

Turkey's secular headscarf policy and Islamic activism

Reclaiming Muslim space in Turkey after Kemalism

By SAFIA AOUDE

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Introduction

The Czech writer and human rights activist, later president, Vaclav Havel described the struggle of civil activism against state-sponsored absolutism this way:

"Even a purely moral act that has no hope of any immediate and visible political effect can gradually and indirectly, over time, gain in political significance."¹

Similar, the famous Turkish scholar and activist Said Nursi wrote:

"If the laws of government are not combined with the principles of wisdom, and the bonds of force not combined with the laws of truth, they will not be fruitful among the mass of the people."²

The words of Vaclav Havel and Said Nursi both present the essence of the civil activism in a country and historical period, where a strict political ideology leaves no space for citizens to have a different opinion, yet where people continue to work for freedom in a peaceful way despite State-sponsored opposition against the process of change.

Islamic activism in Turkey after WWII resembles very much the situation of democratic activism in the former communist East bloc countries; although the political situation in Turkey might be different, even reverse, on some issues, and very similar on other issues.

The aim of my paper is to look into the various steps of Islamic activism against the Kemalists' secular headscarf-politics, headscarf-legislation and social pressure on religious Turkish women.

How did Turkish Muslim activism affect the Kemalist political secularization after WWII, and has this activism been a success or failure?

¹ Letter to the downthrown Czechoslovak Communist Party chairman Alexander Dubček (August 1969)

² Bediuzzaman Said Nursi: *The Damascus Sermon*, p. 102

Part 1: the secularization of Turkey and the headscarf controversy 1925-2002

Before World War II

The first secular political reforms in Turkey were carried out in the Ottoman Empire during the period of Tanzimat (1838-76). However they did not concern itself with the public appearance of women's clothes. At that time most Turkish women in public without exception wore the *çarşaf*, covering the entire body, and the *peçe* covering the face.

During the Turkish War of Independence women fought alongside men and the protection of Turkish women's veil and headscarf from foreign harassment became an intellectual, national issue. After the War of Independence, Mustafa Kemal ("Atatürk") throughout his speeches showed ambivalence towards the issue of headscarf. He saw the headscarf as a sign of backwardness. At one point he openly criticized the Afghan king Amenullah Khan for using Afghan legislation to force Afghan women to dress in Western clothes, and publically stated that "teşettür" (covering) is appropriate both for life and for virtue".³

On the other hand Mustafa Kemal surrounded himself with women in Westernized clothes as examples for the modernized Turkish woman, and in many of his speeches he openly criticized the face veil (*peçe*), but not the headscarf. During the reign of Kemal Mustafa national and Sunni Islam was promoted and rendered compatible with the modern nation-state. In this respect, Kemalists somehow became heirs to the Ottoman Young Turks' instrumentalist and reformist approach to Islam.

In 1925 the infamous Turkish Hat Law, introducing the prohibition of the Ottoman male headgear; the *Fez*, was issued. Still, women's head dress was not legalized against; just socially discouraged. Another control on Islamic clothing was passed in 1934 with a law against wearing of 'Prohibited Garments'. It banned religion-based clothing, such as the veil and turban, while actively promoting western-style attire, but did not specifically mention women's clothing. After some time the Kemalist regime moved towards more extreme measures. They prohibited religious education. The existing mosques were turned into museums or used for the regimes secular purposes.

³ Atatürk'ün Söylev ve Demecleri II (Ankara: Türk İnkılap Tarihi Enstitüsü, 1989), page 155

It was after the death of Mustafa Kemal, during the reign of Ismet Inönü, that the war against headscarves and veils became part of Turkish legislation, including prohibition of *adhan* (prayer's call) in Arabic, closure of religious convents and dervish lodges, closing even more mosques and turning them into museums or granaries.

Anti-Islamic dress code legislation was implemented vigorously through the strengthening of Law 4055 in June, 1942. In the beginning of the Inönü-period, Kemalist women were used as instigators for criticism of the headscarf, appearing in media and in public accusing Muslim women wearing the *çarşaf* of carrying out acts of deception and fraud.⁴

After World War II

It was also during the regime of Inönü that the party founded the so-called *İmam Hatip*-secondary schools for state-controlled religious education. At that time, *İmam Hatip*-schools were not open for women and headscarf was thus not an issue yet, and the reason for opening up these schools was the Inönü government's need to control religious education and activities, whose graduates later became missionaries of governmental views on religion when they were sent out as village imams to teach the rural population about Islam.

During the reign of Adnan Menderes and the Democratic Party (DP) political opposition against headscarf became less important. Opponents of Menderes accused him of using religion as a political tool to gain votes and support for his political agenda.

After the military coup against Menderes, general Gürsel's regime used religion as a symbolic system of virtual motivation, encouraging Turkish men and women to work hard, and he tried a positive approach towards making Turkish rural women to don their *çarşaf*. In a speech he urged

women of the Kemalist elite to give away their coats in charity to rural women wearing *çarşafs* because they were unable to afford modern coats!⁵

⁴ Yücel Bozdaglioglu: *Turkish Foreign Policy and Turkish Identity*, New York, Routledge, 2033, page 46

⁵ Marve Kavakci Islam: *Headscarf Politics in Turkey*, Palgrave, 2010, page 45

The regime of Demirel and the *Adalet Partisi* (AP) was not originally anti-religious, as they allowed graduates of the Imam Hatip-schools admittance to universities and other higher educations. Demirel later changed his view on Islam and became a staunch defender of Kemalism in the 1990ies.

Militant secularists persuaded the Higher Education Council YÖK to issue a regulation in 1987 forbidding female university students to cover their heads in class.

