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# **RELIGION, POLITICS AND GENDER EQUALITY IN TURKEY: CONFRONTATION, COEXISTENCE OR TRANSFORMATION?**

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#### Main Research Questions:

1. How are religion and politics intertwined?
2. What are the social and political effects, especially from a gender perspective?

#### Synopsis:

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. Religion and politics are intertwined both at the level of political as well as civil society.

If indeed, “Islamic values are less supportive of gender equality and less tolerant of sexual liberalization” as has been argued often (Esmer, 2003, 67), we need to assess urgently 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 Islamist<sup>2</sup> 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, 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 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.

## 1. Introduction

### a. 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 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

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<sup>2</sup> 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 an other making oblique references. As a short hand both Refah and AK parti might be referred to as Islamist but there is a radical difference in their Islamism.

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<sup>3</sup>. 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.

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 the Ministries of Sharia and Religious Foundations followed. Institutions of higher Islamic education, medreses as well as religious orders were banned. The secular Ministry of Education unified all education under its authority. Sciences and morals could thus develop independent of religious dogma. Secular education replaced religious teaching.

In an attempt to oversee the process of secularization and 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 secular Republic. Unlike any other Muslim country, women in Turkey could thus be liberated from the restrictions traditional Islamist interpretations imposed on them.

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<sup>3</sup> 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 in institutionally establishing the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Parla and Davison, 104)

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 prohibited 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 and attending Republican Balls in décolleté dresses insured 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 Republic on its 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 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 that took place against the Democrat Party, which became increasingly more authoritarian even though it did expand 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 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 the headscarves to the universities and was against the ban on the issue. The military, the state bureaucracy, the judiciary, the president and the educated professionals were all against the Islamist parties and in support of Kemalist secularism where religion was privatized and state controlled religion. 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 to have changed 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 the 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<sup>4</sup>. In 2007, for the first time in Turkish history a political party with an Islamist background was coming to power with practically half the electorate behind it. The balance between the so-called secularists and the Islamists had changed. AKP now could coalesce the necessary two-thirds majority to enable 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 with a 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 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.

## THE 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 both 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 Alevi<sup>5</sup> 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.

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<sup>4</sup> In 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.

<sup>5</sup> a minority Muslim group that constitutes about 10 percent of the population.

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. (Altınay 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 covered and different interpretations of what the different styles of head covering means. Many, that is about 55% seem to covers 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 what the respondents understand from these distinctions is unclear and we need to use these figures with caution.

73% of women who cover their heads say that they do so because of religious beliefs. 13.7% say that it is a custom for them, 2.7% say their husbands wants 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, 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. European Human Rights Commission as well as the European Court of Human Rights supported the ban on cases that came before them.

By 2007, only 22% of the population supports the ban on wearing headscarves in universities and 78% oppose it. Yet, the 20% who are opposed to the ban feel intensely about it and 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 country were in an open-ended question, less than 1% of the population named the headscarf issue (Çarkoglu and Kalaycioglu, 2006, 51,152). In 2006, when asked what the most important problem of Turkey was in a question where options were predetermined, only 3.7% mentioned the headscarf issue (Çarkoğlu and Toprak, 2006, 45).

Yet, this religious population does not want to be ruled by Shariat, the Islamic Civil Code. Only about 9% say they would want the Shariat (Çarkoglu and Toprak, 2006, 75)- but

even then what people understand from Shariat is very problematic. When some prototypical Shariat dictates are at issue, and for example when they are asked if, in cases of adultery, they would prefer stoning to civil punishments, the answers change dramatically.

77% of the population thinks that democracy is the best rule to govern the country. 61% thinks that women should contribute to family income (Carkoglu and Toprak, 2006). 92.2% thinks that all women who want to work outside the home should be able to do so (Kalaycioglu and Toprak, 2004, 11). 75% of the people and 80% of women think that there are too few women in the parliament. (Kalaycioglu and Toprak, 2004, 13). In short, Turkey is a religious yet secular country where an overwhelming percentage of people value democracy.

## **b. The status of women**

In this religious yet secular country, women have argued till the early 1980s that the Kemalist reforms liberated them (Tekeli 1986, Kandiyoti, 1989, Sirman, 1989, Arat 2008) Yet, since the 1980s, feminist were critical in bringing to attention the low status of women in Turkey in many areas. While there have always been a high percentage of women doctors, lawyers and teachers including university professors in Turkey, women are not as educated as men nor are they equally integrated into the labor market or politics. The percentage of women doctors lawyers and teachers have been about a third of those in the profession since the 1960s, though the percentages have not changed much since then. On the other hand, only 81% of women are literate. At the high school level for every four boys at high school, there are only three girls registered. Women's labor force participation rate is about 26.6%. Proportion of women working for wages outside the agricultural sector is only 20.6 % (ww.nkg.die.gov.tr). The percentage of women in the parliament did not go above the 4.5% level since 1934 till the 2007 elections when it climbed up to a mere 9.1 %. Most recent work on gender based violence points out that about 34% of women in Turkey have been exposed to physical violence at home. (Altinay and Arat, 2007)

According to the UNDP 2005 World Human Development Index, Turkey ranks 94 among 177 countries ranked. Turkey's ranking in terms of gender empowerment measure is 76 out of the 80 countries that could be measured in 2005. Women's low "empowerment" measure plays a significant role in the poor human development record of Turkey.

However, the feminist message seems to have reached women in Turkey. About 80% believe that household duties should be shared among men and women, 87 % believe that women should be able to work outside home in any job they want, 97% think that all girls should be schooled at least for 8 years and 9 out of 10 women think there is no legitimate beating of women. 87% of women approve government use of taxes for more shelters (Altinay and Arat, 2007).

## **2. How do religion and politics intertwine?** **Level of the State**

Article 2 of the Turkish Constitution states that the Turkish Republic is a democratic, secular and a social state of law. This article can not be changed or even proposed to be changed. In line with the constitution, all laws pertaining to citizenship and personal status code are secular laws. Furthermore the judiciary and the military are staunch Kemalists and

are strongly opposed to Islamist values being permeated in society and skeptical of the religious parties that come to power, including the AKP. Yet when a political party that had Islamist roots is in power, and religious groups and orders that had been outlawed in 1920s are skillfully organizing in social life, there is intertwining of religion and politics.

### **Level of the Political Society**

The AKP that has been taken to the Constitutional Court for anti-secular activism has roots in Islamist political parties that were banned by the same Court because these parties had become focal point of anti secular activities. However, unlike its predecessors, AKP had moved markedly away from its predecessors where many of its leaders were trained as young politicians. It moved to center right to construct the coalition that could bring the party to power with the 47 percent of votes. To assess the intertwining of religion and politics during AKP's term in office, I shall first evaluate its democratic moves that helped expand civil and political liberties between 2002-2005.

### **AKP and Liberal Rights:**

The Party Program begins by stating the allegiance of the party to the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, European Convention on Human Rights, Paris Charter and Helsinki Final Act and promises to put them into force. (AK Party Program, <http://eng.akparti.org.tr>). Unlike the Islamist political parties before it that refer to women under the category of family, the AK Party Program has a separate section on women independent of family or children. The party pledges to implement CEDAW and expand women's engagement in the public realm and politics, improve women's education, eliminate discrimination against women in the workforce, end sexual and economic exploitation of women and violence towards women. It states its intention to help women's NGOs and work with them in ameliorating women's predicament. These were all novel promises for a political party with Islamist roots. The liberal program was an important starting point in constructing the wide coalition, which included some liberal intellectuals as well as different groups of businessmen.

