

Selin Çağatay¹

Dec. 2009

An overview of the “Headscarf Issue” in Turkey: Kemalism, Islamism and the Women’s Movement

Since the foundation of the Turkish Republic, women have been welcome to participate in public life, but there was one informal condition: they would be uncovered. On the post-1980 political map, however, the invisibility of covered women in the public sphere has been questioned and challenged both by the covered women themselves and by the newly rising Islamist intellectual and political circles. Since that time, the “headscarf debate” has been a highly influential factor in Turkish politics each time it has been put on the agenda. This article attempts to sketch an overview of the discussion on the headscarf in Turkey, from an analytical perspective and with a focus on the women’s movement. The aim is to provide the reader with an analysis of the “headscarf issue” with reference to women and their significance in Turkish political culture, and hence to understand why the issue is debated mostly by those who do not wear it and how it has become a problem of representation in recent years.

The last decades in Turkey have been marked by a polarization between secularism and Islamism which disrupts social life. Turkish society has been divided into camps, i.e. secularists and Islamists, “us” and “others”. On one end of this polarization is the rapid increase in the public visibility of religious identities, the ascendance of religious cadres within bureaucratic ranks to high level positions under the consecutive AKP (Justice and Development Party) governments since 2002, and the conservative and oppressive tendencies of the central and local state institutions adopting an Islamist discourse. On the other end, there is an excessive distrust towards the executive and legislative organs, a fear of “neighborhood pressure” among groups who identify themselves with the Kemalist tradition, and opposition from these groups to the AKP’s rising hegemony through a discussion of secularism. Needless to say, the women’s movement is a determining factor and has been polarized in this cleavage, which at times has turned into a regime crisis.

The substance of the headscarf issue in Turkey consists, above all, of the social and political changes which have also lead to the secularist-Islamist cleavage. In other words, the repercussions of the sociopolitical transformations in the post-1980 period, primarily due to the economic restructuring that changed the constellation of classes and class forces within society and the state, have crystallized in the “headscarf issue”. The actors on the political stage have never refrained from taking sides in the issue, and instead, the actors’ approach

Referat:
Westliche Industrieländer
www.fes.de/international

**FRIEDRICH
EBERT
STIFTUNG**

to the headscarf has had a determining effect on their positions within politics. As a matter of fact, the headscarf issue has been intensely addressed by politicians, state institutions, the army and civil society; however, intentionally or unintentionally, the attempts were far from resolving the issue. During the AKP period, the progressive visibility of the headscarf in the public sphere and the relative improvement in the social position of covered women have made the issue even more divisive in society.

Despite the variety of different voices on the headscarf, none of the views offer a thorough evaluation of the topic. The intricate nature of the practice of covering makes it difficult to address every aspect of the issue. Moreover, those parties who have a claim to truth often have a tendency to disregard its vital aspects so as to render their discourses legitimate. Nonetheless, it is possible to denote two perspectives that are systematically excluded from the debate on the headscarf: the socio-historical context within which the headscarf emerged as a problem, and the very subjects of the headscarf, women. Hence, in this article I aim to confront these deficiencies in the headscarf debate. Providing a historical account of and a sociological insight on the issue will make it possible to distance ourselves from the secularism-Islamism axis, to reflect on more concrete grounds, and thereby to discuss the “headscarf issue” in terms of how it is shaped by and what consequences it has for women.²

The invention of the “headscarf issue” in Turkish politics

The “headscarf issue”, even at the very first glance, hints that there are controversial types of womanhood in Turkish society. If so, it is necessary to look at how different types of womanhood were constituted and how they became antithetical to each other. Similar to other modernization projects in the world, the notion of a “modern Turkish woman” has helped Kemalism to sever its ties with the old regime as well as to set itself independent from the West.³ Accordingly, the “educated, social, chaste and altruistic” Turkish woman was a role model for her “traditional and ignorant” sister, yet unlike her frivolous Western fellow. Kemalism’s determination to eradicate the influence of religion from public life helped construct the modern woman. That is to say, the eradication of religion in the public sphere and emancipating women by making room for them in public life were two mutual processes in the early republican period that supported each other.

