JULY 2024 - VOL.8 - NO.2

lectio socialis

E-ISSN:2602-2443

JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

Publisher **Emrah Konuralp**
Address **Iğdır Üniversitesi, Şehit Bülent Yurtseven Kampüsü, Merkezi Derslik Binası. İİBF. Iğdır-TÜRKİYE**
e-mail **emrah.konuralp@metu.edu.tr**
Type of Publication **Periodical e-journal**
e-ISSN **2602-2443**

www.dergipark.org.tr/lectio

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lectio socialis
is a refereed journal.
Biannually published (January-July).
Manuscripts can be submitted in English or Turkish languages.

Published by Emrah Konuralp.

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2024, VOL. 8, NO. 2, pp. 73-98 DOI: 10.47478/lectio.1454452

Honor killings in traditional societies: Revisiting the case of Türkiye after Istanbul Convention withdrawal

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ABSTRACT

This research delves into the complex dynamics of honor and honor killings in traditional societies, with a specific focus on Türkiye, which has a Muslim-majority population and secular-democratic politico-legal system. It sheds light on the cultural and societal frameworks that reinforce honor, particularly in the context of gender relations and familial reputation. Using a qualitative methodology, the study analyzes the case of Türkiye, with a significant emphasis on the controversial withdrawal from the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, also known as the Istanbul Convention. Examining discussions in the parliament, legal documents, and secondary sources, such as research reports, supports the case study. The findings reveal a complicated interplay between traditional perceptions of honor, legal inadequacies, and societal attitudes that perpetuate violence against women. The study argues that while legislative reforms have been implemented, cultural and societal norms continue to pose significant challenges to their effectiveness. The conclusion underscores the urgent need for a multifaceted approach, incorporating legal, educational, and societal strategies to dismantle the cultural norms that condone honor-related violence. This article contributes to the discourse on gender-based violence, advocating for a comprehensive understanding and action to address honor killings in Türkiye and beyond.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 21.03.2024
Revised: 04.06.2024
Accepted: 05.06.2024

KEYWORDS

honor,
honor killings,
women's human rights,
Istanbul Convention,
Türkiye

Introduction

In May 2020, the Thought Platform of Türkiye, chaired by Islamic scholar Prof. Hayrettin Karaman, submitted a report to Turkish President Tayyip Erdoğan, requesting the annulment of the Istanbul Convention. The report, titled "Legal and Psychosocial Assessment of the Istanbul Convention," stated:

> In the definitions of concepts within the Istanbul Convention, while highlighting "grounds of discrimination," it is a significant criticism that concepts such as society, religion, culture, customs, traditions, honor, decency, morality, and family are being opened to debate and devalued. Rather than being perceived as a sincere effort, portraying these concepts as the root causes of murder, violence, and inequality is seen as an attempt to sever society from its roots. Additionally, the conceptualization of honor killings is thought to diminish the esteem of the values that uphold society more than they are well-intentioned. (Yetkin, 2020)

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This assessment is one of the most striking examples of the conflict between societal values and women's rights in Türkiye. The calls to revoke the Istanbul Convention undermined efforts to prevent violence against women and achieve gender equality. Critics of the Convention often justify their opposition by citing the need to preserve deeply rooted societal norms, such as honor.

Honor, as a symbolic form, and honor killings, as a direct form of violence against women, have been significant issues in Türkiye and many other traditional societies around the world (Gryzb, 2016; Hamzaoğlu & Konuralp, 2019). Honor is deeply ingrained in Türkiye's cultural and social fabric, shaping societal norms and values for centuries. However, the practice of honor killings, which involves the murder of individuals, typically women, who are perceived to have brought dishonor upon their family or community, has sparked widespread controversy and condemnation.

In this article, we will explore the historical and cultural roots of honor and honor killings, examining the traditional beliefs and societal expectations that have perpetuated such practices. Additionally, we will analyze the legal and social responses to honor killings in Türkiye, as well as the ongoing efforts to address and mitigate this issue.

This article aims to examine the perceptions surrounding honor killings and gender inequality. The belief that gender inequality is a natural and inevitable phenomenon can lead to the normalization of its consequences, thereby perpetuating its existence. Instead, it is crucial to recognize that gender inequality is a socially constructed issue that has persisted throughout history. Oppression towards women is not an inherent characteristic of human nature but is created by human behavior influenced by societal norms and prevalent discrimination. It is imperative to acknowledge the role of socially constructed gender roles and stereotypes in perpetuating gender inequality. By recognizing the socially constructed nature of gender inequality, we can take steps toward dismantling these structures through persistent efforts.

From a cultural perspective, since honor killings are a result of traditional patriarchal values deeply rooted in certain parts of Turkish society, the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, known as the Istanbul Convention, aimed to challenge these cultural norms by regarding such acts of violence as unacceptable under any circumstances, which opposes the traditional beliefs that prioritize family honor above all. Therefore, the legal and political ramifications of the decision to withdraw from the Convention in Türkiye are seen by many as a political move aligned with a growing conservative agenda that values traditional family values over gender equality. This move has raised concerns about the weakening of legal protections for women, which may lead to a rise in gender-based violence, including honor killings. The lack of international oversight and reduced legal frameworks can decrease state accountability and protection for women. As a societal impact, the debate over the Convention and the withdrawal reflects broader societal conflicts over women's rights and gender equality in Türkiye. This article scrutinizes the symbolic impact that aligns state policies with cultural norms that perpetuate violence against women.

Understanding "honor"

Examining the intersection of gender roles and the concept of honor, it is crucial to recognize how societal norms prescribe specific behaviors that reinforce gender inequalities. Connell

(2005) reveals how societal expectations around gender can dictate the actions and self-perceptions of both men and women, often placing women in subservient positions. This dynamic is vividly outlined by Kandiyoti (1988) in her discussion of how women "bargain" with patriarchal norms to navigate oppressive structures, which frequently tie their honor to their sexual behavior. Similarly, Warrington and Younger (2011) illustrate how gender expectations can govern even the microcosms of society, such as gangs, where gender norms can dictate distinct roles and behaviors. The severe implications of these gendered expectations are most tragically seen in honor-related violence, where women can be subjected to extreme violence for perceived transgressions of these norms, as articulated by Welchman and Hossain (2005a, 2005b) and Sen (2005). Moreover, Yuval-Davis (1997) emphasizes that the concept of national identity can also intertwine with these gender norms, further complicating the lives of women who bear the burden of upholding a community's honor. Together, these works highlight the pervasive impact of gendered societal expectations and the critical need for reevaluating how honor and gender are conceptualized and lived in various cultures.

In today's societies where honor killings are prevalent, honor holds a significance beyond mere "respect." There is a collective belief that honor represents the most crucial value in life, equating life with honor and viewing the loss of honor as tantamount to the loss of life (Doğan, 2014, p. 364). In these communities, individuals are often surrounded by others who consider it necessary to resort to killing or violence in response to any perceived dishonor. Therefore, the concept of honor encompasses broader meanings but often represents a set of values biased towards men, which they use to control women, particularly their sexuality. When the word "honor" is mentioned, it typically brings to mind a woman's sexual purity. If a woman violates the customs' rules of sexual restraint, her honor is considered tarnished. In extreme traditionalist segments of societies, this can result in death through honor killings—the killing of a woman suspected of deviating from societal sexual norms (Faqir, 2001, p. 66). Honor killings are visible manifestations that mark borders between different segments in modern societies with ethnic and cultural diversity (Hellgren & Hobson, 2008, p. 386). They are perceived as specific forms of violence against women within traditional segments but have also been observed in Western societies where minority communities have "ethnicized" them using different cultural repertoires. The paradigm of "multiculturalism," emphasizing respect for diversity and valuing cultural differences, has led to the invisibility and voicelessness of these women by overemphasizing the "private sphere" when addressing violence based on cultural or religious origins (Yuval-Davis, 1997a, p. 63; Yuval-Davis, 1997b, p. 17; Meetoo & Mirza, 2010). Also, these crimes often went unnoticed because they were considered "traditional or cultural practices" outside the bounds of state intervention (Keyhani, 2013, p. 255). In this respect, it is worth noting that multiculturalism arises from a particularism that is separate from the universal, where distinct identities within national categories lead to conflicting struggles and even violence (Konuralp, 2018, p. 143; Özdil, 2021a, 2021b). This poses a challenge for establishing democratic societies based on representation while also potentially reinforcing gender stereotypes in private spheres, complicating efforts to promote gender equality in Western democracies.

Thus, the fight against violence towards women and so-called honor killings cannot overlook the existence of a patriarchal cultural code known as the honor/shame complex. This cultural construct is embraced by some individuals in Middle Eastern and Mediterranean regions as a way to control female sexuality. Gender identity formation

varies across historical periods and geographical locations, necessitating a nuanced cultural analysis that avoids oversimplification. In other words, deep-rooted inequalities should not be neglected in the name of "multiculturalist" tolerance. Instead, uncovering the historical conditions that allowed patriarchal codes to thrive in cultural settings is crucial. Therefore, understanding violence against women requires recognizing its close connection to constructions of masculinity within different patriarchal systems. Therefore, examining forms of control over women's sexual agency along a continuum of patriarchal dominance is imperative for comprehending this issue comprehensively; it may eventually lead to acts of violence. The honor/shame code can thus be seen as an aspect within the broader framework of patriarchal domination (Al-Qahtani *et al*., 2022, p. 4; Akpınar, 2003, p. 427; Baker *et al*., 1999; Kandiyoti & Kandiyoti, 1987).

In societies with solid traditionalism, the concept of honor often signifies men's dominance over women and their hierarchical position. Honor becomes a tool for men to exploit and control women, thereby determining and limiting their lives. This fixation on women's sexuality and virginity to preserve men's privileged status leads to widespread practices like honor killings across different regions, such as Andalusia and the eastern Mediterranean (Acar-Savran, 2018, p. 112).

When we consider the meaning of the word, honor (*namus* in Turkish) is defined by the Turkish Language Association as adherence to moral rules and social values within a society, including chastity. This definition not only encompasses women's sexual purity but also extends to a broader context. The term "chastity" (*iffet* in Turkish), used synonymously with "honor" by the Turkish Language Association, might be more suited to convey women's sexual purity than the concept of honor. The definition of "chastity" pertains specifically to moral guidelines related to sexuality and is commonly associated with women. A woman who abides by these standards regarding sexual morality can be described as "chaste" (*iffetli* in Turkish), while one who does not is termed as "unchaste" (*iffetsiz* in Turkish). Nevertheless, given that the widely recognized term for femicide due to unchastity is "honor killing," this study will use the term "honor" rather than "chastity."

Nevin Yıldız Tahincioğlu (2011, p. 80) explains that the concept of "honor" is as significant as the founding law in Mediterranean and Middle Eastern societies, derived from the Latin word *nomos*, meaning "law." Additionally, Bağlı and Özensel (2011, p. 36) note that *nâmûs* in Arabic originates from the Greek *nomos,* meaning "law." They clarify its derivation from the infinitive *nems* meaning "to keep a secret, to speak a secret word," with associated meanings such as "secret partner, trick, trap, hiding place."

For women, honor is the sexual standard they are expected to uphold. This includes maintaining virginity until marriage and refraining from intimate relations with anyone other than their spouse after marriage. Sexual relations between women and their same-sex partners, either before or during the marriage, typically do not lead to "honor killing" or "honor-related violence." In this phenomenon of "women's honor," the focus is usually on men. According to Tahincioğlu (2011), from the traditional perspective, all women represent the honor of the family. Bağlı and Özensel (2011) also state that a woman's honor is equivalent to chastity. A woman's responsibility to protect her honor means preserving her sexual purity and avoiding actions that would disrupt this purity; therefore, her behavior is supervised by men. The responsibility imposed on men by this phenomenon is to protect and supervise the honor of the women in their families. A woman's protection of her honor begins with shame regarding her sexuality—the source of which stems from herself—and

creates a perception of honor for men as its bearer and owner stemming from this shame and abstinence.

We also find the justification for masculine violence in the fact that the source of the perception of honor for men is women. In social life, honor for the man is the sexual purity of his wife, daughter, sister, mother, and related women. According to custom, men are expected to protect the honor of women, even if it means using force or coercion when necessary. This includes the use of violence against both other women and any men who threaten the honor of women in their family. According to Tahincioğlu (2011, p. 78), honor is defined as the responsibility of men to protect women's sexual purity by using violence when necessary, while women are expected to protect their honor by being ashamed. It has been suggested that a woman's behavior, as perceived by society, reflects on the reputation of the man. This belief is based on the idea that men have the "right" to control a woman's body to ensure the legitimacy of their offspring. Recep Doğan (2016, p. 21) points to this reality that for men, honor is subject to social control due to the importance of the reproductive potential of women. In the context of ensuring the continuation of the generation, the man is committed to marrying a woman who will guarantee that the child to be born will be his descendant and that the woman will provide this guarantee throughout the marriage and draws attention to the fact that in this expectation, the man controls the woman's body, and this is accepted in society.

Accordingly, in practice, men place great importance on virginity. They insist that women be virgins at the time of marriage and then control their sexual behavior afterward. This responsibility is tied to the concept of honor, and they expect women to prioritize it as well. In terms of femicides, for men, honor is considered equal to life, while dishonor is equivalent to death. The man prefers (the woman's) death rather than being characterized as dishonest and dishonorable (Doğan, 2016, pp. 85-86). Because it is the woman's chastity and honor that makes a man honorable or dishonorable. If the woman has been unchaste, the man believes that he has saved his honor by killing her, and he accepts that this is what his environment expects of him. This is the man's understanding of honor as prescribed by tradition.

The historical development of honor killings shows that this phenomenon is a political problem based on socio-economic and social structure. In this context, while the phenomenon of honor plays a constitutive role in social organization as a means of male domination of women, we also witness the formation of a masculine power and state structure on the socio-economic structure shaped accordingly. In the end, it can be said that this structure, which constructs and feeds gender inequality, turns into biopower and that this power based on sexual ideology strengthens the hierarchical superiority and domination of men over women by positioning men at the top and women at the bottom, and "legitimizes" the subjection of women to male domination and sexual control through legal regulations. This situation shows that the structuring and governance of society and the state have been left to men throughout history. The masculine power based on this structure has passed down the patriarchal family, society, and political structure from generation to generation for hundreds of years, condemning women to a subordinate position and life. In other words, it should be underlined that the masculine nature of social and political power, which began with the control of women's sexuality and continues today, has remained valid from the societies where the "consanguine family" ruled until today's modern societies. Looking at this point in terms of the control of women's bodies, it can be said that both the process of social development and the state organization built on

the changing structure in this process have been realized around the phenomenon of the control of women's sexuality. In societies based on the matrilineal family, the organization of lineage was structured with the prohibition of incest, and in matriarchal societies, the threat of killing was only in question for incest. In other forms of relationships, sexual freedom and equality between men and women prevailed. Therefore, the notion of honor and murders based on it did not exist in these societies (Ecevitoğlu, 2012, p. 475; Engels, 1986, pp. 53-54; Reich, 1995, pp. 29-36).

After the transition to a patriarchal structure, the dynamics changed significantly. In societies that follow patrilineal descent, where genealogical ties are traced through the father, women found themselves marginalized by sexual control and societal organization this time. Within the patriarchal system, male dominance was established on the basis of controlling female sexuality. Men not only regulated women's conduct but also dictated their way of life after marriage by imposing expectations of chastity and loyalty to their spouses, ultimately leading to women's exclusion from public life. As a result, the public and political spheres became exclusively reserved for men (Ecevitoğlu, 2012, pp. 475-476).

In contrast to matriarchal times when women's fertility held sacred significance due to an unknown role for men in reproduction, during patriarchy, there was an emphasis placed on men's role in lineage reproduction, which reduced women's fertility solely to serving as surrogates. To ensure the reproduction of labor, vital for capitalist relations of production, the need to control women's fertility has persisted into the modern era (Acar-Savran & Demiryontan, 2008, p. 22).

Throughout history, male dominance and the resulting patriarchal society have persisted to this day, albeit with variations across different societies and countries. It is crucial to highlight three key aspects of these orders: Firstly, the rise of male domination was influenced by economic advancements and inter-tribal conflicts. Men gained prominence in agriculture and animal husbandry, establishing themselves as leaders through tribal disputes. Subsequently, they seized control over governance and leadership roles within their communities. Meanwhile, women became increasingly reliant on men during this period. The second aspect involves the emergence of private property ownership and men asserting dominion over women as possessions. Fathers claimed ownership over women, children, and enslaved people within families while also gaining the right to exercise authority, including life or death decisions. Lastly, those in power—in both public and private spheres—viewed women as a means of perpetuating their lineage while safeguarding family assets from external influence without foreign interference, given that it is associated with tradition; today, it remains intertwined with these fundamental characteristics.

Men have historically held greater economic and social power as the heads of their families. They transitioned from hunters to warriors, responsible for guarding the community and managing food resources. As private property emerged, men became the leaders of large families, while women were often viewed as objects of exchange and carriers of economic value, placing them in a lower position. Men's control over women's bodies became a means of enforcing moral rules and defining honor in accordance with their own sexual, economic, and social interests (Cooney, 2014; Thrasher & Handfield, 2018).

According to Morgan (2015), Engels (1986), and Reich (1995), the subjugation and control of women were deeply rooted in society and were further strengthened with economic growth, societal differentiation, and the emergence of classes. This led to the

establishment of moral codes and the concept of honor. In today's world, if we want to combat gender inequality, we cannot overthrow the core institutions of the gender-based power structure without addressing class politics since these institutions perpetuate both gender and class domination (Connell, 1998, p. 413). The reason behind the connection between patriarchy and modern-day capitalism is because patriarchy, which has existed for thousands of years, and capitalism, particularly through the unpaid and invisible labor of women in the home, work together to reduce the cost of labor power and its reproduction (Acar-Savran, 2018, pp. 18-19).

When considering honor as a phenomenon that contributes to the "domestication" of women within the home, family, or private sphere, it becomes apparent that it is closely linked to the relations of production in several ways: women's labor in the private sphere is normalized and considered inherent to their nature; the extent of this labor is often overlooked as it does not involve standard working hours; it remains unseen because it is not financially compensated (Acar-Savran, 2008, p. 11; Rogers, 2005). This hidden labor constitutes an essential component of patriarchal capitalism. It should be noted that Türkiye serves as an example in this article for evaluating honor-related phenomena with significant impacts on traditional society segments. The country exhibits strong reflections of patriarchal capitalism due to its economy being predominantly intertwined with capitalist structures and a secular-modern legal framework.

The so-called "modern" liberal order that replaced the feudal society and state structure, which treated women as objects of lineage and property, has also exhibited patriarchal characteristics that are detrimental to women. McKinnon (2015) maintains that the liberal state shapes the social order with a male-centric perspective. Due to the liberal state's emphasis on objectivity in law, it does not intervene in gender discrimination and inequality, thereby contributing to its perpetuation. This is because liberalism sees individuals as free to act as they please in their private lives. Consequently, the state has enabled and participated in the oppression and violence directed towards women by men in positions of power within the household. The patriarchal order's male dominance is reflected in the liberal state, thus institutionalizing the masculine character of the liberal state structure.

Similarly, Fatmagül Berktay (2015, p. 37) argues that the liberal state's notion of an "individual" is inherently male because women are denied citizenship rights in the private sphere, which is essentially the home. Even though John Stuart Mill (2017, pp. 30-31) addressed the issue of women's subjugation in his work *The Subjection of Women*, published in 1869, his voice was relatively weak compared to the dominant understanding of his time. Liberal thought was generally not sensitive to the issue of women's rights. Mill did, however, acknowledge that women's dependence on men, much like slavery, was based on the "law of force," which is a law based on power rather than the fact of existence. He also noted that men who held physical power also held legal (public/political) power in this way.

The distinction between public and private spheres, as posited by liberal theory, is of great importance for our discussion. Beyond being an analytical distinction, this separation functions as a structural distinction and serves the reproduction of capitalist patriarchy. Moreover, a conceptualization of "publicness" that excludes the economic dimension, in Nancy Fraser's (1989, p. 168) words, leads to the depoliticization of many issues by either economizing, personalizing, or familializing them since what is "political" in a male-

dominated capitalist society is defined in opposition to what is "economic" and "domestic" or "personal."

Moreover, there are arguments that the public/private distinction is specific to Western societies and that in traditional Eastern societies, it is replaced by the *mahram/namahram* distinction, reflecting the influence of culture in shaping gender division (Ilyasoglu, 1994, pp. 110- 111). In Islamic culture, there is a distinction made between individuals with whom one can or cannot have physical and social interaction based on their gender and relationship. *Mahram* pertains to those with whom one shares a close familial bond that excludes the possibility of marriage, allowing for more relaxed interactions without strict dress codes or physical segregation. This category typically encompasses immediate family members like parents, siblings, and children, as well as select extended family members such as grandparents, grandchildren, and in-laws based on varying interpretations. On the other hand, non-*mahram* (*namahram*) refers to individuals with whom marriage is allowed; therefore, adherence to Islamic rules regarding modesty and interaction is required. This entails maintaining distance, observing appropriate attire, and possibly refraining from private conversations or meetings according to a particular understanding of the concept (Krisjanous *et al*., 2022; Sehlikoglu, 2016).

