TO VEIL OR NOT TO VEIL

The Contested Location of Gender in Contemporary Turkey

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women

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Turkey

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Middle East

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This article focuses on the April 1999 'headscarf incident' at the Turkish national assembly when two newly elected headscarved deputies had to be sworn in: while one unveiled for the ceremony to obey the rule on wearing 'modern' attire and was sworn in, the other remained veiled, claiming it was her religious responsibility and civil right to do so, only to be protested by the social democrats for politicizing religion, thus having to leave without being sworn in. The argument takes issue with the interpretation of the incident solely as another individual enactment of the secularist–Islamist divide in Turkey, and presents instead a multivalent approach that studies the layers of meaning that form around the incident, comprising political posturing, polarization, intercession and silences. By so doing, the article moves the debate from the personal gendered choices of the protagonists to the societal forces that shape their actions.

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On 3 May 1999, the Turkish national assembly held one of its most difficult sessions when the newly elected deputies were sworn in. Among the record number of twenty-two women elected to the assembly, one woman, Merve Kavakçı, a deputy of the Islamist Virtue Party, caused an uproar by attending

the ceremony wearing a headscarf.[1] The only other woman deputy who had appeared in public with her head covered, Nesrin Ünal, a deputy of the Nationalist-Islamist Nationalist Action Party, uncovered her hair for the session. All other women deputies, including some from these two parties, were uncovered. Even though the assembly dress code only specified for women deputies 'a suit and modern attire', the additional use of a headscarf signified for many deputies a politicized religious practice that had no place in the national assembly. These deputies reacted very strongly and differently to the two women: they enthusiastically applauded Nesrin Ünal, who uncovered her head for the occasion, but started banging on their desks chanting 'out, out!' when the covered deputy Kavakçı walked in, causing her to leave without being sworn in. The secularist women deputies joined their counterparts as they shouted in unison 'Turkey is and will remain secular' and '(let) all Merves (go) to Iran'.[2]

In interpreting this incident, most accounts frame the action of the head-scarved deputy within the Islamist–secularist tension in Turkey. While western coverage stresses the need for the secularists to incorporate all modes of political expression into the assembly including that of the headscarved deputy, the local analyses emphasize instead the necessity for the Islamists to abide by the dress code of the national assembly and have their headscarved deputy unveil. Yet such an interpretation reifies the action of one deputy within one context and fails to capture the multiplicity of meanings embedded within the incident.

I argue that the actions of the deputy who unveiled and those who never covered also need to be studied in order to explain the contested location of gender in contemporary Turkey. I therefore propose a multivalent approach that analyses the incident through four interconnected social processes which create layers of meaning. The first layer comprises 'political position-ing' as each political actor takes a position on the incident and thus sets the initial boundaries of meaning. The second layer of 'polarization' emerges when the meanings start to separate as social actors filter and interpret the incident through the disparate standpoints of the Turkish state, Islam and western civilization. The third layer of 'intercession' is set as the Turkish military intervenes, in this case indirectly, to specify the limits of tolerance in society and to suggest to the politicians and the public the acceptable range of meanings. The fourth layer of 'confinement' comprises the ensuing silences in meaning created within and outside the incident; these silences point to the social cost of intervention in meaning production. When viewed within this framework, the decision to veil is no longer reduced to a personal choice propagated by religion; it becomes instead a social choice that spans the full spectrum of action to veil, unveil or not to veil, one decided upon through the complex process of political positioning, polarization, interces-sion and confinement.

Reactionary rhetoric: prevailing positions on the incident

The initial positions which the political actors started to take on the incident centred on the agency of Kavakçı. While her opponents marginalized her agency by arguing that she had been misguided and led astray against her will, her proponents also reduced her agency by declaring that she was only exercising her personal choice by wearing the headscarf. Among her opponents, the president of the republic, Süleyman Demirel, accused Kavakçı of 'inciting trouble', of literally being an *agent provocateur* controlled by foreign powers. He also added that while it was indeed traditionally acceptable to wear a headscarf in public, the national assembly had its own rules which had to be abided by and which she clearly had not followed. Furthermore, he commented that Kavakçı's headscarf symbolized the movement 'which aimed to turn Turkey into an Iran, Afghanistan or Algeria, and which (for that purpose) murdered one thousand people in Algeria'. The chief public prosecutor interpreted the incident in a similar vein, using Kavakçı's action to start a lawsuit against her party for inciting her to take a stand against the secular principles of the state, and to eliminate, once and for all, all party members who 'were like vampires constantly sucking on the blood of the nation'.

