

Religion and State in Turkey

by **Binnaz Toprak**

The issue of religion and its role in political affairs is a very old one in Turkey. It became salient in the mid-nineteenth century, when the Ottoman empire began to westernize. As in the cases of the Russian and Chinese empires, which had failed to industrialize and so remained behind Europe, the Ottoman empire too became a setting for much soul-searching by intellectuals and statesmen about the apparent decline. And it remains a national pastime to mull over what must be done “to save the country.” The saying goes that whenever two Turks come together over a dinner table and have a couple of glasses of raki, the conversation will invariably turn to what should be done “to save the country.” There was a joke circulating a couple of years ago about two Germans in Berlin who go into a Turkish restaurant and order beer. The proprietor has none, so he offers them raki, and after they have had two glasses, one turns to the other and says: “Hans, what are we going to do about this country?”

The question has tortured the minds of generations of Turkish intellectuals and statesmen. By the late nineteenth century two schools of thought had emerged: the Islamists and the Westerners. The Westerners argued in favor of westernization, not only in terms of assimilating the technology and industry of the West, but at the same time adopting its institutional infrastructure. The Islamists agreed that the Ottoman empire had to adopt Western technology and industry, but they were against what they called the imitation of Western institutions, because they felt that the Islamic civilization had produced its own. Needless to say, the Westerners emerged victorious upon the establishment of the republic, and the official ideology or semi-ideology of the republic was to be part of the “civilized” nations of the world, by which they meant the Western nations.

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The early reforms of the republic in the 1920s were basically designed to replace Ottoman Islamic civilization with its Western counterpart. At the center of these reforms was the policy of laicism, a French approach to religion far more militant than secularism. Turkish laicism was very much in the French tradition, especially of the Third Republic, which lasted from 1870 until 1940. During those seventy years, no politician in France who was known publicly to go to mass on Sundays was ever able to enter into the cabinet. The same was true of promotions within the French army.

Let me illustrate the difference between secularism and laicism by an example. Some years ago, I was staying at a Tel Aviv hotel, and in the dining hall there was a sign which said: "Please refrain from smoking on the Sabbath." I thought to myself, were a similar sign posted in any five-star hotel in Istanbul, asking guests to refrain from smoking or eating during Ramazan, we might have a military coup the next day. This would be something unthinkable, just as it is unthinkable that the Turkish *lira* or the French franc would ever bear the slogan of the American dollar: "In God we trust."

Now it is important to correct the very wide impression, especially outside of Turkey, that the state and the military have stood alone in defending this laicism and the secular republic. Just look back to 1997, when Necmettin Erbakan, leader of the Islamist Refah (Welfare) Party, was joined in a coalition government with Tansu Çiller's Doğul Yol (True Path) Party. Even before the military came out against the coalition, big business and big labor unions joined together in opposition to the government. When Süleyman Demirel, then president, attended the opening concert of a music festival in Ankara, the performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony was delayed for 45 minutes, because tens of thousands of people in the stadium rose to chant that Turkey would not become another Iran. The scene was repeated in Istanbul at a soccer match.

After the strengthening of the Refah Party in the 1995 elections, hundreds of citizens' platforms emerged almost overnight. They were definitely not organized by the military or the state. These included many women's platforms. I was told that when a Refah candidate was elected mayor of Istanbul, 80,000 office secretaries faxed each other the very next day. In a grass roots response, women told one another that if they were harassed in public transport for not cover-

ing themselves, they should share the information and mobilize to do something about it.

In a survey representative of all of Turkey, we asked people whether they approved of the interference of religion in political and state affairs. Of the sample, 67 percent said they did not approve, as opposed to 16 percent who favored religious interference. (The rest did not answer.) A great majority, 61 percent, said that there should not be political parties based on religion. On the question of the closure of the Refah Party by the Constitutional Court, the sample divided evenly: 37 percent approved the closure of the Islamist party, the same percentage opposed it. On the question of republican reforms, 77 percent said they had led to progress. Only 10 percent favored a return to polygamy or divorce in accord with Islamic law. Only 1.4 percent of the population thought that adulterers should be punished by stoning, in accord with the Qur'an.

On the whole, Turkish society is tolerant of different lifestyles. Asked if they would object if most women in their neighborhood were covered, 85 percent said no. But a great majority also report they would not object if most women in their neighborhood wore miniskirts. A great majority believe that non-Muslims can go to heaven, and that there are good people among non-Muslims and atheists. Something like 87 percent said that one could be a Muslim by simple belief in God and the Prophet, without praying.

