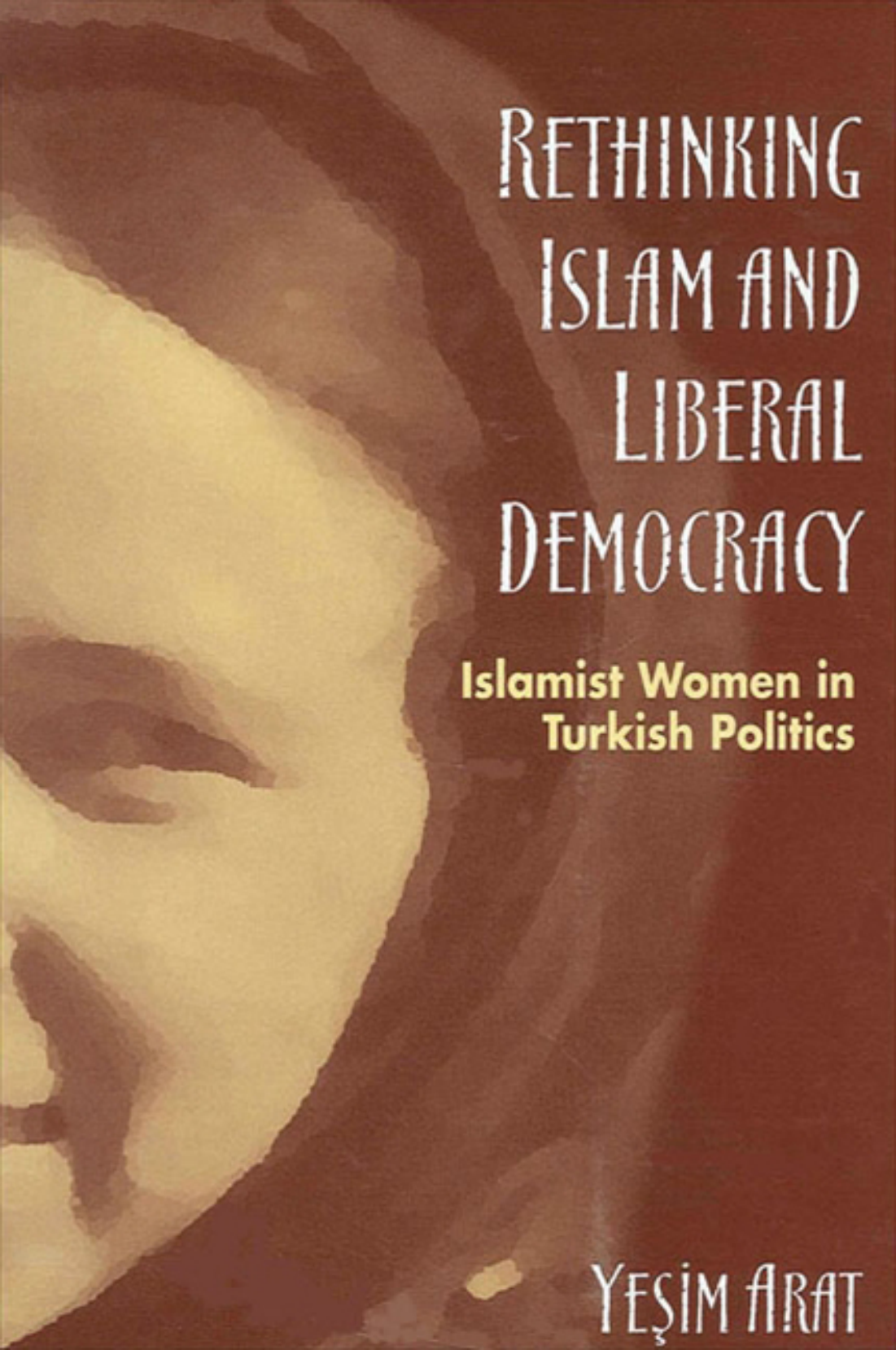

Rethinking Islam and Liberal Democracy

Islamist Women in Turkish Politics

Yeşim Arat

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State University of New York Press

Published by
State University of New York Press, Albany

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For information, address State University of New York Press,
194 Washington Avenue, Suite 305, Albany, NY 12210-2365

Production by Marilyn P. Semerad
Marketing by Michael Campochiaro

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Arat, Yeşim, 1955–
Rethinking Islam and liberal democracy : Islamist women in Turkish politics / Yeşim Arat.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-7914-6465-2 (hardcover : alk. paper)
1. Women in politics—Turkey. 2. Muslim women—Political activity. 3. Refah Partisi (Turkey). 4. Political parties—Turkey. 5. Islam and politics—Turkey. 6. Turkey—Politics and government. I. Title.

