Latife wants to stand for Parliament

At the top of the agenda was the peace treaty that would conclude the Lausanne Conference. Parliament had passed a motion to dissolve, and new elections were in the offing. The time was ripe for the new régime to come to a decision on universal suffrage. Latife had been pressing Mustafa Kemal on women’s political rights since their return from the Adana trip. She intended to stand for a seat in an eastern county. Salih ADC comments on her political aspirations in his memoirs:

Latife had a bee in her bonnet about becoming a deputy, but women had no voting rights, so naturally she couldn’t have been elected! However, she kept pestering the Gazi Paşa, asking that he arrange for her to become a deputy by extending suffrage to the women, and also by giving them the right to be elected as well as to vote.

She knew from her schooling that British women had gained the right to vote as well as stand in a public election in 1918, and that women had entered the House of Commons in the same year. True, the French Revolution had done little to advance women’s political status, but she also knew that fifty years of suffragism had borne fruit, so that by 1923, women had gained full political rights in dozens of countries as diverse as New Zealand, Armenia, Russia, Hungary, Burma and the United States of America. Countless Turkish women viewed régime change as the ideal environment in which to advance their own emancipation: Nezihe Muhiddin led a group who had already made political demands, other prominent women seeking political rights were Matlube Ömer, Azize of Cyprus and Güzide Osman.

Latife’s stance throughout her stay in Çankaya never wavered: a resolute defender of women’s rights, she had no qualms about declaring her position to any foreign correspondent. Consequently, the Western Press repeatedly referred to the woman Mustafa Kemal married as a suffragette and champion of women’s rights.

In the 1920s, women and children still had the same political status in Turkey; so that despite the lack of any specific restriction to that effect in the first Constitution of the 20th of January 1921, the Assembly had remained a staunchly all-male club.

The scheduled elections required a fresh new law. During the debates on the Election Bill of 1923, it soon became obvious that the debate was going in the direction of preserving the status quo of the nineteenth century Constitution, of constituencies based on 20,000 males.

A single voice rose in support of the women: Tunalı Hilmi, MP for Bolu, whose objection “Not only do you deny them the right to vote, or be elected, but you won’t even count them!” caused a furore in the Chamber. The session came to an unexpectedly early end when he shouted, “Gentlemen, our sacred war left behind more mothers than men. Please do not stamp your feet; you’re stamping them on the heads of my holy mothers and sisters!” Nevertheless, the old system was ultimately to prevail. The head of the household would vote until women progressed sufficiently to merit their own political rights!

The Vakit newspaper, published by Ahmet Emin and Asım (Us) ran a survey beginning on the 18th of April. The topic was women’s political rights. The survey entitled ‘Women’s Suffrage’ proved to be a massive hit.
The debate initiated by the *Vakit* created a suitable environment for women’s political demands.

Would nominate you as a candidate...

Encouraged by the initial interest, the survey added the question, “Which woman should stand for Parliament?” Latife’s name featured among the responses. Çankaya, too, had been following the *Vakit* survey closely. One evening, at a tête-à-tête supper, Mustafa Kemal asked his wife:

“Have you seen today’s *Vakit*? A namesake of yours from Constantinople, a Latife Bekir Hanım, is demanding equal rights for women. Were they to obtain the said rights, she would nominate you as a candidate for Constantinople.”

“I agree, Paşam,” she replied, and asked, “Don’t you?”

“With what?”

“With the idea that men and women must live as equals…”

“This, I’ve told you on several occasions, is my wish.”

“Don’t you think I’d make a good MP?”

“Whatsoever is it that brings this about? Yes, I do believe women should enter Parliament, but I’ve no wish to see my own wife there... I want peace at home, peace that only my dear wife can offer.”

An aide entered, an encrypted message in his hand, and brought the conversation to an end.

The Women’s People’s Party

The women’s political activity reached its peak on the 30th of May. Thirteen women, led by Nezihe Muhiddin, announced their intention to fight for political rights. Other notable names in the group were Şükufe Nihal and Latife Bekir -the lady whom Mustafa Kemal had pointed out as Latife’s namesake. They intended to hold a council in the first instance to determine their agenda.

They convened a fortnight later, and announced their decision to form the Women’s People’s Party.

An article jointly written by Arthur Moss and Florence Gilliam entitled ‘The Turkish Myth’ ran in *The Nation* of 13 June 1923. Somewhat prematurely crediting Turkey with universal suffrage, with no discrimination for race, colour, creed or sex, the article then focused on the presence of a powerful women’s party in Turkey:

[...] and there is now an active Turkish Women’s Party with at least as much influence as the National Woman’s Party in America. (Kemal has recently been married to Latife Hanım, one of the leaders of this party.)

It may well have been the similarity in first names as well as the First Lady’s well-known advocacy of the same platform that led the journalists to jump to an erroneous conclusion.

Salih ADC repeatedly refers to Latife “making a problem of” political rights; she would not give up, even in the face of the Election Bill that so manifestly disregarded women. There was a woman in Çankaya who demanded political rights for herself, and for members of her sex.

