

What is Under a Headscarf? Neo-Islamist vs. Kemalist Conservatism in Turkey

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At the end of 2007, Turkey's real unemployment rate reached 20 percent. Since 2002, three and a half million farmers and their families have gone bankrupt and moved to towns and cities. In 2008, the government prepared a new law scrapping social security benefits, increasing the minimum age of retirement, and shrinking the safety net of the retired. Real wages have dropped by eight percent over the past year alone.¹ In February 2008, the Turkish army crossed the Iraqi border and occupied a part of northern Iraq.² These tremors have shaken the very foundations of the country's social life. Yet instead of debating the consequences of those developments, Turks are locked in a discussion about whether young women with headscarves can enter university campuses.

This paper locates the headscarf debate within the intense shifts in political economy and social life in Turkey and attends to the gendered trajectories of political participation. Examining the historical development of the political universe that surrounds the headscarf controversy, the paper argues that the conventional understanding of the headscarf debate as a struggle between secularism and political Islam is erroneous. It shows rather that the headscarf controversy gives rise to a political opportunity that is created and used by neo-Islamist and Kemalist conservatism. By politically deploying the headscarf controversy, neo-Islamists maintain their supporters' class integrity and Kemalists reproduce the empty signifier of Kemalism that serves as the main ideological network that mobilizes its class base.

The neo-Islamist conservatism of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) mobilizes symbolic battles to create an effect of inclusion for the millions of its supporters who have been marginalized by its neo-liberal economic policies. On the

other hand, the conservative Kemalist Republican People's Party (CHP)—the founding party of the republic first headed by Atatürk and a member of the Socialist International—discursively presents itself as a social democratic party. Yet it pursues neither a socialist nor a social democratic program. The CHP contributes to the making of the headscarf controversy to maintain *shari'a*-phobia, or the fear of political Islam, a fear that it helps produce in order to uphold the alliance of its elite, upper middle-class, and middle-class supporters. The hegemony of Kemalist and neo-Islamist conservatism in Turkey's politics has two major consequences. First, it shrinks the libertarian political strands both in Islamist and secular feminist politics in the country, thus in fact working against women's rights. Second, it works to maintain the working- and middle-class support of the elitist politics of neo-Islamism and Kemalism, contributing to the reproduction of class asymmetries in the country. The paper concludes with a discussion of minor yet alternative political developments that may eclipse competing forms of conservatism.

One cannot overstate the hegemony of the headscarf controversy in Turkey. Since the ruling neo-Islamist AKP's members of Parliament proposed a constitutional amendment aiming to deregulate the wearing of headscarves at universities in February 2008, the country has been on a roller-coaster ride. Not a single day passes without a major or minor demonstration against the proposed amendment, and not a single newspaper prints a headline that does not in some way reference the headscarf.

For a number of years now, the AKP has been working on a way to soften the headscarf ban at universities, a measure central to Atatürk's legacy of "Westernization." Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, whose daughter could not attend Turkish universities because of her headscarf and had to pursue higher education in the United States, paid special attention to the issue and built a coalition in Parliament for deregulation of the headscarf. His initiatives were rewarded in January 2008. Members of Parliament from the Nationalist Action Party, a political party with what many consider an extreme-nationalist political ideology, decided to support the AKP proposal.

The supporters of the amendment now constituted almost 75 percent of the members of Parliament. The legislature approved the proposal on 10 February 2008 with 411 of 550 deputies voting yes. Shortly thereafter, President Abdullah Gül approved the amendment, which stated: "Except otherwise stated in the laws of the Republic, no one can be prevented from pursuing the right to university education. The limit to the ways in which this right is pursued is specified by law."³ The amendment's text did not reverse the headscarf ban outright; indeed, various articles of the Higher Education Council Code continue to proscribe the ban.

Opponents of headscarf deregulation, affiliated with the CHP, seized upon the vague wording of the amendment to argue that it had changed nothing. The CHP brought the issue to the Constitutional Court and is still awaiting a ruling. Meanwhile, in an open challenge to the AKP's intent, Turkish university presidents denied headscarf-wearing women entry to campus. Many of them further petitioned the general prosecutor's office to sue Turkish Higher Educational Council president Yusuf Ziya Özcan—an AKP-appointed, University of Chicago-educated, sociologist who backed the amendment—for not abiding by existing law. The AKP retorts that opponents are

ignoring the spirit of the amendment—to make it possible for pious young women to cover their heads on campus—and the interpretation backed by Özcan, the president of the Republic, the cabinet, and the majority of Parliament. The country was quickly divided and the headscarf took pride of place in the political debate.

The Logic of Inclusion

The hegemony of the headscarf debate has deep historical roots in Turkey's political transformations over the last several decades. The 1950s witnessed the first major inclusion of a non-CHP political movement in the political system. With the coming to power of Adnan Menderes' Democratic Party (DP) in 1950, those who were traditionally pushed to the political and social periphery of the young Republic enjoyed a period of limited and selective inclusion. Yet this episode was minor relative to the political, economic, and social transformations that would attend the rise of the AKP five decades later.⁴

The DP leaders were from the ranks of the Kemalist elite, who were among the nascent bourgeois classes of the country and came to power without any grassroots political base. They gained acceptance to the political elite because they did not aim at a mass social mobilization against CHP hegemony. Instead, they chose to register desire for change in the sterile context of elections; they mobilized people to carry their votes, and not their voices and concerns, to Parliament. DP members and leaders mobilized symbolic discontent with the Kemalist symbols of the previous governments in order to regulate class-based discontent. Taking aim at the Kemalist elite's political symbols became an effective political device for all counter-hegemonic political projects. In a political geography where Kemalist symbols dominate all public space, recourse to Islamic symbols was an easy and popular way to organize symbolic dissent for right-wing counter-hegemonic movements like the DP. Yet this trend pushed the army—the main Turkish institution with the symbolic and non-symbolic power to either effect or block change—to take a counter-DP position. The DP was not an Islamist party and cannot be regarded as a predecessor of the AKP. Yet it used Islamic symbols to mark its difference from the CHP.