The popular opposition to Kavakçı included her neighbours who, in protest, adorned their windows with pictures of the secularist founder of the Turkish republic. Secularist organizations consistently disparaged Kavakçı for not abiding by the laws of the land. The secularist newspapers emulated the president and also declared her a traitor in pay of a foreign power; they printed photographs of many secularists who put wreaths on the tomb of Mustafa Kemal, the founder of the secular Turkish republic, and who wept for failing to preserve his republic in the way they thought he would have wanted it. The newspapers also printed rumours that the staunchly secular military officers were planning to stage a coup if Kavakçı had been permitted to be sworn in at the national assembly. They then followed the president's lead in disparaging the moral character of Kavakçı and started to investigate her life: she was rumoured (and later proven) to also be an American citizen and to have ties with Islamist organizations, especially with the Islamic Association for Palestine.[3] Because she had acquired American citizenship without properly notifying the Turkish state, Kavakçı was stripped of her Turkish citizenship on this technicality. The rallies in Iran in support of her and the condoning news releases by Islamist organizations further confirmed the secularist presumptions. All these factors successfully drew the attention away from her political cause, and focused instead on her personal shortcomings.

Kavakçı, a 30-year-old US-educated engineer, immediately held a press conference stating that the real inciters of trouble were those who had prevented

3 The Turkish state accepts dual citizenship if the applicant notifies the Turkish state before applying for US citizenship.

her from being sworn in. She was, Kavakçı said, 'a daughter of the (Turkish) republic representing a persecuted populace', who had been lawfully elected wearing her headscarf, an attire not specifically banned by the national assembly dress code. Kavakçı further stated that even though she could not attend a Turkish university because of her outlawed headscarf, she had no problem with her attire in the United States where she had had to go to receive her university degree. She declared that her democratization protest was 'similar to what the blacks went through during the civil rights movement in the United States', and that 'she would not uncover even if they cut her head off'. Kavakçı's party leader expressed support for her, stating that Kavakçı was 'exercising her individual rights in a legal context which did not explicitly sanction her behavior'. The headscarved university students in the cities of Malatya, Mersin and Sakarya marched in support. The Turkish Writers' Union and the business organization of 'the Anatolian Lions' sanctioned the behaviour of the social democrat deputies against Kavakçı as 'anti-democratic', and some Islamist newspapers exalted Kavakçı as one would 'a crown on our head', while others found what she did 'untimely and improper'.[4] These positions recognized Kavakçı's agency, but only in a personalized form: they interpreted her action not as a social choice but rather as a personal one.[5]

The public attention then focused on the other covered Nationalist-Islamist deputy, Ünal, a practising physician, who had uncovered herself for the occasion. Ünal explained her behaviour by stating that even though she chose to cover herself in public, she also 'respected the rules and traditions of the national assembly' which prohibited her from being covered and had therefore decided to appear uncovered only in the assembly. Ünal's party leader reiterated that 'the state was sacred in the tradition of the Turks and one has to respect that which is sacred'. The secularists and centre left supported Ünal's behaviour; they argued that since all the women deputies elected to the assembly had been uncovered, they should continue to be so out of respect for this heritage. The centre right appeared conflicted over the choice: some were silent, others claimed moral superiority for Kavakçı, while still others accused Ünal of being untruthful to her constituents. This event 'to veil or not to veil' also acquired new meanings at the municipal level as some women representatives wore a headscarf at opening ceremonies amidst protests; one covered social democrat municipal assembly member wore a wig instead, and another stated she would remove 'if there was a need to do so'. Once again, the decision to uncover is presented as a personal choice, downplaying the societal factors behind it. While Kavakçı stresses the significance of legal rights in making her choice, Ünal emphasizes the importance of the sacredness of the state in her decision to uncover.

Meanings began to proliferate around the action as actors started to debate what comprised proper behaviour in which setting. 'A woman could only enter the national assembly covered when one could be admitted to a mosque

4 The expression was inspired by 'the Asian Tigers' who successfully challenged western capitalism for a period of time; this provincial organization of 'Anatolian Lions' drew its strength from the hinterland of Anatolia to challenge both the Turkish business that was almost exclusively concentrated in highly urbanized Istanbul, and also the western capitalism which this business represented.

