



## HAS THE REPUBLIC OF TURKEY BEEN CONTINUING TO USE RELIGION AS THEIR TOOL TO REACH THE MINDS OF THE PUBLIC?

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### Abstract

This study aims to show that in terms of political structure there is a huge difference between the Republic of Turkey and the Empire however the impact of religion has been seen during different periods of the Republic of Turkey. The Islamist movement is rather visible in the society today, the number of mosques in the country and Ramadan tents everywhere the number of veiled women demonstrate Islamism visually. At that atmosphere, in my opinion, veiled or unveiled it is not too much important, and the important thing is their delaying tactic, still in the state, patriarchal hegemony denies women. Therefore, as for the women issue, I do not think, headscarves was emergence, the most important thing is that Turkish women, particularly Islamist women should question the fact that their status is determined by men.

**Keywords:** Headscarves, Women, Political Islam.

### Introduction

Is the era of the Ottoman Empire versus the Republic of Turkey in terms of using religion as their instrument to reach the mind of public? The Ottoman Empire survived over a period of six hundred years until it collapse at the end of World War I and was replaced by the Republic of Turkey (White, 2003: 145). The Ottoman Empire was a religious state ruled by a Sultan who had an authority on the shaykh al-Islam, who was superior authority in the issues of religion (Korkut 2009, 118-119) and in the Empire, only Sultans had political authority (Ergil, 1975: 55). Therefore, in terms of political structure there is a huge difference between the Republic of Turkey and the Empire, because through the republican era, the state started to be governed by the parliament. However, the impact of religion has been seen during different periods of the Republic of Turkey. Even though, Turkey is a secular country, politicians have been continuing to use religion as their instrument to reach the minds and hearts of the public and to corroborate their power on public.

Mustafa Kemal and his supporters adopted some western concepts to Turkey in order to create a modern and a rational state with laws and institutions. However, these adaptations have been criticized by conservative Muslims because Islamist environments claim that the Kemalist state ideology allows Western cultural colonization through the adaptation policies, constitutions and concepts stemming from the West such as secularism, liberalism and democracy (Arat, 1998: 126-127). Nevertheless, even before the establishment of Turkey, some constitutions and concepts were adopted from Western countries during the Ottoman Empire. A secular penal code was introduced in 1853 during the Empire; it was based on French Law, after the secular penal code, in 1877, the first civil law (Mecelle) was codified, but the Civil Law did not cover family law; it included only commercial law (Erdem-Akçay, 2013: 77). After 40 years from Mecelle, the Ottoman Empire codified a family law which only stayed for a few years, because the Empire collapsed after a while later that.

Mustafa Kemal, the founder of Turkey, and his supporters wanted to establish a country with the ideology of secular nationalism in the early 1920s. With the new modern, democratic and secular state women got many rights, even though the state was still male dominated, some steps were taken to provide equality for men and women. For example, women were given the right to divorce and suffrage, inheritance, child custody which were the principles of equal opportunity. Beside these progressive steps towards women's rights, the Republican state wanted to create a homogenous notion of Turkish women; this is main critic of post-colonial theory and if the state accepts the society as homogenous a lot of human rights probably disregard. Furthermore, establishing a homogenous notion is almost impossible in Anatolia territory due to a multinational and multi-ethical structure of it because as Ergil states the Ottoman Empire

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was emerged from 'the Turkish, Arab, and Persian cultures'; and also 'from Islam, from Eastern, and later from Western civilizations (1975: 55)'

### 1. The Republican Period and the Reforms

One observation from 1920s shows to us how Turkish women needed reforms and how they were categorized according to their sex, '[w]omen lived in seclusion, speaking to no one except their husbands or their close relations, and occasionally meeting other women for gossip. Their only functions were to breed, to work, to amuse their men at home. They took no part in the daily affairs of life (Armstrong, 1929: 200)'. This observation depicts the last years of the Ottoman Empire and the first years of Turkey and it is possible to find similar observations in the literature about this era. As it can be seen from Armstrong's observation, most women did not have a place in the public domain and in the social life. They lived in reclusion, and therefore; after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire the supporting of women's emancipation seems to have been a key aspect of Turkish modernity. And, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk tried to change this atmosphere during the 20s and 30s. As Arat says '[t]he founding fathers (she refers to Atatürk) promoted women's public roles and the changing status with patriarchal benevolence (1998: 118)'

