of populism, there is no singular definition of the term ‘gender populism.’ It is a rather new combination that has peaked the interests of academics since the mid-2010s. Gender populism is essentially the use of gender symbolism, language, policy measures and contestation of gender issues by populist actors. For instance, both left- and right-wing populist groups in many Western communities have expressed a need to “protect” their countries, specifically women, from the “illiberal” or “conservative” influences of migrant groups. They profile migrant men as a security threat or as “groomers” and some countries have taken issue with women’s choice to wear a headscarf (Hadj-Abdou, 2018).

At the same time, it is not uncommon to see a huge wave of resistance from right-wing groups reading gender roles. These groups aim to “restore” traditional gender roles which leads them to marginalize feminist directives and disapprove of the LGBTQI+ movements (Agius et al., 2020; Roose, 2020; Gokariksel et al., 2019).

This first stream of literature shows how gender populism helps in the creation of an ideal people or “the people” as opposed to “the others” based on what they consider deviance from their relative gender norms. This also intertwines with the idea of civilizational populism because it gives an image of a utopian dream society or urges people to revert to “the golden era” e.g., the promotion of traditional roles for women (Sledzinska-Simon, 2020).

Gender populism also helps in creating the image of populist leaders in many cases (Ashwin & Utrata, 2020; Löffler et al., 2020; Eksi & Wood, 2019; Roose, 2018). The leader is not only pure from the corruption of conventional “elite” politicians, but he is also a strongman. The populist demagogue is constructed as a ‘strongman’ who can keep threats a bay and take ‘tough decisions’ (Roose, 2022; 2018). Zia (2022) notes that in Pakistan and India, Imran Khan and Narendra Modi present their ‘strongman’ images and vitality as part of their gender populism. Similarly, Eksi and Wood (2019) discuss how both Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan through symbolic (language and body language) present themselves as a mixture of strongmen but at the same time fatherly figures to guide “the people.”

Studies of female populist leaders show that gender plays a critical role in shaping the image of the leader in the eyes of “the people.” In France, Marine Le Pen’s gender populism constructs her as a mother saving the country from the cultural threats posed by ‘the others’ and her comparison to Jonah of Arc makes her the ‘brave hero’ who needs to act against threats such as migration (Geva, 2019; Sayan-Cengiz & Tekin, 2019).

The literature on gender populism also points out that gender populism
is used to marginalize “the others” or “the elite.” One of the most common manifestations is the effeminization of ‘the elites’ and ‘the others’ by populist leaders (Agius et al., 2020; Ashwin & Utrata, 2020; Löffler et al., 2020; Eksi & Wood, 2019; Roose, 2018).

By contrasting “feminine” political opposition, populist leaders contrast them with their “strong” image to gain credibility in the eyes of voters. For example, in the Philippines, the former President Rodrigo Duterte, is known for this ‘tough man’ acts and imagery while he uses terms such as “bitches,” “son of a bitch,” “chicken-hearted,” “sissy” and “idiots” to address all those who oppose him (UCA News, 2019; Bonnet, 2018; McKirdy, 2016).

In short, gender populism manifests in various forms and is highly determined by contextual factors. It helps in the creation of “the people,” the populist leader/party, and “the others.” Simultaneously, it adds layers to the idea of an “ideal” society and is frequently used to marginalize both civilian and political opposition to populist forces. In a
Given the heated debates around the 2023 general elections, various hues of gender populism have emerged which this article will discuss along with the party’s past recorded use of the phenomenon.

The first signs of AKP’s populism were via the means of gender populism in 2007 when the party was contesting to secure its second term. To maintain its support, AKP positioned itself directly in a clash with the Kemalist principles of modernization which had previously barred women from wearing headscarves in public offices and educational institutions (Yilmaz & Shakil, 2021). At that time, AKP predominantly represented Muslims and the future (possible) first lady wore a headscarf which was unprecedented in the republic’s history. AKP presented itself as a
defender of women’s rights as it sought to reverse the headscarf ban. This led to a mass protest by the Kemalist elite especially on social media which was dubbed “a digital coup” and in-person rallies “Republican Rallies.”

To counter this Kemalist resistance, AKP did not simply make this a matter of right of choice for women, but it constructed the issue as a Manichean binary between Islam and the West, Western ideals being imposed by the Kemalists (Yilmaz & Shakil, 2021). This overtly ‘human rights issue’ was, at its core, the beginning of the populist Islamist ideology of AKP. Erdogan in 2013 led the country to abolish this ban as he announced in the parliament, “We have now abolished an archaic provision which was against the spirit of the republic. It’s a step toward normalization.”