HQ1236.5.T9A733 2005
305.42'09561—dc22 2004017001

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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with his customary, exacting standards—to sharpen my thoughts. He was the first and last reader. My daughter, Zeynep Pamuk, was my closest ally, encouraging me to work on the manuscript and even helping with the notes. I am most grateful for all the support I received. The women and men I interviewed from the Refah and Fazilet Parties made the book possible by sharing their lives and their views with me. I thank them all very much.

Acknowledgments

This book began as a study of Islamist women's associations in Turkey. It was part of a larger work on political Islam carried out under the auspices of the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation, TESEV. Binnaz Toprak proposed the larger project and invited me to undertake the section on Islamist women. Thanks to her compelling proposal, the project was generously supported by TESEV. I am grateful to Binnaz Toprak for asking me to work on this issue, which I enjoyed immensely. Had she not extended her offer, this book would not have been conceived. I would also like to thank TESEV for its financial support. Deniz Erkmen and Selma Sabanoviç, my students at the time, worked as my assistants and helped me with the interviews. They were bright, reliable. Ayşegül Karayazgan and Ruşen Çakır helped me arrange my initial interviews.

Even though I toyed with the idea of using my research to develop it into a book, the "realm of necessity" asserted itself and obstructed the realization of the idea. It was at this point that Müge Göçek intervened and changed things. Not only did she help me arrange for a sabbatical at the University of Michigan, Center for Middle Eastern and North African Studies so that I would work on the book but she adamantly believed, more than I did, that I would write it. Her unswerving faith gave me the stamina to finalize the book. Margot Badran read the entire manuscript and came up with concrete proposals for the publication of the book, which, though not actualized, kept me going. My two readers at the State University of New York Press provided sound criticism. Their advice and guidance was invaluable. Dina LeGall, Deniz Kandiyoti, and Amy Singer each gave me precious advice regarding publication. Friends or colleagues graciously invited me to present various portions of the draft in various academic gatherings, including the University of Michigan, The Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center, University of Berkeley, Tel Aviv University, Yale University, and Princeton University, all helping me to develop my thesis. My husband, Şevket Pamuk, read the draft and pushed me—

Introduction

This book is based on a study of the women activists of the Islamist Refah (Welfare) Party in Turkey.[1] The women's organizations of Refah were established in 1989, six years after the party was founded, and closed in 1998 along with the party by a constitutional court decision.[2] In their short life span, these organizations played a critical role both in bringing their party to power and engaging a large female constituency in politics. Hundreds of women were working for the party and recruiting thousands of others to support it. Refah received the highest percentage of votes in the 1995 elections (21.4 percent) and was the major partner of the governing coalition from June 1996 to July 1997. For the first time in Turkish political life, a religiously inspired political party had come to power. Moreover, Refah had an impact in politics as the precursor of the Adalet ve Kalkınma (Justice and Development) Party. Adalet ve Kalkınma came to power after the November 2002 elections as a single-party government after a period of coalitions going back to 1991.

If "the locus of study is not the object of study," as Clifford Geertz reminds us,[3] then the Ladies' Commissions of the Refah Party is only the locus of my work. Within this locus, I try to understand the women activists of the Refah Party using qualitative methods, primarily via in-depth interviews. I trace who the women activists of the commissions were, how they were recruited into politics in the Islamist camp, how they recruited other women to vote for their party, and what their worldviews were.

The object of my work, however, is broader. Through this study, I examine the conflictual relationship between secularism and Islam in a liberal democracy. Islam versus liberal democracy, and secularism versus Islam have long been linked as antithetical. This antithetical positioning conceals the extent to which these concepts can be part of one another in historically specific contexts. I trace this interdependence through the experiences of the people who live by them. Refah women challenged the preconceived attributes that the secular establishment

projected to Islamism, and they negotiated with ingenuity what Islam can entail in a secular democratic polity. They redefined what liberal individualism can or should accommodate in a secular context. Through their experience, we can assess how religion can assume new meanings, threaten or expand the boundaries of secular democracy, and reshape socio-political reality. We can explore how liberalism that prioritizes the individual and his or her human rights can transform, coexist, or remain in tension with a belief system that allegedly prioritizes a collective notion of identity in which a sacred God legitimizes rights. Boundaries of Islam are porous, and liberalism infiltrates these boundaries. I maintain that liberal democracy could enrich itself by accommodating these groups rather than excluding them.

The antithetical positioning between Islam and liberal democracy has important implications for contemporary debates on illiberal challenges to liberal democracies.[4] Problems of accommodating so-called communitarian religions in secular liberal democracies trouble many culturally diverse societies. Practical problems in dealing with headscarved Muslim girls in schools or with polygamous marriages carried out according to Islamic precepts persist in many established liberal democracies of the West and challenge their prevailing citizenship laws.