In short, there seems to be an abundant tolerance towards different lifestyles, and a strong resistance to politicization of lifestyle issues.

The Rise of Refah

Since the early 1970s, Turkey has had a political party that represents what might be called the Islamists, or the Islamic movement in Turkey. This party has been closed down by the Constitutional Court or by the military several times, but each time it reemerges, basically under the same leadership and more or less with the same program (although there are now some programmatic changes with the Fazilet Party, formed since Refah's closure). The issue was less sensitive in the 1970s. At that time, even the staunchly laic Republican People's Party of Bülent Ecevit formed a coalition with Erbakan, whose party

entered several coalitions on the right during the same decade. At that time, the central political struggle pitted right against left, and Islam, which seemed outside the arena, did not seem to be as much of a threat to most people. That perception has come only since 1980, with a gain in Islamist electoral strength, and especially after the 1995 elections.

Why the growing strength since 1980? That year, remembered for its military coup, also ushered in a wider era of conservatism, from Thatcher to Reagan. Across America and Europe, the objective was to reintegrate the rebellious youth of the 1960s into establishment values. A similar thing happened in Turkey: after the coup, the military began to emphasize a new ideology, the “Turkish-Islamic synthesis.” That ideology already existed; it had been originally put forth by the Nationalist Action Party, the nationalist right. There is a 1983 document on Turkish culture by the State Planning Organization, and it reminds one of the fascist regimes, because it postulates these three pillars of the “Turkish-Islamic synthesis”: the family, the mosque, and the barracks.

The state espoused this ideology only briefly, but it opened the way for Islamic movements to flourish, even though they did not support the entire package of the “Turkish-Islamic synthesis.” The suppression of left-leaning and even liberal ideas also created a *tabula rasa* for Islamic ideas. But more important were the social changes resulting from Turkey’s post-1980 shift from import substitution to export-oriented growth. Prior to 1980, 60 percent of the Turkish population lived in rural areas; after 1980 it was the reverse, 60 percent lived in urban areas. At the same time, the government, in an effort to follow free-market policies, withdrew subsidies and floated the Turkish *lira*, almost destroying the middle class and further impoverishing the urban poor. The massive influx from the countryside filled squatter neighborhoods on the peripheries of cities. And as the Turkish economy became subject to world market forces, the small merchants, little businessmen, and artisans—the little man in the bazaar working his copper plates—all lost out. They had no voice in organized big labor or organized big business, and eventually they gave their support to the Islamic movement, as well as the ultra-nationalist right.

Prior to 1980, the parties of the left used to gather the votes of the urban poor, but the military coup and the collapse of the Soviet

Union both served to debilitate the left. The left could not generate alternative policies and a new vision of its role in a market economy. This failure was so extensive that in the last elections, the Social Democrats could not even muster enough votes to cross the 10 percent threshold.

The Islamist Appeal

Imagine yourself as someone on the margins of Turkish society, in the ranks of the urban poor, buffeted by subsidy cuts and 100 percent inflation. There appears this party which talks about a just order, which employs a Marxist analysis without employing a Marxist discourse, which denounces the exploitation of the toiling man by anonymous market forces. This was the message of the Islamic party, and it appealed to many people.

Not only were the program and slogans appealing. The party was highly organized, filling the vacuum left by the state. In the poor neighborhoods of big cities, they were there to help the sick land a hospital bed, to distribute food on freezing winter days, to provide a small present to newlyweds, to help with the cost of a funeral. They relied upon an army of covered women, who until then had never occupied any public space, but who could now leave the house in the name of a cause.

The party also appealed to the basic urban conservatism that characterizes all rural migrants to great cities. The city lacks trust. In your small village or town, everybody knows everybody, and you can trust people. In the big city, everybody is suspect, especially the men: they might assault your daughters and wives. A political party that emphasizes traditional values, that criticizes promiscuity in gender relations, the drinking in discotheques, the wearing of mini-skirts—this kind of program appeals to urban conservatism.

Ultimately, the Islamic movement not only resolved problems of identity and conservative *angst*. It became a channel to political power, social status, intellectual prestige, and economic wealth, for people who in one way or another had been marginalized by the republican ethos. From within these circles there emerged the so-called Anatolian Tigers, a new generation of businessmen who differ from the established business community in their conservative values. The Islam-

ists have occupied positions of power in municipal governments and, until very recently, within the state itself. They have produced their own intellectuals, publishing houses, television channels, radio stations, and daily newspapers. From within this movement, a counter-elite has arise. Paradoxically, as Islamists enter into elite circles, with different values and lifestyles than those of the more established elites of the Turkish republic, prospects for radical Islam become dimmed.

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