The modern Turkish woman was idealized by the Kemalist cadres as she represented the break from the Ottoman period, and to legitimize this construct, the traditional/religious womanhood was positioned as her opposite. Here the traditional, covered woman was a means for the modern woman to demonstrate herself as modern, educated and having control over her body and her life. The new woman, however, would serve as a model for the traditional woman in the way she benefited from the advantages of a modern life style but not to the extent that she would participate in public life. Those who were given the privilege to participate in public life by the Kemalist regime were urban, upper-class women

who had already, to a significant degree, adopted a modern lifestyle in the pre-republican period. These women, whether they accompanied their husbands or took part in certain occupational groups, were primarily uncovered. Covered women, on the other hand, were glorified as the mothers of the nation as Kemalism sought its roots in the Anatolian peasantry. In this sense, in the republican period, women were always already divided on a class basis.

On the other hand, it is noteworthy to indicate that there is a complex relationship between Kemalist secularism and Islam. Whether the two are mutually exclusive or inclusive has been rather ambiguous in the history of the republic. Secularism is an essential feature of Kemalist modernization in its problematic and fragile relationship with Islam. Although Kemalism was openly against Islam's public existence, it is neither realistic nor convincing to think that it had a radical attitude against Islam itself, and yet there is clear evidence that the two have related to each other since the foundation of the republic. Still, the modern-traditional dualism of the republic associates progressivism with secularism and reactionary movements with religion. Since elements of the traditional would interrupt the modernization processes, any movement that conveyed Islamic references was excluded from the political sphere. Similar to the modern Turkish woman, secularism was both a unifying and a disruptive element of Kemalism.

Notwithstanding the apparent hierarchy between covered and uncovered women, the headscarf was not a matter of social conflict up until the 1980's. It was a common trend, if not a necessity, for women to uncover when entering into public life. The modernist spirit of the era encouraged uncovered women to take part in Kemalist social engineering, while discouraging covered women from transforming the gender relations they were engaged in. There was no ban on the headscarf but there was a silent consensus that covered women could not be a part of the workforce. Still, the evidence shows that there were covered women employed in professions such as teaching, nursing, secretarial work, etc. Certainly there have been individual examples where covered women were not allowed in higher education, but they are very limited in number. In any case, covered women were not seen as a threat unless they challenged the status quo.

How then, did the headscarf suddenly become such a fiercely debated topic? Certainly, the massive migration from rural to urban areas has resulted in different experiences of modernity; instead of uncovering when they came to urban areas, women remained covered but "modernized" their headscarf. The Islamist ideology gaining popularity among the Middle Eastern populations, particularly with the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, has helped build an Islamist, yet modernist, intellectual position within conservative circles, to which the above mentioned urban masses would be articulated. What is missing in this common explanation, although it is valid, is the very role Turkish politics played in giving the headscarf its political significance.

The military coup of 1980 and the governments that followed saw Islam and Turkishness as unifying identities which would terminate the left-right conflict and guarantee the survival of the state. This approach, later named "the Turk-Islam Synthesis", was the precursor of an era marked by identity politics. It was then possible for the Islamist ideology to rise, the Islamist identity to come up as a challenge to Kemalism, and religion to legitimately exist in the public sphere. In its modernist version, Islamism clearly demarcated itself from traditional Islam, while at the same time it developed in opposition to and as an alternative to Western modernity. While it emerged and consolidated as a political project, it constructed its own discourse on women, to whom the headscarf was inevitably communicated. In the Islamist constellation, the profile of the covered, educated Muslim woman symbolized the disavowal of the superiority of Western civilization, as well as of the "Westernist elite".

On a parallel basis, the economic restructuring again led by the military regime and the following ANAP (Motherland Party) governments enabled a structural transformation in the political sphere by rearranging state-civil society relations. The "structural adjustments" which the Turkish bourgeoisie needed to keep up with the neo-liberal era and to restore its domination necessitated a change in the form of the state. From then on, the state would be responsible not for reproducing the hegemonic means to steer the civil society, but for providing the necessary infrastructure for integration into global markets. Accordingly, the state would be an essential feature of a new hegemonic project and gain the consent of the masses by adopting a discourse of moderation (Turkish-Islam Synthesis). Meanwhile, the balance of forces within the state changed, and newly rising classes emerged, which would then become the electoral base of the Islamist ideology.

During this period, in which the "others" of the nation found an expression, Kemalism lost its unifying character as the national identity. It shifted its struggle for hegemony to the field of civil society in the 90's. Although this was evaluated as a process of relative democratization in liberal circles, it was actually a strategic maneuver that would enable Kemalism to have a legitimate ground from which it could interfere in the state. The Kemalist streak within civil society deemed Islamism as counter-revolution and it reemphasized the virtues of the Kemalist revolution. Not surprisingly, the most fiercely defended element was secularism since it was what detached Kemalism from its Islamic past. While the cultural aspects of Kemalism were highlighted, it was once again the women's task to represent these aspects as they were the symbol of the secularist state. Therefore, the Kemalist answer to the headscarf was the re-imposition of the "modern Turkish woman."

