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Religion, Politics and Gender Equality in Turkey: implications of a democratic paradox?

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Religion, Politics and Gender Equality in Turkey: implications of a democratic paradox?

YEŞİM ARAT

ABSTRACT This article examines the gendered implications of the intertwining of Islam and politics that took shape after the process of democratisation in Turkey had brought a political party with an Islamist background to power. This development revived the spectre of restrictive sex roles for women. The country is thus confronted with a democratic paradox: the expansion of religious freedoms accompanying potential and/or real threats to gender equality. The ban on the Islamic headscarf in universities has been the most visible terrain of public controversy on Islam. However, the paper argues that a more threatening development is the propagation of patriarchal religious values, sanctioning secondary roles for women through the public bureaucracy as well as through the educational system and civil society organisations.

Turkey is going through a revolutionary experiment with Islam in liberal democratic politics, the results of which are not yet clear. The process of democratisation that began with the transition to multiparty rule in 1950 increased the presence of Islam in public life and relaxed the state's hold on religion. Over the past decade this process has triggered the intertwining of politics and religion and revived the spectre of restrictive sex roles for women. The country is thus struggling with a democratic paradox: the exercise of religious freedoms, encouraged by democratically elected governments, accompanies potential or real threats to gender equality. If, indeed, 'Islamic values are less supportive of gender equality and less tolerant of sexual liberalisation', than those of other cultures, as is often argued,¹ then we need to explore urgently the implications of this democratic paradox for gender equality.

This paper first traces the intertwining of religion and politics in the past decade in Turkey. It then examines the effects of this interface from a gender perspective, exploring how this process affects the 'opportunities' available to women. I argue that it is not the lifting of the much-publicised Islamist² headscarf ban in universities that we should prioritise as a danger, but the propagation of patriarchal religious values sanctioning secondary roles for

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women through the state bureaucracy, as well as through the educational system and civil society organisations. Party cadres with sexist values infiltrate the political system, and religious movements that were once banned establish schools, dormitories and off-campus Quranic courses, socialising the young into religiously sanctioned secondary roles for women.

Without essentialising Islam, we need to locate the specific dangers that certain Islamist discourses pose for women. To counter these dangers, we can strengthen cross-cutting alliances between liberals both within Islamist and secular camps to initiate pro-women's rights change from within these groups. A vigilant and active civil society, including a bourgeoisie committed to an enlightened secularism and to liberal democracy, can become an important oppositional force against the promotion of a conservative agenda that sanctions secondary roles for women. Closer global links with those states, institutions and people that uphold women's rights as human rights, are also important for the containment of restrictive gender roles.

The context: secularism and Islam in Turkey

This paper focuses on the intertwining of religion and politics taking place in the past decade in the context of a secular Turkey, whose Constitution states that the country's secular nature can not be changed or even proposed to be changed. The break from a formally Shariat (religious law)-ruled empire and the institution of a secular Republic took place in the 1920s.³ The founding fathers abolished the Caliphate, Ministries of Sharia and religious foundations. They secularised the legal system and educational institutions and aimed to secularise the culture too (by changing dress codes, adopting the Latin alphabet and the Gregorian calendar). They adopted a new Civil Code (borrowing from the Swiss Civil Code), which allowed women in Turkey, unlike any other Muslim country, to be liberated from the restrictions that traditional Islamist interpretations had imposed on them. The new Civil Code prohibited polygamy, subjected marriage to secular law, outlawed unilateral divorce, and recognised gender equality in inheritance and guardianship of children. The newly established secular Ministry of Education unified all educational programmes and establishments under its authority. Sciences and morals could thus develop independently of religious dogma. Secular education replaced religious teaching.

The founders further established a Directorate of Religious Affairs, allowing the state to oversee religious matters and shape religious activity.⁴ The state could thus have a say in how religious functionaries interpreted religion and what the preachers and prayer leaders could or could not say in Friday sermons. Public praying was discouraged as mosques deteriorated because funds were not allocated for their repair.

