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The Immanent Frame
Secularism, religion, and the public sphere

The headscarf controversy:

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The headscarf controversy in Turkey, which now occupies center stage in Turkish politics and public debates, cannot be properly understood unless it is historicized. On the face of it, it seems to be a spurious issue that should not, under any context of "normal politics," divide the public into two uncompromising camps. After all, the controversy is about a simple question: whether women, who are of university age and hence legally considered adults, should be allowed to wear whatever they see fit. Based upon any reading of liberal politics, this indeed falls within the category of individual rights. This has been my own personal position. Since, in modern societies, both the freedom of religion and the right to education have equal status as basic rights, the state cannot ask individuals to choose between one or the other. Let me add that I would not make the same argument for students who are minors or for civil servants, since, in the case of minors, one cannot assume "individual choice," and in the case of civil servants, this would contradict the secular state's claim of religious impartiality.

I nevertheless think that the analysis of the headscarf controversy cannot simply be based on arguments of liberal politics. Rather, it has to be analyzed within its historical context. In Turkey, the headscarf has assumed a symbolic character that refers to different historical memories and different understandings of modernity. For both sides of this conflict, the headscarf is at the center of the debate because the debate is, in its essence, about gender relations.

According to data from the World Values Survey (conducted between 1995-2001 by Ronald Inglehart of the University of Michigan and his international team in 75 countries that contain approximately 80% of the world's population), what distinguishes Muslim publics from publics elsewhere are questions of gender equality and sexual liberation. Anyone familiar with Islamic doctrine would concur that the issue of gender is indeed its "fault line," and Islam's gaze at women, despite claims from modernist Islamists that men and women are equal in God's eyes, would be extremely difficult to reconcile with any liberal understanding of gender. Both in history and now, societies living under Muslim law are singularly problematic from the point of view of women's status. And critical literature by Islamists about secular societies thoughout the Muslim geography is full of the imagery of modern Sodoms and Gomorrahs, of sinful cities with mini-skirted women, nightclubs, promiscuous sexual relations, and the like.

Turkey, of course, is not a country that is under Muslim law. For many years, secularists argued that Islamist parties in power had a hidden agenda: to publicly accept the secular legal system, but ultimately aim to destroy it. In recent years, this discourse has been replaced by a new argument: given secularists' resistance to the Islamist political project, including resistance by the judiciary and the army, the agenda is no longer to work toward the impossible goal of overthrowing the secular regime in favor of an Islamic state, but to gradually "Islamize" the country so that the public sphere is transformed into an Islamic public sphere, the most apparent feature of which is the overwhelming presence of covered women and

gender-separated public spaces.

At the root of this controversy lies a century and a half of debate about the role of Islam in Turkish society. The beginning of this debate goes back to the mid-19th century when Ottoman statesmen and intellectuals found the panacea to the empire's decline in modeling their institutions on Western examples. The establishment of the Republic in 1923 by revolutionary cadres who were committed to a program of total Westernization ended the debate between the Islamists and the Westernists as to what to take from the West. Repressing the Islamist opposition during the one-party years, the original founders of the republic were successful in both taking Islam out of the public sphere and in marginalizing people who wanted to have a more visible role for Islam in the social and political life of Turkey. This, however, proved to be short-lived. After the transition to democracy in 1946, the Islamist "underground," originally instigating rebellions in the early years of the Republic, chose to play by the rules of the game and advance its agenda through political party competition. From 1950 on, this started an intense political debate about the role of religion, which has continued to this day.

On one side of this division are the "secularists." Traditionally, the "secularist camp" consisted of the judiciary, the bureaucracy, the academia, the intelligentsia, mainstream business circles and the press, the army, and the urban educated middle and upper middle classes. Over time, however, positions have changed. In each of the categories cited above, except the military, there are those who have grown much more sympathetic to the rights claims of the Islamists and who now believe that the real problem lies in the radical, repressive understanding of the Republic towards questions of identity. On the other side are the "Islamists." These were, traditionally, mostly people of rural, small town, or lower middle class backgrounds who were not, or could not, be part of the "Westernized elite" of the center and who represented the "Muslim" periphery. They were left outside of political power circles, social status groups, and intellectual prestige circles of the Republic. At the same time, they also benefitted least from an economic system that followed import-substitution policies until 1980, and which required connections with the government for success in economic entrepreneurship. Like the "secularist" camp, their status has also changed over the years, as they now occupy important positions of power within the state bureaucracy, the government, and the economy. Thanks to political Islam and its electoral successes, they now constitute what might be called a "counter-elite" of politicians, entrepreneurs, intellectuals, journalists, university students, and middle and upper middle classes. What now divides these two groups are questions of lifestyle, and especially, gender relations.

At the root of both the republican and Islamist projects lies the status of women in society. In order to achieve the republican aim of being a part of what its founders considered the "civilized" West, the position of women in Muslim society had to be radically altered. The restructuring of gender relations during the early republican years was one of the most important achievements of Kemalism. Many of the legal and educational reforms implemented during the early years of the republic were designed to empower women so that they would have equal status with men in the public sphere. In this transformation, the republic was indeed radical in its abolition of Islamic law and its opening up of educational and career opportunities for women. The lifestyle that goes with this republican project is mixed-gender public places, whether these are schools, restaurants, bars, parks, discotheques, beaches, etc.