In its first term in office, the party acted by the liberal tenets of its program. Immediately after the November 2002 elections, the party leaders began working on the European accession process. In December 2002, Erdoğan was touring the European capitals to seek membership negotiations with the European Union. Between January 2003 and April 2004 the parliament passed a number of "harmonization packages" expanding the democratic parameters of Turkey. These amendments and new laws extended civil liberties, including freedom of association, banning torture, improving rights of prisoners, disbanded State Security Courts, totally abolished death penalty including in times of war, allowed for broadcasts in Kurdish in Turkish Radio and Television, made closing of political parties more difficult, restricted the role of the military in politics. National Security Council (NSC), composed of top-level military and civilian officers, which gave the military the opportunity to define political priorities and strategies of the state, was transformed into a mere advisory body. A civil servant rather than a military officer was appointed as the secretary general of NSC. The NSC representative in Radio and Television Supervision Board was dismissed (Dağı, 2006). The opening of accession negotiations with the European Union in October 2005 was a great success for AKP. This success expanded the support base of the party to

include the Westward looking intellectuals and liberals not merely the conservative middle classes in the country. European Union helped AKP grow (Gökalp and Ünsar, 2008).

Meanwhile women also benefited from AKP's drive to meet the Copenhagen criteria. The coalition government before AKP had amended the Civil Code and AKP took its turn to amend the Penal Code. Under outside pressure from the EU to expand women's rights prior to the opening of accession negotiations and local pressure from women's groups to discard patriarchal assumptions in the amendment of the penal code, AKP did finalize the amendment in 2005. The new penal code accepted a liberal as opposed to the earlier communitarian framework within which to dispense justice. The women who organized themselves into the "Women's Platform on the Penal Code" drafted the new code where crimes related to sexual violence are defined as "crimes against individuals" rather than as "crimes against public morality" which had been the case in the old code. Rapes and honor killings are now punished with heavier sentences and the new code criminalizes sexual harassment as well as rape attempts. Marital rape and harassment at the workplace are recognized as crimes. Penalties for domestic violence as well as sexual violence towards children are increased. The new code, unlike the old one, does not recognize consensual relationship in cases of child abuse nor does it allow deferral of punishment for rapists who marry their victims. Articles that discriminate between married and single women or virgins and sexually active women have been abolished.

Before the amendment was voted in, the Prime Minister Erdogan tried to intervene to criminalize adultery, which feminists had been fighting against for almost a decade. It was probably Erdogan's Islamist morality against adultery as a sinful act requiring punishment that made him intervene. He wanted an equal punishment for both men and women, which is not what an orthodox reading of Islam dictates in cases of adultery<sup>6</sup>, but this would effectively translate into punishment of women rather than men, because it was more common for men to commit adultery rather than women and women would not be able to sue their husbands for adultery both because they would have less access to law and also because there would be social pressure against exposing their husbands. Besides, feminists argued, adultery could be a reason for divorce not punishment. Yet, feminists were very organized and very quick. They mobilized the European Women's Lobby to bring pressure on the government from the EU and raised havoc through the media. The Prime Minister had to withdraw his proposal.

After the Penal Code, the government took an important first step in prevention of violence towards women. In response to the increasing visibility of honor killings since 2000, the Grand National Assembly initiated a parliamentary investigative commission and prepared a report on the subject. In line with the policy proposals of the commission, the Prime Ministry issued a Decree in July 2006 on the Prevention of Violence toward women that is like a feminist manifesto. The decree is important because it articulates the responsibility of the state for prevention of any type of violence towards women and provides a detailed plan of cooperation between different state and civil society institutions to realize this goal. The measures prescribed by the Decree reflect the proposals of women's NGOs at large and the statements issued by the Women's Shelters Assemblies that had been meeting since 1998 every year, bringing together more than 100 women at a time to discuss the problems of gender based violence and shelters. While the Decree is yet to be enforced, the AKP government has generally been more responsive to women's demands for protection

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<sup>6</sup> Orthodox Islamist readings punish women's adultery with stoning.

against violence than their demands for quotas in political representation or opportunities for employment<sup>7</sup>.

Meanwhile the AKP government stabilized the economy and insured a strong recovery after the economic crises of 2001. (Ziya Onis, 2006) It was committed to the IMF program that the former World Bank executive Kemal Dervis initiated crises of 2001 both in terms of fiscal discipline and structural reforms. Inflation dropped from above 100% levels to below 10% and negative growth rates were replaced with those above 6% per year.

With its economic policies, AKP secured the support of both small and medium sized business groups, including the newly emerging industrial bourgeoisie of Central and Eastern Anatolian regions as well as the established Istanbul based industrial elites. The provincial business groups had benefited from the patronage of Refah party to grow in size that other secular parties had denied to them in the process of modernization till the 1980s. However as these groups became more competitive and explored the opportunities of the 1996 European Customs Union Agreement that Turkey was able to sign, they preferred Westward looking pro European Union policies which could expand their horizons and profits. This group was critical in supporting AKP and AKP in turn was careful to serve their newly articulated pro European Union interests. The party did not neglect to extend patronage by passing a tax amnesty and eliminating a property accounting law which most benefited the small and medium sized Anatolian business groups. (Demiralp, 2009, forthcoming) The more religious middle and small business groups of Anatolia organized around the Independent Businessmen' Association MUSIAD since 1990 as well as the more established secular business groups organized around TUSIAD since 1971 both supported AKP and its moderate outward looking pro- Europe and pro globalization policies of the first term.

The staunchly secular army had proved itself to be an important political actor to be reckoned with and so AKP took care not to antagonize the military with overt radical Islamist moves that challenged secularism. They compromised on the headscarf problem, that is they did not bring up the issue of uplifting the ban in the parliament their constituency expected them to do, so as not to antagonize the secular establishment, particularly, the president and the military. They withdrew their attempt to abolish the existing barrage for the graduates of Prayer Leader and Preacher Training Schools in university entrance examinations, which makes it harder for them to study subjects that are not related to theology. Evolution of AKP took place within a secular paradigm and the rules of procedural democracy, unlike the "civil pluralist traditions" within Islam that accounts for example for the tolerant Islam in Indonesia (Heffner, 2001)

### **AKP and the Headscarf Issue:**

Yet in its second term in office, after AKP assumed power with 47% of the vote, it became more responsive to the demands of its major conservative constituency. The party had been pressured to call for early elections in 2007 summer instead of those scheduled for fall,

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<sup>7</sup> The minister of state responsible for women initiated programs for the education of the police handling cases of violence. Directorate of Religious Affairs personell, and military personell received briefings on this subject. Television spots asking an end to violence towards women were prepared and aired to draw attention to domestic violence.

primarily because of military' attempt to preempt the election of then the Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdullah Gul to the Presidency. After the general elections, despite opposition from various sectors of the population, AKP had Gul elected to Presidency in the parliament. Moreover, as a consequence of a hasty referendum, the rules of Presidential elections changed from a parliamentary to a popular vote system as mentioned before. From the perspective of those skeptical of the party's commitment to secularism and afraid of its Islamist heritage, the separation of powers between the executive and the legislative thus collapsed.

After this self confident move, the second radical step the party took was patching a hasty coalition with the rightist nationalist National Action Party in January 2008 to secure the two thirds majority necessary for a Constitutional amendment which would abolish the headscarf ban in universities. Even though the attempt to amend the Constitution and the headscarf issue at large should not be prioritized as a main threat to women's interests that the intertwining of religion and politics precipitates, they should be examined because of the heated and controversial nature of the subject.

