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Secularism In Turkey

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Introduction

Turkey may be a unique exemplar of issues with respect to secularization. Turkey is the only secular country with a Muslim majority population ([roughly 95%] Eurobarometer, 2005, 2010; ISSP, 2008) and is a country without a state religion (Barro & McCleary, 2005). At the same time, The Republic of Turkey is the continuation of the Ottoman Empire, which was a combination of Turkish, Arabic, Persian, and Byzantine civilizations. Contemporary Turkey is a candidate for the European Union and a member of NATO. Therefore, Turkey is not only geographically, but also demographically, politically, and culturally a bridge between East and West. Furthermore, it is a country heavily involved in issues associated with both secularization and modernization.

From the beginning, the modernization and secularization movements in Turkey were largely inspired by France, and thus French laïcité has provided a substantive model for Turkish secularism (Çitak, 2004; Berkes, 1964; Kuru, 2006). The French term “laicism” (Turkish: laiklik, Franche: laïcité, laique) is commonly used by the Turks when referring to secularism in their country. According to Parla and Davison (2008), the translation of laicism from Turkish into English as “secularism” leads to ambiguity. Laicism refers to the control of the clergy by the nonreligious or nonclerical people (secular government). Because of this, Parla and Davison (2008) suggest it is not possible to say Turkey is a secular country.

However, other scholars claim that Turkey is an assertive secularist country (Kuru, 2006, 2007), as Turkey and France are the only countries in the Middle East and Europe with assertive secularism as a constitutional principle (Çitak, 2004). Is Turkey a secular country or not? This question is entangled in the emergent process of secularism in Turkey and Turkey’s relation to its own political history. In Turkey, secularism has no social or historical base, it is being carried out by the hand of the state, it was instansiated from top to bottom, and it only
The present chapter establishes a very brief history of secularism in Turkey, before touching on its current political situation.

**History of Secularism in Turkey**

Secularization in Turkey, contrary to common understandings, did not simply start with the establishment of the Republic of Turkey and has much earlier roots dating back to the last 200 years of the Ottoman Empire (Doğan, 2013; Findley, 2010; Silverstein, 2011; Küçükcan, 2005). However our focus is restricted to historical facts associated with the creation of the establishment of Republic of Turkey.

In 1914, the Ottoman Empire entered World War I as a German Ally. Some parts of the Ottoman Empire, such as modern day Turkey, were eventually occupied by the Entente Powers. Immediately after this invasion, the Turks war for independence began. They formed a parliament, The Grand National Assembly, which opened in Ankara in 1920, and elected Mustafa Kemal as president. The parliament included Islamist, Ottomanist, Nationalist, Bolshevist, Turkist and Kurdish representatives from all sectors of society (religious men, merchants, soldiers, etc.) (Çinar, 2005; Findley, 2010; Berkes, 1964). The post-war Entente Greek forces occupied territory in Western Anatolia and began to encroach further East. This prompted the parliament to give full power to Mustafa Kemal, a successful military leader, in order to halt the advance of the Entene (Findley, 2010). Kemal was victorious. The occupation of the Entente Powers came to an end with the Lausanne Treaty of July 24, 1923. Then, Mustafa Kemal and his colleagues founded the Republican People's Party (RPP), which eliminated the other parties (e.g. Islamists, Kurds, Bolshevists), and enjoyed ruling as a single party for roughly 30 years. The RPP was based on a statist ideology (Walton, 2009) intertwined with the principles of Kemalism, which Momayezi (1998, p. 5) suggests “came to the forefront between 1927 and 1935 as a project of politically constructing and manipulating
a modern Turkish nation-state on secular and western, rather than Islamic, precepts”. The basic principles of the RPP and Kemalism are called the *six arrows*: republicanism, nationalism, populism, étatism, secularism, and revolutionism. These principles appeared as “a poor adaptation of Western modernism and rationalism and an *ex post* rationalization of loosely related policies” (Tepe, 2008, p. 191). Kemal, and by proxy Kemalism, “moved Turkey closer to the West culturally while moving it further from Western democratic practice. Like the CUP\(^1\) leadership of 1913-1918, he preffered strengthening the state rather than the constitution or the electoral system ” (Findley, 2010, p. 252). Further, Kemal saw French laicism as the most original form of secularism (Hanioğlu, 2012), and because of this, Turkey had an assertive non-democratic version (Parla & Davison, 2008) of secularism by fiat (Kuru, 2006; Özbudun, 2012).

