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Religion, Politics and Gender Equality in Turkey

Implications of a Democratic Paradox

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Introduction

Turkey is going through a revolutionary experiment with Islam in liberal democratic politics (“political society” in the words of J. Casanova, 1994), the results of which are not yet clear.¹ The process of democratization dictated the relaxing of a statist hold on religion which in turn revived the specter of restrictive sex roles for women. Turkey is working through a democratic paradox where expansion of religious freedoms accompanies threats to gender equality. The religiously rooted government in power does not challenge the prevailing legal framework. However, the intertwining of religion and politics both at the level of political and civil society, independent of the legal framework, sanctions societal norms legitimizing gender inequality.

If indeed “Islamic values are less supportive of gender equality and less tolerant of sexual liberalization” as has often been argued (Esmer, 2003, 67), we need to urgently assess the effects of religious intertwining with politics. In this paper, I evaluate the effects of this intertwining using the criteria of whether or not this process expands “opportunities” for women. I argue that it is not the uplifting of the Islamist² headscarf ban in the universities that we should prioritize as a danger, but the propagation of patriarchal religious values that sanction secondary roles for women, both through public bureaucracy, the educational system and civil society organizations. Party cadres with sexist values are infiltrating the political system, and religious movements that were once banned are establishing schools, dormitories, and off campus Quranic schools which socialize the young into religiously sanctioned secondary roles for women.

Without essentializing Islam, we need to locate the specific dangers that certain Islamist discourses have for restricting women’s options. We can strengthen cross cutting alliances between liberal groups both within Islamist and secular groups to initiate pro women’s rights change from within.

A vigilant and active civil society, including a bourgeoisie committed to an enlightened secularism and liberal democracy is an important safety valve against the promotion of secondary roles for women. Closer global links with those states, institutions and people, which uphold women’s rights as human rights, is also an impending necessity.

In this paper, I shall first trace how religion and politics are intertwined in Turkey. Then I shall discuss the social and political effects of this intertwining especially from a gender perspective.

Historical Context

The founding fathers of the Turkish Republic inherited a religious state and society with a strong tradition of secular rule from the Ottoman Empire. Observers of Turkish Ottoman history underline the long entrenched secular tradition in the Turkish-Ottoman Islamic state (Berkes, 1964; Inalcik, 1964; Mardin, 2005). Niyazi Berkes explains that the

¹ I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to the democratic paradox I describe in the paper. I would also like to thank Shahra Razavi and Anne Jenichen for their careful readings and acute criticisms that I benefited from in various drafts.

² The term “Islamist” is used in an all-encompassing vague sense to refer to views, norms or practices that are colored by religious reference in some way. The meaning of the term changed over time from one claiming a more literal reference to Islam to another making oblique references. As a short hand both Refah and AK Party might be referred to as Islamist but there is a radical difference in their Islamism.

classical Ottoman polity was ruled by a Sultan with patrimonial authority, bound by the Islamic sacred law Sharia (Berkes, 1964, 9). The Sultan had discretionary prerogatives and exercised his will as the direct representative of God in the world. The highest religious authorities were tied to the Sultan and primarily helped legitimize his rule. Only when the Empire began to unravel did religious authorities increase their autonomy in the hierarchic structure of rule.

However, the secular tradition took a radical turn with the foundation of the Republic of Turkey. The disestablishment of Islam was crucial in the process of nation building and modernization in Turkey (Berkes, 1964; Mardin, 1981; Lewis, 1976; Toprak, 1981; Heper, 1985; Keyder, 1987; Kalaycıoğlu, 2005). The Republic declared sovereignty to belong to the nation and took radical steps to privatize religion and secularize the state. It restricted public visibility and dissemination of Islam. Republican secularism was neither democratic nor liberal but it was comprehensive and radical.³ The new regime was less interested in securing religious freedoms than in disestablishing Islam and controlling its power in civil life. As such, the state did not necessarily separate itself from religious affairs but rather attempted to shape its content and role in society. Through secularism, it aimed to facilitate westernization of the predominantly Muslim society inherited from the Ottomans. Under Kemalist secularism, the Enlightenment faith in reason and science thus flourished. Because of its close links to the state, secularism in Turkey has been compared to the Jacobin French “laicism” rather than the liberal Anglo-Saxon secularism. To this day, this particular secularism, namely “laicism”, shapes the worldviews of many, including the educated elite as well as the military.