Turning back to the distinction between the public and private sphere, this serves a dual purpose as an explanation of women's subordinate position and an ideology that constructs it (Davidoff, 2002, p. 190). Legal and administrative decisions, conditions, and rules in these areas also determine the level of gender inequality. The public/private distinction has existed from Ancient Greece to the present day. The concept of private space, based on the oikos/polis dichotomy, is where basic life needs, such as nutrition and reproduction, are met (Davidson, 2011; Elshtain, 1981; Foxhall, 1989; Hansson, 2008). On the other hand, the public sphere is where social, political, and civil interactions and communicative actions occur.

Feminist theories that question the division between public and private spheres argue that the private sphere, which includes the home and family, should also be a focus of public research. However, since individual relationships and family are considered to be part of the private sphere, they are seen as "non-political," excluded from the public sphere, and depoliticized. The public-private sphere dichotomy, which is a reflection of gender roles, was supported and developed by 18th and 19th-century thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Immanuel Kant. For instance, according to Rousseau, the family cannot participate in the social contract since it cannot provide the neutrality required for the establishment of the general will (Berns, 2005; Fermon, 1994; Fox-Genovese & Schwartz, 1985; Schmitz, 2004). This distinction prevented women from engaging in politics and business, thus reinforcing women's dependence and social invisibility.

In terms of gender equality and violence against women, there is a noticeable division where men are associated with the public sphere and women with the private sphere. In patriarchal social structures, masculine authority is often confined to the outside world, while women are expected to manage affairs within the home. This pattern extends to various levels in modern state settings as well. It originates from the perception of women being more closely linked to nature because of their fertility, while men are viewed as transcending nature and responsible for creating and owning culture (Hunter, 1988; Trigger, 2003; Walby, 1989).

In examining the patriarchal character of liberal theory from a feminist perspective, Berktay (2015, pp. 37-39) points out that the liberal state pursues a policy of strengthening male power by regulating the public sphere but not the private sphere. Feminists argue that gender inequality persists because the gendered division of labor in society is viewed as a natural problem rather than a political one (Acar-Savran, 2002, p. 267; Özgün, 2012, p. 355). In other words, the unequal distribution of labor between men and women is seen as a normal and acceptable state of affairs. This is where the feminist proposition of "the private is political" comes in. The feminist movement has been emphasizing this idea since the 1970s. It aims to highlight that women's lives in the private sphere are not separate from the political sphere; thus, gender inequality is a political issue. The idea questions the power of masculine culture, ideology, or power structures that restrict women's roles to the domestic sphere, rendering them "untouchable" by confining them to the private sphere and far from achieving gender equality.

The development of human rights and women's human rights

The 1789 French Revolution and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, as well as the United Nations's (UN) 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, mention equality, freedom, and brotherhood for human beings. However, they only refer to "man," with no acknowledgment or recognition of men's historical dominance over women (Clinton, 1975; National Assembly of France, 2008; Morsink, 1999; United Nations, n. d.). This is evident in their economic exploitation, restriction from education, sexual control over their bodies, decision-making authority on behalf of women, treating them as property—effectively confining them to the private sphere while excluding them from public life.

Both declarations take a "neutral" approach that reflects a patriarchal understanding equating "man" with "human being." The failure to legally regulate domestic matters within liberal states represents a violation of women's human rights by feminists who argue that such legal institutions are inherently masculine. Despite overthrowing feudalism through revolutionary struggle and redefining societal hierarchies, liberal states did not fully recognize "women's human rights," leaving them in a social context reminiscent of medieval times.

Since the French Revolution, where women leaders demanding equality went to the guillotine, to the establishment of the UN after World War II, women have fought for "women's human rights" without achieving universal progress. However, with public pressure from effective feminist movements in the 1960s, the UN organized a special convention on the mistreatment of women... The UN's 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) stands as an important milestone as it is the first international regulation focusing on "women's human rights" (Joachim, 2018; Okin, 1998; Tinker, 1981). The fact that it took until 1979 for such a regulation to be established indicates that male domination over women has been deeply ingrained in the social and political order. This dominance persisted through hundreds of years, and its effects can still be seen today, particularly in Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, and Latin American countries. It underscores how issues faced by women living under male dominance are both ideological and political—including honor killings. Henceforth, the struggle for "women's human rights" is inseparable from a broader political battle led by feminist movements; one cannot ignore this point: oppression experienced by women under

male dominion goes beyond cultural-ideological-legal-political dynamics; at its core lies a relationship rooted in exploitation (Acar-Savran & Demiryontan, 2008, p. 17).

Relatedly, there are two approaches to human rights. The first asserts that human rights should apply equally to all individuals based on a universal understanding of human rights. The second contends that human rights may vary based on cultural and religious norms across different countries or regions (Okin, 1998; Rose, 1999; Simuziya, 2021; UKEssays, 2021). This perspective is known as cultural relativism. However, this approach is often used to justify the oppression of women and uphold male dominance and control, making it unacceptable.

To comprehend honor killings, it is crucial to examine the reasons why moral codes centered on regulating women's sexuality and the concept of honor, which can lead to murder, are more widespread in the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern regions. Furthermore, it is necessary to acknowledge that these practices have persisted until today.

The Mediterranean and Middle East regions have moral codes as significant as their founding laws. This is due primarily to the societies' anthropological specificity. According to Pınar Ecevitoğlu (2012, p. 336), this specificity originates from the concept of "honor," which is closely related to the sexually oriented idea of "shame." The woman is regarded as the upholder of honor, which is defined as the protection of her sexual innocence, while the man is seen as the possessor of honor, which is derived from the woman's honor. This dynamic leads to male dominance. The man has the right to use force to safeguard the woman's chastity and, as a result, his lineage's purity. He perceives the woman as a biological entity that can tarnish his lineage's purity by "defiling" her chastity. This possibility gives him a fatal "authority" that justifies honor killings.

Although honor is one of the central concepts that shape daily life and influence value judgments in Mediterranean and Middle Eastern societies, its influence may vary based on a woman's social class, location, and level of education, but it permeates all levels of society. Tahincioğlu (2011) conducted a face-to-face study with villagers, urban migrants from rural areas, as well as educated men and women, which confirmed this observation. The social structure centered around kinship revealed in studies such as Abu Ludhog's (2004) work on Bedouins and Germaine Tillon's (2006) research in Maghreb countries, along with religious and cultural justifications presented by countries like Egypt, Libya, Bangladesh, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates for their reservations to CEDAW further shed light on these reasons. The persistence of moral regulations, including honor killings, can be attributed to semi-feudal relations still existing within the region's socio-economic fabric despite attempts to use cultural or religious sentiments for justification. This explains why honor killings are prevalent in this region while being almost non-existent in more democratic and economically advanced Western societies.

Traditionalism holds strong sway in societies where semi-feudal production and the associated social structures persist. This is evident in the acceptance and even tacit approval of honor killings. In these communities, a significant portion supports those who commit murder in defense of their honor, while only a minority condemns such actions (Tezcan, 2003). The prevalence of honor killings reflects the deep-rooted notion of societal honor. The leniency shown towards perpetrators in countries like Türkiye until recent years or exempting them from punishment, as seen in Syria until 2009, further underscores this point. Indeed, the tolerance and reverence accorded to individuals who commit honor

killings within Turkish society—including within prisons—highlight an enduring support for male control over women's sexuality by some segments of society.

In Türkiye, it has been observed that honor killings have moved from rural to urban areas. Despite the changes in the understanding of honor due to higher education levels and urban settlement, the underlying principles of honor remain intact (Tahincioğlu, 2011). This means that as individuals and families migrate from rural to urban areas, they bring with them their traditional and cultural beliefs, including those related to honor and controlling women's sexuality. This transition does not necessarily lead to a complete abandonment of traditional values and practices but instead involves a negotiation between traditional norms and the modernizing influences of the urban lifestyle. In the case of honor killings, this means that while urbanization may lead to changes in the understanding of honor, the underlying power dynamics and fundamental principles remain entrenched (Erman, 1998, 2001; Schnaiberg, 1970).

Moreover, the experience of migrant communities in urban areas is characterized by a contrast between traditional values and the realities of urban life. This contrast leads to tensions and conflicts within families and communities as they struggle to balance preserving cultural identity while adapting to the changing urban landscape. Therefore, the persistence of the honor phenomenon and its associated practices, such as honor killings, reflect the enduring influence of patriarchal and traditional norms within urban spaces.

In summary, the phenomenon of honor and its manifestations, including honor killings, persist even in urban spaces after migration. The intergenerational transfer of cultural values, combined with the lasting impact of patriarchal norms, contributes to the continuation of the honor phenomenon within urban settings. A holistic approach is necessary to address this phenomenon, which acknowledges the intersections of culture, tradition, and urbanization in shaping attitudes and behaviors related to honor and women's rights.

Combating violence against women in Türkiye: Change of politico-legal realm and transformation of socio-mentality

Since the beginning of the 1920s, Türkiye's official definition of gender equality was "equal rights for women and men." Many legal and institutional arrangements were put in place to achieve this goal. In the 1990s, there was an improvement in the women's movement's understanding of this issue. When Türkiye became a candidate for EU membership in 1999, there was increased attention on achieving gender equality through policies and amendments to basic laws to end discrimination against women. The EU process provided opportunities for legal changes that would advance gender equality (Ecevit, 2004). During this period, the women's movement and civil society activism actively influenced changes in established policies and norms while advocating for new policy demands. However, it is argued that a conservative and patriarchal value system has become increasingly prominent in Türkiye in recent years. These values have significantly impacted family and social policies as they align with an official discourse that undermines gender equality and promotes traditional gender roles (Acar & Altunok, 2013, p. 16).

Although Türkiye differs from other Middle Eastern countries with its formal democratic and secular structure, it has not yet been able to prevent honor killings and femicide despite significant gains in this direction. On the contrary, the increase in femicides

every year shows that the problem is intensifying beyond the classical definition of honor killings. For example, according to data from the We Will Stop Femicide Platform (2024), the total number of women's deaths, either suspiciously or femicides, has been very high (Figure 1). In 2023, the reasons for 58% of the femicides remained unknown. Lack of identification regarding the motives and individuals responsible for violence against women hinders accountability and proactive measures. When the motive is known, approximately 70% of women were murdered due to their desire to assert independence in decision-making about their lives. This suggests that women are frequently victimized for asserting their autonomy, particularly in situations involving relationship endings or marital separation (We Will Stop Femicide Platform, 2024).

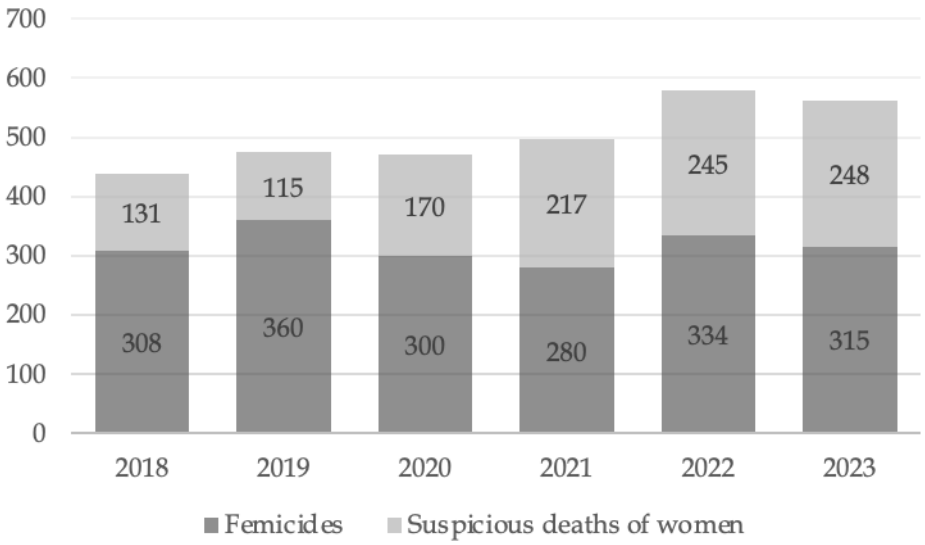

Figure 1. Femicides and suspicious deaths of women between 2018 and 2023
Source: The author tabulated the data collected from the We Will Stop Femicide Platform (2024).

Türkiye was not only one of the first signatories but also the first country to ratify the Istanbul Convention without any reservations. This took place in 2011, and the Convention itself is named after Istanbul, where it was opened for signature. The Istanbul Convention represents a significant milestone in the fight against gender-based violence as it is the first legally binding treaty in Europe that creates a comprehensive framework to prevent violence against women, protect victims, and end the impunity of perpetrators. By ratifying the Convention, member states are compelled to adopt a series of legislative and other measures, including criminalizing psychological violence, stalking, physical violence, sexual violence, including rape, and all forms of violence against women. The Convention also established a specific monitoring mechanism to ensure the parties effectively implement its provisions. Also, the 5th paragraph of Article 12 of the Istanbul Convention explicitly rejects the concept of cultural relativism. It addresses cultural issues such as "honor" with a universal understanding of human rights, stating: "Parties shall ensure that culture, custom, religion, tradition or so-called 'honor' shall not be considered as justification for any acts of violence covered by the scope of this Convention" (Council of Europe, 2024a; Council of Europe, 2024b). Essentially, this clause establishes the principle that no cultural or traditional argument can be accepted as a valid excuse for committing acts of violence against women. It is a firm stance against cultural relativism that can sometimes be invoked to excuse gender-based violence, reaffirming that human rights and

the safety of individuals shall not be compromised by adherence to traditional beliefs or practices that perpetuate violence.

Türkiye's initial endorsement of this perspective was an influential moment, signaling to both Europe and the world its commitment to addressing and combating violence against women at the highest level of policy and legislation. However, Türkiye's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention in 2021 has raised international concern about the potential impact on protecting women's rights in the country.

Many proponents of Türkiye's decision to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention argue that the Convention undermines the traditional family structure and promotes Western values that are not in line with Türkiye's cultural and religious beliefs (Aksoy, 2021; Çevik, 2020; Yeni Akit, 2020). There are arguments that the Convention imposes a single approach to address gender-based violence, neglecting Türkiye's cultural and religious diversity. It is argued that the Istanbul Convention's emphasis on gender equality and non-discrimination does not align with Turk Türkiye's traditional gender roles and family structure. Some critics believe that the Convention undermines the values of Turkish society and imposes Western ideals of gender equality without considering the cultural context and specific needs of Turkish women. These arguments are present in both Islamic newspapers like *Milli Gazete* and *Yeni Akit*, as well as "mainstream" press like *Sabah*. They place feminism and homosexuality as the most severe threat to "family." For example, according to a conservative woman columnist, the foundation of the family institution is undermined by the imposition of "genderlessness" initiated by the feminist-homosexual movement (Kaplan, 2020a). She finds it troubling that the Istanbul Convention aligns with the rhetoric used by the homosexual movement in asserting that violence should not be inflicted on individuals due to their "sexual orientation" (Kaplan, 2020b). Additionally, some critics believe that the Convention infringes on national sovereignty by dictating specific legal and policy measures that member states must adopt. They argue that Türkiye should have the autonomy to develop its own strategies for addressing violence against women, considering its unique social and cultural dynamics (Anadolu Agency, 2021).

A study was conducted to analyze the news and columns published in the mainstream, left-leaning, and Islamic press when the discussions on Türkiye to withdraw from the Convention intensified. The study used critical discourse analysis to examine the arguments on the subject, which were divided into two opposing groups: egalitarian-feminist and sexist-conservative theses. The study discovered that Islamic newspapers generally utilized conservative arguments when discussing the Istanbul Convention. The discussions often revolved around concepts such as Muslimness, family, and the perceived danger of homosexuality. The news articles portrayed the Convention as damaging to the family values and incompatible with Islam, with calls for its abolition. The analysis of the news texts revealed that the Istanbul Convention was often associated with the word "depravation," suggesting that it was seen as disrupting the order and causing confusion (Kemahlı Garipoğlu & Sezer Şanlı, 2021, p. 182).

Given that it represents the "national will" or "people's sovereignty" that ratified the Convention, it is vital to examine the discussions that took place within the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye (TBMM) to understand the perspectives regarding the withdrawal issue. For this purpose, the speeches refer to the "Istanbul Convention" at the TBMM in the fourth legislative year of the 27th legislative term, from 01 October 2020 to 17 July 2021. This period included intense discussions about the withdrawal from the Convention, which was ultimately decided by the President. Since critical discourse analysis is an approach that

examines how discourses are structured in the social context and how they reflect and reproduce power relations (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 1993), we employed this method to examine the parliamentary minutes and investigate patriarchal power relations.

Our analysis confirmed that the parliamentary speeches were divided into two expected categories: those favoring the Istanbul Convention to promote gender equality (considered feminist) and those against the Convention, expressing sexist or conservative views. Feminist themes, which often include the views of left-wing or secular nationalist MPs, are as follows:

(1) *Increasing Violence Against Women:* It has been emphasized that violence against women has increased, and the number of femicides has risen after the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention. This theme included codes such as "honor killings," "femicides," and "increasing violence." To illustrate this theme, a member of parliament from the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) stated: "The issue of femicide is Türkiye's shame. This cannot be solved by adding one or two articles to the omnibus bill. The problem lies in the changing mentality of the police, judiciary, politicians, women's human rights, and gender equality." Another MP from the Good Party (İyi Parti) argued that "Femicide is one of the most critical and persistent issues on Türkiye's agenda."

(2) *Responsibility of the State:* It has been maintained that the state has not fulfilled its obligation to protect women, and withdrawing from the Istanbul Convention violates this obligation. It has been frequently stated that the state should take measures to prevent, protect, and punish violence. This theme included codes such as "state obligation," "protective measures," and "impunity." For instance, reminding the duties imposed on the state by the Istanbul Convention, an MP from the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) said: "Preventing violence imposes obligations on the state, regardless of who commits the violence, whether it is the woman's husband, lover, father, or boss." Another MP maintained that "Preventing femicide and crimes against women requires the effective implementation of existing laws and the development of policies combating sexism."

(3) *Gender Equality:* The Istanbul Convention has been cited as a crucial part of the efforts to achieve gender equality. Withdrawing from this agreement is seen as a setback for women's rights. Phrases such as "gender equality," "women's rights," and "step back" were used under this theme. To address this issue, one member of parliament stated, "All executive stakeholders should adopt and implement social measures and cultural changes that envisage equality between men and women." Another member of parliament emphasized, "No tradition or social value is superior to human rights or women's rights. Women's and LGBT rights are human rights, and people exist with these rights. Removing the Istanbul Convention is a form of misogyny."

(4) *International Commitments:* It was emphasized that the Istanbul Convention is an international obligation, and Türkiye must fulfill it. It was argued that Türkiye would lose its reputation in the international arena by terminating the Convention. This theme included codes such as "international liability," "loss of reputation," and "termination of the convention." Regarding this theme, an MP from the CHP stated, "The Istanbul Convention is the Council of Europe's first binding international agreement on combating violence against women and domestic violence. Türkiye's becoming a party to this Convention is a significant commitment to prevent violence against women in the international arena. Withdrawing from the Convention would cause Türkiye to lose its reputation in the international arena. This situation calls into question the reliability of our country in the

international arena." Another CHP MP expressed similar views: "We affirm that the Istanbul Convention is binding for Türkiye and clearly outlines the state's responsibilities in preventing violence against women. Adhering to this agreement is an obligation within the framework of international law." Another HDP MP expressed, "The Istanbul Convention establishes an international standard for combating violence against women and places crucial obligations on the participating states. Türkiye's decision to withdraw from this agreement signifies a failure to meet its international commitments. Withdrawal will result in a significant loss of international reputation. Our standing as a leading advocate in the fight against violence towards women will be compromised."

The conservative themes, primarily representing the views of members of parliament from the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its ally, the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), are as follows:

(1) *Family Values:* There have been claims that the Istanbul Convention negatively impacts the traditional family structure and increases divorces. Some argue that the Convention harms the family, citing concerns about family values and the potential for the dissolution of families. For example, prior to the withdrawal from the Convention, a member of parliament from the AKP stated, "It has been claimed that the Istanbul Convention disrupts the family structure and harms social morality, leading to the dispersion and elimination of families." Another member of parliament commented, "The Istanbul Convention includes provisions that promote divorces. We believe that the traditional family structure should be safeguarded." Another MP from the Good Party remarked, "Our society is a familial society. We will meticulously observe the rights and laws of our entire nation, especially those of our women, men, children, and the young and old in all our families. This Convention contains elements that threaten our traditional family structure."

(2) *Homosexuality and Social Norms:* The Istanbul Convention has been criticized for allegedly normalizing homosexuality and disrupting social norms. Conservative groups have expressed discomfort with the treaty, citing concerns about the normalization of homosexuality and its impact on traditional values. The codes "homosexuality," "social norms," and "conservative discomfort" were evaluated in relation to this theme. For example, an MHP MP stated, "The Istanbul Convention contains provisions that normalize homosexuality, threatening our social norms and values." Similarly, an AKP MP remarked, "This Convention goes against the values and norms of our society, promoting homosexuality. Therefore, we had to withdraw from the Convention." Another MHP MP highlighted the conservative discomfort, stating, "The discomfort of conservative segments towards the Istanbul Convention cannot be ignored. This agreement harms our family structure and values."