The post-1980 political conjuncture allowed new social movements to thrive. Feminism was one of the movements which mobilized women politically. Feminist literature was introduced to Turkey and provided women with a feminist perspective on history and society. The feminist push in the women's movement encouraged women to become independent political subjects and to set forth their own agenda. As a result, the women's movement,

hitherto mobilized under the watchful eye of Kemalism or socialist circles, was organized independently, gave voice to authentic demands, and took important steps towards the liberation of women. This has contributed in the differentiation and politicization of different types of womanhood too. Yet, thanks to the political conjuncture, women found themselves already embedded in identity politics.

For these reasons, Kemalism's imagination of a "classless society" proved to be an illusion and the ideal type, the "Turkish woman," turned out to be questionable and challengeable. With the rise of Islamism as an alternative modernization project, covered and uncovered women, who were already in a hierarchical relationship, became "antagonistic others", given their role as bearers of culture. Kemalist tradition saw the individualization of women as a means to become a citizen, whereas Islamist thought regarded this as a threat to the solidarity of the community. Therefore, Kemalism views the headscarf as an obstacle to modernization, but for Islamists it is the barrier to degeneration. In this sense, the headscarf is a political symbol upon which both Kemalist and Islamist discourses are built.

Legitimacy and the ban: women organizing around the "headscarf issue"

At this point, it is vital to examine the legal processes that the headscarf went through, in order to understand how state institutions have contributed to the issue becoming deadlocked. The above-discussed "evolution" of the headscarf opened a discussion regarding the ban imposed on it.⁴ Covered women were banned from attending institutions of higher learning, while, paradoxically, they were allowed secondary education in vocational state schools (Imam Hatip Schools) that were training government employed imams. Public opposition, however, forced the ANAP government to look for solutions in order to allow covered women in the universities. İhsan Doğramacı, the YÖK (Higher Education Council) president at the time, suggested the use of the "turban" instead of the headscarf, asserting that it was more "modern".⁵ This gave the word turban its Islamic meaning as a specific style of covering. From then on, the headscarf issue would be referred to as the "turban issue". Covered women were told that they could enter institutions of higher learning if they were covered in the turban style and so they did. In 1987, YÖK included "wearing a headscarf" in its list of disciplinary issues, defining it as "reactionary threat"; the headscarf was banned again. In 1988, an additional clause 16 in the YÖK Code said: "It is mandatory to have a modern dress code and outlook in higher education institutions, classrooms, clinics, polyclinics and belief." This clause, however, was deemed to be "a violation of secularism" by the Constitutional Court and was annulled in 1989; the headscarf was banned once again. In 1990, a final legal arrangement was made and the additional clause 17 was added to the YÖK Code, which said: "There is freedom of dress in institutions of higher learning unless it is a violation of the existing laws." In fact, this article remains in effect to this day.

Kemalist and Islamist women organized in different terms but at the same time. Kemalist women organized for the cause of "maintaining the acquired rights" of gender equality in

the public sphere. They came together as the pioneers of Turkish modernization, as women for whom society's interests were prior to their own. They claimed to raise the awareness of women and to represent all women. Since the beginning, their organizations were manifestly against the headscarf, which was increasingly becoming the symbol of Islamist ideology. A woman who studied in higher education and yet still wanted to cover her hair was unintelligible in the Kemalist women's understanding of modern life. Aysel Ekşi, the first president of the Support for Modern Life Association founded in 1991, summarized the purpose of their organization as follows: "For some time now, we have been facing a serious and sneaky reactionary movement in Turkey which hides behind the veil of 'women's freedom to dress as they like' but endeavors to take our society back to the dark ages... we came together, conscious of this threat and based upon the authority given to us by Atatürk's revolutions, in order to preserve Atatürk's revolutions, the secular republic and our rights, which are inseparable from them".⁶ Indeed, the Kemalist women have systematically organized around the country and discussed at length how to "rescue" women from the headscarf. Their struggle was recognized and appreciated by various state institutions more often than not, and it had a certain influence on the state's attitude towards the headscarf issue.

