

ABSTRACT

Panel 3: Charities as Surrogates of the State or Competitors of the State

Unpacking Politics of Charities: The Case of Two Educational Charity Organizations in Turkey

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Turkey's welfare regime has been undergoing a significant transformation over the last decade. From healthcare provision to pension funds, from the social assistance programs to entire social security system, the "institutional welfare mix." Two major features of this transformation, among others, are quite visible. One is the growing private sector involvement in the welfare provision, which parallels the overall neoliberalization of the country's political economy. Second is the remarkable increase in social assistance programs and the charities to address the needs of the poor and the economically disadvantaged. Though paradoxical at first sight, the pro-Islamist (Justice and Development Party,(AKP) government has managed to combine the significant "retreat" of the state from public welfare provision, with the rise of social assistance and significant subcontracting of "management of the poor" to the charity organizations.

Nowhere are these trends more evident in the area of educational reform. The AKP government has systematically encouraged the private sector involvement in education, providing significant tax breaks and exemptions to private donors. The number private schools and universities have risen exponentially, while the quality of under-funded public schools has systematically deteriorated. The controversial 2012 the educational reform law, for instance, has institutionalized, a voucher system enabling poor parents to send their children to private schools. More importantly, there has been a significant rise in the number and range of activities of educational charity organizations which provide extensive amount of scholarships for poor students, open dormitories, open their own private schools and universities.

AKP government's fundamental defense of growing privatization in education has been its critique of the excessively politicized curriculums in prior governments, the obsession of the earlier governments with raising a standardized, pro-Ataturk, "secular" generation and the absence of choices. With increases in private options, they argued, education will be depoliticized, families will have more options and have more say in how they raise their children and the private charities can fill the gap for the economically disadvantaged.

This paper will explore the political implications of the increasing subcontracting of education in Turkey to the private sector, and rise of the various charities in education. Contrary to the neoliberal expectations that increasing the involvement of the private sector and the charities will somehow depoliticize education, education has become one of the most politically contested issue in the country. Secondly, the educational charities themselves reflect the deep political divisions and contestations in the country, (from debates over secularism to the Kurdish problem) proving that privatization has not led to "withering of politics."

I suggest that one of the modalities through which privatization and "charitization" of education lead to over-politicization rather than depoliticization, is the problematic, and often un-transparent linkages between the state and the charities. The legal, political and economic privileges, direct and indirect support that the government provides to *some* charities over others, while constraining and legally harassing other charities shows that the governments