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# Women between Tradition and Change: The Justice and Development Party Experience in Turkey

ZANA ÇİTAK & ÖZLEM TÜR

The 2002 elections in Turkey were considered as a political earthquake by many observers.<sup>1</sup> The elections brought to power the Justice and Development Party (JDP – *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) and led to the formation of a single-party government after a long decade of coalition governments. The JDP emerged as the culmination of tensions between the secular, military-bureaucratic elite and the Islamists in the 1990s. The resulting polarization brought about a series of recommendations to the coalition government of the Islamist Welfare Party of Necmettin Erbakan and the centre-right True Path Party by the National Security Council on 28 February 1997, aiming at curbing the power of political Islam. This ‘post-modern coup’ started a process of division within the Islamist movement, leading to the formation of the JDP in August 2001.<sup>2</sup> From the beginning, leaders of the party have emphasized that they have broken away from the *Milli Görüş* (National Outlook) Movement of Erbakan, the long-standing leader of the Islamist movement in Turkey. Despite their Islamist roots, the party elite denied any Islamic credentials and described themselves as ‘conservative democrats’. This ‘label’ helped place the party into the centre-right of the Turkish political spectrum and appeal to a larger constituency. At a time when established political parties were suffering from a legitimacy crisis, exacerbated by the 2001 economic crisis, the JDP found an opportunity to convey the image of a ‘new and clean’ party. This image was accompanied by a discourse of ‘change’ that underlined a rupture from their political Islamist legacy. This ‘change’ manifested itself most strikingly in the party’s pro-EU stance in contrast to Erbakan’s traditional anti-Western discourse. Thus, in line with the harmonization of Turkish law with the EU *acquis*, the JDP embarked on an ambitious political reform programme between February 2002 and July 2004, continuing the previous coalition government’s legislative packages. Consequently, following the European Council meeting of 17 December 2004, Turkey started accession talks with the EU on 3 October 2005. As different from Erbakan’s movement, the JDP has also refrained from a confrontational approach toward the secular establishment and has presented itself as a legitimate and thus a ‘systemic party’ within the Turkish political scene.

This article aims at examining the extent to which the JDP has been able to reconcile its claim of change with tradition, two essential themes of its ideological discourse of conservative democracy. The women question stands as a key parameter

in understanding the JDP's attempt at balancing tradition and change. Despite the centrality of the women question, there has been a relative absence of scholarly work on this subject.<sup>3</sup> This article contributes to the literature by concentrating on the party's discourse and practice regarding women. It relies on an analysis of the party ideology as reflected in official party documents as well as party leaders' statements, a close scrutiny of the press and field research based on interviews with party members.<sup>4</sup>

The JDP Party Programme has a separate heading, 'Women', devoted to explaining JDP's perception of the women question and their problems. The programme states that women and their problems – 'a culmination of long-time neglect' – constitute one of the priorities of the party. To mention a few of the broad recommendations within this framework, women's participation in public life and politics is strongly encouraged; the JDP promises to support women's civil society organizations; aims at addressing educational activities targeting sexual and economic exploitation of and violence against women which also involves women's suicides and 'honour' killings; and, finally, emphasizes the schooling of girls. Some of the recommendations that have been mentioned in the party programme were realized to a certain extent: there has indeed been party condemnation of 'honour' killings and a special parliamentary commission, headed by one of the JDP's women MPs, Fatma Şahin, was established to investigate the causes of the problem and to suggest solutions.<sup>5</sup> In the same way, there has been a nationwide campaign, including the government agencies, to increase the schooling of girls.<sup>6</sup> The JDP government currently pays a monetary allowance to poor families who are reluctant to send their children to school. The government pays the money to mothers rather than fathers and the amount is greater for girls than for boys.

In fact, the most important changes carried out by the JDP regarding women can be observed in the legal field. Among those, the JDP put into effect an important reform regarding women's rights and male–female equality, by amending the 10th clause of the Constitution. By this amendment, the state became the guarantor of gender equality. Superiority of international legislation was accepted by making an addition to Article 90 of the Constitution. With such amendments, the JDP government has rendered the CEDAW (The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women), which Turkey has signed in 1985, operational in law.<sup>7</sup> It also established 'family courts' to deal with issues and cases regarding the Family Law. It extended the duration of paid leave for working women after giving birth to 16 weeks. Another change was made in the new Penal Code that nullified the former code's provision that pardoned a rape in case that the raped woman married her rapist; thus it was accepted that marriage would not cancel criminal responsibility. Besides, the new law requires all municipalities that have more than 50,000 residents to establish shelter houses for women and children.<sup>8</sup>

The party's Women's Branches stands out as another significant dimension of the JDP's stance concerning women. Women's Branches are vigorously organized nationwide; there are regular meetings on a monthly basis, bringing together the heads of women's branches of all provinces in Ankara. The leaders of the Women's Branches take pride in having introduced a form of organization that could serve as a model for other parties as well. At the micro level, the women's branches are organized through neighbourhood representatives, who serve both as agents for