(3) *Sovereignty and National Values:* It has been argued that the West imposed the Istanbul Convention and is against Türkiye's sovereignty. It has been stated that this Convention is not compatible with national values. The codes of "Western imposition," "sovereignty," and "national values" are combined under this theme. Before the decision to withdraw, an AKP MP stated, "We do not have to submit to the impositions of international agreements; we must make decisions that are in line with our own values." After the withdrawal, he said, "Our decision to withdraw from the Convention was taken to protect Türkiye's national sovereignty."

(4) *Legal and Political Justifications:* The decision to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention was justified on legal and political grounds. It was argued that the withdrawal by presidential decree was a constitutional right granted to the President and a political decision. The key points included in the discussion were "legal justification," "political decision," and "Presidential decree." An MP from the AKP stated, "Our decision to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention is a legal necessity. We acted as required by our Constitution." On the other hand, an MHP member of parliament expressed, "The decision to withdraw from the Convention is a political choice. This choice was made in accordance with the values and needs of our society."

After mentioning the discussions on withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, it is also essential to counter these claims with fact-based information and from the perspectives of universal human rights and the rule of law. Firstly, despite being approved by the Turkish parliament and having only a seven percent opposition rate among the Turkish public (KONDA, 2020), President Erdoğan withdrew Türkiye from the Istanbul Convention through a presidential decree. This move can be seen as a violation of international law, which holds priority over national legislation according to the Constitution of the Republic of Türkiye, as well as a challenge to the power of the parliament (Apaydin, 2022; Pirim, 2022, p. 579; Türközü, 2021).

Secondly, viewing the Istanbul Convention as an imposition of foreign powers or disregarding national sovereignty is unrealistic. This is because the Convention was unanimously approved by all parties in the parliament, including the government and opposition. This means that the parliament demonstrated "national" unity against violence towards women. Furthermore, Türkiye played an active role in preparing the Convention. At the time it was signed, there were two Turkish representatives in the European Council: Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu was the Chairperson of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, a member of parliament from the ruling Justice and Development Party, was elected as the President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

Thirdly, the Convention is fundamentally about protecting human rights and providing safety and justice for victims of gender-based violence, which are universal values rather than exclusively Western ones. The Convention's measures are not aimed at undermining families but at protecting their members from violence and abuse. Furthermore, gender-based violence is a critical issue that affects individuals in all societies, and addressing it does not conflict with preserving cultural and religious identities. Additionally, gender equality and the fight against violence are often seen as integral to moral values, as many faiths and cultures advocate for the dignity and worth of every individual. Measures to prevent violence and protect victims are not antithetical to these beliefs but complement them. It is also important to note that the concept of family need not be rigidly defined; it can be inclusive and respectful of the rights and safety of all its members.

Fourthly, contrary to the framing of the Convention as a promotion of "genderlessness," it recognizes that gender roles are socially constructed (Article 3/c), not natural. Rather than "genderlessness," the Convention seeks to ensure that all people, regardless of their gender, have the right to live free from violence and discrimination—principles that are consistent with the human rights frameworks to which Türkiye has committed itself as a member of the international community. Moreover, the Convention explicitly recognizes the need for culturally sensitive implementation of its measures,

allowing countries the flexibility to address gender-based violence within their specific social and cultural contexts. To illustrate, after the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in the TBMM in 2012, the "Law on the Protection of the Family and Prevention of Violence against Women" (Law No. 6284) was enacted.

The Law No. 6284 in 2012 met with overall positive reception. However, due to the legislator's emphasis on protecting the family institution and moral concerns instead of a rights-based approach to prevent violence against women, international standards and expectations were not fully met. The policymaking strategy here failed to establish the theoretical link between gender-based violence against women and gender inequality in general (Acar & Altunok, 2013, p. 19). Violence against women was not widely recognized as a severe violation of their human rights within the broader framework of human rights. Instead, it was often viewed simply as physical violence and believed to be preventable through measures outlined in the penal code.

Moreover, women are often perceived as victims in need of protection, and violence against them is seen as a threat to the institution of the family. Women subjected to physical violence are offered protection within the family rather than being protected in society in terms of social, political, or economic equality. The forms of gender-based violence are detailed in academic studies and state research reports; however, they do not receive sufficient attention in national policymaking. For instance, while early marriage is acknowledged as a type of violence in international agreements such as the Istanbul Convention, it is not classified as a form of gender-based violence in Turkish legislative and policymaking procedures (Acar *et al.*, 2007).

Finally, violence should never be justified or overlooked on the basis of protecting cultural or family values. The protection of human rights, including the rights of women and LGBTQ+ individuals, should be the cornerstone of any society aiming to be democratic and respectful of its citizens' dignity and safety. The resistance to gender equality by striking against the Istanbul Convention aims to delegitimize the norm that it embodies, which is ending gender violence (Berthet, 2022). A study on social media confirms how certain groups reframed their opposition to the Convention by leveraging homophobia as a tool to restrict women's rights, aiming for a wider appeal. According to this study, especially the groups formed by divorced men, who argue that Law No. 6284's provisions favor women and are particularly critical of the new alimony regulations, have tactically reframed the reference to "sexual orientation" in Article 4/3 of the Convention as promoting homosexuality to garner more backing from conservative, Islamist, and homophobic factions within Turkish society. These groups worked together with *Yeni Akit*, an Islamist and pro-government newspaper that is known for its opposition to the Convention (Elmas, Overdorf & Aberer, 2021). Unsurprisingly, the ruling alliance used similar tactics to vilify the opposition during the 2023 Elections. Therefore, another dimension of the instrumentalization of the Istanbul Convention against the opposition by the ruling alliance, which blends conservative, ultra-nationalist, and Islamist elements, is the tendency towards authoritarianism. The withdrawal from the Convention is seen as a move to centralize power, legitimize authority, and repress opposition. Unfortunately, instead of addressing issues related to the Convention itself, this move is seen as an attempt to restrict democratic freedoms and become more authoritarian. Ultimately, this is an effort to solidify the ruling party's voter base (Bayar, 2024; Cerami, 2021).

Critics of Türkiye's decision to leave the Convention argue that it could set back years of progress in the fight against gender-based violence (Bengisu, 2021). The departure from

the Convention has been seen by many as a step away from the commitment to protect women's rights and could potentially weaken the existing mechanisms that prevent violence against women and femicide. The influence of this withdrawal on the actual number of femicides and violence against women in Türkiye remains a subject for empirical examination and research. However, it is often mentioned that eliminating legal protections and signaling a diminished state commitment to combating violence against women could negatively impact the rates of such violence. Withdrawal from the Convention could also discourage victims from coming forward and reporting abuse due to a potential lack of trust in the protection mechanisms provided by the state.

Although coping with the issues of honor killings and domestic violence requires comprehensive efforts, including legal frameworks like the Istanbul Convention, social and cultural change also plays a significant role in addressing the deep-rooted patriarchal values that contribute to violence against women (Aysan & Yurdakul, 2001; Kiener, 2011). Furthermore, successful strategies often involve collaboration between governments, legal systems, civil society, and international bodies to encourage a holistic approach to ending gender-based violence (International Federation for Human Rights, 2017).

Regarding the legal aspect, Türkiye should make the civil and criminal codes clearer and more effective in practice. The courts should monitor the implementation of restraining orders more effectively. Article 29 of the Turkish Penal Code, which regulates unjust provocation, should not be left open for perpetrators of femicide on the grounds of honor or other reasons. Women's shelters, which were officially launched in 2006 to save women from male violence, should be activated in all provinces and districts and made widespread and effective. For law enforcement and the judicial system to protect women before they are subjected to violence and become victims of honor killings, women's applications to the police and prosecutors' offices must be responded to quickly, and the most effective protection measures must be taken.

In the previous section, we discussed how the CEDAW has played a crucial role in recognizing women's human rights as a part of international law. Recent surveys conducted in Türkiye reveal that women are perceived as the group whose rights are violated the most, with a high percentage of up to 45%, followed by people experiencing poverty at 30% (KONDA, 2021, p. 20). This indicates that society has grown more sensitive towards women's human rights, with 61% of young people agreeing (KONDA, 2022, p. 47).

However, a study conducted before Türkiye's decision to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention highlights that while women are gaining more space and weight in daily life, they also trigger mental transformation in a rapidly urbanizing and metropolitanizing country. One clear indicator of this is the perception of "honor." The percentage of people who thought it was "absolutely wrong" to go beyond the law in matters of honor was 11% in 2010, but this increased to 36% in 2016 and 41% in 2020. A total of 67% of society finds this statement either "definitely wrong" or "wrong." The voters of the HDP, a political party with a high voting rate in Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia, where Kurds are predominantly living, agree with this statement at the highest rate, which suggests that Kurds are more attached to the traditional perception of honor beyond the right-left political divide. Age and religiosity are directly proportional to the agreement rates with this statement, while education and income are inversely proportional (KONDA, 2020, p. 17). Taken together, despite the setback caused by withdrawal from the Convention, these

findings suggest that the mental transformation triggered by the changing gender roles will likely become even stronger in the years to come.

Conclusion

The societal and cultural values that perpetuate gender-based violence are deeply rooted in the phenomenon of honor. Across many communities and cultures, the concept of honor is often associated with the control and ownership of women. This leads to the justification of violence against women as a means of restoring or preserving honor within family and community structures.

The notion of honor is frequently invoked to enforce traditional gender roles and to curtail the autonomy of women. Behaviors and choices that are perceived as challenging these traditional roles, such as asserting independence, refusing forced marriages, or seeking divorce, are often met with violence under the guise of protecting family honor.

In the context of gender-based violence in Türkiye, the phenomenon of honor plays a significant role in perpetuating violence against women. It influences societal perceptions and responses to such violence, often leading to victim-blaming and impunity for perpetrators. Furthermore, the lack of recognition of certain forms of gender-based violence, such as early marriage, within legislative and policymaking processes reflects the embedded nature of these harmful cultural norms.

To truly address and eliminate gender-based violence, it is essential to challenge and transform the underlying notions of honor that contribute to the subjugation and mistreatment of women. This requires a comprehensive shift in societal attitudes, legal frameworks, and policy approaches to prioritize gender equality and the protection of women's rights.

The struggle for gender equality and eradicating gender-based violence should not be confined to feminist movements alone; it is a collective endeavor that demands the engagement of diverse segments of society, political parties, trade unions, and new social movements. By challenging the deeply ingrained patriarchal values and interests that underpin societal structures, a meaningful revolution in mentality can be achieved, paving the way for concrete and sustainable gender equality. Since there is a fine line between men appropriating the bodies of women they are close to and appropriating their labor, and this transformative endeavor must consider the class basis of capitalist patriarchy and production relations. It should emphasize how the struggle for gender equality is interconnected with broader social, economic, and political dynamics. In other words, this revolution of mentality cannot be viewed as a change limited to the ideological sphere and in an external relationship with the material ground; instead, it should start with an analysis of the relations of production and the class basis of capitalist patriarchy.

In essence, the phenomenon of honor must be critically examined and dismantled as part of the more extensive pursuit of gender equality, social justice, and freedom for all individuals. In the Turkish context, the discussions about withdrawing from the Istanbul Convention and the decision to do so are consequential because they indicate how patriarchal reactionary impulses hinder these goals.

Our analysis of the discussions in the TBMM about withdrawing from the Istanbul Convention revealed that feminist perspectives emphasized the importance of women's rights and gender equality. They highlighted the state's responsibility in preventing

violence against women as outlined in the Istanbul Convention. Feminist MPs pointed out that the Convention provides international legal protections and expressed concerns that these protections would be weakened by the decision to withdraw. These discussions underscored that violence against women is rooted in gender inequality and emphasized the need to eliminate this inequality.

While feminist approaches aim to address the patriarchal power structures present in society, conservative arguments oppose the Convention, arguing that it disrupts family dynamics and undermines social morality. Politicians in this view often emphasize national sovereignty and traditional values, claiming that the Convention does not align with local values. Additionally, they argue that the Convention promotes LGBTI+ rights, which they believe poses a threat to the existing social structure.

In conclusion, this analysis demonstrates how the discussions about the Istanbul Convention in the TBMM reflect social power struggles and how these discussions shape ideological positions in the fight for gender equality. This conflict between feminist and conservative discourses can be seen as a reflection of social values, power dynamics, and the battle for women's rights in Türkiye.

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Disclosure statement

The author has declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. The author has received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Lectio Socialis
2024, VOL. 8, NO. 2, pp. 99-134

RESEARCH ARTICLE
DOI: 10.47478/lectio.1489487

Dressing the Empire: Clothing, identity, and social control in the Ottoman millet system

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the intricate relationship between the *millet* system and dressing within the Ottoman Empire, emphasizing how attire served as a potent symbol of communal identity and religious affiliation intertwined with the socio-political fabric of society. By analyzing historical texts, images, and clothing artifacts, the study illustrates how the Ottoman administration employed dressing as a cultural identity marker and a means of religious and social control. The Empire managed its diverse population through the *millet* system by allowing religious communities, or *millet*s, significant autonomy within a structured governance framework. Dressing styles within these *millet*s were not merely functional or aesthetic choices but were imbued with deep symbolic meanings that reflected the complex interplay of identity, status, and religious adherence. Each community's distinctive attire helped reinforce social boundaries and foster a sense of belonging and collective identity among its members. The research highlights significant transitions in the traditional dress codes influenced by political reforms, such as the *Tanzimat*'s push towards modernization and secularization, which gradually shifted public expressions of identity. This shift was marked by a tension between preserving traditional attire and adopting more homogenized, secular dress styles, reflecting broader socio-political changes within the Empire. In conclusion, the article provides insights into how dressing transcended mere personal adornment to act as a crucial medium through which communal identities were negotiated, expressed, and maintained within the Ottoman public sphere. This examination enriches the historical understanding of the Ottoman *millet* system and contributes to broader discussions on fashion, religion, and identity formation.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received: 24.05.2024
Revised: 24.07.2024
Accepted: 30.07.2024

KEYWORDS
Ottoman Empire,
Ottoman fashion,
millet system,
dressing,
identity

Introduction

In the intricate mosaic of the Ottoman Empire, composed of religious communities, namely *millet*s, dressing was not merely a matter of fabric and fashion but a profound statement of identity and belonging intertwined with the complexities of the *millet* system. This system, an embodiment of the Empire's approach to religious diversity, delineated the boundaries of communal identities in a society where religion was inseparable from daily life.

As we trace the transformations within this multi-ethnic and multi-religious empire, the significance of attire emerges as a potent symbol of collective and individual identity. Against the backdrop of the Empire's gradual modernization, which threatened to erode

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the visible markers of religious affiliations, dressing became a bastion for expressing *millet* identity. This article explores how the traditional dress codes prescribed by the *millet* system evolved or resisted in the face of modernity. Thus, it uncovers the medium of clothing, shedding light on the nuanced dialogue between appearance, allegiance, and the dissolution of religious distinctiveness that spurred the Empire toward the secular Turkish Republic to come.

Through an analytical gaze upon photos and engravings, this article delves into the sartorial expressions of various *millet*s—distinct religious communities recognized and managed under Ottoman governance. These visual artifacts present more than mere aesthetic value; they are windows into the nuanced identities, social status, and complex interplay of inter-*millet* dynamics that thrived within the Empire. By interpreting the attire and iconography depicted in these images, we peel back layers of historical narrative, disclosing how each thread and motif weaves a story of belonging, differentiation, and adaptation in the face of the Empire's slow march toward modernity. Through this visual exploration, we seek to understand not just how Ottomans from different *millet*s presented themselves but also how these presentations reflected and contributed to the societal norms and evolving cultural landscapes of the time. This examination thus aims to illuminate the silent, yet eloquent testimonies of identity and change inscribed within the Ottoman visual archive, providing vivid insights into the rich mosaic of life during a pivotal era of transition.

This research focuses exclusively on visual sources that address the dressing of Istanbul residents. As the Ottoman Empire's capital, Istanbul was the primary site for implementing clothing regulations and modernization efforts, making it the most relevant location to observe these changes. The city's cosmopolitan nature, with significant Muslim and non-Muslim populations, provides a diverse and comprehensive context for studying identity negotiation and social dynamics. Istanbul's unique position as the administrative and cultural center of the Empire, combined with its varied demographics, ensures a rich and detailed analysis of how clothing reforms influenced its inhabitants.

Theoretical framework: Visible religion and the *millet* system

The study is framed within a set of theoretical constructs that underlie the relationship between dressing, identity, and the millet system. To come to terms with the closed collectivist/communitarian system of the Ottoman Empire concerning religious minorities and varying practices regarding clothes, this research adopts a socio-cultural lens to interpret the symbolism of dressing as a marker of millet identities, drawing on theories of social identity and cultural practice (Özdil, 2021b, 2021a, 2021c). Dressing is analyzed as a performative act that signifies membership, social status, and religious affiliation within the Ottoman public sphere. In this regard, this study explores the symbolic values of "dressing" in a historical context, going beyond its primary use as a material utility. Although some fashion historians refer to this sense of dressing as the "fashion system" (e.g. Welters & Lillethun, 2011, p. xxvii), we will adopt the perspective that it was challenging to apply the modern concept of fashion to the analysis of pre-modern periods, as there was no mass production, and the pace of style change was significantly slower. In other words, we will discuss "dressing" here, not as an ahistorical concept but in a historical context that includes symbolic values as well as material dimensions.

Furthermore, the concept of "visible religion" provides a foundational understanding of how modernization processes have historically influenced the public exhibition of

religious identities. "Visible religion" pertains to the outward manifestations of religious practices and their role in public life.

In contrast, "invisible religion" concerns private belief systems that are not readily apparent in public behavior. This approach situates the discussion in a broader context of how material culture and visual markers mediate the complex interplay between individual identity formation, collective expression, and the state's shifting stance on secularism. Through this theoretical framework, the article aims to dissect the layered meanings attributed to dressing and how these meanings influence and are influenced by the socio-political currents of the time, giving insight into the Empire's struggle with its own modern identity.

Émile Durkheim (2001), one of the founding figures of sociology, analyzes the sociological function of religion within communities as he explores how religious practices and rituals contribute to social cohesion and collective consciousness. His seminal book, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, first published in 1912, deals most directly with studying religion from a sociological perspective. Durkheim investigates the simplest form of religion within society to understand the nature of religion itself. Through his analysis of rituals, symbols, and totems, Durkheim reveals how these visible elements of religion play a crucial role in uniting members of a community by providing shared practices and beliefs. Durkheim's explanations of social rituals, sacred objects, and communal beliefs align with what may now be referred to under the umbrella term "visible religion," which entails the outward expressions of religious affiliation, and the social phenomena associated with these expressions.

The *millet* system, in effect, serves as an example of Durkheimian theory in action, with each millet embodying a microcosm of the wider society, upholding its internal cohesion, and affirming its unique identity through visible symbols such as dressing, architecture, and public rituals. These outward expressions of religious life are not mere reflections of individual belief; rather, according to Durkheim's framework, they represent the collective realities and social solidarities of the various millets operating within the broader Ottoman society. This intersection of Durkheim's perspectives on the social functionality of religious life with Ottoman reality accentuates the importance of visible religion in both fostering a sense of belonging among members of individual millets and in maintaining the overarching integrity of the multi-faith Empire.

In the Ottoman *millet* system, a non-liberal, conservative, and patriarchal model of religious tolerance, multiculturalism was a system of non-territorial autonomy in which Muslims and Orthodox Greek (*Rum*), Orthodox Armenian, and Jewish nations had separate local government units based on ethnicity, language, and religion. Therefore, it is also possible to see this system as a model of decentralization based on community (Barkey & Gavrilis, 2016, p. 24; Tosun, 2018, pp. 28–29). In other words, the Ottoman *millet* system was a form of administration and governance that allowed various religious communities to conduct their own affairs with a high degree of autonomy under the oversight of their own leaders while remaining subject to the overarching authority of the Ottoman Empire. Each *millet* was responsible for personal matters such as marriage, divorce, education, and religion for its members, fostering a sense of community and continuity within each group yet intertwined within the more extensive multi-ethnic Empire.

Although the *millet* system was seen as a "federation of theocracies," beyond the freedom to practice their religion, it was a model in which minorities had their own schools, places of worship, laws, judicial bodies, and general freedom in resolving internal issues, especially regarding family status (Kymlicka, 2016, pp. 325–326). However, there was no

individual freedom of conscience, and conversion was suppressed alongside collective belief. In this respect, this religious tolerance, which did not recognize individual autonomy, was not based on liberal principles; on the contrary, it rejected the ideal of personal freedom of classical liberal thinkers, from Locke to Kant and Mill, made a rigid distinction of community, and did not allow much permeability (Kymlicka, 2016, p. 326; Mendus, 1989, p. 56). An important point here is that the Ottomans addressed the subjects not as individuals but as religious communities (Adıyeke, 1999, p. 256; Kurtaran, 2011, p. 62).