**Reforms in the Single-Party Period**

Between 1923 and 1937, Mustafa Kemal implemented secular reforms directed towards political structure, administration, education, law, and social life. For example, the Law on the Unification of Education, issued March 3rd, 1924, had far reaching implications for the government’s position on religion. As a result, madrasahs were closed and the entire education system became “secularized” as it fell under state control (Çitak, 2004). In 1930, all religious schools were closed, and in 1933 faculties of theology met the same fate (Kuru, 2006; Kuru & Stepan, 2012; Koştaş, 1990). Furthermore, even optional religion classes were removed from the secondary education curriculum in 1931, and from primary school curriculum in 1935, which completed the secularization of the public school system (Kuru, 2007).

\(^1\) The Committee of Union and Progress was established as an underground organization among military students in the late 19th century. The group dethroned Abdulhamid II in 1908, marking the beginning of the Turkish revolution, although the republic was not officially proclaimed until 1923. Mustafa Kemal and his colleagues were the successors of CUP (Mardin, 2008).
In Turkey, there are several requirements that both students and schools have to follow. For example, all students from primary education to university level have to attend classes dedicated to studying the *History of Atatürk’s Principles and Reforms*. In addition, the education system is filled with the symbols and narratives of Kemalism. Meşeci (2007) indicates that in the wake of religion’s removal from the educational sphere, other rituals, however state imposed, found their way into the classroom. These rituals are, arguably, intended to create an effect on people similar to the effect of “religion”. For example, until recently, in the primary schools, students had to take a vow every morning before beginning their class. This oath, of course, includes pledging commitment to Mustafa Kemal. In addition, his sculpture has to stand in front of the schools, and even the school walls must be adorned with Mustafa Kemal’s pictures and Atatürk's Address to Turkish Youth.

Much like the school system, the Turkish Judicial system was secularized with the closure of Sharia courts April 8th 1924. This effort was then furthered by the adoption of the Swiss civil code February 17th 1926, abolishing polygamy. In addition, this reform afforded increased equality for women regarding issues such as inheritance and divorce, and even amended the Penal code. With these changes, Swiss, Italian, and German law practices were adapted for use in Turkey. The most symbolic step towards secularization came April 10th 1928, as the article affirming - "state religion is Islam" – was removed from the 1924 Constitution. By 1937, the principle of laicism entered the constitution further solidifying the assertive secularist stance for Turkey (Berkes, 1964).

The secularization of Turkey under Kemalism left no stone unturned, and on November 1st 1928, the Arabic alphabet was replaced with the Latin alphabet. According to Çitak (2004), this change clearly favored the Western World over the Arab World. However, this linguistic revolution was much more than simply switching alphabets. In addition, even Turkish words of Arabic and Persian origin were also eliminated. Interestingly, the Turkish
state then accepted a rather ideological theory of language ("Sun Language Theory"), whereby all languages are thought to be derived from Turkish, which in turn is an ancient Central Asian language (Findley, 2010, p. 255). Accepting this theory allowed the Turkish state to further justify its adoption of the new alphabet and had the added benefit of constructing a more coherent national identity, even if fabricated. In a further attempt to create this unified identity, a Turkish “history thesis” was developed (Mardin, 1991, p. 68) based on the pre-Islamic Central Asian and Anatolian civilizations (Doğan, 2013). According to this thesis, broadly speaking, the Turks are ancestors of ancient civilizations such as the Sumerians and the Hittites (Fidley, 2010). As asserted by the Kemalists, the specifics of this historical thesis consists of three main points: (1) Turks are one of the oldest nations of the world (2) The historical heritage of the Ottoman dynasty is rejected (3) Mustafa Kemal provided national independence and unity for Turkey (Çınar, 2005; Hanioğlu, 2012). In order to further distance Turkey from the Ottoman era, government sponsored history teachings from the Turkish revolution targeted the Ottoman empire as an ancien régime (Mardin, 1991), and even chose Ankara as the capital city to spite Ottomanism (Çınar, 2005).