Following Menderes' open critique of the army and its political allies within the CHP, the DP was ousted by a coup d'état in 1960. Within less than five years, however, the Justice Party (AP) filled in the space its predecessor, the DP had produced and won more than 52 percent of seats in the parliament. Almost all of the AP leaders came from the ranks of the DP.

The years between 1960 and 1980 witnessed the institutionalization of this initial inclusion of pro-Islamist, yet Kemalist, conservatism in the country. The leaders of the DP and the AP prayed and fasted, but never used their religious identity as a platform for political mobilization. They did not deploy political Islam as a mobilization objective but used their religious practices to differentiate themselves from the CHP's Kemalism. The DP's explicit and public investment in laicism fused Kemalist reforms and an Islamic political vernacular.

It was during these years that a left-wing counter-hegemonic movement emerged with the stated intent to carry not only the votes but the also the voices of subalterns to

the center. In parallel with the rising power of the left in the world, Turkish socialists enjoyed unprecedented political and economic power thanks to their mobilization on the ground and among labor unions. Furthermore, they dominated the cultural production of the country. The total circulation of leftist and social democratic periodicals exceeded that of the conservative and tabloid press organs combined.

In this period, there was a simultaneous surge of both hope and suffering. Student boycotts and labor strikes shook the country. As real wages rose, farmers experienced relatively prosperous times. A wide spectrum of leftist political groupings provided a socialist alternative with a Kemalist touch that sustained for many a measured sense of hope for Turkey's future. At the same time, the U.S. policy of supporting reactionary political movements and regimes in the Third World bolstered the extreme right and led to the further militarization of politics.

The left's revolutionary rhetoric made its self-representation as a reformist movement vying for inclusion virtually impossible. The left organizations wanted to claim the entire country and were unwilling to share power even among one another; they pursued diplomacy in neither language nor approach. In 1980 General Kenan Evren organized the bloodiest coup d'état Turkey had seen to date. It crushed the entire structure of leftist political networks, unions, and organizations, and crippled two generations of left-leaning students raised by left-Kemalist cadres.

In the three years following the 1980 coup, the counter-hegemonic project of the left was so brutally maimed that it took two decades for the socialists to rebuild even an elementary organizational network. Moreover, the first decade following the coup witnessed state- and army-supported nationalist and moderate Islamist movements rapidly gaining ground in public space and the state bureaucracy, while also effectively organizing underrepresented working classes. The rise of the Kurdish separatist guerilla movement bolstered the power and legitimacy of the nationalists and the army. Both processes took place while the left was in deep hibernation.⁵

Until the demise of Soviet Union, the ideology of Turco-Islamic synthesis united Islamists and extreme nationalists. Both the army and the neo-liberal Motherland Party (ANAP), the political sister of the DP and the AP, constructed and bolstered an ideology that was Islamic in form and Kemalist in substance in a bid to overshadow the socialist and communist ideals of the left.⁶

Until 1995, three political trends dominated Turkey's politics. The first was that of the Turco-Islamists of the ANAP and the True Path Party (DYP), the political followers of the now dissolved DP and AP parties. The second was the Kemalism of the CHP and the Democratic Left Party. The third was the slowly developing Islamist Welfare Party (RP), the predecessor of the AKP.

In 1995, for the first time in Turkish history, an Islamist party won the elections. The RP secured more than 21 percent of the votes. The party's leader Necmettin Erbakan belonged to the generation of political leaders who were incorporated into the political center through the routes of the AP or the CHP. This was the first time an openly Islamist leader who suggested that "major changes were going to take place in the country either in a bloody or a peaceful way"⁷ became the prime minister of the country. His radical language unleashed a politics of symbolic confrontation. On one

highly performative occasion, he threw a dinner party at the prime minister's office for the shaykhs of several religious orders who attended the event in turbans, long gowns, and gray beards.

The army cautiously followed these developments. It was no longer possible to organize a coup d'état like the one in 1980. One primary reason was that the Army Officials' Mutual Aid Association (OYAK) had become one of the three largest corporations in the country, with investments ranging from insurance to finance. Coups, the army had gathered, would come at a heavy cost.

Two years after his election victory, Erbakan's symbolic battles with the republic pushed radical and moderate Kemalists to form a united front against Islamism. On 28 February 1997, the National Security Council decided to "warn" the country against emerging religious radicalism "that shook the foundations of the republic."⁸ The national press interpreted the warning as a sign of potential military intervention, as did Erbakan himself. He promptly dissolved his coalition government and his RP was closed down within the year. Erbakan's most prestigious follower, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, lost his post as mayor of Istanbul in November 1998.

