

P E N N O R W A Y

Turkey Elections: What Does the Future Hold for Freedom of Speech?

**PEN Norway's Interview with
Zeynep Esmeray Özadikti, candidate for
MP from Turkey's Worker Party (TİP)**

Published: 2 May 2023

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Since 2020, as part of the Turkey Indictment Project, PEN Norway has examined 25 separate indictments focused on freedom of expression in Turkey and has produced reports on these indictments in cooperation with expert lawyers from different European countries. The PEN Norway Turkey Indictment Project reports of 2020 and 2021 revealed that every one of the 25 indictments in question failed to comply with Turkey's domestic legal provisions and also international provisions and contracts such as the European Convention on Human Rights and the UN Guidelines for prosecutors.

PEN Norway's in-person, recent, observations of such trials as the Gezi Park trial, the We Will Stop Femicide Platform case and trials of Turkey's chief physician Prof. Dr Şebnem Korur Fincancı, activist Pınar Selek and journalist Sedef Kabaş all demonstrate the lack of independence of the judiciary as well as serious fundamental flaws in the preparation of indictments.

Historic elections take place in Turkey on May 14th, 2023, in which the candidates for both the President and Turkey's Parliament will be determined. A month before the elections PEN Norway's Turkey Adviser travelled to Istanbul to interview representatives of the major political parties to question them about issues such as freedom of expression, the freedom of the press, the rule of law, and the right to a fair trial in Turkey.

As part of this interview series, we conducted face-to-face and written interviews with the following:

- Dr. Canan Kaftancıoğlu, the Istanbul Regional Chair of the Republican People's Party (CHP),
- Lawyer Züleyha Gülüm, Istanbul's MP for the People's Democratic Party (HDP),
- Former journalist and now MP for the Worker's Party (TİP) Ahmet Şık,
- Lawyer Bahadır Erdem, Vice Chair of the İyi Party,
- Bülent Turan, Vice Chair of the Justice and Development Party (AKP),
- Selahattin Demirtaş, imprisoned former co-chair of the People's Democratic Party (HDP),
- Serhan Yücel, Secretary-General of the Democrat Party,
- Mustafa Yeneroğlu, Justice and Legal Affairs Policy Chairman of the Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA),
- Muharrem Erkek, Vice President of the Republican People's Party (CHP)
- Zeynep Esmeray Özadikti, candidate for MP from Turkey's Worker Party (TİP)
- Bülent Kaya, Legal Affairs Chairman of the Saadet Party.

None of the content of the interviews has been altered by PEN Norway, the views expressed are those of the individual politicians.

We hope that these historic elections in Turkey will be instrumental in strengthening fundamental rights and freedoms for all.

Caroline Stockford, Turkey Adviser, PEN Norway
Şerife Ceren Uysal, Legal Adviser on Turkey, PEN Norway

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Would you say that freedom of expression and the freedom of the press exist in Turkey today? How do you see the general picture?

I have to say that there definitely is an atmosphere of repression. In the press, there are attempts to silence the journalists who protect the public and report for our rights. Journalists are intimidated when they try to investigate the murder of a woman. People are under arrest just because they are Kurdish and are trying to explain this struggle to people. Many journalists were arrested, and media organisations closed down. According to the World Press Freedom Index of 2021, Turkey ranks 153 out of 180 countries due to the factors such as government repression, arrests of journalists and restrictions on social media. Not only the press, but young and old alike are summoned to testify for a tweet or a word they say. But despite this, no one is afraid to tell the truth. No matter how hard they try, no matter how hard they try to cover the things up, everyone speaks about what they see and know. They can say that the emperor has no clothes.

The lists of MP candidates were announced, revealing that women's representation and especially LGBTI+ representation is very limited. What is your take on that?

We see that right-wing and conservative parties in Turkey have recently begun targeting the LGBTI+ community. Nowadays, they claim that sexual orientations and identities are imposed to Turkey from outside in a way to "disrupt" the family structure. Historically, right-wing parties in Turkey have never followed an LGBTI+-friendly politics. Therefore, I did not expect right-wing parties to consider allowing the LGBTI+ community to be represented within them. In the coming elections, the number of LGBTI+ candidates is small. It's unfortunate. Equal representation, one of the basic principles of democracy, is important in terms of conveying the views and demands of different groups in society. Representation of different sections of society, especially of women and the LGBTI+ community, is also necessary to have an inclusive and fair decision-making process. On the left, the Workers' Party of Turkey has made a special effort to safeguard human rights for the LGBTI+ community but also to ensure their representation in the fight for these rights. Both the process of my nomination and the opportunities offered to LGBTI+ candidates hold great significance to me. That served as an opportunity to discuss LGBTI+ rights within Turkey, to reveal the difficulties we face and to make our demands heard. It's very important.



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If elected, you will be the first trans woman MP in Turkey. What is the significance of this possibility for the LGBTI+ community in Turkey? Is the LGBTI+ community able to exercise their freedom of thought and expression in Turkey? What kind of work do you plan to carry out in this field?

