

Title: IMAN Interviews Turkish Ambassador, Dr. Merve Kavakci (Part 2)

Participants:

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Iman Zambasri: [0:00] Hello! My name is Iman Zambasri here from The Affair and I'm here to introduce part 2 of an interview IMAN Research conducted with Dr. Merve Kavakci the Turkish Ambassador here in Malaysia. If you haven't heard part 1 of the interview yet, please head over to our website to give it a listen. In part 2 of the conversation, Dr. Kavakci talks about the change in Turkey's official stance towards the *Hijab* and comments on her own experience with this change. As you may or may not know, Dr. Kavakci was first elected to Turkish parliament in 1999 but was then denied permission to take her oath because she refused to remove her *hijab*. She also speaks on the topic of gender balanced leadership and women representation in the political realm. And then the interview goes into talks about having a female mufti, and finally, we end the conversation on Turkey's role in fighting extremism, where Dr. Kavakci urges people to think deeper on the conceptualization and definition of terrorism. And so without further ado, this is part 2 of Dr. Merve Kavakci interviewed by IMAN Research.

I: [1:03] You have a very interesting history with your own government, so it would be remiss of us not to ask you a few questions on that. Turkey's official stance towards the hijab has changed since 1999 when you were first elected to parliament and then stopped from taking the oath. What are your views on compulsory hijab/modesty laws? For example in Iran, or Saudi.

K: [1:40] I think I can comment based on my own experience that Turkish Republic I think has moved away from its ideal of secularization over the decades and moved more towards establishing a state religion of secularism, so that state religion of secularism constituted that women should appear only in one context that was found permissible and fit by the state authority. And I was only one out of hundreds of thousands of women who were denied from things like healthcare, things like education, things like economic freedom, but it took again a process of democratization of both the minds and the institutions of Turkey that in February 2017, the last bit of the hijab ban was finally dissolved, and the headscarf ban from Turkish Republic was completely revoked. And after that my appointment as the ambassador came into fruition. And in the looking out this process in a way, not only personally growing, but also nationally growing, and the reformation of the state machinery becoming more people friendly was a process. And this is part of a larger philosophical discourse on to 'what extent the state can have its hand on people's individual life space?' This includes the French, when the French authorities wanted to put their hand into a family's life in choosing their children's' religion. This involves the East, the West. It's a paradox within itself that we refer to as rights paradox within the context of language of rights in political philosophy. When we're talking about a paradox, you can't necessarily come up with a theory that you can avert(?), that you can prove to be 100% true. You rather have different parties coming and clashing to one another and what's

important I think is to come to terms with the reality of your own nation state, your history, your culture, your ethnic, your religious, your racial background, maybe? Depending on which geographical demarcation we're talking about, and find a way of consoling your differences. Trying to come to terms with the reality. Teasing out the differences and coming to a common ground. Finally, I can say that the state machinery, the ideology of the state machinery of Turkey, caught up with the people of Turkey. That is to say, when you go to the lay person on the street, when you go and observe the reality on the ground, Turks never had an issue of secular and di-secular of hijab, no-hijab. They even did not have an issue of religion. Why? They embrace on another. We come from a tradition of the Ottoman tolerance, where the Jews, Christians, and Muslims lived together in peace for centuries. From there we came to a place where the state in of itself had an issue with the women who wanted to committed Muslims, like myself. And now, we upgraded, we updated our state understanding to catch up with the people in a way to reform itself. And that's a process that all countries can find whatever might fit in their own way and emulate. Take out their own lessons.

I: [8:01] When we talk about our rights-based approach and in particular this example that we used, it's mostly directed towards women and women's bodies and what they can wear, and what they cannot wear, I think that speaks to a greater lack of solid female leadership, not due to women not stepping up, but due to, as you say, not having those institutional processes to really encourage female leadership. Although, having said that, female leadership has grown worldwide. I mean we see more female presidents and MPs and taking government positions, but it is still a relatively small group and these women are often not in power for very long. Do you think gender balanced leadership can become a norm? And more specifically, become a norm in Muslim countries such as Malaysia or Turkey?