While civilian and military putsches had effectively ousted Erbakan's RP, the party's younger generation began organizing to form a moderate neo-Islamist political party. From the younger generation's perspective, Erbakan's ambiguous economic policies that drew on Hayekian neo-liberal market reform and Keynesian state-led heavy industrialization, his controversial remarks that tended to polarize the country, and his privileging of symbolic confrontation had all hampered the Islamist movement's potential for broad-based mobilization. They began to imagine a new Islamism that married a neo-liberal economic policy with a moderate politics that steered clear of explicit and uncalculated symbolic confrontation. The architect of this neo-Islamism, Erdoğan, was also a former marketing director of Ülker—a corporation run by a family of Islamist businessmen who purchased the global chocolate giant Godiva in 2007.

Refusing to join the ranks of the Virtue Party (FP) that the senior leaders of the RP had formed, Erdoğan claimed that he had "changed his shirt," referring to the new ideas that he and his followers began to deploy. He founded the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2001. In 2002, his party won almost 35 percent of the vote, despite the fact that he could not run for office since he had been briefly imprisoned. At a demonstration in southeast Turkey in 1997, Erdoğan had read from the poetry of Ziya Gökalp, the Kurdish father of Turkish nationalism, referring to mosques as barracks, domes as helmets, minarets as bayonets, and believers as soldiers. His move to discursively join Islam and militarism cost him four months in prison.

Yet his party's political power made it possible for him to run for office the following year when a parliament member from Siirt, in the southeast, lost his seat as a result of AKP lobbying to cancel the city's election results. Erdoğan became prime minister in 2003.

From Democratic Victory to Civilian Coup

The political economy of the Turkey that the AKP envisioned rested on a radical neo-liberalism that aimed to reduce the size of the formal social safety net, suppress

real wages for the poor, and hand out tax benefits to the rich. At the same time, the AKP's victory rested on the votes of the poor.⁹ The party took various steps in order to maintain the precarious balance between its preferred economic policies and the need to tend to its political base. By mobilizing the resources of municipalities and private religious funds, the party replaced the social state with municipal and community charities. The AKP's success in mobilizing the working poor was in part due to the absence of a socialist and social democratic alternative.

These patchwork moves to destroy the social democratic state and then haphazardly compensate for its demise proved insufficient as a governing strategy. Rising foreign direct investment did not translate into new jobs or gross domestic product growth. Unemployment rose and gas prices soared. The AKP now turned to the private sector and rapidly became the champion of unequivocating privatization in Turkey.

The political-economic policies of the AKP resulted in increased marginalization of the very people who had brought the party to power. The AKP unleashed the politics of symbolism, taking aim at the heart of the establishment's discursive universe. This move was not categorically different from the DP's dealing with Kemalist symbols in the past. For the DP had also argued that the CHP's policy of laicism could make people lose their religion. Creating a fantasy of inclusion for the marginalized, the AKP aimed to make the point that it could make a "real" difference by opening symbolic spaces of participation for the marginalized. The marginal became active in the realm of symbolic politics without voicing any class-based claims of substantive politics.

Between 2003 and 2007, therefore, the AKP pursued a policy of dual containment: neo-liberal politics for the rich and pro-Islamist conservatism for the poor. Making the headscarf a more visible element in public space rapidly became the AKP elite's most effective policy option for sustaining its habits of making millions of dollars, driving expensive cars, and running giant corporations, while still representing the oppressed, the poor, and the marginal.

Among Islamist men, the headscarf created that needed bond between oppressed and oppressor. For women — Islamist or otherwise — the control, regulation, and deregulation of the body was yet again at the forefront of the discursive battle in Turkish public space. The concession these two classes of men granted women was to ease the control over their bodies if they took the headscarf.¹⁰ Thus, donning the headscarf became an act that the most marginalized women of Turkey could undertake to ostensibly empower themselves as they maintained the Islamists' vertical alliances.

Women's bodies were again the primary geography of politics. When Kemalist-conservative women stepped onto the scene in the spring of 2007, a series of demonstrations against the AKP shook Turkey with unprecedented force.¹¹ These were the largest demonstrations in the country's modern history. Furthermore, women were the primary organizers and attendees.

The first demonstration took place in Ankara on 14 April 2007. Bringing together more than a million people, this rally kicked off a series of gatherings that organizers dubbed the "Republic Demonstrations" or the "Flag Demonstrations." The Atatürkist Thought Association, run by a retired general with coup-organizing inclinations, and the Association in Support of Contemporary Living, comprised of various Kemalist women of elite backgrounds, co-organized the demonstrations. For emotional observ-

ers of Kemalist persuasion, the modern, secular women of Turkey were successfully resisting the Islamist party and maybe even paving the way for the ouster of the Erdoğan government, all in the name of modernity.

Dubbed the “Women’s Revolution” by observers in Turkey and abroad,¹² the demonstrations, with their slogans of fealty to Kemalism, also caught the attention of Aksu Bora’s eleven-year-old son. One day he asked, “What is Kemalism?” His tendency to pose questions unexpectedly and catch her off guard had worked yet again. Aksu answered, “Exaggerating the task of loving Atatürk.” Realizing her evasive maneuver, he gently changed the subject. How could she have addressed the question?