The amendment which the Constitutional Court rejected in June 2008 for undermining the Constitutional principle on secularism was a major debacle for AKP. The party had created the expectation that there would be a grand coalition drafting a liberal Constitution improving civil, social and political liberties for all. Instead, only Article 10 of the Constitution on equality and equal treatment before law was amended to specify equality in "the procurement of public services" and article 42 on right to education was amended to specify, "no one would be deprived of the right to education unless openly articulated by law". The amendments aimed to end the ban on the headscarf, which AKP avoided in its first term in office because of the *intensity* of opposition on this issue if not the numerical majority, and when the party had the electoral strength it immediately ignored the serious fear the secular minority had, to push the party's way even if it involved changing the Constitution.

The secular opposition in the minority feared the amendment. Majority of the population, including more than half of those without head covers, was against the ban and it could be argued that AKP was merely responding to popular demand. However, by 2008 there was a long history behind the headscarf issue which had redefined its meaning. Though the women who wore it might not have been against the Republic, or secularism or the Civil Code (Arat 2001, 2005), those who opposed the ban were deeply threatened by the headscarves. The headscarf had actually become "the symbol of Islamist opposition to the democratic Republican regime" for those in the minority irrespective of its meaning for those who wore it. In the context of the 2008, when the Islamist rooted government with an unprecedented electoral power aimed to change the Constitution to allow the headscarves, it was an explicit defiance of those fears.

Resolving the problem through the Constitution had further implications for intertwining of religion and politics beyond the fears it ignited. The headscarf after all was an Islamist dictate that even the Directorate of Religious Affairs did not deny. A secular Constitution the secular nature of which could not even be proposed to be changed was being altered with reference to liberal dictates to accommodate what was ultimately an Islamist code. There were other Islamist dictates, including polygamy, unilateral divorce or unequal division of inheritance that would be contrary to an egalitarian understanding of rights which the secularist groups argued the abolition of the ban through a constitutional change would invite.

The problem could be solved through other means in a longer term. The government could seek a broader coalition by engaging in debate and dialogue with those who were suspicious of the headscarves as a symbol of opposition to the secular regime or through convincing the rectors opposed to the abolition for merely laxing controls. After all there were no laws against head covering. Even though the Constitutional Court had previously defended the state's right to install the ban on the headscarves, there were jurists who argued that the headscarf ban could be lifted under the present Constitution even before it was amended and that the pretexts written in support of the ban by the Constitutional Court in previous cases were not binding for allowing headscarves in the universities (Selcuk, 2008).

Resolving the problem through a Constitutional amendment amounted to bringing in a religious dictate through the back door into the secular Constitution the secular nature of which could not even be amended by popular vote. Even though the language of the amendment made no reference to religion nor to freedom of religion and simply put the issue in terms of liberal rights to equality and equal rights to receive education, after all those who wore the headscarves did so because they assumed it to be a religious dictate. Under these conditions, one is led to ask how far can religious dictates be reconciled with liberal principles in a secular and predominantly Muslim and religious society? Will a majoritarian understanding of democracy, which AKP seemed to exhibit in the headscarf case, lead to a religious rule if that is what people demand? To these questions, one can respond by drawing attention to the individualistic nature of the headscarf debate and that it is not against any secular law. Concessions on polygamy, unilateral divorce or unequal inheritance rights would explicitly defy the secular Civil Code.

### **AKP and Propagation of Islamist norms**

Even though the headscarf debate is the most controversial and visible manifestation of the intertwining of religion and politics, I would like to argue that we should prioritize propagation of patriarchal religious values that promote gender inequality or confine women's opportunities to the domestic realm as a potential threat of this intertwining. Headscarves are an outcome of a particular religious socialization. Intertwining of religion and politics is more problematic when people are socialized to endorse religious dictates and practices beyond the headscarf through political society.

Before elaborating the different levels of this intertwining, relationship between religious as opposed to conservative world views at least as used in this paper need to be articulated. Orthodox, if not feminist, readings of Islam like those of most other religions, promote maternal and domestic roles for women, essentialize gender roles, and encourage obedience to husbands. Even though they might thus overlap with some conservative worldviews, a religious worldview is different from a secular conservative worldview because the former is legitimized and sanctioned with reference to a sacred God that reinforces and augments its power. However, both religious and conservative views can restrict public opportunities for women and steer them into private realm.

In practice there can be and there is much diversity as to how religions are interpreted. Orthodox readings need not be the prevalent readings. However, there is evidence that religious teachings for example in Prayer Leader and Preacher Schools in Turkey, where many AKP leaders including the prime minister Erdogan studied, promote maternal roles, segregation of sexes and sanction control over women's bodies as well as honor (Acar and Ayata, 2002). In other words, they are orthodox readings of Islam. When members of a

political party that had Islamist roots take office, conservative religious values, where for example traditional roles for men and women constitute the norm, are propagated through public bureaucracy and educational institutions. AKP need not implement a systemic plan to promote traditional roles sanctioned by religious readings but the infiltration of religious cadres into state bureaucracy and educational institutions does propagate these values.

Similar to previous governments before it, AKP is recruiting its own male supporters to its ranks. Yet, unlike the previous cases, the recruits are mostly religious people. Newspapers frequently report that civil service positions are steadily being filled with AKP partisans (*Radikal*, December 22, 2007) and religious partisans uphold traditional patriarchal roles legitimized by religious dictates rather than egalitarian roles that the AKP Party Program refers to. Even though employment rates during AKP's term in office have been very low both for men as well as women, there is data that women's employment rates have been slightly worse. Turkish Entrepreneur and Business World Confederation (TÜRKONFED) recently published its report on "Women in the Business World" (*İş Dünyasında Kadın*) which shows that women's employment in Turkey decreased during AKP's term in office between 2003 –2007. While there was an average GNP growth rate of 6.5% during this period, employment increased by 1.1% and women's employment decreased by 0.8%. (Yılmaz and Karadeniz, 2007- *Radikal*, 13 December, 2007).

The results of the survey carried out by the feminist platform on the surveillance of gender equality, IRIS are similarly disconcerting concerning women's public presence under AKP rule. The report, which studied the employment of women in public service based on a quantitative as well as a qualitative study pointed that AKP men were uncomfortable in working with women in public service. While there has been a significant decrease in the number of both male and female top-level administrators since 1994 because of austerity measures, the percentage of women administrators who left public service compared to men is slightly higher. In 1994, there were 528 top-level women administrators and 2,959 men (15% of top level administrators were women). In 2006 the figures were 302 women to 2,264 men (11% of top level administrators were women). The AKP government did not seem interested in increasing top level women administrators at least since 2002. However, the qualitative part of the survey is perhaps more harrowing. The intensive interviews with women employees indicate that AKP bureaucrats and politicians did not merely treat women administrators with traditional patriarchal attitudes, but they also resented the presence of women without headscarves in public spaces. (IRIS, 2007)

Women argue that, despite promises of commitment to various international human rights documents, the AKP government discouraged women from participating in the labor force. In March 2008, feminist groups and women in the labor force protested the government initiated Proposal on Social Security and General Health Insurance Amendment because it retracted women's rights in the labor market. According to this proposal which became effective in October 2008, women's retirement age was raised and their conditions for retirement were made more stringent. Considering most women do not work full time or hold secure jobs, working outside the house was made less attractive to women. In the same proposal, their ability to benefit from their father's health insurance was repealed. Feminists argued that these changes undermined women's economic independence and opportunities for work, made them more dependent on husbands and encouraged them to stay at home. While the Social Security Amendment was heatedly debated, the prime ministers duly advised that women give birth to at least three children. There was no mention of day cares or women's choice. This conservative mind set resonated orthodox interpretations of the religious texts

that encourage maternal roles for women and restrict substantive opportunities for them. Independent of the party program that cited CEDAW as the politically correct means of approaching EU, the party cadres had restrictive views on women's roles in line with religious teachings.