Turkish Islamic activism confronting Kemalist secularization

Before World War II

From the beginning of the *tanzimat* period, there were attempts to secularize certain parts of Ottoman society. The secularization process did not start with Kemalism; it was introduced during the *tanzimat* period in order to modernize Ottoman society.

During and shortly after the War of Independence 1919-1923, Mustafa Kemal and the Young Turks had become national symbols not easily criticized by neither the intellectual elite (that formed the core of Kemalist), nor the Muslim clergy. Kemal and the Young Turks had become national heroes and were worshipped as such; making political criticism by intellectuals almost impossible during the establishment of the First Turkish Republic.

In the view of Mustafa Kemal, modernization of Turkey consisted of abolishing the Arabic script, introducing a modernized Turkish language complete with Latin alphabet and revised grammar. The Kemalists wanted technical, economic and social progress in Turkey, and the only way to establish modernization in the republic (according to their views) was by copying European culture, bringing Turkey into the political and cultural realm of Europe, rather than to the struggling and powerless, colonized Middle East.

The change of alphabet did not bother the rural population who were mainly illiterate and did not feel much of the change from Ottoman Empire to Turkish republic. The modernization process of the Kemalists was aimed at the intellectual elite in Istanbul and other urban centers; pushing Muslim clergy and the Islamic intellectual elite of the Ottoman Empire into oblivion.

Yet, the headscarf as a “peasant dress code” was still accepted – at a level where even in 2004 it was impossible as a Turkish female citizen to enter the premises of the Turkish Military Museum in Istanbul wearing a headscarf unless the headscarf was put on “peasant style” with a knot under the chin!⁶

After introducing the anti-Fez-legislation and outlawing the religious lodges, some Sufi clergy rebelled against the Kemalist government in the Eastern parts of Anatolia; the so-called Sheikh Said Rebellion who claimed the lives of at least 30.00 people. Although it can be argued that the rebellion was partly steered into uprising for Kurdish nationalism, one of the main causes of eruption was the clergy’s opposition to Turkey’s new secularization laws. The rebellion was brutally crushed, and the Muslim clergy had to hide religious education and activism from the eyes of the Kemalist police.

The Kemalists went to great length in the late 20ies and 30ies to show the Turkish population that Islamic belief was superstitious, but some of its virtues (hard work, patience, accepting central leadership) could be deemed quite useful. The headscarf was not discussed insofar it was used to cover rural women’s head while working on the fields.

Even today the Turkish Military Museum in Istanbul does not accept Turkish women wearing the Muslim headscarf during visits – they are, however, accepted as visitors if they tie their headscarf under the chin like a rural woman!

After World War II

By late 40ies during the Inönü regime, the majority of Muslim scholars and clergy from the Ottoman period and the early Republican years were either executed, expelled, sequestered or had died of natural causes. Thus there was no central body of religious authorities to counter the Kemalist regime’s secularization process. Instead, non-coordinated individual activism, often carried out by individuals, became the main means of resistance against secularism in the Turkish republic.

One of these individual activists was the Muslim scholar Said Nursi from East Anatolia. He argued

⁶ <http://www.haber7.com/guncel/haber/5554-turbana-askeri-muze-kriteri>

that the spiritual guidance of the Quran was essential for people's happiness, and he wrote a series of treatises on religious awareness through letters to his students; the so-called *Risale-i Nur*. By using modern technology of publishing and through generous grants from some of his educated and well-off students he started the Risale-i Nur movement throughout Turkey. He was arrested, tried and imprisoned several times by the Kemalist regime between 1925 and 1948, and at some points sent into exile in the remote villages in Turkey, where he kept writing.

When he was released in 1949 he publically supported the Democratic Party and urged his followers to vote for Adnan Menderes in the 1950-elections. The Menderes government and later general Gürsel's government found Said Nursi's teachings useful insofar they acted as popular inspiration against the evolving ideas of socialism among the Turkish population who – despite the Kemalists' dream of technological progress like the one in the West – still remained as one of the world's poor and under-developed countries.

Said Nursi's tremendous popularity in the main population, mainly throughout Anatolia, meant he could use his ideas to influent the government of Adnan Menderes, which he did in several public speeches and letters. It is said that Menderes's decision to reimburse the Arabic call to prayer and re-opening thousands of closed mosques around the country came after advice from Said Nursi, whom Menderes had met already in 1925.

Said Nursi died in March 1960 only weeks before the military coup d'état that removed Menderes from power and installed the military government of general Gürsel.

Another influential Muslim activist emerging during the 1960ies and continuously gaining more popularity up till today is the Turkish author Şule Yüksel Şenler.

In the early 1960ies she was a column and op-ed writer in various Turkish newspapers⁷, promoting the ideas of *teşettür* through her writings. In her columns she advised Turkish women how to create modern looking headscarves to match the fashion styles of the 60ies and 70ies without compromising Islamic values for dressing up. One of her fashion designs was later dubbed “şulebaş türban” and has become a separate Turkish style headscarf for modernized Muslim women wearing the veil. Şule Yüksel Şenler held several popular speeches for Turkish women all over Turkey, after which loads of Turkish women pledged to wear the Muslim veil, and she was arrested and imprisoned for several months for “insulting the president of the Republic” in 1971.

⁷ Such as *Seher Vakti* and later *Zaman* and *Milli Gazete*

Şule Yüksel Şenler was very much aware of the impact of her civil activities and writings; she was told the government would pardon her prison sentence, but she refused to accept the pardoning, becoming a heroine waving to her followers from behind barred windows in her prison cell. She is still very much active in Turkey today.