Kemalism, as the official ideology of the country, has been central to almost all public debates concerning politics since the founding of the republic in 1923. The nature of Kemalism is plastic, ensuring its hegemony in corporatist, Keynesian, and even neo-liberal times.¹³ But one wonders whether Kemalism will survive the conservative times of the neo-Islamist AKP that slowly grew out of Erbakan’s Milli Görüş movement.¹⁴

The Kemalist opposition appeared to throw the ruling party into disarray. Amidst the “Women’s Revolution,” the AKP failed to nominate its founding leader, Erdoğan, for the post of president. Instead, the party nominated Abdullah Gül, the foreign minister and Erdoğan’s right-hand man, only to see the nomination blocked, unconstitutionally, by the constitutional court. Faced with a constitutional crisis, Erdoğan dissolved the cabinet and called for early elections.

The various “Flag Demonstrations” of 2007 make strikingly visible how Kemalism has come to function as an empty signifier—a system of thought, perception, and style constituted in a void.¹⁵ The ideological content of the slogans chanted during these demonstrations makes visible what the flag erases: the function of emptiness, which works to produce meaning for a system that has been constituted to exclude the different.

These demonstrations were indeed women’s demonstrations. Many observers argued that the women who organized these demonstrations were simply the mouthpieces of men. Yet this is to grossly misunderstand the movement. Women ran these demonstrations and campaigns; they boldly represented themselves as “the guardians of the Republic.” What kind of a system of exclusion and inclusion does such a process entail?

Chambers of Inclusion and Exclusion

The political careers of Nur Serter and Necla Arat provide important vantage points from which to address this question. Both women are professors and members of Parliament representing the CHP, and both were among the chief organizers of the spring 2007 “Women’s Revolution.”

Serter was the architect and director of the “persuasion chambers” of Istanbul University that have functioned since 2003 as sites for dissuading students from donning the headscarf. Young women with headscarves were “invited” to these chambers so that Kemalist women could “persuade” them to take them off and liberate themselves from the agenda of the conservative men surrounding them. We remember the

violence embedded in these chambers.¹⁶ A minority was “convinced.” The rest were expelled from the university.

Arat, for her part, was behind the prosecution of Eren Keskin, a human rights activist and noted feminist who has publicly spoken out against rape under military custody and brought charges against some of the soldiers responsible. Arat organized a campaign against Keskin, formally applying to the public prosecutor’s office, accusing Keskin of dishonoring the army. These two examples make visible the trajectories of exclusion and inclusion in Turkey. The women excluded from the Kemalists’ supposed march to progress included everyone from the university student to the woman publicly battling misogyny and rape. It is these women that Kemalists actively identify as threats to secularism and national unity. Their exclusion is not some simple case of false gender consciousness. Instead, it exposes the structure and character of a specific form of womanhood that is constructing and reconstructing what “secularism” and “national unity” mean.

The secularism of Kemalist women such as Arat and Serter does not rely on freedom of thought and belief. Their “national unity” slogan is in fact stripped of any universalist political stance. Their agenda is based on excluding “other” women by either “liberating” those who wear the headscarf or silencing those who expose the intersections between militarism and sexism, such as rape in the army. These Kemalist women do not in fact discriminate against a political stance or perspective; they carve out a conservative and exclusionary understanding of womanhood. The fact that these Kemalist women share a vocabulary with contemporary Turkish nationalism, however, does not render their acts transparent or simply derivative.

Indeed, their work and their politics, while arguably strengthening patriarchy, more importantly empower and reproduce a conservative politics of femininity that relies on the specific construction of “women as the guardians of the Republic.” This new womanhood is neither transformative nor universalist; its exclusionary nature is a political imperative. Indeed, this womanhood holds out neither the promise nor the aim of liberating elite, middle-class, or working-class women. It is instead a bid for power among the CHP’s list of candidates so that Kemalist women may ultimately join the chorus of the country’s most reactionary and militarized political party. The women behind this new womanhood are among the architects of contemporary Kemalist conservatism in Turkey.

Lifestyles and *Shari’a*-phobia

The second dimension that is necessary to explore to understand the “Women’s Revolution” is the perception that a certain “lifestyle” is now under threat. The question of lifestyle is a crucial one for women, since its borders pass over, on, and through women’s bodies. The headscarf is central to the politics of exclusion and inclusion in Turkey. It symbolizes the borders of “lifestyles.” The fear of trespassing such a border is related not only to *shari’a*-phobia. The headscarf is also related to other fears, such as those of the anti-European Union bent, who claim in an oft-repeated slogan that accession to the E.U. threatens Turkey’s “complete independence.” What could be endangered simultaneously by the E.U. and political Islam? What kind of a

singular fear could these two strange bedfellows produce in Turkey? How can women be afraid of both?

Attention to class can help us make sense of this otherwise elusive fear of both West and East. The Republic's promise to middle-class women was that they would be "almost equal" citizens on the condition that they were self-sacrificing girls, virtuous mothers, hard-working managers of the domicile, and loyal companions of men. Such a hierarchy implied that the righteous daughter of the Republic could attain a higher status than a lower-class man. It seems that this promise has been partially fulfilled.

Yet the majority of women in Turkey seem to be divided into two. On the one hand, well-educated, middle-class professional women live lives that are distant from those of undereducated and underemployed subaltern women, who are more marginalized and impoverished than the men of their class. In this sense, privileged middle-class women are partly correct when, during their lobbying delegations to the E.U., they argue that Turkish women are not the women Europeans know; they are "modern" and powerful working women.