registering new members of the party and communicating the party's message to the people and people's demands to the party. The Women's Branches of the JDP also distinguish themselves from other parties through their institutionalized educational/training activities.<sup>9</sup> The party has so far been successful to a great extent in attracting women into the Women's Branches, mostly those who were not involved in politics before. The JDP women<sup>10</sup> joined the party mainly on their own initiative, in contrast to the women members of the Welfare Party and Virtue Party, who were brought into politics by their husbands/brothers/fathers to help their work, mainly for logistical support during elections. The percentage of women in the JDP ranks who have previously worked for the Welfare Party and the Virtue Party is estimated to be approximately 30 per cent.<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that for most of these women the main reason in joining the party was Erdoğan, thanks to his political experience before and after founding the JDP, his personal life and his humble background. Most women express their admiration for Erdoğan, whom they had closely followed during his mayorship of İstanbul. His 'ability to solve problems' and his 'commercial skills' seem to have convinced these women that Erdoğan alone is the leader that will finally solve Turkey's long-standing economic problems. Besides, many women also are impressed by what they call his 'honesty', 'sincerity', 'studiousness', 'charisma', and 'leadership' as well as by his 'family'. They also underline that Erdoğan is 'one of them', in contrast to previous 'elitist' politicians. In fact Erdoğan stands as a central figure for the JDP women. Many women claim that they have initially faced resistance to their participation in politics from the men in the party. Erdoğan's active encouragement, according to this view, forced many male members of the party to accept, sometimes reluctantly, working alongside women. At this point, it is possible to talk about a tension that exists between the party elite and the lower (male) ranks of the JDP.<sup>12</sup>

Although these developments have given important opportunities to women, the JDP does not have a clear guideline vis-à-vis crucial issues concerning women<sup>13</sup> – most prominent being the quota question and the headscarf issue. In this context, it is possible to understand the quota question within the framework of the JDP's reliance on moderate social change or 'evolution'. Despite its initial support for a quota system, the JDP soon changed its mind and adopted an anti-quota stance. Erdoğan has recently expressed his opposition to quotas: 'Are women like tradable goods to which you can impose a quota? Can there be such a thing? This is nonsense.'<sup>14</sup> Selma Kavaf, the head of the party's Women's Branches, justified the anti-quota policy as follows:

We do not have a positive stance on the women's quota. We want the women to climb up the ladder of politics from the bottom to the top, by experiencing each step and maturing in the process. If not, they will tell you 'you did not deserve this post, you are here because of the quota'. . . . The aim is to increase women's participation primarily in terms of quality. It cannot be a symbolic presence as someone's daughter, someone's wife. She has to participate actively and work.<sup>15</sup>

Most women in the party share a similar line of thought. The JDP women consistently underline that there is no necessity to impose an official quota as there is already an 'unofficial quota' of 30 per cent in the party. Erdoğan's statements that

encourage women's participation are again emphasized within this context.<sup>16</sup> In any case, the general belief in the party is that women's participation and representation in politics can only occur gradually and cannot be realized by imposition from above or by such means as quotas; it should be left to time and to the natural and gradual evolution of society.

The absence of a clear guideline is more obvious in the case of the headscarf question. The debate over the headscarf is a development especially of the 1990s. It constituted the main parameter of the polarization in the country that led to the 28 February process, which led to a stricter implementation of the ban on the headscarf in universities and in the public space. This issue is closely related to women's participation in politics and the public sphere at large which was mentioned in the party programme. The JDP's women members argue that, contrary to widespread belief, there is in fact no headscarf problem in society since the veiled and non-veiled women 'walk holding hands in the street'.<sup>17</sup> According to them, this issue has been constantly exploited by the politicians and state institutions: the main responsibility in transforming the headscarf issue into a problem belongs to the military-bureaucratic elite. However, these women also add that political parties following the *Milli Görüş* line have also contributed to the exploitation of this subject and Erbakan's name in particular is mentioned as one of the politicians responsible for the current stalemate. Even though the JDP leadership frequently states that the headscarf problem is not at the top of their agenda, it remains a major preoccupation of the JDP. The JDP women consider the headscarf a very important problem, which awaits a solution. However, they also emphasize, like Erdoğan, that the solution should be found without creating unnecessary tension in society, mainly by consensus.

On this point, one could observe a certain divergence of view between the JDP leadership – including women in the upper echelons of the party and the women MPs – on the one hand, and women in the lower echelons, on the other. The former believes that the issue will be solved in time and through social or institutional consensus,<sup>18</sup> especially after solving other pending problems such as those in the economy. One member of the Women's Branches stated that once the economic problems decrease, people 'won't preoccupy themselves with the other's personal priorities'. Women in the lower echelons, however, see the issue as a much more urgent problem and are more outspoken about it. Nevertheless, they also underline their confidence in Erdoğan's commonsense attitude to this matter and do not want to pressurize the party leadership too much. The number of veiled women increases as one goes down the levels of the party administration as well as the Women's Branches.<sup>19</sup> That the headscarf is much more of an integral and natural part of the lives of these women in the lower ranks of the party can explain the divergence within the party regarding this issue. Thus, the JDP's present policy regarding the headscarf has the potential of alienating those women wearing a headscarf since the JDP women are 'more demanding' and are not in politics just for the sake of providing logistical support to the party, in contrast to the Welfare Party women who were mostly in politics merely to support men for the 'sake of Allah' and without having any ambition of their own.<sup>20</sup> The JDP women are generally more ambitious and claim that it is necessary to climb up in the party from the very bottom, by gaining experience gradually at the real heart of politics. They do have a

firm belief in women's capacity to accomplish difficult tasks, even better than men. But it remains unclear how the JDP will respond to women's demands. A member of the Women's Branches, who wears a headscarf, stated almost in tears that 'she is not sure how she would react if another woman who has not worked enough and who has not sacrificed as much as she did for the party appears on the candidate list in the next elections'. Nevertheless, there are also others among the JDP women who are ready to take their headscarf off 'as a necessity of politics' if there is a prospect of making it to the candidate list.

