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The Headscarf in Turkey in the Public and State Spheres

DILEK CINDOGLU & GIZEM ZENCIRCI

This article deals with the trajectories of the headscarf issue in contemporary Turkey from the gender politics angle by exploring its counter-hegemonic potential in a historical perspective. In the spring of 2007, the process to elect the president in the parliament was blocked by the opposition party RPP (Republican People's Party) mobilizing the opposition of the secular masses in large street demonstrations. Only after the 22 June 2007 early elections where the JDP (Justice and Development Party) came to power with 47 per cent of the votes and 62 per cent of the seats in the parliament, was Mr. Gül elected by the majority as the president, regardless of his wife's headscarf. The contemporary political scene in Turkey is shaped by the discussions regarding to whether the JDP should be banned from the political scene due to its anti-laic practices such as attempting the ending of the headscarf ban in universities through legislative changes to the constitution. A court appeal was accepted by the constitutional court and the case will be pursued in the coming months.

Earlier in spring 2007, when the next President of the Republic of Turkey was to be elected, the then prime minister, Mr. Erdoğan, again encountered strong opposition to his own candidacy and that of Mr. Gül, the minister of foreign affairs at the time. The opposition was clearly due to the fact that both of their wives were notorious for wearing headscarves. The question of whether Mrs. Erdoğan, the prime minister's wife, or Mrs. Gül, the minister of foreign affairs' wife, are fit be the first lady of the Turkish Republic has received immense discussion in the political arena. They both wear the headscarf regularly and this seems to be the signifier of their religiosity and their husbands' lack of commitment to secularism. Their prospective existence in the presidential palace (Çankaya) was perceived as problematic for contemporary secular Turkish politics. Certainly, it is not only the headscarves that made the possible candidacy of Mr. Erdoğan or Mr. Gül for the presidency open to intense discussion in Turkey, however this is the most critical point over which their candidacy has been contested by secularist elites in Turkey. Whether there can be a first lady with a headscarf in the presidential palace has been a significant component of the current discussion regarding the presidency. This discussion has brought Mrs. Erdoğan and Mrs. Gül, who have otherwise been non-political figures, to the forefront of politics. This article deals with the impact of the rising opposition in and out of the parliament shaped around the headscarf issue by dwelling upon the prospects of gender and politics paradoxes in contemporary

Turkey. Moreover, it also argues that the counter-hegemonic potential of the headscarf has been withering in the last three decades towards a more conservative, less emancipatory basis.

In the course of these political crises, Nimet Çubukcu, the minister in charge of women's affairs, publicly criticized the ways in which the wives of politicians have been used for political aims. She also criticized Deniz Baykal, the head of the main opposition party RPP, by stating that: 'Someone who can't even go to dinners with his wife, who doesn't take her to dinners, can not appreciate Mrs. Erdoğan who represents her husband with her headscarf at all occasions, and Mr. Erdoğan who doesn't leave his wife alone.' Çubukcu's remarks created a debate among politicians, and when she was further questioned, she stated that: 'I am not going to claim that I did not say those words, I wanted to show how it is wrong to do politics through women. This is neither a question of the JDP nor the RPP, it is an issue of men and of masculinity.'¹

This article takes issue with the transformation in the ways in which 'doing politics through women' via the discussions of the headscarf has shaped the political terrain of contemporary Turkey during the post-1980 period. The recent crystallization of the headscarf issue is obviously not something new in Turkish politics; in fact, it is the result of the culmination of the politicization of headscarf since the early 1980s. The geographies of this contestation have been in universities, the National Assembly, the mausoleum of Atatürk (Anıtkabir) and the presidential palace.

In this article we trace three such events in order to examine the transformation of this contestation; the first is the case of Merve Kavakçı, former elected MP of the now dismantled Welfare Party, who drew protests in the National Assembly because she entered it and demanded to take her oath wearing a headscarf. The second case is the so-called 'Reception Crisis' in 2003, when the presidential palace failed to invite to the Reception the wives of MPs from the JDP who wear the headscarf regularly. As our third case we examined the recent emergence of the issue of Mrs. Erdoğan's and Mrs. Gül's headscarves in relation to the presidential elections.

The link between women's agency and the headscarf has opened up a discussion wherein the boundaries between submission and resistance have blurred, and it has remained a puzzling question for scholars working on this topic. Contrary to the view which perceives women wearing headscarves as just another instance of their traditional submission to male patriarchy, the literature examining the headscarf movement in Turkey has come up with two intertwining arguments: (1) headscarf is argued to be the most important symbol of the Islamist movement in Turkey and (2) it is argued to be not a passive submission to patriarchy but rather a modern form of agency.² These early studies on the question of the headscarf in Turkey were mostly directed towards understanding the demands of university students who wanted to enter university campuses with their heads covered, and when not allowed they protested with sit-ins and boycotts.

