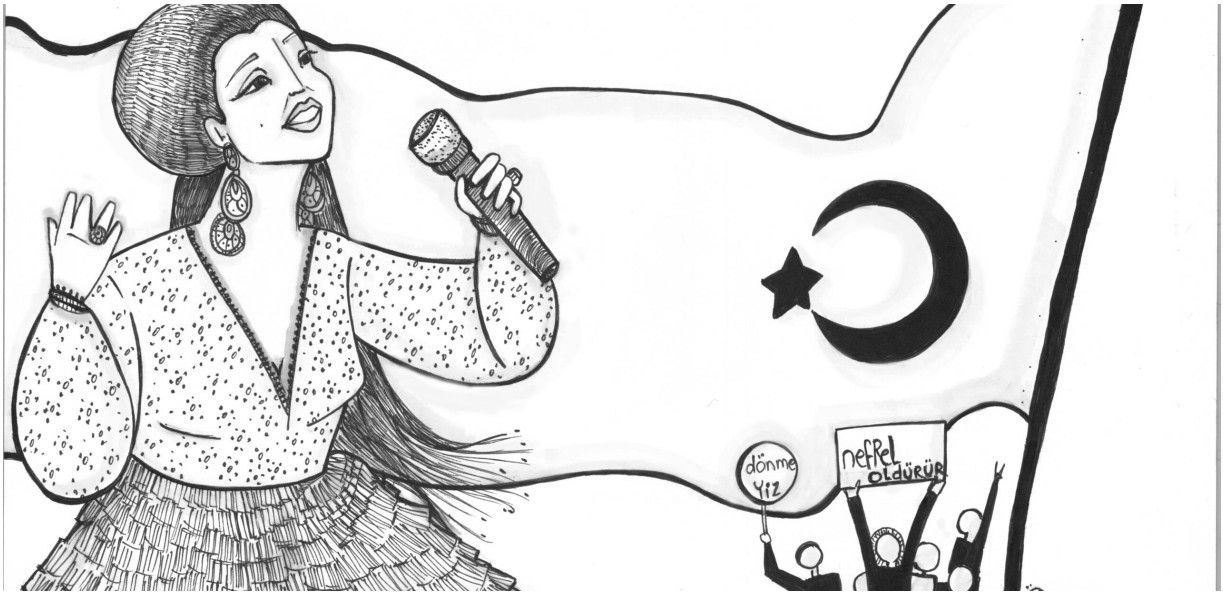


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Erdogan's queer moment

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Yanar Bayramođlu



What the Turkish president's unlikely alliance with a trans woman tells us about sexual politics in the country.

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There is an astonishing picture of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan,

the president of Turkey, and Bülent Ersoy, a famous trans singer, having dinner together. Erdoğan's wife Emine Erdoğan and another singer, Sibel Can, are sharing the same table. Everyone is smiling; everyone seems to be enjoying the moment. Because they are sharing their table with a trans singer, because Erdoğan is literally sitting next to a trans singer, one might interpret this picture as a queer moment. In this very moment, Turkey appears to be another kind of country; for a moment, all its norms on gender and sexuality seem to have been suspended.

This picture astonishes, because it fleshes out the complexity, hybridity, and even the hypocrisy of sexual and gender politics in Turkey. As a Turkish academic living in Germany, working on queer politics, I am frequently asked how bad the situation in Turkey is for queers. One might expect the answer to be very simple: under the rule of a president who is becoming more despotic every day, and under a regime that is increasingly distancing itself from basic democratic principles, queer lives cannot thrive. No need for discussion.

But then we discover this picture of Erdoğan and Ersoy having dinner together. On the right, a conservative Muslim politician, whose ultra-nationalistic and pro-Islamic policies have made Turkey more conservative than ever before, and at his left, a trans woman, who has made history by fighting for her rights to get publicly and legally recognized as a woman. This photograph confounds any simple answer. As we look at it, we see how scattered and multi-faceted queer stories can be in Turkey.



Trans singer Bülent Ersoy (L) sits with Turkish President Recep

Tayyip Erdoğan.