Besides the administrative ranks, traditional or religious values began infiltrating the educational system as well. The high school philosophy course guides prepared in the context of a revised curriculum have been criticized because they propagate religious values. The guide books expect philosophy teachers to teach students the value of religion and existence of God. Teachers are expected to engage in drills that prove the existence of God with cosmological, ontological and theological proofs (*Radikal*, October 3, 2008). If secular education is used to legitimize religion and religious values, space for expanding secular opportunities for women or even fighting against restrictive roles that orthodox interpretations of Islam endorse becomes more difficult.

Egitim-Sen, social democratic labor union of teachers, reported that especially in public schools in Anatolian districts and villages, AKP employs teachers within a web of patronage relations, recruiting people close to its conservative background. (*Radikal*, 22 December, 2007) Under these conditions, according to Egitim-Sen report, students are encouraged or directed to attend the dormitories and the off-campus courses of religious orders and communities. Students are featured in the press now and then about how they are pressured to cover their heads and pray in dormitories that are owned by religious orders (*Radikal*, April 1, 2008). Given the constitutional commitment to secularism, secular public education should not be promoting religious based values about how women should cover and pray if we are interested in expanding opportunities for women.

Even though it is difficult to quantify, newspapers and journals almost regularly report incidents which show that religious practices are infiltrating the primary and secondary public education not merely dormitories. There are required religion courses in elementary schools which are problematic in themselves to the extent that they legitimize and endorse religious teachings. The ECHR has a decree against the required religious courses, yet they continue to be part of the curriculum. Beyond the requirements of these courses, encouragement of religious practice seems to be spreading. For example it is reported that there are high schools with prayer rooms and students sometimes use prayer rugs to pray even in class rooms (Tamer, 2008). Head covering seems to be spreading even in public high schools. In December 2007, there was uproar because a high school student who received a prize in a national science competition organized by the TUBITAK came up to the podium with her headscarf. Apparently in the particular high school she attended all the students were headscarfed and there was a small mosque in school. Even textbooks used by Religious Knowledge courses advise the use of headscarves for girls. (Tamer, 2008) The secular school education should not be promoting religious worldviews, especially because they attribute secondary roles to women.

In April 2007, towards the end of AKP's first term in office, there was a secular protest because in various cities, public elementary schools had been celebrating the birth of the Prophet with religious Quranic chants sung by young students with covered hairs and long dresses. This religious celebration in secular public schools was being carried out with the consent and knowledge of the governors and administrators. In the Altindag district of the capital Ankara, all the head masters of public schools in the districts were asked to attend the celebrations. The General Staff duly issued a warning in its Internet cite and protested the

developments. They underlined that secular schools were not expected to promote religious observance and socialization especially when the students were young.

Besides administrative and educational bureaucracy, the civil servants of the Directorate of Religious affairs promote patriarchal norms legitimized with religious reference. The Directorate of Religious Affairs under the AKP Prime Ministry claims that head covering is a requirement of Islam<sup>8</sup>. The Director Ali Bardakoglu has publicly argued that “for fourteen centuries in the Islamic world, women covered their heads because it is a religious requirement” (<http://www.diyanet.gov.tr/turkish/baciklama.asp?id=1146>). Beyond head covering, in its internet site on sexual life and prohibitions, the Directorate exhorted women not to use perfume outside their homes, not to remain alone with man who was not a relative, and not to flirt. (*Radikal*, May 27, 2008) In effect, the Directorate as the highest religious authority in the country and ironically as part of the secular state apparatus was aiming to control women’s bodies, discouraging them from working outside their homes where they would have to work with men who were not their relatives with the risk of remaining alone with them and was aiming to regulate their sexual lives. These pronouncements, to say the least, would be hard to reconcile with CEDAW that the state had signed and AKP in power had paid its formal homage with reference to it in its program. In a country where only a quarter of the women were in the labor force, if the Directorate tied to the Prime Ministry argued that women should not remain alone with men, the pious Prime Minister would have no incentive to provide opportunities to women for employment. While the believers might not take issue with these pronouncements, and happily abide by them, these religious interpretations are expanding their control over women’s choices and women’s bodies. The more liberal interpretation of Islam which did not expect women to cover and which the founding fathers assumed is being replaced by another where religion has increased its control over women’s bodies. The fact that alternative interpretations of Islam that don’t extend control over women’s bodies, where one might not cover or might wear perfume, are not propagated by government controlled bodies is disconcerting.

Another high profile case of sexist values being propagated by a public employee of the Directorate was that of a prayer leader in a mosque advising his congregation in a Friday sermon not to let their wives work outside the house, because women working outside the house would be more liable to commit adultery. Even though an ex-social democrat professor of Constitutional Law recruited to AKP as a symbolic “notable” from the secular camp just prior to elections, happened to pursue this particular case, the imam was merely moved from one mosque to another as a punishment, clearly not enough to deter other similar acts even when they are not simply overlooked. Worse still, on April 11, 2008 a group of feminist women prepared an indictment against the Prayer Leader for defying the equality principles in the Penal Code and the Constitution. To their utter disappointment, the Public prosecutor advised the feminists that the prayer leader had freedom of thought. The fact that a sexist, patriarchal dictate was being preached by a public employee in a position of state as well as religious authority to denigrate women was rationalized as an act of liberalism. The party in power might have a liberal/conservative program rather than a religious one, but the religious conservative constituency of the party is emboldened to practice and propagate its religiously legitimated conservative values that discriminate against women.

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<sup>8</sup> When a female employee of the Directorate Ayşe Sucu publicly voiced her opinion that headscarves were a formality and the important issue in Islam was for women to be prudent, she was silenced (*Milliyet*, February 2, 2008). Feminists protested. Yakin Erturk the UN Special Rapporteur On Violence wrote a letter in support of Ayşe Sucu followed by an other petition by feminist women in support of the same position.

Meanwhile the government decided to allocate public funds to expand theology education in public universities. Most recently the Higher Educational Council increased the number of students the 22 theology faculties in Turkey could recruit from 813 to 2,724 (Cumhuriyet, July 16, 2008). The government also encouraged the proliferation of Quranic courses by reducing punishments against illegal ones. There are about eight thousand registered Quranic courses and the number of illegal ones are not known, though it is easy to locate one around any mosque. The previous Director of Religious Affairs argued that these illegal courses mostly affiliated with religious communities were preaching separatist religious propaganda. (Radikal, August 6, 2008) There is little reason to expect that their teachings on gender issues are progressive. Case stories of how they subordinate young girls before the age of eighteen and control their sexuality abound. The political elite that had Islamist roots was prioritizing the expansion of religious teaching and consequently its dissemination. The content of this religious teaching was likely to be restrictive of women's choices.