Although the Ottomans were not sensitive to the permeability of the boundaries between religious communities and the subjective attitudes of individuals at the level of designing the administrative system, it should be noted that different theoretical approaches addressed the identity negotiation dimension to varying degrees. For instance, on the one hand, primordialism, unlike its predecessor theories like social Darwinism and assimilationism, which emphasize objective factors, also incorporates subjective elements. It emphasizes the significance of emotional and primordial ties, such as nationality, race, language, religion, culture, place of birth, and so on, in the formation of identity. On the other hand, circumstantialism, which argues that ethnic identities are a product of the situations, conditions, and context faced by communities rather than their deep roots, argues that individuals or groups are mobilized in line with the aims of the political elite by taking advantage of their religious, racial, and national (multiple) identities according to preferences that serve their own interests (Konuralp, 2017, 2018, p. 135).

Challenging the primordialist theory on ethnic groupings as fixed entities characterized by fundamental cultural qualities, Fredrik Barth's (1969) work on ethnic boundaries can be transposed as an integral theoretical basis for comprehending the negotiation of identity inside the Ottoman millet system. According to Barth, ethnic groupings should be regarded as entities that are defined by certain characteristics, and social boundaries play a crucial role in maintaining the existence of these groups. The community is perpetuated not by the cultural substance within its boundaries but by the boundaries themselves. However, Barth considers the border to be penetrable; in fact, transactions across the boundary contribute to making the boundary more long-lasting.

Although Barth's transactionalist approach faces criticism for presuming that ethnic identities with explicit boundaries, protected by symbolic border guards such as language, religion, dressing, and diet, are fixed and for not considering the types of ethnic commitment, the resources available to various ethnic groups, and their individual subjective aspects (Francis, 1976; Wallman, 1986), it is helpful in analyzing the Ottoman millet system that has roots in the pre-modern eras.

Similarly, Armstrong (1982) utilizes Barth's overarching methodology to analyze pre-modern communities, specifically medieval Christendom and Islam. However, Armstrong also incorporates a focus on the cultural expressions that Barth had previously disregarded. According to Armstrong, like A. D. Smith (1986), myths and symbols have a crucial function in bringing together populations and guaranteeing their long-term existence. Armstrong examines various aspects, such as a longing for previous ways of life, religious cultures and institutions, powerful mythical narratives associated with empires, and divisions caused by language, to construct fluid ethnic identities.

Following this line of analysis, we can categorize the medieval religious communities as e*thnie*s or ethnic communities. Hutchinson and Smith (1996, p. 6) define these communities as a designated group of people who believe they have a similar ancestral lineage, possess shared memories, have some or all aspects of common culture, maintain an identification with a homeland, and experience an awareness of solidarity across more than

a portion of their fellow members. In due process, the emergence of the contemporary bureaucratic state and capitalism has led to a heightened political significance for ethnic communities that maintained a passive yet acknowledged status as distinct populations, like the *millet*s in the Ottoman Empire, and that mostly converged into nation-states during the 19th and 20th centuries (Hutchinson & Smith, 1996, p. 11).

In the Ottoman *millet* system and as it was used in the Ottoman Turkish language, the word *millet*, which is of Arabic origin and even based on the Holy Quran, did not refer to ethnic or linguistic groups but to the religious communities of the Empire (Eryılmaz, 1992, p. 11). During the era of the Second Constitutional Monarchy (1908–1920), this term started to be utilized in a political context rather than solely in a religious context (Berkes, 2002, p. 408). In other words, under the grip of the Committee of Union and Progress, the term "millet" came to refer to a political community literally similar to the Western concept of "nation." This evolution of the *millet* concept represents the birth of a new mode of politics in the Ottoman Empire, namely Turkism (Konuralp, 2013, pp. 61–62).

Ultimately, the religious communitarian heritage of the Ottoman Empire succumbed to the lure of nationalism as the millet system, which ruled for nearly five centuries from 1456 until the Empire's collapse after the First World War, was replaced by the modern Turkish nation-state. After the Republican Revolution, the Turkish language was purified from Persian and Arabic words. As a result, the word "ulus" was used as a synonym for "millet."

The *millet* system's closed structure prevented the formation of a common Ottoman culture, envisaged governance based on religious and sectarian distinctions, and linguistic commonality was not taken into account. For example, even the neighborhoods where Armenian-speaking Armenian-Gregorian, Catholic, and Protestant people lived were separate. In contrast, Orthodox Serbs, Bulgarians, and Rums/Greeks all worshiped in the Greek language and were affiliated with the Fener Patriarchate as a spiritual, judicial, financial, and administrative center. In the 19th century, after the French Revolution, with the spread of nationalism in the Balkans, these ethnic groups began to strive to establish their own national churches (Adaş & Konuralp, 2020a, 2020b; Konuralp, 2018, 2021; Konuralp & Adaş, 2020).

Similarly, there was no linguistic unity among the Jews, whose numbers increased rapidly with the Ottoman encouragement of immigration from Europe. Again, despite linguistic differences, Muslims of various ethnic groups, such as Turks, Albanians, Pomaks, Bosniaks, Caucasians, Arabs, and Kurds, were considered the main monolithic element of the Empire, with weak ethnic divisions between them (Ortaylı, 1985, p. 997).

For centuries, the *millet*s lived autonomously under Ottoman rule. They were never forced to convert and were exempt from certain obligations compared to Muslims, such as military service, which could sometimes last for life. With Russian support in the Balkans, they began to gain independence and targeted the Christian majority through ethnic cleansing campaigns and massive massacres against Muslims. This brutality forced many Muslims to migrate to Istanbul and the Anatolian heathland of the Empire (McCarthy, 1995; Shaw, 1985, pp. 1003–1005; Wilson, 2011; Yavuz, 2020, p. 355). Western states also utilized the Ottoman millets as a form of "patronage" to destabilize the system with imperialist tactics aimed at penetrating Ottoman territories (Küçük, 1985, pp. 1012–1014).

To unite and strengthen the Ottoman population, which was at risk of falling apart, the Ottomans declared the *Tanzimat* Edict on November 3, 1839. This declaration was made in line with the recommendations of Western powers to democratize the millet system and prevent the mismanagement of the non-Muslim men of religion. However, the reforms had an unintended effect: they weakened the authority of spiritual leaders over their own

millets. This, coupled with the encouragement of Russia and newly independent Balkan states that wanted to expand their territories, led to a rise in revolts among Christian Ottoman subjects (Küçük, 1985, p. 1016; Shaw, 1985, p. 1005).

While the increasing terror caused by the guerrilla organizations of Christian nationalists in Muslim-majority Macedonia and Eastern Anatolia led to genocide against Muslims, the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization, founded by Bulgarians in Macedonia, and the Hunchak and Dashnak organizations, founded by Armenians in Eastern Anatolia, used the military interventions of the Ottoman Empire to prevent the violence as propaganda material to gain the support of Western powers. It incited Muslims to a sense of revenge (Shaw, 1985, pp. 1005–1006).

As the hundreds of years of rule based on the millet system came to an end with increasing instability, reform efforts based on equality gained momentum in the post-*Tanzimat* period; secular laws and institutions began to be put into practice in order to provide equal rights to all Muslims, Christians, and Jews, regardless of religion, under the idea of Ottomanness or Ottoman citizenship (Shaw, 1985, p. 1006).

The idea of unity and equality among the Ottoman nations, conceptualized as Ottomanism, was found to have an official expression in the Constitutions of 1876 and 1908. Article 8 of the constitution of the First Constitutional Monarchy era, namely *Kanuni Esasi*, adopted in 1876, read: "All of the people who belong to the State of Osmâniyya, regardless of their religion and sect, are called Ottomans without exception" (Özcan, 2007).

On the other hand, especially after the 1856 Edict of Reform, the process and consciousness of Christian communities becoming "nations" in the true sense gained momentum, and constitutionalism, secularization, and nationalization took root with the election of representatives from the people to the church assemblies by leaving the theocratic framework (Küçük, 1985, p. 1023). Therefore, the "egalitarian" efforts of the Ottomans, which were put into practice with the indoctrination of the Europeans, failed to prevent the nationalist tendencies of the Christian millets. In the process, the Ottoman millet system was erased entirely from the stage of history as Muslims, starting with Arabs and Albanians, became divided along the axis of ethnic nationalism. Finally, Turks turned to the national liberation struggle to establish their own nation-state.

Clothing of the religious communities in Istanbul

Building upon the established conceptual framework and historical background discussed previously, this section introduces an in-depth analysis of the principal communities comprising the Ottoman *millet* system. We will examine their distinctive dress practices and illustrate how these traditional community distinctions are prominently reflected in everyday social interactions. This exploration aims to shed light on the intricate interplay between cultural identities and social dynamics within the Ottoman Empire.

The census data from 1905–1906 offers a glimpse into the diverse and varied society of the Ottoman Empire (Table 1). Muslims made up the majority at 74.47%, reflecting the Islamic character of the state, while significant minorities included Rum Orthodox (13.55%) and Armenians (5.38%). Smaller groups like Bulgarians, various Christian denominations, and Jews also contributed to this rich tapestry of diversity.

The 1897 ethnic distribution data for Istanbul, the capital of the Empire, reflects a diverse and cosmopolitan city at the turn of the 20th century (Table 2). Turks formed 56.3% of the population, demonstrating their significant influence on the city's demographic and

cultural aspects. The presence of Rum and Armenian communities at 22.2% and 15.2%, respectively, emphasized Istanbul's role as a center for diverse ethnic groups within the Ottoman Empire while also highlighting its cultural and economic significance. The Jewish community made up 4.4% of the population, adding to Istanbul's historical reputation as a place committed to religious and ethnic tolerance.

Table 1. Distribution of the Ottoman Population by Ethnic Communities (1905–6 Census).

Ethnic/Religious Community	Population	Percentage
Muslim	15.508.753	74.47
Kazak	1.792	0.01
Rum	2.823.063	13.55
Armenian	1.031.708	4.95
Bulgarian	761.530	3.66
Ulah	26.042	0.13
Greek Catholic	29.749	0.14
Armenian Catholic	89.040	0.43
Protestant	52.485	0.25
Latin	20.496	0.10
Maronite	28.738	0.14
Assyrian	36.985	0.18
Chaldean	2.371	0.01
Jewish	253.435	1.22
Gypsy	14.470	0.07
Foreigner	142.018	0.68
Other	4.213	0.02
Total	**20.826.888**	**100**

Source: Directorate of the Administration of Registry and Population Administration of the Ministry of Interior (Dahiliye Nezareti Sicil-i Nüfus İdare-i Umumiyyesi Müdüriyyeti, 1919).

Table 2. Ethnic Distribution of Istanbul Population (1897).

Ethnic Community	Population	Percentage
Turkish	597.000	56.3
Albanian	10.000	0.01
Kurdish	5.000	0.005
Rum	236.000	22.2
Armenian	162.000	15.2
Jewish	47.000	4.4
Serbian	1.000	0
Christian Arab	1.000	0
Total	**1.059.000**	**100**

Source: Karpat (2003, p. 143).

The costume book genre, which constitutes one of the most important sources in terms of fashion history, emerged from travelogues, etiquette books, and costume engravings in the 16th century (Welters & Lillethun, 2018, p. 44). Nicolas de Nicolay's (1568) *Navigations* stood out as one of the finest travelogues. Nicolay traveled to the Ottoman territories in his capacity as France's royal geographer, meticulously documenting local traditions and attire throughout his journey. The album for the 1873 World Fair in Vienna serves as another significant costume book for the Ottoman Empire. The distinguished painter Osman Hamdi

Bey and the French artist and historian Victor Marie de Launay, who worked for the Minister of Commerce, Ibrahim Edhem Pasha, prepared this album (Ersoy, 2004).

The 1873 album *Elbise-i Osmaniyye* depicts Istanbul through five photographs featuring fifteen figures (Osman Hamdi Bey & de Launay, 1873). The album portrays ordinary Ottoman subjects from an ethnographic perspective. As Osman Hamdi Bey and de Launay put it (1999, pp. 10–11), Istanbul is the center of agricultural and industrial production for the Ottoman people. Furthermore, it serves as a transit trade warehouse where products from India, China, Iran, and Russia via the Black Sea and America via the Mediterranean are collected and accumulated. The city's streets are bustling with people wearing unique and diverse clothing. For instance, Persian sellers wear wide and flat caps, while Ottoman officers don fezzes with black suits. Caucasian Russian merchants wear tight frock coats and pleated skirts tightened at the waist with a belt. Ottomans of Rum origin wear top hats, white turbans, and tulle veils that attract the attention of British tourists. Additionally, Asian, European, and African foreigners wear their national costumes, creating a variety of clothing that is perhaps not seen anywhere else in the world. This diversity is a result of the city's status as a trade center as well as the existence of different religions.

People from lower income groups also have specific clothes according to their professions. Figure 1 illustrates the attire of an Istanbulite *saka*, a boatman, and a porter. As members of different artisan guilds, they are protected by the government and their guilds. The clothing of the *saka*, who carries drinking water to the houses, is the same as the general dressing of other workers, except for the additional pieces required for the job. The boatmen have a shirt made of twisted rope called *bürümcük*, a bright and embroidered vest, a red or black *yemeni,* and a fez on their heads. The porters, who are usually of Armenian origin, wear a *mintan* and shalwar made of aba, a felt fabric, a Persian shirt, sturdy wool socks, slippers and *yemeni* worn together, and an embroidered white felt cone with a turban wrapped around it.

The *ayvaz in* Figure 2 is the servant responsible for serving food. He wears a thick and colorful turban, *salta*, vest, and shalwar; colorful woolen socks, red or black *yemeni*s, a striped *futa* (apron), and a white Bursa cotton napkin over his shoulder. The Istanbul gentry (bourgeoisie) in the higher income group could be distinguished by religious or traditional dress *(right*), but with the lifting of dress restrictions and modernization, they also began to wear uniform Western dress *(left*). Osman Hamdi Bey and Marie de Launay (1999, pp. 17-18) provide an insightful observation on the correlation between modern dressing and identity. They compare the Muslim bourgeois figure, who opposes the impact of Western culture and demonstrates their allegiance to customs and traditions by means of their attire, with the Europeanized figure. In contrast, the Europeanized figure's clothes do not reveal their religion or social class.

Osman Hamdi Bey and de Launay (1999, pp. 17-18) note that the attire commonly worn by government officials, described as a ceremonial black formal dress comprising a red fez, a black *setre* jacket, and black trousers, had become a symbol of progressiveness. Yet, within the wealthy class, there was a push towards further Europeanization, with some opting for more comfortable and stylish alternatives to the traditional *setre* jacket, particularly when enjoying leisurely activities such as strolling in parks. In major Ottoman cities like Istanbul and Izmir, Hamdi Bey and de Launay (1999, pp. 17-18) observe a distinct preference among the urban elite for the stovepipe hat, a Western emblem of sophistication, over the traditional fez. However, pragmatism prevails as these individuals often carry a fez with them to avoid offending conservative officials, illustrating the delicate balance between modern inclinations and traditional expectations. Hamdi Bey and de Launay (1999, pp. 17-

18) acknowledge the unifying power of the newer, standardized attire in reducing religious and nationalistic tensions within the Empire. The adoption of such uniform dress codes had helped to obscure religious differences, protecting non-Muslims from potential harassment by making their religious identity less conspicuous, thus fostering a more harmonious public life. Despite recognizing these practical benefits, they express a nostalgic lament for the loss of the traditional Ottoman attire, which they describe as not only visually striking but also more comfortable and healthful than the restrictive European styles. They fondly recall the old garments' functionality and aesthetic appeal, from the loose shalwar and the unrestricted *salta* to the colorful *yemeni*s and the protective qualities of the cone and turban. Their narrative is tinged with regret over the erosion of cultural identity that comes with adopting Western fashion, hinting at a more profound struggle between maintaining tradition and embracing modernity within the Empire.

Figure 1. A *saka*, a boatman and a porter from Istanbul in the late 19th century.

Source: Osman Hamdi Bey and de Launay (1999, p. 20).

Historically, this is because the Western European aesthetic, based on the display of body contours, has always had fundamentally different qualities from the Eastern form of loose clothing (Jirousek, 2004, p. 234). Hamdi Bey and de Launay's commentary, which desperately identifies the defeat of traditional "comfort" against the modern without ignoring the achievements of civilization, also approaches the concept of "fashion," which was just beginning to enter the Ottoman agenda at the time, with reservations: "Because fashion, with its armies of tailors, shoemakers, cobblers, women's barbers, and others, is attacking with all its might to defeat us. There is no choice but to surrender to this power," Osman Hamdi Bey and de Launay (1999, p. 18) add. In other words, modernization and fashion transformed traditional identities by taking them to another dimension.

Figure 2. Istanbul bourgeoisie (*left* and *right*) and the *ayvaz* (*center*) in the late 19th century.

Source: Osman Hamdi Bey and de Launay (1999, p. 16).

Muslims

Being the *millet-i hakime* (sovereign nation), Muslims formed the dominant element of the Ottoman Empire, with Turks and Turkomans at its core as the state's founders. The Ottomans conquered Turkish principalities in Anatolia after the collapse of the Seljuk Empire and settled Turks in newly conquered lands in the Balkans, thus amassing a sizeable Muslim population that included Bosniaks, Albanians, Kurds, and Arabs following Yavuz Sultan Selim's Egyptian campaign. It is worth noting that Europeans commonly referred to all Ottoman Muslims as "Turks." This confusion was highlighted by Marion-Crawford (2019, pp. 10–11), who stated:

I do not know whether it would be more accurate to define Turks as a nation or as a community of different races united by the common bond of Islam. In any mosque we randomly enter, you can see a Turk, as pale as any Norwegian, with flaxen hair, prostrated and praying next to one of the blackest people in black Africa.

Although there is no clergy class in Islam, as in Christianity, and Muslims are seen as a single ummah, they were divided into different sects and orders within themselves as religious networks. As seen in Figure 3, the attire of the dervishes, sheiks, and mullahs who practiced different religious teachings also varied. For example, in the Mevlevi order founded in Konya during the Seljuk period by Jalaluddin Rumi, a disciple of Sheikh Shahabeddin Suhraverdi, the founder of the *Nurbahşiye* order, dervishes wore a *ferace*, red *yemeni*, *haydariye* (jacket), *tennure* (skirt) and *sikke-i şerif* (holy cone). Mevlevi dervishes are known for their whirling dances and mystical practices. The *sikke* represents the tombstone of the ego, and the white robe signifies the ego's shroud as the dervish strives for spiritual rebirth and union with the divine (Schimmel, 2011). The *Bektaşiyye* order combines Shi'a and

Sufi thought, emphasizing direct personal experience with the divine. Its practices and beliefs are distinct from mainstream Sunni Islam (Karamustafa, 2007). The *Bektaşi*s were a group closely connected with the Janissaries, who were established during the reign of Orhan Gazi. The Janissaries converted to Islam by enlisting Christian children. The *Bektaşi*s wore a headdress, which they made with their own hands from felt, and was called a crown. This headdress had an extension at the end, representing the sleeve of Turkish saint Hacı Bektaş Veli's cardigan. As obligatory accessories, they wore a star-shaped jade stone called a surrender stone on their chest, a crescent-shaped earring in their right ear, a *nefir* (a wind instrument mostly used in *mehter* music) resembling a hunting pipe, and an oak *cilbent* (a rectangular leather bag with a buckle strap on the belt and a front lid that descends like a small box). Apart from the cardigan, they wore a jacket, very wide and pleated *potur* (pants), and red or black *yemeni*s. In the ulema class, which consisted of *talip* or *softa* (student), *danişment* (wise man), *mulazim* (assistant), *mullah* (senior judge), *muderris* (senior educator), *hoca* (teacher) and *mufti* (the highest interpreter of the law), the different ranks were symbolized by gold embroidered cloth ribbons on their white turbans. Their dressing was the same as other Muslims, and their overcoat was called a *biniş*, not a robe (Osman Hamdi Bey and de Launay, 1999, pp. 24-29).

The dressing history of the Muslim Turks, who were the dominant element of the Empire, shows a mix of pre-Islamic and Islamic traditions with roots in the steppes of eastern Central Asia. As nomads engaged in animal husbandry, the Turks had developed a form of dress suitable for a mobile lifestyle and unpredictable climates that could include extremes of heat and cold. The basic garments for both men and women were loose trousers and front-opening coats, vests, or jackets, ideal for riding (Özel, 1992; Scarce, 1987, pp. 32–36). Coats, jackets, and vests could be worn over a shirt to provide warmth. These had the advantage over closed tunics in that they could be easily removed one layer at a time as needed, even on horseback. Belts were used to cover clothing and also served as slots for personal items or weapons. Differences in gender or status were indicated by variations in jewelry and other accessories, particularly headgear. Conspicuous and often intricate headdresses were a unique feature of Ottoman dress for both men and women. Ottoman Turks used the choice of textiles, textile ornamentation, accessory details, and the layering order of garments to distinguish gender, class, clans, and communities (Jirousek, 2004, pp. 232–233). Figure 4 shows some examples of these garments.