Even though women were not prohibited from wearing the veil, regulations, if not laws, led female civil servants to adapt to Western dress codes instead of Muslim ones, including uncovering their hair. In this era of wholehearted Westernisation, female role models around Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the Republic's founder and first president, dressed in Western style

in daily life. Attending Republican balls in décolleté dresses assured the legitimacy of a Turkish Islam for women, in which women could express their sexuality in public life.

Republican secularism was neither democratic nor liberal but it was comprehensive and radical.⁵ The new regime was less interested in securing religious freedoms than in disestablishing Islam and controlling its power in civil life. As such, the state did not necessarily separate itself from religious affairs but rather attempted to shape the content and role of religion in society. Through secularism it aimed to facilitate the Westernisation of the predominantly Muslim society inherited from the Ottomans. Under Kemalist secularism the Enlightenment faith in reason and science flourished. Because of its close links to the state, secularism in Turkey has been compared to the Jacobin French 'laicism' rather than to the liberal Anglo-Saxon secularism. To this day this particular secularism shapes the world-views of many Turkish citizens, including the educated elite as well as the military.

However, while the new Republic was successfully pursuing the twin goals of Westernisation and development, the emerging middle and agricultural classes led the call for democratisation. This in turn precipitated the need to relax the secular hold of the state over society. In 1950 Turkey moved away from a single-party to a multiparty regime. The call to prayer began to be delivered in Arabic again and the government established Prayer Leader and Preacher schools.⁶ The 1960 military intervention and the ensuing 1961 Constitution, which expanded the freedom of expression and civil liberties, led to the emergence of a series of Islamist political parties. Each of them was subsequently closed either by a military intervention (Milli Selamet) or by the Constitutional Court (Milli Nizam, Refah and Fazilet Parties) on charges of undermining secularism. The younger generation of Fazilet members, who wanted their party to become mainstream, founded the Adalet ve Kalkinma Party (AKP, Justice and Development Party) in 2001.⁷ They reconciled themselves with Turkey's European orientation, which their predecessors had opposed, and prepared a liberal party programme which even promised to uphold the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

The resilience of electoral democracy in Turkey helped moderate the Islamists who sought political power. In the November 2002 elections the AKP received 34.3 per cent of the votes and assumed power as a single party government with 363 seats in the parliament (out of 550).⁸ The overwhelming majority of the population at the time (about 70 per cent), including the AKP's primary constituency of the provincial Islamist bourgeoisie, supported the prospect of joining the European Union, and everyone wanted a strong, stable and growing economy.⁹ By 2002 the smaller Anatolian-based entrepreneurs, along with the Istanbul-based big business, were ready to profit from closer integration into Europe. AKP responded to both economic and political demands, overcame the long-entrenched antagonism of the Islamists towards Europe and proved to be capable of running a stable economy—something that previous governments had failed to do.

Although the party was against the famous ban on Islamic head covering in universities, which had been supported by the Constitutional Court as well as the European Human Rights Commission and the European Court of Human Rights, it underplayed the issue during its first term in office.

In the July 2007 elections AKP returned to power with 47 per cent of votes and 340 seats in the parliament (out of 550).¹⁰ It was the first time in Turkish history that a political party with an Islamist background had come to power with half of the electorate behind it. The balance between the so-called secularists and the Islamists had changed. More easily now AKP could build the two-thirds majority it needed for changing the Constitution. After it had come to power, the party pushed through its candidate for the presidency of the country, Abdullah Gül, to the utter disappointment of the opposition. Leaving aside its promises of a liberal, comprehensive constitutional amendment endorsed by a broad coalition both within and outside the parliament, which could also have facilitated relations with the EU, the AKP sought to change the Constitution only to bypass the ban on headscarves in universities. In March 2008 the Public Prosecutor took AKP to the Constitutional Court, accusing it of undermining the constitutional principle of secularism, and asking for the closure of the party. In July 2008 the Court found AKP guilty but decided not to close it, as had been the case in earlier instances, but to punish it with a fine.