Although we agree that the initial political strategies of resistance employed by the university students through which they both challenged the ways in which the early Republican discourse constituted the private and public spheres, and demanded a space in the public sphere through building upon universal human rights discourses and demanding democratic rights, these efforts did not succeed even in the JDP period of 3 November 2002 up to today. The recent attempts of the JDP to revise the

constitution allowing all women to enter the universities regardless of their dress code attracted opposition and ended up as a case against JDP in the constitutional court of 31 March 2008.

We suggest that the current conjuncture of the headscarf debate in Turkey needs to be understood separately from what has been argued as a modern form of agency on the part of university students throughout the 1980s and 1990s. This shift is due to two factors: (1) the move of the Islamist movement in Turkey from a radical to a more moderate position, and (2) to the impossibility of entering the state sphere as an agent with the headscarf.

In contrast to the 1990s, the meaning and the feminist value of the headscarf was altered significantly especially after the election of the JDP to office in 2002. More specifically, the headscarf movement was initially set against the ways in which the Turkish state constituted the place of Republican women. Thus, it carried a feminist potential in challenging the ways in which Turkish nationalism had constituted the triangular relation between norms of visibility for women, the national public sphere, and the state. The contemporary example of the headscarf controversy falls short of critically claiming the democratic right to wear the headscarf in what we term the state's sphere. Moreover, the headscarf discussion shifted from the actors of politics (i.e. MPs or university students) to the wives' of the politicians who happen to be the non-actors yet visible elements of politics.

The use of the headscarf controversy as a proxy to assert the difference between the secularist and Islamist elites, especially within the context of state protocols, thus diverges from the politicization of the headscarf throughout the 1990s as a democratic right to education for the purpose of entering universities only to come back later with Mr. Erdoğan's challenged attempt through the constitutional court in 2008. Even though the headscarf is still banned from higher education, this shift in the political discourse of the headscarf issue and its eventual accommodation in the system have two implications for the relationship between women and politics in Turkey.

First the mainstreaming of the headscarf issue though the centring of the Islamist movement in Turkey has been stripped of its gender components. Second, the centrality of the headscarf question to the political scene has created an important obstacle for women to form bridge identities between different feminisms in Turkey, and thus the feminist potential of the headscarf movement in challenging the state, has been affected negatively from the ways in which the headscarf controversy has been accommodated in the system. In this regard, Çubukcu's criticism is imperative since it shows the ways in which the contemporary political scene of Turkey, which construes women as the wives of men, of MPs, operates as a parameter that disallows Turkish feminists from the possibility of forming bridge identities among the secularist and Islamist groups, which could have had the potential to form feminist alliances between women as independent agents, eventually contest, resist and alter the channels through which women find a space in politics.

Globally, the 1990s were a decade where new social movements mobilizing masses around race, ethnicity, religion, and gender issues have marked the political scene of

all nation-states around the world. Similarly, the early 1990s saw a proliferation of new social movements, which have asserted their difference by articulating their demands on ethnicity and religion – such as Kurds, Alevi and Islamists in Turkey. Turkish scholars have argued that the emergence of new social movements basing their claims on identity politics is an unintended outcome of the authoritarian and modernization-driven policies of the early Republican period. The foundational discourse of the Republic had imagined Turkish national identity as a homogenous whole, and this national identity was built around a claim to modernization and progress. In the Turkish case: ‘Statism and the absence of direct colonial rule made possible the wholesale construction of a national identity that was modernist in character.’³ This homogenization and modernization of the nation was carried out by initiating various reforms which were not only directed at creating a modern state apparatuses, but also were intended for penetrating into the lifestyle, manners, behaviours, daily customs of the people: that is, the formal elements of change of the daily lives of citizens.

Thus, the Kemalist national project, in the name of modernization, interfered in all areas of social life, education, culinary practices, customs and family life.⁴ The nationalist vision of a good life for the Turkish national citizenry obviously involved certain exclusionary practices so that a homogenous citizenry could be imagined. As Keyder suggests, the hope of the early Republican elite was based on the claim that: ‘If there was a homogenous nation with a common past, their interests and future goals should have been common too. The state would be the narrator and the agent to realize these common goals and interests.’⁵ The constitution of a homogenous citizenry through the parameters of Turkish nationalism also served to legitimize a certain relation between state and society, via which the interference of the state in the everyday lives of the citizens was legitimized.

This triangular dynamics between the everyday lives of the citizens, the constitution of state sovereignty and legitimacy and the production of national identity has been argued to be directed towards the ‘creation of a national public’, in which the national public sphere needs to be understood as being a ‘a result of deliberate projects or strategies of nationalization and etatism’.⁶ As a non-western public sphere, in Turkey the national public has been produced through the proliferation of the images of the state that marks the domain of publicness and thus the legitimacy of the state was closely tied to the visual practices that constitute publicness. Through this project not only the Turkish national citizenry, but also the Turkish state as the proprietor of modernity and secularism was constituted. Perceiving the ‘public sphere’ not as a coming-together of critical-rational individuals that form organizations and then confront, resist and challenge the state, but rather as a domain whose contours are drawn and redrawn by the state, has important implications for our study.

