

Al-Monitor: You couldn't complete your university education because of the headscarf ban, and took the issue to the European Court of Human Rights. But now you enrolled in Bogazici University and started taking courses on Nov. 18. How is it going? Are you happy with it?

Gul: Education is a lifelong process. I believe people can and should improve themselves at every age and in any circumstances.

I was really interested when I heard that Bogazici University, one of Turkey's most prestigious universities, had launched a Second Spring Academy as part of activities marking its 150th anniversary. I'd been thinking of joining such a program for a while. I took the psychology and arts modules first and was really very satisfied. I'm now taking a module called "Turkish politics overview." It's quite interesting to take a course covering events that one has personally witnessed.

Universities are places where free thinking flourishes and develops. In Turkey, however, universities were until recently associated with prohibitions. Many people like me could not complete their studies because of those prohibitions. Thankfully, Turkey has left those days behind. Today, a free atmosphere prevails in our universities. But, unfortunately, all those lost generations, wasted opportunities and suffering cannot be made up for. I hope we never go back again from this atmosphere of freedom and democracy.

Al-Monitor: You have a passion for arts. And you did a lot for Cankaya Palace — you got major artifacts restored. The fine dinners at the palace, the elegant presentation of dishes acquired a fame of their own. Are you going to keep up similar activities, though maybe in a different form?

Gul: Presidents' wives have their own responsibilities and duties. I wouldn't be exaggerating if I said that during my husband's term as president from 2007 to 2014, I worked day and night to improve the condition of the palace and make it worthy of representing the presidency in every sense. This is achieved only with personal commitment and persistence. And I did commit myself with real devotion.

Gul speaks at a luncheon for spouses of ambassadors serving in Turkey at Cankaya Palace in Ankara, January 2013. (Courtesy of Hayrunnisa Gul)

I'd like to underline that in everything we did, we paid great attention to systematize and institutionalize things, to raise skilled people and leave a legacy behind. To be frank, many times we went through very lengthy, arduous work and often had to experiment and discover. Hence, we wished to spare our successors the same hardships and let them benefit from our experience. I'll continue to use this experience in the field of arts and culture for the public good.

Al-Monitor: We know that being Turkey's first veiled first lady was not easy, especially in the initial years. What did you go through during that period?

Gul: Even before the presidency, I was actually the first veiled wife to actively take part in state protocol back in 1996, when my husband became a state minister. The late Nermin Erbakan, the wife of the then-prime minister, the late Necmettin Erbakan, also wore the headscarf, but she preferred to stay back. I remember we would host most foreign delegations on the prime minister's behalf. And starting from 2002, as the wife of the prime minister first, then of the foreign minister and finally president, I tried to meticulously fulfill my duties and responsibilities, despite all the obstacles I faced.

You would recall that when Mr. Gul became a candidate for the presidency, one of the most contentious issues was my headscarf. It was difficult for some parts of the population to accept a veiled first lady at the time. And when my husband was elected, this resistance did not disappear overnight, of course. Practices unprecedented in state traditions were put in place. It was quite a difficult and tiring period for us, and also resulted in unseemly scenes for the country. In time, however, things began to normalize as the people got to know us and saw the right things we did, or our reactions to events.

Al-Monitor: You toiled for Cankaya Palace from the moment you set foot there to the moment you left. You worked also on many social responsibility projects. One of your dreams was to set up a modern library in Cankaya Palace. Are there any plans or possibilities for realizing this idea elsewhere?

Gul: The social responsibility projects hold a special place for me, of course. We carried out a number of very successful projects, which received praise both at home and abroad. Almost all projects were completed with great results that exceeded expectations.

Gul stands with US First Lady Michelle Obama at the Gary Comer Youth Center in Chicago, May 2012. (Courtesy of Hayrunnisa Gul)

When it comes to the library, it's something I do regret I could not realize. I so wanted to equip Cankaya Palace with a modern library. All the planning and the project were ready, but could not be started for certain reasons. Hopefully, we'll make this dream come true in Kayseri [the Guls' hometown], where work is underway for a library and a museum. During my husband's term, a regulation was instituted to set up museums and libraries to honor former presidents, similar to examples in other countries. In this context, the Abdullah Gul Library and Museum are being established in Kayseri now. It will be the first of its kind in Turkey.

Al-Monitor: Let's talk a bit about women now. In the Global Gender Gap Report by the World Economic Forum, Turkey ranks 125th among 142 countries. In terms of economic participation and opportunity, inequality in Turkey always turns out among the worst in areas such as women's participation in the workforce, equal wages for work and total income equality. What do you think on this issue?

Gul: We have to acknowledge that significant progress has been achieved over the past two decades for the empowerment of women in Turkey. The schooling rate of girls has

significantly increased, with support and incentives from both the state and civic society groups. In the business community, we see many successful businesswomen in various sectors. Many of our conglomerates of global caliber are run by female bosses and managers. The number of working and productive women keeps increasing. Many women, who used to toil at home lacking opportunities, are today setting up their own businesses with microloans and support from the business development centers. We have many accomplished women in all realms — university scholars, scientists, jurists, diplomats, politicians, doctors and teachers. But is the current level of progress enough? Certainly not.

Like many other countries, we still have a long and difficult way to go in terms of women's empowerment. That's a fact. Despite all the measures taken, women still lack adequate access to educational opportunities. And when women are deprived of education, it's unrealistic to expect them to participate equally in working life or play an influential role in decision-making in politics and the bureaucracy.

But on this issue, too, I believe in women's strength. For years, I've been telling families — especially mothers, the pillars of families — the following: “Educate your children, especially your daughters. A good education is the most precious inheritance you'll leave them. Only with education can you prepare them for life and empower them against the hardships they'll face. By depriving your daughters of education, you leave them vulnerable to all sorts of lifelong exploitation and abuse. Empower them with education.”

Al-Monitor: The brutal murder of university student Ozgecan Aslan sparked a nationwide outcry. How do you view such horrible incidents? There is a perception that the country is becoming more and more violent, that violence is becoming commonplace.

Gul: We were all horrified. We probably suffered a social trauma in the face of such savagery. May God give her family patience. I called her mother to convey my condolences. They are really a very stoic and noble family. May God give them strength.

Such problems of violence are the bleeding wound of the whole world. In Turkey, incidents of violence against women have unfortunately become frequent in recent years. I think social rehabilitation is needed on this issue. We cannot deny the existence of a subculture that legitimizes, encourages and even sanctifies violence and that certain segments of society embrace it. This needs to be rehabilitated.

Al-Monitor: Do you miss the hectic life you used to have? Do you spend more time with your family now?

Gul: Since 2002, I had to be in front of the public eye as the wife of prime minister, foreign minister and president. My only purpose throughout this period was to be worthy of those positions. I always acted with a sense of responsibility. I strived to represent our people in the best way, both at home and abroad. I really worked hard and, frankly, I got tired. I want to spend more time now with my family, children and grandchildren.

Al-Monitor: We've learned of your interest in cuisine. Do you cook?

Gul: I've always had a special interest in cuisine. For years, I had to host foreign visitors of the highest level, which further increased my curiosity. I saw that dining and cuisine culture have a prominent place in promoting a country and even in international relations.

Al-Monitor: Apart from the classes, do you have any hobbies? How do you relax?

Gul: Gardening relaxes me a lot. During my husband's presidency, I devoted close attention to the landscaping of both Cankaya Palace and Tarabya Mansion [the presidential residence in Istanbul]. Together with colleagues, we implemented very beautiful landscaping projects. I'm now taking care of our home's garden.

I also love books. I have more time for reading now, which makes me very happy.