

Introduction

Joining [the] Gezi resistance, being the very first in the very first stage with some important groups, we took our pride back from society. It was important. It was ... stolen from us ... with their homophobic words and discrimination. But ... we took it back.

Boysan Yakar

On Sunday, June 28, 2015, police interrupted the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex (LGBTI)¹ Pride March in Taksim Square – and on Istiklal Street – in Istanbul, Turkey. Officers used tear gas, as well as rubber bullets, against those walking in the march, forcing the protesters to move out of these areas (*Public Opinion*, 2015). Some people were actually able to capture video on cell phones, which showed police also using a water cannon against the marchers (Heavy.com, 2015). This sort of direct violent behavior was new for Turkish police; the 2015 Pride March was the first time that authorities attempted to stop the parade with force. As to why the police attempted to halt the Pride March during that particular year, authorities argued that they decided to interrupt the march because the event took place during the Islamic month of Ramadan (*Public Opinion*, 2015). This is a holy month in the faith, when Muslims believe the Prophet Muhammad first received divine messages from God.

What transpired in 2015 was not the only instance of Turkish police breaking up LGBTI Pride Marches; similar actions occurred the following year. For example, in 2016, a Pride parade in Izmir was cancelled because of what authorities said was “intelligence that there will be terror propaganda” (Uras, 2016). Then, on June 19, 2016, according to reports,

Taksim was put under police blockade prior to another Pride March, the 7th Trans Pride March (organized by Istanbul LGBTI Solidarity Association), which was scheduled to start at 17:00 ... Cumhuriyet Monument at Taksim

Square was surrounded by barriers; water cannons and police vehicles were positioned on Taksim Square, Istiklal Avenue, Cumhuriyet Avenue, Tarlabası Boulevard and various streets that lead to Taksim where a high number of riot police were assigned to. After 15:00, transphobic groups started gathering along Istiklal Avenue. A group that got off Taksim metro station chanted “Ya illah bismillah Allahuakbar” and “Faggots don’t be surprised, don’t test our patience.” At 16:00, metro services were cancelled. A poster that reads, “Dear Passengers, our vehicles will not be stopping at Taksim station for a temporary duration” was hung on the metro. (Tar, 2016)

The police prohibited this Trans Pride March from taking place (although some activists still went to the location of the Pride March). Then, when individuals – including the organization committee – wanted to make a statement to the press about what transpired (Tar, 2016), over 300 police (NBC, 2016) used tear gas, as well as rubber bullets, to break up the crowd of dozens of protesters (BBC, 2016b). Similar to the arguments made in 2015, authorities said they stopped the parade because it took place during Ramadan, and because of “security concerns” (Sezer, 2016), specifically arguing that they acted this way in order to “safeguard security and public order,” (Sezer, 2016), even though the Islamists and ultranationalists – despite threats – never showed up (NBC, 2016). Again, human rights activists were quick to challenge the police decision. For example, Ebru Kiranci, the spokesperson for the LGBTI Solidarity Association said, “(The) holy month of Ramadan is an excuse. If you are going to respect Ramadan, respect us too. The heterosexuals think it’s too much for us, only 2 hours in 365 days” (Sezer, 2016).

Officials in Istanbul issued similar orders for the larger LGBTI Pride March that was to take place on June 26, 2016, saying that they would not allow it to occur based on similar “security concerns,” and that those who tried to take part in the march could see a police intervention (Williams, 2016). While activists used social media to stress the importance of participating in the Pride March, the police still urged people to not attend the event. Despite claims by the LGBTI Pride March organizers that they applied for permission to hold the event, the authorities denied this, saying (over a week before the event) that “[a]n application is required to conduct a procession, parade or race in Istanbul and the governor’s office must be informed. As of today, no such request has been received by the governor’s office” (Uras, 2016). The claim that they did not receive a request for permission contradicts