In any case, there is a great uncertainty about the JDP's claim that solution of the economic problems would bring about the solution of other problems, the most important being the headscarf. It might be that, as Gamze Çavdar argues, the JDP is relying on gaining more legitimacy through success in economic and democratic reforms.<sup>21</sup> Secondly, it is also unclear how and when the social/institutional consensus that is presented as a solution will materialize. Given the existence of a variety of models of state-religion relationship in Europe as well as different policies regarding the issue of the headscarf in the EU countries, it would be unrealistic for the JDP to expect that Turkey's accession to the EU will bring about pressure from the EU on the secular military-bureaucratic elite to give up its intransigence on the headscarf ban in the public space. The European Court of Human Rights' (ECHR) silent approval of the French law banning the 'ostensible religious signs in public schools' in January 2004 and its decision in the Leyla Şahin Case in June 2004,<sup>22</sup> which rejected the claim that the ban on the headscarf in universities constitutes a breach of the freedom of religion and conscience, have shown, to the dismay of the JDP, that the ECHR could not be seen as an ally on this matter. Hence, the discourse of an 'institutional/social consensus' continues to remain as an ambiguous guideline of policy for the JDP.

Since its foundation in 2001, the JDP has named itself a 'conservative democratic party', thus rejecting the alternative label of 'Muslim democrat', *à la* Christian Democratic parties in Europe. According to some observers, the rejection of any Islamic credentials in its official identity was due to the fact that 'it is not easy to use the term "Muslim" in a country that has transformed authoritarian secularism into an official ideology',<sup>23</sup> with the implication that the term 'conservative democrat' was a proxy for 'Muslim democrat'. While the leader of the party, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, did not give any clear explanation for this rejection of the 'Muslim democrat' label though underlining his disagreement with such a term,<sup>24</sup> Yalçın Akdoğan, a close adviser of Erdoğan, argues that opting for the name 'conservative democrat' was more appropriate and 'politically expedient in a country possessing different religions, sects, and ideologies'. Thus, Akdoğan maintains that the term 'Muslim democrat' risked sounding too exclusionary and 'conservative democracy' was employed to embrace the whole population.<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, the JDP is a 'mass party built on the foundation of conservatism'.<sup>26</sup> In trying to distance itself from political Islam, 'conservatism' served as an innovative shelter for the JDP. Although, as Sultan Tepe has argued, 'conservative' has not been a 'conventional marker' in Turkish politics, it can be seen as a politically expedient label aiming at 'carving out a new and safe place in Turkey's political and ideological space'.<sup>27</sup>

Similar to its reluctance to be labelled as 'Muslim democrat,' the JDP leadership has been cautious not to look like a cadre party, thus 'de-emphasizing ideology'.<sup>28</sup> Yalçın Akdoğan for example refrains from using the word 'ideology' to describe conservative democracy, although he provides a historical sketch of the evolution of ideologies in general and conservatism in particular in his book.<sup>29</sup> One could find, in fact, a variety of terms that are used to define conservative democracy in this text. Conservative democracy is considered at times as a 'political identity' or an 'understanding', at other times as a 'line of thought', a 'form of political thought', a 'political style', or a simply a 'concept', but never an 'ideology'. This could be seen as a general exercise in caution characterizing the JDP's attitude toward ideologies. In line with this attitude, it is striking to observe that both the women MPs of the party as well as the members of the Women's Branches frequently state that '-isms are dead in the context of globalization' and emphasize their dislike of ideologies, including feminism.

Democracy as outlined in Akdoğan's formulation of conservative democracy is a regime that should reflect the will of the nation. Accordingly, democracy is an inclusive regime, the only one capable of providing the mechanisms necessary for tolerance, dialogue and reconciliation. Therefore, conservative democracy is against any attempt and understanding of 'social and political engineering',<sup>30</sup> having as its ultimate aim, as Sultan Tepe has argued, 'the closing of the distance between state and society'.<sup>31</sup> The party programme criticizes the majoritarian understanding of democracy as follows:

To win the competition [in a democratic election] and to come to power does not render the will of the majority absolute. One of the most valued characteristics of modern democracy is that the majority can under no condition make the basic rights and freedoms contingent and that it is always respectful of the rights and freedoms of those in the minority.<sup>32</sup>

Nevertheless, the contrast between the discourse and the practice is striking. Despite all the emphasis on the coexistence of diversity and difference through dialogue and reconciliation, the JDP's approach to democracy as manifested in certain specific issues concerning women has demonstrated rather an understanding of democracy defined as majoritarian. This limited understanding of democracy has meant two things. First, the JDP has seen itself as the direct spokesperson for the people/nation, and therefore the highest authority to take decisions. At this point JDP leaders rely on their overwhelming parliamentary majority and they also have a self-perception as 'coming from among people'. Thus, the JDP elite see themselves deeply anchored in society, respectful toward its values and norms, unlike the secular establishment, and thus could rightly claim to represent the Turkish people and their shared values. Secondly, the JDP has taken for granted the existence of a set of shared values, beliefs and needs, which have hitherto remained unfulfilled in the political arena because of the domination of the military-bureaucratic elite. The JDP government will finally make sure they respond to the demands of the people and reflect the people's beliefs in politics.

The debate on the question of adultery can also be understood in this light. In September 2004, during the legislation process of the new Penal Code in accordance

with legal harmonization with the EU, the JDP introduced a last-minute bill to re-criminalize adultery. The old Turkish Penal Code that dated back to 1926 had accepted adultery by both men and women as a criminal act. With the 1996 and 1998 rulings of the Constitutional Court, first men's, and then women's criminal responsibility in case of adultery were annulled. The JDP's bill to re-criminalize adultery envisaged penalization on the basis of complaint by women or men and was thus defended that it was based on equality, not prejudiced against women.<sup>33</sup> The JDP argued that the bill reflected public opinion and the demands of the majority of women, despite widespread criticism by women's associations that it would definitely work against women. The then minister in charge of women and family, Güldal Akşit argued that the new law was appropriate because, by 'taking into account Turkish traditions', it envisaged 'the preservation of social order'.<sup>34</sup> In fact, the protests organized by the Women's Platform against the proposed change in the Turkish Penal Code were dismissed unequivocally by Erdoğan as 'marginal'.

