



A PARADOXICAL TALE. READING THE Transformation of Erdoğan's Turkey Through the Lens of Religion

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State identity and societal identity are diverging in Turkey: while religion is more and more used by politics in all areas, the younger generations have begun to distance themselves from Islam. A development that offers clues about the future of the country

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In mid-2020, **Hagia Sophia church**, which had been a museum since 1934, was **converted into a mosque**. The Justice and Development Party (AKP), which has been in power in Turkey since 2002, announced the mosque's opening with nationalist, archaic, and harsh rhetoric that described the conversion using terms such as a "right of conquest." [1] It was a shocking move for non-Muslim and secular components Turkey, as well as a dramatic disappointment for some groups that still hold out hope for Turkey's AKP, which ostensibly rules Turkey independently but in reality is intertwined with various circles of state and societal power.

While the conversion of the Hagia Sophia was the subject of a great debate centred on the topic of world cultural heritage, it is also part of a discussion that extends to the clash of civilisations. However, the gravity of the event and the increasing ethno-religious authoritarianism of the AKP has stymied this debate. Unfortunately, it is not the first time that a place of worship with the status of a museum or an active place of worship has been changed into a mosque during the AKP's rule. **The transformation of Armenian, Syriac, and Orthodox Christian churches**, either moribund or in active use, into mosques that are then placed under the auspices of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet Isleri Baskanligi, *hereinafter* the Diyanet) **has been a common occurrence during the AKP period.** [2] Undoubtedly, this practice is an **indication of the relevance that Islam has achieved during the AKP's rule**, both as an instrument and as an objective. Additionally, in recent years the head of the Diyanet has accompanied President Erdoğan to many official mosque opening ceremonies that are accompanied by prayers, a practice that does not comply with Turkey's unique understanding of secularism. Moreover, most recently the head of the Diyanet has ascended 21 levels in state protocol, to the twelfth level, without legal provision.

While religion and its official representative, **the Diyanet, have taken on a powerful and important position in the echelons of the state** within the borders of Turkey, foreign political elites outside the country's borders have begun to approach it with suspicion. For instance, the German branch of the Diyanet, which has opened mosques in Germany and has been appointing imams to work there since the late 1970s, was investigated in 2017 based on accusations that it had gathered information about

Turkish dissidents and collaborated with Turkish intelligence.[3] In 2018, the Austrian government attempted to shut down mosques financed by the Turkish government on the grounds that they might have connections to radicalism. Most recently, in 2021 French President Macron accused Turkey of intervening in French elections through religious bodies in France that influence the Muslim diaspora, and he indicated that these organisations may be subjected to stricter monitoring. [4] While this is the situation in the West, **Turkey is building large mosques and sending imams far and wide**, from Tirana to Bishkek and from Mogadishu to Havana, **as part of its efforts to become the protector of the Muslim world.**

Turkey's projection of two completely disconnected representations of religion beyond its borders indicates a profoundly paradoxical situation. There are various reasons for this paradox, such as political realities, power relations between countries, and the fact that states have diverse identities. However, it emerges in Turkey in a specific way. While religion is used by politics in all areas, and especially in education, **the younger generations in particular have begun to distance themselves from Islam** and identify with philosophical currents such as deism, agnosticism, pantheism, and materialism. This development, which demonstrates how **state identity and societal identity are diverging**, offers clues about the future of Turkey. To understand this paradoxical transformation it is necessary to examine the relationship between state and religion and the relationship with society in the pre-AKP era and in the AKP era. Such a reading will present us with a broader perspective concerning not only Turkey, but also the Muslim world and the role of religion in politics.

Religion, Politics, and Society in Turkey's pre-AKP Era

The **modernisation of the Ottoman empire**, Turkish society, or simply Turkey goes back to the sixteenth century and has a history that can be read in tandem with the global history of modernisation.[5] In fact, after the first quarter of the eighteenth century, plans began to be drafted for reforms in education, administration, and social relations, but due to both internal and external factors these plans did not evolve into significant change. This entire legacy, which was primarily continuous but also included vital ruptures, was realised by the founding elite of the Republic of Turkey, or by a cadre we may call **Mustafa Kemal** and his companions. This dynamic of continuity and rupture is best observed by analysing the relationship between religion, politics, and society, which plays an important role in the state identity of Turkey.[6] This is such a crucial topic that it not only explains Turkey's past, but it is also a candidate for determining its future.