In Figure 4, the depicted gentleman is clad in attire that epitomizes traditional Turkoman garb, comprising a striped robe, voluminous trousers, and a long sash encircling his waist. This ensemble is complemented by a short jacket, adorned with ornamental motifs, and a tall, meticulously wrapped turban. Such attire is emblematic of Turkoman men's clothing, designed to fulfill both practical functions and cultural expressions (Hole, 2009, pp. 262–263). The attire not only served as a daily wear but also symbolized social status and tribal affiliations within the Turkoman community. The intricate textile patterns and the layering of garments indicated the wearer's wealth and standing.

Figure 3. A Mevlevi dervish, a *Bektaşi* dervish, and a mullah in the late 19th century.
Source: Osman Hamdi Bey and de Launay (1999, p. 25).

Conversely, the woman in the illustration is arrayed in a long, resplendent robe, cinched at the waist with a broad sash, and a head covering that, while less elaborate than the man's, is nonetheless indicative of social significance. The edges of her robe are embellished with decorative details, reflecting a discerning sense of style and the importance of decorative artisanship in women's clothing within the Turkoman culture. Despite the simplicity of her headgear relative to that of her male counterpart, it nevertheless conveys a level of detail that underscores its social import. Moreover, her adornment with ornate jewelry is a testament to the cultural practice among Turkoman women of using such embellishments to display wealth and status. The attire of the woman not only underscores the aesthetic appeal but also highlights the crucial role played by Turkoman women in preserving and promoting their cultural heritage through their choice of dressing. The decorative elements on her dress serve not only aesthetic purposes but also act as symbols of identity and familial connections.

This illustration transcends its value as a mere depiction of historical attire, serving also as a cultural artifact that illumines the interactions and perceptions bridging the East and West during the early 19th century. It provides insight into the European romanticization of Turkoman traditional attire, contributing to the broader discourse of Orientalism prevalent at the time (MacKenzie, 1995, p. 46).

The wearing of many layers was always a feature of ceremonial or festive dress, as well as a sign of wealth and status (Gervers, 1983). Layering is an exceptional quality of the Turkish dress, creating a silhouette that hides the body shape and balances the luxurious dress with modesty. Not only are the layers worn on top of each other, but the materials of all layers are designed and arranged to create a sumptuous effect (Berker, 1985). The importance of layering as a broader aesthetic and spiritual concept is deeply embedded in culture. Here again, formality is associated with layers. In Islamic decorative arts, the

layering of complex patterns on top of each other is seen as a spiritual metaphor for the nature of the divine order, seemingly incomprehensible but actually planned and meaningful (Ardalan & Bakhtiar, 1973).

Figure 4. Turkoman clothing drawing by a French illustrator.

Source: Charlotte Jirousek (2004).

When Turks converted to Islam, they also adopted the practice of wearing clothes that distinguished Muslims from non-Muslims (Baker, 1986). Men wore turbans, women veiled themselves, and specific colors and fabrics became the symbols of being a Muslim. In Ottoman society, which was comprised of various ethnic groups, legally prescribed attire was a significant indicator of one's religious affiliation (Quataert, 1997).

Figure 5 exemplifies hijab, which is the striking difference between indoor *(on the right*) and outdoor *(on the left*) attire, as a characteristic of the shaping of women's identity through clothing and dress in line with Islamic tradition. Sewn from brocade produced in factories in Damascus, Aleppo, or Istanbul, Turkish women's clothing is completed with a floor-length skirted robe and velvet shoes adorned with pearls and gold embroidery hidden under the wide shalwar, while the sash hanging from the cashmere shawl helps to gather the hem of the robe and make it easier to walk. The hair toilet falls in front of the forehead. The garment is decorated with needlepoint called *bibil*, which is produced in the vicinity of Istanbul. When going out of the house, all this ornate outfit is covered by a *ferace* (abaya) made of broadcloth, merino, or cashmere, depending on the season, and a white muslin veil, which has become more transparent with modernization (Osman Hamdi Bey and de Launay, 1999, p. 33). To put it briefly, this photograph subtly reflects the difference between Ottoman Turkish women's private and public lives. The indoor clothing allowed for more personal expression and comfort, while the outdoor attire served as a public uniform that adhered to the societal norms of modesty and decorum.

Figure 5. Turkish ladies and a Turkish schoolchild from Istanbul in the late 19th century.

Source: Osman Hamdi Bey and Marie de Launay (1999, p. 31).

Figure 6 also shows Turkish women with distinctive characteristics. On the upper left and right are Muslim women from Istanbul in their chador and green abaya, dressed outside the home; on the lower left is a Muslim woman from Pera, an exclusive district of Istanbul, in her wedding attire; and on the lower right, a Muslim woman from Pera in her domestic attire. Outdoors, many women opt for the chador, a garment that envelops the body, leaving only the eyes visible, as a sign of modesty and adherence to conservative values. Others might choose an abaya, which is similarly modest but allows for more facial visibility, indicating slight variances in conservatism or marital status, with green symbolizing a connection to Islam. In contrast, wedding attire is much more elaborate, with vibrant colors and floral patterns celebrating joy and marking a significant life event, blending traditional Ottoman and local influences. Meanwhile, domestic attire shifts dramatically; women wear less conservative clothes like floral skirts and patterned vests, allowing for personal expression and comfort within the privacy of home.

The nuances of women's attire, both indoors and outdoors, in the late 19th century were also prevalent in the 16th century. The illustrations published by Nicolas de Nicolay shed light on the attire of the reign of Suleiman the Magnificent. The woman depicted in Figure 7 with the title "Turkish Woman Walking in the City," is dressed in a long, loose-fitting garment that covers her from head to toe, typical of the modest dress codes for Muslim women in the Ottoman Empire during the 16th century. The garment has elaborate patterns or embroidery around the collar and cuffs, indicating a certain level of affluence or social status.

Figure 6. Turkish women.

Source: Dalvimart (1802).

Referring to the Islamic tradition that emphasizes women's privacy, Nicolay attributes women's going to the bathhouse several times a week to reasons such as socializing, relaxing, experiencing worldly pleasures away from men, purity, and the obligation to worship with ablution. He even refers to homosexuality as follows: "They fall in love as passionately as if they were men. So much so that when they see a girl or woman of perfect beauty, they do not stop until they realize that it is a great privilege to have the opportunity to wash with her, to hold her by the hand, and to taste everything according to their taste" (Nicolay, 1568, p. 73). He also alludes to Sappho, the Greek poet from Lesbos, who is recognized as the originator of the term "lesbian." Regarding the engravings in Figure 7 titled "Turkish Woman Going to the Bath," Nicolay (1568, p. 73) writes:

> The worldliness of body, health, superstition, freedom of strength, and freedom of pleasure make it not surprising that the baths are customarily frequented by Turks. Even the stateswomen willingly go there early in the morning to stay until dinner time, accompanied by one or two slaves. One slave carries on her head a leather vase, embossed in the shape of a small bucket for drawing water. Inside this vase, there is a fine and long shirt of woven cotton, another shirt, loose linen creams, and a mineral drug called *rusma*, which is pulverized and soaked in water with lime and applied to areas where they want to remove hair, causing it to fall out immediately with the smoke. This vase, thus garnished, is worn covered with a rich velvet paillon or crimson satin enriched with gold and silver, with hanging silk and gold tassels. The other slave, if there are two, carries a fine carpet with a pillow. In such an apparatus, the slaves go behind their mistresses, who are dressed over their dresses in a fine linen shirt called *Barami*. Upon arrival, they spread the carpet, strip off their clothes, and place their clothes and jewels on it. For their preparation and parade are such that, whether they are Turks or Christian women, they adorn themselves with all their richest clothes and most precious rings to better please others. When entering the bath, they are stripped on the carpet, and the vase is opened with the mouth open and the bottom facing upwards for more convenience in sitting there. The slaves, one on one side and the other on the other, wash them and rub them all over the body as long as necessary. Then they go to rest in a small, temperately warm room. However, during their rest, the girls also greet one another.

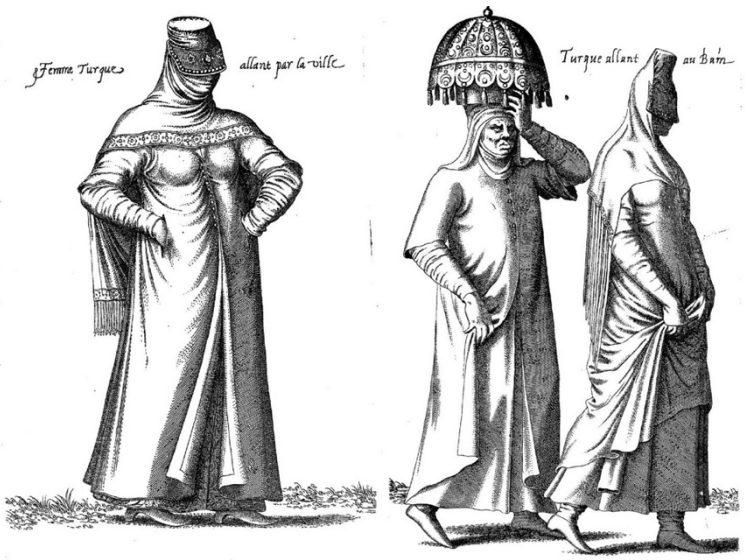

Figure 7. Muslim women in their outdoor clothes (Nicolay, 1568).

The clothes of a noblewoman who resides close to Topkapi Palace is depicted in Figure 8. Welters and Lillethun (2018, p. 114) highlight the similarities between the fashion of Venice and Istanbul during this era when interpreting this outfit:

> The fashionably dressed woman wears a patterned robe, striped sash, headdress, necklace, and chopines (elevated footwear). The chopines show the influence of Venetian styles on Turkish fashion. Both Venice and Istanbul were among the world's top luxury markets in the sixteenth century; fashion news must have traveled easily between these two cities.

Figure 8. "Noble Woman of Turkey."
Source: Nicolas de Nicolay (1568, p. 56).

Rums

"Rum" was historically used to refer to Greek-cultured Orthodox Christians residing in Rumelia and Anatolia. It was derived from "Roman," which reflected the Eastern Roman Empire's heritage (Ergul, 2012, p. 630). Following the Greek independence, this term was

used to distinguish Greek-speaking Orthodox Christians from the Greeks of modern Greece. The Ottomans called the latter "Yunan," implying the Ionian civilization. This term was directly linked to the classical heritage of Greece and its modern nation-state identity. It is essential to understand this differentiation to comprehend how these communities were viewed and governed within the Ottoman Empire. Hence, the most important group within the Rum millet, which includes various linguistic communities, is the Greek-speaking Orthodox Christians. According to the 1895 census, the Rum population was nearly 2 million 400 thousand. However, by the 1914 census, after the cession of Ioannina, Epirus, Macedonia, Macedonia, Thrace and the islands to Serbia and Greece and the independence of the Albanians, it had fallen to 1 million 700 thousand, around nine percent of the total population of the Ottoman Empire (Karpat, 2003, p. 88).

Following the conquest of Constantinople in 1453, the Rums, the largest minority in the Ottoman Empire, maintained their political creed under the rule of the Fener Patriarchate and took part in state administration. Until the Greek Revolt of 1821, the Greeks enjoyed privileges that other communities, including the Turks, did not enjoy. These privileges included significant roles in administrative and economic sectors, particularly through the influential Phanariots, Greek families who served as advisors and diplomats to the Ottoman court. Additionally, the Greek Orthodox Church had substantial autonomy and influence, which allowed the Greek community to maintain its educational and religious institutions with considerable independence. They were seen as the spokesman and representative of all Orthodox people. So much so that until 1840, the Ottomans referred to all Orthodox people as "Rum" (Karpat, 2003, p. 86). However, in recent years, it has become evident that the *millet* system's presentation of all non-Muslims as a closed category and its treatment of religious communities as identical communities contradicts reality (Özil, 2016).

The language of the Bulgarians, another sizeable Orthodox community, is Bulgarian, which belongs to the Slavic language family. Bulgarians reside in the region between the Danube and the Balkan Mountains, as well as in Thrace and Macedonia. During Mithat Pasha's governorship of the Danube in the latter half of the 19th century, the Bulgarian people made economic progress and developed a large middle class due to his reforms and breakthroughs. This class contributed significantly to the development of Bulgarian nationalism. Through the efforts of Greek educational institutions and the church, the Bulgarians had been Hellenized for a long period. In 1870, after the "Edict of the Bulgarian Erkzahlik" by Sultan Abdülaziz, the Bulgarians gained the right to choose between the Fener Patriarchate and their own church. They were recognized as a separate millet with the establishment of the Bulgarian Church. This was the result of the efforts of this class. Almost all Orthodox followers in the Danube and two-thirds of those in Macedonia preferred the Bulgarian Church. On the other hand, most Romanian-speaking Vlachs preferred the Fener Patriarchate and became Hellenized. The few Vlachs who preferred the Bulgarian Church became Bulgarians. During the Ottoman-Russian War between 1877-78, Bulgarian and Russian forces massacred between two to three hundred thousand Muslims and displaced over one million people. This led to an increase in the Bulgarian population ratio in the region. As a result of the Treaty of Berlin in 1878, an autonomous Bulgarian Principality was established. By the end of the 19th century, it was estimated that approximately three million people spoke Bulgarian in the Balkans, including Bulgaria. The 1881-1893 Ottoman Census reported that over nine hundred and fifty thousand Bulgarians lived in the Ottoman Empire (Dadyan, 2020, p. 64; Karpat, 2003, pp. 88–91).

Between 1840 and 1880, the Bulgarian population in Istanbul was approximately 50 thousand. Bulgarians were particularly known for their involvement in the dairy industry

in the city. Istanbul, which Bulgarians referred to as "Tsaringrad" (City of Tsars), has always held great significance for them since the era of the Eastern Roman Empire. In the 19th century, the first Bulgarian religious community administration, churches, newspapers, printing presses, and schools were established in Istanbul. These centers played a crucial role in nurturing Bulgarian nationalism, especially in response to the oppressive policies of the Rum Patriarchate (Dadyan, 2020, pp. 44-45). Interestingly, Istanbul, not Sofia or any other Bulgarian city, served as the central role model for constructing Bulgarian identity (Dadyan, 2020, p. 70). Moreover, the increasing Catholic missionary activities among Bulgarians, taking advantage of the Orthodox Bulgarian-Rum church conflict, led to the establishment of the Bulgarian Catholic Church affiliated with the Vatican in Istanbul in 1860 with the approval of the Ottoman court. However, due to the limited Bulgarian Catholic population, the church remained weak and could not be effective (Dadyan, 2020, p. 50).

If we look at the examples of clothing, there are some differences between the dress of Greek, Armenian, and Jewish non-Muslims, even during the modernization process when the dress laws based on dhimmi law were gradually abolished. Osman Hamdi and de Launay (1999, p. 40) contrast the young Greek girl in Figure 9 (*right*) with the Jewish woman (*left*), whose appearance is more tied to the past and is considered as her opposite pole. With her elaborate hair bun and innovative dress, the Greek girl is, in fact, reminiscent of the Malakoff toilets of the past. The Bulgarian women's costume in Figure 10 consists of a thin cloth, wide-sleeved shirt with an open collar and lace embroidery on the chest, a robe and matching vest, an apron made of woolen fabric, a skirt with cross-stitch embroidery, and a headscarf decorated with colorful tassels and embroidery, giving the appearance of a skullcap. The Bulgarian men's costume, which attracts attention with its comfort, consists of a fez, a vest extending towards the *potur*, an embroidered fur coat, a red sash, a *potur* with various curved patterns, and red marquetry *yemeni*.

Figure 9. Jewish woman, Armenian bride, and young Greek girl from Istanbul in the late 19th century.

Source: Osman Hamdi Bey and Marie de Launay (1999, p. 37).

Figure 10. Clothing styles of Bulgarians living in Istanbul in the 1900s.

Source: Saro Dadyan (2020).

When analyzing the attire of affluent Greek women residing in upscale areas during the 16th century, a period characterized by a more stringent dress code, the indications of refinement and prosperity are remarkable. N. de Nicolay (1568, p. 78) provides a depiction of the clothing worn by Greek women in Pera in Figure 11, describing it as follows:

> The attire worn by Greek Perotte women and girls is incredibly opulent and splendid, to the extent that it may be difficult for those who have not witnessed it firsthand to fathom. They dedicated their utmost attention and exertion towards exhibiting bravery and adorning themselves. Primarily, they display their magnificence prominently as they traverse the city en route to their bathing establishments.
>
> Every bourgeois or merchant woman wears dresses made of velvet, crimson satin, or damask, adorned with gold or silver buttons. They wear taffeta and figured silks from Bursa, as well as multiple chains, bracelets, large bangles, pendants, and displays. These accessories are embellished with various gems, both precious and of lower worth.
>
> The girls or newlyweds adorn themselves with circular headwear made of crimson satin or patterned gold brocade. These caps are embellished with silk and gold bands, approximately two fingers in width, and are adorned with exquisite pearls and other valuable gemstones. Their shirts are crafted from crepe or colored taffeta, intricately woven and adorned with gold, resembling the attire of the Turks.
>
> Dressing well is not just an option, but an expectation. As they stroll through the city, their presence brings to mind the likeness of nymphs or exceptionally courageous brides, surpassing even the court brides in radiance. They accompany reverence and chastity with all forms of voluptuousness. Older women, although richly dressed, are more modest. As they traverse the city, they don large veils made of exquisite white linen that extend down to their thighs.
>
> Widows wear these veils in saffron yellow, walking freely, as can be seen in the following figure.

Figure 11. Greek Women from Pera.
Source: N. de Nicolay (1568, p. 78).

Armenians

Armenians were a Christian community that was highly trusted by the state, and they lived scattered throughout the Ottoman Empire, particularly in Eastern Anatolia and Istanbul. They differed from Armenians in other countries in that almost all of them spoke Turkish fluently in addition to Armenian. Furthermore, their women, like Muslim women, wore veils outside (Figure 12).

In his account, N. de Nicolay (1568, p. 151) characterizes the Armenians as a cohesive group primarily engaged in commercial activities, particularly in the lucrative trade of Levantine goods such as camelots, mohair, textiles, and rugs imported from Syria (Figure 15). Armenians of lower socioeconomic status often pursue careers as craftsmen or dedicate themselves to the cultivation of gardens and vineyards. Their attire consists of lengthy garments, resembling the clothing worn by the Greeks and other Eastern nations. Additionally, they adorned their heads with a blue turban adorned with a combination of white and red colors. Only the Turks are allowed to wear the simple red turban. In his work from 1568, N. de Nicolay (pp. 151-154) provides a detailed account of the origins of Armenian traditions and beliefs, as well as the geographical context in which they have historically thrived:

> Historically, the laws, customs, and way of life of the Armenians closely resembled those of the Medes, including religious practices. Most of their practices mirrored those of the Persians. The Armenians adhere to Christianity as their present faith and religion, practicing their own distinct church and rituals. Armenian Christian practices diverge considerably from those of the Roman Church and even more so from the Greeks. The role of a Catholicos encompasses both temporal and spiritual leadership, distinguishing it from the positions of the Roman Pope or Greek Patriarch. Their services are conducted in the Armenian language to ensure better comprehension by the congregation, who in turn respond in the vernacular. During religious services, individuals stand up to listen to the Gospel and exchange a kiss on the mouth as a gesture of peace and reconciliation. The Armenians observe the Eucharist by using unleavened bread and wine, just like the Latin Church, but in their native language. They abstain from observing Christmas but instead host a grand commemoration on the day of the Epiphany. In comparison to Europe, their

observance of lent is more rigorous, as they completely avoid consuming any animal products and indulgent foods.

Armenia is a region in Asia, named after Aram, a companion of Jason the Thessalian on his Argonautical expedition. Armenia is partitioned into two regions: Greater Armenia, presently known as Turcomania, and Armenia Minor. This region includes Mount Ararat, where Noah's Ark is said to have landed after the Great Flood. The river Araxes traverses the plains of Armenia, alongside the renowned rivers Euphrates and Tigris. Despite its historical significance, much of Armenia Minor is now under the dominion of the great Turk, while Greater Armenia is under the rule of the Safavids.

With the reign of Mahmut II, Armenians began to take part in high-level state administration (Toros, 1985, p. 1009). The Armenian community was divided into different sects and had a more traditionalist social organization and culture compared to the Greeks and Bulgarians. According to the Ottoman census taken between 1881 and 1893, the Ottoman Empire was home to approximately 1.1 million Armenians (Karpat, 2003, p. 95).

Osman Hamdi Bey and de Launay (1999, p. 36) describe the traditional Armenian bridal attire shown in Figure 9, capturing its cultural richness and symbolic significance. They detail the bride's dress as a long robe made from thick cloth, lavishly embroidered with gold and silk. The robe features elaborate and heavy pleats, an open front, and a tail, with sleeves rolled up to the elbows, adding a regal and ceremonial quality to her appearance. Accentuating the bridal ensemble is a white tiara adorned with flowers, enhancing her elegance and grace. The bride's veil, made of fine tulle, adds a layer of mystique and delicacy, while another golden veil, specifically designed to cover the face, adds to the complexity and opulence of her attire. Her hands are tied together, symbolizing perhaps her commitment and the solemnity of the marriage ceremony. Osman Hamdi Bey and de Launay note the profound respect shown to the bride, seen as the future matriarch of her family. This respect is not just for her as an individual but also for what she represents—fertility and continuity. The ceremonial attire and the elaborate presentation are said to evoke, perhaps unconsciously, ancient religious sentiments associated with universal fertility. This connection underscores the deep cultural and historical roots of the bridal attire, linking the personal and celebratory event of a wedding with broader themes of fertility and renewal that transcend generations.

