

# Headscarf Heresy

*For one Muslim woman, the headscarf is a matter of choice and dignity.*

By Merve Kavakci

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or about 40 minutes, my colleagues in Turkey's parliament shouted at me: "Get out! Get out!" Their cries paused briefly when then Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit raised his hand and pointed in my direction. "Put this woman in her place!" he screamed. I sat still, stiff, and appalled. I had expected some controversy that day in May 1999 when I arrived at parliament.

After all, I was the first woman wearing the Islamic headscarf (or *hijab*) elected to the legislature. In Turkey, these headscarves are considered symbols of backwardness and are banned from public offices. But for me, the headscarf was—and remains—part of my personal religious conviction. Wearing it is a matter of choice.

Eleven days after that appearance in parliament, I lost my Turkish citizenship. My children and I moved to the United States. Two years later, the Constitutional Court shut down the Virtue Party to which I belonged on the grounds that it threatened Turkey's secular state. On the eve of my fifth year of exile, I still cannot understand the wrath I experienced that day in parliament. Even most of the Muslim female lawmakers who could have supported me opted instead to join their male colleagues and protest my presence. Some women even took to the streets, declaring they would never allow a woman wearing a headscarf into parliament. They called for *laicite*, the Turkish form of

secularism that effectively allows the state to dictate the boundaries of religion in every facet of life.

At the heart of my fellow parliamentarians' reaction was a simple message: We will only accept you if you adhere to our values. This view—often supported by secular states, Western feminists, and some human rights groups—displays the worst kind of backwardness. Rather than celebrate or promote Muslim women's liberation, such positions reveal a deep and growing misunderstanding between Muslim women and the rest of the world. In February, French lawmakers approved a ban on headscarves and other religious imagery from public schools; German and Belgian politicians may follow suit. Human Rights Watch Executive Director Kenneth Roth has criticized the French policy, insisting that "for many Muslims, wearing a headscarf is not only about religious expression, it is about religious obligation."

Meanwhile, a recent survey reveals 71 percent of Turks believe the headscarf should be permitted in universities, and 64 percent say female parliamentarians should be allowed to wear it while in office. Indeed, a growing number of young women in Turkey view the headscarf as a symbol of moderni-

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ty and liberation, an alternative to the secular fundamentalism that the government inculcates into Turkish minds. Turkish girls of lower social standing, many of whom are raised with little or no Islamic instruction, often become more religious as they seek more education. They do not want to remain as ignorant as their mothers and as indifferent to religion as both their parents. Yet the state denies them access to education if they choose to wear headscarves. By striving to be more progressive than their mothers in every aspect of their lives, including their insistence on wearing an Islamic headscarf, these young girls defy the false progressivism that the state seeks to promote.

Regrettably, Western feminists also fuel the common misunderstanding of Muslim

women's motivations for wearing headscarves. In late 2003, several dozen prominent Frenchwomen, including philosopher Elisabeth Badinter and writer Catherine Millet, sent an open letter to French President Jacques Chirac, arguing that "the Islamic veil sends us all—Muslim and non-Muslim—back to a discrimination against women that is intolerable." These thinkers link headscarves with suffering and conclude that they impede the personal growth and social development of women.

But such feminists make two significant mistakes. First, they fail to understand that, in some Muslim societies, gender inequalities have much less to do with the religious requirements of Islam than with old cultural traditions. If headscarves were inherently linked to female suffering, then women probably would have experienced particu-

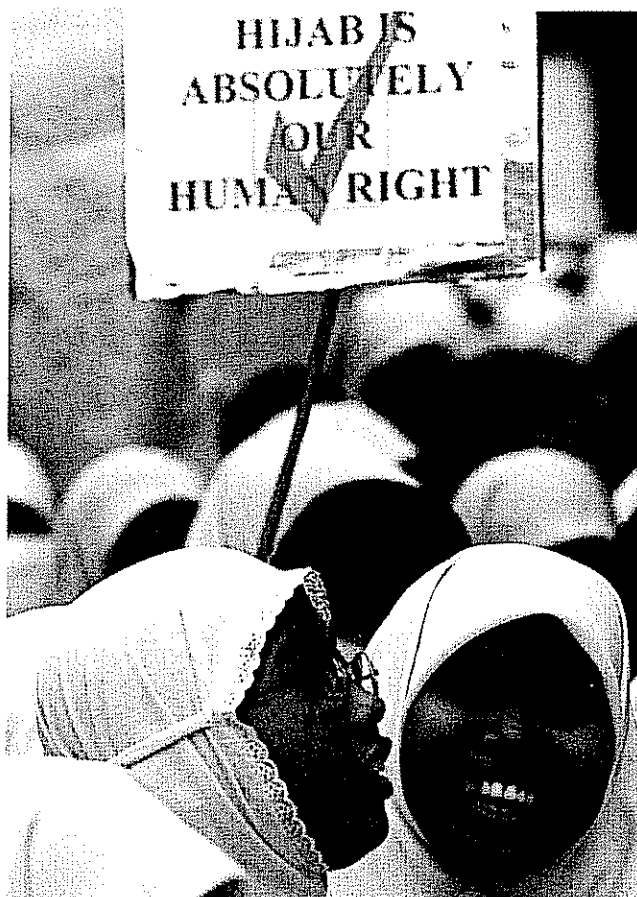
lar hardships in the earliest days of Islam, during the life of the Prophet Mohammed in the seventh century. Yet Muslim women of the time were prominent

professional members of society. They experienced neither the brutality that Afghani women endured under the Taliban nor the repression that Saudi women still endure. Over time, though, equality deteriorated in most of the Muslim world and women were coerced into more traditional household roles.

Second, Western feminist critics of the headscarf overlook its important religious value. The two other Abrahamic religions also originally mandated female covering. (Today, some Christian and Jewish women still opt to wear the headscarf.) Mainstream Islamic tradition considers the

headscarf an obligation for Muslim women because it conceals their physical allure. By covering themselves, Muslim women can be recognized not only for their religious beliefs but for their contributions to society as well; they can be judged for their intellect and not just their appearance.

Certainly, some Muslim women today are forced to cover themselves against their will. However, it is incorrect to claim that every woman that does so is necessarily coerced and oppressed. Muslim women everywhere must refute this all-too-prevalent Western misconception. For women who choose it, the headscarf is an indispensable part of their personal identity, one that should not be compromised. If Western feminists and other critics want to advance women's rights, they are better off honoring a woman's right to choose rather than trying to impose their prejudices on Muslims. **BP**



*We're feminists, too.*

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