How can we see Bülent Ersoy in a picture with Erdoğan at all? What is the common ground shared by the two? How did their very different paths intersect and meet on this occasion?

In order to understand the intricate meanings of this picture, we need to look back and remember Ersoy's own struggle against the Turkish state. As we do so, the picture can function as a point of departure for an analysis of queer histories in Turkey, and its significance within that history.

Ersoy started her career in 1971. Just before the coup d'état in 1980, she came out as a trans woman. Although Turkish audiences were accustomed to queer singers and performers, Ersoy's transition nonetheless attracted a great deal of media attention. Her bold fearlessness and skillful way of disrupting yet also complying with norms ensured her place under the spotlights.

In September 1980, for instance, shortly before the Turkish military took over the regime, she showed one of her breasts in the middle of a concert. It was a very radical and well-planned act to draw attention to the Turkish policies that did not allow for the legal recognition of transgender identities. Because she had shown her breast in public, the prosecutor's office opened proceedings against her. They saw in this very act a threat to Turkish moral values. Yet by interpreting the act as a threat to Turkish moral values, they were recognizing her as a woman. Ersoy indeed used the hearing to reiterate that she was a woman. She told the prosecutors that all women who trust their bodies should not need to be afraid to show their breasts in public. She

pointed out that women show their breasts on beaches, in clubs, and even on the streets. So why should it matter if she showed her breast at a concert?

At the same time, as the trials got underway, Ersoy's lawyer used the government's non-recognition of Ersoy's gender identity in her defense. He argued that since Ersoy was officially a man; since the state saw her as a man, her act could not be considered a threat to Turkish moral values. Men were allowed to bare their chests in public. Moral values were not jeopardized by topless men in public view.

When Ersoy decided to undergo gender reassignment surgery in 1981, Turkey was still in turmoil as a result of the coup. Since gender reassignment was still illegal in Turkey at the time, she flew to London. Turkish newspapers reported daily on her trip. Instead of scandalizing her decision to take gender reassignment surgery, the Turkish media and public celebrated it. There were reports about how amazed Londoners were by her beauty, how the doctors were treating her well, how Ersoy had celebrated the successful surgery by sharing a bottle of champagne with her doctors. Turkish media even asked the Turkish public for their opinions about Ersoy's gender reassignment, which were generally very positive.

Ersoy came back to Turkey with the vain hope of finally gaining legal recognition as a woman. The military regime passed a law that forbade "men performing in women's attire." The law was followed by displacements and deportations of queer communities. Trans women who were living and working in big cities such as Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir were evicted from their homes and deported by rail to rural areas in Anatolia. The administrators of the

military regime knew that queer lives thrived best in the diverse and open-minded environments of cities.

Furthermore, the same law was used to forbid Ersoy to perform. In the state's view, she was simply "a homosexual man wearing women's clothes." Hence, particularly in the early 1980s, Ersoy fought for her rights to sing and to be recognized as a woman. It was not only a personal struggle manifested in obscure bureaucratic wrangling. It was also a high profile public issue: in May 1981, for instance, the Ministry of Health organized a conference dedicated solely to the topic. Doctors, psychiatrists, jurists, policymakers, and even representatives from the Directorate of Religious Affairs attended the conference to discuss whether Ersoy was a woman or a man. Only Ersoy herself was absent. Not only her right to sing, but also her right to speak for herself about her own body and identity was denied.

Unsurprisingly, the men who attended the conference reached the consensus that she was not a woman. Their verdict hinged on her inability to give birth. They concluded that womanhood couldn't be "reduced to an artificial vagina."

Throughout the 1980s, a stifling decade of suppression under the military, Ersoy was denied permission to go on stage in Turkey. She gave concerts abroad, however, which helped her to keep on building her career as a singer. Many other queers did not have such a chance to escape the brutality of police violence. Those who managed to establish queer communities in big cities faced constant police raids. Many were taken into custody, where they experienced physical and psychological violence. Media portrayals of queers in the 1980s were heavily loaded with public shaming, which stood in complete contrast to the

celebratory image of Ersoy's trip to London for gender reassignment surgery.