In Figure 12, the woman's attire is characterized by its elaborate design and rich textiles, reflecting the socio-economic status and cultural heritage of the Armenian community. The traditional dress includes a long, embroidered robe, often adorned with intricate patterns and vibrant colors that denote not only aesthetic preferences but also cultural symbolism. Like the case for Muslim women, the veil, an essential component of the ensemble, signifies modesty and religious observance, aligning with the broader cultural practices of the time.

As further illustrations, the Armenian man's identity is easily recognizable by the color of his headdress and *yemeni*, as shown in Figure 13, where he is depicted alone, and in Figure 14, where he is shown with a Turk.

Figure 12. An Armenian woman on the street in the 19th century
Source: Bogos Tatikian (1850).

Figure 13. An Armenian man.
Source: Dalvimart (1802).

Figure 14. Armenian (*left*) and Turkish (*right*) clothing in the 18th century.
Source: Saro Dadyan Collection (Akbaş, 2020, p. 84).

Figure 15. Jewish (*left*) and Armenian (*right*) merchants from Istanbul.
Source: N. de Nicolay (1568, pp. 150, 154).

Jews

The Jewish community was dispersed throughout the Ottoman Empire and mainly settled in cities such as Istanbul, Thessaloniki, and Izmir, which were centers of foreign trade. Jews were generally engaged in trade. For example, in Figure 15, there is an engraving depicting a Jewish merchant from the 16th century who is shown leaving on Fridays while wearing a draped garment as he moves through the city of Istanbul.

Along with the local Jews, there were also immigrant Jews who fled from anti-Semitic Christian countries and found refuge in the Ottoman tolerance. The Jewish community did not have linguistic unity as Hebrew was not a common language beyond being the language of worship. Those living in the Arab provinces spoke Arabic, while Sephardim from Spain and Ashkenazic immigrants from Poland and Russia had no common language.

Octavien Dalvimart (1802) created an album of clothing engravings from the Ottoman Empire depicting Jews, who were a persecuted race, enjoying more privileges in Istanbul than in any other country. They were on the same ground as the Turks and, in some cases, even had more freedom. They controlled trade and attained great wealth and prestige in Istanbul. Figure 17 shows a Jew in his traditional dress, while a Sephardic Jewish couple is depicted in Figure 18.

The medical sector of Istanbul was also under the dominance of the Jewish people. As N. de Nicolay (1568, p. 105) noted, although Turkish physicians wear the same attire as the rest of the population, many of the Jewish physicians wear a high pointed cap stained in scarlet red, which can be seen through the drainage line, rather than the yellow *tulbant* that was characteristic of the Jewish people (Figure 16).

Figure 16. A Jewish physician in Istanbul.

Source: N. de Nicolay (1568, p. 106).

As N. de Nicolay (1568, p. 150) notes in the 16th century, "the Jews who live under the domination of the great Turk are all dressed in long clothes like the Greeks and other nations of the Levant." Therefore, the traditional lines in the attire of Jewish men and women in Istanbul in Figure 19 also draw attention. Osman Hamdi Bey and de Launay (1999, p. 40) describe Jewish women's clothing as a bizarre mixture of Northern and Eastern fashions. The outfit in Figure 19 (*left*) is a color illustration of the Jewish women's dress in Figure 9, consisting of a tightly wrapped floral headscarf with a white embroidered border that prevents the hair from showing, a striped or checkered silk robe with a gold-embroidered

border, a belted waist, a cardigan in bright pistachio green, lilac, fawn, etc., lined with white astrakhanum or swan feathers, and shoes.

Figure 17. A Jewish senior.
Source: Dalvimart (1802)

Figure 18. Sephardic Jewish couple.
Source: Silvyo Ovadya Collection (Molinas, 2020, p. 297).

Figure 19. Ottoman Jewish clothing.
Source: Ivo V. Molinas (2020).

Boundary lines in the *millet* system: Colors and fabrics

In historical times, Muslims were distinguished from non-Muslims by allocating certain fabrics and colors specifically for Muslims (Faroqhi, 2004, pp. 24–25). The green turban, for instance, was a symbol of religious privilege and was exclusively worn by *seyyid*s, who were descendants of the Islamic prophet Muhammad. Non-Muslims were not permitted to wear this color. However, Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, although not a *seyyid*, used green to symbolize his religious devotion (Nahum, 2011). In contrast, the color white was also forbidden for non-Muslims. For example, Jews wearing a prayer shawl with a green cord were advised not to use it to avoid trouble during their pilgrimage to Jerusalem. French diplomat Pierre Belon (1554, p. 400) mentioned in his travelogue that yellow turbans were worn by Jews, while Armenians, Greeks, Maronites, and Coptic Christians wore blue turbans or turbans of other colors because white was only acceptable for Turks (referring to Muslims). However, the use of yarns of colors other than green made white fabric acceptable (Peters, 1985, p. 526). By the early 19th century, Christians and Jews began wearing white turbans with blue or blue-black stripes. Additionally, the shape of the headdress could also be used to distinguish one *millet* from another. For instance, the Armenians were known for wearing a non-elegant and impractical type of *kalpak*, in addition to the black color that had become their trademark (White, 1845, p. 186).

During the 16th century, edicts allocated certain colors to specific groups of people. Jewish and Armenian non-Muslim women were allowed to wear skirts made from a particular blue, black, or navy-blue Bursa fabric. Muslims were reserved yellowish leather shoes, while non-Muslims could wear black shoes (Altınay, 1987, pp. 47–48). The belief that colors ranging from dark blue to black symbolized evil further cemented the idea that these colors were suitable for non-Muslims, and they came to be associated with mourning. However, by the 18th century, mourning attire was no longer used for the funerals of sultans, in keeping with Islamic etiquette. In the 15th and 16th centuries, dignitaries wore dark blue and black kaftans at the funeral of Suleiman the Magnificent, while it was customary to wear old, worn-out clothes as visible signs of grief (Bağcı, 1996).

Jews and other non-Muslims were distinguished from Muslims by their dressing. For instance, in 1702, it was forbidden for Jews and Christians to wear yellow shoes and a red heart, and they were only allowed to wear black shoes and hats instead. In 1730, it was stated that Jews would face the death penalty if their headwear resembled that of Muslims. In 1752, the types of furs that Jews could wear were limited, and only blue and dark-colored cloth and short *kalpak*s were permitted (Molinas, 2020, pp. 315–316).

During the 18th century, the wealthy Ottoman population had the privilege of selecting the colors of their clothes. They preferred bright shades of red and blue, which was revealed through the sample fabrics included in the 18th-century French merchants' commercial correspondence in the eastern Mediterranean. This preference was directly related to income and class, as stated in an 18th-century French Levantine trade manual. A bale of cloth for the upper-income group included several pieces of carmine red, one of lilac and one of violet, one of purple or cinnamon, and three pieces of green. However, the color known as grass green was avoided because of its religious significance. Meanwhile, bales for lower-income buyers consisted of soft-colored fabrics, such as three pieces of blue, two khakis, and two dark violets. It should be noted that even these modest buyers avoided black and dark blue, which were reserved for non-Muslims according to 16th century edicts (Faroqhi, 2004, p. 26).

Red woolen fabric was in high demand, especially the cheapest varieties imported from England, until the mid-18th century, when British merchants temporarily withdrew from the Ottoman market. Fez makers preferred red London fabric dyed with a vegetable dye known as root dye (Davis, 1967, pp. 109–113). Locally produced fabrics during that period included turkey red, a relatively dark shade that does not bleed after washing, which was in high demand among European customers. In addition, some of the Indian fabrics that fascinated wealthy Ottomans in the 1600s and 1700s were successfully imitated by local manufacturers from Aleppo to Ayntab in Northern Syria in the 18th century (Faroqhi, 2004, p. 25).

With its roots in the pre-Islamic Eastern Roman and Sassanid empires, Islamic dress codes also have parallels in medieval Europe, where the Church enforced similar but less stringent regulations for Jews and Muslims (Cohen, 2008, pp. 38–74). However, these regulations disappeared during the Age of Enlightenment, first in Western Europe and then gradually in Eastern Europe and Russia. In 1781, Emperor Josef II of the Habsburg Empire abolished the obligation for Jews to wear the yellow star (Elliot, 2004, p. 107). In the Ottoman Empire, the modernization process led to a gradual relaxation of dress restrictions. By the 20th century, modern dress had become prevalent, especially among non-Muslims in Istanbul, due to Ottoman modernization efforts encompassing many aspects of life.

The Dissolution of Dress Codes in the Ottoman Empire

As well as the primordial counter challenge to change, the circumstantial forces like the interaction of modernizing pressures with traditional organization of the Ottoman society impacted the negotiation of identity. These interactions disputed then existing social order and the markers of identity that kept it intact as the State started reforms targeted at modernization and centralization. Often at odds with the strongly ingrained customs of the *millet*s, modernizing initiatives aimed to produce a more homogeneous and secular public space. Adoption of Western dress forms among the Ottoman elite, for example, marked a change in identity that matched the more extensive socio-political transformations taking place throughout the Empire (Quataert, 1997, p. 409).

Nonetheless, not all *millet*s went through the same cycle of identity negotiation. Reflecting their own historical experiences and socio-political setting, different communities responded to modernization pressures in different ways. For example, the Rum or Greek Orthodox community negotiated their identity differently than the Armenian or Jewish groups given their close ties to the Phanariets and the Orthodox Church (The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica, 1998). The administrative duties and economic privileges of the Greeks let them negotiate modernization with a degree of autonomy that is unattainable for other *millet*s (Karpat, 1985, pp. 213–214). In contrast, other groups, such the Armenians and Jews, on the other hand, had different opportunities and barriers for adaptation. Their historical background, social level, and interactions with the Ottoman government affected their reactions to pressures of modernization. For these groups, negotiating their identity through clothes usually meant striking a careful balance between preserving customs and embracing new looks fit for contemporary setting (Masters, 2001, pp. 92–93).

Furthermore, the negotiation of identity took place at an individual level in addition to the communal one. Members of the *millet*s had to negotiate their own identities within the framework of social norms as well as external pressures. Often in this negotiation, one had to strike a balance between preserving customs and adjusting to modern reality. For instance, a young Armenian merchant in Istanbul might adopt Western business attire to appeal to European clients while adhering to traditional dress codes within his community to maintain social standing.

Social mobility in the Ottoman Empire was primarily facilitated through the state apparatus until the 18th century. The state apparatus was responsible for mediating social mobility, and until the mid-17th century, the expansion of the Empire provided significant opportunities for progress. Thousands of Christian peasant sons were appointed as administrators and Janissaries through *devşirme*, which led to the acquisition of wealth and social prestige. Similarly, poor Turkish nomads regularly became leaders of armies, administrators of provinces, or leaders of administrative units with full social and economic privileges. However, as territorial expansion slowed down, so did mobility through military channels (Morrison, 2024; Yapp & Shaw, 2024).

During the time when the Empire was completing a period of great social mobility and fluidity, Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent (1520-1566) enacted numerous regulations on tailoring. After this period, clothing laws remained mostly unchanged for more than 150 years, until 1720. During this time, there was little social mobility, and the state was established. However, from the early 18th century onwards, there was a steady stream of dress codes introduced. This was due to the emergence of new groups who challenged the economic, social and political power of ruling dynasties and their supporters. First, new groups of Muslim and non-Muslim merchants developed, thanks to increased international trade and a general increase in the circulation of commodities. Second, with the creation of the system of lifetime *iltizam* in the 1690s, the manorialists became a new and powerful source of political power, linked to the wealth of the state and the functioning of the state apparatus. These changes led to the status derived from wealth competing with the status gained from holding office (Quataert, 2005, pp. 144-148).

During the Tulip Age (1718-1730) in the Ottoman Empire, the new wealth was visible, and the court used competitive displays of consumption to maintain its power and prevent new rival groups from emerging. Sultan Ahmet III and his son-in-law, Grand Vizier Ibrahim Pasha, organized competitions in palace construction, festivities, and tulip cultivation to showcase their wealth. As international trade was just beginning to gain prominence in this period, the primary target audience was the wealthy estate owners. With the Tulip Age and

the rest of the 18th century, a series of dress codes emerged. These laws promoted a status quo that opposed the various forms of dress that were considered too extreme for morality, social discipline, and order. For example, in the 1720s, 1750s, and 1790s, laws were passed that opposed men's and women's clothing that were too tight, too revealing, too rich, too extravagant, or the wrong color. In the 1760s, merchants and artisans were criminalized for wearing ermine furs, which were reserved only for the sultan and his viziers. Similarly, in 1792, women's coats made with thin fabric were banned, and a few years earlier, non-Muslims were prohibited from wearing yellow shoes, a color permitted only for Muslims. This social change and mobilization caused concern for state officials and social groups whose privileged position was threatened. Thus, the state enacted a set of laws to protect its legitimacy and the loyalty of those who belonged to the old merchant circles and the civil service. Ottoman sharia registers show that there were some lawsuits for violations of these laws. However, social change and mobility had become so drastic and beyond the state's ability to control that in 1829, Sultan Mahmud II had to abolish the old social markers based on dress overnight. Instead, he introduced a series of new regulations that required all officials and civilians to wear the fez, which was the same headgear for everyone. Robes and slippers were replaced by redingotes and cloaks, trousers, and black leather boots. Jewelry, fur clothing, and ornaments were abandoned, and beards were shortened. The clergy was exempted from this law, but Ottoman women were ignored (Çiçek, 1996; Elliot, 2004, pp. 106–107; Lewis, 1993, p. 143; Quataert, 2005, p. 148; Soykan, 2000, p. 183).

1829 law meant that people were no longer required to wear clothing that indicated their identity. The law was a precursor to more sweeping edicts in 1839 and 1856 that aimed to ensure equality for all Ottoman subjects, regardless of their religious or group identity. Many people welcomed the disappearance of old markers, which had become strained and eventually collapsed due to increasing social change. Wealthy merchants, mostly non-Muslims, quickly adapted to the new attire, sometimes to avoid discrimination. However, other Ottoman subjects rejected the effort to create uniform clothing and instead created new social markers.

For example, Muslim and non-Muslim Ottoman workers at the bottom of the social hierarchy did not accept the fez (Zürcher, 2004, p. 112). This was not a reaction against equality between Muslims and non-Muslims. Instead, they were seeking solidarity by insisting on their identity as workers and not preserving class differences against a state that was attacking guild privilege (Quataert, 1993, p. 89). They saw the Janissaries as their protectors and were unhappy with the state abolishing economic practices that had long provided protection to workers (Faroqhi, 2000, p. 145). Most, if not all, Muslim and non-Muslim workers insisted on headdresses that identified them as a distinct group (İnalcık, 1994, p. 210).

In the 19th century Ottoman society, there was an increase in social fluidity between various professional and religious groups and ranks. This led to a diversity of dress in which wealthy Muslims and non-Muslims flaunted their new wealth, power, and social prominence in the latest fashions of extravagant dress. This was a way of mocking the 1829 law that sought to impose uniformity, modesty, and simplicity.

Women in the Ottoman Empire experimented with fashion in the private sphere of the home before moving out into the public sphere. In the 18th and early 19th centuries, Ottoman Muslim women wore shalwar and flowing, three-skirted house dresses at home. By the late 19th century, urban elite women switched to the new fashions of crinoline skirts, corsets for a slender waistline, and bun hairstyles at home. This new style eventually moved into the public sphere, where women took care to conceal their body contours with a long-

skirted veil that covered almost the entire body. Over time, this long-skirted veil became more and more transparent, resembling the coats of European women.

Fashion historians are divided along two lines when discussing the meaning of the Western dress adopted by Ottoman men and women. The first group argues that the adoption of Western dress and culture reflects westernization or a desire to become part of the West. The second group sees the adoption of Western fashion in a more complex way, not as an effort to integrate with Western society, but as part of a broader process of civilization that continued throughout the 19th century. Lace dresses or frock coats in the latest Parisian fashions were an attempt to mark social differentiation and modernity through dress, emphasizing being both part of the new rather than the old and superior to those in their own society who did not wear such dresses (Quataert, 2005, pp. 151-152).

Conclusion

The Ottoman Empire officially recognized Orthodox Rums, Armenians, and Jews as non-Muslim communities, establishing relations with them through a non-liberal communitarian multiculturalism model. To manage these communities, the Ottoman palace used the *millet* system, a non-territorial autonomy structure. For centuries, this system has applied the understanding of "visible religion" as a fundamental aspect of identity.

This article examines how dressing functioned as a means of religious classification and social control against the backdrop of the complex interaction between ethnic identities and social dynamics in the Ottoman Empire. The sultan's edicts, which imposed special clothing requirements for different religious groups, required subjects to reveal their religious affiliation through dressing. This obligation not only strengthened ethnic boundaries—in Barth's terminology—but also enabled the negotiation of identity within the religious community within a rigid socio-political structure. The Ottoman modernization process, which dates to the 18th century, influenced this negotiation by introducing new forms of dressing that challenged traditional norms. Thus, the process of identity construction based on primordial ties underwent changes due to circumstantial influences.

When we compare identity negotiation to clothing literature, we also see how visual markers, such as dressing, serve as both symbols of cultural heritage and tools for navigating social structures. For example, Welters and Lillethun (2011) suggest that clothing functions as a visual language that conveys complex messages about status, belonging, and differentiation. Welters (2011, pp. 27–30), who has extensively discussed the role of dressing in expressing and negotiating identity, argue that clothing is not only a reflection of ethnic identity but also a dynamic context through which individuals and communities negotiate their position in a broader socio-political context. She emphasized that dressing is a visual language instrument. In our case, the Ottoman Empire's *millet* system codified and institutionalized this visual language by mandating specific dress codes for different religious communities. These dress codes made religious and social identities instantly visible, strengthening boundaries between different groups and facilitating social control (Chagnon, 2013, p. 263). But the negotiation of identity through dressing was not static. Traditional dress codes began to dissolve as modernization efforts like the *Tanzimat* reforms revealed new socio-political dynamics. For example, the adoption of Western clothing styles by the Ottoman elite symbolized a shift towards modernity and adaptation to European cultural norms. This change was not merely an imitation of Western fashion but also a strategic negotiation of identity that allowed individuals to navigate the changing socio-political environment (Chrisman-Campbell, 2011, pp. 45–46). This exemplifies an ethno-

symbolic synthesis by going beyond primordialist and circumstantialist approaches within the framework of ethnicity theories.

In synthesizing these findings, it becomes apparent that the study of clothing and the millet system within the Ottoman Empire offers valuable insights into the broader themes of identity formation, religious diversity, and the role of material culture in mediating socio-political change. This examination contributes to our understanding of the Ottoman Empire's legacy, providing a nuanced perspective on the challenges of navigating religious diversity and modernity in a complex imperial context. This underscores the enduring significance of dressing as a medium for negotiating, expressing, and preserving communal identities, providing a rich avenue for future research into the intersections of fashion, religion, and identity across historical and cultural landscapes. This insight not only enriches the academic discourse on the Ottoman *millet* system and its implications for identity formation but also sheds light on the broader sociocultural dynamics of clothing as a form of non-verbal communication and social negotiation.

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Acknowledgments

This article is an expanded and refined version of the theoretical approach of the thesis titled "The Role of Clothing in Identity Construction in Multicultural Societies: Ottoman-Turkish Modernization." The article enhances the thesis by diversifying the data used and incorporating a more comprehensive theoretical framework.

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Disclosure statement

The author has declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. The author has received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Lectio Socialis
2024, VOL. 8, NO. 2, pp. 135-156

RESEARCH ARTICLE
DOI: 10.47478/lectio.1454452

Democratic rollback in West Africa: Coup contagion, sit-tight tyrants and best options for regional organizations

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ABSTRACT

Unconstitutional changes of government (UCG) have resurfaced in West Africa, undermining decades of democratic progress. This article examines the effectiveness of intervention strategies by regional organizations, specifically the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), in preventing democratic backsliding and mitigating military coups. Despite these organizations' efforts, their strategies, including diplomatic pressure, economic sanctions, and military threats, have often yielded limited success. The study investigates the strengths and weaknesses of these approaches, highlighting the inconsistency in sanctions application and the internal divisions within ECOWAS that hamper effective intervention. Through a comprehensive review of recent coups in Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Gabon, the study explores the broader political and economic factors contributing to instability, such as corruption, weak institutions, and socioeconomic challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings suggest that enhancing democratic institutions, promoting good governance, and enforcing strict term limits are crucial for long-term stability. This study aims to contribute to the development of more robust frameworks for safeguarding democracy in West Africa, offering recommendations for regional organizations, national governments, and international actors to address the challenges of democratic backsliding and coup contagion.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received: 29.03.2024
Revised: 14.05.2024
Accepted: 05.06.2024

KEYWORDS
democratic backsliding, coups d'état, regional organizations, social discontentment, Africa

Introduction

After independence from colonial powers in the late 1950s and early 1960s, African countries embraced a semblance of Western-style democracy before being ravaged by unconstitutional changes of government (UCG), which lasted till the 1990s. There followed a resurgence of democratic governance, which is currently threatened by the fallout from decades of authoritarian civilian regime, sit-tight leadership, and a creeping contagion of military coups. Consequently, Africa has been one of the world's regions most prone to coups since the majority of its states attained political independence (Baltoi, 2023), having experienced 220 attempted or successful coups in total since 1950, accounting for nearly half of all attempted or successful coups worldwide (Fleck, 2023). As shown in Figure 1, as of August 2023, that is, after the Gabon coup, 45 of the 54 countries that make up the African continent had experienced one or more coup attempts, with an average of four coup

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attempts per country, except for Sudan has experienced it seventeen times, including two in 2021 (Ani, 2021; Chin & Kirkpatrick, 2023).