Intertwining of religion and politics: AKP and the headscarf issue

The most visible intertwining of religion and politics during AKP's tenure was its attempt to abolish the ban on headscarves by amending the Constitution. In January 2008 AKP constructed a hasty coalition with the rightist nationalists to abolish the ban on headscarves by amending the relevant constitutional articles. The government aimed to amend article 10 of the Constitution on equality and equal treatment before the law by adding a clause on equality in 'the procurement of public services'. It also tried to amend article 42 on the right to education by adding 'no one would be deprived of the right to education unless openly articulated by law'. The attempt backfired and encouraged the Public Prosecutor to take the party to court.

Attempting to resolve the problem through a constitutional amendment amounted to bringing in a religious dictate through the back door into the secular Constitution, the secular nature of which could not even be amended by popular vote. Even though the language of the amendment made no reference to religion or to the freedom of religion and simply put the issue in terms of liberal rights to equality and equal rights to receive education, the religious motive was clear to all. After all, those who wore the headscarf did so because they assumed it to be a religious dictate.

Even though the headscarf debate has been the most controversial and visible manifestation of the intertwining of religion and politics in Turkey, I would like to argue that a more insidious development, as far as women's right to equality is concerned, is the propagation of patriarchal religious values promoting gender inequality and confining women to the domestic

realm. Headscarves are an outcome of a particular religious socialisation. But more problematic is when people, especially members of the younger generation, are socialised to endorse religious dictates and practices that attribute secondary status to women. Headscarves might be part of such a socialisation, but need not be.

AKP and the propagation of Islamist norms

There are different levels at which religion and politics are intertwined in Turkey. Before discussing them, we should note that, in practice, there can be and there in fact is much diversity as to how religions are interpreted. Orthodox readings that subordinate women need not be the prevalent readings. However, there is evidence that religious teachings, for example in Prayer Leader and Preacher Schools, in which many AKP leaders and partisans including the prime minister Erdoğan studied, promote maternal roles and the segregation of the sexes, and sanction men's control over women's bodies as well as over their 'honour'.¹¹ AKP does not have to implement a systematic plan to promote traditional roles sanctioned by religious readings. However, religious cadres infiltrating the state bureaucracy and the educational institutions propagate these values because this is part of their socialisation.

As has been common practice in Turkey, AKP, as the ruling party, has recruited its own male supporters into civil service positions and other public institutions. Yet, unlike in previous governments, the recruits are mostly religious people who endorse traditional sex roles. Newspapers frequently report that civil service positions are being steadily filled by AKP partisans,¹² who uphold traditional patriarchal values legitimised by religious dictates. Feminist researchers argue that women administrators feel AKP bureaucrats and politicians are uncomfortable working with women in the public service and resent the presence of women without headscarves in public places.¹³

In a country where the labour force participation rate of women does not even reach 25 per cent, the government seems to discourage rather than encourage women to enter the labour market. Even though employment rates during AKP's term in office have been very low for both men and women, women's employment rates have deteriorated to a larger extent than men's.¹⁴ The new Social Security and General Health Insurance Amendment, which became effective in October 2008, restricted the conditions for women's retirement. Even though this is sometimes seen as a useful mechanism for keeping women in the labour force, in a country with such low rates of female labour force participation, women's entry into the labour market is discouraged if the lure of a retirement benefit is taken away. Working outside the house to acquire the safety of a pension is out of reach for many women. In the same amendment women's ability to benefit from their father's health insurance, a privilege men never had but which allowed women to be less dependent on their husbands, was repealed. These changes can undermine women's economic independence and opportunities for work, make them more dependent on their husbands and encourage them to stay at

home. While the Social Security Amendment was heatedly debated, the prime minister advised women to give birth to at least three children.¹⁵ There was no mention of the need for day-care centres or women's choices in this matter. This conservative mind-set resonates well with orthodox interpretations of religious texts, encouraging maternal roles and restricting substantive opportunities for women.¹⁶

Besides the administrative ranks traditional or religious values are also infiltrating the educational system. In line with the 1982 Constitution, there are required religion courses in elementary schools, which are problematic in themselves to the extent that they legitimise and endorse religious teachings. The European Court of Human Rights issued a decree against mandatory religious courses for all children, irrespective of their faith, to learn the teachings of Islam; yet they continue to be part of the curriculum. Beyond the requirements of these courses, religious practice seems to be spreading, as is evident in the increasing number of women who cover their heads even in public high schools. Textbooks used by Religious Knowledge courses advise the use of headscarves for girls, there are now public high schools with prayer rooms, and some students even use prayer rugs to pray in classrooms.¹⁷