a statement by the LGBTI rights organization Kaos GL (2016b), which said on their website that an application was “not approved.” Then, when some activists still decided to still carry out the Pride March, the police disrupted the march for the second year in a row. Similar to their actions during the previous marches, plainclothes police officers used tear gas (*Los Angeles Times*, 2016) and rubber bullets to break up the crowds, and then also arrested a total of twenty-nine activists. One individual that was detained was Volker Beck, a member of the German Green Party (*Los Angeles Times*, 2016). Beck stated, “They [the police] ripped my passport away from me and pushed me around. It was a massive and arbitrary police attack that we saw” (Paton, 2016). This crackdown began after “[d]ozens of activists assembled on Istanbul’s main pedestrian street to publicly read a statement marking the end of the gay, lesbian and transgender pride week and to denounce the ban. Several of them were detained, however, before they could speak” (*Los Angeles Times*, 2016). LGBTI rights activists were very upset at what they saw as yet another attempt by the government to restrict the rights of the LGBTI community in Turkey. They continued their demonstrations elsewhere, but were quite critical of the state position, stating on social media that the government’s decision was a “flagrant violation of the constitution and the law” (Williams, 2016). Kaos GL (2016b), an LGBTI rights organization in Turkey, posted on their website the following message:

Our popular Pride Marches, held for 12 years with great joy, are a space where we celebrate our existence, our persistence to live a proud life, and our exponentially growing organized movement. They influence not only LGBTI+ individuals’ lives but everyone. Pride March allows humanity to dream: If this world were different, what kind of people would we be? What would we wear, desire, do, say? What would the streets of this city look like? If we organized with love, what could tear us apart from each other? If we held our bodies, work, and future in our own hands, what would happen? The ban on Pride March is an effort not only to stop us from leading dignified lives but also to stop us from dreaming of this world.

As alluded to earlier, the government’s unwillingness to allow the 2016 Pride March also came after threats by conservative Muslim groups in Turkey against the LGBTI community. On June 13, 2016, an organization named the Anatolia Muslim Youth Association (MAG) said that they would carry out an “intervention” against what

they called an “immoral” Pride March (Korkmaz, 2016). Then, one day later, another youth conservative group by the name of Alperen Hearths – which is linked to the nationalist Great Union Party (BBP) in Turkey – said that they would do what they could to make sure that the 2016 Pride March would not take place. The president of the organization, Kürşat Mican also said, “They can do whatever they want by gathering somewhere, but we definitely don’t want them to walk naked on the sacred soil of our country in the blessed month of Ramadan” (Korkmaz, 2016). Other statements included: “Dear state officials, who close your eyes and ears to this immorality and allow this, we are calling on you to perform your duties to stop this immorality. Otherwise the Alperen Hearths, who are the representatives of the people, will perform their duties on this soil, which was passed to us from our ancestors” (Korkmaz, 2016).

Like the year before, authorities took a similar approach to the 2017 Pride March. The Istanbul government disallowed a Pride March protest to take place, issuing a statement saying, “The march will not be allowed after considering the security of citizens, especially the participants themselves, and tourists who will be in the area” (Uras, 2017). However, despite this ban, some activists assembled anyways, as they viewed this ban as unjust. Police in Istanbul responded by breaking up the Pride March in Istanbul, shooting rubber bullets, as well as tear gas towards the demonstrators. While the government used the “Ramadan” argument for why the protests were shut down, the 2017 protests did not occur during the month. This led Lara Guneş Ozlen, an LGBTI activist and spokesperson for the Pride Week to say that “[f]or the last two years, the march overlapped with Ramadan. This year it does not. So, that is not an excuse [to prevent it] either. I believe the ban is about not accepting our sexual orientation and it is a reaction to the movement getting stronger” (Al Jazeera, 2017). As evidenced by their recent decisions, the government has shown little sign of a willingness to allow LGBTI individuals to gather and march in pride parades.