Another case of AKP politicians using their office to propagate sexist ideology was that of the Tuzla mayor who had a pamphlet on how to maintain a good marriage published and distributed to newly weds where women were advised to be subservient to their husbands and husbands to beat their wives if need be. (Radikal, 3 May, 2006). What the mayor did had nothing in common with the party program which promised allegiance to CEDAW, but the religious constituency of the party was hearing a more conservative tune which resonated orthodox readings of Islam where women play secondary roles. The party in turn was committing sins of omission by ignoring or giving symbolic punishments to these partisans who were occupying public positions.

In so far as lifestyles are concerned, drinking of alcohol is made more difficult under the AKP rule. The international survey company Nielsen reported that during the years 2005-2008 there was a 12.6% decrease in the number of places that sold alcohol in Turkey (Radikal, September 12, 2008). AKP backed municipalities that assumed the management of alcohol selling restaurants and cafes stopped serving drinks after they took charge and thus became instrumental in restricting the sale of alcohol. According to a decree issued in 2005 by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, many restaurants with alcohol licenses were required to do business only in designated districts and even the social clubs of sports teams were prohibited from serving alcohol. (Radikal, January 20, 2008) In Denizli, a city in the Western Anatolia region, the AKP mayor ordered all restaurants selling alcohol to move to that part of the city where there were tanneries, a move that the restaurant owners still protest particularly because of the smell which would keep customers away (Radikal, March 2, 2008). A similar decision was announced in Bursa. Islamic prohibition of alcohol was thus creeping into secular life under the pretext of paternalistic motives such as "alcohol selling restaurants would create noise and disturb public order in residential areas" or "sports and alcohol should not go together for the benefit of the youth". The right to drink alcohol or disregard religious dictates was thus being denied using functional, secular explanations. In this case, intertwining of religion and politics that would narrow life styles for both men and women was spreading.

Causality is difficult to establish in social sciences, and the different examples I have given intertwine religion and politics differently. Some bring in religion directly to promote a religious way of life through public schools, others appeal to secular functionalist arguments and liberal principles rather than make any explicit religious reference. There is no explicit reference to Islam when AKP bureaucrats express their resentment of uncovered women in public office or when the Denizli mayor banishes alcohol selling restaurants to a ghetto, yet they indirectly intertwine religion and politics.

Similarly these examples do not mean that the all party cadres exclusively represent regressive views on gender issues nor that there is a “hidden agenda” shared by all members regarding control of women’s public presence. However these are examples of conservative values detrimental to women’s interests creeping in and permeating the society at large through the religious cadres of a political party that had Islamist roots. The party constituency does not expect the party cadres to abide by the progressive party program regarding, for example CEDAW that it has perhaps not even heard of, but rather accepts the conservative religious values the party cadres propagate and that are more familiar to them.

If we were to assess the implications of the two AKP terms in office for the gender based interests of women, we could say that the first term provided opportunities that the second did not. During its first term in office AKP at least responded to pressures to amend the Penal Code and expand the legal framework to struggle against gender based violence while the second term was shaped by the party’s losing battle to amend the constitution to legalize headscarves in the universities. The two critical variables that can explain these different steps are the increased electoral support AKP had in its second term and the decreasing significance of EU in Turkish politics. The strong domestic support for increasing ties with the EU curbed the conservative inclinations of the religiously rooted AKP in its first term in office and encouraged it to promote progressive legislation for women. However infiltration of conservative values through the public bureaucracy and the educational system, the ad hoc patriarchal stances of its conservative cadres or the various restrictions on alcohol consumption were part of a process that began when AKP took office and continued during its second term as well.

### **Level of Civil Society**

Intertwining of religion and politics and the protest against it is not confined to political society. It takes place in civil society with serious consequences. Civil society is buoyant in Turkey. Even though it was traditionally weak because of a strong state tradition (Heper, 1985, Toprak 1995 a and b, Mardin, 1995), it is playing an increasingly strong role in Turkish politics. Both religious groups and secular groups are organized. Secular business groups, including business chambers as well as private businessmen’s associations are watchful of the political process and raise their voice when they feel secularism is threatened. They are ready to organize civil initiatives on important political debates as for example when they did to draft a Constitutional amendment.

At this point it is important to recall that though civil society is an important means to empower, reinforce, legitimize, support and control the democratic institutions of political society, it can also act to restrict, control, prevent participation, reinforce prevailing unequal distributions of economic or social power in society and work against the marginalized groups who do not have the resources, means, and ability to organize through civil society. Elaborating the significance of civil society for women, Anne Phillips warns that “Celebrating civil society as the sphere of freedom and autonomy is not really an option for feminism” because of the existing gender based inequalities prevailing in society (Phillips, 2002, 87). The problem becomes exacerbated when a conservative religious group that is hostile to feminist concerns and advocates religiously legitimated private roles for women organizes and gains immense power through civil society as is the case in Turkey.

Religious groups, religious businessmen and religious communities, some of whom were banned during the early years of the Republic, are widely organized in society and politics. Extension and empowerment of religious orders is problematic, not because they give their support to a political party with a religious heritage, and this has not always been the case, but because there is sexist socialization in their organization where some of them do control immense resources to shape the educational system and early socialization of the young. There is serious need for transparency in how they relate to the women in their communities yet they continue to augment their power through civil society working their way into political society.

Gülen movement is a case in question. The movement takes its name from its leader Fethullah Gülen,<sup>9</sup> a Muslim preacher and a follower of the Saidi Nursi order ( Aras and Çaha, 2000; Yavuz, 2003). As a most charismatic and eloquent preacher translating and transmitting the ideology of the religious leader Saidi Nursi, Gülen began expanding his network of adherents when he was a government employed mosque preacher in the coastal city of Izmir. Early on as he was gathering adherents around him, Gülen recognized the importance of education to capture the hearts and minds of the young and invested his energy in expanding an educational network under his influence. His adherents gradually began organizing around foundations to promote education and the well being of those in the educational sectors of society. Teachers Foundation of Turkey was one of the first within the community (Balci, 2005, 155). As his adherents began organizing throughout Turkey in increasing numbers, the community began opening schools which provided excellent secular education and establishing dormitories which imbued those who stayed in them with the pious culture of the community. The teaching in Gülen school is striking for their superior quality of science education. The community grows rapidly so the figures might not be exact, but it has more than five hundred schools around the world, more than one hundred of which are in Turkey (Turam 2005). Gülen thus channeled his followers to open schools instead of mosques (Başkan, 2005), choosing a more effective means of reaching a secular constituency to propagate his religious beliefs rather than merely preaching through mosques that many secular people at least in the 1980s and early 90s did not go. Even when the community does not own the school, it organizes dormitories around many university campuses and offers scholarships to needy students who are then gently guided into the pious environment of the group. Boys as well as girls thus move into Gülen community and are led to accept more orthodox religious understandings of gender roles or interests. Summer camps the community organizes have also been important tools to socialize younger cadres that have played key roles in the expansion of the community.

The foundations that prioritized education also developed ties with the wider capitalist system and the corporate world. Anatolian based industrialists and the newly emerging provincial entrepreneurs have been an important source of support for the community. There are powerful banks, hospitals, journals, television channels, newspapers affiliated with or sympathizers of the Gülen group. This immense network is hierarchic in its internal structure with Gülen as a charismatic leader at the helm. The financial structure is not transparent and the movement takes its strength from its cell based structure where different groups function quite independent of one another.

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<sup>9</sup> F. Gülen was charged by the Izmir State Security Court for aiming to establish a system based on religion in Turkey. He left the country to take refuge in the United States but was then pardoned in Turkey, though he still did not return.