She intentionally used her writings as a civil protest against the Kemalist government, and did this also in her fictional writings. Her famous novel *Huzur Sokagi* (The Street of Inner Harmony) started a cultural trend that later became labeled as *hidayet romanları* – popular salvation novels describing how ordinary Turkish citizens struggled with the many problems of life only to find peace through the return to Islamic values. These novels, including *Huzur Sokagi*, became popular movies in the 1980ies. In the new millennium *Huzur Sokagi* became increasingly popular with the new generation of Turkish citizens. The book was transferred into a successful TV-series on the private Turkish channel ATV.⁸

When the Turkish state in 1975 gave girls admittance to the Imam Hatip-schools, veiled girls and women grasped the possibility to get a higher education without having to don their headscarf compromising religious directions for dress code. However, this created a dichotomy of interests between Kemalists trying to provide and control religious education, at the same time avoiding “islamization of Islamic education, because many of the female students wore a headscarf not just during Quran education class, but throughout the entire curriculum.

In the school year 1977-1978 in Izmit, the local Imam Hatip school board filed case against 215 female students who refused to take off their headscarf in class outside Quran lessons.⁹

During the 1970ies there were several incidents in Turkish public sphere where women openly challenged the Kemalists opinion of modern women. In 1972 female Turkish lawyer Emine Aykenar took on the Muslim headscarf and was immediately disbarred from the Ankara Bar Association.

It was during the 1980ies after the third Turkish coup d'état since WWII that the Evret regime introduced a formal ban against headscarves and religious clothing and was one of the ways this ban was institutionalized in Turkish society, was through the establishment of the *Yüksek Öğretim Kurumu*

⁸ <http://huzursokagi.tv/>

⁹ Aksoy, Murat: *Basörtüsü-Turban*, Istanbul 2005, page 152

(YÖK) – which loosely translates as the Higher Education Council.

Turkish women were officially banned from both public and private educational institutes, such as universities, and from attaining jobs in public administration while wearing headscarf. Students were stripped of their headscarf in front of university entrances or were forced to emigrate to Bosnia, Europe or the US to pursue higher education. It also prompted several embarrassing situations where female students at Turkish universities were arrested by the police for causing “stirrup” by refusing to undress on campus, or female students having to hide their hair under knitted caps or even under artificial wigs.

The most serious Kemalist opposition against the Muslim headscarf happened in the 1990ies where Turkey found herself in the middle of the Cold War destabilization and had to balance between political pressure from the Middle East and EU demands for westernization. Internally, the Kemalists felt pressure from the many religious parties who had gained foothold among not just rural voters, but also Kurdish voters and voters from the former Kemalist pool of intellectual elite in the cities.

The government outlawed several Islamic movements and parties, forcing religious activists to use political creativity to circumvent the constitution’s prohibition against religion playing a part in politics. The *AKParti* (AKP) became such a party, officially merging Turkish nationalism with spiritual values and campaigning against corruption and poverty, but whose leading members belong to the Muslim elite, for instance former Istanbul mayor Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, a close friend of Muslim activist Şule Yüksel Şenler and himself a former student at a Imam Hatip school.

Still, Islamic activism became politically organized on a more serious level in the 1990ies, riding on the wave of recent liberalization of civil society. Islamic radio and TV-stations, newspapers, associations and parties emerged everywhere in the first half of the decade with the military elite and the Kemalists worrying about “foreign influence”, i.e. fear of Iranian or Arab political and economic influence on Turkish politics. To secure the power of Kemalism and political secularization, the military maneuvered the removal of an Islamic-oriented prime minister, Necmettin Erbakan, in 1997 through a series of lawsuits, seen by analysts as the fourth coup d’état in Turkish history since WWII.

In 1999 Turkish female politician Merve Kavakçı became elected Member of Parliament for the recently established *Virtue Party*. As she went to perform her parliamentary oath, she was prevented from doing so. Kavakçı was never allowed to take her oath, her seat was left empty, practically

denying her constituents (voters) their representative rights. Kavakcı's name and picture was removed from the annals of Parliament. A state prosecutor investigated whether she might be put on trial for provoking religious hatred by appearing veiled in Parliament, and later the Turkish republic stripped Kavakcı of her Turkish citizenship allegedly because she had become a US citizen during her stay abroad.

A member of a well-known Muslim family, Kavakcı then used her academic knowledge and international connections to raise political awareness to the pledge of religious Turkish Muslim women, criticizing openly on an international level the failure of Turkish constitutional legislation to provide and secure basic human rights to Turkish women, revealing the Kemalists' abuse of democracy in a time, when "democracy" became almost a religious concept internationally.

In 2000, Nuray Bezirgan, a Turkish female student, wore a headscarf at her college final exams. A Turkish court sentenced her to six months jail for "obstructing the education of others".¹⁰

Another Muslim activist was Mine Karakas – who appeared on the front page of TIME Magazine in 2007 telling her story as example of how the Kemalist headscarf ban forced young, highly educated and promising Turkish intellectual women to leave their country to acquire education abroad, only to return to Turkey, finding themselves barred from attaining any public administrative jobs in Turkey.

This form of activism challenged the Kemalists and contemporary Turkish society in a new context; namely the international discussion of a value system based on universal human rights. After the collapse of the Cold War and the reformation of world power balance, the Turkish republic had to adapt to the new political situation, where human rights played an important role internationally, affecting not just geographical issues but also economic issues.

In the first decade of the new century Turkey found itself increasingly under pressure from international human rights activists, not least among their traditional Western allies. According to the US Country Reports 2007, Turkish women who wore headscarves and their supporters "were disciplined or lost their jobs in the public sector" (US 11 March 2008, Sec. 2.c). Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported that in late 2005, the Administrative Supreme Court in Ankara had ruled that a teacher was not eligible for a promotion in her school because she wore a headscarf outside of work (Jan. 2007).