On the other hand, since the 1980s, the profile of elite women has changed significantly, signaling a weakening of the "Turkish Woman." As the women and men of the periphery have moved rapidly toward the center, old-guard elite women have lost some of their political and cultural hegemony to the men of the new elite. These conservative men from the periphery, primarily AKP followers, actively sought political, social, and economic power—and achieved it.

The gendered repercussions of the rise of a new conservative elite indicate that the stakes underlying the "Women's Revolution" were broader than some flawed notion of women's liberation or feminism. It will not be a surprise to find other articulations of "feminism in suits" in the near future.¹⁷ "Feminism in suits" is a term referring to the politics of Kemalist women who produce a limited and selective opening in the public space for women. Such a politics focuses on the ways in which public space is made accessible or closed for women without questioning the patriarchal nature of the very space itself.

So far, we have become familiar with a form of feminism whose aim is "liberating" oppressed women by enlightening them. As this aim converges with politics on the ground, the discourse grows more sexist and exclusionary. Those who critique Nur Çintay, a liberal writer with the left-leaning *Radikal* newspaper, by calling her a "fat chick with a husband who cheats" seem to be wearing flags, not suits. But their style is the same and seems to be saying: Let's destroy the chick's nest if she flies without saluting my flag!

But women of privilege were not the only ones struck with a fear of change. The institutionalization of neo-liberalism and the transformation of the nation-state resulted in deteriorating conditions for women in all walks of life. Women's unemployment increased, insecure working conditions became widespread, and the public sector hired less skilled female labor. Thus, workers' "lifestyles" were also threatened. Women are located in a specific space in this last group. While Turkey never had a full-fledged welfare state, the state nevertheless did work as a mechanism in the redistribution of economic resources that subaltern classes deployed through various forms of clien-

telism. Different kinds of social spending in education and public health did raise the living standards of the working poor. As a result, some people looked to the future with measured hope.

As social spending decreased under the AKP, the exploitation of women made up the emerging deficit. The state transferred its social obligations to the family, resulting in women shouldering more and more of the burden. Women began to look after the sick and the old more frequently, moving away from the formal labor force, especially after having children. These tasks were represented as women's traditional responsibility. Yet during that short period when the social welfare state still carried social and political legitimacy, it was still plausible to hope that things would improve. There were cheaper kindergartens in state enterprises and municipalities, health centers, and free medicine. As neo-liberalism progressed, people began to lose hope in the very possibility of one day overcoming poverty.

These developments gave rise to a shared fear produced by different sources: the fear of change. Some were afraid of losing their privileges; others were afraid because they did not know what change would bring about. Yet others felt that the future would not bring anything positive to their lives. Whatever the fear, all joined the demonstrations.¹⁸

Kemalist Fear

Blessed by a variety of symbols such as Turkish flags and Atatürk buttons, the "Republic Demonstrations" presented themselves as the acts of those unafraid of Islamists. They created this self-representation by producing, communicating, and circulating fear.

These demonstrators did not face the risk of being attacked, detained, or gassed by the police. It is ironic that such difficult political objectives as preserving the nation from decay can be pursued so easily. (Sometimes one wonders whether everything really repeats itself first as tragedy, then as farce!)

Some observers see a civic potential, a glimpse of hope, or a sign of resistance in the marching masses of the spring of 2007. But such observations miss a great deal. For example, they gloss over the irony of discontent with religiosity being expressed with the (almost religious) fixation on "secular" symbols such as Atatürk buttons, flags, headbands with inscriptions such as "Atatürk, it is you who we follow," or Atatürk's signature tattooed on young women's bodies. Irony is becoming impossible in Turkey.¹⁹

Some in Turkey confuse these expressions with left politics. It seems as if chanting slogans such as "complete independence" is enough to qualify you as a socialist. There are even those who think that one becomes a leftist if one equates the struggle against fundamentalism with the struggle against imperialism. These stances sadly reveal what little is left of left politics in Turkey.

If one is forced to locate in these demonstrations a glimmer of a potential for change, it could only be a bit of hope for the restoration of what was an ideal move for conservative politics. The hope embodied in these women is a nightmare for feminists. The references to the spirit of 1968 that the Kemalist demonstrators incessantly

parroted have turned into an empty slogan about “lifestyle” in their elite hands. The empty signifier of these demonstrations has created a center of attraction for those who are full of fear. Yet it continues to signify only if it reproduces not only fear but also loathing in Turkey.

The Demonstrations Fail

With the government’s decision to call for early elections, the “Women’s Revolution” demonstrations quickly dissipated as their organizers rushed to run for office under the banner of the CHP. The supposedly social democratic CHP, whose leader Deniz Baykal once served as the vice president of the Socialist International, built its entire election strategy on the possibility of losing the Republic to Islamists, a fear produced and popularized by the Republic Demonstrations.

But the AKP did not let the CHP set the agenda or further polarize the country along Kemalist lines. Instead, the AKP drew on the rhetorical universe of developmentalist ideology with a touch of neo-liberalism. Instead of mobilizing counter-Kemalist symbols, a mistake committed by their predecessors, the AKP constructed their election manifesto along the axes of nationalism, developmentalism, and order.

