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The Relationship of Participatory Democracy and City Councils: A Comparative Analysis Through Kırşehir and Yozgat City Councils*

Mustafa Kocaoglu**

^aAssist. Prof. Dr., Ahi Evran University, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Department of Public Administration, Kırşehir, 40000, Turkey

Abstract

Participatory democracy describes that individuals of their own accord, active and versatile to be incorporated into management decisions and practices. Today, administrative participation applications such as participatory democracy and city councils as one of the most basic values of local governments realized on a local level hold great importance with respect to the fact that both fellow countrymen are actively involved in administrative process. This study as well, will help to understand how successfully city councils in Turkey have developed in terms of participatory democracy and to acquire concrete results in terms of testing theory-practice contention. To achieve this, present data (directives, meeting decisions, internet sites, etc.) related to corporate structure and function of Kırşehir and Yozgat City Councils have been utilized. Findings acquired within this scope indicate that Kırşehir City Council is more successful in terms of both structure and functioning and participatory democracy applications. However, both special administrations have attempted to realize change in positive direction and still, there are problems which need solving.

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1. Introduction

Participatory democracy which is one of the most basic values of local governments and administrative participation practices implemented on local level are highly important for fellow citizens because these enable

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** Mustafa Kocaoglu. Tel: +90 386 280 4914.

E-mail address: : m_kocaoglu@hotmail.com, mkocaoglu@ahievran.edu.tr

active involvement and have an impact on the administrative process. The practices mentioned herein are being demanded by majority of society in parallel to the improvement of democracy at the present time. City council is an organization formed with participation of local government representatives as well as all fellow citizens living in that city and other related groups. City councils have an important role since they have a dynamic structure which brings together a wide range of groups and resolves problems of that city. As a matter of fact, Article 76 of the Municipal Law numbered 5393, which governs City Councils, clearly states that City Councils are organizations that serve within the framework of certain principles fit for this role.

This study will do a comparative analysis of two different practices for Kırşehir and Yozgat City Councils based on theoretical infrastructure related to city councils. Accordingly, the first issue to be discussed is participatory democracy approach and participatory democracy approach aspect of local governments. The second section discusses the intellectual principles and historical background of city councils, which are important tools of participatory democracy practice, and continues by discussing legal grounds, structure and operations of city councils in Turkey. The last section compares structure, operation and participatory democracy practices of Kırşehir and Yozgat City Councils.

2. Participatory Democracy Perception at Local Level and City Councils

Modern democracies make a great effort to resolve insufficiency problem of representative democracies by coming up with participatory mechanisms (Çukurçayır and Eroğlu, 2009: 228). Although democracy is considered to be universal value, the representative democracy's need to comply with global criterion brings along new pursuits and practices paving the way for participation (Sağır, 1992:28). The public's need to determine its own future and its belief that autonomy is a desirable element are the basis of this development (Heywood, 1999: 75). This is where participatory democracy comes into the picture.

Participatory democracy enables fellow citizens to actively participate in the process of creating will and making all decisions with an impact on these fellow citizens (Schmidt, 2002: 165; Franklin and Ebdon, 2007: 87) and this participation should be based on a high level of decentralization spread around all segments of the society (Sarıbay, 1998: 71). Furthermore, the essence of participatory democracy is "self-action", "self-dominance", "self-perception" and "self-improvement" (Sartori, 1993: 124-125).

Participatory democracy needs a change in the viewpoint of fellow citizens; they should see themselves as active, try to increase and improve their capacity for this purpose (Held, 1997: 265). Hence, will based on solely voting and dominated by representatives does not apply anymore; will directly expressed by the public in various forms and through various tools has started to emerge.

Local governments are autonomous legal entities which are organized with the impact of democracy, freedom, autonomy and re-share elements and for the purpose of meeting common needs of the public and these autonomous legal entities have decision making bodies elected as well as certain duties, authorities, budget and personnel within the limits of the law. (Çoker, 1998: 249). Government at local level functions as a unit that offers opportunities required by a citizen as well as enabling different alternatives to offer luxury to choose to the citizen and it is the main milestone of modern democracy (Çukurçayır et al., 2012: 103).

Accordingly, direct involvement of fellow citizens' demands in decision making processes at local level and its impact on administrative formalities and actions are basic indicators of the meaning of participatory democracy for local governments. Besides, formation of decision making bodies directly on the basis of fellow citizens' preferences and the administrative structure and operational form of these bodies which allow direct administrative participation of fellow citizens verify the importance of local government units with regard to participatory democracy system.

City Councils are one of the substantial application areas of participatory democracy at a local level. City Councils are defined as "a platform where everybody will have the opportunity of stating their opinions". City councils function as democratic platforms where city's development priorities and problems are defined and discussed (Emrealp, 2005: 65). City council is an organization with the participation of local government representatives, all fellow citizens living in that city, non-governmental organizations and other related segments. City Councils have a significant role because they bring together a wide range of groups and they have a dynamic structure which discusses and resolves problems of the city with a multi-dimensional approach.