But this “normalization” is towards Islamist ideas of gender roles. For instance, during the 2010s on several occasions, the then Prime Minister and now President Erdogan expressed gender conservatism. In 2014 during an international summit, he said, “You cannot make men and women equal,” […] That is against creation. Their natures are different. Their dispositions are different.” He also accused feminists of not understanding the idea of “motherhood.” He also openly said Muslim families should not use birth control, “I will say it clearly … We need to increase the number of our descendants.” He added, “People talk about birth control, about family planning. No Muslim family can understand and accept that. As God and as the great Prophet said, we will go this way. Over the years he has glorified the role of mothers and demonized the idea of a non-traditional women, for example, he said, “A woman above all else is a mother.” He has also called women “half workers” and labelled childfree women “deficient.” His exact quote for this instance reads, “A woman who rejects motherhood, who refrains from being around the house, however successful her working life is deficient, is incomplete.”

In 2021, during a meeting with various officials from the EU, Erdogan ignored the head of the Union, Ursula von der Leyen, and left her standing while all the other men were seated on chairs. In a later comment, von der Leyen noted, “I am the first woman to be President of the European Commission. I am the President of the European Commission, and this is how I expected to be treated when visiting Turkey two weeks ago, like a commission president, but I was not […] Would this have happened if I had worn a suit and a tie? In the pictures of previous meetings, I did not see any shortage of chairs, but then again, I did not see any women in these pictures either.”

These are not just simple comments by an elected official, they have real-life consequences for women in the country. Since AKP’s ascend to power, the rights of women have greatly suffered in the country compared to its European counterparts e.g., an increase in violence against women. Due to the growing discontent in 2015, following the murder of a woman, a social media and in-person campaign featured men wearing skirts to show
solidarity with women who were being brutally attacked for wearing “Western attire” or were increasingly being subjected to violence without any state efforts to curb them.

A direct policy consequence of this growing disregard for women’s safety is the historical pull out of the country from the Istanbul Convention in 2021. The Convention was designed to ensure pathways of seeking safety in case of domestic abuse by providing not only legal support but ensured victims safe places to reside when feeling from violent partners. AKP and its ultra-conservative alliance argued that this convention was hurting family values or was a hurdle in traditional ways of family law even though the murder rate of Turkish women rose from 66 women being killed in 2002 to 953 in 2009 which is an increase of 1400 percent. Erdogan and his party scraped this crucial form of protection by simply saying, “We will not leave room for a handful of deviants who try to turn the debate into a tool of hostility to our values.”

In addition to Erdogan, over the years various AKP officials and allies have issued highly contested remarks about women and their rights. For instance, in 2014 former Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc publicly on national television advised women not to “laugh in public.” Arınç has also told Nursel Aydoğan, a member of the Turkish Parliament from the Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP), to be quiet because she is a woman. He said, “Madam be quiet. You, as a woman, be quiet.” On a state-sponsored television program, Omer Tugrul Inancer an Islamist religious leader, said that it is a shame for pregnant women to be out in public. Turkey’s Finance and Treasury Minister, Nureddin Nebati, while discussing economic factors clearly stated that women should not or are not “suited” for “heavy work.” He defended his stance by saying, “Women are the crown of our heads, the medicine for our hearts. We do not care about some extremist and ideological discourses. Our values, this civilization and beliefs already order us to be sensitive about women. We just need to understand it. The enrolment rate in school for girls increased to 97 percent. The number of female MPs increased from 4.4 percent to 17.5 percent [under the AKP government]. The participation rate of women in the workforce has increased.”

After over a decade of gender populism, women from within the party and from other opposition parties are open to sexist attacks within the parliament and also by citizens on online social media platforms. Arrest patterns since the 2016 mysterious coup attempt show that women along with dependent children and babies in thousands have been arbitrarily arrested because of their alleged involvement with what the government terms “terrorist” organizations. Women face a greater brunt of state-sponsored violence because they are harassed during “strip searches,” separated from their dependent children and infants, and at times are arrested because of the alleged crime of their husbands.
Turkey’s progress (Yilmaz, 2021).

It was after the mass protests and their violent aftermath that AKP directly targeted the LGBTQI+ community by barring the Pride Parade under the guise of security. Since 2015, the state has actively tried to stop the parade but rather than security concerns the parade is framed as a ‘threat’ to Turkish culture and society as well as a foreign agenda to ‘mislead the youth.’ Nearly a decade after Erdogan has blamed ‘deviant’ youth for causing unrest and rioting over the years. In 2021 during a mass protest at a higher educational institute, the President Erdogan again blamed the group and said, “You are not the LGBT youth [to his followers], not the youth who commit acts of vandalism. On the contrary, you are the ones who repair broken hearts.” In 2022 he hinted at introducing legislation to

Another gender dimension of AKP’s populism has been directed at the LGBTQI+ community. As early as 2013 the group has been repeatedly targeted by the party. In the country, there are no laws that criminalize or legalize the community but in recent years with the growth of Islamist views, state-led persecution and hate crime towards the community has escalated.

