

MERIA

Freedom Under Wraps: Islamic Garb on Turkish Campuses+

By Ustun Reinart*

During the spring festival at the Middle East Technical University (METU) in Ankara, a large banner under the willows and Judas trees across from the library, catches the eye. "Universitede Ozgurluk" (Freedom at the University), it says. Four female students dressed in "hijab"--floor-length trenchcoats and head scarves covering half their faces--sit behind a display table under the banner, handing out leaflets and petitions. The petition claims that university rules banning Islamic attire in classrooms violate Moslem students' human rights, and that the restriction of one group's freedom threatens everybody's freedom.

"Our faith requires that we cover ourselves. It's God's will." Guler, the student who hands me a pamphlet, offers by way of explanation. "We're not bothering anybody. All we're asking is not to be harassed. We should feel free to wear what we want. Instructors who send us to the disciplinary committee just because we cover our heads are violating our human rights, and our democratic rights."

Guler, an administrative studies student, is one of thousands of female students across Turkey who defy university dress codes requiring Western-style clothes. They have become prominent symbols of political Islam--one of the most important and controversial political issues in Turkey. Guler's friend, Semiha, says wearing a turban, the word used in Turkey to refer to the particular kind of female head scarf worn in the way required by Islam, is an important way of expressing her values.

"I'm much more conservative and much more religious than most of the girls at this university," says Semiha, "I believe that God sees me all the time. Seeing the girls in short skirts disturbs me. I find those girls shallow and corrupt. Islam offers women freedom and dignity."

For some, Islam is the religion which considers women's bodies instruments of lust, deems a women's testimony half as valuable as a man's, and allows men several wives. For others, Islam is a liberating force and an alternative to feminism.

"The Islamic movement is very important to women," says Guler. "Moslem women are not passive or oppressed. They're free from competition on the job market. They're also free from social competition. It's our future husbands' responsibility to look after us. The only obligation of a woman is to bear children. Everyone knows that motherhood is a noble obligation. I'm not studying to get a job. I'm studying in order to be able to educate my children properly, and because I know that educated people are respected in society."

With its worldview and emphasis on endurance and obedience, Islam has determined the texture of Anatolian life and culture for centuries. But after the collapse of the Ottoman empire, the secular reforms of Kemal Ataturk, the father of modern Turkey, succeeded in confining religion to the private sphere of life. The first four articles of the Turkish constitution assert the laic nature of the Republic as its fundamental and immutable quality.

This means that religion and state are permanently separate, even though people are free to worship as they please. Women working as teachers, civil servants, or judges may not wear religious attire. Such attire is also forbidden in universities like METU since, among other reasons, students have to be easily identified on their I.D. photos. Students are expected to attend classes and laboratories in Western-style dress. And until the late 1980s, they did.

But political Islam, a relatively new force, has been on the rise in Turkey, especially during the last two decades; and the Islamists have identified the turban issue as an important symbol in their strategy.

Turkey, like many developing countries in the world, is in the throes of economic, social, and political convulsions. It's embracing the global marketplace, deregulating its industries, devaluing its currency, privatizing, buying, selling and constructing feverishly. Millions of people with rural origins live in shanty towns on the outskirts of big cities like Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir--jobless, disenfranchised, and alienated by commercial western culture and western values that invade them.

In 1996, the Islamic fundamentalist Welfare Party did so well in elections that it became a member of the government coalition, with its leader later becoming prime minister for a year. Part of Welfare's attraction was their ability to reach out to ordinary Turks in contrast to the major political parties, which had lost touch with voters, according to experts. The well-organized women's branch of the party taught women in small villages to perform such essential tasks as buying a bus ticket to the city and dealing with stores and banks.

But most urban, middle-class women in Turkey reject political Islam with great fear. The name of a prominent METU female academic appeared a few years ago in the report of a leading human rights group in the context of violations of freedom of

conscience. She was cited for her vigilance in enforcing university regulations banning religious attire.

"In our department, we've taken this issue particularly seriously because the majority of our instructors are women, and we see this as a women's issue. [The turban] suppresses women's freedom," said the academic recently, who fearfully asked that her name not be published. "Those who talk about democratic rights today will not hesitate to force us all to cover ourselves, if they get a chance." She added, "Far from being a human rights issue, I see this [the turban issue] as a political onslaught, organized by radical Islamists and supported by countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia."

Most of the girls in "hijab" on campus come from low-income families, she maintains. "Usually, their clothes and their shoes are extremely modest, but all of them wear turbans made of pure silk, turbans that cost about \$100," she said. "We have also noticed a Mercedes that comes to pick up these girls, in a group, behind the building every evening. These things tell me that we're facing an organized movement, determined to turn Turkey away from the laic reforms of Ataturk."

The professor said she used to be firm in enforcing university rules against "hijab." But not anymore, so students like Guler and Semiha have no problems wearing their turbans to class.

The Islamic fundamentalists "don't want human rights, they want confrontation," said the academic. "At the disciplinary committee when we try to talk to them [female students in "hijab"] gently, they take an aggressive, provocative stance. 'You may send us away now, but we'll be back in droves,' they say. Often, they appear with bearded men who speak on their behalf and who threaten administrators, and make them targets of violence by publishing their names. They have made threatening phone calls to our administrators, and they've

succeeded in intimidating them. Now our administrators say 'we have families, we don't want to get involved.' People are scared."

Back on campus, summer has come and the grounds are lush with pines, willows, and plantains. In mid-morning, a young couple lies in each other's arms on the lawn, beside the agriculture building. The girl, clad in a skimpy tee-shirt and tight jeans, nuzzles her partner's neck, oblivious to the students and instructors passing by.

Casting a sideways glance at the necking couple, Guler turns her eyes to the ground. Such sights were partly responsible for her decision to turn to Islam. "I went to a religious high school in a small town," she says. "When I came here, I saw a kind of relationship between girls and boys that I had never seen before. I was embarrassed by the way they touch each other. I found it immoral and alienating. I felt that I could never dress like the girls here. I wouldn't want to. I decided to fully live my religion and to cover myself."

At the threshold of a new millennium, mini-skirted women and women in turbans walk through the same university corridors in Turkey. But the issue is heating up. For now, Moslem girls turn their eyes away from necking couples, confident that their rustling skirts and flowing turbans will protect their self-esteem. Today, they demand their democratic rights to Islam. But defenders of the secular republic fear that if the Islamists ever have their way, no democratic rights in Turkey--and certainly no women's rights--are likely to be spared.

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