5 If they had interpreted the action as a social choice, they would have recognized the societal forces that generated Kavakçı's action and then would have commented on the nature of her personal interpretation.

uncovered', argued one. 'Can a woman enter the national assembly in a bathing suit or wearing a huge flowered hat?' asked another. 'Can a man enter the national assembly wearing a turban?' enquired yet another. Interestingly enough, all these analogies failed to recognize that what made the headscarf unacceptable was not its impropriety as a mode of dress, the way a bathing suit or a hat would be, but instead its symbolism of sacredness, a sacredness that contrasted with and often opposed that of the state.

Imagined dialogues: intersection of the state, Islam and the west

The initial meanings of the incident start to polarize as they filter through the historically constructed categories of state, Islam and the west. In the late eighteenth century, the relationship between state, religion and the west was redefined as the emerging nationalism stressed the significance of legal rights embedded not in divine, but in popular will. The political system was subsequently secularized, and industrialization emerged in full force. As the west, most specifically France and Britain, gradually acquired material and later moral superiority over the rest of the world; it legitimated its colonialism through the 'civilizing mission'. The Muslim world responded with a series of reforms to accommodate the changing social and material conditions and these social transformations had very significant effects on gender relations.

Even though the attempts to control the body had been in existence in the west throughout the centuries (Porter 1991: 217–20), the impetus to establish a better social and religious order led to the simultaneous development of self control and the desire to police the bodies of others (Foucault 1978). In the specific case of women, the patriarchal concern with securing the correct transformation of privilege and resources through the male line induced a strict guarding of women's sexual activities. Women's space in society subsequently became more and more constricted; with modernity, this space shifted decisively from the workplace to the home, where they appear desexualized, docile, frail and passionless (Laqueur 1987). Again at this time, a conceptual transformation occurred from the emphasis on sex, defined as the activity of the body in conjunction with the urges and appetites of nature, to the deviant and the abnormal, which in turn became psychiatrized into the category of sexuality. In this shift, the latently 'natural' activity of sex developed into a socially learned and therefore controllable category.

There was an especially strong link between the nation-state and the body (Boyarin 1994: 24–5). In addition to the organic metaphor of nationalist ideology where the word *nasci* alluded to 'birth,' as of a people, the nation generated loyalty similar to that which one owes to one's parents, uniting against 'foreign' enemies that threaten its unity and creating a single acceptable code of social and sexual behaviour of the 'citizen'. Again in the specific

case of women, this code was infused with patriarchal concerns dictating that women employ their sexuality specifically in the privacy of their home for the biological reproduction of the nation. Education and emancipation became necessary for women to make them more efficient mothers who then biologically and culturally reproduced better citizens for the nation-state (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989). Women therefore appeared more in public, but often divested of their sexuality, to emerge next to men as 'equal' citizens, an equality that existed more in form than content, and one that was monitored closely by the state.

The modern nation-state attempted to control the body in order to 'manufacture docile subjects and an obedient work force through the systematic disciplining of people's bodies' (Porter 1991: 218). The intersection of capitalism with nationalism further exacerbated this control as the nation-state attempted to increase the efficiency of labour and, at the same time, to reproduce the legitimation of the political system through developing checks and balances on the social actions of its citizens. States created secular spaces so that their legitimacy rested not in a divine source but rather in opposition; secular space became by definition that which was not religious, a category which quickly became blurred since religion and culture often overlapped.

The concomitant transformation of social relations within the west entered a different stage as it started to translate across societies. The colonial state set up a system of rule that relied on a definition of colonial difference which assumed the local culture to be inferior and backward and thus in need of the colonial intervention for improvement (Chatterjee 1993: 17). When the nationalists inherited this system, they also internalized the presumed backwardness to justify their control over decision-making. Women fitted perfectly within this context, since they were located first in colonial feminism as oppressed subjects waiting to be liberated by the colonialists, and second, after national liberation, in state feminism, where they became asexual citizens sacrificing their self-empowerment to aid the development of the nation and were given the political rights of citizenship in return.