The community that has formed around Gülen and evolved over time from a more confrontational to a more tolerant one aims to “revive Islam under secular democratic political institutions not in the mosque or a theocracy”. (Turam, 2005 p. 29) It is keen to cultivate harmonious relations with the state including the military. Despite the liberal outlook of the community, and the care the followers take to recruit adherents with carrots rather than sticks, its exit option is quite limited, once you are part of it. Understandably the community would not want to let go of its members and could put pressure on them so that they continue to provide services.

Very little is known about the women of the community. We know that the community has good relations with women without headscarves and employs them in its media and publication networks when cultivating a secular public image; however the wives and daughters of the community lead secluded lives where women are encouraged to lead pious lives as good wives and mothers, spending time with religious gatherings and readings of Risale, the teachings of Saidi Nursi (Turam 2005). They thus help extend the Risale networks and the propagation of Nursi’s ideas. These women of the community are expected to marry within the community. Some of the women work voluntarily as bigger sisters in community’s schools or dormitories helping recruit younger followers, working with high school students preparing for university entrance examinations or introducing the schools of the community to potential recruits. (Turam, 2005, 121) Berna Turam who provides a most sympathetic view of the community has entitled her chapter on the women of the community as “Compromising Women’s Agency” (Turam 2005, p. 133).

In line with its nonconfrontational style and respect for the state, the Gülen community has not supported religious political parties like Refah that were openly opposed to the secular establishment. However the relations with AKP are different. Gülen and AKP have allied themselves in the words of Berna Turam in a “marriage of convenience” between Islam and the state (Turam 2005, 134). Gülen sympathizers have been recruited in large numbers to the ministry of interior as well as the police. This cell-based religious movement organized through numerous civil society organizations, mostly foundations, has thus created a monopoly of power that has little transparency and, from the little that we know, that encourages traditional women’s roles.

### **Women’s Movements**

Women have been organizing to expand their rights and opportunities since the 1980s in Turkey. There are more than 350 women’s organizations some more active than others, all working to expand women’s opportunities. Mostly secular women, though divided between themselves into liberal, radical, Kemalist, Kurdish, lesbian and other brands of feminists or women’s rights activists, bring women’s predicament into focus at the level of the state as well as society. They developed different women’s perspectives on Islam, the headscarf issue and the Kurdish issue. They articulated the question of domestic violence and precipitated some legal changes like the Law on the Protection of Family, which was accepted in 1998. They were a major force in the amendment of the Civil Code in 2001 and the Penal Code in 2005 (Arat, 2008). Feminists in Turkey who were influenced by second wave feminisms in the West distanced themselves from the state in protest of their marginal status in society during the 1980s and later in 1990s began working with the institutions of the state as well, disseminating information, lobbying, petitioning, acting as interest groups, in short, bringing about change from within the political system. To have the amendments in the Penal Code, feminists worked with the AKP government and the MPs as well.

The headscarf issue and the meaning of secularism that is part of the debate divide the “secular” women both amongst themselves and from the Muslim women who cover their hair. Many liberal and radical feminists support the uplifting of the ban in solidarity with Islamist women who want to attend universities with their heads covered (Arat, 2004). They argue for the right of Muslim women to choose to cover their heads and they respect religious women’s agency, even when they are watchful of government policies and ready to raise their voice against conservative moves that might undermine women’s rights. Other secular women, particularly those who call themselves Kemalist feminists<sup>10</sup> disagree. These women are very suspicious of and threatened by the headscarf as a symbol of opposition to the secular Republic.

The Kemalist women were in the forefront of a series of large public protests that took place in six major cities against the AKP government in April and May 2007. These protest meetings called, the Republic Meetings, gathered hundreds of thousands of people to protest what they perceived as the intertwining of religion and politics<sup>11</sup>. The AKP government’s attempt to have Tayyip Erdogan or Abdullah Gül elected as the President of the country before the general elections scheduled for fall prompted the protests. Çağdaş Yaşamı Destekleme Derneği (Association for the Support of Contemporary Life) led by Kemalist women and Cumhuriyet Kadınları Derneği (Association of Republican Women) were most active in the organization of these demonstrations and women from different social groups and ages participated in them in large numbers. “Turkey is secular and will remain so”, “The Cabinet Resign”, “The Roads of Çankaya [the residence of the President] are closed to the Shariat”, “We do not want a Prayer Leader [Erdogan was a graduate of Prayer Leader and Preacher Schools] in Çankaya” were some of the slogans used in the rallies. These rallies did articulate the fears of a significant group of women in the country, but if their aim was to forestall the election of Gul to the presidency or the weakening the government, these were both thwarted.

The protests succeeded to polarize the society further. In that atmosphere of increasing polarization, at the end of April, the Turkish Armed Forces made a declaration in its web site stating how it had a stake in defense of secularism, which further crystallized and polarized the secularism-Islamism divide in the country. Secular women might have most to lose if the Civil Code were replaced by an Islamic Code, but the existence of this particular threat is yet questionable and the street demonstrations seem to have been counterproductive in weakening the Islamists.

The protests failed because they aimed to do too many things at the same time. Different people joined the protests with different reasons. Some feared the Islamist rooted AKP would precipitate an Islamic state, others merely did not want to see AKP expand its institutional hegemony by claiming the presidency, others sought help from the military to bring back an authoritarian secularism. Ultimately, their message conveyed the cultural elitism of an earlier era when modernity was defined in explicitly Western terms. Those who gathered were in effect expressing their dislike of a democratically elected government that

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<sup>10</sup> The reference is to the reformist politics of Mustafa Kemal that did expand women’s rights in Turkey by abolishing the Shariat law and expanding secular opportunities for women in the 1920s and 30s. This group is staunchly secularist and close to egalitarian feminists.

<sup>11</sup> The first meeting took place in Ankara on April 14, 2007. Some reports claimed that close to 1.5 million people participated in the protest meeting. The others took place in Istanbul, Manisa, Çanakkale, Izmir and Samsun during April.

was expanding the visibility of Islam in public life, rather than protesting specific anti secular activities or specific policies harmful to secular interests that the policies or sins of omission of this government entailed.

The liberal or radical feminists who are against the ban and the more staunch secularist feminists have built an effective coalition amongst themselves in pressuring the AKP government for some legislative reforms when AKP was seeking EU accession, but they have been unsuccessful in many others, especially as the soft power of EU waned. Amendment of the Penal Code (even though they had to mobilize the European women's lobby in the last minute) in 2005, which involved a large women's coalition, was a success. The Prime Minister's Decree on Violence Towards Women issued in the summer of 2006 and drawing its inspiration from the work of feminist NGOs working on issues of violence can be considered another example. In both cases, the soft power of the EU in pushing government to amend sexist legislation and extend protection for gender based violence helped local activists secure their goals.

However the secular feminist coalitions are also very disappointed with the government (Berktaş, 2008). Their demands for a parliamentary quota are dismissed and ignored. About 80 women's NGOs protested the draft of the Social Security Code (Sosyal Sigortalar ve Genel Sağlık Sigortası), which ignores women's work at home, does not protect working mothers and implicitly encourages maternal roles for women assuming them to be dependents on their husbands and fathers. By 2008, the soft power of EU was waning and the local groups could not generate the pressure to push for policies that would expand women's employment outside the private realm.