There have been some who have marched in Ankara in the name of democracy in the recent controversy. I was truly sorry on behalf of the Turkish women when I saw some handbills that went against their traditions and moral values. We have moral values; I would never applaud those handbills in the name of the Turkish women. Because the strength of Turkish women derive from these values. There can be no such understanding that a specific *marginal* group represents the power of Turkish women. 52 per cent of Turkey's population is made up of women. Among them, there are also those who have set their hearts on the JDP.<sup>35</sup>

Erdoğan's attitude can be seen as an example of the JDP's belief in the existence of an absolute set of moral values and corollary demands in society and its claim to know what these are. Therefore, all views that are not in conformity with these values and demands are seen as marginal. Accordingly, they represent not the 'Turkish people', but a small minority, and, more specifically in the case of adultery, not 'Turkish women', but some 'some marginal women'. The JDP's claims to act according to the wishes of Turkish women were based on a survey conducted by the JDP who claimed to be deeply concerned with the 'cries' of the Turkish women.<sup>36</sup> Thus, notwithstanding the JDP's promise to take decisions and make laws in consultation with civil society organizations,<sup>37</sup> the process of amending those articles of the Turkish Penal Code which deal with adultery excluded women's organizations. The final reversal of the proposed bill on 14 September 2004 was itself the result of the EU's harsh criticism and pressure and not those of the civil society organizations.<sup>38</sup> Thus, the adultery episode is telling in terms of the contradictions within the JDP: although they vehemently rejected the typical attitude of the ruling elite in Turkey, described as 'sitting around a desk and trying to shape the society',<sup>39</sup> the JDP leaders, as self-proclaimed depositaries of the values and demands of the society, do not seem to see anything wrong in sitting around a desk and presuming to know what the women really want.

For the JDP, the society and its needs, wants and values can easily be ascertained: 99 per cent of the Turkish population is Muslim and therefore it is natural that politics should respond to this in Turkish society. In this context, the conservative



identity of the party puts the JDP in a particularly privileged position as it sees Turkey's Islamic heritage as one of the most important components of the value system.<sup>40</sup> One JDP woman MP expressed this 'natural' overlap between moral values and Islam as follows:

I believe that the way to happiness passes through upholding those values that make us what we are. These values make one happy. Instead of going to a therapist, I become happy by praying. These values should not be looked down upon. ... This is the measure of conservatism for me. We have to adapt to the modern, contemporary world; we have to preserve the values that make us what we are.

These women emphasize that they are not against modernity and change. But because Turkish society is primarily a Muslim society, it is inevitable that the values that lie at the basis of society originate from Islam.

In a similar manner, the JDP's claim to know the Turkish people as well as their values and demands can be observed in relation to the issue of the headscarf. Since its foundation, the JDP leadership has stated that the headscarf issue does not constitute their priority and that it should be solved through consensus. This attitude can be seen as a reflection of the transformation of the *Milli Görüş* movement in the post-28 February process. The JDP frequently states that the headscarf issue should be understood from within the perspective of individual rights and freedoms. One male MP has stated that 'even though [veiling] (*örtünme*) is not one of the five commandments of Islam, it is an obligation'. What is significant in this context is that this 'obligation' is defined as '*türban*'<sup>41</sup> and all other forms of veiling such as *çarşaf*<sup>42</sup> are considered 'radical' or 'extreme'. Members of the Women's Branches often point out that the extent and definition of veiling are clearly set in the Koran and all other forms are excluded from this definition. As a result, these women support women's right to wear the headscarf in the public sphere. However, they seem reluctant to extend support to women who wear other forms of veiling, since the latter are seen as 'not in the religion', thereby defining what is 'in religion' and what 'is not'.

Situating itself in a long history of conservative ideology while at the same time underlining its own local peculiarities shaped by the particular conditions and historical experience of Turkey, the JDP puts forward conservatism as the aspect that distinguishes it from other political parties. Accordingly, the centre-right parties and even the centre-left parties did indeed have a 'conservative vein', but what distinguishes the JDP from them is the fact that conservatism constitutes the main body of its politics as well as its engine, which is itself understood as a novelty in Turkish politics. In this respect, the JDP tries to present its conservatism as a difference not only from the centre-right tradition of the past and present, but also from the parties that have based their politics on religion, namely the Islamist parties of the past.<sup>43</sup>

The female members of the party as well as Akdoğan, as the 'ideologue' of conservative democracy, define conservatism as a 'synthesis of and a fine tuning between tradition and change'.<sup>44</sup> Hence the principle of the Women's Branches is stated as 'adapting ourselves to technological developments and principles of

permanent and inevitable change and transformation simultaneously with the modern world while at the same time preserving our traditions shaped by antique civilizations and our societal values'.<sup>45</sup> The JDP women are keen on underlining that they are not against change and modernity but that this change should take place while preserving essential social values 'which make us what we are'. Thus, it is important to understand how, in practice, the conservatism aspect of conservative democracy strikes a balance between tradition and change regarding the women question.