In response to the repeated police violence experienced by trans women in particular, the first LGBTIQ political movement was launched with hunger strikes in 1987. First in Ankara, then in Istanbul, queers organized press conferences to publicly make their voices heard.

In other words, although Ersoy and queer activists experienced the brutality of the military regime, their struggles took different paths. They never walked on the same path—nor even in the same garden, once Turgut Özal had lifted Ersoy's performance ban. Özal, a neoliberal right-wing politician, was the first democratically-elected president after the 1980s coup. At the risk of being reductive, we can define that moment as the one when Ersoy ceased to fight against the state.

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan sees himself, politically, in alignment with Özal. When Erdoğan came into power in 2001, one of his promises was to curtail the power of the Turkish military. Since the military has always acted as a Big Brother watching the state, his pledge to reduce the military's power was supported by many intellectuals and artists, who had suffered under the military regime. Among other things, his agenda to reduce the military's power formed the bedrock of Ersoy's sympathy for Erdoğan. Other reasons for Ersoy's and Erdoğan's mutual sympathy may be their religious and nationalistic political views.

So, when we return to our picture, we see a conservative trans singer and a neoliberal politician who share more or less the same political views. There is another crucial detail

about the photograph: it was taken during Ramadan. As he did every year, in 2016 Erdoğan invited artists to his presidential palace to celebrate Ramadan by eating dinner together. Adding another dimension is that the dinner took place on the same day that police attacked the LGBTIQ Pride demonstration in Istanbul. It shows Ersoy eating dinner and celebrating the holy month of Ramadan with Erdoğan on the very same evening that queer activists were brutally denied their right to celebrate Pride Week by marching on the streets.

While trans activists were unable to have their pride march, a trans singer was enjoying dinner with the president. What does this say about gender and sexual politics in Turkey? Can we describe Ersoy's presence at the president's dinner as a sign of normalization? Does it indicate the acceptance of sexual and gender diversity? Or is it rather Ersoy's complicity with state power that welcomes her to the presidential palace?

Queer identities, stories, and moments have always been part of popular culture in Turkey. The general rule was that they should not disrupt the state or contest the state's values. As long as they respected those values, and did not question taboo topics, they would be welcomed as part of society. Zeki Müren, for example, another successful queer singer, was a very nationalistic citizen who left his entire inheritance to the Turkish army. Unlike Ersoy, he never openly questioned the norms of gender and sexuality, which is why he never had any problems with the state during his career.

Activists, on the other hand, cause trouble. Instead of complying, they question the state's ideology. Nonetheless,

however, until 2015, LGBTIQ organizations were able to hold the annual Pride March in Istanbul, attended by tens of thousands. It could be argued that LGBTIQ mobilization was never seen as a serious threat by the state. Hence, it was simply tolerated.

Everything changed when queer activists were among the groups who occupied Gezi Park in 2013. It can justifiably be argued that the Gezi Uprising was one of the most important fractures in the queer history of Turkey. The Uprising changed public perception of the LGBTIQ movement forever. While other oppositional groups began acknowledging the LGBTIQ movement as an important ally, the state came to see the movement as one of the oppositional voices that needed to be suppressed. Most notably, directly after the Gezi Protests, when the LGBTIQ organizations showed their support to the secular party CHP and the pro-Kurdish party HDP, Erdoğan's response to the alliances was to attack the Pride march with police violence.

Police attacks on the Pride march can be cited as one example of the currently worsening situation for queer lives in Turkey. The bans on queer events imposed by the municipalities of Istanbul and Ankara are further examples. The ongoing government-imposed boycott of the Eurovision Song Contest, due to its very queer content, is yet more evidence of Turkey's homophobic and transphobic policies.

And yet, there remains the picture of Erdoğan and Ersoy at dinner. The picture demonstrates that even a trans singer, who showed her breasts in a concert and fought the law to gain her rights, can win, under certain circumstances, the respect of an ultra-nationalistic and conservative Muslim president in Turkey. It shows that even in a suffocating,

oppressive political atmosphere, queer voices can find a way to exist—and sing. But, as the picture also illustrates, radical potential is inevitably lost along the way.