Even though Turkey had not been colonized, it nevertheless carried on an imaginary dialogue with the west, one that aspired the Turkish nation-state to be 'just like the west'. Subsequently, in 1928, five years after the establishment of the republic, the Turkish Constitution was formally amended to disestablish Islam as the state religion; the amendments of 1937 expressly defined the Turkish state as secular. Covering was not legally banned for women but 'a vigorous propaganda campaign led by the founder of the republic, Mustafa Kemal, exhorted women to adopt modern styles of dress and the dissenters were dealt with severely' (Kandiyoti 1991: 23). He wanted them to appear and to be like civilized western women. Even though the new Kemalist women increased women's visibility, women's autonomous political initiatives were actively discouraged: the Women's People's Party founded in

1923 was transformed into the Women's Federation, only to be disbanded in 1935 after acquiring the right to vote and deciding that women had now indeed established equality. Women's emancipation was not an aim in and of itself but part of a larger project of nation-building and secularization. Although Kemalism was a progressive ideology fostering women's participation in the public sphere, it did not alter patriarchal forms of morality. Kemalist women 'veiled' their sexuality in the male world of public affairs by checking sexuality and desexualizing themselves (Kandiyoti 1987: 323; Durakbaşa 1998: 149). Gender neutrality therefore reproduced patriarchal modes by not challenging them.

The emergence of the postcolonial and post-nationalist era alerted people to the hegemony of the filter of the west, leading many to seek 'an indigenous identity, untainted by modernity'. The Islamist women resisted incorporation into the nation-state by objecting to the state-supported image of the desexualized secular woman in a suit with her hair in a bun; they provided instead an alternative image of a woman who also desexualized herself but this time through covering her hair and wearing loose-fitting clothing. Covering was specifically 'the demarcating element of a Muslim woman's identity, the zone of transition from the private to the public' where the woman neutralized the private by covering herself (İlyasoğlu 1994, 1998). By doing so, she successfully negotiated the tension between guarding her privacy and modesty in accordance with religious principles and publicly carving herself a space and a mode of participation. The marches against the state control of veiling started in the late 1960s and still continue today, alongside very active work to mobilize the voters and increase political participation, especially of women (Benton 1996).

The Islamist writers criticized Turkey's decision to secularize and extended their criticism to the entire orientation of Turkey towards the west, one they saw as imitating form but not substance: Cihan Aktaş traced the relationship between attire and political rule to Turkey's relation with the west, from the 'first serenades of the Western desire that would last three hundred years' to 'wardrobe westernization', which then transformed into 'wardrobe Kemalism' when the republican cadres officially adopted western garb and prosecuted those males who did not abide by it (1989: 65, 233). As a consequence of this development, one argued that 'women no longer gave birth to [Ottoman sultans like] Yavuz, Kanuni, Fatih because no moral education was provided and all knowledge was reduced to Western imitation' (Aktaş 1989: 258). The Islamist accounts contained frequent comparisons with the west. Some argued that covering rather than uncovering was a sign of civilization, while others contended that covered women emerge as a consequence of urbanization and education, not due to the lack of it (Aksay 1989: 80; Aktaş 1991: 18). [6] Similarly, an Islamist journal carried an article by Adile Oduncu that compared Islamists to black people in the west; entitled 'Are there blacks

6 Aktaş (1988) also provides a typology of women in society, namely western elite women, alienated materialist women, consuming hollow women, traditional women, intellectual women and Muslim intellectual women. The best are obviously in the latter category, where the author herself is also located.

in my country?,' the article replied in the affirmative and related the experiences of covered women to those of black people (Arat 1990b: 22). As a Muslim, one became the passive 'other', possessing an identity with a dual sense of injury/pride (Saktanber 1994: 103).

The filters of state, religion and the west polarized the meanings surrounding gender in Turkish society. Women started to take sides on the secular/religious divide overlooking their shared experiences as women. The inherent gender biases in the formation and transformation of the Turkish nation-state thus sustained themselves. Secular women vehemently protected their limited legal rights whereas Islamist women ardently tried to achieve rights for themselves in the secular system. This tension and ambiguity informed the choices of the deputies in the national assembly; while one covered in the fight to attain legal rights, the other uncovered to retain those rights – the secular women deputies instead celebrated their rights and promised to better them.