¹⁰ Singh, K. Gajendra. [Ban on headscarves and Turkey](#). *Turkish Daily News*. 2004-09-21.

Turkey wanted to become a member of the EU, and the Kemalists found themselves caught in a bizarre dichotomy; since the establishment of Kemalism, their political basis had been built on concepts of modernism and secularism in order to bring about national unity and Western-style progress; yet their political actions became increasingly unpopular not just among their own citizens in Turkey, but also in the Western hemisphere with international accusations of abuse of human rights and political reactionary hegemony towards minorities (mainly Kurds) and religious citizens.

Cleverly, parts of Turkish Muslim activism against the Kemalist politics of *laiklik* (secularism) was transferred from national struggle to international struggle, pressuring the Kemalists not just from within Turkey but also on an international level from outside. During the election campaign of 2007, the AK Parti and now Prime Minister Erdogan promised the lifting of the headscarf ban from all public institutions.¹¹

The reaction of the Kemalist elite and the military towards this pressure was evident: On 27 April 2007, in advance of the presidential elections later that year, and in reaction to the politics of Abdullah Gül, who had a past record of involvement in Islamist political movements and banned Islamist parties such as the Welfare Party (RP), the army issued a statement of its interests. It said that the army is a party to "arguments" regarding secularism; that Islamism ran counter to the secular nature of the Turkish Republic, and to the legacy of Mustafa Kemal. The Army's statement contained a clear warning that the Turkish Armed Forces stood ready to intervene if the secular nature of the Turkish Constitution is compromised, stating that

*"...the Turkish Armed Forces maintain their sound determination to carry out their duties stemming from laws to protect the unchangeable characteristics of the Republic of Turkey. Their loyalty to this determination is absolute."*¹²

Among female "activists" for a lifting of the headscarf ban in Turkish politics is without any doubt Emine Erdogan, the wife of Turkish PM Recep Tayyib Erdogan. Although she seemingly started off her activism by remaining silent, she – like other female family members of prominent Turkish politicians, took up the headscarf issue through media interviews. In 2007 she was publically humiliated by security personnel at a military hospital, when she was visiting a hospitalized Turkish

¹¹ Jones, Dorian. "[Turkey's Parliament Eases Ban on Islamic Head Scarves at Universities](#)". Voice of America. 2009-04-13

¹² "[Excerpts of Turkish army statement](#)". [BBC News](#). 28 April 2007. Retrieved 30 June 2008.

actor. Rather than making any public fuzz out of the barred entrance, she remained silent on the issue for almost three years. Then, in early 2010 she dared to speak out against the headscarf ban.

Similarly, the headscarf-bearing wives of other AK Parti-members started to speak out in Turkish media about the headscarf ban. Erdogan's daughters, who had to study in the US because of the headscarf ban on Turkish universities, also spoke publically for the first time in 2008. The failed attempt by the Turkish Kemalists to ban the AK Parti and 71 of its leading members through court indictment did probably encourage much of Turkey's Muslim intellectual elite and leaders to speak out against the headscarf ban, or to simply ignore it by showing up in public situations that would have prohibited such a violation of protocol before 2008.

This all came during an interesting move in civil Turkish society, fuelled by the new liberties of expression and association, where civil Turkish society began to form independent associations and dared to use their freedom of expression to criticize political issues in Turkish society on a much more liberal level than ever before. On February 28, 2010 the Turkish women's association "Women's Rights Organization against Discrimination" (*Ayrımcılığa Karşı Kadın Hakları Derneği*) (AKDER) launched a progressive Internet agenda against the headscarf ban in public sector under the slogan of "February 28 Can't Last a Thousand Years" – in less than a week more than 10.000 Turkish citizens signed a petition to remove the headscarf ban at universities. Among the signatories were famous actors, politicians from broad spectra of Turkish parties, pop-stars, housewives and workers from various professional sectors.¹³

The petition was a sign that the headscarf ban was not so much a religious problem; rather than a problem connected with issues such as democracy, freedom of expression and equal rights for education.

On February 7, 2008, the Turkish Parliament passed an amendment to the constitution, allowing women to wear the headscarf in Turkish universities, arguing that many women would not seek an education if they could not wear the headscarf. On June 5, 2008, Turkey's Constitutional Court annulled the parliament's proposed amendment, ruling that removing the ban was against the founding principles of the constitution. (AP 7 June 2008).

Then in September 2010, the ruling AK Party vowed to support any student who was disciplined for

¹³ <http://ak-der.org/default.gbt>

wearing the headscarf on a university campus.

This happened after an incident where a student at the 15th century Istanbul University had been unfairly dismissed from class for hiding her hair under a hat, a tactic favored by students who wish to conform to Islamic dress but who cannot do so overtly. As reported in *The National* (a Gulf newspaper), “YOK told officials at the university that they had no right to punish students for violations of disciplinary rules by throwing them out of the classroom. Although the ruling did not mention the veil, the implication was that students in headscarves could attend classes.”¹⁴ Following this, the head of YÖK, Yusuf Ziya Özcan, announced that instructors in universities may no longer take action against students wearing the headscarf.¹⁵

At the same time Kemal Kilicdaroglu, the leader of the Republican People's Party (CHP), the main opposition group with strong secularist politics as their goal and their visions, which had long supported the ban, did also speak in favor of letting students with headscarves into classrooms. It is believed he was trying to broaden the electoral appeal of his party before general elections in 2011, knowing that the AK Parti had the wide popular support that his party lacked.