The founding fathers initiated a series of institutional changes to promote secularism. The Sultan was deported and the institution of patrimonial rule abolished in 1922. The abolition of the Caliphate and of the Ministries of Sharia and Religious Foundations followed. Institutions of higher Islamic education, madrasahs as well as religious orders were banned. The secular Ministry of Education unified all education under its authority. Sciences and morals could thus develop independently of religious dogma. Secular education replaced religious teaching.

In an attempt to oversee the process of secularization and to control religion, the Directorate of Religious Affairs was established in 1924. The Directorate aimed to “administer all matters concerning the beliefs and rituals of Islam” (Berkes, 1964, 485). The Directorate could thus allow the State to oversee religious matters and shape religious activity politically. Religious personnel such as imams and prayer leaders became state employees expected to take instructions from the Directorate. The state thus could have a say in how the religious functionaries interpreted religion and what the imams and prayer leaders could or could not say in Friday sermons. Public praying was discouraged as mosques deteriorated because funds were not made available for repair.

Perhaps most importantly especially for women and their legal status in the new Republic, a new Civil Code adapted from the Swiss Civil Code displaced the Muslim Sharia and became the legal code of the country in 1926. The new code prohibited polygamy, subjected marriage to secular law, outlawed unilateral divorce, recognized male female equality in inheritance and guardianship of children. In 1934, the new state recognized suffrage for women thus expanding the public roles women could assume in the

³ Parla and Davison, 2004 argue that Kemalist secularism was not “true secularism” because it prohibited “religious freedom” rather than guaranteeing it (p. 6). They further argue that it was intertwined with politics from early days on because the founding fathers privileged Sunni Islam by institutionally establishing the Directorate of Religious Affairs (p. 104).

secular Republic. Unlike any other Muslim country, women in Turkey could thus be liberated from the restrictions traditional Islamist interpretations imposed on them.

After the establishment of the new institutional and legal basis of the secular state, the founding fathers aimed to secularize the culture of the polity. Even though women were not barred from wearing the veil, regulations, if not laws, led female public servants to adapt Western dress codes, including uncovering the hair. In this era of whole-hearted Westernization, female role models around Mustafa Kemal all dressed à la West in daily life. Attending Republican Balls in décolleté dresses ensured the legitimacy of a Turkish Islam for women where women uncovered in public.

In 1925, the traditional male headgear fez was abolished and a law was passed for wearing the European style hat. In 1926, the Gregorian calendar was adopted and only two years later Latin script replaced the Arabic script associated with Islam. The call to prayer traditionally delivered in Arabic was translated and delivered in Turkish. In 1928, the constitutional article that Islam was the religion of the state was dropped. In 1937, secularism became a constitutional principle.

Secularizing measures of the Republic were arguably the most radical and the most important in setting the course of modernization à la west. The founding fathers aimed to use secularism as a means to develop and modernize the country. As they successfully pursued their goal, the need to democratize the country precipitated the need to lax the secular hold of the state over society.

The process of democratization that accompanied Westernization brought about several concessions. In 1950, Turkey moved away from a single party to a multi party regime. The Republican People's Party that had introduced the secularizing reforms and had ruled as an authoritarian single party was replaced by the Democrat Party, which allowed for relatively more extensive religious expression in public space. The call to prayer began to be delivered in Arabic and the government initiated the founding of the Prayer Leader and Preacher schools (Acar and Ayata, 2002, Akşit, 1991).

After a military intervention took place against the Democrat Party, which had become increasingly more authoritarian even though it had expanded religious rights, a new more liberal Constitution was drafted. The 1961 Constitution, which expanded freedom of expression and civil liberties, allowed for the development of leftist as well as rightist ideologies. The Islamist Milli Nizam (National Order) Party, which was founded in 1970, was immediately closed by a constitutional court order because the dictates of the party undermined the secularist principles of the constitution. The Milli Selamet (National Salvation) Party duly replaced the Milli Nizam Party. The new party upheld traditional values and the importance of the Ottoman (i.e. Islamist) past for contemporary problems from the Kurdish issue to the problems of uneven capitalist development. It was an articulate critic of modernization à la west because the project denied the importance of religion in people's lives and Turkish secularism controlled Islam (Toprak, 1984).