Impassioned military: polarization and the limits of tolerance

The polarization among women reflects the deeper symbolic divide between the secularists and Islamists. Even though these two polarized groups could possibly negotiate tolerance, its expression at both the communal and political levels also necessitates the development of respect. Yet the polarization of the discourse, the inability to publicly debate the options, and the strong military support of the secularists, make such respect impossible in Turkey.[7] This social condition also affects relationships among the women, whereby secular and Islamist women work separately to promote the political aims of their own group rather than the betterment of all Turkish women.

One scholar aptly identifies the chasm between the Islamists and secularists, where 'the former are absorbed into the myth of the era of bliss (*asr-ı saadet*), and retreat into the golden age of Islamic history and the latter view Islam as an anomaly or antithesis of modernity and try to erase it from their history by unleashing a process of voluntary amnesia in the name of modernization' (Kadıoğlu 1994: 659). Indeed, the secularist and Islamist literature amply demonstrate the sharp divide between the two groups as both idealize their own group and stereotype the other. In Islamist children's literature, for instance, there are two contrasting worlds, the pious honest Muslim world pitted against the materialist hedonistic impulsive 'modern' world (Saktanber 1991: 180). In Islamist fiction, misguided secularist women engage in meaningless activities such as 'playing card games, training dogs and painting their face', whereas all Islamist women 'are modest, hardworking and brilliant' (Aksay 1989: 68, 94). In the monthly Islamist periodicals, Islamist women are referred to as 'holy warriors' (*mücahide*) who fight against the dangerous and

7 An-Na'im argues (1995: 56) that even though such respect could develop through public debate, the emphasis placed on the boundaries of identity rather than its content, and the continuous confrontation with the west, skew the interpretation of practices to make such a public debate inherently impossible.

evil forces of secularism and westernization (Güneş-Ayata 1991: 297). Secularists similarly polarize and idealize; one identifies pre-Islamic periods in Turkish history to argue that Turkish culture promoted gender equality before the advent of Islam (Arsel 1987). Another promotes the use of voluntary associations such as Lions and Rotary clubs to promote Kemalism and secularism (Özsoyeller 1995: 24). Yet others present statistics to demonstrate how much women's status in Turkey has improved with secularism (Abadan-Unat 1986). All perceive Islamist women as misguided and exploited.

This difference between the secular and Islamist women presents a great challenge to the liberal model of tolerance that forms the basis of current democracies where tolerance is defined 'in individualistic terms as the protection of individuals' free conscience' (Galeotti 1993: 595). By focusing exclusively on the individual rather than on the society within which they are embedded, the model runs into problems when a number of differences intersect to form societal patterns; it lacks the analytical tools to successfully recognize groups and communities, and naturalizes the consensus reached by a powerful segment of society. In the case of Turkey, the application of the liberal model of tolerance naturalizes the powerful secular women and thereby renders them invisible as a social group. The Islamist women, however, form a community through their beliefs and practices, and their difference intersects gender with religion. Their practice of head-covering therefore symbolizes not only an individual choice but also the expression of a communal belief and practice, one articulated through the visible symbol of the headscarf. Similarly, since the liberal model of tolerance recognizes and focuses exclusively on individual choice, it balks at the intersection of the individual with the community on one hand and the representation of difference by the headscarf on the other. It is this quandary that has generated in Turkey the secularist response that head-covering is only a personal choice inherently unsatisfactory. Secularists socially define head-covering as an individual choice and are therefore willing to tolerate its presence in society as an exercise of the individual's civil rights. The same secularists also address the cultural tradition that developed over time into a substantial community of people who did not unveil and chose to recognize the veil not as a form against modernity, but rather as a form of a local, alternate version of modernity defined in opposition to the inherently 'western' conception. These secularists also fervently sanction veiling as a separatist symbol of difference when they see it as crossing the boundaries into the public sphere of politics.

This separation of the individual, communal and political levels also contains within it the assumption of a private/public divide, the boundaries of which work well when imagined analytically but are constantly challenged in practice. As Joseph argues, the development of civil society, citizenship and democratic nationhood all hinge on the separation of the public and private spheres, a separation which ultimately abnormalizes both spheres since liberal

political theory perceives the public sphere as the realm of reason and the private sphere as the realm of body and emotion, that is, the realm of the woman (Joseph 1997: 74, Benhabib and Cornell 1987; Young 1987). This formulation also informs the way headscarving in Turkey is defined and tolerated: it forms an individual practice in both private and public spheres, but becomes ambiguous when articulated as a public practice. While headscarved women define their home as the private sphere and therefore uncover, they interpret the national assembly as a public sphere where it is necessary to be covered. For the covered women to uncover their head in the national assembly, they would need to redefine the public sphere of the assembly as a part of the private sphere: the Nationalist-Islamist deputy's attribution to the 'sacredness' of the Turkish state tradition in the national assembly is a partial attempt to make this conversion and to find within the assembly the sacredness of one's home. For the national assembly to change its rules of conduct and accept covered women, it too would need to redefine the private sphere of the covered women as a part of its public sphere, one it would then have to extend to other similar spheres such as schools and public buildings.