A few years later, on January 15 2013 the Turkish Higher Education Board (YÖK) introduced a bill to the Turkish Education Ministry to remove the headscarf ban for academics who are teaching at Turkish universities. The reason for the bill was the fact that “*YÖK is of the opinion that discrimination based on gender, religion or background is not acceptable.*” The bill also stated that “*students in institutions of higher learning cannot be discriminated against for their political views, religion, language, race, gender, and choice of dress or any other reason.*”¹⁶

Then, on September 2013 the Turkish PM announced the official end of headscarf prohibition as a legal part of a proposed “democracy packet” in Parliament. Anyone serving or joining the Turkish public sector with the exception of the Police and Military Forces would be able to dress according to personal desire, which includes the wearing of the Muslim headscarf.

This political step seems to be supported by a large part of the Turkish population. An opinion research carried out by the Gülen-based, conservative daily Turkish newspaper Zaman from 2008 among 7422 people from 12 Turkish provincial quarters showed that 99,5% of the questioned women

¹⁴ <http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/europe/headscarf-ban-fizzles-out-in-turkey?pageCount=0>

¹⁵ Hürriyet Daily News: YÖK head gives guarantee to all Turkish students on headscarves

<http://www.hurriyedailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=yok-head-gives-personal-guarantee-to-all-students-2010-10-13>

¹⁶ <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-304074-education-board-plans-to-remove-headscarf-ban-for-academics.html>

who carried headscarves supported a lifting of headscarf-ban in public sectors and universities. 73,1 % of women not wearing the headscarf were also in favor of lifting the headscarf ban in public sectors and universities. Among men the number was 78% in favor of a lifting of the headscarf ban in public sectors and universities.¹⁷

Part 2: After the Cold War - the AK Parti and Islamic activism

The message of the military from 2007 leaves no doubt as to who was (still) in charge in the Republic of Turkey. The question, however, was as to whether the military and Kemalist intellectual elite was able to pull Turkey through the political transition from State-controlled secular absolutism into modern democratic diversity, or if they were determined to keep old ideas in power for the sake of history?

In that way the Turkish military leadership and Kemalist intellectual elite resembled the military leadership and secular elite of former East bloc countries. Both Kemalism and communism had been politically institutionalized as a new, Godless state “religion” in the late 1920ies and early 1930ies. Both were about to fall.

Muslim activism in Turkey in many ways resembles political anti-system activism of the former East bloc countries, where issued of human rights and democratization grew steadily until the collapse of communism in 1989 and onwards. Religious traditions and beliefs in communist countries were re-established, churches and mosques re-opened in the countries of former Soviet Union, where religion and traditional spiritual values had been banned during socialist secularism.

This is to some extent also true with Turkish Kemalism. The Turkish Kemalist intellectuals and political elite apparently did not recognize the political lessons learned from the structural and political collapse of the former East bloc countries, and after the end of the Cold War the political climate in Turkey still seemed ambivalent as to the issue of headscarves. However, this was to change very sudden:

In 1994, the Welfare Party (Refah Partisi, RP) began seriously rattling the cage of Kemalism by winning local elections nationwide and taking control of Turkey’s two largest cities, Istanbul and

¹⁷ http://www.zaman.com.tr/gundem_toplumun-yuzde-80i-yasagin-kalkmasini-istiyor_649699.html

Ankara. The party was led by Necmettin Erbakan, who had close connections with Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. After seven decades, Turkey's secular times seemed to be running out. A year later, the Welfare Party won the largest bloc in parliamentary elections, putting a political coalition in charge of the entire country.

But the victory of the RP was a short one. Suspecting a “*hidden Islamic agenda*”, the Turkish military stepped in. Turkey's generals and the secular press warned of an “*imminent Islamist revolution*”.

On February 28, 1997, the military—with broad backing from civil society and the secular media—forced the RP out of power. The ban spurred serious identity issues among Turkey's Islamic activists, eventually sparking a generational and ideological rift within the movement, which eventually became the corner stones of today's AK Party. But it was also a reminisce of the 1980-coup and what could happen, if the military felt the political situation in Turkey could get “out of hand.”

But another political party on the move had learned from the lessons of the 1980-coup and the 1997-dissolution of the RP; the AK Party!

Islamic activism has gained much encouragement from the political progress of the ruling AK Party, so we should definitely dig into the basic goals and measures of the AK Party in order to understand the recent development of Islamic activism after 2002. It did finally lead to an abolishment of the headscarf ban in public sectors in 2013:

Also often being accused of harboring a “*hidden islamists agenda*”, the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) is today the largest political party in Turkey with 327 seats in Parliament. Turkey's prime minister Recep Tayib Erdogan is a prominent member of the AK Party, and so is the president of the Turkish republic; Abdullah Gül.

The party was founded on August 14 in 2001 on the reformist faction of the former Virtue Party (*Fazilet Partisi*) and the Motherland Pary (*Anavatan Partisi*) and members from other Turkish parties, such as the Turkish Democratic Party (*Demokrat Parti*).

The AK Party considers itself a “*conservative democratic mass party that situates itself at the center of*

*the political spectrum.*¹⁸ Yet, at the time of its foundation Kemalist supporters suspected the AK Parti was working towards an “islamization” of Turkish society.

Right from the beginning of its foundation the AK Parti has tried to distinguish its image from that of the former Welfare Party. The reason for this is mainly because the Kemalist reality in Turkey, as the Welfare Party was banned and dissolved in 1998 by the military.

Additionally the founders of the AK Parti wanted to distinguish themselves from the Middle Eastern-orientated Welfare Party. They wanted a much more modern and unifying political platform with orientation towards the Western hemisphere. Already at the first national elections since its founding, the AK Parti won a sweeping political victory in 2002, becoming the first political Turkish party in 11 years to win a full majority in the Grand National Assembly/Parliament.

