

After Headscarves, What's Next?

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Articles & Testimony

On February 9, Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) passed constitutional amendments to legalize a specific woman's headscarf, known as the turban, on college campuses. The Turkish turban -- not to be confused with the south Asian male turban -- emerged in the country in the 1980s. When Kemal Ataturk founded Turkey as a secular republic after World War I, he looked to Europe, and especially France, for his inspiration. While American secularism provides freedom of religion, the French version that Ataturk adopted emphasizes freedom from religion -- that is, keeping religion and its symbols out of government and education. Turkey's secular courts have considered the turban a political religious symbol -- AKP leader and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, whose wife wears a turban, suggested that this might indeed be the case. Accordingly, the courts had, until last weekend, banned the turban on college campuses. But now that the turban is allowed on campuses, what will happen next?

The turban is a political wedge that bitterly divides Turkish society. Conservative women in Turkey have always covered their heads as a sign of modesty. There are a variety of styles to choose from: the esarp, an eastern and southern European-style handkerchief, worn by urban women, and a gauze cloth -- think of Benazir Butto -- yazma/Yemeni, worn by rural women. According to a recent poll, almost half (49 percent) of Turkish women used these traditional head coverings, while 37 percent did not cover at all.

The turban, however, is a specific, nontraditional type of headwear that arose in Turkey during the early 1980s after first appearing in other Muslim countries. The turban exposes no hair and, unlike the other scarves, covers part of the face. Despite efforts to popularize it as a sign of virtuous living or political activism, the turban failed to become a mass phenomenon once the courts banned it on college campuses in 1989. According to a recent poll, only 11 percent of Turkish women wear the turban.

The spirit of democratic freedom suggests that the turban, which is also a symbol of religious observance, be permitted. Will allowing the turban on campuses make Turkey a more free, peaceful, and secular society? A look at more general attitudes toward Islamic practices across the country suggests otherwise.

Islamic practice in Turkey is far from homogenous, with varying degrees of tolerance for non-practicing individuals. In this regard, the country can be separated into three zones: the west, the center, and the southeast. Tolerance during Ramadan, the Muslim holy month when devout Muslims fast from sunrise until sunset, varies from region to region and is a good measure of the public's feelings about practice of Islam.

In metropolitan western Turkey (which comprises Istanbul, Ankara, and the coastal regions), tolerance is cherished. For instance, one could have lunch at a restaurant during Ramadan without feeling uncomfortable -- and even be served by a fasting waiter. Tolerance for practice and tolerance for non-practice are two sides of the same coin in western Turkey.

Then there is conservative central Turkey, where there is less tolerance for those who do not practice. Finally, in southeastern Turkey practice is deemed compulsory. In this mostly Sunni Kurdish area, Kurds follow the orthodox

Shafii school, which differs from the liberal Hanefi school followed elsewhere in Turkey. If one tried to eat in a restaurant here during Ramadan, one may be insulted or even physically harmed. Indeed, each year there is an incident of an unobservant college student being beaten up or even murdered in the southeast for not fasting during Ramadan.

What will happen now that the turban is permitted? Conditions in much of Istanbul and the West will not change much. In low-tolerance areas, however, things will be different. In rural central Turkey, women may feel uncomfortable without the turban, and in the southeast women will feel compelled to wear them. Instead of resolving the issue, lifting the turban ban will create a new problem for the many Turkish women who choose to not wear the turban. These women will be under social pressure to conform to the new practice of "virtuous living."

In order to resolve this issue, the AKP must convince the Turkish population that it is ready to protect women who do not wear the turban and that it is genuinely interested in women's freedom. For instance, the AKP could pass legislation protecting women who do not cover their heads as well as those who do. According to a recent poll, 10 percent of women who cover their heads are forced to do so by their families and husbands. What is more, to assure secular Turks that it is not a single-issue party, the AKP should pass the turban legislation as part of a package of freedoms and liberties towards European Union (EU) accession -- lately, the party has shied away from EU reforms. Third, the AKP should allow more room for debate; the amendments passed after only three weeks of public discussion.

In the absence of these steps, Turkey will not necessarily become a fundamentalist state overnight, but it will become a country in which one symbol of religious practice -- the turban -- will become universally enforced in many areas. Religious homogenization will ensue, resulting in court interventions and counter-protests by secular Turks. What lies ahead for Turkey is a period of soul-searching and, unfortunately, political turmoil, until the country settles on a new balance between religion and politics.

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