

# Sharing civil society experience with the Middle East

Wednesday 9 February 2011, by [Ayse Karabat](#)

**It was very entertaining and also surprising to listen to some politicians who were drawing parallels between the situation in Turkey and what is happening in Tunisia.**

While the Tunisians are taking to the streets for real change and the Egyptians are doing the same to replace Hosni Mubarak, Turkish citizens who want to see real change are taking to the salons and the discussion platforms for a brand new constitution because here in Turkey the period of taking to the streets for “big changes” is over for several reasons. Despite some shortcomings, the rule of law has been established — despite some problems, the culture of democracy is gaining strength and more importantly, here in this country, civil society is flourishing and blossoming every day.

While Tunisians and Egyptians are taking to the streets because they don't have any other means to voice their concerns, here in this country the representatives of civil society organizations are meeting to discuss a new constitution. For example, today in İstanbul there will be a meeting of a platform called “We are writing the constitution for all of us.” It is really “all” we: women's rights defenders, students, unions, professional associations, Alevis, Kurds, Caucasians, Laz, conscientious objectors, intellectuals and academics.

This is the way to make a new constitution; after trying it many times, after being forced to approve constitution texts we didn't like but accepted due to the military coups, now we know — actually we learned — how to make a brand-new constitution.

Now we know it is not only the constitution itself, but the way we create that it is important also. Every day we are getting further away from harming each other because we are not willing to buy the ideas clandestine forces try to impose on us that we should be hostile to one another. We are no longer accepting the fact that because our country is bordered by hostile countries we should sacrifice our freedoms in order to stay united. It is not at the desirable level yet, but we are learning to tolerate each other. All of these things are happening for several reasons, but the one of the most important among them is that our civil society is improving.

But it does not mean that Turkish civil society does not have any problems. It faces many challenges, like finding financial resources and new members, as well as legal obstacles. The polarization in politics also sometimes has repercussions on civil society, causing some groups to refuse to cooperate with one another.

However, this is a temporary situation, and if we look at the history of civil society in Turkey, we can say that still the road that we take is important.

Levent Korkut, the chairperson of the Civil Society Development Center, in a previous interview with Today's Zaman summarized the history of civil society in this land in the following way:

“During the classical Ottoman era, we can say that civil society had its own institutions and structures, it was in progress; at least when you compare the situation of Ottoman civil society with other examples in the world at that time, their situation was better. But after the process of modernization, state bureaucracy started to dominate, which led to the emergence of the state elite. The first universities, such as medical faculties and engineering departments, were also established as military academies so knowledge would be available to the military. This is one of the reasons the military enjoyed its power for

a long time — they were controlling the knowledge also.

“Before World War I the first women’s associations were established in Turkey. There were many publications about these associations, and the colorful ethnic structure of the country was reflected in them as well. But the republic was founded as a nation-state. Like all nation-states it had an authoritarian side, which could be considered normal since it was established after extreme turmoil. But the real problem of the republic was ensuring the continuation of the bureaucratic structure, which excluded civilians and of course civil society.”

I think if we must draw parallels between Turkey and other Middle Eastern countries, this summary can be an example of it. They may have had different experiences, but any Middle Eastern person can find something familiar in this summary.

We will be able to say that civil society in Turkey has matured, not only when it becomes strong enough to prevent interventions in democracy, but also when it can share its experience with the Middle East in solidarity.

The cooperation between Turkey’s civil society organizations and regional ones might affect not only Turkey and its region but also the world in a positive way. Then we will be able to shape our home based on humanitarian and civil values, free from the interference of external powers and inadequate politicians. The governments are there to change, but the people and civilians will stay.

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## **Sources**

Source : TdZ, 30 January 2011