

THE UNETHICAL DISQUALIFICATION OF WOMEN WEARING THE HEADSCARF IN TURKEY

The author presents an outline of the last two decades of the headscarf controversy in Turkey, from the perspective of a 'religious feminist'. She questions not only the intentions of those who present the headscarf as a threat, but also the sincerity of the government in wanting women with headscarves to fully join public life. The author explains how the headscarf is not necessarily a part of package that includes different forms of degradation of women, as much as cases like Afghanistan naturally make the world think otherwise.

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Almost 20 years ago, in the front yard of the Faculty of Theology of Ankara University, a group of young girls were on a hunger strike for the first time in their lives, protesting the headscarf ban on students. They perceived the impasse as being rooted in the power struggle between the secular elites and religious people.

These women, now in their forties, could not have predicted back then that the headscarf issue would be high on the global agenda in the years ahead; because, in their point of view, it was a domestic problem. The headscarf ban was, in their view, another one of the impositions of the state's ruling elites, aiming to radically transform, sometimes with violence, the Islamic values and daily lifestyle attached to these values that had been shaped over the years. In the past, the banning of the call to prayer in Arabic, the prohibition of fez caps, and the inhibition of Koran education were also part of the same ambitions.

These were the times following the coup d'état of 1980, when the Turkish military was the ruling power, resembling the one-party rule of the early Republican period. The headscarf issue had always disturbed the Turkish military.

In this era, a significant segment of the society showed deep interest towards the protesters and their support was strong evidence of the disconnect between the society and those that had imposed, from top-down, such a ban. The ban was referred to as the "headscarf ban" not the "türban ban".¹ The notion of "türban" has been, ironically, proposed by YÖK (The Higher Educational Council)² in order to deter students from using headscarves yet be lenient to the covering of the hair. The government of Özal elected in 1984 supported this as a way to find middle ground between YÖK and the headscarfed students.³ However, the use of "türban" never did really catch on and become popular, and for a time it was forgotten.

The notion of "türban" was later "rediscovered" during the heightened discussions of the headscarf ban following the 28 February process⁴ to create controversy among the public. This time, acknowledging that the use of the

¹ In the contemporary context and in the state elite discourse, "başörtüsü" means the traditional headscarf of women while covering some part of the head and the state elites argue that the use of "başörtüsü" is tolerable, on the contrary "türban" means the Islamic headscarf and conceived as veiled and totally covering the head. It is argued that it has a political significance and should be banned from state universities and public offices, bearing in mind the secular structure of the state.

² YÖK is an institution founded after the military coup of 1980 in order to regulate the higher education and is known as one of the core institutions supporting secular Kemalist discourse.

³ The turban, in actuality is unknown to Anatolia. It was a head garment used by older members of the elite class who wanted to cover yet also look modern. It left the hair above the forehead visible and the neck open, thus didn't really satisfy *tesettür* (Islamic covering) requirements. It was also a form students were not used to. Thus it was not favored by students. In 1984, YÖK introduced a regulation allowing the turban to be worn by women studying theology in universities, and then extended it to other faculties. In 1987 this regulation was lifted and the turban was banned by YÖK.

⁴ The period following the 28 February 1997 National Security Council meeting in which the military seriously warned the Islamist political figures and threatened to intervene in political sphere where political Islam contradicts with secular structures of the Turkish state.

traditional headscarf is widespread, the word “turban” was used to refer to the woman veiled more tightly, covering every string of hair meticulously. The discourse was that the “türban” was objectionable and the “headscarf” was not. Using media to perpetuate it, a new line of thinking was created: “The shift from a headscarf to a turban reflects a politization of religiousness”. Based on this, the turban was put forth as a justification of why a political party (the Welfare Party) was banned.⁵ Thus a “crime” was attached to the so-called turban of headscarved women.

On the other hand, much has changed since the day the veiled girls went on a hunger strike... Compared to the 1980’s, the contemporary political sphere is strongly marked by conservative religious people. Following the removal of the Virtue Party from executive power via the quasi military coup on 28 February 1998, the Justice and Development Party’s (AKP) success in the 2002 general elections –with 34,43 percent of the total votes– solidified the position of the conservative religious segments.