For the Kemalists, the Islamist RP's (Welfare Party) seizure of political power, first in the local government in 1994, then in the central government in 1996 meant that the "threat of Sharia" had materialized. Reactionary speeches of the party members, the overt influence of certain religious orders within bureaucratic ranks, and the local government's display of exclusionary Islamist attitudes have strengthened Kemalist women's fear of counter-revolution and accelerated their organizing against the headscarf. But more importantly, it triggered the pro-coup dynamics within the military and in 1998 the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) gave a memorandum to the government and asked for several structural changes against the reactionary threat, to be executed immediately, known better as the "February 28th Decisions" or the "post-modern coup". During this period which resulted in the change of government, the newly appointed president of YÖK (Kemal Gürüz) issued a brief to the universities, asking them not to accept covered women in the universities, basing his act on a circular issued by the Ministry of Education in 1997. Once again the headscarf was banned, this time not even legally. The ban turned into a legal crisis and covered women demonstrated at university gates for months. Many cases were brought to the court but none of them won, arguably because of the judiciary's reluctance to challenge the memorandum from the TSK. In time, the ban was normalized and accepted as legitimate and even as legal. Needless to say, the state with its vague attitude had a determining role in the "turbanization" of the headscarf, no less than the Islamist ideology which took the headscarf as its symbol.

Covered women rapidly politicized and gained identity, thanks to the ascendance of the Islamist cadres and due to the ambiguity of the state's position. They mobilized through

the women's branches of political parties, especially in the RP, playing an important role in election campaigns. Through Muslim women's journals, Islamist literature and the increasing exchange of ideas among themselves, they built their intellectual-political discourse. However, since covered women were identified only with their headscarf on the political scene, they started to organize primarily around the ban on the headscarf as "covered women", which pushed them further into identity politics. This also has confirmed the covered woman's antagonistic position against the secular woman.

The response of Kemalist women to the politicization of covered women was to declare that the modernist gains of the republic were at stake. The backwards, ignorant and sectarian elements were returning from the dead, women were abused, and all this meant the retreat of women to their traditional position. Islamist women's claim to use the space that Kemalism created for "women" was interpreted by the Kemalists as a retreat from what the republic offered to women, since they saw the headscarf mostly as an indicator of women's obedience to men. While covered women discussed Islam, women's place in Islam and whether Muslim feminism was possible at all, the Kemalist women remained indifferent to these developments on the grounds that Islam was enslaving women. They insisted that there can be no egalitarian interpretations of Islamic restrictions on women and that the hierarchical gender relations in Muslim societies are by no means just. One has to admit that not all of the fears of Kemalist women were groundless or delusive. However, by depicting the covered women as thoroughly passive, their discourse detached the headscarf from its bodily subject.

From the threat of counter-revolution to the problematic of representation:

The AKP period

The headscarf issue, which had calmed down to the disadvantage of covered women, rekindled with the AKP's rise to power in 2002. However, this time the situation was quite different. The AKP broke its ties with the previous Islamist parties and asserted itself as moderate and by no means radical. Indeed, the AKP has something to offer people from almost all walks of life, which classifies the party as catch-all; without sacrificing its adherence to religious and conservative values, the party increasingly supports a neo-liberal socio-economic structuring. After the elections in 2002, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced that the "headscarf" was not their primary problem and did not promise a solution. After it won the majority of the parliamentary seats in the 2007 elections, the party took some steps towards lifting the ban on the headscarf, but those attempts were once again judged to be "against secularism" by the judiciary, which this time led to a legislative crisis.

Needless to say, the headscarf acquired new meaning with the AKP governments. The cabinet members' wives all wore a headscarf. Over time, almost all the men who were appointed to top state institutions had covered wives. As being religious and having a covered wife

became an advantage in engaging with the state, secular people were increasingly excluded from the affairs of the state, which finally materialized the “headscarf threat”. Through the AKP cadres covered women, hitherto been excluded from the state, had access to the upper levels of bureaucracy through the positions which their husbands held, and the headscarf became a norm among the new bureaucratic elite. During this period the persistence of the headscarf ban in the public sphere became, to say the least, absurd.

Although there are contradicting public surveys on whether the number of covered women has increased or decreased, their public visibility has clearly risen. Many job opportunities have opened for them within religious-conservative economic circles. Courses, such as computers, literacy, craftwork, etc. are supported by local governments and play an important role in their socialization. They furthered their social competencies through various associations. While all these increased covered women’s social mobility, what attracted the most attention was perhaps the concomitant rise in their (husbands’) class position. Some covered women who had been seen solely as housewives or working in low paid and/or unpaid jobs and who as such were not challenging the status quo, suddenly became upper class women who were spending good money in decent neighborhoods and in shopping malls. They started to live in luxury apartments; to engage in luxury consumption and to have their own popular culture. They skillfully found alternative ways of education such as going abroad or going to (mainly private) universities who “let them in”. This rise in their class position indubitably popularizes and renders desirable the world of values which the headscarf implies. Moreover, covered women’s engagement in social aid networks effectively encouraged women to adopt the traditional role attributed to women as mothers and wives further. These confronted the Kemalist women’s role as educators and modernizers and pitted covered and uncovered women against each other as rivals in social life.

