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Turkey & the *Türban*: The Dilemmas of Laicist Ideology

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THE RECENT bid by the ruling Justice & Development Party (AKP) for parliament to elect Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül as Turkey's next president has backfired and has plunged the country into its most serious political and social crisis in decades. The Armed Forces warned of a possible military coup, parliamentary elections have been advanced four months to 22 July, and huge street demonstrations in major cities by opponents of AKP have been held. All in all, the national laicist identity is being contested in the face of resurgent Islamic identity.

Interestingly, the current tension between a resurgent Islamic identity in Turkey and the national laicist identity may be better understood through a deeper appreciation of the divisions within the country over the wearing of the female *turban*.

The Head-Cover.

In today's Republic of Turkey, Islamic veiling refers to wearing a head-cover together with long loose-fitting gowns. In the mass media and general public this new use of head-cover is termed *türban* (originally Ottoman Turkish *tülbend* – via Persian *dülband*). The current style contrasts with the traditional head-cover which enclosed a woman's hair yet left her neck uncovered.

Islamic veiling is an instrument of morality that seeks to conceal a woman's hair and body from male view, requiring modesty of behavior to limit her appeal in public. In many Muslim societies the sexuality and even the beauty of women have been and are still frequently perceived as threats to community order as Islam exhibits an emphatically communal social ethos. Such attitudes may also spring from deeply embedded patriarchal privileging that prove resistant to change.

Among Turkish elites the position of women in society became the touchstone either of cultural 'integrity' or of 'backwardness', and, since the early 1980s, a fierce controversy over banning the *türban* has animated public debate. The reality underlying the ongoing socio-political crisis is the acute tension between the Republic's official laicist ideology and the resurgence of public religion in Turkey. This tension reflects major social and ideational changes ushered in by rural to urban migration accompanied by the rise of Muslim networks gaining political empowerment through access to state resources.

In 1982 the Council of Higher Education issued a directive prohibiting students from attending academic classes if they wore the *türban*. This provoked grassroots dissatisfaction, and over the following decade a convoluted process of making and reversing decisions ensued. From 1984 – 1987 the ban was lifted only to be reimposed in 1987 and then from 1990 – 1997 came a *de facto* lifting of

the ban, only to be revived in 1997 in the all-encompassing form still in force today. These reversals provoked waves of protest actions making the *türban* the frontline issue of contestation and mobilization for both its supporters and opponents.

Evidenced by the unprecedented level of sensitivity on the part of political elites and the massive street protests over the past two months, the symbolic gravity of this matter in Turkey's current crisis is difficult to exaggerate from the perspectives of the guardians of the official nation-state ideology as well as their Islamic opponents. Historical perspective helps one to apprehend the seriousness of the present impasse.

State Domination of Religion.

As a predominantly Muslim society Turkey is a unique example of state-religion. The model it aspires to is a constitutional, democratic secularist polity. In practice, this model is expressed in a political regime that excludes interpenetration of the religious sphere with public order. Kemalist reformism defined a political system free of religious and dynastic legitimacy, placing the Republic upon a laicist-nationalist basis.

Pursuit of secularization was promoted by laicist policies: in 1928 Islam was dis-established as the state religion; in 1937 the principle of laicism was made an integral part of the Constitution; and, in 1982, laicism was reiterated in the Constitution. Religion was something to be modernized, reformed and relegated to the private sphere by restricting it to a question of individual conscience.

The military coup of 1980 – 83 led by the former Chief of the General Staff Kenan Evren was a turning point in official policies towards religion. Amidst heightened political polarization and prevailing radical left-wing discourse, the high command of the Armed Forces passed laws promoting a 'religious culture'. Their intention was to elicit the support of Islamic loyalties of the populace behind an authoritarian institutionalization. The ensuing politicization of state institutions and their penetration by communally organized political networks, has led to the unforeseen consequence of Islamic networks gaining access to state resources.

The Republican civilian and military elite failed to anticipate the secular side of religious interests: the organizational efficacy and political momentum that Islamic circles achieved by offering systematic community benefits to its members. In the decade following the 1980 coup, the head-cover issue emerged in this politicized atmosphere of increased political significance and public visibility of Islam – particularly at the local municipal level. By the late 1980s the political atmosphere in Turkey was roiled by paradoxical and unintended consequences of this official attitude.

Consequences of the Ban.

The state-imposed head-cover ban has far-reaching consequences for those women who view veiling in public life to be a religious obligation. These women are excluded from the entire public sector in Turkey. By being deprived of the opportunity of a university education, their access to employment in public offices and other forms of engagement in public life become blocked. Their only alternative is to work in the private sector, be self-employed, or remain at home.

Sociological research shows that contemporary Muslim women in Turkey consider learning and acquiring an education to be a religious duty advocated by Islam. The ban engenders a conflict by forcing them to choose performance of one religious duty over the other, creating avoidable incompatibility between covered women's religious convictions and their wish to be productive members of society through education and employment.

This is especially relevant for children of migrants from villages to cities seeking increased

opportunities yet maintaining intact their preference for Islam's communal social ethos. They form the chief constituency voting into office successive political parties with opaque Islamic inclinations, most recently the AKP. The mothers may be maids or grow and sell vegetables, but their daughters seek university education and professional employment.

The republican civilian and military elite have ideologized wearing the *türban* to the point of completely disregarding its significance as a tenet of individual religiosity. Banning of the head-cover has transformed a religious manifestation into a symbol of systematic ideological opposition. In justifying this ban, legislators and judges portray wearing the *türban* as a politicized act of infidelity to Kemalist nationalism. Women with higher education who wear the *türban* are seen as consciously adopting a habit symbolizing their rejection of women's rights in a laicist state. Alarmist rhetoric that Turkey risks regression into a Taliban or Iranian-like repressive society only magnifies such polarization.

Advocates of the *türban* portray Islamic faith as a conscious commitment to the totality of Islamic values and obligations rather than mere habitual unreflective participation. The status of women as the core symbol of the socio-communal dimension of Islam is being forcefully asserted as an alternative to the Kemalist cultural project, shaking its very legitimacy. This effectively puts the Turkish experience of modernization/ westernization back onto the public agenda.

The *türban* now serves as the primary icon for the mainstream Turkish Muslim agenda, just as it offers a target for the most ardent laicist protests. The upcoming elections promise to be a decisive if not divisive showdown for Janus-headed Turkey. The head-cover issue is now crystallized into a non-negotiable boundary between laicism and Islamic identity, with looming risks of yet another internal military coup or an imminent cross-border military adventure into Iraq.

For the European Union and the United States, the inevitable impetus of their NATO ally Turkey towards recovering its overtly Muslim identity poses a real test of commitment to the democratic process and to the capacity to shed their phobia of 'Islamists'.

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