The JDP claims to have an evolutionary understanding of change, as different from the radical, revolutionary approach, which it considers as a typical characteristic of the social and political engineering attitude. Radical change would nullify the past, which is something that needs to be preserved. Destruction of 'the institutional and conceptual systems' are considered as 'treason against the society', for one should not deny the values and accomplishments of the past. Modernization should be carried out without endangering the 'unitary nature' of the social structure.<sup>46</sup> Tradition is the main vehicle of preserving this unitary structure of society through time and across space, of binding individuals together and establishing social solidarity. It is thanks to the tradition that values of the past are transmitted to future generations. Tradition consists of three main and interrelated components: family, Islam and morality.

Family is put at the centre of conservatism. Akdoğan sees the family 'as the value that is of highest importance to conservatism'. He argues that 'the dissolution of the family which is the social institution that has the function of transmitting tradition and societal values is the most negative aspect of the modern era'.<sup>47</sup> Erdoğan even appointed a personal consultant in charge of women and family, Dr Ayşenur Kurtoğlu. Kurtoğlu started a project entitled 'My Family Turkey' (*Ailem Türkiye*) which included the publication of a series of books such as *Family Law Guide*, *Family Health Guide*, *A Life on the Same Pillow* and *Family Home Guide*. These books were meant to provide recommendations and guidance for 'a healthy family life'. Like Akdoğan, Kurtoğlu argued that 'our highest and the most uncorrupted value is precisely the family. We should be jealous of the family. It is the institution that we have to take care of most'.<sup>48</sup> For Erdoğan, the proposed change concerning adultery aimed at protecting the institution of family which was 'a corollary of our conservatism'.<sup>49</sup> In fact, the very timing of the JDP's attempt to make the adultery a criminal act, punishable by law, in September 2004, at a time when considerable progress had been achieved in integration with the EU, demonstrates the JDP's care to underline the difference of Turkish society from European societies. For the JDP, in other words, what distinguishes Turkey from Europe is essentially family and morality. In this context, Ahmet Taşgetiren, a conservative columnist writing in *Yeni Şafak*, a Turkish daily close to the JDP, argued that European societies are experiencing a moral decline 'due to extra-marital relations and sexual freedom'. Thus, this is seen as 'something unacceptable' for the Turkish society. As Taşgetiren himself put it, it is possible to see the JDP's insistence on penalizing adultery as 'demonstrating a resistance of difference', which it defines as the family.<sup>50</sup>

Second, besides the family, one of the most important components of the value system inherited from the past is Islam. In this context, Turkey is seen primarily as part of Islamic civilization. Considering that the official discourse of the Republican

ruling elite, ever since 1923, has been based on Turkey's Western identity, the emphasis put by the JDP on Turkey's Muslim identity is not without consequences for Turkey's self-perception and self-definition. In line with this shift in the official discourse, two women MPs of the JDP have expressed their agreement with Erdoğan's statement regarding Islam being the most important cement binding the Turkish nation since '99 per cent of the Turkish population is Muslim'. Besides his role and his various statements regarding the UN-sponsored 'Alliance of Civilizations',<sup>51</sup> Erdoğan's statement at the opening ceremony of the new school year on 18 September 2006 in Antalya placed Turkey without hesitation in the Islamic civilization. In this statement, Erdoğan took pride in increasing the budget of the Ministry of Education and explained the motivation behind such an increase as follows: 'we belong to a civilization whose first command is "Read!"'.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, in the Third Congress on Women in Local Government held in Ankara on 27 March 2007, Erdoğan stated that there is no status comparable to motherhood and that this is the reason why '*our civilization* has placed the heaven under the feet of mothers, and not those of fathers'.<sup>53</sup>

The JDP claims to reject an understanding of politics that instrumentalizes religion, as has been done by religious parties of the past. It follows that this understanding has proved to have harmful consequences both for religion and politics.<sup>54</sup> However, religion is one of the most cherished values of the conservatism of the JDP. It has been constantly emphasized that religion constitutes a major social value. In Akdoğan's formulation of conservative democracy, religion is important for Turkey's social structure as well as its geopolitics. Accordingly, not only is religion an important source of identity, it is also considered as a source of motivation in order to mobilize human resources for modernization. Religion and freedom of religion and conscience are also considered as crucial components of democratic regimes. In addition, religion is seen in functional terms as a social bulwark against the dangerous influences originating from radicalism and terrorism and serves to create awareness of moral values and virtue in order to build social order and unity.<sup>55</sup>

Third, moral values are another crucial element of tradition. The JDP women have a tendency to closely link Islam and morality. They see it as important to live in a morally upright society, for which they consider Islam the basis. However, the key role in the creation and continuity of a morally upright society is accorded to women because women, in their capacity as mothers, will raise generations with high moral values and therefore will directly contribute to the transmission of moral values to the future. Moreover, a morally correct society depends on the morality of women themselves. The issue of the headscarf, in addition to being a question of freedom of religion and conscience, could also be understood from the perspective of morality. Accordingly, the headscarf in Islam is a commandment which aims at protecting and glorifying women. The nature of men is a given, according to JDP women: man has uncontrollable desires. Therefore, it is women's responsibility to limit themselves in their relations with the other sex.<sup>56</sup> Notwithstanding this 'given nature of man' and the corollary obligation of women to limit their own conduct, the JDP women do not see Islam as a religion that oppresses women. On the contrary, they believe that Islam has had a liberating effect on women in both social and political life. At the basis of this belief lies particularly the idea of the 'Golden Age of Islam', romanticizing the period of the Prophet and the Four Caliphs. Accordingly, in this

period, the Muslim women played an important role in a variety of activities, from commerce to war, and in all aspects of social life.<sup>57</sup> From that time on, however, there has been an unfortunate backlash in women's social status due to a 'misinterpretation of Islam' and superstitions. Thus, for the JDP women, the systems of thought and practice that oppress women go against the very essence of Islam and originate from its misinterpretation. In fact, they believe that 'the country which lives Islam in the most correct way is Turkey'. They point out, however, that, even in Turkey, there has been a tendency to link some understandings and practices, which despise women and consider them as second class human beings, to Islam itself. They believe that it is necessary to know the true teachings of religion and when one closely studies the basic sources of Islam, it would be easy to see the absence of any prejudice against women and, on the contrary, Islam acknowledges women's real worth.