The founding elites of the Republic claimed to have introduced a brand-new system, but, in fact, its methodological continuity with regards to religion was hidden behind major upheaval. To put it more explicitly, **the founding cadres abolished the caliphate when establishing the republic, but only to found the Diyanet**, a body that closely resembles the semi-bureaucratic, semi-political institutions that controlled religion in Byzantine and Ottoman times.[7] Hence, while on the one hand they removed the historical leadership offices held by Sunni Muslims, on the other they used the Diyanet to seize control of reconstruction, direction, and overall religious guidance. At the same time, by declaring all religious brotherhoods and sects to be illegal, they created a monopoly over Sunni Islam. Although this system allowed no place for Alevis, or non-Muslims, they claimed that it was a separation of religion and the state. One could call this the **Turkish form of secularism, which is not a complete separation of religion and politics**. On the contrary, it is the political practice of controlling religion and aligning its sphere with its own wishes.[8] In this respect it is very different from both Anglo-Saxon secularism and the French model of *laïcité*. However, founding cadres' desire to control, a situation that they thought would continue for ever, has not worked out as they imagined it would. For social dynamics and reciprocal interests in politics have resulted in plans going a little off course.

First of all, one should underline the following: despite all the claims of the Republican elite, religious communities and sects never completely disappeared from society. The young and not particularly powerful Republic's Diyanet could not compete with these well-established, historic structures. This situation became clear in the **1940s** as the **transition to a multi-party system** began. The realisation that religious structures were an important and relatively fast route to power and influence, and that religion could be transformed into votes, led to not only right-wing parties, but even the Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP), which founded the Turkish form

of secularism, to do their utmost to establish relations with religious structures, particularly in Anatolia. Although it may seem that the series of military coups that began in 1960 replaced this dynamic, or that there was at least an interest in changing it, in fact not a lot changed. On the contrary, between 1960 and 1980 the re-emergence of religion on the political stage established an institutional structure of **political Islam in Turkey, a structure from which the AKP subsequently emerged**. These were also the years in which we witnessed religious communities—in harmony with global politics—organise more publicly and diversify in Turkey. In this context, it was in this period that the **Gülen Movement**, which would later form close relations with the AKP in the early 2000s and subsequently clash with them, leading to the present situation in Turkish politics, first emerged.[9]

Just as **from the seventeenth**, or even the sixteenth, century onwards **Turkey changed** and transformed to become more integrated with the wider world, this was also the case in the 1980s and 1990s. As **politics adapted to a neo-liberal capitalist order** with free market rules, social and religious structures had to fall in step with market economy conditions.[10] These religious structures gradually became more middle class and gained political strength, first winning municipal elections in Istanbul and Ankara and then a short time later becoming the senior partner of the central government. However, **the political Islamists came into covert conflict with the army**, which saw itself as the founder of the state, and, following a post-modern coup on 28 February 1997, they were removed from power. Or, at the very least they made people think that they had been removed from power, ushering in the years of preparation before they would change Turkey.

In short, the intricate relationship between religion, politics, and society in Turkey did not begin in the Republican period. Rather, it was a continuation of a longer legacy aligned with global politics. As regards this continuity, one can say that the corners of the religion-politics-society triangle are irrevocably bound up within it in an interest-oriented way.

The AKP Years: The Degeneration of the Political Islamists as They Grew More Powerful

Following the 28 February period, the political Islamists, who realised that if they came to power through conflict with the state or the global system they would not be able to remain in power for long, emphasised that they had changed and broke away from their origins, founding the AKP under the leadership of the former Metropolitan Mayor of Istanbul, **Recep Tayyip Erdoğan**. Although most of the founding members of the AKP were devout, **the party vowed not to mix religion with politics** and, furthermore, to act in harmony with Western norms, including the European Union. They stated that their fundamental **goals** were to **end the military and rigid secular tutelage, making Turkey a pluralist country** compatible with the global system. This discourse gained support in liberal and even some left circles, and, after winning the vote of the traditional conservative right in the 2002 elections, the AKP came to power. **Up until 2007, the AKP introduced many innovations**, first and foremost with regard to the EU, and as the global economic system developed, it succeeded in growing the Turkish economy. In addition to this, the AKP gained popularity on the world stage by making radical proposals to resolve Turkey's chronic problems, such as those with Cyprus and Armenia. As suspicions of Islam rose following 11 September terrorist attacks, the AKP seemed to be evidence that Islam and democracy could coexist.[11] However, behind the scenes things were not as healthy and as transparent as they appeared. While state resources were distributed to AKP supporters and religious communities on the one hand, on the other **a devout and conservative middle class began to develop**. This led to a situation in Turkey where a government with religious sensibilities distributed resources in a non-patrimonial way, using religion as a vehicle and as a criterion.

2006–2007 witnessed the Gülen movement and the AKP establishing interest-based partnerships. The **Gülen movement** can be described as **a multi-layered structure that has religious priorities** and is money-power oriented.[12] This partnership was firstly an initiative to set up an alternative to Kemalist secular political and social structure that had close ties to the military, and subsequently to purge its proponents. While the AKP opened the way for the Gülen movement's cadre to move into the security and judicial bureaucracy, the Gülen movement defended the AKP both with its cadres and with its media organs in Turkey and worldwide. While this relationship demonstrated itself in

the economic and religious spheres, it succeeded in rendering the Kemalist and secular cadres ineffective. In this context we may define the years between 2006 and 2012 as the period when Turkey began to be transformed through a covert understanding of religiosity. Undoubtedly, we will encounter this transformation in Turkey's state identity in future years.