Thus, in the Turkish context, the public sphere was institutionalized and imagined as a site for the implementation of a secular and progressive way of life, however this constitution also involved the drawing of the parameters of the image of the Turkish state within this national public sphere. From this perspective, rituals, commemorative practices, press releases, and most importantly state protocols and the presidential palace take on a critical significance.⁷ According to Migdal, a culturalist understanding of the state can be traced back to Geertz’s study of the Balinese state, in which ‘the court-and-capital is not the nucleus, the engine, or the pivot of the

state, it is the state . . . It is a statement of a controlling political idea – namely that by the mere act of providing a model, a paragon, a faultless image of civilized existence, the court shapes the world around it into at least rough approximation of its own excellence.’⁸

Similarly, following Bourdieu,⁹ Hansen and Stepputat highlight that one important dimension of how state power operates is ‘not so much or how the state governs but rather how the specific authority of the state, its stateness and its hegemonic location at the center of society, is (re)produced through symbols and rituals’.¹⁰ Geertz explains the court as being *the* Balinese state, and similarly it can be argued that the presidential palace is imagined as constitutive of the Turkish state in Turkey. This perspective, which takes the centrality of the state in the creation of the national public sphere, enables us to understand the anxiety over whether women with headscarves can be present at state occasions in the contemporary era in Turkey. Although government policy is a crucial part of state power, still, the multiplicity of the operations of state power in everyday life and in meaning-making is, we argue, as crucial as government policies to the possibilities of success of women’s movements.

In other words, a culturalist perspective of the state thus enables us to understand why the entrance of headscarved students to universities during the 1990s, and later to the Turkish Grand National Assembly, and recently in the presidential palace has come to be such a point of contestation in the Turkish political scene. It is not only the creation of the image of the state that comes out of the constitution of the national public sphere, but also a designation of the state’s sphere – as in the state’s protocols – whose contours are drawn through the foundational discourse of the Republic. Thus adding a conceptualization of the ‘state’s sphere’ to our current understandings of the institutionalization of the national public sphere in Turkey enables us to understand the present-day problem that has been encountered frequently with whether a headscarved woman can be present at state occasions and the national assembly. Although the literature mostly explains these incidents as an outcome of the quarrels over determining the accepted norms of behaviour within the public and private spheres, we suggest that the headscarf problem in Turkey cannot be understood without sufficient attention to the norms governing what the Turkish state stands for. Despite the question of the headscarf almost always being discussed in relation to the concept of the public sphere, here our attempt is to reveal that it is not the public sphere, but the state’s sphere that has become the obstacle to further political gains that can be achieved by headscarved women in Turkey. In order to understand the present-day debates surrounding the issue, a brief overview of the constitution of women and the centrality of this constitution in the visual imaginary of secularism in the national public sphere is in order.

Since the ‘other’ of Kemalism, included religion which was perceived as oppressing women’s existence in the public sphere, the early Republican discourse considered ‘Republican women’ as citizens who hold the right to enter the public sphere, and thus participate in public life freely. By instituting secularism as one of the six pillars of the Turkish Republic, the founding elite sought to disassociate the new state from the Ottoman past. In the cause of modernization, religion – Islam – was seen as an irrational attitude towards the world, and attempts were made to rationalize it.

Thus, the nationalist discourse in Turkey established a tense relationship with Islam – ‘religion’ – by progressively distancing itself from religion, which resulted in ‘Islam’ becoming the ‘other’ of Kemalist secularism. Labelling Islam as an out-of-date way of governing society fostered the emphasis that everything new was welcome in the name of modernizing society. In the encounter with Islamic forces, Kemalist elites presented themselves as secular, modernizing and anti-religious. However, paradoxically, the Kemalist conception of secularism became a ‘quasi religion’ of modern Turkey.¹¹ This imposition of secularism not only constituted ‘Islam’ as an internal other, but also constituted the periphery as a ‘silent other’ with the hope that in time it would be incorporated into the national public sphere, which was based upon the modernist hopes associated with education. That is not only the nation-state intended to educate the society towards the image of a westernized, modern, secular nation but also the nationalist imaginary reminded that everything associated with the past ought to be left behind. Most importantly for our purposes, in the Turkish context the meanings associated with secularism were not only within the domains of the legal and institutional sphere, but more importantly were vital to the introduction of a modern, western, civilized way of life for the new Turkish citizenry, and thus achieved significance to the extent that they were performed within the national public sphere. In other words, secularism was ‘enacted as a modern social imaginary through gendered, corporeal and spatial performances’.¹² The centrality of the female body in the representation of secularism in the national public sphere is in accordance with the ways in which nationalist projects symbolize the female body to assert their difference both from their past, and from other nation-states.