Women with headscarves, on the other hand, are not as organized, though they have adamantly resisted state policies and widely protested in front of university entrances or in some street demonstrations. The Organization for Human Rights and Solidarity for Oppressed People, Mazlum-Der (İnsan Hakları ve Mazlumlara Yardım Derneği) which is a human rights NGO founded in 1991 helps headscarved women in universities seek their rights, take their cases to domestic as well as European courts and provides legal consultancy. After the amendment of the Constitution to abolish the ban, a group of headscarved women created a blog and wrote a petition in defense of freedoms besides the freedom to wear headscarves ([www.henuzozgurolamadik.blogspot.com](http://www.henuzozgurolamadik.blogspot.com)). In their petition they announced that as women who are discriminated against because of their headscarves, they will not be happy to attend universities with their headscarves till, Kurdish rights and Alevi rights were recognized and freedom of expression was expanded and minority rights were granted. (*Radikal* 23 February, 2008). This was quite new because the Islamist groups were much accused of merely demanding liberties for themselves and freedom of religious expression.

Another unprecedented development after the Constitutional Amendment, which aimed to legalize the headscarves in the universities was the petition written by an Islamist feminist Hidayet Şefkatli Tuksal who covers her hair and by her friends against oppression of women. The petition that was announced through a blog on February 29, 2008 (<http://www.birbirimizesahipcikiyoruz.blogspot.com>) went as follows: "We, the women who are non-believers-believers, uncovered-covered, women who do not say "if you are in, I am out", in a spirit of women's rights and freedoms.....we, the women do not want our bodies to be controlled in the name of modernity, secularism, the Republic, religion, tradition, custom, morality honor or freedom. We, the women do not suspect one another, we stand by one another, because we, the women are side by side with those we are conscious of." This was

the first time a group of covered women initiated a public petition that was signed by both covered as well as uncovered women in solidarity with one another. In a country polarized over the headscarf issue, this was an important alliance which showed that women who covered their heads and those who did not could find common ground to pursue opportunities in a grand alliance beyond the headscarf debate. The prospects for empowering such common platforms and amplifying their voices are not very probable but not unlikely either.

### **Customary Sphere-**

Social pressures are very important in Turkey but they need not be related to AKP or religion per se. In Fall 2007, the eminent social scientist Şerif Mardin, in an interview he gave to a popular daily, warned against the importance of “mahalle baskisi”, pressure coming from the close community in Turkey. The warning, and whether this pressure existed or increased during AKP’s tenure was discussed for days. However there is little ethnographic research on how these social pressures impinge on women’s rights and gender equality.<sup>12</sup>

### **3. What are the social and political effects, especially from a gender perspective, of this blending of religion and politics? When is it likely to pose a danger for gender equality and democracy?**

To assess the social and political effects of the blending of religion and politics, I shall use a criterion widely used in liberal and radical feminist analyses: expansion of women’s opportunities. I shall examine if intermingling of religion and politics restricts or expands opportunities for women. Some women might not care and might well be happy if their opportunities are restricted. Moreover women might engage in fundamentalist ideologies that seemingly restrict their opportunities yet they might derive a pious or even worldly satisfaction from the experience. In an earlier work on women’s commissions of the Islamist Refah Partisi, the predecessor of AKP, I witnessed how women could be empowered and politicized working for a religious political party. However, even when women opt for lives that could restrict opportunities, real options should be there for them to choose. Women should be given substantive choice for us to talk of a feminist expansion of opportunities. I shall discuss below the effects of intermingling of religion and politics on different groups of women that are influenced by this process.

The most visible and controversial result of the blending of religion and politics has been the unsuccessful move to legalize headscarves in the universities. The headscarf issue has polarized society and divided it into secular and Islamist camps. Moreover secular and Islamist men and women have been divided amongst themselves on this issue. There are those for or against the ban, among both secular women as well as secular men. On the other hand some Islamist women/feminists who cover their heads ally themselves with secular feminists and express their opposition to the state as well as the religious patriarchy on issues of women’s rights thus dividing the unity among the Islamist ranks.

Religious women who cover their heads and want to attend universities would benefit from the abolishment of the ban. The proportion of headscarved women who could pass the university entrance examination and not attend because of the ban is not available but this

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<sup>12</sup> Binnaz Toprak is leading a project initiated by the Open Society Institute on social pressure in Turkey but the research is not complete as yet.

group which is likely to be small, will have a chance to attend universities.<sup>13</sup> These girls will be able to practice their religion as they believe to be the correct way. So their right to education as well as freedom of religious expression would expand.

Parameters of liberal individualism might thus expand if these women make their choices free from coercion and can explore options beyond what orthodox religious teachings exhort. Even though many secular groups are doubtful, women do seem to cover because of religious reasons and because they want to not because they are forced to. Surveys tell us that the percentage of women who cover their heads because of family pressure is not more than 6% whereas those who cover for religious reasons are about 73%. On the other hand, traditional roles do not require a university education; pursuit of a university education with persistence despite the ban might suggest that these women want to expand their opportunities beyond those that traditional roles can provide.

Similarly the meaning of secularism might thus broaden. Traditionally Turkish secularism has been understood not merely as a separation of religion and state, but also state control over religion. When the ban is abolished, citizens are left to practice religion the way they understand it or the way they believe is the right way. State control over how religion is interpreted and practiced thus weakens with the lifting of the ban.

Yet, encouraging headscarves that lifting the ban could mean might restrict opportunities for women. Afterall for many, headscarves are a religious control over women's sexuality and choice<sup>14</sup>. Headscarved women can serve as role models for other women. It is not merely that headscarved women can not work in public service with headscarves, many do work anyway, but head covering can come with other restrictive views about women's place at home and in their relationship with their husbands. If women cover their heads as a religious dictate, then they might endorse other religious dictates or at least interpretations that see women assuming secondary roles. This need not be the case, but there are statistics for example that women who cover their head tend to be more reluctant about women working outside the house (Erdem, 2007). Afterall both might be seen as religious dictates. These women can and apparently do resign themselves to restrictive roles that religion proposes. On the other hand, even when covered women are active in public space, head covering will restrict women's engagement in many activities including many sports, dance and ballet. They might not express interest in these engagements but many women who do not have substantive options do deny interest in alternatives that seem beyond their reach. Even those who are physically beaten come to rationalize this violence when they do not have alternative options.

For the secular women who are not covered, the threat of pressure to cover might increase if the ban is lifted. This group argues that their freedom of religious expression which does not necessitate head covering is threatened in a context where the sheer majority of covered women put pressure on the uncovered women. They argue that covering women is a patriarchal control over women's sexuality and women should not be socialized into this particular religious interpretation.

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<sup>13</sup> Enrollment rate of women at the university level was about 11% in 2000 (<http://www.die.gov.tr/tkba/t103.xls>)

<sup>14</sup> Even though covered women normally do not experience head covering as such there is the sociological argument that headscarves either assume women too weak to defend themselves against male lust or too strong sexually, and hence a threat to social order because they can create disorder with their unbridled or manipulated sexuality. So women either need protection or discipline which in either case is derogatory for women.