The JDP women believe that while women in Turkey have a higher status and more rights in society in comparison with the rest of the Muslim world, they are nevertheless faced with serious difficulties. At this point, it is striking to observe that in an overall assessment of women's status in Turkey, while accomplishments and positive aspects are linked to Islam, problems are seen as independent of it. In other words, women's relatively better place in social life is explained by the fact that 'Turkey is the country where Islam is lived best'. However, the source of the insurmountable problems of women is 'misinterpretation' of Islam, 'the durability of values of agricultural society', the 'Oriental culture' and, generally, 'wrong traditions and value systems'. When questioned about the accomplishments in women's rights in Turkey, there is hardly any reference to the Kemalist reforms of the early Republic, except for the right of women to elect and to be elected to office in 1934, long before some European countries. One exception to this general absence of the acknowledgement of the Republican secular reforms has come from a prominent JDP woman, also a founding member and a journalist. In an interview on her recent documentary 'Behind the Walls: Women in the Muslim World', Ayşe Böhürler admitted that the relatively better position of women in Turkish society could be explained by the early adoption of the secular legal system in Turkey, referring primarily to the adoption of a secular civil code in 1926. Nevertheless, in line with other members of the JDP, she maintains that the difficulties women are facing in the Muslim world do not stem from Islam but from patriarchal interpretations of their religion, among others.<sup>58</sup>

Having found a safe refuge in the discourse of conservative democracy, the JDP nevertheless faces several challenges. First, despite important achievements regarding the women question, obstacles remain for further mobilization in politics for women. Among the achievements which stand out, one may count especially the schooling of girls, a willingness to tackle 'honour' killings, legal amendments to achieve gender equality and expand women's rights and the creation of a vigorous women's organization within the party. As to the obstacles, the absence of quotas and the headscarf issue stand in the way of further mobilization for women in politics. Except for a vague notion of 'evolution' and 'consensus', there remains an ambiguity in the JDP in providing specific policy guidelines to address these issues. Second, contrasting its policy style to the elitist policy-making of the secular

establishment and basing itself on an overwhelming majority in parliament, the JDP seems to be tempted by the advantages of majoritarian democracy. Thus, while criticizing the 'social engineering' attitude of the military-bureaucratic elite, they claim to be the ultimate authority that knows society's values and demands. These presumed values are especially relevant to questions of morality which sustain traditional role models for women. A third and final challenge for the JDP is how to define conservatism by balancing tradition and change. Tradition as defined by the JDP's conservative democracy places women at an intersection of family, Islam and morality, which together draw the legitimate boundaries of women's activity. It is not at all clear how the JDP will manage to balance its discourse of change with its attachment to tradition.

## Notes

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1. For a detailed account of the 2002 elections see S. Özel, 'Turkey at the Polls: After the Tsunami', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol.14 (2003), pp.80–94; Z. Öniş and F. Keyman, 'Turkey at the Polls: A New Path Emerges', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol.14 (2003), pp.95–107; S. Coşar and A. Özman, 'Centre-right Politics in Turkey after the November 2002 General Election: Neo-liberalism with a Muslim Face', *Contemporary Politics*, Vol.10 (2004), pp.57–74.
2. For an evaluation of the emergence and subsequent experience in power of the JDP, see A. İnsel, 'The AKP and Normalizing Democracy in Turkey', *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol.102 (2003), pp.293–309; S. Tepe, 'Turkey's AKP: A Model "Muslim-Democratic" Party?', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol.16 (2005), pp.69–82; İ.D. Dağı, 'Transformation of Islamic Political Identity in Turkey: Rethinking the West and Westernization', *Turkish Studies*, Vol.6 (2005), pp.21–37; M. Heper, 'The Justice and Development Party Government and the Military in Turkey', *Turkish Studies*, Vol.6 (2005), pp.215–31; F. Atacan, 'Explaining Religious Politics at the Crossroad: AKP-SP', *Turkish Studies*, Vol.6 (2005), pp.187–99; B. Toprak, 'Islam and Democracy in Turkey', *Turkish Studies*, Vol.6 (2005), pp.167–86; Ş. Mardin, 'Turkish Islamic Exceptionalism Yesterday and Today: Continuity, Rupture and Reconstruction in Operational Codes', *Turkish Studies*, Vol.6 (2005), pp.145–65; T.W. Smith, 'Between Allah and Atatürk: Liberal Islam in Turkey', *The International Journal of Human Rights*, Vol.9 (2005), pp.307–25; M.J. Patton, 'The Economic Policies of Turkey's AKP Government: Rabbits from a Hat?', *Middle East Journal*, Vol.60 (2006), pp.513–36; M. Çınar, 'Turkey's Transformation under the AKP Rule', *The Muslim World*, Vol.96 (2006), pp.469–86; G. Çavdar, 'Islamist New Thinking in Turkey: A Model for Political Learning?', *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol.121 (2006), pp.477–97; M.H. Yavuz (ed.), *The Emergence of a New Turkey: Democracy and the AK Parti* (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2006).
3. There are a couple of studies that focus on the question of women and the JDP. See for example E. Sözen, 'Gender Politics of the JDP', in M.H. Yavuz (ed.), *The Emergence of a New Turkey: Democracy and the AK Parti* (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2006), pp.258–80; S. Tepe, 'A Pro-Islamic Party? Promises and Limits of Turkey's Justice and Development Party', in M.H. Yavuz (ed.), *The Emergence of a New Turkey: Democracy and the AK Parti* (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2006), pp.107–35. Sultan Tepe's study, while not focusing exclusively on the woman question, provides the most comprehensive account available in the literature.
4. 21 in-depth interviews have been conducted with mostly women MPs and members of the Women's Branches in five cities (Sakarya, Ankara, Konya, Kırıkkale and Çorum) from April to July 2006. This article covers the JDP government's record from November 2002 to April 2007.
5. For the proposal given at the Parliament to establish this commission, see [http://www.tbmm.gov.tr/komisyon/tore\\_cinayeti/onerge.htm](http://www.tbmm.gov.tr/komisyon/tore_cinayeti/onerge.htm). For the activities of the commission see the daily *Sabah*, 10 March 2007. Fatma Şahin also gave information on this issue during an interview with the authors on 28 April 2006.
6. For information on the project, see <http://iogm.meb.gov.tr/pages.php?page=projects&id=4>.