Replacing his AKP collar pin with a Turkish flag, Erdoğan marshaled the state’s resources to extend emergency spending to the urban poor and released Ministry of Agriculture funds to farmers in need. The AKP pursued these populist policies not only by using state resources but also by deploying grassroots community networks, a site no other political party had penetrated. In this way, the AKP managed to reach the invisible poor of the informal sector, a vast majority of the working class in the country. Knowing that these populist policies could be bypassed by the nationalist rhetoric of the Nationalist Action Party and the Kemalist-conservative CHP, the AKP also presented itself as the champion of nationalism by summarizing the main idea of its election manifesto under the slogan “One Nation, One Motherland, One Flag, One State.”

It worked. Winning the largest number of votes of the last quarter century, the AKP achieved an unprecedented victory on 22 July 2007. One of every two people in the country voted for the party. Returning to the National Assembly that it had left a few months earlier with an even stronger presence, the AKP went so far as to incorporate former CHP members of socialist backgrounds, such as Zafer Üskül, or high CHP officials like the former general secretary, Ertuğrul Günay.

Despite forging an alliance with the Democratic Left Party, and although they believed that they were successful in convincing voters that the very foundations of the Republic were under threat, the Kemalist CHP won only 20.88 percent of the vote. After a few days of rest, Deniz Baykal managed to present this failure as a success, promising to conserve the Kemalist Revolution that took place ninety years ago. Yet it became crystal clear to everyone, including the CHP, that the elitist politics of Kemalism, despite the mass mobilization of Republic Demonstrations, could only convince one of every five voters in the country, almost all of whom belonged to the upper middle class.

Following the unprecedented success of the AKP, almost all parties of the political spectrum recognized the appointment of Abdullah Gül as president as not only possible but also legitimate. Even the CHP did not directly contest the nomination. Gül's wife, however, was a problem. Her headscarf was dragged to the center of objections to Gül's presidency. The CHP went so far as to suggest informally that the party would object less to the presidency of an Islamist if he had a wife with no headscarf.

Giving the AKP a wonderful opportunity to organize symbolic dissent around the headscarf controversy, the CHP continued manufacturing *shari'a*-phobia as its main policy. Referring to the CHP's perception of the headscarf as a symbol of Islamism, Prime Minister Erdoğan asked whether there was anything in Turkey that was not a symbol of anything else. The AKP leader thus took aim at the heart of the Kemalist project's naturalization of Kemal's symbols and dismissal of counter-hegemonic symbols as politically charged.

For many party representatives and MPs from the CHP, there was nothing wrong with the headscarf as long as it was worn "grandmother style," that is, a folklorized way of covering the head that is categorically distinct from the way young women currently use the headscarf in Turkey.²⁰ Many Islamist conservatives argued that neither women with headscarves nor those without them dressed like their grandmothers. The AKP managed to present the headscarf controversy as a struggle between those who believed in the freedom of choice as a means of progress and those who saw freedom of choice as a sign of invisible agendas.

But the CHP did not object. For them, headscarf use by young women could not be seen as the choice of free individuals, but only as a sign of Islamist politics aiming to build hegemony, first in universities, and then in the entire country. There is more than an individual under the headscarf. It is a cloaking device that reveals the radical politics of the AKP that aims to unleash an Islamist revolution in Turkey. Women donning headscarves, for the CHP, are the passive agents of AKP politics.

Clustered around this main line of argumentation, the party and its social and political allies developed other critiques of the headscarf. With the subversive intention of bringing leftists with liberal leanings toward the CHP, some argued that poor women could not attend university in any case and that those who donned the headscarf were primarily from privileged families of the corporate Islamists. These problematic observations were supported by dubious polls conducted by Kemalist researchers.

Those with Kemalist principles, Kemalists argued, should populate the public space. The main line of contention was really that simple. As one of the main public spaces in society, the university had to be cleared of the symbolic presence of counter-hegemonic projects. Kemalists predicted that Islamists would first take the university, and then the entire public space. A Kemalist university professor from Middle East Technical University in Ankara wrote to Çalışkan: "What if they [Islamists] one day want primary-school children to wear the headscarf, and public employees have the right to wear the headscarf, even in the Grand National Assembly, the house of Atatürk?"²¹

AKP representatives, such as Speaker of Parliament Köksal Toptan, argued that the party did not have any plans to deregulate the wearing of the headscarf in other

public spaces such as the National Assembly. No one believes him, including his own party. This is primarily because the AKP needs the headscarf controversy to mobilize symbolic dissent and thus create a fantasy of inclusion for the masses otherwise marginalized by neo-liberal economic policies. The CHP also needs the headscarf controversy to reproduce its own politics of symbolic mobilization and to continue deploying the empty signifier of Kemalism.

Independent initiatives of liberals and socialists did attempt a third way. Politically unorganized and having no organic relations on the ground, these minor strands predictably wrote petitions and letters for publication in the liberal press. Their position rightly argued that the AKP's stance to leave women free to wear the headscarf in the universities is a badly planned move for individual liberties. A genuine libertarian move would be to focus on Article 301 of the Penal Code that the state uses to silence dissent.²² Unleashing a war of signatures, these initiatives led to a competition among university professors who are for the headscarf, for the ban, and for the third way.

Conclusion or New Beginnings

Although the headscarf controversy that has been shaking the country for months is about women, the majority of conversations in the public space have taken place among men. Despite the central role that Kemalist-conservative women played in the Republic Demonstrations that took down the previous AKP government, the men of power pushed aside women of both conservatisms. All seven drafters of the Headscarf Bill are men, as are the AKP president of the Higher Education Council who threatened university presidents opposing the headscarf was a man, the prime minister, the president, and the speaker of the parliament. Yet the controversy is about women's bodies. Where have the women been?