In general, if a trans woman is elected as an MP in Turkey, this would be an important step for LGBTI+ rights. However, the obstacles and discrimination faced by LGBTI+ individuals in Turkey persist. I will work to raise awareness on the problem of discrimination, to strengthen the struggle for constitutional rights and support those who fight for LGBTI+ rights.

In Turkey, the LGBTI+ community cannot use their freedom of expression in any way and are criminalised. Rainbow-themed products are banned, rainbow flags are seized in protests, Pride parades and indoor meetings are banned. Associations and organisations working for LGBTI+ rights are targeted and threatened. I believe that my election will strengthen the struggle against these bans and obstructions. We can start a process of solidarity, awareness-raising and social transformation together with organisations working for LGBTI+ rights.

If I am elected, as an LGBTI+ and feminist MP in Turkey, I can raise awareness of LGBTI+ rights and women's rights in society and encourage more work in this field. I'm very excited in this respect. As a matter of fact, even our existence within the Parliament is significant by itself. It will be a big leap even to speak from that lectern as the representative of a social group that is ignored, excluded, and targeted by hate speech.

We know that you are a feminist. That's why we especially wanted to ask you: Why did Turkey withdraw from the Istanbul Convention? After the elections of 14 May, should we expect that Turkey returns to the Istanbul Convention?

Yes, I am a feminist and thank you for asking about such an important issue as the withdrawal of Turkey from the Istanbul Convention. The Istanbul Convention is an important step towards preventing and combating violence against women. However, unfortunately, some social groups within Turkey have pushed for the termination of the Istanbul Convention, claiming that it "harms" the Turkish family structure and they even targeted LGBTI+ individuals saying that they have been promoting homosexuality. AKP is willing to sacrifice an important achievement such as the Istanbul Convention for the sake of its current political interests. Hence on 19 March 2021, the President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced that they withdrew from the Istanbul Convention. This decision represents a significant setback in combatting the violence against women. Turkey's withdrawal from this convention dealt a significant blow to protecting the women and upholding women's rights in the country. There was, however, a huge public outcry against the decision to withdraw from the Convention and many civil society organisations, feminist organisations, human rights defenders, and political groups protested the decision. And as women and LGBTI+ community, we continue to struggle for the re-ratification of the convention. As a person who fought for the re-enactment of the Istanbul Convention, I will continue to fight for its implementation in Turkey and for the necessary steps to be taken.

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Every year Turkey hosts Europe's most well-attended 8th of March Night Parades (International Women's Day) and Pride marches. But at the same time, almost every year we hear that many people are detained and injured during these parades. The 2023 Pride will take place after the elections. Prospectively speaking, how do you see the 2023 Pride and the 8th of March celebrations in 2024? We know that the CHP (Republican People's Party) has said that next year, 8 of March would be enthusiastically celebrated in Taksim. Do you think that's realistic?

In Turkey, the 8th of March and Pride parades that are held every year provide a very important platform for the struggle for women's and LGBTI+ rights and equality. They are important days of our struggle when problems and demands are expressed. However, unfortunately, since 2015 these parades have been banned and we have been facing various obstacles. Every year there are police interventions and detentions. What we see on the street is a reflection of violence and discrimination in general.

For us, the 8th of March and Pride Parades have always been places where those who struggle for equality and freedom can stand in solidarity and thrive. With the Gezi Park resistance, we began to realise how common our demands for freedom and rights actually were. Since 2013, especially in Istanbul, pride parades have also evolved into a platform where demands for equality and freedom have been expressed by many sections of society. Due to the escalating repression, particularly in recent years, such events could not be held in a peaceful and democratic environment, and individuals have been denied their freedom to defend their rights. Despite these pressures, the women and LGBTI+ community did not abandon the streets. Despite all obstacles, we have been gathering every year. We have continued and will continue to crowd the streets in and around Taksim, no matter what. The rule of AKP/the Palace Rule will come to an end, and I believe that the 8th of March and Pride Parades will bring together a much larger crowd in the future. Thank you. ■

Esmeray Zeynep Özadikti

Esmeray Zeynep Özadikti (b. 1973) moved to Istanbul from Kars when she was 15. She took theatre, Turkish and Kurdish classes at the Mesopotamia Cultural Centre.

Esmeray, who has been active in women's and LGBTI+ struggle since 1998, took acting classes at the Mesopotamia Cultural Centre after working in many jobs from forced sex work to selling mussels.

She staged the one-woman plays *Witch's Bohçası* (*Witch's Bohçası*) and its sequel *Yırtık Bohça* (*Torn Bohça*) about a trans woman's journey from Kars to Istanbul, which she compiled from her own experiences.

As a comrade and friend of Pınar Selek, she was active in the ÖDP and took part in the feminist movement. In the First Extraordinary Congress of the Peoples' Democratic Party held in October 2013, she was elected to the Party Assembly. She took active roles in Lambdaİstanbul, Amargi Women's Cooperative and Hevi LGBTI+ Association. Esmeray shouldered the struggle with the belief that women's and LGBTI+'s struggle for equality and freedom must be woven together with the labour struggle. As a labourer, feminist, Kurdish trans woman, Esmeray wants to carry the voices of not only LGBTI+'s but also the voices of all citizens who are ignored.