The situation facing the LGBTI community in Turkey today is a very dangerous one: there exists a real threat to those who are LGBTI in Turkey by those who wish to repress their human rights. The LGBTI community continues to be discriminated against in a country that claims to be an open society for those living within its borders. Again, this topic of LGBTI rights abuses is not limited to violations in Turkey.

The issue of LGBTI rights as a whole is an issue that has been receiving a great deal of attention in domestic and international media. LGBTI individuals in many parts of the world continue to face discrimination, from public statements by political leaders condemning homosexuality (this has been observed in many places across the globe) to murder. LGBTI individuals are often viewed as targets by governments and homophobic members of civil society.

Again, unfortunately, such tensions between LGBTI activists and government leaders (often conservative parties and groups) are quite common not only in Turkey but elsewhere. Yet, what makes Turkey an interesting case for analysis is that leaders of the state have attempted to argue that the country – through its constitution and national law – offers a series of human rights protections to those living within the country. Political elites in the government have tried to sell Turkey as a progressive state that is not only in line with international human rights law norms, but they have also tried to convince the world that Turkey provides full rights to all members of its society. This, coupled with a strong economy, they argue, shows why Turkey would also be an excellent partner and state for economic and political international organizations such as the European Union. However, as I shall argue throughout this book, this perception of Turkey is merely an illusion, one becoming clearer as the days and months pass. As Amnesty International researcher Andrew Gardner explains, “[Turkey] is a tolerant society but also a country badly served by its government and its media in terms of the negative stereotypes about gay people. There has been a long history of negative statements by public officials and the government is incredibly reluctant to recognize that people have rights or any protection in law” (Jamieson and Akyavas, 2015). Gardner also goes on to say that while LGBT celebrities are often more accepted in Turkey, they are but the few, as those who are not nationally or internationally known, or those who are not perceived to be part of the higher socioeconomic levels or statuses in Turkish society, are not viewed positively, nor are they accepted (Jamieson and Akyavas, 2015). However, it must be noted that even the celebrities and well-known LGBTI figures are rarely seen as equal to those not of the LGBTI community in Turkey.

Given the hostile conditions facing the LGBTI members in Turkey, my reasons for writing this book are to examine the history and levels of sexual orientation discrimination in Turkey, to understand the role

of religion as it is used in the context of LGBTI rights, and to explore how activists are working within this space to improve human rights for LGBTI individuals. While there is a larger body of literature looking at same-sex rights movements in the West, there are far fewer studies that examine this issue outside of the region (Engin, 2015) and fewer still situated in the Middle East itself.² The primary goal of this book is to explore the various facets of LGBTI rights in Turkey, shedding light not only on rights abuses but also on how individuals and NGOs are – in very difficult climates – working to improve conditions for sexual minorities. The central themes of this book center on the examination of the legal, political, economic, social, and cultural conditions facing members of the LGBTI community in Turkey, and also the activism strategies by LGBTI activists in Turkey. But along with the attention to LGBTI rights-based activists, I am also interested in exploring the relationship between the use of religion and such human rights. I examine how groups attempt to use religion to justify their positions against homosexuality, as well as whether activists approach LGBTI rights from the lens of Islam itself. Thus, this book aims to analyze the issue of sexual orientation rights from a series of perspectives, each one ultimately intersecting with the others.

In the work, I begin with a discussion about public opinion of homosexuality in the “Muslim World” and Turkey, showing the high level of anti-LGBTI sentiment that exists and also how people use Islam and religion to “justify” their anti-LGBTI positions and behavior. I then look at whether activists use religion to advocate for LGBTI rights. In the next chapter, I examine the history of same-sex rights in Turkey, which will center on the various conditions facing the LGBTI community. As I show, the Turkish government has been using ambiguous state laws to discriminate against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex individuals. While Turkey technically does not ban homosexuality, I will discuss how the interpretations of the law make it quite easy for the state to ignore equal protections for the LGBTI. But human rights violations towards the LGBTI are not in any way confined to the actions of the government. In fact, many members of society within Turkey have also committed crimes against LGBTI individuals.