Although the Kemalist nationalist project offered women new roles in the public and private spheres, this emancipation from religion, and the associated backwardness, did not bring an actual liberation for women.¹³ In association with the modernist ideal of civilizing and constituting the national citizenry, new Republican women were envisioned as a bridge between (western) civilization and the (Anatolian) nation, who were expected to save the Republican reforms from degeneration and who were saved from the fanaticism of Islam by these reforms. The desired revolution in the relation between religion and women was emphasized through the changing role of women in the national public sphere. For the modernist-secularist project, the national public sphere was secular in character, and consequently religion was confined within the private domain of the individual believer. In this vein, clothing, or more specifically the unveiling of women, was emblematic of the project of Turkish modernization.

The female body and the unveiling of the female body was a terrain wherein multiple meanings could be conveyed. The ideal Republican women were constituted in opposition to the reactionary, backward, traditional women, and the former took upon the role of ‘citizen women’, imagined as urban, socially progressive but dutiful at home. In other words, the new vision championed by state feminism for Turkish women was merely to be traditional in the private sphere, and modern in the public sphere. In envisioning a new Republican woman, the unveiling of women was crucial. Initially, the foundational discourse of the Republic did not have an open ban on the headscarf in the public sphere, however through the introduction of modernist reforms and the ways in which the new Republican woman was depicted

in the nationalist campaigns, it was implied that the new Republican woman was expected to uncover her head through modernist education. Throughout the early Republican period 'headscarves and veils were banned only on official premises, including schools and civil service offices, but were tolerated elsewhere, although discouraged'.¹⁴ What state feminism provided was a new social visibility for women through unveiling; however this emancipation was only achieved at the expense of the individual and sexual identities of women.

Feminism as a strong and visible movement appeared in the early 1980s, when Turkish women challenged the role of being subservient and traditional in the private sphere by asserting, 'daily private life was the real arena of patriarchy'.¹⁵ The new feminist movement in Turkey was termed liberal feminism,¹⁶ radical feminism, and individualist feminism since it brought together 'women speaking on their own behalf and not in the name of "other women"'.¹⁷ What distinguished the post-1980 feminism from the modernization-oriented state feminism was the claim made by women to be the subjects of their own lives and not a symbol of state feminism. Furthermore, the issues addressed shifted from right to education to issues such as sexual education, sexism and domestic violence. This feminist movement attempted to define womanhood in Turkey in a 'modern' way, 'a woman learns about herself and her sexuality, a woman who is decisive, aware of her rights, able to stand on her own'.¹⁸ For example, they advocated the right for women to have sex outside marriage, as men do, and advocated against the criteria of using virtuosity as a discount element in rape-crimes against prostitutes. Their central project was to claim that women were as *free as men*, both within and outside of the marriage institution.

The emergence of a women's movement in Turkey, as a social movement, challenging the roles bestowed upon women by the early foundational discourse, occurred at the same time as the emergence of political Islam and the accompanying Islamist women's movement. The question of whether Islam and feminism are compatible has been a long-standing debate with regard to questions such as 'veiling and Islamic identity, feminisms among Arab/Middle Eastern women, orientalism, universal values and cultural relativism'.¹⁹ The extent to which the Islamist women's movement in Turkey can be termed feminist is obviously questionable – for example, Arat argues that despite the view that Islam and feminism seem incompatible at the first sight, the Islamist women's movement in Turkey has brought venues of empowerment, and thus 'women's involvement with Islam need not necessarily oppress or liberate women'.²⁰ Therefore, any attempt to understand the relationship between feminisms and their use of religion, or other right-wing ideologies should keep in mind that the hegemonic power of the state is crucial in shaping the domain of possible contestations for women.

Initially, the university students who grounded their right to education within the human rights discourse and presented their right to enter university campuses as a democratic right took up the new headscarf in Turkey. Theirs was a cultural-social movement, in the sense that they were resisting the early foundational discourse, which envisioned that religion, and the associated backwardness would fade away with modernization. However, the daughters of the new urban Muslim middle class in Turkey resisted this definition of modernity, and instead developed an alternative modernity that involved religion. Moreover, they demanded their right to be visible

in the public sphere in general, and in university campuses in particular, throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Their quest was confronted by the state, with the argument that secularism requires individuals to leave their religious beliefs behind in the private sphere, and that secularism meant that individuals did not have any symbol of their religious affiliation on their body.

