

Youth and Participation in Turkey

Youth in Turkey does not and cannot participate in social and political life of the country at levels that would significantly contribute to national human development. Among the most significant reasons for this phenomenon lie economic, attitudinal and cultural as well as strictly political factors. All of these do interact with one another to various degrees and thus renders the consequences quite complex.

Several arguments are worthy of note facing this complexity. One is the dynamic impact that early childhood socialization brings into a child's adolescent life. If a child socializes into an environment that promotes active participation into social life and asks of the children that accountability in public administration is to be sought actively by citizens and responsibility in the creation of public goods should be taken as well, then most likely these kids will grow to support democratic system and actively participate in the development of their communities. Another is the role that, open, responsive, responsible and accountable institutions plays in quality democracies. Unless such an institutional environment faces the individuals, active citizenry may not always pay-off the expected fair benefits and is likely to undermine democratic participation.

Political socialization and quality institutions support and depend on one another. As long as children receive inadequate or conflicting messages from their social environment and schools, they are likely to grow into a political culture and general world view that is not supportive of a well-functioning quality democracy. As emphasized in different sections of this report, education system should make sure that children are given clear signals as to what it takes to run a quality democratic system. Protection of freedoms, citizenship rights and duties should be an integral part of curriculum at all levels with different levels of sophistication. Very critical in this process is acknowledgement and tolerance of differences in religious, ethnic and cultural peculiarities among different groups in society as an integral part of the curriculum and educational practice and experience. What children hear and learn in schools should not totally contradict their daily experiences in their families. Especially in this respect it is critical that fathers do not violate rights of mothers and daughters and that women's rights are actively protected. Women's equal standing within the family should be protected and promoted as part of an active policy in the country. Otherwise, kids socializing into a family environment where women have very little say and are abused frequently; verbally or physically, will provide conflicting signals to the kids besides violating women's basic rights and freedoms. Similarly, to break out of closed parochial social structures, ensuring full participation of future generations into social life necessitates that women's participation in workplace is promoted. Girls socializing into thinking that their primary role in social life is to raise their kids and take care of the house, will not be readily forthcoming in taking responsibility in social life with their full potential. Obviously, a non-participatory setting creates a negative loop within which individuals remain inactive and isolated and the human development in the country suffers from such suboptimal equilibrium. Breaking out of this vicious circle requires conscious effort in the education system.

In Turkey younger generations cannot find an environment within their closest social circles or their families that are conducive for their autonomous and self-confident development during their early childhood. Their families carry the cultural traits of earlier generations that do not support such active participation in social life of the country. As a result, their subsequent lives in their teenage years and afterwards simply lack the quality level of participation in any dimension of social life. An important factor behind these problems of

early phases of child development may be attributed to insufficient economic resources. Given the lack of public resources, only families with sufficient sources can afford to invest in their children's early education which gives these kids a head-start in life guiding them into better schools that prepare them better for further stages of selections into higher levels of education. As such, even at the earliest stages of their lives children grow into well-entrenched inequalities that lock them into inadequate levels of participation in social life. Only provision of public funds can pull these children into adequate early education that could guide them into adequate schooling chances which in turn would provide them better opportunities in the economic sphere.

Equally important in this respect, is the fact that as a result of their early childhood and teenage education their eventual worldview and culture is also expected to change in certain predictable ways. If they remain in below standard schools where socialization into full citizenship rights and duties lag behind modern necessities, these kids inevitably socialize into communal life without acknowledging differences, tolerating and promoting the protection of social differences, free expression of different viewpoints etc. As such, these students' inadequate education locks them into circles of ideological predispositions that resist democratic reforms and promotion and expansion of democratic freedoms and responsibilities as citizens. They are neither ready to pay their due taxes nor are they ready to acknowledge and support protection of religious and ethnic differences. They are more likely thus to be suspicious of the trustworthiness of fellow citizens and refrain from participating into civic activities that help human development in the community and country at large.

Institutions also dynamically shape and be reshaped by individual citizens. If the public institutions at various levels of government simply do not respond to citizen demands and expectations then their adequate funding by citizens' taxes will not be forthcoming. Why would individuals pay their taxes if they think that these funds will be wasted by the bureaucrats either to fill their own pockets or simply distributed to their cronies for political gains. So, to ensure adequate participation at all levels citizens should see that their administration acts responsibly and can be held accountable for the policies followed, monies spent and taxes collected. No education system can provide adequate educational and moral backing to young generations for their proper democratic socialization into public life as long as corruption, irresponsiveness and unaccountability are rampant in the system. School administrations should thus make sure that their students actively take responsibility at all levels of education for the monies spent, policies followed and act accountably for any unsatisfactory performance as an example of what should exist in the real world outside of schools.

At the top level of this proper socialization lie the political parties. In Turkey, political parties have weak grassroots organizations. Representation of women, young generations and ethnic and religious minorities as citizens with distinct political identities are simply non-existent. For long, this was due to the imposition of the 1980 military regime. However, the situation was neither different prior to 1980, nor is it any different nearly twenty five years afterwards. So it is time that the civilian politics takes responsibility for the current situation. One too quick move on this issue that has been on Turkish public agenda is to impose a single organizational structure and ask all parties to conform to a single organizational framework. Immediately in response however, parties find ways to avoid or by-pass such regulations since their survival simply does not depend on these impositions. Rather, different incentives should be given to parties to actively include different social groups, make their financial accounts transparent for their members, and the public at large, and actively seek to

understand and respond to membership demands and expectations. Public funds given to political parties should thus come with a responsibility. If parties do not hold transparent membership records, protect their membership rights against leadership intrusions and oppression and actively seek their participation into party's policymaking process, then public funds should be severed. Women and youth participation could easily be linked to the use of public funds as well. Instead of seeking single organizational structures, imposing certain activities and hierarchical structures, such a more subtle provision of incentives is expected to be more effective in promoting representation and thus participation of different groups into party politics.

Reduction of minimum age for election and party membership is a step in the right direction. However, unless they are complemented by financially based incentive structures more of the same may continue despite on face value young generations might be show cases of parties without having any real biting power over the way politics is being run in the parties. Equally important is that via these incentive systems the financial transparency of the parties can be established more solidly and their links to clientelism can be reduced. The oligarchic control of the party leadership can also be regulated by more active participation of different citizen groups in these parties.