Conservative women of Kemalist and neo-Islamist backgrounds have played an active yet secondary role in the controversy. Their politics were mostly mobilized by agendas that suppress the emergence of a mass feminist politics. For short-term individual gain, many women of various conservative strands are ready to give up feminist politics, if not politics altogether.

Yet not all women have been silenced or coopted. Like the rest of the political spectrum in the country, the women's movement was split between Kemalist and libertarian feminists. Now it is even more difficult for the feminists of Turkey to form a united political bloc, precisely due to the fact that the object of controversy is women. On the one hand, Kemalist-leaning feminists argue that the headscarf regulates women's bodies, pushing them into a secondary position in public space. As a policy option, these feminists argue that women donning headscarves should thus be banned from public space altogether! Ridiculing such a self-contradictory position, libertarian feminists argue that any prescription—whether Islamist or Kemalist—for what women can or cannot wear contradicts the gains of feminism and should be resisted.²³

Accusing the libertarians of indirectly supporting the conservative AKP, the Kemalist-conservative feminists labeled their opponents as naïve and ignorant about what "really" was happening in the country. Kemalists invited the libertarians to

join their struggle by reminding them of the miniscule participation of women with headscarves in the demonstrations that Kemalists and libertarians had co-organized to forge a major reform in the Turkish civil code. They also tried to drag the libertarians to their side by recalling that neo-Islamist feminists did not recognize the freedom of choosing homosexuality. And they were right. Yet they, themselves, did not recognize the rights of gays and lesbians.

Women's rights activists from the Islamist spectrum are also divided. Those affiliated with the AKP seem to subcontract the solution to the men of power. These men are openly against the organization of a mass movement as a solution and thus regulate the democratic reflexes of their women (and men) supporters as it aims to deregulate the headscarf. A great majority of AKP women accept this deal and remain relatively silent.

Many Islamist women do organize petitions and work to form a coalition with the libertarian feminists who have organizing skills and a relatively powerful political network. Yet Islamist women fail to gain the support of these non-Kemalist feminists because of their ambivalent position regarding women's rights and their selective take on freedom of sexual orientation. Gender still smacks a bit too much of sex for many Islamists.

Nevertheless, there is a window of hope. Not everyone took a side on the narrow spectrum delineated by Kemalist and neo-Islamist conservatism in Turkey. Small yet effective initiatives from the right and the left brought fresh perspectives to the controversy. A group of Islamist women in the country put together a statement signed by more than three hundred women with headscarves. These women argued that they were against pursuing their freedom to wear the headscarf if freedom of speech and expression continue to be regulated in the face of the government's reluctance to forge a coherent liberal agenda. Surprising the Kemalists, these women refused to be hijacked by either party's conservatism. Choosing the words "women with headscarves" as their e-mail address, these pioneers ended their statement with the words of the prophet Muhammad, "It is thanks to justice that the skies and the earth stand on their feet."

Similarly, a small group of students and activists organized a demonstration at Boğaziçi University with the participation of socialists, libertarian feminists, and Islamist women's rights activists. Men covered their heads with a scarf, and marched with women with and without headscarves, chanting, "Don't touch my friend." The students argued that they organized the demonstration as a reaction to a professor who violently grabbed the headscarf of one of their friends during a lecture and revealed her hair. The student left the classroom silently and went home, bypassing this unique demonstration.

Despite some hopeful openings in the controversy, mass conservatism continues to dominate the debate. Neo-Islamists pursue a politics of contemporary conservatism in line with the tradition of European Christian Democrats. They want capitalism with a moral face. Yet they lack the wealth European conservatives enjoy thanks to the gains of colonialism. Creating an effect of inclusion for those who are marginalized as a result of neo-liberal policies, the conservatism of neo-Islamists mobilizes a politics

of symbolic dissent to create an effect of inclusion. The neo-Islamists regulate social movements, for they know that if things get out of hand, the army may ask them to leave the political center, which is open only to political entrepreneurs who can control their supporters.

On the other hand, the conservatism of Kemalism reproduces an empty signifier. Emptied of its corporatist content, Kemalists reproduce their position by mobilizing a politics of lifestyle and fear. Without independent social democratic politics, Kemalist conservatism contributes to the further polarization of the debate by alluding to the fact that the AKP could “turn Turkey into Iran” one day. With no prospect of mobilizing masses along Kemalist lines, the elite and upper middle-class supporters of Kemalist conservatism now exude signs of exhaustion and soul searching. Realizing the unprecedented success of neo-Islamist organizing in unions such as Hak-İş, that secured an 81 percent increase in membership in the last four years, Kemalists are now pondering what went wrong.

The only opening that they can forge now is to realize that what went wrong was Kemalism itself. Yet as long as Kemalism works to provide the elite with an empty signifier, it will remain intact despite the unbearable vacuity of its substance. This is the power of symbols in Turkish politics. What after all is under a headscarf is the politics of symbol mobilization working against working women and men. The substantive agendas of these working people are dominated by the politics of Kemalist and neo-liberal conservative elites, whose wives wear, or do not wear, the headscarf.

ENDNOTES

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¹ The data published by the Bureau of Government Statistics places unemployment at 11.2 percent, yet distorts the real figure in two ways. First, those who lost hope of finding a job are subtracted from the unemployment data. Second, the data overlooks the rising unemployment in the informal sector. For estimates of real unemployment rates, see www.kesk.org and www.tisk.org.tr.