The exclusion of women with headscarves from the public sphere involved fear on the part of the secularist Kemalist state establishment of a perceived Islamization of the state and society. Alongside the rise of Islamist politics in Turkey, these university students were able to capitalize on being the symbol of the Islamist movement in Turkey. Although they have not been able to enter university campuses – the state's sphere – their existence in the unofficial public sphere, that is anywhere other than state institutions, has come to be commonly accepted. Thus the initial Islamist women's movement was resistant to the parameters of modernity and its relation to religion through rejecting the norms with regard to what it means to be modern in the public sphere. Göle perceives this early Islamist women's movement as a feminist movement:

Islamic women have begun to redefine the Muslim female identity by their entrance to the social sphere. References made to feminism support their definitive transition from the position of being 'objects' to that of being 'subjects'. They struggle to survive as objects leaving behind their identities which depend on others – including being the symbol of the Islamist movement, the wives of men, and the mothers of children.

Here, what matters is not whether Islamist women define themselves as feminist or not, but actually whether they have been able to articulate their position by taking their own stance without reference to the importance attributed to 'women' as carriers of nationalism or religious movements. We suggest that both the early Islamist women's movement and the feminist movement were able to contest the early foundational discourse with regard to the status of women within the national public sphere. The feminist movement challenged the expectation that women were to be subservient and traditional in the private sphere, and the Islamist women's movement challenged the assumption that becoming modern and entering the public sphere meant that one left religion behind. In a sense, both of these movements were able to form a resistance against the hegemonic imagination of the nation, and the place of Turkish women within it. Moreover these examples of women's movements show us the ways in which each of the social movements had to re-create meaning as a reaction to the initial institutionalization of meaning by state power. In the first wave of women's movements in Turkey, these movements have been able to challenge the expectations of what it is to be a woman in both the public and private spheres. However, as the rise of political Islam became the central point of contestation in Turkish politics, the alliances that these social movements formed with the leftist circle and the Islamist circle respectively started to work to women's disadvantage.

Also, the rise of political Islam associated with the resistance of headscarved women by their insistence in being present in the public sphere led the Turkish state to reconsider what 'public sphere' meant. In this respect, Göle argues that it was the

secularist imagination of the national public sphere that added new layers of meaning to public spaces:

some common spaces are transformed as they gain additional symbolic value and become public sites of visual modernity and gendered secular performances. In addition to Parliament, schools and the workplace, spaces such as beaches, opera and concert halls, coffeehouse, fashion shows, public gardens and public transportation all become sites for modern self-presentations.²¹

Even if Göle highlights the centrality of public imagination to the constitution and contestation of the national public sphere, she takes the national public sphere as a coherent spatial metaphor, and does not highlight the particular ways in which the parliament, universities and state institutions vs. public gardens, streets and coffeehouses can come to signify different practices of meaning-making with regard to modernity and secularism. Instead we suggest that in order to understand the transformation of the headscarf issue in Turkey, such a differentiation is of extreme importance. Although the issue of whether headscarved women can be present in the streets and other unofficial places was discussed during the 1980s, the decision in 1991 made it clear that it was not illegal to cover one's head in the ordinary public sphere. The question of *official public spheres* was an issue that was discussed more vehemently by the public from the late 1980s. A couple of times, the Motherland Party (ANAP) made it legally acceptable to wear the headscarf in official public spaces by abolishing the ban on headscarves and giving the right to university rectors to decide on an individual basis,²² only to find the law sent back by the Constitutional Court, which annulled the decision and stated that 'using democratic principles to challenge secularism is the abuse of freedom of religion'.²³ Moreover, in 1998, the Higher Education Council reinstated the ban and advised all universities to apply it, warning that university presidents who did not comply would risk dismissal. Thus the headscarf has been banned in state universities and state institutions and therein lay the importance of headscarved students' resistance. Furthermore, the allowance of the headscarf in the ordinary public sphere led to the emergence of a secularist-feminist elite who were 'threatened by the increasing presence of veiled women in the public sphere' and therefore 'organized around associations, actively protesting and demonstrating against political Islam and the headscarf in Turkey today'.²⁴ These groups of women, identifying themselves as Kemalist feminists, were organizing against what they perceived as an Islamist threat to society. As Arat explains:

They were concerned that the rising tide of Islamism would undermine women's rights that had been secured by Kemalist reforms... Unlike the more radical feminists, and ironically more similar to the Islamists, the Kemalist feminists felt comfortable with the communitarian as opposed to individualistic values in society... Kemalist feminists believed that Islamist women had been misguided and needed help.²⁵

The result of this separation of feminists as Islamist feminists and secularist-Kemalist feminists is that the moderate groups within each of these were not able to form

bridge identities, since as a consequence of the politicization of the headscarf issue and the issues accompanying it, 'women started to take sides on the secular/religious divide overlooking their shared experiences as women'.²⁶

The position of women within the Turkish nationalist imaginary had captured feminists, secularists and Islamist alike within a binary oppositions of modern versus traditional, the politicization of the headscarf has been detrimental to the potential successes of the feminist movement in Turkey. Although the 1990s were the peak of this separation of the feminist movement between Islamists and secularists, the shift of the Islamist movement from a radical to a relatively moderate position did not help to heal the splits between these two women's movements either. Instead we suggest that the encapsulation of women as symbols of the divide between secularists and Islamists in Turkey, by being denied their agency, has ironically deepened under the reign of the relatively moderate JDP government. However, before we move on to explain the effects of the JDP's move into a moderate position on the resistance of headscarved women, we would first like to examine the case of Merve Kavakci, whose public political activism in the Turkish parliament set the stage for the subsequent transformation of the political uses and abuses of the headscarf question in contemporary Turkey.