Then, I discuss the history of the LGBTI movement (and subsequent government responses to the rights movement), interpretations of domestic law as they relate to LGBTI rights, and statements by public

figures regarding homosexuality, Next is a chapter on how the government, and other state institutions such as the police, have carried out human rights violations towards LGBTI, be those violations are related to politics, economics, or many other aspects of life. However, despite the challenges that the LGBTI face, I then shift the focus to how LGBTI activists are working to improve human rights conditions in Turkey. Before examining their specific tactics in Turkey, I review the academic and policy literature on LGBTI rights activism over the past decades. I look at what strategies LGBTI activists have taken in the Middle East and elsewhere, and within this lens, show what has been more successful as it relates to advancing LGBTI rights. Then, I present my findings with regards to how activists are working to improve LGBTI rights in Turkey. I devote additional attention to specifically examining the question of same-sex marriage in Turkey. I then discuss challenges LGBTI activists face, and what they see as the course of action to take.

In this book, not only do I examine state law and reports of rights abuses but I also interview a number of NGO leaders and political human rights activists who have been fighting for LGBTI rights in some shape or form for years. During my time in Turkey (the in-person interviews took place during the summer of 2015, with follow-up (and additional) interviews in the Spring of 2016), I spoke with activists of leading LGBTI organizations, which include Lambda Istanbul,³ Kaos GL, Pembe Hayat, Social Policies, Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation Studies Association (SPoD), and Families of LGBT's in Istanbul (LİSTAG). I also interviewed the founder of a well-known LGBTI digital magazine, *GZone Magazine*, as well as municipality workers Sedef Çakmak and the late Boysan Yakar. Through these various interviews, I was able to gain insight into the histories of these organizations and the strategies employed by LGBTI activists in their pursuit of domestic and international justice. The timing of the interviews began less than two weeks following the police breaking up the 2015 Pride March and went through the new onset of the civil war in southeastern Turkey, the state's continued fight against ISIS, a series of terror attacks in Turkey, and the cancellation of the 2016 Pride March. Because the interviews occurred during this period, this allows for detailed documentation and analysis of how these different domestic and international events have affected the progression (or regression) of LGBTI rights. I received consent for all interviews. I had copies of consent forms in Turkish as well as English,

but all interviews were conducted in English. I used a convenience sampling method, reaching out to various activists and organization leaders, wanting to interview anyone who would grant this request.

It is my belief that this work will be useful not only in documenting LGBTI rights abuses in Turkey but also in showing just how LGBTI rights-based activists in Turkey are willing to risk their lives in challenging authorities on matters of ensuring full rights for the LGBTI (and all individuals) in Turkey. The hope is that others in the international community will recognize the work done in Turkey. This is not only important for the sake of learning about what is transpiring in Turkey but it is also with the goal that others can be inspired by the work these activists are doing in the country, and in turn they themselves can possibly provide any additional needed support through a rights advocacy network with local activists. Moreover, it is also a hope that the same LGBTI rights-based activists elsewhere can also apply some of the strategies and tactics to their own work wherever else they may be working on these human rights issues.

Unfortunately, LGBTI community members face what seems to be perpetual discrimination in various parts of the Middle East, Africa, Asia, Europe, and elsewhere. Yet, regardless of the challenges and outright discrimination, people are continuing to fight for change. It is within this vein that I hope to detail the level of commitment, the various strategies, and the successful results of LGBTI rights activism, and also any challenges that continue to exist. Every person in the world should live freely, without any form of discrimination whatsoever. There should be no judging of people, and there must also be direct and continued condemnation of any forms of discrimination, whether this discrimination is based on race, ethnicity, economics, gender, religion, or one's sexual orientation.