7. Nevertheless, the JDP refrained from inserting a provision in the Constitution on the necessity of 'positive discrimination' for women in order to ensure gender equality in line with CEDAW.
8. For details of the legal changes see the website of the Directorate General on the Status of Women: <http://www.kssgm.gov.tr/>.
9. While these educational activities including seminars on a wide range of subjects are presented as providing political education for women by the leadership of the party, they might also be considered as a way of socializing these women. Most women, particularly those who live in smaller provinces, have especially mentioned how these seminars, conferences, trips and charity works have helped them get to know each other and experience new things and visit new places. For most of the members of the JDP's Women Branches, providing social services and charity constitute an important part of their activities. Some members perceive these activities as their major function. In fact, having had previous experience in civil society organizations, some women see the women's branches as yet another, though more efficient, way of reaching the poor and the needy. One of the most important functions of the women's branches is to campaign during the election period. Trying to get votes for the party is crucial to the JDP's Women Branches. However, unlike the Ladies' Commissions of the Welfare Party this is not the main reason of their existence. For a detailed study on Welfare Party's Ladies' Commissions, see Arat, *Rethinking Islam and Liberal Democracy: Islamist Women in Turkish Politics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005).
10. By the 'JDP women', the authors mainly refer to the women interviewed during the field research.
11. For the argument about the Welfare Party, see *ibid*.
12. However, even within the party elite, one could at times observe a relative absence of enthusiasm to women's participation in politics. The head of the Parliamentary Commission on the Constitution, Burhan Kuzu stated that the reality is 'unfortunately' different: there is a negative perception in society vis-à-vis 'female MPs who come back home after midnight due to long working hours at the Parliament'. See 'Her yer Etiler değil' [Everywhere is not Etiler], *Milliyet* (daily), 3 May 2004.
13. A similar argument has been made by Sultan Tepe. Tepe, 'A Pro-Islamic Party?', pp.123–5.
14. [http://www.akparti.org.tr/haber.asp?haber\\_id=16632&kategori=1](http://www.akparti.org.tr/haber.asp?haber_id=16632&kategori=1).
15. Interview with Selma Kavaf, 28 April 2006.
16. Some of the interviewees have been puzzled when asked whether it is not unjust to look for quality, effort and work only for women while there are many unqualified and unsuitable men who are engaged in politics. Nevertheless, one could observe an internalization of the discourse of the party on the matter of quotas by the women members.
17. This point was repeated by the JDP members during the interviews.
18. These two terms are often used interchangeably.
19. The JDP currently has 11 female MPs out of 363, reduced from an initial 13. According to the Internal Statute of the Turkish Grand National Assembly, there are no MPs with a headscarf. Thus, the JDP had to put on the election candidate list women without a headscarf. There are three women members out of the 20-member Central Executive Committee of the JDP and none of them wears a headscarf. There are 12 female members in the 51-member Central Legislative and Executive Committee and again 12 women out of 55 members of the Party's Founding Committee. About half of these female members in these last two committees wear a headscarf. Around 65 per cent of the heads of the Women's Branches wear a headscarf. This percentage increases in the lower echelons of the party.
20. Arat, *Rethinking Islam and Liberal Democracy*.
21. Çavdar, 'Islamist New Thinking in Turkey', p.485.
22. Case of *Leyla Şahin vs. Turkey* (Application no. 44774/98), 29 June 2004.
23. Etyen Mahçupyan, quoted in Y. Akdoğan, 'The Meaning of Conservative Democratic Identity', in M.H. Yavuz (ed.), *The Emergence of a New Turkey: Democracy and the AK Parti* (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2006), p.58.
24. William Hale mentions Erdoğan's statement in an interview in December 2002. W. Hale, 'Christian Democracy and the JDP: Parallels and Contrasts', in Yavuz (ed.), *The Emergence of a New Turkey*, p.66. Erdoğan reiterated that 'such characterizations as an "Islamic party" or as "Muslim democrat" are not correct'. Tepe, 'A Pro-Islamic Party?', pp.118–19.
25. Hale, 'Christian Democracy and the JDP', pp.58–9. Hale discusses whether conservative democracy of the JDP could be called Muslim democracy and compared to the tradition of Christian democracy in Europe.