In Turkey, City Councils gained a legal infrastructure following enactment of Municipal Law numbered 5393. According to Article 76 of the Law numbered 5393, a city council assumes the role of implementing a series of principles such as “fellow citizen consciousness”, “environmental consciousness”, “social assistance and solidarity”, “transparency”, “calling to account for and being accountable”, “participation” and “decentralization”.

Representatives of certain institutions and establishments should participate to the formation of City Councils. These are; the highest ranking local authority of the location or its representative, members of parliament responsible for the electoral district or districts within the territory of municipality, mayor or representative, maximum ten representatives of public institutions and establishments which will be appointed by governors in cities and district governors in districts, aldermen, mukhtars and representatives of political parties. Besides, university representatives, representatives of professional unions categorized as public agencies and various non- governmental institutions as well as one representative from each council and working group formed by the city council shall participate.

A representative of political parties which have organization in the district and member in the Grand National Assembly of Turkey as well as professional unions considered to be public agencies, syndicates, notaries, bars, cooperatives, unions, related associations and foundations and, if any, highest authorities of those shall participate to the metropolitan city council.

Article 12 of the City Council Regulation allows city councils to organize councils and working groups which are within the scope of duties assigned to them. It is clear that operational principles and procedures of these councils and working groups will be determined by the general assembly and ideas discussed at these councils and working groups will be further discussed at the city council’s general assembly and, if approved, they will be presented to the municipal council for review.

3. Comparison of Kırşehir and Yozgat City Councils in terms of Participatory Democracy Practices

This part of the study discusses and compares Kırşehir and Yozgat City Councils. Accordingly, the initial step is to explain the organization and structure of both city councils in order to determine whether it allows participatory democracy practices or not. Then, functions and activities performed by both city councils will be discussed in detail and the functions, activities mentioned herein will be analyzed to determine the extent and forms of their impact on participatory democracy. Finally, websites of both city councils will be examined since a website is one of the important indicators of participatory democracy practices.

3.1. Organization and Structure of Kırşehir and Yozgat City Councils

Kırşehir City Council, established in 2008, has “Council of Women”, “Council of Youth” and “Council of Disabled People”. Besides these councils, there are working groups operating directly under the responsibility of city council’s senior management. These are; “Culture and Art Working Group”, “Agriculture Working Group”, “Governance Working Group”, “Communication and Media Working Group”, “Sports Working Group” and “Poets and Writers Working Group”.

Yozgat City Council, established in 2007, has “Council of Women”, “Council of Youth” and “Council of Disabled People” and it has ongoing studies for “Council of Children”. It does not have any working group which operates at an official level.

As for the organization of “executive committee” which is the highest decision making and execution body of city councils, the members of Kırşehir City Council’s Executive Committee are the Mayor, Ahi Evran University’s Rector, Chairman of General Provincial Council and chairmen of non-governmental organizations.

Just like Kırşehir City Council, the Executive Committee of Yozgat City Council has a wide range of members. Members of General Provincial Council, aldermen, mukhtars and heads of public agencies and establishments as well as non-governmental organizations participate to this Committee.

3.2 Participatory Democracy Functions and Activities of Kırşehir and Yozgat City Councils

Kırşehir and Yozgat City Councils’ functions and activities related to participatory democracy are organized by

taking into consideration the principles listed on the Municipality Law numbered 5393. The aspect of enabling public participation, projects related to common life awareness; studies and researches on women, children, youth, elderly and disabled people will be discussed within the scope of participatory democracy.

3.2.1. Enabling Public Participation

Although meetings and activities organized by Kırşehir and Yozgat City Councils are regular and open to public, the participation is generally limited to the capacity of halls where the meeting and activity takes place. However, especially Yozgat City Council offers more opportunities in terms of physical capacity to participate to a meeting. On the other hand, it is very important to inform the public about the meetings and activities organized. In order to inform the public, the announcements regarding the meetings and activities mentioned herein are published on some local newspapers in Kırşehir and Yozgat as well as national newspapers.

3.2.2. Projects about Common Life Awareness

Both city councils have projects on common life awareness and they have established a diversified and participator working platform which is supported by non-governmental institutions, universities as well as public institutions and establishments.

Kırşehir City Council made a large scale medical screening with Public Health Directorate. Kırşehir Municipality organized a certificate program on basic computer skills course by cooperating with the City Council and private sector. Kırşehir Public Education Directorate and City Council cooperated to organize diction and foreign language (English) courses. Governance Working Group implemented school painting projects in villages and towns. A Strategic Sustainable Development Plan is being prepared with cooperation of University-Municipality-City Council. Kırşehir State Hospitals Union-Municipality-City Council cooperated and organized two training seminars. There are ongoing preparations about a seminar on “Family Communication”.