Under these conditions, on the one hand, contemporary political theorists reconsider and expand the parameters of liberalism to make it more amenable to cultural diversity. They emphasize the importance of culture for the individual. Culture promotes human well-being, because it cultivates a community and a feeling of belonging. It is also the medium in which meaningful individual choice and autonomy can be sought.[5] Even though blueprints to accommodate cultural diversity are difficult to sustain, theorists rethink liberalism to integrate group rights to enhance the civil and political rights of the individual.

On the other hand, the "clash of civilizations" thesis resurfaces and reverberates. Even though many refuted Samuel Huntington's thesis[6] for its simplistic and essentialist depiction of cultures and cultural interaction, his conceptual framework proved its resilience, particularly with the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Islam quickly became the inscrutable, violent, and intractable Other, a threat to liberal democratic values.

This essentialist reading of Islam does not take place only in the West. In the secular but Muslim Turkish context, the controversy was redefined among those who claimed to prioritize a certain understanding of secularism as opposed to others who claimed to prioritize a certain Islamist identity. The "secularists" feared the gradually spread-

ing wave of "Islamism" and the Islamist claims to political power through the parliamentary system. The "Islamists" resented this fear. The "secularists" assumed that Islamists were all authoritarian, illiberal reactionaries, and the "Islamists" believed the secularists to be the same. This exclusionary polarization foreclosed dialogue and mystified the claims of each side. Polarization denied the recognition of either interchange between or transformation within different belief systems. Edward Said, in his criticism of Huntington and the clash of civilizations thesis, argued that the history of civilizations was not only one of "wars of religion and imperial conquest but also one of exchange, cross-fertilization and sharing."[7] It is this exchange, cross-fertilization, and sharing between Islamists and their secular adversaries that I trace in this book. An awareness of this interconnection might provide a critical perspective on the problems of accommodating seemingly irreconcilable belief systems such as liberalism and Islam. In real life, neither ideology may be as pure and categorical as its respective adherents tend to assume.

SECULARISM AND ISLAM IN A DEMOCRATIC STATE

The Turkish context is unique if we want to probe into the dynamic relationship between Islam and secularism. The contemporary Turkish Republic inherited a Muslim Ottoman culture and a predominantly Muslim population when it was established in 1923. The founding elite and its single-party regime then opted for a project of modernization à la West that was defined primarily by its secularizing measures.[8] Cultivation of secularism rather than democracy became a priority. The project of modernization and its secularizing measures were in tension with Islam, because the state aimed to privatize religion, thus redefining what it was and where it belonged.

Before the establishment of the Republic, Islam helped legitimize the patriarchal Ottoman rule and the secular authority the sultans had to control religion. The Republic, however, severed all ties with the religiously sanctioned Ottoman Empire to become a secular Westernizing nation-state.[9] The first article of the 1921 constitution declared that sovereignty belonged to the nation unconditionally, thus replacing Islam as a principle of political legitimacy.

The founding fathers initiated a series of institutional and legal reforms to disestablish Islam and separate religious institutions of the state from those of society.[10] The caliphate was abolished. Similar fates befell the position of the Şeyh-ül-Islam (the highest Muslim authority of the Ottoman state) and the ministry of religious foundations. In

their place, the General Directorate of Religious Affairs and the General Directorate of Pious Foundations were instituted. The Law on the Unity of Education outlawed religious education and established state control over education. In 1926, a new civil code was adopted from the Swiss code. The new code, which was critical for providing the framework of male female equality in the polity, unequivocally dismantled the power of the Shariat, the Muslim law, over political and social life.

A conspicuous desire not merely to disestablish Islam but also to control it was manifest in the secularization process of the founding fathers. The General Director of Religious Affairs, the highest religious authority in the country responsible for the administration of all mosques, was appointed by the President and worked under the Prime Minister. The Directorate decided unilaterally on what was to be published on or related to religion and was the formal legal authority on religious questions. The state thus aimed to supervise religious observance, its content, and the limits within which it could be practiced.

Controlling Islam and its role in people's lives was pursued not merely at the formal or legal level but also at the popular level. The brotherhoods, religious orders, convents, and sanctuaries were closed, which severed the organic links that the mass of the population had to popular Islam in the public domain. The traditional fez associated with male Islamic dress codes was banned and replaced by Western-style hats. The call to prayer traditionally delivered from the minarets in Arabic was translated and delivered in Turkish. In the words of Bernard Lewis, "The state aimed to end the power of organized Islam and break its hold on the minds and hearts of the Turkish people."[11]

Thus, secularism, in its inception, was intimately linked to state authority. The founding fathers were heroic commanders who had won a war of independence, but their hard-won legitimacy could not change the fact that they ran the country with a single party regime until 1950. An authoritarian, single-party regime had initiated and instituted the secularizing reforms at the cost of democratization.