26. R.T. Erdoğan, 'Preface', in Y. Akdoğan, *AK Parti ve Muhafazakar Demokrasi* [JDP and Conservative Democracy], 2004. Accessed at <http://www.akparti.org.tr/muhafazakar.doc>.
27. Tepe, 'A Pro-Islamic Party?', p.120.
28. Çınar, 'Turkey's Transformation Under the *AKP* Rule', p.471.
29. Akdoğan, *AK Parti ve Muhafazakar Demokrasi*.
30. Ibid.
31. Tepe, 'A Pro-Islamic Party?', p.120.
32. The JDP Party Programme, Heading 2.5. 'Democratization and Civil Society' can be accessed at <http://www.akparti.org.tr>.
33. 'Zina kadının derdi' [Adultery is a women's problem], *Sabah* (daily), 1 September 2004.
34. 'Kadın Bakan Akşit: Zina suçu uygundur' [The Female Minister Akşit: The criminalization of adultery is appropriate], *Sabah*, 2 September 2004.
35. Italics are added by the authors. 'Kadınlara yakışmadı' [This is not an appropriate behaviour for women], *Sabah*, 25 September 2004.
36. 'Ak Parti zinadan geri adım atmadı' [JDP did not step back from adultery bill], *Sabah*, 9 September 2004; 'Karadenizli kadınlar inim inim iniyor' [Black Sea Women are deeply suffering], *Sabah*, 14 September 2004; 'Bakan: Zina ruh sağlığını bozar' [Minister: Adultery spoils spiritual health], *Sabah*, 12 September 2004; 'Kadının hakkını koruyoruz' [We are protecting women's rights], *Sabah*, 8 September 2004.
37. Akdoğan, *AK Parti ve Muhafazakar Demokrasi*. The JDP's Party Programme under the heading 2.4 'Law and Justice' and 2.5 'Democratization and Civil Society'.
38. 'Avrupa'dan zina uyarısı' [Warning from the EU on adultery], *Sabah*, 4 September 2004; 'AB'den sert uyarı' [Harsh warning from the EU], *Sabah*, 13 September 2004.
39. Akdoğan, *AK Parti ve Muhafazakar Demokrasi*.
40. 'Erdoğan: Kadını özel alana hapseden baskıcı anlayışlar asla medeni olamaz' [Erdoğan: Those oppressive ideas that imprison women to the private sphere can never be civilized], *Zaman* (daily), 20 February 2006.
41. Headscarf covering the hair, neck and shoulders.
42. The veil, covering the full body except for the face or sometimes even the face.
43. Akdoğan, *AK Parti ve Muhafazakar Demokrasi*.
44. Ibid.
45. *Siyaset ve Kalite Yönetimi* [Politics and Quality Management], Presidency of the JDP Women's Branches, n.d.
46. Akdoğan, *AK Parti ve Muhafazakar Demokrasi*.
47. Ibid.
48. 'Evlilik sertifikası almayanın nikahı kıyılmayacak!' [Those with no marriage certificate will not be able to get married], *Zaman*, 21 August 2003. See also 'Başbakanlık danışmanından gerdek gecesi kitabı' [First night book from the consultant of the prime minister], <http://habervitrini.com/haber.asp?id=177422>, 13 June 2005.
49. 'Kadının hakkını koruyoruz' [We are protecting women's rights], *Sabah*, 8 September 2004.
50. Interview by journalist Neşe Düzel, with A. Taşgetiren, 'AB'yle sorun cinsellikten çıkacak' [The problem with the EU will stem from sexuality], *Radikal* (daily), 13 September 2004; A. Taşgetiren, 'AK Parti'nin sıkıntısı' [JDP's nuisance], *Yeni Şafak* (daily), 23 September 2004. See also D. Dursun, 'Zina öncelikle bir ahlak sorunudur' [Adultery is above all a moral issue], *Yeni Şafak*, 23 September 2004.
51. "Erdoğan: Kadını özel alana hapseden baskıcı anlayışlar asla medeni olamaz", *Zaman*, 20 February 2006. See also Erdoğan's various statements on the 'Alliance of Civilizations': 'Fransa'daki olaylar "medeniyetler ittifakı" projesinin önemini gösterdi' [The events in France have shown the importance of the 'alliance of civilizations' project], *Zaman*, 7 November 2005; 'Medeniyetler İttifakı'nda ilk adım' [The first step in the Alliance of Civilizations], *Sabah*, 27 November 2006; 'Erdoğan: Medeniyetler İttifakı şart' [Erdoğan: The alliance of civilizations is a must], <http://www.ntvmsnbc.com/news/360037.asp>, 5 February 2006.
52. 'İlk emri oku olan medeniyetimiz' [We belong to a civilization whose first command is 'Read'], *Milliyet*, 19 September 2006.
53. Italics added. [http://www.akparti.org.tr/haber.asp?haber\\_id=16632&kategori=1](http://www.akparti.org.tr/haber.asp?haber_id=16632&kategori=1). Erdoğan is referring to the *hadith*: 'The heaven is under mothers' feet'.
54. Akdoğan, *AK Parti ve Muhafazakar Demokrasi*.

55. Ibid.
56. Most of the interviewees pointed out the different impact that women with and without headscarf have on men's sexual desires. It is all the more striking that with few exceptions, they have generally described the women without headscarf as those 'with short skirt and half-bare breasts' and 'self-displaying'.
57. The interviewees gave more or less the same examples: The Prophet's wife, Hatice was an important business woman; women were at the forefront in wars and were caring for the wounded; women were also consulted in political matters. Also, the JDP women point out the Prophet's Farewell Speech in which he 'entrusted women to men and men to women', and the *hadith* that states 'the heaven is under the feet of mothers'.
58. Interview by journalist Yasemin Bay with A. Böhürler, 'Kadın meselesinde Türkiye daha Batılı' [Turkey is more western in the women question], *Milliyet*, 21 February 2007.