Yet this is not a threat that could be prevented by a ban on the wearing of the headscarves in the universities. The threat will exist if headscarves are in the majority outside the university doors anyway. Encouraging the use of headscarves might be goal independent of the headscarf ban in the universities. The impact of religious cadres at the administrative and educational levels and the spread of religious communities through which intertwining of religion and politics takes place are the more important processes at work. The extension of Islamist education or propagation of Islamic values regarding traditional sex roles where women are encouraged to become traditional mothers and housewives could mean a serious danger for many secular women who believe in expanding opportunities for women outside the home and increasing women's autonomy from traditional patriarchal means of control. If the influence of Islamic communities in the educational and administrative ranks spread, such restrictive roles are likely to spread. Hence they pose a danger and what the younger generation is exposed need to be supervised. The feminist concern, in Phillips's words "that horizons are drawn in relation to what is perceived as possible" (Phillips, 2007, 148) is very appropriate. Rather than the headscarf ban, the institutional spread of Islamist values that propagate restrictive roles for women and restrictive lifestyles at large are likely to pose a danger from a gender perspective.

If the concept of "adaptive preferences" involves the "capacity to ignore those things we feel we cannot change or undervalue those opportunities we know to be closed to us.....and Perceptions of what is desirable are formed against a backdrop of what seems possible, and choices are made from what appears to be the available range. (Phillips, 2007, 39)" then widespread propagation of religious norms and gender roles is problematic. When women find themselves in religious communities where traditional division of labor is sanctioned, or when they are exhorted that obeying their husbands or wearing the headscarf are religious dictates, they might "adapt their preferences" and assume that this is what they want and this is what makes them happy. When these women are not given the opportunity to seek alternative means of self fulfillment such as through public engagement, leadership or employment outside the house, they might lower their aspirations and claim that they are happy with what they have. They might seek neither opportunity nor autonomy and be happy.

To the extent that we are concerned about increasing women's options and giving them a chance to lead lives where they can choose not to be dependent on their husbands, then the propagation of religious values as a consequence of the intermingling of religion and politics can be a hazard for women. Can women increase their opportunities for self enhancement by engaging in the life and mission of the community and opt for communitarian values without "adapting their preferences"? Can women increase opportunities for self-enhancement within the context of religious communities? Working for a political party that upheld an Islamist discourse, women could have opportunities for empowerment (Arat, 2005). However the religious communities that are fast spreading, shaping a religious population and denying transparency, particularly concerning their women give little hope that they expand women's opportunities. To the contrary the little evidence that we have suggests that women's options are quite limited within their religiously patriarchal communities particularly to bring about internal change (Turam, 2007).

Considering that the governing party is in alliance with the predominant religious communities and not interested in supervising them let alone in challenging what they teach and do about their women, it is important to empower the civil society groups who are interested in women's rights as well as others engaged in expanding civil, political and economic rights for all including the religious groups. Women's groups do react and protest

any incursion on women's rights. Yet they need to strengthen their alliances with other groups whose lifestyles or priorities are threatened with the onslaught of restrictive values legitimized with reference to Islam. Either secular or Islamist groups such as Islamist feminists who are against religious as well as secular oppression of women can be important allies to expand opportunities and autonomy. Intertwining of religion and politics would pose a danger for gender equality and democracy when these groups do not ally and raise stronger voices that are heard both by the state as well as more progressive groups within conservative communities that restrict women's options.

In this context, integration into the global community is another important factor against threats to women's rights. European Union was very important for democratization and expansion of women's rights in Turkey during the first AKP term in office despite intertwining of religion and politics through political office holders. European links did not merely influence the government but strengthened civil society and those groups who sought extension of liberties and more democratization for all. They could also contribute to strengthening secularism (Altınay and Kalypso, 2008). However the European power to influence progressive politics came to a halt. The reluctance to integrate Turkey grew within the Union and the consequent decline of support for the European project slowed down the process of democratization in Turkey<sup>15</sup>.

European Union need not be the only way of integrating to the global community. Whether it be through means of communication, the international law, integration into the capitalist system or merely tourism, interaction with the global community would help sustain opportunities for women by providing models, news and information about other women's opportunities, life styles and demands. Interaction with "the other" fosters internal change in any community assuming borders are permeable (Parekh, 2000, Phillips, 2002). Thus we see headscarved women arm in arm with boyfriends walking through the university campuses, and going to Cat Stevens turned Yusuf Islam concerts and cheering for and wishing he was available (*Radikal* 2, 2007). These developments show that traditional religious communities are prone to outside influence and that their members are not all puritanical fundamentalists and that women can have different options in this context of transformation.

We can see that transformation takes place within the religious Muslim community when we look at the literature produced by their authors over time as well. Kenan Çayır who studied Islamic novels and the Islamic novelists' representations of their community in the 1980s and the 1990s shows how Islamist novels evolved from being mere ideological documents to more sophisticated self-reflexive pieces of writing. In the later novels, Çayır analyzes how the authors criticize the restraints of the collective definitions of Islamic identity and their religious community (Çayır, 2007). We cannot generalize for all the Islamists on the basis of these developments let alone for the majority, but they do point to the dynamic nature of religion and politics and the importance of dialogue and inclusion rather than confrontation and exclusion to insure that change takes place in more restrictive religious understandings particularly concerning women.

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<sup>15</sup> From the 114 laws that were expected to pass through the Parliament during the 2007-2008 term in the context of harmonization with the European Union jurisdiction only 19 did (*Radikal*, April 11, 2008)

## Conclusion

Turkish state and society are going through a cultural transformation. Since its inception in the early 1920s, the Turkish state has committed itself to secularism. It has signed the basic human rights conventions that shape the contemporary liberal democratic legal framework as well as CEDAW that promotes women's rights. However, religious norms and practices out of line with these documents are spreading as a consequence of choices democratic majorities are making. Conservative cadres with religious values are moving into the civil bureaucracy as well as the educational institutions. Religious communities are organizing through civil society and propagating religious worldviews. There is evidence that these religious worldviews promote traditional roles for women, which could restrict women's choices and engagement in the public world.

Religion at large and Islam specifically need not be a threat to women's interests by definition. If, as feminists, we respect women's agency, we need to be ready to hear how women can expand their opportunities for empowerment or fulfillment through religion. However, as feminists, we also need to be watchful of the secondary roles orthodox interpretations of religion assign to women and the control they exert over women's bodies and their moral choices. We need to keep in mind that if women are not given viable alternatives to religious moral grounding, they might be liable to accept these secondary roles religions prescribe and adapt their preferences to the religious choices that have been made available to them. In the Turkish case, we see a process whereby orthodox religious choices are increasingly promoted and made readily available to women at the cost of substantive secular choices. This is a threat to women's interests.

Secular grounding, secular moral choices and opportunities need to be fast extended to women to expand their horizons. Restrictive religious values need to be criticized and exposed. In the Turkish case there is a strong secular bourgeoisie, a sizable group of secular professionals and feminists who are interested in preserving their values and integrating with the outside world in secular terms. The newly emerging Muslim bourgeoisie has economic interests in integrating with the secular Western world as well. This strong economic alliance as well as professionals and feminists are important forces that could contain a threat that intertwining of religion and politics has for women. They would not merely defend secular values domestically, but also push for integration with the secular world at large which would undermine the influence of restrictive religious dictates or religious conservatism in general. In a context of globalization, the alliance between secular forces and economic interests that engage with the outside world would help contain the threat that intertwining of religion and politics can have. In Seyla Benhabib's words these groups would engage in a "democratic iteration" by "mediating the will and opinion formation of democratic majorities and cosmopolitan norms" (Benhabib, 2006, 45). In other words they would mediate the religious proclivities of the "democratic majorities" of the local context and the cosmopolitan norms of secularism that the global context upholds. In the Turkish case the strong as yet undisputed legal framework is the underlying support for the secular forces at work.

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