The Islamist project, on the other hand, is largely based on the segregation of sexes. Although political

Islam in Turkey is to be distinguished from radical Islamist movements elsewhere, and although it does not argue for same-sex public life, its understanding of the place of men and women in the public sphere differs from the republican understanding. This difference is most vividly apparent in the covering of young girls and women There has been heightened press coverage of numerous attempts by municipal governments, public educational institutions and other government offices controlled by the Islamists to introduce changes that might indeed suggest the "Islamization of public life," such as to include Islamic or 'intelligent design" texts in primary and secondary school curricula, to permit the covering of young girls in certain extra-curricular activities even at the primary school level, to relocate restaurants that serve liquor to the outskirts of cities or refuse to give them licenses, to open "women only" public parks, to ban alcohol in municipal-owned recreational or art centers, etc.

At stake in this controversy is what one might call a "culture war." It has to do with the question of what constitutes moral behavior. Traditionally, the Islamic understanding of moral behavior is closely linked with Islamic theology, which considers the community life of the believers to be under the principles of religious law. The historical solution to this Islamic insistence on social control has been to give the men charged with Islamic theology and jurisprudence the authority to determine the limits of moral life. Accordingly, both in historical examples of the Islamic state as well as its contemporary versions, the Islamic way of life has meant the ordering of gender relations on the basis of sex segregation. This has often led to the repression of women in the public sphere and their seclusion behind veiled bodies and/or same-gender public spaces as, for example, in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime or in other contemporary examples.

This Islamic conception of morality – as an issue that needs to be regulated through state control of public and private lives – is in sharp contrast to the secular understanding that leaves the question of morality to individual conscience and choice. It is here that the "culture war" between the Islamists and secularists in Turkey is most fiercely fought out. For both women and men who have internalized the republican understanding of gender equality, covered women are symbols of repressed sexuality and the gender-biased conception of public life. For the Islamists, on the other hand, the headscarf is also a symbol, of a Muslim way of life that the Republic destroyed.

At issue is also a certain resentment by established elites toward people who were marginalized by the Republic and left out of political power circles and high status groups, but now constitute part of the elite. There were, of course, always large numbers of women who covered despite the Republic's discouragement of it. However, it was largely peasant women, women of traditional families in towns, or rural migrants in cities who covered. Hence, the social establishment in Turkey has long associated the head cover with rural or lower class origins. With the growing success of Islamist parties since the mid-1970s, however, and especially in the last few decades, a new entrepreneurial class has emerged in Anatolian cities. Many of these entrepreneurs come from conservative, religious families and benefit from connections with government, as well as new groups of people in major metropolitan cities who now occupy important positions of power within politics and the state bureaucracy. Thus, for the first time in the history of the Republic, there are growing numbers of covered women who are economically well-off and who do not live on the outskirts of Turkish society. Although the head cover of peasant or lower middle class women has never been seen as a major threat by the secularists, the old status groups feel threatened by and resent the emergence of a new middle class that has adopted a lifestyle different

from their own. The Islamists, on the other hand, are aware of the fact that no matter how successful they are economically, politically, or intellectually, they continue to be shut out from the social circles of the old establishment. In fact, the Islamists often remark that they are the "Blacks of Turkey" and that status groups are caste-like, reserved for "White Turks" only.

Also at issue in this conflict is what one may call an image problem. For the secularists who have internalized the Republic's vision of placing Turkey among the "civilized" nations of the West, Turks who resemble, either in dress or lifestyle, the "backward, reactionary Muslims" of the *ancien régime* create an unacceptable international image of Turkey. This attitude is at the same time related to secularists' historical consciousness, the fact that the Republic called on them to be oblivious to the past, even changed the alphabet and the vocabulary of the language so that new generations would have no access to that past, that its official historiography equated the Islamic civilization of the Ottomans with obscurantism and represented itself as an enlightened world based on progress. Hence, in the collective psyche of the secularists, public visibility of an Islamic way of life, most apparent in women's covering, has the negative impact of a feared return to the Islamic past. On the other hand, in the collective psyche of the Islamists, the Republic symbolizes the defeat of their 19th century stand that Islamic civilization is kept untouched and Westernization is limited to technology transfers and industrial growth. Although the various Islamist parties since the 1970s have been keen on economic development and have accepted the need to function within a democratic system, their vision of a Muslim society remains substantially the same. This has meant two different interpretations of how Turkey should situate itself in the contemporary world.

By way of summary, let me end by pointing out that the headscarf debate in Turkey needs to be analyzed within a much more comprehensive and nuanced paradigm that takes into account the historical context and the collective historical psyche of both sides of the debate. Thus far, much of the literature has concentrated on understanding the Islamists and empathizing with their "underdog" status. There is no study, to my knowledge, that tries to uncover the fears of the secularists who have been dismissed as "the dinosaur Kemalist elite," oblivious to change and clinging to past authoritarian measures despite the fact that there are large numbers of secularists who are neither within elite circles nor display authoritarian values. This lacuna needs to be filled if we want to make sense of this major dispute that goes beyond the question of who should wear what.

Tags: culture wars, headscarf, Islam, public sphere, women's rights

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