The rise of political Islam in Turkey was interrupted by the 28th February Coup. From the beginning of the 1990s Turkey was witnessing the fragmentation of the political centre, but both instability and the rise of Islamism made such fragmentation evident in the eyes of the secular elites, when the Islamist WP (Refah Partisi [Welfare Party]) formed a coalition with the TPP (Doğru Yol Partisi [True Path]) Party. For the military elite, WP's seat in the government was a very obvious sign of Islamist reactionism, thus they issued a series of measures to the Refah-Yol government in order to prevent the supposed Islamization of Turkey. 'Unlike previous instances, there was no direct government overthrow. Instead the military chose to engage in an "education" campaign, whereby prosecutors, judges, academics, journalist, businessmen and others were summoned to the Turkish General Staff headquarters'.²⁷ The developments beginning on 28 February 1997 led to the resignation of the Erbakan government, and the WP was closed down on 16 January 1998 by a decision of the Constitutional Court, 'for having violated the secularist principles of the Turkish constitution'.²⁸ This process has been labelled the '28th February process', and, according to Cizre and Çınar,

This phrase was coined to indicate not only the far-reaching implications of the National Security Council decisions, but also the suspension of normal politics until the secular correction was completed. This process has profoundly altered the formulation of public policy and the relationship between state and society. No major element of Turkish politics at present can be understood without reference to the February 28 process.²⁹

It was during this period when political Islam adopted a low-profile, non-confrontational stance towards the state that the 1999 parliamentary elections took place. On 3 May 1999 Merve Kavakçı, who was elected the previous month as a

deputy from the Fazilet (Virtue) party, entered the Grand National Assembly with a headscarf. Other social democrat deputies protested by beating on the desktops, demanding that Kavakçı had to leave the parliament without taking the oath. Another female deputy from the Nationalist Action party, Nermin Ünal, took off her scarf in order to be sworn in. This event received intense attention, and, as Göcek argues, it has been framed within the Islamist-secularist tension in Turkey, and the behaviours of these two deputies need to be studied within the contested location of gender in Turkey, rather than as a result of their personal choices.³⁰ Göcek argues that the behaviours of veiling and unveiling by these two female deputies need to be understood by deconstructing the multiple layers of meaning that are constructed through processes of political positioning, polarization, intercession and confinement. This is crucial to understanding the significance of this event as exemplifying the ways in which the 'headscarf' has been presented as just a matter or personal choice in Turkey. But, for our purposes, what is at stake is the ways in which the protest of Merve Kavakçı revealed the inadequacies in resorting to the concept of the public sphere for understanding the transformation of the headscarf question in Turkey. The headscarf incident in the parliament is not totally unrelated to the earlier politicization of the headscarf issue in Turkey, and thus there is similar social dynamic at play in the trajectory of the Muslim deputy and the Islamic female students protesting at university entrances for the right to an education.³¹

However, what is important is that 'it was Merve Kavakçı's physical presentation in the parliament, not her election, that provoked a public dispute'.³² For Kavakçı, her public visibility in the parliament was a democratization protest, and she stated that 'she would not uncover even if they cut their head off'.³³ In contrast, Nermin Ünal 'explained her behavior by stating that even though she chose to cover herself in the *public*, she also 'respected the rules and traditions of the national assembly' which prohibited her from being covered and had therefore decided to appear uncovered only in the assembly'.³⁴ Ünal's assertion that there was a difference between the 'public' and the parliament – state's sphere – was also reiterated by other politicians, for example Süleyman Demirel, then president of Turkey, stated: 'while it was traditionally acceptable to wear the headscarf in public, the national assembly has its own rules which had to be abided by'. The head of the Social Democratic Party, Bülent Ecevit, similarly defended the protest of the SDP deputies by arguing that: 'No one is intervening with the attires and headscarves of women in their private lives. Yet this place is not the private sphere of anyone. This place is the most exalted institution of the state. This is not a place to challenge the state. Please put this lady in her place'.³⁵ Ünal's party leader supported her decision to unveil for the ceremony by saying that 'the state is sacred in the tradition of the Turks and one has to respect that which is sacred'.³⁶

The sacredness of the state, and the difference between the public sphere and the state's sphere was further established by the following event in Anıtkabir, Atatürk's Mausoleum, approximately five months after the Kavakçı incident. In order to avoid a similar confrontation in the Mausoleum, where traditionally a ceremony is held on the commemoration of Atatürk's death, 10 November, a 'dress code' was applied in 1999 in the aftermath of the Kavakçı incident. The text announced a 'contemporary clothing obligation' for the official part of the ceremony. Yet the press announcement led to some confusion as to whether headscarved citizens could still

visit Anıtkabir, and the follow-up announcement cleared this confusion by suggesting that it was only the state protocol, the official ceremony that the ban on the headscarf was referring to, which meant that ordinary citizens could still visit Anıtkabir, a common practice in Turkey, regardless of their clothing.