The Ottoman Empire was declared as dead and as a result, as Armstrong says the 'trace of it (the Empire) was rooted out (1929: 202)'. After the multi-ethnic Empire dissolved, Atatürk wanted to set up a secular country with national awareness. And after the War of Independence, a new republic was founded and the leader of the modern Turkish Republic and his friends made a lot reforms in the 1920s. It can be said that Turkey is one of the countries where the most radical changes took place at an institutional, and a legal level as well as a social one.

The reforms during the early decades of the Republic aimed at a country which would be systematically western and nationalistic. So, through this approach the code of clothes, time, calendar, the alphabet, and the numerical system were changed systematically. Also, the aim of the Kemalist ideology was the integration of Muslim women with respect to laicism and women involved in public life by means of educational reforms. As Heper states '[i]n Turkey the aim was *reformation* rather than a *renaissance* of Islam (1981: 351)'

Consequently, Sharia was replaced with the Turkish Civil Code, which was adopted from Swiss Civil Code in 1926 (Ergil, 1975: 61 & Kadioğlu, 1994: 652) and even today, 65 per cent of the Turkish code matches this law (Erdem-Akçay, 2013: 77). The adaptation of French and German Commercial (1926) and Italian Penal Codes (1926) followed the Civil Code (Ergil, 1975: 61) to meet the needs of the newly established Republic of Turkey and through these laws the modernization process was facilitated. Additionally, revolutions and Civil, Commercial and Penal Codes were adapted to remove religion from daily life to make the acceptance of modernity and secularism easy and as Arat points out that reforms and amendments have been done in the name of democratization and '*catching up with the West* (2010: 236)'. In consequence, 'the 1926 Civil Code was one of the most radical cases of secularization and modernization of civil and family law in the Muslim world (Erdem-Akçay, 2013: 77)', and 'Turkey became the first Islamic country to eliminate the Sharia, the Islamic code that underlies the segregation of sexes and their differential legal treatment (Arat, 1996: 401)'. By dint of law; all citizens were under the protection of the Civil Law, which meant equality for every citizen, gender neutrally.

In 1924, equal right to education was given to every Turkish citizen. Through secularism, public holidays were changed from Friday to weekend in the name of maintaining the consistency with secularism with society in 1925. Wearing headscarf was banned in state institutions and the western dress code started to be adopted in 1925 (Heper, 1997: 34). The alphabet was changed from Arabic to Latin in 1928 (ibid); the Quran and Hadith were translated from Arabic to Turkish. Turkish women got the right of enfranchisement in 1934 (Kadioğlu, 1994: 652 & Arat, 1998: 118). Furthermore, in the same year, the surname law was enacted (ibid), and after the surname law the title of 'Atatürk' was enacted in 1934 (The father of Turks) was given to Mustafa Kemal.

Women's rights were confirmed by the Turkish constitution so gender equality has been protected constitutionally since the 1920s. Without any doubt, the target of the Turkish law was to support a new modern country via giving equal rights to women. As Starr points out, 'Turkish family law became secular for the first time in history' through the 1926 Turkish Civil Code (1989: 498). Therefore, in general, it can be said that the 1926 civil law is important in terms of gender equality in Turkey. To be more specific, it gave women equal rights in divorce, suffrage, inheritance, child custody, principle of equal opportunity and equal title by descent. Having say that, as Starr states '[u]nder Islamic law and custom women had no rights to



divorce (ibid)'. These kinds of new constitutional rights demonstrate the place of Turkish women in the newly established state.