Another shift in the headscarf issue during the AKP period is the manner in which the ban was opposed. Up until the 2000’s, the request for “freedom for the headscarf” was an important part of the claim for recognition of the Islamist identity, and therefore it found expression within a discourse of “freedom of thought and faith”. The 2000’s witnessed the headscarf issue being increasingly discussed within the terms of “individual rights and freedoms”. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has expressed this shift very well by saying “If Turkey still cannot solve this problem, in a world in which freedoms are discussed, in which everyone dresses as he likes, it is a tremendous difficulty in terms of freedoms... As the government in this country we always said, it is a topic on which there is social agreement because there is no unease about this; there is an institutional incompatibility.”⁷ In these words, Erdoğan reduces the headscarf issue to a disagreement between the institutions of the state as if state institutions are divorced from the social content, whereas in actual fact an institutional incompatibility is reflective of a social disagreement. For this very reason, the AKP had to wait for someone from its own cadres, Abdullah Gül, to become the president of the republic, before taking any action on lifting the ban.

When the institutional compatibility was relatively secured, the AKP made an amendment to the Constitution in January 2008, by collaborating with the MHP (Nationalist Movement Party) in the parliament. The amendment was to add a sub-clause in article 42 saying “No one can be deprived of their right to higher education unless it is indicated in the law. The use of this right is demarcated by law.” Another amendment was added to article 10 regarding equality before law, binding state institutions to treat everyone equally in terms of “benefiting from public service”. The amendments resulted in a split among the universities. Some rectors announced that they would not recognize the amendments unless the YÖK Code was amended, whereas others have found the amendments sufficient for lifting the ban. Hundreds of professors have signed petitions against lifting the ban, while hundreds signed petitions in favor it. Ultimately, the Constitutional Court annulled the amendments on the ground that they were against the principle of secularism because they were “methodologically abusing religion for politics; contextually violating others’ rights and public order”.

Inevitably, the attempts to lift the ban on the headscarf and the AKP’s conservative discourse on women are seen as two identical processes. This view perceives covered women as AKP’s electoral base, where in fact the party insists on imposing a type of womanhood on all women, be they covered or uncovered. It is useful to note some examples of the party’s discourse here; as early as 2003, Ali Babacan, who was then the Minister of Foreign Affairs announced that the economic crisis was over, and since men were back in employment women did not have to work. He said, “It is not necessary for women to work if their husbands are earning enough”. In his message Women’s Day in 2008, Erdoğan said “Human beings are essential for an economy... They want to eradicate the Turkish population. If you do not want your population to decrease, each family should have three children”. Recently, Minister of State, Mehmet Şimşek declared: “Do you know why the unemployment rate is increasing? More people seek jobs during crises. And particularly, the rate of women participating in the labor force increases during periods of crises.” However, this “particular” rate was as low as 0.3 per cent of the total unemployment rate. Some days later, the Minister of Environment and Forestry, Veysel Eroğlu responded to women demanding employment by saying, “Is not the work at home enough for you?” These examples clearly show the AKP’s mentality about women; women are not welcome in the workforce and womanhood is strictly associated with motherhood, wifehood and housework. This conservative discourse on women indubitably gets more radical in the lower ranks of the central government and in the local government.

All these turn the headscarf issue into a problematic of representation. This shift in the context of the headscarf issue, as can be guessed, agitated the Kemalists further. As the identification of conservative womanhood with the headscarf is adopted by more and more women, the representation of “Turkish women” becomes a field of struggle. As a consequence, political polarization on the secularism-Islamism axis is reduced to being

covered or not, to being “closed” or “open”. Society is divided into camps, fighting over whether turban (and not the traditional headscarf) is an indicator of religiousness or of quackery. Whereas the “Islamists” refuse to use the word turban because of its undesired connotations, the “secularists” insist that what they are against is not the headscarf itself but those who politicize it in the form of turban.