One of the most prominent waves of opposition to AKP took place in 2013 in the form of the Gezi Park protests. The protests began as a peaceful denunciation of AKP’s gentrification of public spaces in Istanbul and soon turned into a violent spectacle due to police brutality. After the death and injury of several peaceful protests and mass rioting, the Gezi Park protest fiasco was framed by the AKP as a ‘foreign’ attempt to curtail Turkey’s progress (Yilmaz, 2021).

Religious Turks was marching in an anti-LGBT demonstration in Şanlıurfa, Turkey in October 2022. Hundreds of people attended the protest with signs that read “Protect your family and your generation.” Photo: Hakan Yalçın.
criminalize LGBTQI+ communities in Turkey and he justified these actions by saying, “Can a strong family have anything to do with LGBT? No, it cannot. … We need a strong family. … Let’s protect our nation together against the onslaughts of deviant and perverted currents.”

Turkish Interior Minister, Suleyman Soylu called the LGBTQI+ community a “propaganda of a terrorist organization” in 2022. He also added, “There is cultural terrorism. The propaganda of a terrorist organization tries to make people forget their values, their religion, unity, parental love, and family loyalty. It is exactly Europe’s policy, exactly America’s policy of divide and rule.” He added, “What will happen? They will bring LGBT to Turkey. Forgive me, men will marry men, women will marry women. It just suits (the main opposition CHP leader Kemal) Kilicdaroglu. What a shame. It lacks all values. They are trying to create a policy based on an understanding that will alter almost all our values so that they can win the hearts of the Europeans and the West.”

In 2023, during a re-election campaign Erdogan said, “In this nation, the foundations of the family are stable. LGBT will not emerge in this country.” He went on to say, “Stand up straight, like a man: that is how our families are.” He contrasted this by publicly accusing Kemal Kilicdaroglu, the alliance opposition leader, of being gay, as Erdogan at a rally said, “We know that Mr Kemal is an LGBT person.”

During the period the LGBTQI+ community has been demonized as a threat to “family” and a ploy of the West, which according to AKP, represents “deviant structures” and stands as a symbol of a “virus of heresy.” At the same time, political opposition is not only targeted for its support for the community, but they are emasculated by being labelled as part of the community.

The 2023 elections have sadly become a showcase of homophobia by AKP. Various AKP electoral candidates along with Erdogan have weaponized gender populism. They have attacked and accused the opposition coalition as supporters of ‘un-Islamic’ and ‘Western agendas’ because they supported the LGBTQI+ community and at times AKP has attacked the opposition by labelling them as ‘gay’ or ‘LGBT’ to construct them as weak, alien and loyal to the West.
CONCLUSION

While the 2023 presidential and general elections hold political significance for all those in Turkey, for women and the LGBTQI+ community these elections directly impact their future existence. This wave of Islamist reengineering of society, under the AKP regime, has changed the country’s social fabric. Women are increasingly left without state support when at their most vulnerable while top ministers and officials are openly issuing sexist comments and remarks. The Turkish idea of womanhood has undergone extensive change. Motherhood, virtue, and modesty are new parameters where those who oppose these traditional confines are constantly demonized, marginalized, or demonized. Similarly, the LGBTQI+ community, which enjoyed a relatively obscure existence, has become the front of a cultural battle. Their existence is seen as a direct existential threat positioned by the West to the Turkish ‘traditional’ values.

These are not merely instances of the state being simply sexist or sexism being displayed by elected parliamentarians. It is rather a marriage between populism and gender conservatism which has fed AKP's civilizational populism. It is a layer of populism that helps in the creation of “the others” and “the people” while remaining a useful tool to discredit the political opposition also called “the elite.” It also gives a threatening face to the ‘crises’ under the guise of being a threat to family and the way of life, making it quite simple and relatable for many. In essence, gender populism also feeds off the sentiments of the masses, it is not purely created by populists.

The election results do matter, but what is worrying is the toll gender populism has taken on the Turkish social fabric. Its attempts to redefine gender roles have been met with opposition but at the same time have found a home in various quarters of society. This means a possible clash of narratives and further polarization in society which emanates gender-based hatred towards women and LBGTQI+ individuals might continue.
REFERENCES