The high school philosophy course guides prepared in the context of a revised curriculum have been criticised because they propagate religious values. The guide books expect philosophy teachers to teach students the value of religion. Teachers are expected to engage in drills that prove the existence of God using cosmological, ontological and theological evidence.¹⁸ If the public education system is used to legitimise religion and religious values, then the space for expanding opportunities for women or for fighting against restrictive roles that orthodox interpretations of Islam endorse becomes narrower.

Egitim-Sen, the social democratic labour union of teachers, reported that, especially in public schools in Anatolian districts and villages, AKP recruits and employs teachers from its patronage networks who are close to its conservative background.¹⁹ Under these conditions, according to the Egitim-Sen report, students are encouraged or directed to attend the dormitories and the off-campus courses of religious orders and communities. Students who were pressured to cover their heads and pray in dormitories owned by religious orders are featured in the press now and then.²⁰

In April 2007 there were several instances in various cities in which public elementary schools began celebrating the birth of the Prophet with religious Quranic chants sung by young female students with covered hair and long dresses.²¹ These religious celebrations in secular public schools were carried out with the consent and knowledge of governors and administrators. In the Altındag district of the capital, Ankara, all headmasters of public schools in the district were asked to attend the celebrations. Secular schools were thus involved in promoting religious observance and socialisation.

Meanwhile, the government decided to allocate public funds to expand theology education in public universities. Most recently the Higher Educational Council increased the number of students the 22 theology faculties in Turkey could recruit from 813 to 2724.²² The government also encouraged

the proliferation of Quranic courses by softening the penalisation of illegal ones. There are about 8000 registered Quranic courses and the number of illegal ones is not known, although it is easy to locate one around any mosque. The previous director of religious affairs argued that these illegal courses, mostly affiliated to religious communities, were preaching separatist religious propaganda.²³ There is little reason to expect that their teachings on gender issues are progressive.

Besides administrative and educational bureaucracy, civil servants of the Directorate of Religious Affairs themselves also promote patriarchal norms legitimised by religious reference. The Directorate of Religious Affairs under the AKP Prime Ministry claims that head covering is a requirement of Islam.²⁴ The director, Ali Bardakoğlu, has publicly argued that 'for fourteen centuries in the Islamic world, women covered their heads because it is a religious requirement'.²⁵ Beyond head covering, on its website on sexual life and prohibitions the Directorate exhorted women not to use perfume outside their homes, not to remain alone with men who were not relatives, and not to flirt.²⁶ In effect, the Directorate, as the highest religious authority in the country and ironically as part of the secular state apparatus, was aiming to control women's bodies, discouraging them from working outside their homes where contact with non-relatives would be inevitable, and aiming to regulate their sexual lives. These pronouncements, to say the least, would be hard to reconcile with CEDAW, signed by the state and to which AKP has paid formal homage in its platform. If the Directorate, tied to the prime minister, argues that women should not remain alone with men, then the pious prime minister would have no incentive to provide employment opportunities for them. While believers might not take issue with these pronouncements, and would indeed happily abide by them, these religious interpretations are expanding men's control over the choices and bodies of women. The more liberal interpretations of Islam, which do not expect women to cover their heads and which the founding fathers assumed, is being replaced by another interpretation increasing patriarchal control over women's bodies. The fact that alternative interpretations of Islam which do not restrict women's choices are not being propagated by government-controlled bodies is disconcerting.