When considering such possible reinterpretations, the issues of who makes these redefinitions and how much social and political power they possess become extremely significant. The national assembly and the covered women have disparate amounts of power. The national assembly politically represents the entire nation, has administratively developed a set of regulations for such representation, and counts on the support of the legal system for their execution. Since these regulations have been in existence for a long time, they have also been 'naturalized' in that they are interpreted as given rather than as socially constructed. Yet the assembly faces the danger of gradually losing its legitimacy if it fails to adapt to societal transformations. The covered women, on the other hand, represent only a segment of the voters; they lack any administrative coordination, do not have an alternative set of regulations they can propose, and are not supported by the legal system. They do have social support outside the assembly, however, and draw attention to the possible reconstruction of assembly regulations and by implication of the legal system. Such a contestation becomes inherently destabilized when the military weighs in to sustain the national assembly: backed by the military, the national assembly may become less careful about adapting to societal transformation, and this may eventually lead to its gradual delegitimation through alienation from the people.

Hallowed hybridity: silences within and outside the incident

Given the constraints on the incident discussed above, I would argue that the only way one could constructively interpret the incident without becoming

politically polarized is to map out the silences within and outside the incident. These silences span the situational to the structural; the first question that needed to be asked about the issue of the headscarf but was not can be formulated as follows: Why was the dress code of the assembly not modified at any point since its inception to specifically exclude the headscarf? Assembly debates on the issue demonstrated that opinion was sharply divided within the assembly; opinion polls within society at large also revealed that people wanted the practice of covering the head to be left to the discretion of the individual.[8] The national assembly therefore avoided the issue because it was bound to create tension. Indeed, one could argue that the assembly as a practice chose to leave the rules governing women's behaviour ambiguous in order not to contradict the existing tradition that inherently opposed, at least in appearance, the modernity of the secular political structure.

The second silence concerns the avoidance of the discussion of the issue which Kavakçi was attempting to address: why was Kavakçı's act immediately diverted away from the larger issue of democratic space in modern Turkey on to her personal failings? The virulent campaign against her person trivialized the behaviour and marginalized her political position. She was perceived as a person with particular traits and life history not shared by the rest of society; the fact that she had been elected with the votes of a significant proportion of the populace was overlooked. No one was concerned about who would represent that proportion and how.

The third and most significant silence pertains to the secularist fear voiced mainly by the army: Why do the secularists and the military assume that their compromise on this headscarf issue would naturally and swiftly lead to an Islamist state? This fear is so naturalized in Turkey that no one is willing to consider the possibility that it can be critically examined and altered. Interestingly enough, the Islamists themselves do not attempt to question and critically examine the fear; instead, they rationally try to convince the secularists that their compromises would not necessarily lead to the demise of the secularist state. Yet one needs to understand the dynamics of this fear for the establishment of social peace in Turkey: it is a truism that, as secularists point out time and again, the contemporary states with a specifically Islamic character like Iran and Afghanistan are indeed very undemocratic. It is also true that historically the political protests against the Turkish state have often taken on a religious character. In addition, as secularists and the military often contend, Turkey does indeed have hostile neighbours and perhaps many foreign powers who constantly attempt to destabilize her. Finally, it is also true that some Islamists have actively criticized and vowed to eliminate the secularists and 'their' state. Yet these truths are also social constructions that have emerged through history under the influence of specific events and processes. Rather than attempting to impose these views on others, it may be more productive to start debating them

8 This finding is based on a survey on the boundaries of the Islamist movement in Turkey that Yılmaz Esmer and I conducted in Istanbul and Konya during 1994 and 1998. Almost two-thirds of the subjects in Istanbul and half of the subjects in Konya indicated that the decision to veil should be left to the discretion of the individual.

publicly. If Turkey is an active democracy with a strong legal system that guarantees the rights of her citizens, the incorporation of Islamist viewpoints would not obliterate the state but instead strengthen it.

