

The turban, multiple wives, and a hundred lashes

Had Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan not felt so dizzy about his election victory, he would probably not have decided to keep his long-delayed promise to his Islamic constituencies and liberalize the turban on campus. And had he not done so, Turkey's ruling party would probably not have faced a legal challenge for its closure. That, along with a series of recent "social news" featuring "how observant Muslim men view and treat women," makes it necessary to correct parts of the Islamic propaganda.

In fact, the main opposition party which boasts of being the guardian of Turkey's secular regime should have done this country a favor and itself spearheaded the parliamentary initiative to lift the campus ban on the turban. But it is too late for should-have-done's. The damage is already done.

What's wrong with many wives?

Let's go back to the turban. What was Mr. Erdoğan's justification for his "freedom for the turban" campaign? Ladies wear this garment because they believe it is God's commandment. Ostensibly, a very convincing argument. Things may look different, though, with a more in-depth thinking. Mr Erdoğan's party's not-so-shrewd move to amend the Constitution "because some ladies believe a certain practice is God's commandment" could set a very perilous precedent.

First, let's get our facts straight: there is no mention of any appropriate headwear for Muslim women in the Koran. So, the belief that any headscarf is God's commandment is a personal interpretation of the holy book – an interpretation everyone must respect no matter how dubious it may be. But there are some very explicit commandments in the Koran which a dog-



matic/absolutist Muslim cannot ignore – unless he is politically motivated to do so.

Recently, the man known to be Turkey's Muslim fashion guru hit the headlines when secular(ist) media discovered he had three wives. "So what?" the man logically asked, "Having multiple wives (as long as the husband treats them equally) is allowed in our religion and is better than adultery since men by nature cannot be monogamous." He came under cross-fire -- from the secularists as well as from senior figures in Mr Erdoğan's party.

For example, Halide İncekara, a lady MP from Mr Erdoğan's party, said that "it was impossible to accept multiple wives." Former AKP minister for women's rights, now an MP, Güldal Akşit, said that "she would not consider unofficial wives (wives men marry by religious ceremony) as spouses." Similarly, Mr Erdoğan's party's deputy chairman, Nükhet Hotar Gökse, said that "she defended single marriage."

All that's very nice; but is there not something bizarre here? On the one hand the AKP fiercely advocates a Muslim practice, the turban, although this practice is not even mentioned in the Koran, and on the other it stands against a practice which is explicitly mentioned in the Koran (according to the Koran it is perfectly legitimate if men marry up to four wives and treat them equally). How come, the House of the AKP which has

"Muslim thinking" about all things worldly "not accept" a practice allowed by God?

Is there not a contradiction here? Why legitimize a practice not mentioned in the Koran only because "some people believe it is God's commandment," and turn around and whistle about another practice undisputedly deemed "legitimate" in the Koran? Do some people not think having up to four wives is part of their faith?

What's wrong with lashes?

That's the troubling part about the turban. If we apply the same rule – that we can make/change laws in favor of a practice because some people think it is God's commandment—to God's commandments explicitly mentioned in the Koran we should also end up with what Mr. Erdoğan proposed a few years earlier: criminalizing adultery.

But Mr. Erdoğan was wrong about the appropriate sentence for this act when he proposed a prison term. The Koranic verse on adultery describes in detail about how this act should be penalized: "The adulteress and the adulterer you shall whip each of them a hundred lashes. Do not be swayed by pity from carrying out God's law, if you truly believe in God and the Last Day. And let a group of believers witness their penalty. (Koran, 24:2)"

In this case, why should Mr. Erdoğan and his men not legislate a hundred lashes for adultery "because Muslims believe in this practice" – and further because it is explicitly God's commandment, just like avoiding alcohol and pork. Since there are not "more important verses" against "less important verses," why all that trademark perseverance about the turban (and alcohol and pork) and the "let's-not-talk-about-it" shyness on multiple wives and the whip for adultery?

Another recent piece of "social news" the secular(ist) press jumped into was about the 78-year-old columnist, a heavyweight of the Islamic press, who has been arrested on charges of sexual abusing a 14-year-old girl. The accused could have been a man of any ideology since perverted behavior is not limited to any race, religion or ideology.

Partisan and confused

All the same, it was stunning news, no doubt, but the way both the secular(ist) and the Islamist newspapers covered the incident was truly disgusting (or simply too partisan): The secular(ist) editors showcased the incident around a not-so-hidden "see your pervert Islamist mujahadeen" theme; while the Islamic coverage focused on the ideas that (a) this is a conspiracy against an Islamist columnist, and (b) Muslim fighters should be tolerated if they "stumble" in their private lives while fighting for Islam.

But such partisan behavior is hardly surprising in a polarized country like Turkey where confused minds often produce confusing interpretations of confusing incidents, a habit even amusing at certain times. Recently, the police in Istanbul raided a wedding ceremony in which a couple of teenagers, with consent of their families, were to get married. They were not permitted to marry.

Legal proceedings were launched against the would-be groom, himself underage, for "illegally keeping an underage girl." The would-be bride was only 14, or one year younger than our First Lady when she married our president.