The process of democratization in the country, in turn, was intimately linked to relaxing state control over religious life. The emergence of the Democrat Party in 1946 heralded the initial signs of this change. The Democrat Party promised democracy, and this meant, at least in part, allowing more scope for religious expression in public life. When Democrats came to power in 1950, they immediately allowed the call to prayer to be delivered in Arabic. They opened Prayer

Leader and Preacher schools and tried to appease the people's desire for public religious observance.

As the country developed and demands for further democratization became inevitable, the first Islamist political party, Milli Nizam (National Order) Party, emerged in 1970. It was duly closed by a constitutional court order, which claimed that the party exploited religion and threatened secularism, thereby violating the constitution. The closed party was soon to be followed by its replacement, the Milli Selamet (National Salvation) Party. The new party upheld traditional values and drew attention to the significance of history in communal life. Soon, the Milli Selamet Party became an articulate critic of modernization à la Westernization, which repressed and denied the role of religion in people's lives.

After the 1980 military intervention, the Islamist Refah Party was founded to uphold the heritage of the Milli Nizam Party and insist on the pursuit of a "moral order." Unlike its predecessor, which had played a key role in the coalition governments of the 1970s but remained a minor party, the Refah Party became the major opposition party in the country and then—following the 1995 elections in which it received the largest percentage of votes—the major coalition partner in government. In its 1993 convention, the Refah Party expounded the system of "multiple legal orders" and the freedom of the citizens to choose the legal order, which would allow them to live by their beliefs.[12] The Refah Party took a proposal to parliament to amend the principle of secularism, which, it claimed, was inadequate to meet the demands of the day. The initiative failed but was indicative of the demands articulated by the Refah Party. They declared that the notion of secularism, which was one of the fundamental principles of the Republic, was insufficient to accommodate the needs of a major portion of the population.

The process of secularization and the Islamist challenge to its particular unfolding led to a serious polarization within society. There were those who were for the kind of secularism initiated by the founding fathers, and there were the Islamist "others" who opposed it. Each side became deeply suspicious of the other, as values became entrenched over time.[13] The small secular constituency that criticized Republican secularism and the tight state control over religion was not strong enough to dissipate the polarization or bridge the gap. The military memorandum that precipitated the fall of the Refah Party government from power and the consequent closure of the party was given in this context of polarization and reflected its tension.

COMMUNITARIAN VALUES AND INDIVIDUALISM

The confrontation between secularists and Islamists and the projections each side made toward the other were multi layered. The secularists feared Islamists not only because they suspected the latter of disintegrating the Republic but also because the Islamists were considered to be illiberal communitarians. The new Republic had initiated a project of modernization and endorsed Western values. The modernizing state aimed to shed traditional norms associated with Islam and adopt liberal Western values, including secularism and individualism. On the other hand, Islamists resented the imposition of Western norms, including a disdain for communitarian Islamist morals that the project of modernization necessitated. They accused secularists of reckless, self-seeking individualism. However, the stigma of individualism associated with the modernist seculars and communitarianism with the traditional Islamists was complicated.

If liberalism was at the core of Western civilization, and if liberalism was an ethic of individualism, the Turkish project of Westernization lacked both. The notion of the West was redefined in the Turkish context. Communitarian values that had primarily defined the Ottoman tradition that preceded the Republic were perpetuated through a different, namely, solidarist nationalist discourse within the republic. The tradition of a strong patrimonial state that could enforce its will, at least to gather taxes and conscript soldiers, allowed a communitarian view of society to be enforced with ease. Metin Heper called the Turkish state a "transcendental" one in which the rulers know the best interest of the ruled, exercised power for the people, at times despite the people, because of the legitimacy its communitarian ideology had.[14] Consequently, the transition from communitarian Islamism to communitarian nationalism was smooth. In pursuit of their mission for civilizational transformation, the founding elite could not and did not respect liberal values that prioritized the value of the individual and self-expression. Recognizing the need for self-expression would have meant accommodating opposition. Yet, the new regime was not entrenched enough to confront the challenge. Breaking the hold of religion was seen as the primary condition of westernization, even if this involved autocratic means. In this process, liberalism was left for future generations to grapple with.

The founding elite, instead of nurturing political liberalism, propagated a nationalist ideology that upheld communitarian values. The individual was important to the extent that he or she contributed to the national community, which was assumed to be a homogenous whole.