

Without a doubt, female leadership and dress code are two of the most contentious issues in the Turkish Republic today. As a country with 99% of its population Muslim, it is hard to deny the significance of Islam to both the public and private realms. Although the religious homogeneity of the country holds a significant place in the hearts and minds of many Turks, it must be recognized that since 1923 the Turkish Republic, beginning with the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, has maintained a thorough commitment to being a secular democratic state. The major problem arises over the “appropriate” location of Islam in the social, economic and political milieus. In recent years Turkey has seen many public disputes over the role of Islam in its society especially with respect to women and dress. Most notably is that these two issues are not isolated and in fact have major repercussions with respect to intercultural leadership in Turkey.

Prior to opening the discussion on leadership and dress it would be wise to examine the background to the issue. Islam as with many religions is not a unified group of people with an identical belief system. Rather I would offer that it is more of an umbrella with various different groups included underneath its scope. These groups as well posit their own viewpoints on the dress code and female leadership issues. Yet they can be wide ranging in their approach to approach to Islam. One of the widest schisms in the Islam world has to do with the major division between the Sunni and Shiite sects of Islam. In fact such a large difference of opinion has often been the reason for many terrible interfaith violence that we see in many Middle Eastern countries today. By examining the idea of appropriate female dress as well as leadership we can see another way in which Islam has various different concepts.

According to Islam women are supposed to have modest conduct. The female body can cause a man to lust and for this reason in many Islamic countries women are encouraged to dress in a way which would not “provoke” a man’s desires. This can take a variety of forms including extreme viewpoints such as Taliban Afghanistan with the female burka, totally covering the entire body of the woman.

Yet less extreme version are also seen in countries such as Turkey and Lebanon which do not require women any special dress and essentially allow the women to choose for herself how to best represent herself in the eyes of Islam. In these countries it would appear that social pressure in the form of family would be the greatest influence on how a woman dresses. The reasons behind regulating female dress and behavior are many but are thought to originally be aimed at protecting women from men. When Islam was developing as a religion, societies were a much different place and had different acceptable codes of behavior. Covering a woman was meant to protect not only her honor but also that of the family. A concept that is still important today in many primarily Islamic countries. This can be demonstrated in a recent incident involving Zilla Huma Usman, the activist and Pakistani minister of Social Welfare for Punjab who was shot by Mohammed Sawar, a fanatic, who believed that the headscarf that she was wearing did not appropriately cover her hair and that women should not be involved in politics. As in many countries, women in Turkey have to make appropriate decisions for both their dress and behavior based on acceptable social norms which involve a blend of politics, religion and tradition.

When we consider the role of women in the Turkish society we must look at it with a cultural prism. Issues such as education, economics and traditions have a great

impact on gender roles in every society. Yet it must be mentioned that from Ottoman Empire, the system of government that preceded the Turkish Republic, the role of the “sultana” or mother of the Sultan was one of the most powerful in the Empire. She had a great impact on the decisions of the state. Furthermore in the quest for independence and the development of the modern Turkish State, female participation was important. There were many leading women in the republican movement and Mustafa Kemal Ataturk clearly wanted to improve the roles of women in the Turkish society by giving them the right to vote and even electing the first female to the Supreme Court. This was revolutionary at the time because there was no other country with a female Supreme Court Justice. Additionally, women were given the same rights with respect to custody, inheritance and divorce as men were, making gender equality a reality under the law.

If we take a modern view of female political participation and leadership is interestingly to note that Turkey has had a female head of state. Tansu Ciller, part of the DIY Party, the True Path Party, was Prime Minister from 1993-1996. Rather than being a token female politician Ms. Ciller oversaw many major accomplishments such as the technological transformation of the Turkish army, the signing of the Turkey-EU Customs Union as well as convincing both the US and EU to list the PKK as a foreign terrorist organization. Ms Ciller who eventually left office under some unpleasant circumstance went on to be the foreign minister of Turkey.

While Ms. Ciller’s experience is certainly no indication of the general experience of all females in Turkey it goes to show that Turks are open and supportive of the notion of a female leader. When compared to other Western nations such as the United States

it would appear that Turkey is more progressive in its recognition of women in leadership positions. According to the European Stability Initiative, the recent election on July 22 of this year “the percentage of women in parliament sprung from 4.2 % to 9.1%, from 24 women to 50. Of these 30 are from AKP, 10 from CHP, 2 from MHP and 8 are independents supported by the (pro-Kurdish) Democratic Turkey Party”. Prior to this election, women had been gaining more and more ground in the Turkish political scene. This election can perhaps be used as proof that the Turkish society is positive about the idea of females in leadership roles.