The AKP-Gülen unofficial and unconventional coalition acted in concert until 2012-2013, succeeding, or at least believing at that time it had succeeded, in ousting the Kemalist power blocks from the state ranks. In the same years, they embarked on a merciless struggle supposedly based on differences of ideology and principle, but in reality triggered by disagreements on how to share the spoils of government.[13] **It was this struggle that caused the AKP** under the leadership of Erdoğan and the Turkey under his rule **to change in an unprecedented way**. Undoubtedly, although various factors, such as the global conjuncture, Erdoğan's personal characteristics and economic developments played a role, religion was one of the determining factors. While the AKP considered the Gülen movement to be a terrorist group that had infiltrated the state and intended to destroy it, the Gülen movement saw the AKP as an extreme religious, repressive, and corrupt political structure that had broken with the West. This struggle continued both inside Turkey and in many places in the world until **15 July 2016 disputed coup attempt**. However, on that date, when an attempted coup took place involving the Gülen movement, but which was confusing and the details of the attempt are still ambiguous, it resulted in the marginalisation and partial destruction of the Gülen movement and bestowed on the AKP and Erdoğan a regime that could not be controlled.[14]

From that date onwards the AKP, which changed and transformed itself for three reasons, also began to transform Turkey, resulting in the paradoxical situation that I summarised at the beginning of this piece. The first of these is that Erdoğan and **the AKP adopted a more nationalist and pious discourse** to secure their voter-base in the face of internal political conflict and economic problems caused by unplanned development. Secondly, from 2017 onwards, **Erdoğan introduced a Turkish-style presidential system**, declaring himself to be the only leader and opting to use religious terminology to legitimise this declaration. The final point concerns Islamic communities. As the AKP has brought the Gülen movement, an enormous and influential organisation, to its knees, **other Islamist organisations have chosen to toe the AKP line**. This in turn has led to these organisations' influence becoming more apparent in both the public and political spheres and to a change in the identity of the state.[15]

However, all this change does not mean the AKP is ruling a problem-free Turkey. On the contrary, Turkey is grappling with numerous structural problems and is endeavouring to use a religious discourse to overcome them. For instance, during the rule of this government Turkey has become a country where there has been a rise in the number of murders of women[16] and suicides on account of poverty, and where the gulf between rich and poor has widened. In addition to this, as Turkey plummets down the democracy league tables and corruption grows, the importance attached to religion, when there are so many other issues, is one of the main sources of discontent. **The Diyanet budget for 2021 has been more than that of 7 ministries**, and Turkey has more mosques per head of population than any other country in the world. Furthermore, several ministries and bureaucratic institution appear to be under the control of Islamic communities, which has led to Turkey reacting both in the domestic and external spheres in ways that are at odds with the accustomed responses, something which can be linked directly to a change in state identity.

Religion in Turkey's Future and Beyond

One of **the greatest paradoxes of the AKP era concerns religion**. A government that says it has pious sensibilities has been responsible for many reprehensible events, and this has led the younger generations, particularly since 2019, to distance themselves from religion and the **rise in popularity of Kemalist groups**. This is certainly not a situation that can be read as totally pejorative, but it is very difficult to know how such groups would approach the pious sectors of society in the event of regime change. It is also difficult to know how acquiescent the Islamists, who have benefited from all the advantages of being in power since the mid-1990s, starting locally and now nationwide, would be to cede power. At this juncture, the topic of religion is not just about reading the past or understanding the present day, it remains a significant criterion for designating the future of Turkey. However, it is

necessary to underline this final point: for Turkey, religion should not be read as religion, not for yesterday, nor for today, or for tomorrow. Only when we read religion together with politics, power relations, and identity is it meaningful.

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[1] For more on this complicated issue please see, Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, "Turkey's Hagia Sophia decision: the collapse of multiculturalism and secularism or something more?," 3 August 2020, <https://contendingmodernities.nd.edu/global-currents/hagia-sophia-multiculturalism/>; and Ahmet Kuru, "Hagia Sophia, Islamism, and secularism in Turkey", 17 July 2020, <https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/hagia-sophia-islamism-and-secularism-in-turkey>

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[14] İhsan Yılmaz and Galib Bashirov, "The AKP after 15 years: emergence of Erdoganism in Turkey", *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 39, no. 9 (2018), pp. 1812-1830.

[15] Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, "An alternative reading of religion and authoritarianism: the new logic between religion and state in the AKP's New Turkey", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, vol. 19, no. 1 (2019), pp. 79-98.

[16] Bethan McKernan, "Murder in Turkey sparks outrage over rising violence against women", *The Guardian*, 23 July 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/23/turkey-outrage-rising-violence-against-women>

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