In Turkey there are huge differences between women with respect to their education, job, social class and in urban and rural parts of the country, like almost in every country. There is also a difference which is based on the reaching of the Kemalist ideology and the reaching legal rights and the awareness of between rural women and urban women. Even though, the state did necessary things for women, because of the lack of arriving Kemalism to rural women, as Yavuz emphasizes the Kemalist idea has remained in urban part of the country rather than reaching the rural areas of Anatolia (1997: 78) and therefore Kemalist are generally defined as urbanised and form of the top layer of the society. I should add that during the first years of Turkey approximately 20 per cent of the population lived in the urban areas (White, 2003: 147) and rural women started to use their rights at 1950s (Starr, 1989: 500). Consequently, the number of modernized women was remained quiet limited. The rate of using these rights was not same in all part of the state and as a result of it rural parts of the country remain as a traditional and conservative.

## 2. Feminism and Headscarves Issue

Feminism can be described as '(...) a discipline that is very acutely aware of the discursive nature of hegemonic forces in our societies (Barker, 1997: 204)' and of course it is possible to come across many other definitions and interpretations of feminism in the existing literature of social sciences. In general, my interpretation of feminism is that it is not only supporting equality among sexes, it is also a way of challenging patriarchy, which is one of the untouchable and unquestionable notions like religion. At this point, feminism has been challenging traditional roles of gender and, therefore, I always find feminists brave.

Some states demonstrate themselves as a guardian of women rights. Consequently, there is a notion of *state feminism* in the literature. In the case of the Republic of Turkey, some have emphasized the state feminism (Ayata & Tütüncü, 2008: 368, Cindioğlu & Zencirli, 2008: 796-797 and Weber 2008: 85). Even though, women exist in the Republic of Turkey's reforms with reference to the Ottoman Empire and other Middle East countries, they remain only at the legal level as stated by Ayata and Tütüncü's '[t]he inequalities in the private realm were widely disregarded (2008: 368)'. According to Weber, because of the state feminism, in Turkey and Iran there is no space for feminist activity (2008: 85). Therefore, Marshall, Ayata and Tütüncü point out that, feminist women concentrate on the issue of private sphere, for instance, domestic violence, domestic division of labour, sexual harassment, control over women's bodies and women's involvement in politics after 80s. Discussing these issues is found like filling the gap by Bora (cited in Marshall, 2005: 106) and the women's issues get out from books or the Grand National Assembly's judgments start to be harmony with the society via feminist movements and feminist activists. It should be remembered that '[t]hey cannot represent themselves; they must be represented (Marx cited in Mohanty, 1988: 82)'.

As far as the Republic of Turkey is concerned, a lot of scholars from academic circles, namely, Cindioğlu, Zencirli, Marshall, Ayata and Tütüncü agree that feminist women and Islamist women have some things in common. While Cindioğlu and Zencirli point out the main similarity as 'a resistance against the hegemonic imagination of the nation and the place of Turkish women within it (2008: 798)'; Ayata and Tütüncü mention that both movements embrace different groups, colours and ideas (2008: 368). However, as Marshall says, even if these both groups of women share a few similarities, they have not attended in significant dialogue (2005: 105). It should be noted that when political Islam started to rise in Turkey, other groups including feminism, formed with leftist ideology which is the opposite of conservative Islam in the state. That is why; the feminist movement and Islamic movement do not cooperate.

Because of the *sharia threat* feminist women move away from Islamist women movement and therefore, feminist and Kemalist women do come close to each other (Marshall, 2005: 118). To give an example, when a member of the parliament in Merve Kavakçı was not allowed in the Grand National Assembly wearing the headscarf, feminists walked with Kemalist women to protest the use of headscarf in public places (ibid), because feminists felt insecure as a result of the rising Islamist movement. However, perceiving and portraying all headscarved women as a homogeneous group is rather problematic, as Mohanty states, '[t]he crux of the problem lies in that initial assumption of women as a homogeneous group or category ('the oppressed'), a familiar assumption in western radical and liberal feminisms (1988: 79).'

At this stage, I find the ideology of Turkish nationalism and the approach of Diyanet towards women as the opposite of the post colonial theory, because in the state ideology and according to Diyanet aspect whole women accept as a homogenous group, which can be the reason of the oppression of women



and also, considering women as a single group is one of the main argument in the post colonial feminism. For this, as Mohanty, post-colonial theorist, points out that assuming women as singular group is the way of oppression on them, and she says 'sameness' of their oppression (1988: 65)'.