This clarification made it obvious that the ban on the headscarf was strictly for the official ceremony, outlining that a headscarved MP could not be present in Anıtkabir during the official ceremony, but can visit unofficially. This press announcement for Anıtkabir was an example of the way in which Kavakçı's democratization protest was perceived as highly threatening to the normative state order, and marked a turn on the headscarf issue in Turkey, in which the major space of contestation was no longer the universities, but had become the state's sphere: ceremonies, parliament, and later the presidential palace. This does not mean that the ban on wearing the headscarf at universities had been reformed, rather students who wear the headscarf started to cover their headscarf with a wig. But since the 'Parliament as a secular public sphere is imagined, constructed and instituted in the Turkish Republican context',³⁷ this event came to be the first reference point of the contestation between Islamists and secularist elites with regard to the use of the state's sphere.

The following years of the Kavakçı incident also witnessed a transformation in the ideological outlook of the Islamist movement in Turkey. First the closing down of Islamist WP, and later of the VP (Fazilet Partisi [Virtue Party]) affected the Islamist bureaucrats and led them to reconsider their ideological positions. After 2001, the Islamist political agenda developed on two lines; the traditionalists and the reformists. Within a month, on 20 July 2001, the traditionalists formed the FP. On 14 August 2001 reformists formed the JDP. In other words, the 28 February process slowed the rise of political Islam for about four years, and in the subsequent years the Islamist political elites were divided in two groups, reformists and traditionalists, which take a different posture in the presence of the 28 February process.³⁸ The new face that the reformist JDP adopted was a complete break from the tradition that the party had emerged from since the JDP came to represent the transformation to a moderate conservative democratic party from a pro-Islamist party.³⁹ The results of the 3 November 2002 regime prove that the new path adopted by the JDP in their split from their initial party has proved effective. Through this transformation the JDP's understanding of the relation between religion and politics has changed, Özbudun suggests that the JDP reconciled with the principles of secularism in the constitution, in fact, even in the party programme it is stated that: 'while religion is one of the most important institutions of humanity, secularism is a *sine qua non* condition for democracy, and the guarantee of freedom of religion and conscience'.⁴⁰

The gradual transformation of political Islam in Turkey has had important implications for feminist movements. On the one hand, the transformation of Turkish political Islam into a moderate conservative democratic party 'can be seen as a significant step toward bridging the age-old deep cleavage between secularists and Islamists, thus contributing to the consolidation of democracy in Turkey'.⁴¹ On the other hand, however, such a consolidation of democracy does not seem to benefit women in Turkey. Even Islamist women have not benefited from the election of the JDP to office for their democratic right to wear the headscarf in public and state spheres alike. This had to do with the JDP's cautious decision to put the headscarf question aside in order to prove their transformation to a conservative democrat

party. Even Erdoğan stated that 'The problem of veiled students at universities will not be governments priority'⁴² upon his election in 2003. However, he had to break his silence in 2008, when the opposition party leader Mr. Bahçeli intimated possible collaboration towards the elimination of the headscarf ban, which led Erdoğan to move towards the constitutional changes, jeopardizing his presidency by an appeal to the constitutional court: for the anti-laic constitutional change and for being banned as a party based on anti-laic acts.

Despite all these precautions, the first major crisis the JDP ran into was with regard to the use of the headscarf by the MP's wives. First, headscarved spouses of AKP members were not allowed into a ceremony at the presidential palace on 23 April 2003, one of the major national holidays in Turkey. Following this, on 29 October, the 80th anniversary of the founding of the Turkish Republic, President Sezer extended an invitation to a reception to JDP deputies, but barred their headscarved wives.⁴³ separate invitations were sent out to MPs whose wives wear the headscarf and those that do not, with additional clauses such as 'with spouse' or 'without spouse'. President Sezer defended his action by stating that: 'There has been a tendency to position against the state's secular character, I wanted to prevent it.'⁴⁴ Arguing that the 'reception crisis', as it was termed by the popular media, was an outcome of JDP crossing the 'red line' of the military with regard to the use of the headscarf in public. In contrast, we suggest that the struggle was not over the public sphere, but rather about the state's sphere. The transformation of political Islam to a conservative democratic stance has had other results for women in Turkey as well, now being construed only as wives of MPs, women have ceased to claim any right to enter state institutions.