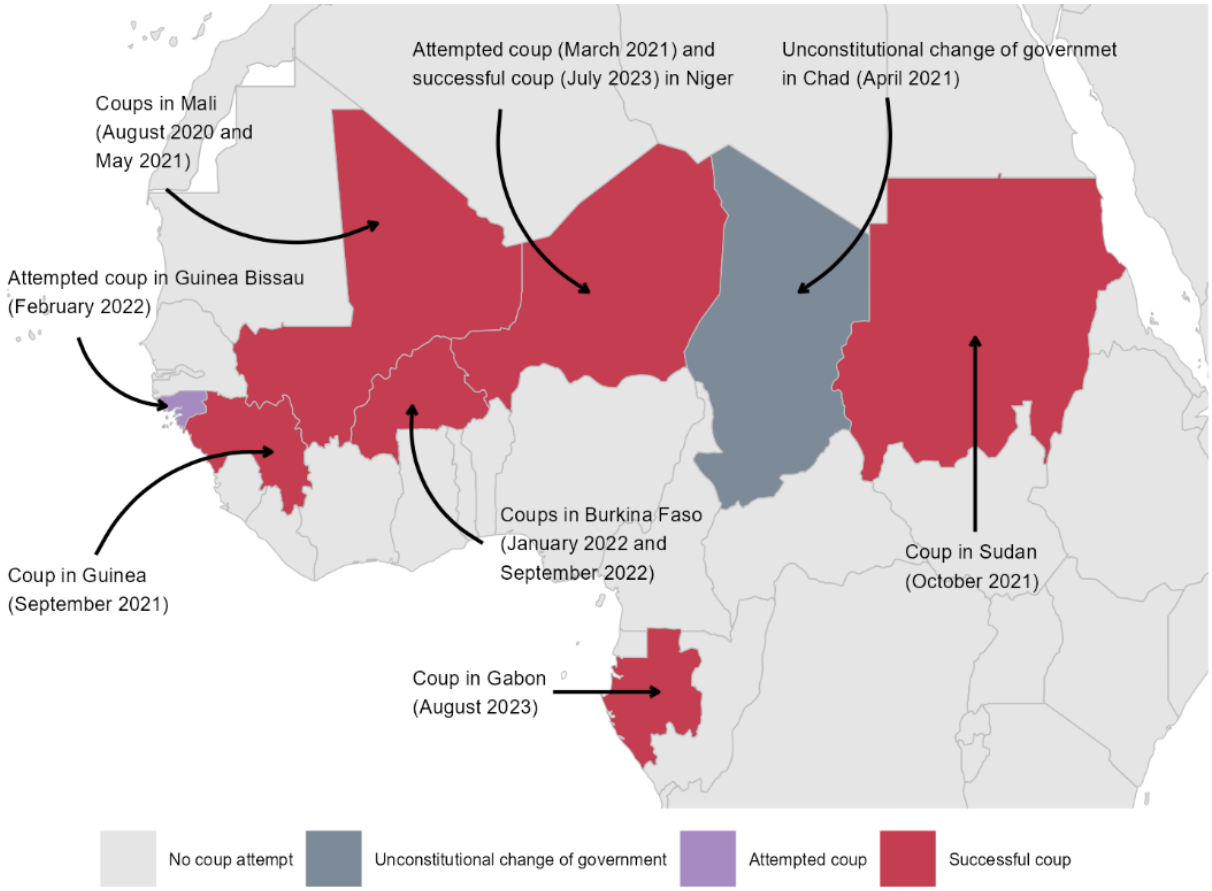

Figure 1. Coup d'etat in Africa since 2020.

Since 2020, amid worldwide threats to international stability and peace, there have been nine successful coups[1] and five coup d'état attempts[2]—two of which were "coups within coups" (Eziakonwa, 2023) in sub-Saharan Africa, more than at any time in two decades. These include Mali in August 2020 and May 2021, Chad in April 2021, Guinea in September 2021, Sudan in October 2021, Burkina Faso in January and September 2022, Niger in July 2023 and Gabon in August 2023. A decade before the current wave of coups, the continent had witnessed seven popular uprisings that brought about changes in government across Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, all in 2011, Burkina Faso in 2014, Zimbabwe in 2017, as well as Algeria and Sudan in 2019.

Several academics and political analysts (Souaré, 2009; Ani, 2021; Chin & Kirkpatrick, 2023; Campbell & Quinn, 2021; Siegle, 2021) posit that the wave of coups and military takeovers across the continent, along with other governance-related problems, is a setback for democracy with "widespread democratic backsliding" (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2023) now exceeding advancement. It equally points to the failure of regional organizations and the international community to find a viable political pathway to end the wave of coups. This succession of coups definitely impacts the sustenance of democracy, good governance,

[1] Powell and Thyne (2011, p. 252) conceptually define coups as "illegal and overt attempts by the military or other elites within the state apparatus to unseat the sitting executive." They operationally define a successful coup as one in which "the perpetrators seize and hold power for at least seven days."

[2] The affected countries include: Sudan (September 2021 and April 2023), Niger (March 2021), Sao Tome and Principe (November 2022) and Guinea-Bissau (February 2022).

and regional stability. Only nine African countries—Botswana, South Africa, Cabo Verde, Namibia, Tanzania, Eritrea, Malawi, South Sudan, and Mauritius—have staved off coup attempts since gaining independence.

It suffices that decades of progress toward stable governance have been undermined in West Africa by the troubling resurgence of military coups and democratic backsliding in recent years. Despite concerted efforts by regional organizations such as the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to uphold democratic norms and constitutional order, these interventions have often been met with limited success. The persistent occurrence of coups, alongside the entrenchment of authoritarian regimes, calls into question the effectiveness of current strategies employed by these organizations. This study aims to critically evaluate the intervention mechanisms of the AU and ECOWAS, assessing their impact on preventing democratic reversals and restoring stability in the region. By identifying the strengths and weaknesses of these approaches and exploring potential alternative strategies, this study seeks to contribute to developing more robust frameworks for safeguarding democracy and promoting good governance in West Africa.

The central argument of this paper is that the current intervention strategies employed by regional organizations such as the AU and ECOWAS are insufficient to prevent democratic backsliding and mitigate the impact of military coups in West Africa. The central hypothesis is that enhancing the robustness and consistency of these interventions, coupled with addressing the root causes of instability, such as corruption, weak institutions, and socio-economic challenges, will lead to more effective prevention of coups and stabilization of democratic governance in the region. In light of this, the article begins by examining the historical context of democratic transitions in West Africa and the subsequent emergence of democratic governance in the region. It explores the current state of democratic reversals and the extent to which African regional organizations (AU and ECOWAS) have responded to this trend. The article concludes by offering suggestions for future policy interventions and research agendas that can be implemented to address the phenomenon of military coup d'état in Africa. It emphasizes the necessity for expanded political engagement, sustained commitment to democratic principles and values, and enhanced governance systems to guarantee the steady advancement of African democracy.

In terms of methodology, this study employs a comprehensive literature review to evaluate the effectiveness of intervention strategies by regional organizations in West Africa. Data was derived from secondary sources like books, scholarly articles, media reports, monographs, institutional journals, and government publications. By analyzing recent case studies of coups in Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Gabon, the study examines the broader political and economic factors contributing to instability. The literature review method allows for an in-depth understanding of the historical context, current trends, and the roles of the AU and ECOWAS in mitigating democratic backsliding. Additionally, the study compares the approaches of these organizations to identify gaps and recommend improvements.

The trajectories of Africa's democratic reversals in two decades

Civilian supremacy over the military is routinely challenged in many praetorian states of Africa due to the armed forces' political interference (Matei, 2021). This explains why the immediate post-independence decade experienced democratic reversals in different African states. The most successful coups in Africa occurred during the Cold War rivalry between

the United States and the Soviet Union, which lasted from 1946 to 1991 (Duzor and Williamson, 2022). The continent's heyday for military takeovers recorded twenty-five successful coups in the 1970s (Munshi and Schipani, 2021). At the turn of the twenty-first century, however, there was a notion that the military was relinquishing its hegemony over African political matters due to the rise of democratization and the restoration of multiparty politics in various African countries. Before 2020, or a decade before the current wave of coups in Africa, there had been, on average, less than a successful coup annually (Thyne and Powell, 2019).

For nearly two decades, there has been a broad consensus among researchers (Brechenmacher and Carothers, 2014; Diamond, 2015; Freedom House, 2019; Papada *et al*., 2023) and public policy think tanks such as the Economist Intelligence Unit, Varieties of Democracy, Freedom House, Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance that there is a growing democratic decline across the globe. While it is established that the number of democracies across all regions of the globe is dropping and the number of autocracies is increasing, Africa, strangely, has the highest number of both democratizing (N=5) and autocratizing (N=12) countries (Papada *et al*., 2023). For instance, the 2022 Freedom House report (2023) reveals that Burkina Faso has the world's largest one-year score decline after experiencing two successive coups, which caused it to drop from "Partly Free" to "Not Free" status, whereas Kenya gained four points to have the region's largest one-year score improvement following its most transparent presidential election ever. In West Africa, only Ghana and Cabo Verde remain eligible to be classified as full-fledged democracies, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index 2020.

During the Cold War, when the "third wave" of democracy surged over most of Africa, expectations were high that Africans would start to experience the freedoms granted to residents of the former colonial powers (Campbell & Quinn, 2021). The frequency of military takeovers has drastically decreased since the end of the Cold War in 1991 (Elischer, 2023). In the early 1990s, almost all countries in the sub-Saharan Africa region had established multiparty electoral regimes and legalized political opposition, resulting in one of the most substantial expansions in democracy. By the end of that decade, however, the process of democratization seemed to have stagnated in most of these countries mainly because of governance crises, third-termism, and constitutional manipulation (Théroux-Bénoni and Kanté, 2023), given how real democratization was limited to fewer than a dozen countries (Arriola, Rakner and van de Walle, 2023). Additionally, many democratic governments metamorphosed into electoral autocracies or authoritarian regimes despite holding regular multiparty elections.

These authoritarian regimes ventured into "constitutional coups" to allow tenure elongation through the connivance and acquiescence of weak, rubber-stamp parliaments and a docile and complicit judiciary (The Punch, 2020). They also adopted legal restrictions on crucial civil and political rights (Rakner, 2019), such as shutting down social media platforms, repressing public protests (Akinyetun, 2022), manipulating the judiciary and the law, and ultimately entrenching bad governance in their countries. As a result, many African countries became a flourishing ground for unconstitutional transfers of power and sit-tight heads of state, many of them transmuting from known reformists or progressives—when they took over power—to full autocrats (Table 1).

Table 1. Failed, attempted, and successful coups around the world since 1950.

Region	Coup attempts	Successful	Failed
Africa	220	109	111
Latin America	146	70	76

East Asia	49	27	22
Middle East	44	21	23
Europe	17	8	9
South Asia	16	10	6
Global	492	245	247

Source: Thyne & Powell (2023).

According to statistics compiled by the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) and the Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa (EISA) (Zounmenou, 2020), twenty-five constitutional modifications aimed at favoring presidential third-term initiatives were sought between 2000 and 2020, out of which only seven failed. Unsurprisingly, Africa is home to "10 leaders who have ruled for over 20 years and two family dynasties that have been in power for more than 50 years" (The Punch, 2020; Siegle & Cook, 2021), as well as a considerable number of single party rulers and life presidents: Gnassingbe dynasty in Togo (since 1967), Bongo dynasty in Gabon (Since 1967-2023), Nguema Mbasogo of Equatorial Guinea (since 1979), Paul Biya of Cameroon (since 1982), Mswati III of Swaziland (since 1986), Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe (1987-2017), Blaise Campore of Burkina Faso (1987-2014), Yoweri Museveni of Uganda (since 1986), Idrissu Deby of Chad (1990-2021), Isaias Afwerki of Eritrea (since 1993), Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia (1995-2012), Denis Sassou Nguesso of the Republic of Congo (since 1997), Mohammed VI of Morocco (since 1999), Ismail Omar Guelleh of Djibouti (since 1999), and Paul Kagame (since 2000). This trend has hindered the entrenchment of a people-driven democracy on the continent.

Today, African states are left increasingly susceptible to illegitimate power grabs by military or executive leaders owing to perennial issues such as corruption and poor governance as well as the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic (Freedom House, 2023) even though the immediate triggers for coups are usually country-specific. According to the Mo Ibrahim Foundation (2023) report, over 60 percent of Africans reside in countries where participation, rights, and inclusion have deteriorated over the past ten years, and more than one-third reside in countries where the trend has worsened since 2017.

The immediate post-independence variables precipitating military takeover, such as nationalism, anti-oligarchism, desire to promote modernization and economic development, anti-colonialism, and the urge to protect the military institution from encroachment or opposition to a nationalist civilian regime, appear to have faded away and been replaced by other complex variables in the political ecosystem. The fact that coup leaders often overthrow unpopular leaders works to their advantage. In other instances, coups "from below" only signify the overthrow of an older generation by a younger generation of army commanders (Ford and Versi, 2022) as against coups "from above" where officers move against civilian elites and executive incumbents in political power struggles within authoritarian elite coalitions (Albrecht *et al*. 2021). However, one persistent narrative, which is reinforced by a substantial body of civil-military relations literature (Aslan, 2020), is that military coups d'état occur either as domestic affairs or as an apparent result of global factors: exogenous pressure from other domestic or international actors.

Curiously, the non-violence nature of the recent coups in West Africa stands in some contrast to the broader political landscape in the region, given that political violence, in the form of protracted conflicts by armed groups and violent extremists, has been prevalent for some years. It could also be connected to the magnitude of support that some of these coups seem to have received from the general public (Ndiloseh and Hudson, 2022) across the affected countries.

Governance failure-regime change nexus in the African political ecology

Growing armed conflict and threats from non-state actors, inter- and intra-state conflict, political repression, and human rights violations have all combined to destabilize several African states, derail the democratization process (undermining the legitimacy and capacity of democratic regimes), and exacerbate domestic instability in other countries (Perez, 2021). The rise of military regimes in the West African subregion has been linked to these variables (Al Jazeera, 2023), which often time result in the displacement of millions of people, the death of thousands, and the escalation of humanitarian crises in various parts of the continent.

Today, more Africans than at any other time in the previous two decades live in entirely or partially authoritarian countries, while many of them continue to experience varying degrees of internal conflict and violence. According to the Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2021), 75 percent of the African countries experiencing armed conflict have autocratic or semi-autocratic governments, while seven of the nine autocracies facing armed conflict have leaders who either came to power through a coup or extended their time in office by avoiding term limits. This trend has devastatingly negative effects on the political and institutional processes and outcomes since it hinders the promotion of sustainable development, democracy, and peace as well as contributes to excessive fragmentation and polarization of the polity.

Since the early 2000s, governments in different African subregions have experienced quadrupled levels of armed conflict, and they are being increasingly challenged with new forms of political violence. West Africa,[3] for instance, has been dealing with violent conflicts and civil unrest for decades. However, the two decades leading up to the new millennium offered increasingly severe and protracted hostilities that caused economic instability in several of the region's countries. Owing to the vast number of actors involved, dynamics in shifting alliances, and their underlying transnational movements, the geography of these conflicts is sometimes ambiguous (Gurría, 2020). History has shown that once coups become established in a country, they usually become easier to take place. The tendency, now evidenced in West Africa, has been studied and dubbed a "coup trap" (Africa Defense Forum, 2023) by scholars.

In 2014, the AU Peace and Security Council (PSC) affirmed that UCG originated from "deficiencies in governance." Like other world regions, there seems to be no more critical variable than governance in determining the level of peace and stability and the prospects for economic development in Africa. This is because "governance determines whether there are durable links between the state and the society it purports to govern" (Crocker, 2019). For example, despite efforts to avert volatile security challenges and UCG in West Africa, the region continues to experience recurrent conflicts. Numerous deeply ingrained and interconnected causative factors have been linked to these conflicts, including environmental crises, illicit maritime activities, fake news (Al Jazeera, 2023), poor governance, unstructured military governance, the proliferation of small arms, mismanagement of diversity, political dysfunctionality, corruption (Keili 2008; Bourkhars, 2013), and a lack of political will on the part of West African governments to carry out signed

[3] Omar Touray, the head of the ECOWAS Commission, told the United Nations in July 2023 that there had been 1,800 "terrorist attacks" in West Africa in just the first half of 2023, resulting in 4,600 fatalities and the displacement of 4.5 million people.

peace agreements and resolutions (Ejibunu, 2007) or to address human rights concerns and create transparent and accountable governance institutions. As rightly posited by Ani (2021):

> Uprisings are reflective of a new trend of democratic re-negotiation where ordinary populations are resolute against governance systems that fail to provide socio-economic dividends to their citizens.

At its core, effective governance is about establishing that a country's citizens are valued. Governments accomplish this by providing essential services like clean water, infrastructure, health care, and education and using accountable security forces that protect civilians while upholding human rights (USIP, 2022). This principle is contradicted by the political class (military and civil) in many African countries, which consistently exhibits a lack of organizational capacity in the formulation and implementation of public policies that have the potential to enhance the living standards of their citizens. A brief analysis of these factors arising from governance failures will be featured here, which are common denominators in countries affected by military coups.

Firstly, social discontent is widespread in these countries, and the military class capitalizes on it to overthrow its civilian counterpart. While there is a steady decline in coup attempts globally, its resurgence in sub-Saharan Africa points to the failure of democracy to deliver on development, given that "coups often occur amid public resentment against the regime" and "coups are most likely to overthrow authoritarian leaders" (Thyne & Powell, 2019). States have failed to create functioning democracies capable of delivering basic public services to their citizens or meeting people's fundamental security and means of subsistence (Carson, 2023). Considering the level of popular support for the putschists in the affected countries, especially at the local level, the poor quality of democracy and governance in Africa, which disregards accountability, transparency, responsiveness, and civic responsibility, has further been established. As seen in West Africa, putschists have taken advantage of these democratic shortcomings (see Kuwali, 2022) to position themselves as the savior and grab power.

Secondly, most coup leaders have often alluded to prevalent corrupt practices in their countries as part of the motivation for their takeover. The threat of corruption in government and governance, which has impeded growth and development in the region, is also provoking multiple military coups against democratically elected governments in various African countries. In the 2022 Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (2023) analysis of regional trends, sub-Saharan Africa was rated as the most corrupt region in the world, with the majority of the countries (precisely 44 out of 49) falling below the midpoint of the CPI scale of 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean). At a time when the impacts of the pandemic and increasing costs of living are telling on the people, high levels of corruption are fueling more tension and conflict in sub-Saharan Africa (Transparency International, 2023). In turn, countries in conflict become more corrupt because it is a vicious cycle where corruption and conflict exacerbate each other.

Thirdly, the predominant presence of weak institutions is connected with democratic backsliding in Africa (Akinyetun, 2022). Africa is represented by fifteen of the top twenty countries on the Fund for Peace's index of fragile states for 2021 (FFP, 2021). Twelve of them have experienced at least one successful coup in the past. Many African countries continue to struggle to expand and institutionalize their democracies and effectively deal with abuse of executive power and human rights violations. Human rights, the rule of law, and citizen engagement in government are unquestionably important democratic ideals that may be protected by a strong institution, promoting good governance (Mbaku, 2020). In countries

with weak institutions, it is difficult to meet any of these values, including the ability to prevent or resolve conflict, prevent state capture, guarantee the provision of public services, and fight corruption.

Fourthly, coups are increasingly restricted to the world's poorest countries, and Africa seems to contain many circumstances traditionally linked with coups (Powell, 2021). Many of the most prevalent coup-precipitating variables continue to exist in the Sahel region, where most recent coups have occurred. Burkina Faso, Gabon, Guinea, Mali, Niger, and Chad all had GDPs of less than $22 billion in 2022, according to a World Bank projection (2022), while Sudan had a GDP of $52 billion. Despite Gabon's abundant natural oil, manganese, and timber resources, its citizens experience widespread poverty (Archibald and Murray, 2023). Meanwhile, Niger is one of the world's poorest and least developed countries (CRS, 2023). In addition to the "combined effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate crisis, and inadequate access to food and energy" (The Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2023), West Africa's advancement in economic fundamentals and human development is constrained by an increasingly tense security environment.