The government seems ready to defend the propagation of sexist values by public employees, including those of the Directorate. When a prayer leader in a mosque advised his congregation in a Friday sermon not to let their wives work outside the home, because women working outside the home would be more liable to commit adultery, the case made it to the national press. The imam was simply moved from one mosque to another as a punishment, clearly not enough to prevent similar pronouncements.²⁷ On 11 April 2008 a group of feminists prepared an indictment against the Prayer Leader for defying the equality principles in the Penal Code and the Constitution. The public prosecutor advised them that the prayer leader enjoyed 'freedom of thought'. The fact that a sexist, patriarchal dictate denigrating women was preached by a public employee in a position of state as well as religious authority was rationalised as an act of liberalism. In short, the party in power

might have a liberal/conservative programme rather than a religious one, but the religious conservative constituency of the party has been emboldened to practise and propagate religiously legitimated conservative values that discriminate against women.

Another case of an AKP affiliate using his office to propagate sexist ideology was that of the Tuzla mayor who published and distributed a pamphlet to newly married couples on how to maintain a good marriage. In this pamphlet women were advised to be subservient to their husbands, and husbands were told to resort to wife-beating if necessary.²⁸ Even though the top leadership of the party did not encourage this, the religious constituency of the party heard a more conservative tune which resonated well with orthodox readings of Islam. The party in turn was committing sins of omission by ignoring or imposing only token punishments on these partisans occupying public positions.

In so far as lifestyles are concerned, drinking alcohol has been made more difficult under AKP rule. The international survey company Nielsen reported for the 2005–08 period a 12.6 per cent decrease in the number of premises selling alcohol in Turkey.²⁹ AKP-backed municipalities took over the management of alcohol-selling restaurants and cafes stopped serving drinks altogether. According to a decree issued in 2005 by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, many restaurants with alcohol licences were required to do business only in designated districts and even the social clubs of sports teams were prohibited from serving alcohol.³⁰ In Denizli, a city in the western Anatolia region, the AKP mayor ordered all restaurants selling alcohol to move to the part of the city where tanneries were located—a move that continues to be opposed by the restaurant owners, especially because the smell would keep customers away.³¹ A similar decision was announced in Bursa. The Islamic prohibition of alcohol is thus creeping into secular life under paternalistic pretexts such as ‘alcohol selling restaurants would create noise and disturb public order in residential areas’ or ‘sports and alcohol should not go together for the benefit of the youth’. The right to drink alcohol or disregard religious dictates is thus being denied, using functional and secular justifications.

Causality is difficult to establish, and the examples discussed above illustrate different juxtapositions of religion and politics. Some bring in religion directly to promote a religious way of life through public schools. Others appeal to secular functionalist arguments and liberal principles without making any explicit reference to religion. There is no explicit reference to Islam when AKP bureaucrats express their resentment of uncovered women in public office or when the Denizli mayor banishes alcohol-selling restaurants to a ghetto, yet indirectly they bring a conservative interpretation of religion into the public and political domain.

These examples are not meant to suggest that all AKP party cadres support regressive views on gender issues, nor that there is a ‘hidden agenda’ shared by all members regarding women’s public presence. However, these are examples of how conservative values detrimental to women’s interests are creeping into and permeating society at large through the religious cadres of a political party that is in power. The conservative constituency of the AKP

does not expect the party cadres to abide by the party's progressive programme, which includes gender equality. They may not even have heard of CEDAW. What the supporters expect, however, is that the party use its position of power to propagate the conservative religious values that they are more familiar with.

Civil society and the intertwining of religion and politics

The intertwining of religion and politics is not confined to the explicitly political realm. Religious groups, religious businessmen and religious communities, some of whom were banned during the early years of the Republic, are widely active in society these days. These groups are politically accommodated and penetrate politics and government service. Although civil society is an important means to empower, reinforce, legitimise, support and control the democratic institutions of political society, it can also act to restrict, control, prevent participation, and reinforce prevailing unequal distributions of economic or social power. The problem becomes exacerbated if a conservative religious group advocates religiously legitimated private roles for women, organises and gains immense power through civil society and exerts power on political groups, as is the case in Turkey.