K: [9:05] I think the answer is not mutually exclusive for a Muslim or non-Muslim countries. A gender balanced leadership is an area that we must all strive for. To what extent we can succeed in creating a leader led world is another question but indeed we can strive for. The visible leadership of women in political realm in the way that we see in presidencies and prime ministries and high ranking office holdings is somewhat symbolic, I would argue. It's not very reflective of the larger realities on the ground. Again, the larger realities on the ground can be examined, can be approached, evaluated within the context of Muslim countries, and within the larger context around the world. These have, both of these examinations, might have overlappings, that is to say, to be a woman, a professional, may not be easy, be a doctor, be a professor, be an engineer, be a homemaker, despite of your nationality or your religion or your color. To be protected and guarded by laws from gendered based harassments could be an issue in any part of the world. And then when you look at the Muslim world, there you might find specificities, some particularities that might emerge due to the cultural tapestry, cultural and reliogiocultural let me say, where you find religion and culture to be inextricable from one another, you might have factors, shall I say coming and stemming from those elements that might put you in a situation as a woman that might infringe your personal or professional growth. Now, these have to be tackled in various facets of the society. One needs to be a state level, one has to be at a more local level. One maybe has to be at a more local level which might have

to do with trainings and teachings and changes that will push changes in behavioral codes system. It might be in your own district, in your own region or vicinity, or your own town, okay? So the challenges are there and they have to be addressed sometimes with its transnational specificities, sometime they have to be addressed in a national specificities, or sometime in a very local specificities.

I: [13:32] So on that note, maybe this is a good segue to talk about the idea of a female mufti. On the magazine we had an article that argued Malaysia should have a female muftis. We have enough women who are qualified to be. How would Turkey respond to this sort of idea?

K: [13:58] First of all, let me put the caveat that as an academic, I must show the reservation that to preach to another country is not something that can be done from an academic perspective. And it would only bring maybe the fallacy of comparing apples and oranges, but it might be a good way to shed light by bending backwards and looking into the Turkish experience. Turkish Republic is now introducing not necessarily female muftis, but we have a female, our first deputy director of religious affairs, so now women will be present in the religio-political realm, more visibly, more conspicuously, taking the role of leadership through Turkey's states hand, so this is a new development. This is not a reformation process in any way. Reformation is a very convoluted concept that carries a connotation and it needs to be addressed with geographic tagging. This is not a discussion of reform in Islam. This is more of a discussion of, on our part, our attempt to understand God's revelation, his religion, in a better way. As believers of religion of Islam, as believer of the unchangeable book, that has a message for people throughout the centuries. If the book is unchangeable, then the way we understand the book is changeable. And therefore, with the changing world, we have to look for ways of better understanding God's message to us, in the 21st century. That also involves women's role as subjects of God. This is not a discussion on Egalitarianism. This is a discussion more within the Muslim community as being full-fledged subjects of God.

I: [18:18] Actually I wanted to ask you about.. since the background of IMAN, our research is mostly on countering violent extremism, so we've been countering extremism, jihadism, and there seems to be a certain perception on what Islam, the religion, is, understanding that the religion is a religion of peace. I think what has been happening is that there are some misguided souls or there is a certain understanding of what jihadism is all about and whether in understanding it, do you think Turkey can play a major role in explaining what the religion is so that it will not be misunderstood to promote violence in any country or any society?

K: [19:31] I think Turkey is doing its part in not just talking the talk but by walking the walk as well in countering and fighting extremism. We had a war, we've been a nation inflicted with extremism, *Da'esh*, through suicide bombings and the (likened?) from Kurdish separatists, PKK, and drew the attention, tried to draw the attention of nation states to extremism and terrorism in all ends. And I think Turkey has done an important job in helping revoking of the masks of various nations and leaving them with their own () attitude, janus-faced, double faced, attitude, when it comes to the issues of terrorism. The discussions that you are tabbing into right now,

such as jihadism, such as fundamentalism, such as terrorism, takes us to the crux of the matter of where do these ‘isms’, all ‘isms’, ‘I – S – M’s added suffixes, where are these all conceptualized? Where do they emerge from? And then when we are talking about terrorism, whose terrorism? And whose terrorist are we referring to? When you see innocent people murdered by one X country and that country is not considered a terrorist state and another country is considered a terrorist state, because there are muslims living there. Then one has to take a step back and ask is it fair to call this nation a terrorist while looking away from the egregious attacks of this country? And that is considered self-defense in the eyes of power-holders in this world? So the discussion of terrorism is deeper than what we can re-see through a course of a reading and that is why the leadership of Turkish Republic, namely embodied in our President Erdoğan, has always pointed out this duplicity and the double standard of various nations when it comes to the issues of terrorism and fighting terrorism. That is why President Erdoğan came up with the motto of “The world is greater than five,” referring to the UN security council for its five permanent nation states that hold all of the strengths attached to the destinies of whole humanity in their palms. That is not fair. So the discussion on terrorism has to address different aspects on terrorism and it must include a one fits all kind of conceptualization and definition of terrorism. So long as we have a double standard on dubbing some people as terrorists and some people in self-determination, we cannot find a common ground to fight against extremism.