² For a cogent analysis of the political economy of the neo-Islamist AKP government, see Ziya Öniş, “The Political Economy of Islam and Democracy in Turkey: From the Welfare Party to the AKP,” in Dietrich Jung, ed., *Democracy and Development: New Political Strategies for the Middle East* (New York: Palgrave, 2006).

³ See www.tbmm.gov.tr for the Turkish version of the constitutional amendment.

⁴ For the history of this period see Feroz Ahmad, *The Making of Modern Turkey* (London: Routledge, 1993) and Erik J. Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995).

⁵ For an analysis of the emergence of political Islam in Turkey see Binnaz Toprak, *Islam and Political Development in Turkey* (Leiden: Brill, 1981).

⁶ For the genealogy of Turkish-Islamic Synthesis see Sam Kaplan, “Din-u Devlet All Over Again? The Politics of Military Secularism and Religious Militarism in Turkey Following the 1980 Coup,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34, no. 1 (February 2002): 113-127.

⁷ *Milliyet*, 24 April 1994.

⁸ *Milliyet*, 29 February 2007.

⁹ For the relationship between neo-liberalism and Islamism in Turkey see Faruk Birtek and Binnaz Toprak, “The Conflictual Agendas of Neo-Liberal Reconstruction and the Rise of Islamic Politics in Turkey,” *Praxis International* 13 (July 1993): 192-212.

¹⁰ For a comprehensive review of the literature regarding women and Islam in Turkey see Yeşim Arat, *Rethinking Islam and Liberal Democracy: Islamist Women in Turkish Politics* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005). For the controversies regarding the headscarf in Turkey see Müge Göçek, "To Veil or Not to Veil," *Interventions* 1, no. 4 (1993); Nilüfer Göle, *The Forbidden Modern: Civilization and Veiling* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1996); Aynur İlyasoğlu, "Örtülü Kimlik (Veiled Identity)," *Oral History* (Autumn 1996); Deniz Kandiyoti, ed., *Women, Islam, and the State* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1991).

¹¹ Unlike the majority of demonstrations, these were not centered in Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir only, but rather took place across the country.

¹² Bekir Coşkun's columns in the newspaper *Hürriyet* were the first to popularize the term.

¹³ On the ideological nature of Kemalism, see Taha Parla and Andrew Davison, *Corporatist Ideology in Kemalist Turkey* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2004). On the changes in Kemalism after Atatürk's death, see John M. Vander Lippe, *The Politics of Turkish Democracy: İsmet İnönü and the Formation of the Multi-Party System, 1938-1950* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005).

¹⁴ On AKP policies and history see Koray Çalışkan and Yüksel Taşkın, "Turkey's Dangerous Game," *Middle East Report Online*, 27 March 2003, and Koray Çalışkan and Yüksel Taşkın, "Litmus Test: Turkey's Neo-Islamists Weigh War and Peace," *Middle East Report Online*, 30 January 2003.

¹⁵ Ernesto Laclau develops the concept of the empty signifier as "strictly speaking, a signifier without a signified." Describing the ways the empty signifiers work, he writes, "The only possibility for a stream of sounds being detached from any particular signified while still remaining a signifier is if through the subversion of the sign which the possibility of an empty signifier involves, something is achieved which is internal to significations as such." Systems that draw on mechanisms of exclusions cannot attach meaning to themselves by the positivity of a signifier. Thus, they have to be built on empty signifiers: "[A]ny system of signification is structured around an empty place resulting from the impossibility of producing an object which, nonetheless, is required by the systematicity of the system. Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 1996), 36, 40.

¹⁶ This violence entailed not recognizing mature women's choices, forcing them to remove their headscarves, and using professors' power positions to force a fundamental change in the students' personal orientations in exchange for a university diploma.

¹⁷ "Feminism in suits" used the headscarf as a weapon against the new elite women. As they pursue feminist politics, they do not hesitate to produce a class elitism, and even racism, even finding leftist supporters for their bizarre politics. The headscarf debate produced such a violent and tough discussion that it became hard to appreciate the multi-layered nature of the problem. The reaction of the new elite women toward the old (from liking to resistance) and the way this conflict reshaped gender relations were not discussed at all. The authors do not think that the question of the headscarf is about subaltern women. Taking up the veil or refusing to wear it belong to two separate contexts; it is misleading to think of these two acts as two sides of the same coin.

¹⁸ While Islamist women had their own fears, they did not politicize them as much as the seemingly secular elite women in suits.

¹⁹ We thank Arundhati Roy for this expression. In a conversation with Çalışkan, she stated, "Irony is not possible in India."

²⁰ On different genres of veiling in Turkey, see Barış Kılıçbay and Mutlu Binark, "Consumer Culture, Islam and the Politics of Lifestyle," *European Journal of Communication* 17, no. 2 (2002).

²¹ Personal e-mail correspondence.

²² The article states: "A person who publicly denigrates Turkishness, the Republic or the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, shall be punishable by imprisonment of between six months and three years." Since the definition of "denigrating Turkishness" is not clear, prosecutors can exploit it to try virtually anyone critical of the country.

²³ For us, feminism refers to the politics of unconditional liberation for women. Such a politics draws on asserting women's agency in public space without subcontracting political action to men, even if these men may pursue various forms of politics with feminist objectives. ♦