Republican Demonstrations: a Kemalist reflex for women

The Republican demonstrations of 2007-2008 are closely related to this new representational context. The non-governmental organizations which collaborated on the demonstrations, mainly the Support for Modern Life Association (ÇYDD), the Association for Republican Women (CKD) and the Atatürkist Thought Association (ADD), were organized in the 90’s in order to reconstruct Kemalism in the field of civil society and had declared their opposition to the headscarf since the beginning. The remarkable thing about these organizations is that, with the exception of ADD, all of their members are predominantly women. These demonstrations are primarily important in connection with the Kemalist women’s movement because the organization committees were composed of leaders of the movement who have actively taken sides in the secularism-Islamism debate since its emergence.

To summarize briefly, the demonstrations against “the abandoning of republican gains” started in November 2006 with the “People’s March for the Republic”, organized by the ÇYDD and the ADD. However, the Republican demonstrations, which were a series of 21 demonstrations that took place in large cities, such as Ankara, Istanbul, Izmir, Samsun, Trabzon, Manisa, Çanakkale, started in April 2007 against Erdoğan’s possible candidacy for presidency of the republic. The demonstrations in which saw numbers in the hundreds of thousands, have been characterized as the most well-attended demonstrations in the history of the republic. They lost their potency due to the failure of the Kemalist CHP (Republican People’s Party) in the 2007 elections held in July, the victory of AKP as it won the majority of the seats in the parliament and Abdullah Gül’s election as president. The elections showed that the demonstrations were not as “massive” as they were alleged to be. Demonstrations flared up again when the parliament took action to lift the ban but this time the number of demonstrators was not as high as before.⁸

As the mouthpieces of the demonstrations, Kemalist women have identified with those who were idealized by the republic. This emphasis, through an analogy with the Turkish woman who took part in the War of Independence, insinuates that the formation of the republic is itself a “women’s revolution”, if not the Republican Demonstrations. This analogy is best expressed by the president of the CKD, Şenal Saruhan, during the demonstration in Samsun: “The Turkish woman who pioneered in the Independence War bursts forth from her kitchens, her schools, from public offices and from factories to the fields... The Turkish woman who knows how to clean her child’s nappy will succeed in cleaning the dirt smeared on the nation of which she is the actual possessor and guardian... Therefore,

all of us are Corporal Halide, Major Ayşe, Sister Şerife. We are Makbule of Gördes, Pilot Rahmiye, and Black Fatma.” This claim should be understood, not as Kemalism urging women to be defenders of the regime, but as women organizing to protect the privileges which enable them to represent the Turkish woman on their own behalf. Here the women are not passive subjects of the Kemalist discourse, but the social actors who adopt this discourse politically. Hence, it can be said that the demonstrations correspond to a rupture in the Kemalist women’s movement since for the first time they came out in masses, spoke to the people and collectively declared their demands.

Nonetheless, this submission to Kemalism’s imperatives contributes to the politics played over women’s bodies. It is reasonable to ask here why Kemalism’s response to the headscarf is necessarily secularism; it should be remembered that Kemalism had substituted religion with nationality in the public sphere through the social role of Kemalist women. The crystallization of the secular-Islamist polarization in the headscarf issue displays how Kemalism relies on Kemalist womanhood for its internal coherence. On the other hand, it is quite paradoxical to position the headscarf against secularism. The Islamist movements have been perceived as anti-regime since the foundation of the republic, but were then articulated by the state within the Turkish-Islam Synthesis as a remedy to the left-right conflict. This articulation did not contradict secularism; instead the Islamist cadres have been determinant actors of the post-1980 political map. The perception of covered women as being against the regime by state institutions such as YÖK, the Constitutional Court, the military, etc. while Islamist men already occupied high posts within the state is indeed meaningful. It shows that, beyond the ideological signifying value of women, the hegemony crisis of the new era is encoded in covered women’s bodies.

Reflections on the women’s movement

Surprisingly enough, those women who organized around the ban on the headscarf were not forthcoming during the AKP period. Although the Islamist women did not take part in the AKP organization, they were identified with the party women as if they belonged to the same camp. On the other hand, they were aware that the AKP would be the only party to take the initiative in terms of lifting the ban, even if they were not satisfied with the way it handled the issue. The 2000’s paved the way for the headscarf to be discussed in terms of women’s rights due to an increase in the independent organizations of covered women within the field of civil society and because of the new bureaucratic elite’s handling of the issue as a matter of individual rights and freedoms. Although Islamist women benefit from the mobilization brought about by this new context, they do not want the headscarf to be detached from its religious content. It can be said that, despite their critical approach, the Islamist women are not yet clear on how to position themselves towards the AKP.