As mentioned above, the creation of homogenous groups is found problematic. However, the Republic wanted to be portrayed as a homogenous society around modernization with Turkish national identity; the Republic built this ideal in the 20s. Therefore, a lot of new reforms were done to make adaptations easier and quicker, the reforms were related to the lifestyle of a new imagined homogenous nation. However, even though a lot of reforms were made during the first years of the state to make the adaptation easier to West and creation homogenous and nationalistic society, the dream of a homogenous state has been almost impossible in Anatolia because of the multicultural structure of the society. In the general frame, Kandiyoti makes an observation for the establishing modern nation states in all Muslim societies; 'all Muslim societies have had to grapple with the problems of establishing modern nation states and forging new notions of citizenship (1991: 10)'. Turkey is one of the country where live the problem as well.

### 3. Political Islam

There are differences between Islam as a belief system and as a political ideology. Also, there is an obvious difference between Muslim and Islamist, Göle explains this difference well, according to her, Muslims purport 'a religious identity' and Islamist movement refers to 'a consciousness and social action (1997: 47)'. Güven states political Islam in the Republic of Turkey began rising during the 70s and reached its peak in the 80s (2010: 378). In fact, as far as the practice of political Islam is concerned, this date goes back even more. In the late 40s and 50s, during the first multiparty elections; Turkey's political parties used Islamic language to attract conservative citizens' votes towards the secular nationalist tradition of Ataturk's Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi aka CHP) (Mecham, 2004: 341).

The first political sign of rising Islamism in Turkey was the victory of the National Salvation Party. Ronnie and Yıldızoğlu states that the party's votes came mainly from rural areas (1988: 14); it is much the same as AKP's votes, but capital also supports AKP (Even, Hale and Özbudun states that rising Anatolian Islamic bourgeoisie is a significant factor of why AKP raised, the party has created a new middle class (cited in Çınar, 2011: 532)).

The Islamist movement is rather visible in the society today. That is a great number of mosques in the country and Ramadan tents everywhere, the number of veiled women demonstrate Islamism visually. While during the first years of the Republic 90% of women were unveiled (Armstrong, 1929: 203), today according to the Research of Political Situation results, 70% of all Turkish women cover their hands during 2008 and vis-a-vis the KONDA survey, during 2007 69.4 percentage of Turkish women cover their hands (Azak, 2013: 92). Also, Arat states almost 70 per cent of women cover their heads in Turkey (2010: 878). Despite all of these, I have serious doubts about their morality, because corruption and degeneration rates do not indicate the same things with the increasing number of mosques or veiled women.

Mecham also states due to the scramble against 'Islamic institutions' in Turkey and the history of secular nationalist ideology, academic circles find the state unique (2004: 341). Except for the fact that Göl points out that Islam cannot be abandoned in the Republic of Turkey because of two reasons, while the first reason is accepting Islam as 'an historical political marker' the second reason for it; being 'an integral part of Turkish cultural identity' (2009: 802). Instead of this togetherness, for the past several years (they refer 70s and 80s), the country suffered from obscurantism (Ronnie & Yıldızoğlu, 1988: 12). As Tütüncü stresses, returning to the original sources of Islamism causes a contradiction between secular Westernists and traditional Islamists (2010: 598). As a result, because of obscurantism, some people 'have been fined, jailed or barred from politics (Shively, 2008: 688)'.

Moudoros transfers one of Erdoğan conservation when he was the mayor of Istanbul, 'alcohol was banned from an art exhibition at a municipal hall' by him, he explained this decision such: 'I am at the same time the Imam of this city and I am also responsible for the sins of the citizens of Istanbul (2014:2)'. Here it is possible to talk of reference to Islamic values rather than the Turkish constitution and with this statement; he also limits non-Muslims citizens' rights. In contrast, Kemalists mayors do not ban alcohol and for this reason, conservative politicians always claim that Kemalist are against the pillars of by allowing alcohol conception. In fact, the truth is Kemalist believe in the constitution and they respect everyone's lifestyle choices and decisions. Nevertheless, their candidate for the presidential elections in August 2014 was Ekmelledin İhsanoğlu the secretary of Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) between 2004 and 2014. This candidate can be an evidence of their attitude towards religious people and towards Islam.