Interventions by regional organizations and perceived gaps

Concerned about the instability and contagion of coups in recent years, the ECOWAS heads of state announced, in December 2022, the establishment of a regional peacekeeping force to restore security and constitutional order in member states (Onuah, 2022; Obiezu, 2022). In the wake of the July 2023 coup in Niger, which generated a heightened international response, the 15-nation regional bloc threatened to use force to put down the coup in Niger after giving a seven-day ultimatum to the putschists to reinstate the constitution and democratic institutions (The Guardian, 2023). This was in addition to issuing travel sanctions, imposing a strict economic sanctions campaign, freezing the country's regional central bank assets, and suspending its transactions with neighboring countries (Sharp, 2023). For ECOWAS, apart from the possibility of motivating other armed forces in West Africa to act unconstitutionally, the coup in Niger was considered an existential threat to the economic, security, and political stability of the entire Sahel region, as well as Coastal West Africa.

A month after a similar event in Niger, the military overthrow of Gabon's democratic government sparked alarm and concerns around the world. As expected, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU) promptly condemned the coup in communiqués. ECOWAS convened two extraordinary summits to deliberate on appropriate responses and strategies in accordance with its zero-tolerance stance towards coups. Threatening military intervention, ECOWAS member states resolved to activate the organization's standby force at a meeting in August 2023. Suffice it to note that military action is often regarded as the last resort. Since the 1990s, for instance, ECOWAS has deployed peacekeeping troops in Sierra Leone (1997), Liberia (1990, 2003), Guinea-Bissau (1999), Ivory Coast (2003), Mali (2013) and the Gambia (2017). While some of these missions failed to maintain lasting cease-fires, others were able to establish peace agreements (Sharp, 2023).

While the region battled with devastating civil wars and military coups that undermined democratic development in the 1990s, ECOWAS member states transformed their community into a guardian of democratic norms despite the organization's original intent to be an intergovernmental economic union (Ronceray, 2023). Although ECOWAS has consistently faced criticism for its failure to take a firm stand against previous military

takeovers (Adeoye, 2023) as part of its broader mission to support and protect the subregion, its response has often taken the same approach- sanctions and the threat of military action. These adopted measures and sanctions- border closure, imposition of trade embargo, or freeze of assets- are unevenly applied[4] to the affected countries based on the peculiarity of each case. In almost all the cases, however, the UN, African Union, and ECOWAS have always condemned such unconstitutional takeover of democratic governments, demanded an immediate return to civilian rule, or agreed to transition to civil rule timeframes.

Over time, these regional bodies have developed a number of binding instruments relating to development, conflict prevention, governance, and peace, emphasizing the conditions considered threats to regional peace and security. The position of the AU and ECOWAS is grounded in elaborate guidelines and other regional protocols in the defense of constitutional order, insisting "on the intrinsic relationship between security and political good governance" (N'Diaye, Saine, and Houngnikpo, 2005) and committing state parties to higher forms of democratic governance (Hengari, 2017). For instance, the AU's normative framework on UCG (Lomé Declaration of 2000), which specifically aimed at protecting the authority of civilian political institutions from military intervention or any form of authoritarian regimes, sternly frowns at the UCG in the form of:

> A military coup against a democratically elected government; mercenary intervention to replace a democratically elected government; replacing a democratically elected government by dissident armed groups and rebel movements; or refusal of an outgoing government to relinquish power following defeat in free, fair, and regular elections. (Handy, Akum & Djilo, 2020)

In the event of UCG, the following measures are to be enforced: condemnation of the act and a warning to the perpetrators; a six-month period for the restoration of constitutional order and suspension from participation in the AU's activities; and limited and targeted sanctions if constitutional order is restored after six months (Dersso, 2016). The 2007 Addis Ababa Charter, however, expanded the definition of instances that constitute UCG to include the issue of retaining power unconstitutionally; that is, "any amendment or revision of the constitution or legal instruments, which is an infringement on the principles of democratic change of government" (Article 23(5). It also stipulated further measures, which include preventing perpetrators from participating in elections held to restore the democratic order and imposing sanctions on any AU member state found to have encouraged or facilitated an UCG in another state.

For ECOWAS, the Niger case is the first time the organization has faced a division of some sort among its member states, and it poses a severe challenge to its regional authority as the stage seems set for a potential break-up of the West African bloc. Some member states' vehement public opposition to ECOWAS' stance further questioned the bloc's influence. In the heat of the Niger crisis, the military regimes in neighboring Guinea, Mali, and Burkina Faso pledged their support to the new regime. Specifically, they warned, "that any military intervention against Niger would be tantamount to a declaration of war against Burkina Faso and Mali" (APA News, 2023).

That these regimes are mainly led by mid-level officers from the ranks of their countries' elite forces[5] further confirms the guardianship dilemma hypothesized in a substantial body

[4] In some instances, too, sanctions imposed against a member state impacted by unconstitutional changes of government are withdrawn prior to the holding of elections and the formation of a new administration.

[5] Colonels in charge of presidential guards or special forces units have led several of the recent military coups. Some of these young officers have become used to their privileged placement

of work (Feaver, 1999; Svolik, 2012; McMahon & Slantchev, 2015): political elites are persuaded that the military forces need to be powerful enough to counteract foreign threats to the government and major upheavals within. Ironically, the same tools employed to avert threats from outside forces may be utilized to topple the government. These countries, earlier suspended from ECOWAS decision-making bodies,[6] also promised to take "self-defense measures in support of the forces, armies, and people of Niger" (Kulkarni, 2023) just as clandestine geopolitical contestation among imperialists and rival global powers with strategic interests in West and Central Africa became more palpable[7]. Put differently, the dynamics of coups and post-coup alignments in these regions are continuously shaped by Russia's rising influence, growing anti-French sentiment, and the NATO factor.

Political upheaval in West Africa's Sahel region is thus accompanied by escalating diplomatic tensions with former colonial power- France- over the extent of its regional counterterrorism activities, among other concerns (CRS, 2023). Given how the international community has often reacted hesitantly or ambivalently to these countries' contentious elections, pervasive corrupt practices, and term limits, the external dimension appears to be more about strategic competition among Western powers than democracy promotion. As Siegle (2023) aptly captured, most often, unaccountable African governments are extremely susceptible to manipulation by foreign authoritarian entities, as recent events demonstrated at a significant cost to citizen sovereignty.

Despite their current political initiatives, practical experience, and robust political frameworks, regional organizations like the African Union and ECOWAS encounter significant challenges in handling threats to peace and security that impact their member states, institutions, and civil society organizations. ECOWAS, for instance, has continually struggled to contain a democratic backslide in West Africa, and previous appeals to the military juntas in Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Mali to return political power to democratic government were not headed. Although ECOWAS has employed military action to restore constitutional order in the case of The Gambia in 2017 when Yahya Jammeh refused to leave office after losing an election (Akinpelu, 2023), a military intervention in Niger or Gabon by ECOWAS was considered unfeasible to execute for logistical, political, strategic, and legal reasons (Thompson, 2023), especially with the risk of escalating into a broader regional conflict and exacerbating the deteriorating security situation in West Africa. Already, the early pledges of the coup leaders to restore an atmosphere of stability to these West African countries are frequently derailed by shrewd political maneuvering as they alternately coopt and intimidate civilian politicians while playing hardball with the regional bloc at the same time (Thurston, 2022).

The inconsistencies between the African Union (especially the lack of transparency in the application of the AU's UCG norm) and ECOWAS in the implementation and

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in the center of power and become politicized having regularly received specialised training, equipment, and salaries to boost their performance.

[6] Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso jointly declared on January 28, 2024, that they would be quitting ECOWAS "without delay." The three countries claimed that in an attempt to overturn the coups in each country, ECOWAS was enforcing "illegitimate, inhumane, and irresponsible" sanctions.

[7] Coup leaders are more likely to obtain support and protection from the international community rather than criticism and penalties when their countries are strategically significant or have close ties to non-Western autocracies. Also, coups are predominantly concentrated in a small number of the world's economically poorest countries, possibly giving the international community a considerable impact on the outcome of a coup.

enforcement framework, particularly the use of appeals, sanctions, or troop deployments in response to coups in the region, have also been pointed out. While ECOWAS failed to criticize the constitutional coups in Guinea and Cote d'Ivoire publicly, the AU could not suspend Chad after an effective military takeover in the country and has remained largely silent on Tunisia despite anti-democratic developments in the country (Abebe, 2022). The military operations of the ECOWAS have not attempted to reestablish law and order in many isolated parts of the Sahel, nor have they tackled the jihadist insurgencies that thrive in the region (Ronceray, 2023). The ECOWAS has also been "less effective in preventing third-term bids by incumbents" (Campbell & Quinn, 2021), and it appears more concerned with safeguarding incumbents than upholding democratic principles (Zounmenou, 2020), while the position of the African Union regarding popular uprisings and manipulation of constitutional term limits does not categorize these events as UCG.

ECOWAS has, however, been negotiating democratic transition schedules with military juntas in the affected countries, albeit with varying degrees of success. With compromises reached between the regional bloc and Niger's neighbors in the Sahel region and amid international pressure, military leaders in all these countries have pledged to design and implement transitions back to civilian democracy. However, despite global criticism of the coups and the enforcement of sanctions by regional and international organizations, these pledges/diplomatic agreements are plagued with difficulties, with election dates being repeatedly pushed back (Akinpelu, 2023). For example, the military junta in Mali has repeatedly ignored timetables to transition to a legitimate civilian authority, and it has employed fear, harassment, and intimidation to restrict civic space and press freedom (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2023). In Chad, Mahamat Déby promised to lead a transition to an elected government within 18 months following the death of his father in 2021, but the military-led hereditary succession shunned the deadline of October 20, 2022 (Eizenga, 2022). Both Niger and Gabon have each proposed a three-year transition program in the wake of global pressure.

The limitations of emphasized regular elections and term limits

In many African countries that have experienced UCG, the quality of electoral processes and disregard for term limits by incumbents to allow them to stay in power have always been recurrent trigger points. With a lack of confidence in the general electoral system and citizens' widespread public disaffection with democratically elected leaders, a leeway has often been created for the military segment to "maneuver and claim their role in this political game" (Sakor *et al*., 2021). Even though modern military coups are always accompanied by the pledge of a swift return to elections, the intervention of the armed forces in these countries' politics usually undermines the democratic principle that government power must be allocated and transferred through regular, free, and fair electoral contests. Based on both historical and contemporary analysis, a few instances indicate that such transition schedules and promises to revert to civil rule are made in response to pressure or merely to appease regional or international powers.

Most often, citizens' agitation for regime change is precipitated by disagreements over manipulated elections by the governing elite while "seemingly adhering to formal democratic processes" (Ani, 2021). However, regular elections and adherence to term limits have not proven an effective antidote to misgovernance and its attendant disenchantment, clamor for regime change, or uprisings in the polity, thereby threatening a reversal of the democratization process in sub-Saharan Africa. As a matter of fact, other potent conditions

precipitating fertile grounds for military coups in Africa, six decades after political independence, include other structural deficits in the affected countries such as the youth bulge, poor human development indicators, failed security sector reform and mounting socio-economic pressure play a considerable role (Théroux-Bénoni & Kanté, 2023) in addition to other variables earlier highlighted in this paper.

As various researchers continue to explore the possibility of military coups to begin or facilitate democratization processes in the last decade, it is hypothesized that juntas must usher in competitive elections and hand over to democratically elected leaders within a specific period (Elischer & Lawrance, 2022). Sometimes, these juntas make provisions for civilian engagement in the transition government while outlining and demonstrating their commitment to election calendars and multiparty elections. The involvement of politicians and civilian bureaucrats in the composition of military regimes has, however, questioned the general definition of such regimes as being dominated by the military. A hybrid government with continuing military influence often reinforces skepticism in the democracy movement.

Though elections help citizens build effective democratic institutions and provide a tool for preserving the government through peaceful periodic replacement of recalcitrant and underperforming political elites (Mbaku, 2020), manipulated elections, as seen all too frequently in Africa, do not guarantee this lofty goal, having failed to establish a strong record of peaceful political competition and democratic power transfers. In certain countries, which Brian Klaas and Nic Cheeseman (2018) describe as "counterfeit democracies" amidst the varied landscape of democratic processes, elections are held regularly. However, opposition parties have no realistic possibility of unseating the ruling party, and over time, civil liberties have either stagnated or significantly degraded. To this end, Cheeseman (2021) submits that there is as much variation in the quality of democracy in Africa as in any other region of the world:

> Africa features a small number of high-quality democracies and some highly authoritarian regimes, while most countries have political systems that fall somewhere in between – combining elements of democracy with elements of autocracy.

The region appears to have become a reference point for the hypothesis that elections alone would not guarantee accountable leadership where institutions are weak. This further explains why the African Union and ECOWAS should never allow the magnitude of elections with doubtful credibility to undermine the effectiveness of their anti-coup position and policy. The attention of the international community and regional organizations should extend beyond the negotiations around election calendars or acceptance of a comprehensive transition agreement, and it should also cover the critical period of overseeing democratic transitions that can guarantee credible elections. For the African region, where there are relatively weak independent democratic institutions, term limits, which form part of a reform effort started in the 1990s (Siegle & Cook, 2021), are considered an exceedingly significant component of checks and balances. However, three decades later, term limits, when institutionalized, have neither remedied the legacy of excessive executive power nor prevented unconstitutional coups. The provision of presidential term limits in the constitution is not an end (Bakare, 2021). Instead, it is a way to guarantee an orderly and peaceful leadership transition while preserving democratic ideals and stability.

Reversing the trend of military takeovers in West Africa

Some academics (Harkness, 2022; Santamaria, 2022) contend that Africa may experience more military takeovers because coups only exacerbate conditions favorable to coups—political instability and poor economic growth—and that countries with a more recent history of coups are more susceptible to coups as evidenced by the most recent wave of coups in West and Central Africa. Thus, in order to enhance peace, security, and stability or avert UCG in Africa, the AU and other sub-regional bodies, especially ECOWAS, must genuinely promote and protect constitutionalism, democracy, and inclusive governance among member-states. Kuwali (2022) proposes three essential steps for halting coups: first, promote democracy and constitutionalism while discouraging UCG; second, Africa needs to enhance governance by building stronger social contracts between citizens and the public; and third, bolstering the security sector governance to improve civilian-military trust.

Building on his proposal, this article strongly recommends that the AU's instruments concerning these thematic areas should be monitored by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) and ensure their effective implementation by member states. It is sufficient to state that before possible implementation, all AU instruments must be approved and incorporated into national legislation. African Union and ECOWAS must be proactive in preventing political turmoil, humanitarian disaster, and unconstitutional seizures of power on the continent in any form.

Evidence from extant literature on state fragility and military takeovers suggests that future coup attempts would not be averted by merely denouncing the phenomenon or imposing penalties without fundamentally addressing the egregious failure of governance by those who exploit the system to achieve power (Ford & Versi, 2022). Even if they are well-targeted, sanctions can be a harsh tool that harms the well-being of common people in the affected country (Brack, 2022). Over the years, the Economist Intelligence Unit and the Fund for Peace, among other international development organizations and think tanks (See Aina & Nyei, 2022), have warned that Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Mali's extreme security and governance challenges could make them particularly vulnerable to instability.

Given the substantial backing from the civilian population, it may be deduced that people in these countries still regard the military as a viable option to the group of unscrupulous political elites who have been holding them captive in poverty and misery. Though a few studies (Marinov & Goemans, 2014; Thyne & Powell, 2014; Geddes *et al*., 2014) indicate that coups against authoritarian governments may be beneficial to the people and improve the state's democratic chances, the danger, however, is that such widespread support for or recognition of military coups "normalizes these extralegal seizures of power" (Siegle and Eizenga, 2021). The paradox lies in the fact that people's expectations for political stability, economic growth, and good governance are rarely fulfilled by African military or authoritarian regimes. Other than Rwanda,[8] which stands out as a rare exception, no autocratic regimes or alternative forms of government have outperformed their democratic counterparts on the continent.

[8] Although elections are peacefully conducted in Rwandan model of democracy, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), led by President Paul Kagame, has ruled the country since 1994. The government has a long history of repressing its political opponents, and members of opposition parties face the threat of disappearance, arbitrary arrest and detention, and assassination (Freedom House, 2023). It has also suppressed political dissent through pervasive surveillance, intimidation, torture, and renditions or suspected assassinations of exiled dissidents. Based on constitutional amendment, Kagame could be in power until 2034.

Building more robust democratic institutions that can withstand political leaders' manipulation is, therefore, necessary to find a solution to instability and insecurity, as opposed to authoritarian ones that exclude people and work against their desires (Mbulle-Nziege & Cheeseman, 2022). The extension of term limits by African leaders who make arbitrary constitutional amendments should not be encouraged by the African Union, ECOWAS, other regional organizations, and the larger democracy-supporting international community. Although there are either unapproved proposals or nonbinding resolutions by African regional bodies to prohibit the extension of presidential rule beyond two terms, a widely acknowledged model of presidential mandate restricted to two terms (Kuwali, 2022) should be implemented across the continent.

In light of this, the AU must be perceived as promoting independent institutions such as the media, electoral bodies, national human rights commissions, and civil society and organizations, as well as strengthening the independent functioning of constitutionally constituted democracy and the rule of law (Amani Africa Media, 2022). As is standard procedure in the EU, strict standards must be put in place for countries desiring to join or remain in the AU, placing particular emphasis on robust institutions that uphold human rights, respect for and protection of minorities, the rule of law, and democracy as such prerequisites (The Punch, 2020). For instance, since Türkiye applied to join the EU in 1987, its inability to satisfy these requirements, particularly its dismal record on human rights, has halted that ambition. The African Union must begin by demonizing leaders who strive to remain in power forever rather than celebrating them. As has been the case with Presidents Alpha Condé of Chad, Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, Teodoro Mbasogo of Equatorial Guinea, and Paul Kagame of Rwanda, the AU must halt the habit of choosing sit-tight dictators who abuse human rights as its chairman.

For ECOWAS, robust enforcement measures and efficient implementation and protection of its normative frameworks and efforts are essential, particularly in relation to the sanction regime (Bakare, 2021). For example, the suspension of electoral support should be firmly applied to those who engage in presidential term extension, as well as non-recognition of governments that emerge from such elections. The recent wave of coups in the West African sub-region underscores the necessity to revise the democratic governance framework within ECOWAS because most of the reforms introduced since 2015 appear to have distanced the citizenry from the political elite (Olukoshi, 2018). In light of this, political reforms should primarily be carried out in accordance with democratic principles while maintaining the strictest possible observance of fundamental human rights, accountability, and sustainability.

Conclusion

The rise of power-hungry armies, violent conflicts, autocratic leaders, as well as intermittent political instability in West Africa continues to threaten the subregion's hard-won democratic gains since the early 1990s (Siegle & Eizenga, 2021; Akinyetun, 2022). Over the years, military interventions have often succeeded in removing ineffectual civilian governments and reducing the intensity of violence in the short term by destroying the bases of violent organizations. However, they still lack the public credibility and capacity to achieve good governance. Rather, coup perpetrators typically depose dictators to install new ones (Vasquez & Powell, 2021). In this context, this paper provides valuable insights into the complex dynamics of democratic backsliding and coup contagion in West Africa,

shedding light on the role of regional organizations in addressing these challenges and the necessity for democracy scholars to explore more workable frameworks in this regard.

Given the conspicuous absence of a social contract between the state (the military juntas) and society (the disenchanted citizenry), many African countries have persistently endured deep-seated vulnerabilities that increase the risk of coups such as inequality, mass unemployment, multifaceted poverty, political corruption, and chronic insecurity. It is, therefore, logical to concede that democracy has greater prospects of restoring social contract with the people and establishing the ecological balances that are essential to both the survival of fundamental rights and human existence in the twenty-first century. It is also anticipated that the peculiarities of African governance deficits and other existential threats will be addressed frontally within the ambient of democratic principles and practice as well as through short and long-term commitments. A democracy must also offer responsible, inclusive governance that enhances the well-being of its citizens (Doss, 2020), and it must constantly preserve the political space to accommodate distinct viewpoints in the context of a participatory discourse.

It is established that "Africa's recent military juntas have not been reformist" (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2023) despite the fact that coup leaders in the cases cited in this article all touted real or imagined security and development concerns to justify their actions. Military coups in Africa are carried out for self-serving purposes, as evidenced by increased military budgets and the acquisition of cutting-edge military hardware for organizational security. Ultimately, this deflates the expectations of citizens who envision social, economic, and security improvements following regime change. It is common knowledge that regional African organizations, particularly the AU and ECOWAS, have been vociferous in their opposition to the spread of military coups across the continent. Despite the challenges, regional organizations like the AU and ECOWAS have the potential to play a significant role in halting the spread of military coups in West Africa. Future research should focus on identifying the most effective strategies for long-term stability and democratic governance in the region. By addressing the root causes of instability and enhancing the robustness of interventions, it is possible to safeguard democratic gains and promote good governance in West Africa.

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Disclosure statement

The author has declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. The author has received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.