Yozgat City Council participated to “Culture Summit of Cities” (five in one) project covering 5 different cities and organized promotional activities in each one of these five cities. On the other hand, there are still studies to raise “fellow citizen consciousness” on the basis of participation. Besides, the City Council has founded a study called “project bank” in order to implement projects related to common life consciousness on different subjects. All segments of the society are involved in this process.

3.2.3. City Council Initiatives on Women, Children and Youth

Kırşehir City Council’s Council of Women organized a touristic tour for almost 100 members of the council of women for sightseeing on historical and touristic areas in and around Kırşehir. The Council offers “micro credit” to improve women employment and thus organized public availability meetings. Women artisans in Kırşehir were invited to Ahi Festival and some initiatives were taken to act together. Whereas Yozgat City Council’s Council of Women believes that entrepreneurship, cooperative system and e-commerce trainings are important for improving women employment opportunities. Besides, a “cleaning company” is to be established for creating job opportunities for women and other disadvantaged groups.

Kırşehir City Council’s Council of Youth plans its activities based on ideas and suggestions of the youth. Besides, it tries to involve into this process some agencies organizing activities for the youth (such as Ministry of Youth and Sports, National Agency etc.). Furthermore, the activities are generally organized on specific days and weeks and activities adding value to the youth are organized on these dates. Yozgat City Council’s Council of Youth cooperates with Yozgat Bozok University for its primary activities targeting the youth. On the other hand, the Council participated in “Councils of Youth Summit” and “IX. General Assembly of Financial Consciousness Summit”.

Kırşehir City Council’s Council of Disabled People initially organized a “string bag knitting course”. A store was opened to sell products produced at this course. On the other hand, “Say No to Nylon Bags” project launched by the Council of Disabled People is considered to be a fruitful initiative. Yozgat City Council’s Council of Youth has no

participatory democracy related activities.

3.3 Analysis of Kırşehir and Yozgat City Councils' Websites

Kırşehir City Council has its own website. If you go on the homepage of this website (kirsehirkentkonseyi.org.tr), you can see that the website is supported with visual images and these are about the operations of city council and Kırşehir itself. Kırşehir City Council's website lists the names and organizational structures of working groups, list of executive committee, activities performed by councils of women and youth, news about the city council, contact details and links about general assembly meetings. Also, Kırşehir City Council has both "Facebook" (<https://www.facebook.com/kirsehirkentkonseyi>) and "Twitter" accounts (<https://twitter.com/KirsehirKK>).

Yozgat City Council has its own website. If you go on the homepage of this website (yozgatkentkonseyi.org.tr), you can see that website lists the names and organizational structures of working groups, list of executive committee, activities performed by council of youth, news about the city council and contact details. Also, Yozgat City Council has both "Facebook" (<https://tr-tr.facebook.com/yozgat.kent.konseyi>) and "Twitter" accounts (<https://twitter.com/yozgatkonsej>).

4. Conclusion

Participatory democracy is the highest form of contribution to be offered to the today's democracy practices and city councils are the most functional local tools to be used for this purpose. Accordingly, Kırşehir City Council assumes an important role in the process of participatory democracy because its councils and working groups appeals to larger groups in terms of number of these organizations and range of activity. Cooperation with universities, involvement of non-governmental institutions on almost each activity and efforts to assure public involvement are highly valued aspects for participatory democracy. "Executive Committee", established by different segments of the public, has become an important power to ensure flow of city council activities and to assure that the activities are supported by large segments. On the other hand, the councils of women, youth and disabled people are possible developments and these take an active role to organize number of activities for their target groups. However, the website of Kırşehir City Council can be seen as a positive development. Besides, it is seen that social media is also being used actively.

Yozgat City Council has certain insufficiencies in terms of working groups. The Council makes important attempts in terms of cooperation with other institutions and this is an important aspect of participatory democracy. A diverse range of Executive Committee members is functional for operability of the activities and support provided by larger groups. On the other hand, the councils of women, youth and disabled people are possible developments but it is observed that only Council of Youth has active involvement in the process. However, the website of Yozgat City Council can be seen as a positive development. Besides, it is seen that social media is also being used actively.

In conclusion, this study analyzing Kırşehir City Council and Yozgat City Council concluded that Kırşehir City Council is one step ahead of Yozgat City Council in terms of organization and structure as well as range and frequency of activities organized. However, Yozgat City Council is considered to be promising example for the future. Without a doubt, this conclusion reveals that both city council and fellow citizens should assume responsibilities in this process. We should always remember that this embracement awareness is the key to a participatory democracy practice at a higher level.

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