Let us also remember that leadership is not solely in the realm of politics. Female leadership roles in Turkey can also be comprised of the women in the business sector. The largest business association, TUSIAD, the Turkish Businessman’s and Industrials Association has a board of directors with a female head Arzuhan Yalcindag. Additionally, AKbank which has one of Turkey’s largest holdings with 22.5 billion USD and is the most valuable bank to the Istanbul Stock Exchange, BORSA, has Susan Sabanci Dincer as its CEO. These recent and past examples of women in powerful leadership positions demonstrate that female leadership in Turkey has always had a great significance.

While it is clear that women have the potential to add great momentum to the Turkish society it is also clear that much more needs to be done. This is evident with an examination of female literacy rates. According to Turkiye Istatistik Kurumu, Turkey has an 81% female literacy rate. This is clearly an upward trend from the 55% in 1980 showing the dedicated effort that Turkey is making toward addressing the issue of

female illiteracy. Yet, according to the European Stability Initiative, the 2006 Global Gender Gap Index rated Turkey a troubling 105th out of 115th countries. This Index measures the difference in economic status of men and women. This is even below countries such as Ethiopia and Burkina Faso. What is also troubling is that the working population in the country is grossly disproportional with 67% of the men to 12% of women working. This also shows a 69% housewife ratio. While these statistics seem dire it must also be mentioned that Turkey's overall unemployment is quite high, according to Turkey Economy Watch, there was a December 2007 unemployment figure of nearly 13%. What is interesting is that 75% of those that were unemployed were male, meaning that women make up as smaller amount of the unemployed population.

We can also see that the birthrate in Turkey is dropping. According to Index Mundi, with a year 2000 figure of 19.0 per 1,000 Turkey is currently experiencing a 16.1 per 1,000 trend in 2008. This is a significant drop of nearly 20% in less than a generation which means many women are postponing childbirth and beginning to make other decisions about their lifestyles which include spending longer time at education facilities and joining the work force.

Although many of the statistics about women may seem rather dire they must be considered in a long term perspective. Huge social and economic trends occur over long periods of time. Turkey has recently made a lot of progress but given the fact that females in Turkey have traditionally been the caretakers of children it is easily to see the reason for these statistics. The important thing to remember is that Turkey has broken

down the barriers it had which prevented women from participating in all aspects of the society. Women must make their own choices about the role they want for their lives.

The major issue with respect to dress code issue in Turkey centers around the concept of the “basort” or headscarf. Yet in Islam as aforementioned there are many different perceptions as ideas about appropriate female dress. The different types of dress include a simple non-Islamic scarf worn by women to cover their heads but not tightly bound. This is generally worn as a sign of respect when entering cemeteries, mosques or perhaps for personal preference. The important aspect about this simple covering is that it is not tied tight, has no religious significance and simply crests the head. Generally a woman with this loose fitting scarf does not have other parts of her body covered. The second level a bit more extreme called the basort, which is the point of contention in Turkey involves a headscarf that is tightly pinned at the sides, leaving only the face exposed. The basort is usually accompanied with a modest clothing choice which covers the legs, arms and feet, leaving only the hands exposed. This type of headdress is used by the wives of Prime Minister Abdullah Gul as well as President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Hyrunnissa and Emine, respectively. This type of headdress has traditionally been associated with a form of political Islam that has also been identified with other less progressive ideas about a woman’s role in a society. According to the BBC, only 11% of the Turkish female population wears the full chador, which is the entire covering of the female body exposing only the eyes.

It is stated in the Koran, the book of Islam, that women should be modest in their dress and appearance. Some groups in Turkey have interpreted this as that women should completely cover their hair as a way of paying homage to Islam as well as

honoring their families. It must be stressed that the headscarf in Turkey is optional for women. There are no laws such as in other Middle Eastern or Arab countries which institute a strict system of dress or even bureaus such as the “dress police” that regulate behavior.

What should be recognized in Turkey is its complete lack of a dress code with respect to women. While a woman may have a personal belief that reflects her own manner of dressing there are no laws in the Turkish Republic regulating female dress. With the present ruling party, the AK Party the country has seen some obvious turmoil with respect to the role of the headscarf in the national identity. Presently according to Headscarf Ban, the wearing of headscarves is not permitted in secular locations such as government offices or even state sponsored universities.

This ban had previously been relaxed in February this year by the Parliament in a 411 to 103 decision to allow women with headscarves to study at university. But in a 9-2 Supreme Court Decision on June 6th of this year, the court reaffirmed that definitively women were not allowed to wear the headscarf at government institutions. While the private sector is free to make its own ruling on a female employee’s dress, the headscarf is strictly forbidden in government locations. This once again emphasizes the underlying secular nature of the Republic. Since the headscarf is so closely identified with Islam, it has been outlawed permanently. As an aside it is also interesting the military has also taken action on dress in some form but with respect to men by not allowing any type of facial hair such as a beard or mustache, other well identified symbols of Islam. Yet in recent years many female students have tried to push the envelope with respect to universities by wearing their basorts to public universities. This

is clearly a violation of the law but many of these young women are claiming that by not allowing them to wear their scarves their civil liberties, including basic freedom of expression, are being violated.