The religious Gülen community, for example, which has organic ties to the business world controls significant resources to shape the educational system and early socialisation of the young. The group allegedly runs about 200 high schools, about 400 classrooms for instruction (*dershane*) and dormitories large enough to board about 25 000 students. It also provides generous scholarships to needy students.³² Although the schools provide excellent secular education, students are gently guided into the pious culture of the group, particularly through dormitory life. They are thus led to accept more orthodox religious understandings of gender roles and interests. Researchers emphasise that women of the community are encouraged to lead pious lives as good wives and mothers, spending time in religious gatherings and on readings of the Quran and at times working voluntarily as bigger sisters in the community's schools or dormitories. Berna Turam, who studied the Gülen group, problematises women's engagement in the community as 'compromising women's agency'.³³ While agency can involve choosing a religious life, this move constitutes a dramatic restriction of other choices.

Binnaz Toprak, in her work on 'othering' in Turkey, urgently drew attention to the social pressures exerted by the Gülen community on those who are outside it. The so-called 'houses of light', established and run by the community to provide much-needed boarding and support to young students, seem to be the loci of religious indoctrination. As researchers report, the 'sisters', 'brothers' and 'prayer leaders' in these houses intervened in, and placed restrictions on, how their boarders dressed, what they watched, what they read and how they related to the other sex. They encouraged girls to wear headscarves, which they argued religion required, and they promoted a religious world view that restricted girls far more than boys.³⁴

Possible implications of the intertwining of religion and politics for women and their rights

The intertwining of religion and politics inevitably affects women's opportunities. The net result, as this paper has argued, has not been a visible expansion of women's freedoms and choices. On the contrary, increasing conservatism seems to extend control over women's lives, although there are niches where religious women have challenged gender-based restrictions imposed on them by religious teachings. In Turkey the most contested and controversial result of the blending of religion and politics has been the unsuccessful move to legalise headscarves in universities. Had the ban been lifted, the right to university education of headscarved religious women and their freedom of religious expression would have expanded. Assuming these women choose to wear headscarves free from coercion and can explore options beyond what orthodox religious teachings prescribe, the parameters of liberal individualism could have expanded. Similarly, Turkish 'secularism' which has historically been statist, would have become more inclusive.

Independent of the ban on headscarves, the closer integration of religion and politics seems to have encouraged women to wear headscarves, which ultimately might restrict their opportunities. After all, for many men and women, atheists or believers, headscarves are a religious dictate and control women's sexuality and choice.³⁵ Headscarved women can serve as role models for other women. It is not that women working in the public service are not allowed to wear headscarves, many do work with headscarves anyway, but head covering can come along with other restrictive views on women's place in society and on women's lower status in relation to men. If women cover their heads because they understand it as a religious dictate, then they might endorse other religious dictates or at least interpretations assigning women secondary roles as well. This does not have to be the case, and headscarved women can be empowered and can play active roles in politics.³⁶ But there are statistics that show that women who cover their heads tend to be more reluctant to approve the concept of women working outside the house.³⁷ After all, both might be seen as religious dictates. These women can and apparently do submit to restrictive roles that religion proposes. On the other hand, even when covered women are active in public space, head covering restricts women's engagement in many activities such as sports, dance and ballet. They might not express interest in these engagements but many women who do not have substantive options do deny interest in alternatives that seem beyond their reach. Even those who are physically beaten come to rationalise this violence if there are no alternative options available to them.³⁸

In Turkey, where about 70 per cent of women cover their hair, secular women who do not can feel the pressure to do so, as head covering receives increasing legitimacy. Women who do not cover their hair argue that their freedom of religious expression, which does not necessitate head covering, is threatened in a context where the majority of covered women put pressure on them. They argue that covering women represents patriarchal control over

women's sexuality and women should not be socialised into this particular religious interpretation.

This threat is not one that could be prevented by a ban on headscarves in universities. The threat exists anyway if headscarves are in the majority outside university doors. The impact of religious cadres at the administrative and educational levels and the spread of religious communities are the more important processes at work. The extension of Islamist education or the propagation of Islamic values regarding traditional sex roles, which encourage women to become traditional mothers and housewives, could pose a serious danger to other women who believe in expanding their opportunities outside the home and in increasing their autonomy from traditional patriarchal means of control. If the influence of Islamic communities in the educational and administrative ranks spreads, such restrictive roles are likely to spread as well. Rather than the headscarf ban, the institutional spread of Islamist values propagating restrictive roles for women and restrictive lifestyles in general is more likely to pose a danger to women and gender equality.