The “hands-off” attitude of the Islamist women towards the headscarf issue verifies that the issue is void of proper content. Indeed, in mainstream politics covered women are not

referred to, except for the claim that they cover themselves passively because of men's oppression, neighborhood pressure, to get scholarships, for money, to support their husbands, to be fashionable, etc. In this sense, the "turban issue" does not refer to covered women; it rather indicates that socio-economic problems are reduced to a secularism-Islamism dichotomy. Accordingly, covered women are seen as a homogeneous group and the differences between them, of which there are many, are underestimated and suppressed. For example, a covered woman who wears heavy make-up and dresses attractively can be seen as a sufficient pretext for declaring all covered women hypocrites. Similarly, the AKP's corruption is linked to the affectedness of the headscarf because the corrupt bureaucrats' wives are covered.

Moreover, the headscarf issue is not a primary matter of social conflict in Turkish society as it is alleged to be. As a recent social research study points out, the "turban issue" does not receive the same attention from society as it does during public debate. When asked, this issue is never listed among the country's most important agenda items. Also, the study shows that the covering of women is not all that related to political aims or to identity. In fact, those who cover for political/identity purposes are around 4% of all covered women. Likely, the rate of women who are forced to cover themselves or are covered because all the women around them are is around 4%.⁹ It can be inferred that the headscarf is not the most oppressive tool of patriarchal gender relations, but it can be classified as one of the most visible ones. In fact, the headscarf debate has not resulted in enmity among those covered and uncovered women who share a common daily life, but among those who have socialized in isolation from each other within diverse cultural and socio-economic circles. This reveals the class content of the issue; it is the upper and/or newly rising classes for which the headscarf is a problem of representation and recognition.

The consequences of the headscarf issue for the women's movement are a strengthening of women's organic ties with gendered politics and their organization along lines of identity politics. As a result, they fall short of giving voice to their authentic demands and disregard the feminist problematization of the private sphere. Their agenda remains defined by mainstream gender-blind politics and their organizations as supportive of national/hegemonic projects. Furthermore, identity politics leads to the crystallization of different forms of womanhood and to the polarization of differences within the women's movement, and as such, it reaffirms the cleavages and hierarchies between women.

Here, however, it is necessary to make a distinction between the identity claims of Kemalist and Islamist women. Whereas Islamist women are struggling for recognition, Kemalist women have a claim on hegemony. Kemalist women's discourse, appropriating modernity and denouncing the headscarf as its anti-thesis, serves to preserve their position within the social hierarchy. On the other hand, identifying the headscarf as a political symbol and a derivative of the Islamist ideology, Kemalist women take sides in the "turban issue" in a

determined way and they abuse the headscarf for their own struggle. Consequently they contribute to the detachment of the headscarf from its socio-historical context and from its normative content. This perspective influences the feminist movement as well; feminists who are closer to the Kemalist/secularist view are inclined to confront the covered women by questioning their reasons for covering, assuming that they will uncover once they understand the patriarchal essence of the headscarf.

Kemalist women feel outraged and betrayed by having to share the same social environment as “equals” with Islamist women, whom they hitherto regarded as provincial and ignorant. They see no harm in saying that they were happy to “bring modernity and service” to their covered fellows and they reject covered women’s attempt to benefit from their political gains and the reputation which they attained through years of struggle. The exclusionary attitude of the Kemalist woman obstructs the covered women from participating in political lobbying and in the international women’s community as a movement. This makes it inevitable for covered women to organize around their “coveredness”, since their headscarf is perceived as an identity in itself. In return, it gets much harder for covered women to become independent and to transform the relations of gender they are engaged in since the Islamist identity they are pushed into requires them not to challenge the existing social norms under which they are suppressed. Even when they organize independently they are suspected of carrying out a hidden agenda.¹⁰ They are working not only for freedom for the headscarf, but also on issues such as violence against women, women’s employment, draft laws, education, etc., though in a self-supportive way. Since Kemalist and Islamist women rarely get together, neither side shares the experiences of the other and this feeds the feelings of fear, hesitation, anger and enmity that women have towards each other. Hence, the hierarchical relationship between covered and uncovered women is maintained.