It is also important to remember that the wife of the current President, Mrs. Gül, withdraw her headscarf case in the European Human Rights Court upon her husband's appointment as the minister for foreign affairs in 2004. Her status as a wife overshadowed her status as an agent and citizen who demands equality and asserts her case in the court. This was the first step of the headscarved women from being the active agents of politics towards residing in and priming their traditional gender roles.

It is within this social and historical context that we suggest the recent discussion regarding Mrs. Erdoğan and Mrs. Gül needs to be understood. When, Abdullah Gül, the former minister for foreign affairs, became the presidential candidate, the 'red line' of the military was once again crossed, not only because his wife wore the headscarf, but also because the military establishment and the secularist elite were afraid that he still had some radical Islamic views. This crisis led to tensions between the secularist establishment and the ruling party. The military issued a statement online (which was termed by some as an 'e-coup'), suggesting that it did not approve the possible election of Gül to the presidential office. Early parliamentary elections were called in Turkey together with major constitutional amendments to the procedure by which the president is elected. Nevertheless the 22 June elections brought the JDP 62 per cent of the seats and Mr. Gül was elected president.

The recent discussions of whether Emine Erdoğan or Hayrunisa Gül can be the first lady of Turkey, however, do not entail any real political gains for the women in Turkey. Such contestations between the secularists and Islamists have not seemed to decline, especially in building possible alliances between women in Turkey. Gulalp also supports this argument by stating that:

No doubt, Islamist women are covered not because they feel that they look good in them, but because they believe they have to. Hence, just as it is true for Islamists, so for the Kemalist imposers of this dress code, wherever there is higher, sacred truth, human rights can not be an issue... Kemalist and Islamist epistemologies are remarkably parallel; insofar as they both rely on unquestionable truths.⁴⁵

The national imaginary thus continuously limited women's ability to make social movement linkages to lead to their betterment. This insight is only available by prioritizing the realm of the state imaginary in addition to the imaginations of the public and private spheres. As Saktanber states:

Similarly, in today's Turkey, the exclusion of covered women from public life may result in women's compliance with Islamic patriarchal codes and religious rules rather than in their questioning them. These codes have often served to legitimize modern patriarchal practices. Making women's headscarves the object of fear of Islamization has also obscured the common problems that are shared by both secular and devout women.⁴⁶

This article has argued that the headscarf issue lost its counter-hegemonic potential via the transformation of the headscarved women as agents (either as university students or as women politicians) to the status of the agent's wives. Both symbolically and literally the headscarves of these wives blocked the way to the presidential palace for the prime minister Mr. Erdoğan and minister of foreign affairs Mr. Gül in the spring of 2007. It was only after the 22 July elections that presidential elections were held and Mr. Gül was elected without contest. The state elite's wives' headscarves generated discussions and organized the opposition around the actual and the symbolic meanings of the headscarf in general. These discussions not only blocked the road to the presidency for the JDP and its representatives but also that to further governing capacity. This crisis resulted in early elections. This is essential in understanding the predicament of the headscarf issue, and of women with headscarves as agents in Turkey. On the one hand, the headscarf question lost its democratic rights discourse by losing its agents, i.e. individual women, through the transformation of the assumed agency from individual citizens to the wives of the political elite. The second outcome of this process is more critical for the predicament of the women's movement in Turkey. Through this transformation, the headscarf issue lost its counter-hegemonic potential and capacity to form bridging identities with other feminists. If there is to be any future for feminism in Turkey, it is certain that feminists in the secularist and Islamist orientations need to form a bridging identity for the women of Turkey that can go beyond the constructed differences and achieve collaboration on main political agendas.

What is most problematic in the current situation in Turkey is not that women's issues are not discussed at all, but rather that they are always discussed within the parameters of the national imaginary, whether it is a single woman, or a certain women's movement, or a NGO has had to situate itself within either Islamic or Secularist groups, and this, in turn, prevented Turkish women from forging alliances across groups. In the latest International Women's Day, 8 March 2008. Erdoğan

urged families, not the women directly, to have at least three children based on a nationalistic worry that, although Turkey currently has a young population, if the trends continue it would be ageing by 2030: 'So, if you want to preserve the young population of Turkey, every family should have three children...I have four children and wish I had more. Children are a blessing.'⁴⁷ This statement created some unrest among secular feminists but not among Islamic women.

Although it does not seem very likely today, the next step for the women's movement in Turkey would be to 'imagine different worlds and construct new analytical meanings' that go beyond the 'political trajectory of oppositional imaginations'.⁴⁸ The extent to which women's movements can be autonomous from other organizations within the national imaginary calls for a comparative analysis through which women in specific nation-states get a better understanding of the multiple ways in which they have been situated by nationalist projects through the constitutive bi-polar opposition between public and private spheres. Only through uncovering how hegemonic state power comes to shape our lives as women can we then imagine and forge feminist alliances, which can benefit women beyond the boundaries of the nation-state, and thus be fully aware of the limits of our experience as woman, which might set a limit to feminist possibilities of engagement.

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