Safarian explains '[u]ntil the reforms of Sultan Mahmud II, the Ottoman society were silent on the subject of woman' (2007: 141). As for the Republic of Turkey, women played central role in the 80s and 90s in terms of political Islam (Kadioğlu, 1994: 646). In fact, from the establishment years of Turkey, on the one hand the state force the veiling women to stay at home, on the other hand, conservative men force to veiling women to stay at home, in both situation, women are precluded by patriarchal hegemony. There is a reason why they are forced to stay at home, Kadioğlu states, Edwards Said influenced the Kemalists with his fundamental work Orientalism in the sense of the 'the manufactured Western image of the Muslim world' and this image cause the representation of Muslim women as 'the secluded, veiled and hence oppressed (1994: 649)'. In the Turkish media, while modern women are associated with shorts or skirts, traditional women are associated with veiling (Kadioğlu, 1994: 660). In other words, women are not represented according to their views but rather with their bodies, which is one of the main issues that Feminism problematizes. As a result of serving headscarf as a political symbol by secular Kemalists in Turkey (Azak, 2013: 92) wearing a headscarf in public places was banned as a part of the secular system in the Republic of Turkey in 1981 if veiling women insisted on covering their heads; they lost their jobs (Güven, 2010: 381) or even the right to continue their education.

I should add as a result of viewing veiling women potential obscurantism supporters, the society polarized and veiling women marginalized. Therefore, the headscarf ban is one of reason to dissociality of veiled women in the society and I accept that veiled women were perceived and treated as minority groups and were seen as stepchildren of the society until the freedom of headscarf in 2013. As Nira Yuval-Davis explains the state '*construct minorities into assumed deviants from the 'normal', and excludes them from important power resources* (cited in Donlon, 2007: 338)'.

On the other hand, because of the population of veiled women in the state, as Arat mentions as, non-veiling women feel oppressed because according to non-veiling women, veiling women represent 'patriarchal control over women's sexuality' and their freedom of religious expression in under threat (2010: 878-879). At this point Donlon also agrees with Arat, she states that in the Western discourse veiling is often a symbol of oppression and it represents patriarchal oppression (2007: 329). Those who are forced by their brothers or father to cover their heads should not be ignored, as Güven points out these women should be protected (2010: 381).

### Conclusion

Atatürk was not only concerned with the constitutional rights of women, but he also encouraged women to give up wearing the veil, which was a very important step for the liberation of Sunni women citizens, who had been under oppression. After the revolution was introduced by Atatürk, almost 90 per cent of women go unveiled in Istanbul (Armstrong, 1929: 203).

However, some Islamist women did not saturate the secular concept of equality and they experienced some problems until a few decades ago. Because of their headscarves, some Sunni women could not go to school, so they could not find good jobs. Therefore, '(t)heir (Islamist women) search for a religiously defined identity caused them to defy the secular codes of the Republic (Arat, 1998: 129)'. However, today if conservative Sunni women are well educated and want to occupy a position of equality, I strongly believe that the democratic modern system established in 1923 by Atatürk plays important role in it even today.

On the other hand, there is an another fact. Like the era of Ottoman Empire, during the Republic of Turkey politicians have been continuing to use religion as their tool to reach the minds and hearts of the public and to corroborate their power on public.

I think, in the state, patriarchal hegemony denies women, veiled or unveiled it is not too much important, and the important thing is their delaying tactic. Headscarf is accepted by feminists as a symbol of this sexist status quo (Marshall, 2005: 109), and she adds that covering women bodies and head make them invisible, and women alienate their bodies (ibid). Therefore, as for the women issue, I do not think, headscarves was emergence, the most important thing is that Turkish women, particularly Islamist women should question the fact that their status is determined by men.

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