Then, in 2008, after another massive landslide victory by the AK Parti in 2007 (and maybe especially after proposing a new constitutional change packet in 2007!), Turkey’s Chief Public Prosecutor of the Supreme Court of Appeals, Abdurrahman Yalçınkaya, indicted the AK Party and 71 leading members trying to ban them from politics for five years. Yalcinkaya had argued in his indictment that the party had used a strategy of “*social agreement to introduce moderate Islam and was aiming at sharia law*”. He argued that “*the Republic is in more danger than ever before*” in his 162-page document and listed eleven different crimes of the party.¹⁹ Interestingly, the indictment came immediately after a vote by parliament to ease a ban on scarves being worn on campuses.

Yalçınkaya’s ban request failed as only 6 of the 11 judges ruled in favor, with 7 required; however 10 judges agreed that the AKP had become “*a center for anti-secular activities*”, leading to a loss of state funding for the party.²⁰ The court gave its verdict on 9 July 2009, rejecting the demand, and the case against the AK Party was over.

It was a striking change! All previous pro-Islamic parties in Turkey had been shut down by either military intervention or rulings by the constitutional court: The National Order Party was prohibited by the Constitutional Court in 1971. The National Salvation Party was outlawed after the 1980 military coup. The Welfare Party was banned by the Constitutional Court in 1998. The Virtue Party was banned in 2001.

¹⁸ <http://www.akparti.org.tr/upload/documents/akparti2023siyasivizyonuingilizce.pdf>

¹⁹ <http://bianet.org/english/crisis/106004-constitutional-court-starts-akp-closure-trial>

²⁰ <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=ruling-party-to-face-closure-trial-2008-04-01>

Banning the AK Party would have been interpreted by many Turks – as well as by the West (!) - as yet another step against democratically development in the Turkish Republic; maybe even bringing about another coup d'état if the biggest political party would be resolved by force. Joost Lagendijk, who then was member of the European Parliament on matters regarding Turkey, summed the situation up in very subtle words: “*Everybody is very happy with this decision; otherwise it would have created a hell of a situation for Turkey.*”²¹

AK Parti itself does never speak about “islam” – rather it refers to itself as “*a conservative democratic mass party that situates itself at the center of the political spectrum.*”²² PM Erdogan stressed his party’s non-religious foundation several times. In 2005 he said: “*We are not an Islamic party, and we also refuse labels such as Muslim-democrat.*”

It is very interesting that among its definition of conservatism, the AK Parti claims in its most recent political party program from 2013, that:

“*...conservatism refuses radicalism and societal engineering. Politics should be based on compromise, defragmentation and tolerance rather than conflict and polarization. Change should be achieved by protecting the core values and gains of traditional structures.*”²³

During the reign of the AK Parti 2002-2013 it has been easier for Turkish headscarf activism to gain ground for their means and measures. From having been a mainly religiously based activism issue the battle for lifting the headscarf ban has turned into a struggle for democracy, freedom of expression and human rights. The “core values and gains of traditional structures” could very well be interpreted by critics as a “hidden agenda to reinforce Islamism into Turkish society” – but it showed hard to prove in a court of law.

Supporters of this phrase would, of course, interpret it as a right to adhere to “core Turkish values and traditions, i.e. culture” and the right to express their adherence to these “values”, i.e. freedom of expression according to culture and belief.

Under the reign of the AK Parti it has become easier to wear the headscarf in public. Where secularist public servants still tried to oppose the headscarf by upholding administrative measures against

²¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/31/world/europe/31turkey.html?fta=y>.

²² <http://www.akparti.org.tr/upload/documents/akparti2023siyasivizyonuingilizce.pdf>

²³ <http://www.akparti.org.tr/upload/documents/akparti2023siyasivizyonuingilizce.pdf>

women wearing them (such as YÖK or the Askeri Müzesi), the AK Party took the battle of the headscarf ban on a national level into Parliament, to the ballot box, to the media and to court. Islamic activism in Turkey wasn't on its own anymore; it had made new friends in high places!

It is very fitting that we should divide the struggle against the headscarf ban into two parts; as civic opposition towards Kemalist reign from 1923 until 2002 (part 1), and as a pro-Government civic activism from 2002 and until today (part 2). The difference between part 1 and part 2 is, of course, that headscarf activism doesn't have to fight the Government in part 2.

Islamic headscarf activism is certainly not to be regarded as a political party; yet the success rate of headscarf-activism has certainly been much higher during the reign of the AK Party than during the 7 decade-Kemalist reign. Islamic activism after 2002 has not just become mainstream but also broad in a both factual and popular context.

Discussions:

When Mustafa Kemal and İsmet İnönü tried to outlaw the headscarf in Turkish society it was an attempt from their point of view to "modernize" Turkey in order to revive Turkey as an independent, national state in competition of the European world powers.

Interestingly, the very same political struggle to legalize the headscarf by the AK Party and the civic struggle to legalize the headscarf by Islamic activism could be seen as exactly the same attempt to revive Turkey as an independent national state in competition of world powers.

In the post-colonial world after WWI there was an ideological quest to modernize the colonial world – or be modernized. Under the threat to be dissolved and shared among European states just like the Arabic parts of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey had to make a move that would cementite its national existence in the shadow of the new emerging European powers. The headscarf issue became a value-based political issue for the Turkish intellectual elite, who saw themselves as the modernizers of the Ottoman Empires; as pioneers of modernization through secularization; the saviors of Turkish nationalism. Additionally, the Kemalist intellectual elite and political leaders adhered to the issue of headscarves in a same manner as European orientalists of the time.

Human rights, freedom of expression and freedom of religion were not yet important in a world that -

between WWI and WWII - was under influence of progress through fascism. The reign of Mustafa Kemal and the early reign of Ismet Inönü did not differentiate much from the reign of Mussolini in Italy or Franco in Spain. It was a sign of political “zeitgeist”, and the Kemalist view of headscarves was to be understood as a prism of post-colonialism.