After the 1980 military intervention, the Milli Selamet Party was closed along with other parties. In the post 1980 era, the Islamist Refah (Welfare) Party (Çakir, 1994, Gulalp, 1999a and b, Jenny White, 1995, 1997, 2002 a and b, Yavuz, 1997), which replaced Milli Selamet, promoted the pursuit of a "just order". Similar to Milli Selamet, Refah was also critical of the West, Turkish westernization and secularism. The party was against the European Union and advocated a union of Islamic states where Turkey would play a leading role like it did during Ottoman times. During their term in opposition, the party leaders developed and later advocated the concept of "multiple legal orders", where different groups of people would choose to abide by different legal systems, a direct challenge to the prevailing concept of secularism where there was only

one secular legal order. Though the proposal had no policy implications and was waived aside without much debate, it did reveal an alternate understanding of secularism the party was ready to imagine. Refah openly supported women who wanted to attend universities with their headscarves, and thus recruited large numbers of women into its ranks (Arat, 2005). Unlike its predecessor, which had played a key role in the coalition governments of the 1970s but remained electorally weak, Refah became the major opposition party in the country. Following the 1995 elections, where it received 21.4% of the votes, Refah became the major coalition partner in government from June 1996 to July 1997.

In 1998, Refah was also closed by a constitutional court order. Fazilet (Virtue) Party, which dropped the rhetoric of multiple legal orders and criticism of the West, replaced Refah (Esmer, 2002, 109; Güneş-Ayata and Ayata, 148-155; Yeşilada, 2002). It was also closed because it supported the wearing of headscarves in universities and was against the ban on the issue. The military, the state bureaucracy, the judiciary, the president and educated professionals were all against the Islamist parties and in support of Kemalist secularism where religion was privatized and controlled by the state. Yet, the discourse of staunch secularism began to lose its monopoly in civil society and Republican secularism began to be criticized for its illiberal ethos by secular as well as Islamist groups in the 1990s.

The younger generation of Fazilet members who wanted their party to become mainstream founded Adalet ve Kalkınma Party (AKP, Justice and Development Party) in 2001 (Tepe, 2005). Democracy had become, in the words of A. Przeworski, the “only game in town” (Przeworski, 1991), and the Islamist parties that were closed came back to try to win under the same rules which outlawed them. The resilience of electoral democracy in Turkey helped moderate the Islamists who sought political power in Turkey. With the November 2002 elections, AKP received 34.3 % of the votes and assumed power as a single party government with 363 seats in a parliament of 550 (Çarkoğlu and Kalaycıoğlu, 2007). It had a successful term in office for about 4.5 years during which the party proved itself its change into a moderate conservative party, aware of the globalizing transformations taking place in the world and responsive to the changing needs and demands of its domestic constituency.

AKP had recognized that the only route to political power was through winning elections and playing by the rules of procedural democracy that the population unequivocally endorsed. To win the next elections, AKP responded to popular demands. The overwhelming majority of the population at the time (about 70%), including AKP’s primary constituency of provincial Islamist bourgeoisie, supported the prospect of joining Europe, and everyone wanted a strong, stable growing economy. By 2002, the smaller Anatolian based entrepreneurs along with the Istanbul based big business were ready to profit from closer integration with Europe. AKP responded to both economic and political dictates, overcame the long entrenched antagonism of the Islamists towards Europe and proved itself capable of running a stable economy that its predecessors could not.

In the July 2007 elections, AKP returned to power with 47% of votes and 340 MPs in a parliament of 550 members. In 2002, even though AKP ruled as a single party government with 363 seats in the parliament, it had received only about one third of the votes.⁴ In 2007, for the first time in Turkish history a political party with an Islamist background came to power with practically half the electorate behind it. The balance

⁴ After the 2002 elections, only two parties were in parliament. The high 10% electoral barrage leads to wasting of votes in the Turkish electoral system even though it is based on proportional representation.

between the so-called secularists and the Islamists changed. AKP now could coalesce with the necessary two-thirds majority enabling it to change the Constitution with more facility. After it came to power, the party had its candidate for the Presidency of the country, Abdullah Gul, elected to office to the utter disappointment of the opposition. Through a quickly patched referendum, the party changed the rules of presidential elections from one where members of parliament elected the president to another where the people elected him/her by direct vote. Leaving aside the promises of a liberal comprehensive Constitutional amendment endorsed by a broad coalition both within and outside the parliament, which could also facilitate relations with the European Union, in January 2008, AKP constructed a hasty coalition with the rightist nationalists to abolish the ban on the headscarves by amending only the relevant Constitutional articles. In March 2008, the Public Prosecutor took the AKP to Constitutional Court to have the party closed. In July 2008, the Court decided against the closure of the party but punished it with a financial penalty because of its anti-secular activities. In this paper, I shall focus on the intertwining of religion and politics during the AKP terms in office, because it was the Islamist rooted party that had more political power than any of its predecessors. However, I shall first cite some relevant data to extend our understanding of context, which is crucial for evaluating the effects of this intertwining.