Anne Phillips invokes the feminist concern that 'horizons are drawn in relation to what is perceived as possible'.³⁹ This concern resonates well with developments in Turkey, where the spread of religious control over women's bodies and minds could be perceived as 'what is possible'. If the concept of 'adaptive preferences' involves the 'capacity to ignore those things we feel we cannot change or undervalue those opportunities we know to be closed to us . . . and perceptions of what is desirable are formed against a backdrop of what seems possible, and choices are made from what appears to be the available range',⁴⁰ then the widespread propagation of religious norms and gender roles is problematic. When women find themselves within religious communities in which a traditional division of labour is sanctioned, or when they are exhorted to obey their husbands or wear headscarves as religious dictates, they will most likely 'adapt their preferences'. If these women are not given the opportunity to seek alternative means of self-fulfilment, such as through public engagement, leadership or employment outside the house, they may well lower their aspirations. Women should have substantive choices about what they can do with their lives before we encourage them to lead pious lives, especially in a political context constitutionally committed to secular egalitarian laws rather than religious ones.

If we are concerned about increasing women's options and giving them a chance to lead lives in which they can choose not to be dependent on their husbands, then the propagation of religious values can be a hazard to women. Can women increase their opportunities for self-enhancement by engaging in the life and mission of the community and opt for communitarian values without 'adapting their preferences'? Can women increase opportunities for self-enhancement within the context of religious communities? Working for a political party that upholds an Islamist discourse can empower women. However, the kind of religious communities that are fast spreading gives little hope for expanding women's opportunities. On the contrary, the little evidence that we have suggests that women's

options are being limited within their religiously patriarchal communities, and that these communities are resistant to internal change.

Even though the governing party in Turkey may not be monolithic in pursuit of a single-minded islamisation of society, it is not interested in regulating the dominant religious communities, let alone in challenging their teachings about and practices regarding women. Under these circumstances it is important to empower those secular civil society groups who are interested in women's rights and in expanding civil, political and economic rights for all, including religious groups. Women's groups in Turkey do react to and protest against any violation of women's rights. Yet they need to strengthen their alliances with other groups whose lifestyles or priorities are threatened by the onslaught of restrictive values sanctioned with reference to Islam. Both secular and Islamist groups, such as Islamist feminists, who are against the religious as well as secular oppression of women, can be important allies in the expansion of opportunities and autonomy. The intertwining of religion and politics will pose a danger to gender equality and democracy if these groups do not ally and raise stronger voices that are heard by the state and more progressive groups within conservative communities.

In this context integration into the global community is another important factor countering threats to women's rights. The EU was very important in the democratisation process and the expansion of women's rights in Turkey during the first AKP term of office. Links to other European countries did not merely influence the government but also strengthened civil society and other groups who sought to extend liberties and democratisation for all. These links could also strengthen secularism.⁴¹ However, the EU's reluctance to integrate Turkey and the consequent decline of support within the country for the European project slowed down the process of democratisation in Turkey. As a result, the European power to influence progressive politics came to a halt.

Nevertheless, the EU does not have to be the only way of integrating Turkey into the global community. Whether through communication, international law, integration into the capitalist system or merely tourism, interaction with the global community will help sustain opportunities for women by providing models, news and information about women's opportunities, lifestyles and demands in other countries. Interaction with 'the other' fosters internal change in any community, assuming borders are permeable.⁴² Thus we see headscarved women walking through university campuses arm in arm with their boyfriends and flirting with them. The Islamist feminist Hidayet Şefkatli Tuksal, who covers her hair, and her feminist friends, who don't, formed a coalition and created a blog in defence of women's rights. In solidarity they denounced any type of 'control over women's bodies whether in the name of modernity, secularism, the Republic, religion, tradition, custom, morality, honour or freedom'.⁴³ These developments show that traditional religious communities are prone to outside influence and that their members are not all puritanical fundamentalists. Women can have different options in this context of transformation.