In the post-modernist world after WWII human rights did become the new political mantra of the world powers; but the struggle for independence and power also became linked to the struggles of the Cold War. Thus “human rights” were defined according to which ideological block a country adhered to. Turkey chose to become a bulwark against communism, joined NATO and became in practice a military dictatorship with several failed attempts of democratization.

The military regimes of post-modern Turkey after WWII played their part in the Cold War as de-facto political-feudatory governments, securing the strategic and tactic position of the “free Western World” on the borderland of communism. Strengthening of religion in post-modern Turkey (*irtica*) was still deemed dangerous, but Islam was also seen as the way to prevent separatist and socialist views. Thus, the 1980 military coup actually paved the way for the strengthening of political Islam by using religion as a unifying tool and by eliminating leftist political parties, trade unions and organizations.

It wasn't until after the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the rumbling of the communist world power that Turkey for the first time since 1918 had to create its own national identity anew.

Is there any danger today of another Kemalist coup d'état, should the AK-Parti go “too far” on issues of *laiklik* (secularism)? It seems hardly likely; noting how military coups have become increasingly “unpopular” as political tools. The “soft way” (removing unwanted political opposition through court indictments) also failed when AK Parti remained in power after Kemalists tried to ban the party at the Constitutional Court in 2008.

A coup attempt would destabilize Turkey in a way that could resemble the destabilization of the Arab countries during the so-called Arab Spring. Turkey's economy has risen to high altitudes during the reign of the AK Parti, and nobody in Turkey, nor in the West, wants to see it tumble downwards in the aftermath of a coup attempt.

The Kemalist-Islamist balance in Turkey today has changed; putting Kemalism in opposition and

Islamism in the main stream category of politics. The first political signs were the election victories and broad popular support of the AK Parti during two national elections, and the failure of the Constitutional Court ban in 2008.

The first urban sign of this balance shift became very clear in the Gezi Park-uprising in the summer of 2013, when a simple environmental protest became overpowered by secularist activism and transformed into an anti-AK Parti-uprising in Istanbul and some other urban areas of importance in Turkey. The AK Parti could be and was criticized for handling the Gezi Park uprisings with some excessive use of force and with little regards for flexibility, dialogue between Government and citizens and perhaps even democratically etiquette, but the fact remains that the secularist protesters were largely talking to themselves in the 140-character echo chamber of Twitter, complaining about not being able to drink alcohol on Taksim Square at midnight – while Erdogan and the AK Parti could publically show of more than a decade of economic growth and the largest popular support for any party since WW2.

It seems secularism (few today will use the term Kemalism) has become the de-facto opposition in Turkish society; perhaps even a minority. It has lost political power, it is in the process of losing legal power, and even in the military it is losing foothold (with the Ergenekon-case a hard example). Even on a popular level, secularism today does not seem to have much firm hold in Turkish society other than in the superficial acknowledgement of “Atatürk” as the great – but old - reformator. A military coup d'état to uphold *laiklik* (secularism) in Turkish contemporary society does simply not remain a valid nor possible option.

Does the abolishment of the headscarf ban, then, mean the end of Islamic activism in Turkey?

Critics might assess the abolishment of the head scarf ban as a step towards islamification of Turkish society. They might feel, that there will be more “steps” and that suddenly Turkey will transform into Iran or Afghanistan; but few political analysts today adhere to these theories. The success of the AK Parti in gathering nationwide support and producing economic growth puts such theories to sleep.

Would, then, the accept of Islamic activism as a civic player in Turkish politics mean the social rift of separation between secularists and Islamists will become larger or more open in Turkish society?

Some political analysts see the AK Parti and the politics of the AK Parti as a model of implemented

Islamic democracy – or as a Muslim variant of the German Christian Democratic Party (CDU).²⁴ They claim that the AK Parti program clearly shows a design of inclusion, being able to accommodate both Islam as a traditional value and modern representative democracy in one single political establishment.

In some ways this is quite true. By “taking in” traditional Muslim values, such as the right to wear headscarf, the AK Parti has included years of Muslim civic opposition into a legal, political program, and at the same time minimized the danger of radicalization that has caused problems in other countries, where Muslims have been excluded from exercising their political and civil rights. Under the political umbrella of the AK Parti, Islamic activism has become structured, democratically and open, whereas in decades of Kemalism Islamic activism was random, fragmented and often worked undercover – or had been practically ostracized - in a social and political context.

In that way much of the feared “popular separation” has been controlled and developed by the AK Parti into civic institutions as part of a democratic, political structure.

This is why the Gezi Park protests really had no power. There was no “Turkish spring”, as protesters had no credible indictment to question the political or legal authority of the Turkish Government. They might have felt that their secular lifestyle was being cut down by a Government, which didn’t want to listen to their complaints, but they still have the constitutional and democratically possibility to use mainstream political tools to create change and to voice their opinion in public. There is no political separation; the separation between secularism and traditional Turkish conservatism as defined by the AK Parti is a separation of minds and intellectual thinking, rather than a political separation.

After all, not just “Islamists” have been voting for the AK Parti; the party has a very broad base of votes from all sides of the Turkish intellectual elite, and in many geographical places all over Turkey. AK Parti has become the favored party of the Turkish middle class due to its success in establishing economic growth, social strength and national cohesion, and is not – as hardcore critics claim in the early decades of the new millennium – a mouthpiece for Islamist activism. AK Parti has absorbed Islamic activism into its practical political visions, but not because of Islam itself, but because Islam is (still) an integrated part of Turkish traditional culture and values. It is in such a light the abolishment of the headscarf ban should be interpreted.