The chasm between Kemalist and Islamist women’s movements will presumably exist as long as the “turban issue” remains on the political agenda. However, recently there have been attempts to turn the controversy between the two womanhoods into a democratic plurality. More and more covered and uncovered women come together for campaigns, even if not in the same organizations, and express their collective opinion on diverse issues. An important attempt to go beyond the dividing line of identity politics made in February 2008 by covered and uncovered intellectual women is named “We’re looking after each other”. The group declares their reason to organize as “We are religious and non-religious women who are against every kind of discrimination and injustice, who denounce exclusionary understandings of women’s rights and freedoms, reject all kinds of prohibitions on and the oppression of women by the state, which ignores us through the perception that ‘a woman’s place is by her husband’s side’, which discriminates against us under the guise of ‘public morality’, and which is a ‘field of contest’ that aims at determining women’s freedom. We, as women, do not want our bodies to be controlled in the name of modernity, secularism, the republic, religion, customs, morality, honor or freedom.” As

such, the group challenges the duality of secular-religious women, although it is still in the phase of organizing and therefore does not have a clear political stance. It can be anticipated that the number of women's groups which also consider the "headscarf issue" as a class division and which identify the main problem as the progress of conservatism that oppresses all women, will increase in the near future. Whether these groups will succeed in transforming the headscarf-based schism in Turkish politics depends on the extent to which they can move beyond an intellectual movement and adhere simultaneously to the politics of the private sphere.

1) **Selin Çağatay**: Central European University, Department of Gender Studies, PhD

2) For the scope of this article, I will discuss the headscarf issue only from the viewpoint of dominant ideologies, i.e. Kemalism and Islamism, and of the women's movement. However, there are many other factors and political actors that are significantly influential, such as the European Union process, the Turkish media and the foreign press, the army, etc. Besides, the axes of polarization in Turkish politics are not limited to secularism-Islamism. For example, the Turkish-Kurdish conflict also results in social and political cleavages, which also has an important impact on the women's movement.

3) Kemalism, named after Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, was accepted as the official ideology of the Turkish state in the 1935 congress of the CHP (Republican People's Party). In general, the republican modernization period is referred to as the Kemalist period since it was carried out by the bureaucratic cadre that gathered around Mustafa Kemal and within the CHP.

4) The ban was brought by the Higher Education Council (YÖK), in 1982 with a dress code circular which covered many other "inconvenient" types of dresses and outlooks. YÖK itself is a post-coup state institution established by the 1982 Constitution and its aim is to plan, organize, govern and monitor education in higher education institutions, and to govern educational and scientific research in these institutions. Upon its establishment, many professors were fired, and many others subsequently resigned on the grounds that the autonomy of institutions of higher learning was threatened. Today, YÖK's existence is still a serious obstacle to the autonomy of university education.

5) Indeed, during the 1980's it was popular among women to cover the shoulders too with a loose headscarf. The suggested turban, being a tighter style, shows the shape of the head and gives a presentable outlook. It is important to say that there are many different styles of covering given the multiplicity of local cultures. Turban here can be seen as an attempt to standardize the headscarf, presumably to make it suitable for state control.

6) Quoted in Yeşim Arat, "Modernleşme Projesi ve Kadınlar," in *Türkiye'de Modernleşme ve Ulusal Kimlik*, eds. S. Bozdoğan and R. Kasaba. Istanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 1998, pp. 97-98. The same motive is manifest in the names of the Kemalist women's organizations founded throughout the 90's; Foundation for Modern Education (ÇEV), Association for Protection and Promotion of Women's Rights (KHKGD), Association of Republican Women (CKD), etc.

7) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's speech to the press, January 14th, 2008.

8) Republican demonstrations were not only against the headscarf but also all other factors threatening Kemalist secularism. Many demonstrators participated rather because they were adversely affected by the economic conditions. Most importantly, the speeches made during the demonstrations revealed that the Kemalist movement suffered from a feeling of having been offended, but it failed to offer new solutions and instead clung to the imperatives of Kemalism as official ideology, especially to secularism. Some slogans such as "Çankaya roads closed to Sharia," "We don't want an imam in Çankaya" or "You don't deserve it if you're not secular" revealed hot they insisted on denying the new hegemonic formation (Çankaya refers to the presidential residence of the republic).

9) Binnaz Toprak and Ali Çarkoğlu, *Religion, Society and Politics in a Changing Turkey*, Istanbul: Tesev, 2007.

10) Here it should be noted that the Islamist women name their movement the "Religious Women's Movement", demarcating themselves from the Islamist project.

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
Cihannüma Mahallesi
Mehmet Ali Bey Sk. 10/D5
34353 Beşiktaş-Istanbul
Türkei
Tel: +90 212 310 84 90
contact@festr.org
www.festr.org

Verantwortlich:
Bettina Luise Rürup
© FES Türkei, 2009

**FRIEDRICH
EBERT
STIFTUNG**