We can see that transformation takes place within the religious Muslim community when we look at the literature produced by their authors over time. Kenan Çayır, who studied Islamic novels and the Islamic novelists' representations of their communities in the 1980s and the 1990s, shows how Islamist novels evolved from being mere ideological documents to more sophisticated self-reflexive texts. Çayır analyses how in the later novels the authors criticise the restraints of the collective definitions of Islamic identity and their religious community.⁴⁴ We need to keep in mind that these are singular developments which might not prevent a layered islamisation of society in which orthodox understandings of women's status are institutionally propagated.

Conclusion

Democracies, in Larry Diamond's words, live through 'built-in paradoxes or contradictions' that they each have to resolve.⁴⁵ If political participation and regular elections are not enough to establish a democracy and if liberal rights and freedoms are necessary if not sufficient conditions for democratic rule, then we should be wary that the expansion of democratic participation does not lead to the contraction of rights and freedoms.

The Turkish state and society are going through a cultural transformation in the context of their own democratic paradox. Since its inception in the early 1920s the Turkish state has committed itself to secularism. It has signed the basic human rights conventions that shape the contemporary liberal democratic legal framework, including CEDAW, which promotes women's rights. Nonetheless, religious norms and practices out of line with these documents are spreading as a consequence of choices democratic majorities have made. Democratically elected governments that come to office are instrumental in this change. Conservative cadres with religious values are moving into the civil bureaucracy as well as into the educational system. Religious communities are organising through civil society and propagating religious world-views. There is evidence that these religious world-views promote traditional roles for women, and that these restrict women's choices and engagement in the public world.

Religion in general, and Islam specifically, need not necessarily be a threat to women's interests. If, as feminists, we respect women's agency, we need to be ready to hear how women can expand their opportunities of empowerment or fulfilment through religion. But we also need to be watchful of the secondary roles orthodox interpretations of religion assign to women and the control they exert over the bodies and moral choices of women. We need to keep in mind that, if women are not given viable alternatives to religious moral grounding, they might be liable to accept the secondary roles prescribed by religion and adapt their preferences to the religious choices that have been made available to them. In the Turkish case we see a process whereby orthodox religious choices are increasingly promoted and made readily available to women at the cost of

forgoing substantive secular choices. This constitutes a narrowing of the range of choice and a threat to women's interests.

The potential threat has to be further contextualised. In Turkey the strong secular legal framework still provides the infrastructure for expanding women's opportunities. In the context of globalisation the alliance between forces, including feminists, professionals and the bourgeoisie, that engage with the outside world can help contain the threat posed by the local intertwining of religion and politics. Even the newly emerging Muslim bourgeoisie has an economic interest in integrating into the (secular) Western world. This alliance could, as Seyla Benhabib puts it, engage in a 'democratic iteration' by 'mediating the will and opinion formation of democratic majorities and cosmopolitan norms'.⁴⁶ The prospect remains that these groups will help mediate the religious proclivities of the 'democratic majorities' in the local context with the cosmopolitan norms of secularism upheld by the global context. There is room for caution and need for skilful accommodation of conflictual forces at work.

Notes

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- 2 The term 'Islamist' is used in an all-encompassing vague sense to refer to views, norms or practices that are coloured by religious reference in some way. The meaning of the term has changed over time from one claiming a more literal reference to Islam to another making oblique references.
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- 14 F Özkan, 'AKP'nin işsizliği kadınları daha çok vurdu' (AKP's unemployment hit women more), *Radikal*, 13 December 2007.
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- 24 When a female employee of the Directorate, Ayşe Sucu, publicly voiced her opinion that headscarves were a formality and the important issue in Islam was for women to be prudent, she was silenced. *Milliyet*, 2 February 2008. Feminists protested. Yakın Ertürk the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence wrote a letter in support of Ayşe Sucu, which was followed by another petition by feminist women in support of the same position.
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- 35 There is the argument that headscarves either assume women to be too weak to defend themselves against male lust or sexually too strong and hence a threat to social order because they can create disorder with their unbridled or manipulated sexuality. So women either need protection or discipline, which in either case is derogatory towards women. However, this sociological argument does not reflect the perceived experiences of women who cover their heads.
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