Votes for Latife in the ballot box

The elections were held in June, and they did, after all that, exclude women. Yet, there were males who, fully aware that women could not be elected, had still cast their votes in favour of prominent women, Latife among them.
The first news came from Smyrna. The ballot box had yielded one vote for Latife. She wired her thanks to the Smyrna City Council and the Defence of Rights Association on the 28th of June.

The *İleri* newspaper of 5 July published the news of votes for Latife and Halide Edib, illustrating the article with their portraits, “Smyrna’s voters, whilst selecting their deputies, have cast one vote each for Latife Hanım, the honourable wife of our Gazi Commander-in-Chief, and Halide Hanım.” Şarkı Karahisar (a district of Giresun county today) had also cast two votes for Halide Edib.

Latife and Mustafa Kemal were discussing the election results the following evening at supper. One of the aides entered, bearing the results from Konya county.

Mustafa Kemal laughed after casting his eyes over the results.

“Congratulations, Sweetheart. You received 39 votes in Konya. Despite not having the right to stand. So if you were to stand officially, you would have crushed the party list.”

“Really, Kemal?” she asked, “Let me see...”

On the returning officer’s list from Konya stood the name, Latife Gazi Mustafa Kemal, and facing the name, a count of 39.

“Send a telegram to the people of Konya and thank them... This gallant gesture will have facilitated our job for the future...” encouraged Mustafa Kemal. When she read out the message of gratitude she had composed, he said, “Very good; let’s wire this without delay... Except, Sweetheart, this is a historic document, make sure you sign it...”

“So, Kemal,” she asked, “are you still determined not to let me become an MP?”

He would not budge, “Women may have their place in Parliament, but I cannot find another wife like you. Please indulge me: I have not changed my mind.”

“Oh, you’re incorrigible!” said Latife, shaking her head. She passed her arm through his as they went up the staircase.

The results from Malatya and Diyarbakır were surprising, too, with votes for Latife, Halide Edib, Mevhibe Hanım, Nezihe Muhiddin, Kara Fatma, Mişide Ferid and Aliye Fehmi.

The voter had proved to be more sensitive than the legislature.

Latife had been born and raised between the two Constitutional Monarchy eras of the Ottoman Empire. These were times when women were rapidly becoming politicised, rebelling against their lowly status. Women held international meetings and demonstrations attracting thousands in the early twentieth century. European women led a powerful pacifist movement. Their Ottoman sisters were also awakening. While the 1839 Tanzimat - Reform- Edict had offered women little tangible improvement, the subsequent reform movement did embrace all subjects.

Equal inheritance rights had come into effect in 1847.

Girls’ secondary schools opened for the first time in 1858, and a women’s teaching college was founded in 1870. Equal inheritance rights were extended into land ownership in the same year.

Legislation opened the way for the education of girls in 1869. This was enshrined in the first Constitution of 1876 as a fundamental right. Primary education became mandatory for both boys and girls.

Women obtained the right to work for wages in 1897, and to work as civil servants in 1913. Within a year, women were active in commerce and trades. Another higher education institution for women opened in 1914. Within seven years, this college became co-educational, and in another year, seven female students enrolled at the Medical College.

Non-Muslim women, who enjoyed significant privileges at the time, had been able to attend private schools since the nineteenth century.

The number of associations and societies with female members had reached 19 by 1919.

Widely read women’s magazines transformed their own dialogue into a debate for fundamental rights.
From the very beginning of the Second Constitutional Monarchy, women had been asking for change: to obtain social rights and status, to participate in public and political life, to work, to enjoy education and instruction and to be freed of polygamy, and of quick, unilateral divorces.

Leading women’s activists were Makbule Leman, Fatma Aliye, Ṣair Nigar, Emine Semiye, Yaşar Nezihe and Aziz Haydar.

The 1917 revolution had liberated Russian women, who then began to point the way for the rest of the world. Similarly, Latife drew strength from, and fully intended to support, the women’s movement in her own country.

The women of Turkey were in a far better position in 1923 than their great grandmothers of a hundred years previously. Isaac Frederic Marcosson, the journalist, visited Turkey in July, soon after the elections, and spoke with Latife.

Madame Kemal has very definite views on the future of Turkish women. Just like Halide Hanım, she, too, strongly believes in the liberation of women. This is what she said on the subject:

“I believe in equal rights for Turkish women, which means the right to vote, and to sit in the Grand Assembly. I maintain, however, that before suffrage and public service must come education. It would be absurd to impose suffrage on ignorant peasants. We must have schools for women eventually, conducted by women. It must be evolution instead of revolution.”

The Cabinet kept the Women’s People’s Party hanging for a response for months. The Party finally took a decision at the end of 1923 to continue their activities under the Turkish Women’s Union banner, postponing their demands for universal suffrage for the foreseeable future.

It would take another eleven years for women to enter Parliament.

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1 In Islamic sharia, husbands may summarily divorce their wives, while women had to petition in court for a divorce.