The AK Party, which has sympathetic Islam tendencies, has been less than ambitious about enforcing this issue. This lack of enforcement is how the major problem developed because there seems to be an obvious negligence on the part of the government due to their subtle backing of their dress code. It is interesting to note that the ruling party, which has a majority in the parliament, was at the head of trying to push through the reform which would lessen the impact of the Headscarf Ban. This issue has also been claimed by many secularists, including Secretary of the Armed Forces, Yasar Buyukanit, as signs that the AK party is trying to push thorough subtle changes to the constitution and impose an Islamic agenda in accordance with the AK party belief system.

This blending of Islam with politics is what is troubling to many Turks because it violates a principle of the constitution, a document that many hold so dear and consider the foundation of the country. Persons such as Hyrunnissa Gul and her headscarf have in the international media become an identifiable symbol of Turkey and many strictly secular Turks are afraid that this can open a Pandora's box of religious uncertainty.

Having made a thorough discussion of both female leadership and dress code in Turkey it would now be appropriate to examine how both of these issues have come to affect intercultural leadership in a country such as Turkey. As a country with a 99% Muslim population, Turks have a long history with the religion of Islam. Yet there is also

a tangible acceptance of people from different cultures and religions in the country. Turkey has always welcomed foreigners and itself has a greatly deal of ethnic diversity with a population that includes Armenian, Jews, Kurds and even Greeks. There is no lack of acceptance on the part of Turks when it comes to non-Turks. Yet this acceptance is also coupled with a dedication by a large majority of the population to secular principles. These are major elements of the constitution as well as the education system.

So while it is true that Turks accept others there seems to be a line drawn when it comes to writing religious-sounding behaviors into law. This is seen once again with the headscarf issue and secular institutions. Because of the strong bond Turkey has to secular democracy any behavior that sounds remotely religious will cause an immediate reaction among Turks. This is a difficult position to be in according to the present administration with its mildly Islamic slant. Primarily because they were elected by their constituents on the ideas that they would in fact support more relaxed laws with respect to religion yet at the same time they are unable to change the constitution without causing a huge reaction by the public. So it would appear that there needs to be some form of compromise that will not infringe on the constitution but one that will satisfy a majority of the population.

The major difficulty lies in Turkey's ability to bring these groups together. Looking at the ethnic and religious gamut in Turkey it is clear that any solution to the leadership and dress code issues is bound to dissatisfy at least one group. By proposing a strictly secular approach, Turkey would isolate many of its religious leading individuals. Yet it appears that any compromise in the form of religious acceptance will enrage the devout

secularist and the military. The present administration, which holds the positions of Prime Minister, President and a near majority in the Parliament is quickly losing support from the public because of its often thoughtless and religious oriented moves. This includes a relaxing of the headscarf but also an increase in the number of Imam Hatip Schools, religious high schools that are regulated by the state but that teach a form of approved Islam. As a result it has been very difficult for the government to work together as a cohesive unity because these frequent attempts to situate Islam in a political context.

Therefore the average Turkish person is faced with a difficult decision between reconciling his or her religious beliefs with secular and modern Turkey. It would appear that the different levels of religious participation have come to constitute a intercultural differences. Although it is not that simple, the government is on one side and the secularists on the other with the average Turk floundering in the middle looking for guidance on how to bring both of these issues together. Another problem which adds to the mix is that the government is not a consistent entity, with parties rotating in and out every four years and trying to create their own agenda accordingly. By not being about to come to a decision about its religious identity, Turkey will continue to be plagued by problems such as what is the appropriate role of women and dress in the public sphere.

In conclusion, it is obvious that there are some serious issues facing the Republic of Turkey. While dress code and female leadership may appear to have easy solutions when observed through a secular prism, the average person does not see these issues so clearly. Additionally, there is a clear split between the population over what is acceptable behavior for women and for the Turkish identity as a whole. Having a long

standing tradition of female political, economic and social participation it cannot be denied that women have a vital role in the Turkish society. These roles seem to be moving women toward a more active role in many important sectors. Yet the caveat to the situation would be how certain perceptions in a society are trying to manipulate or mold that role with respect to religion. With perception often influencing reality and vice versa, the choice for a personal belief system as well as a government that best represents one's ideas is very difficult to manage. On top of all these layers is the idea of intercultural leadership and how Turkey is trying to include all of its constituents in a political process that is often riddled with inconsistencies. Although the task is not an easy one, Turks seem to have a positive attitude which can be expressed in the simple quote from Mevlana, a 12th century citizen of the Ottoman Empire who was a Sufi mystic and Persian,

*"Come, come, whoever you are, wanderer, idolater, worshiper of fire,
Come even though you have broken your vows a thousand times,
Come, and come yet again.
Ours is not a caravan of despair"*