

Turkey



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GENERAL OUTLOOK

Turkey has a secular system of government and operates nominally as a democracy. It is currently seeking membership in the European Community (EC) and has already become part of EC customs unity agreements. Many new laws have recently been introduced in Turkey, including a new national health service and laws that will increase penalties for rape and domestic violence.

Despite these promising changes, many marginalized groups, including ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities, continue to be denied their rights. Human rights violations in Turkey have been increasing as religious fundamentalism has gained strength over the past several years.

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL PRESSURE ON LESBIANS

The population of Turkey is 99% Muslim. Although the

country has a long-standing tradition of secularism, religious fundamentalists are currently gaining political power and influence in the country. As is the case with any form of religious fundamentalism, Muslim fundamentalism threatens to make life very dangerous for all marginalized communities.

Homosexuality is prohibited within Islamic law. The Koran talks about the tribe of Lut, in which men had sex with men; as punishment for this transgression, Allah sent stones raining down on them from the sky. In many mosques in Turkey, religious authorities preach against homosexuality and talk about AIDS as another rain of stones on homosexuals. Through teachings such as these, Turkish children are brought up to believe that lesbians and gay men are sinners. Homosexuality is seen as a threat to the family and by extension to society as a whole.

LEGAL SITUATION

The Turkish Penal Code has been subject to a series of revisions, beginning in the early 19th century, that have

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been based largely on French law. Although homosexuality is not mentioned in Turkish law, however, there are several broad ranging provisions that have been selectively enforced against sexual minorities. These laws, which prohibit indecency and offenses against public morality,¹ are most often used against transvestites, transsexuals, and gay men, particularly those who are sex workers. Because

the terms of the laws are fairly broad and do not specifically single out lesbians or gay men, they are extremely difficult to challenge, even when they are enforced in a discriminatory manner.

In July 1993, the Istanbul city government intervened to stop a group of lesbians and gay men from organizing a lesbian and gay pride celebration. In the week prior to the event, the organizers also received calls from fundamentalist groups threatening to bomb the cinema where the activities were scheduled to take place. This harassment was provoked in part by inflammatory reports in the newspaper *Bügün*, which for an entire week devoted its back page to the event. Articles announced that "perverts" would be meeting in Istanbul and that "perverts" from abroad were coming to force Turkish youth into decadence. On the day the celebration was scheduled to begin, the Governor of Istanbul faxed hotels in the city instructing them not to accept foreign participants in the celebration. The next day, Turkish authorities arrested and expelled 28 foreign delegates who were there to take part in the celebration. In addition, three Turkish men were arrested for their efforts to organize the event. Letters protesting the government's action arrived from many different countries around the world, and the incident was included in the Human Rights Foundation's 1993 report on human rights abuses in Turkey.

There have been no reports of Turkish lesbians being arrested or otherwise subjected to state persecution on the basis of their sexual orientation. This is in part due to the invisibility of lesbians in Turkish public life. Lesbians are not a visible presence on the streets or in bars, and the events in 1993 have cast doubt on the ability of any lesbian or gay group to form a legal organization, since this would require registering with the government. Turkey's first lesbian group, *Venus'ün Kizkardesleri* (Sisters of Venus), was established in July 1994 (see below), but the group does not exist legally and cannot hold a bank account or otherwise

establish itself publicly.

ISOLATION OF LESBIANS

The pervasive prejudice within Turkish society puts lesbians under a great deal of pressure. It is very difficult for a lesbian, especially a young lesbian, to "come out" to herself or to her family or friends. Each lesbian has to find her own way, without the help of a visible lesbian community or any sort of support organizations. Forced marriages are very common, especially in rural areas, and girls are brought up to believe that there are no alternatives to heterosexual marriage. In big cities, the incidence of forced marriage is not as high, but younger lesbians are frequently sent to psychologists to be "cured."

LESBIAN ORGANIZING

Lesbians who have managed to live independently have a difficult time reaching other lesbians. The Sisters of Venus, the first lesbian group in Turkey, began meeting in July 1994. This group began with three lesbians; it has grown to over 20 women, and the membership continues to increase as more women learn of the group's existence. While the group is not yet strong enough to be a political pressure, it is nonetheless able to offer support to lesbians. The group holds regular meetings where members can share experiences and difficulties with one another. It has begun to print brochures and to assemble a small library of articles and books. The brochures focus on subjects, such as "coming out," homophobia, how to feel proud of one's sexual identity, and the like. At great risk Sisters of Venus lists its post office box number on these brochures and receives both positive and negative feedback. Sisters of Venus members also contribute to Turkey's only lesbian and gay publication, KAOS GL, which is an underground publication that cannot be distributed openly. The organization has also responded

to the mainstream media's generally negative portrayal of lesbians by sending protest letters.

Sisters of Venus is beginning to work with other organizations in Turkey, including the AIDS Prevention Society; feminist groups such as Eksik Etek, Mor Cati, Pazartesi, and the Women's Human Rights Project; Lambda, a gay men's group in Istanbul; and KAOL GL, a lesbian and gay group in Ankara. The group has also begun to network with organizations in other countries, such as the Indian group Sakhi, the organizers of the Berlin Lesbian Week, and Frauenzeitung in Munich.

While Sisters of Venus has received support from many feminists, there is clearly a need for lesbians to organize independently of the feminist movement. Some lesbians work in feminist groups, but they can only be outspoken on heterosexual women's issues because even within such organizations anti-lesbian prejudice is pervasive.

CONCLUSION

The lesbian and gay movement is just beginning in Turkey and is limited to urban centers. The threat from the fundamentalist movement and, conversely, the possibility of Turkey's becoming a member of the European Community have created strong incentives to organize and to push for an increased emphasis on human rights.

NOTES

1 Articles 419, 547, and 576 of the Penal Code.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Deniz Kiliç and Gaye Uncu are members of Sisters of Venus, the first and only lesbian group in Turkey.