²⁴ “One category which the AKP at least rejects is any notion that they are an Islamic Democratic Party in the way that some European parties are Christian Democrats.” - http://www.ucis.pitt.edu/euce/events/turkey_eu/Finkel.pdf

There might be another future for Islamic activism ahead in Turkey in the future. For instance the problems of alevism. Great many of the protesters at the recent Gezi Park unrests had Alevi background, and many Alevis are strong supporters of secularism in Turkish society. It is estimated that between 12 and 15 millions of Turks belong to Alevi minorities, which is a considerable amount when reckoning the entire Turkish population to about 80 million people.

Both the AK Party and the Fethullah Gülen movement have both worked hard to solve the Alevi problem in Turkish society, but there remain many unfinished issues. Hardcores Sunni-critics of Alevi-Islam might also provoke new platforms of Islamic activism of a kind, which the AK Party has vowed firmly to deal with; namely radicalism and extremism.

And there could also be the challenge of the Gülen Movement. The first subtle hint of a possible challenge between the Erdogan-block and the Gülen-block in the AK Party became visible during the Gezi Park protests in summer 2013, where president Gül and some other Gülen-related members of the AK Party openly rebutted some of the statements, which PM Erdogan made in the days during the unrest of Taksim Square.

I will not use much space here to discuss the challenges of the Gülen movement, but just make a note about the ability of the Gülen movement to separate itself from the AK Party establishment and take power.

During the last 15-20 years the Gülen movement has grown rapidly throughout Turkish society and politics, and it owns some of the biggest and most popular media institutions in Turkey, has established many preparatory schools (*dershaneler*) and runs universities etc. So far the Gülen movement has been faithful to the AK Party, and even its own civic Islamic activism throughout 1970-2000 has been carried out with no political aspirations what so ever.

In November 2013 the AK Party suddenly spurred the Turkish Government to focus on a draft version of a new law that foresees the closure of all kinds of preparation schools, beginning with the 2013-2014 school year and imposing severe fines on those that continue to operate.

This unexpected move caused great concern in the Gülen Movement. In a speech released on the herkul.org website on Nov. 15, Islamic scholar Fetullah Gülen called on his supporters to pray in “these difficult times” and urged patience among his followers. “They might even want to close the doors of heaven to us and say that ‘we will enter heaven before you enter.’ We have been seeing these [situations] since the 1960 coup. We saw the 1970 coup and we got its kick. We saw the 1980 coup

and we got its horse kick. We got something from all of them,” said Gülen.²⁵ This plea from Gülen might spur forward activism movements from within the Gülen/Hizmet movement in the future.

So far the Gülen movement, which is quite popular among modern, Islamic activists in Turkey, has sided with the AK Party in Governmental issues and political visions, playing it low and remaining out of direct politics as a mark of the Gülen agenda.

But will the Gülen movement continue to remain apolitical once it becomes witness to possible challenges of the AK Party in the future?

This is a really interesting question. Sooner or later any political party in a democratically structured constitutional system will have to deal with the issue of opposition, and that situation will emerge for the AK Party, too. It might not be the time right now for any strong opposition, and the AK Party seems to sit tight in the saddle. Next national elections are scheduled for June 2015, and even though it looks like the AK very well could haul off another landslide victory, small cracks of opposition are present – if not dealt with now, they might get bigger later.

Conclusions

Evidently, Turkish Islamic activism has had a strong impact on Kemalist ideologies and politics since WWII. From a selective, ostentative perspective, Islamic activism in Turkey seems to have had quite a lot of backlashes during the post-colonial and post-modern years of the Turkish republic, especially in regards to the headscarf or Muslim veil. Human rights of Turkish women have suffered tremendously during the Kemalist regime, but the various forms of activism, political lobbyism and political persistence has seemingly paid off today.

Today, Turkish women are no longer arrested and imprisoned for wearing the headscarf, but Turkish history also shows that during Turkey’s post-modernism epoch this could change any time, if the Kemalist military elite feel threatened by internal or external pressure.

Today, political activists such as Erdoan have managed to go from politics to prison and come back to politics again; it has become much easier to merge religious values into a political context under the ideological umbrella of secularism. Especially in regards to issues of democracy,

²⁵ <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/governments-proposal-on-test-prep-centers-causes-row.aspx?pageID=238&nID=57997&NewsCatID=338>

freedom and human rights, which after the end of the Cold War have become measurable core values for international powers – and if Turkey wants to be an international power, it must show its willingness to comply with these values.

Through years of political lobbying and public awareness Islamic activism has proved its worth in Turkish civil society the same way democratic opposition has done in the former East bloc countries. Islamic activism in Turkey has moved from a *religious opposition movement* against secularist, military dictatorship towards becoming a *civic movement* for democracy and human rights aided by the traditional-values-conservative reign of the AK Parti. Kemalism in its absolute form seems to be a political dinosaur of the past, soon to become extinct.

In that way, Islamic activism, now endorsed, absorbed and protected by the ruling AK Parti, is tasting its success right now. The headscarf ban has been abolished. Religious freedom seems to have been reinstalled in Turkish society, even if not to a full level, then certainly on a level that would have been unthinkable during the last 9 decades of Kemalism rule.

Vaclav Havel's and Said Nursi's wise words are evident being echoed in the way AK Parti has handled the issue of Islamic activism during its reign of power. It has included Islamic activism and managed to solve the issues, which Kemalists refused to acknowledge; namely that Islamic values and culture are an integrated part of Turkish culture and tradition and must be dealt with through inclusion, through compromise and through political realism. There will be new challenges to Islamic activism in Turkey, as mentioned in my discussion above, but so far – with the help of Islamic activism throughout the years - Muslim space in Turkish society seems to have survived after many decades of political ostracization.

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