However, this does not appear to have led to serious change in the mentality that left well over a thousand (and according to some, close to five thousand) women out of their jobs in public offices and thousands of veiled young women deprived from their educational rights since the 28 February incidents.⁶ On the contrary, the headscarf issue has become a notch more troublesome: for the past 4.5 years Turkey has been discussing the discrimination of the headscarved wives of Members of Parliament and Ministers, including Mrs Erdoğan and Mrs Arınç. Nowadays, campaigns stating that “a woman with a headscarf/turban can’t reside at the Presidential Palace” have come about. We will wait and see what happens however it is useful to take a glance at the roots of the headscarf problem which is becoming more and more complicated both in Turkey and in the world as each day passes.

Covering with a veil has been a tradition spanning for over a thousand years in Muslim societies, especially among the urban elite. Even if the style differs from region to region, covering both the head and the body somehow has been preserved as a common approach. Bearing in mind that the spaces where men and women lived daily life were separate until modern times, we may affirm that the practice of covering connects women to social life. And this is the point that creates intense debates:

Today, numerous Muslim women who want to live without detaching themselves from the traditions they feel they belong to and they feel it is natural to cover up on the basis of tradition and religion. In other words, they say: “I am veiled/cover my head because it is a religious requirement”. This statement

⁵ The decision of the Constitutional Court in January 1998 stated “In public institutions and teaching institutions, the headscarf and the particular dressing associated with it is a tool for discrimination. Initiatives based on religiously rooted arrangements can not be valid and contradict the secularism principle of the Constitution.

⁶ Unfortunately official information does not exist thus a more precise figure can not be used.

neither reflects the rebellious language of the feminist ‘body politics’ thinking, nor does it entail the challenging tone of those who say, based on liberal philosophy, “my personal choice is not anyone’s business” Because many Muslim women consider veiling so natural that they do not need a defensive, rebellious or libertarian discourse.

However there is the reality that it is difficult to explain covering up as a “natural womanly deed” when the world sees an Islamic regime like that in Iran forcing women to cover up whether they want to or not and when one sees on television the tragic state of Afghan women caged up in their burqas.⁷ Looking at these scenes as a veiled woman, one sees the cold and commanding face of imposition, not a sense of unity. It is scenes like this that make women’s organizations and activists that fight discrimination, pressure and violence against women all over the world ambivalent or insensitive about the discrimination veiled women face. As some feminists in Turkey also explain, the justification for this attitude is that the use of the headscarf is part of a package that also entails polygamy, limited civil rights, and a lower status than men. The fact that in many Muslim countries, this described “package” is indeed implemented under the guide of Islamic principles unfortunately supports this reasoning.

At this juncture, as defenders of women’s rights, we need to find an answer to the question: “What can we do (about the headscarf) without violating principles against gender discrimination, violence and the pressure against women?” In my view, the most reasonable answer to this question is to object to all pressures and impositions, including written/non-written regulations and clothing rules that deprive women of their rights in education, work and social life in the case that they are not followed. In an environment where there are no such rules and impositions, respect of a woman’s personal choice to cover up or not would prevail.

As easy as it may sound, for this formula to work, the segment of society that has unethically disqualified a crowded mass of women –in order not to have to compete with them– from participating in education, the work force and politics by making the headscarf a political statement needs to give this up, based on conscience. This segment of society is roughly referred to as the Kemalists or Republicans and includes most of the bureaucracy, the military, the judiciary, higher education administrators, and many of the civil society present at the recent demonstrations in Turkey.⁸ These segments of society, with a passion for power, have gotten used to getting cheap support by using the headscarf card. They do not care what this will do to the country. Are they going to succeed, we will see.

⁷ *burqa* covers the wearer’s entire face except for a small region about the eyes, which is covered by a concealing net or grille.

⁸ Massive demonstrations were held in may 2007 in Ankara, Istanbul, Izmir and Samsun, with the claim that secularism was under threat.

I hear it is not only the secularist circles who enjoy the sweet benefits of using the headscarf as a political tool; some AKP members of parliament see it as an advantage to them that they do not have to compete with headscarved women. I pray these rumours are not true— because if they are, they are not only cowards but also very low. This will hurt them sorely.