I would conjecture that the roots of this fear and of the implied but unstated fragility of the Turkish state can be traced once more to Turkey's dialogue with the west and her adoption of the western legal system. The main difference between creation and adoption concerns empowerment: Turkish citizens and their representatives may not feel empowered enough to successfully question and reconstruct the legal system, and therefore concentrate their efforts on preserving it. Indeed, in his short speech to the assembly upon the entrance of Kavakçı, the Turkish prime minister Bülent Ecevit asserted that 'this place is the most exalted institution of the state. Those who serve here have to obey the rules and tradition of the state. This is not a place to challenge the state.'[9] One can further contend that since the western legal system was one of the foundation stones of the Turkish republic, any criticism of the system may be directly associated with the nature of the republic itself. Hence any attempt to reflect upon, criticize and possibly alter the legal system is dismissed and sanctioned as if it were pulling away the foundation stone of the republic. Ironically, this same process to preserve the republic also leads to its ossification as the public is not able to negotiate its legal system with the changing world order.

How could one go beyond the secularist fear and the Islamist challenge? I would argue that the constructive solution to the problem concerns the recognition of the hybridity of the categories of Islamists and secularists: such an acknowledgement only develops when one analyses the two social groups together as they coexist in society. When the secularists and the Islamists are studied in comparison to one another, the continuities, differences and variations between them become more articulated. Yet in the Turkish context the secularists and Islamists are always studied as two disparate groups; the inordinate attention paid to the Islamist women has led to many studies on them (Acar 1990, 1991; Akgökçe 1994; Atasoy 1997; Benton 1996; Göle 1991; Güneş-Ayata 1991; Ilyasoğlu 1998; Saktanber 1991, 1994; Toprak 1982; Üşür 1995) whereas there are very few studies on the secularists (Durakbaşa 1998). In everyday life, Islam and secularism interweave in Turkey to yield a multiplicity of hybrid experiences, not taken into account by the existing literature. One could depict these experiences in everyday life; for instance, while the two groups differ in the rejection of western cultural rituals such as New Year celebrations, they also revise existing rituals such as watching movies and television but only selectively, or wearing Victorian era-inspired white bridal gowns but with their heads covered. Such syntheses cross the boundaries between the secularists and the Islamists to create a joint social space.

Only recently have there been studies analysing the secularist and Islamist

9 The full speech by Ecevit is as follows: 'No one is intervening with the attires and headscarves of women in their private lives. Yet this place is not the private space of anyone. This place is the most exalted institution of the state. Those who serve here have to obey the rules and tradition of the state. This is not a place to challenge the state. Please put this lady in her place.'

positions concomitantly; the leading work in this new path is that of Mervat Hatem on Egypt (1994, 1998). Indeed, in her analysis of the Egyptian discourses on gender and political liberalization, Hatem demonstrates that the options offered by the secular state and the Islamists are similar, as both attempt to politically incorporate women into their agenda on their rather than women's terms (1994). Similarly, in reconciling cultural nationalism with the pursuit of the universal project of modernity, both the Islamists and the secularists share a common history and actually proceed to accommodate cultural difference in the same manner but in opposite directions: while the secularists localize cultural difference to the private sphere, the Islamists attempt to extend the private to the public sphere (Hatem 1998). Once one crosses the secularist–Islamist divide, the patterns that extend beyond the two groups to restrict their options become more evident.

In conclusion, when the headscarf incident in Turkey is analysed as more than an instance of the tension between the Islamists and the secularists, the social actors who shape the event and the meanings they create become more clearly articulated. One observes that the political positions of Kavakçı and Ünal polarize as they intersect with the conceptions of state, Islam and the west; the ensuing dynamic is then further bounded by the intercession of the army. The most significant dimensions emerge through the analysis of the silences contained in the incident; the focus on the individual behaviour of veiling avoids the collective message of the electorate behind it, the restrictions placed upon democracy, and the fear of religion among the army and the secularists in Turkey. Indeed, the issue of to veil or not to veil transforms beyond gender boundaries to a discussion of democracy and its boundaries in contemporary Turkey.

Acknowledgement

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