Some quantitative snapshots

According to the 2006 Freedom House Survey, which uses a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 represents most free and 7 least free, Turkey is ranked 3 in terms of political rights as well as civil liberties (Puddington, 2007, 128-129). There are still legal restrictions in civil liberties and democratic rights. Article 301 of the Penal Code restricts freedom of expression under the pretext of upholding national unity. Turkey has not been able to solve its Kurdish problem. There are breaches of Alevi⁵ rights under the Sunni majority. It is still difficult to talk about the massacres of Armenians during 1915-1917.

Against this background of restricted liberties, Turkey remains a secular country with a religious population. In a country of about 70 million people, there are about 85 thousand mosques. According to a 2007 survey, 82% fast regularly during the month of Ramadan, and only 45% think that restaurants should be open during Ramadan. 56% regularly go to mosque for Friday prayers, about 44% do the five daily prayers regularly, and 41% do them now and then. Defined as “one who tries to observe the requirements of Islam”, about 53 % consider themselves as religious. Defined as “one who does observe all the requirements of Islam,” about 10% consider themselves as devout Muslims. About 34% consider themselves as believers who don’t observe the dictates of Islam (Erdem, *Milliyet*, 5 December, 2007). These high figures are the results of reliable nationwide surveys. They might not reflect the reality and the figures might be actually lower than these surveys reflect, because people might have wanted to portray themselves as more religious than they really are. Still even this concern shows that being religious is a highly prized, socially sanctioned value.

In this religious population, 15% of the people are married with civil marriage only, while about 83% contract both civil as well as religious marriages. However, only 2% have only religious marriages (Altinay and Arat, 2007, 64).

About 70% of women (69.4%) cover their heads when they go out in public (Erdem, 2007). Within this 70%, there are different figures about the way heads are cov-

⁵ A minority Muslim group that constitutes about 10% of the population.

ered and different interpretations of what the different styles of head covering mean. Many, that is about 55%, seem to cover their heads with a scarf under their chin in a traditional fashion and others, about 15%, mostly among the young, seem to cover their heads with a turban closing the hair and the neck tightly. However, the distinction between different styles of head covering is difficult to communicate in a survey and how the respondents understand these distinctions is unclear, thus, we need to use these figures with caution.

73% of women who cover their heads say they do so because of religious beliefs. 13.7% say that it is a custom for them, 2.7% say their husbands want them to cover, 2.9% say it is the family elders who expect them to cover and 4.9% say it is a habit for them to cover (Erdem, 2007).

In Turkey, there is the famous ban on Islamic head covering in universities that has been a major cause of polarization in the country between the so called Islamists and seculars (Arat, 1991, 2001; Göle, 1996; Özdalga, 1997, 1998; Saktanber, 1994, 2002; Göçek, 1999; Özyürek, 2000). It was widely accepted that women in rural areas traditionally tied their heads loosely with a scarf. However, it was only in the 1980s that female students in visible numbers began covering their heads in metropolitan urban universities in a context of Islamist revival. It is widely agreed that head covering of women is an Islamic dictate. In 1981, the Council of Ministers issued a statute, which prohibited head covering for university students and public employees. The ban became a battle ground between the Council of Higher Education which changed its stance on the ban a few times. The Parliament which unsuccessfully tried to pass a law to allow the ban in 1987, the two previous Presidents who were adamantly opposed to it and the judiciary where the lower courts gave some verdicts in defense of the headscarves and the higher courts which vetoed them. Ultimately, both the Council of State and the Constitutional Court banned head covering in the universities because they declared it to be against the secular principles of the Republic. The European Human Rights Commission as well as the European Court of Human Rights supported the ban. Even though many women do attend various universities with headscarves because it is difficult to implement this law, the headscarf issue has been divisive.

By 2007, only 22% of the population supported the ban on wearing headscarves in universities and 78% opposed it. Yet, the 22% who support the ban feel intensely about it. They include mostly the educated elite, the military and the gate holders in judiciary. Among those who do not cover, about 56% oppose the ban. About 68.4% say it is not a symbol of opposition to secularism in Turkey. About 69% think that women should be able to cover in civil service as well if they want to (Erdem, 2007). However, prior to the 2002 elections, when asked what the most important problems of the coun-

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