The wave of secularization and westernization in Turkey went far beyond legal reforms, as a new worldview and lifestyle were created in effort to shift away from more traditional Islamic practices and way of life (Gürbey, 2012, p. 5). The state intervened in domains ranging from music to clothing (Çınar, 2005). They temporarily banned “oriental-style” music (Mardin, 1991) and prohibited or restricted certain clothes. Western music and art saw increasing support from the state. In particular, “balls” and “beauty contests” found their way into Turkish life in an attempt to challenge Islamic perceptions about the place of women in society (Çitak, 2004). The “hat law” was enacted on November 25th 1925. The aim of this law was for people to wear western style clothes instead of traditional clothes. Because of opposition to this law, 808 people were arrested and 57 people were sentenced to
death (Nereid, 2011). Further still, on June 21st 1934 the surname law banned traditional
titles of lineage and adopted Turkish surnames. These were mostly determined by the
authorities and were given to everyone. That same year, Mustafa Kemal was given the
surname Atatürk (The Father of Turks).

In 1935, Sunday replaced Friday as the official traditional holiday. Non-religious
holidays were later created to celebrate other national anniversaries. Specifically, many of
these national holidays stemmed from historical events, beginning with Mustafa Kemal’s
arriving on the shores of Samsun (1919), and leading up to Mustafa Kemal’s death (1938).
These festivals are celebrated by the authorities throughout the country, but students and
officers must join compulsorily. Since the early years of the Republic, there have been efforts
to build sculptures of Mustafa Kemal in the center of every city (Mardin, 1991). Presently,
and as Çınar (2005, p. 99) mentions: “There is not one city in Turkey that does not have at
least one square with Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s statue”. There is at least one school or street
named as “Atatürk” in every city, and Kemal’s pictures must hang on the walls in every
official building (Frick, 2011). Officers and civil servants have to visit his statue on national
holidays and present a garland to it. Bearing this in mind, Mustafa Kemal’s pictures,
sculptures, and statues are seen as symbols of assertive secularism, which is one reason they
are sometimes harmed by Islamists (Çınar, 2005). This is why there is a law that protects
Mustafa Kemal (see, The Law Concerning Crimes Committed Against Atatürk, 1951).

In 1925, all sufi orders were declared illegal and banned. Their lodges and shrines were
forced to close, and their rituals and ceremonies prohibited (Çitak, 2004) as they represented
serious opposition against Turkey’s assertive secularism (Mardin, 1991). The main aim of all
reforms were to achieve the Ottoman Westernization movement, which was held at bay for the
last 150 years. Complete secularization was the goal. However, a large segment of society,
who are Muslims and linked to their tradition, have failed to achieve full compliance with
these reforms. The Turkish revolution was not supported by masses, instead it grew from an elite few (Mardin, 1991). As Momayezi (1998, p. 13) characterizes the situation:

The new government carried out its reforms by dictatorial means. In their zeal, the Kemalist reformers not only separated religion from government but interfered with the religious worship and practices of individual Muslims. In doing so, they alienated the majority of the population.

Further, minority populations in the New Republic could not hold political office (Findlay, 2010), because minorities were neither Turk nor muslim. “Turkishness” and “controlled Islam,” however were identities set in place by the state. The New Republic has non-democratically practiced against non-Muslims and non-Turks. For example, non-Muslim Turks were not permitted to emigrate to Turkey, and non-Muslims living in Turkey have been enormously taxed (Gürbey, 2012).

State Control Over Religion

In Turkey, the state controls religious and Islamic authorities (Tezcür, 2007; Çınar, 2005; Boer, 2014; Doğan, 2013). They saw this as a way to strengthen national unity (Somerc, 2007). Further, this allowed Kemalism to limit the influence of religion on the public (Driessen, 2014; Yavuz, 2003), as well as using religion as an instrument of beneficence to the state (Büyükakara, 2008). According to Davison (2006), there is militant secularism in Turkey, precisely because the state controls religion, rather than focusing on state-church separation.² As Bernard Lewis (2002, p. 412) notes:

The basis of Kemalist religious policy was laicism, not irreligion; its purpose was not to destroy Islam, but to de-establish it—to end the power of religion and its exponents in political, social, and cultural affairs, and limit it to matters of belief and worship.

The state attempted to limit the influence of religion in many ways. Notably, one of them was by the establishment of a Directorate of Religious Affairs under the Prime Ministry. In the process of rationalizing and nationalizing religion, the state set its sights on religious

² For one view that sees this strategy as necessary, given the structure of Islam, see Berkes (1964).
education (Gürbey, 2012), as this fell under government purview with the establishment of the Republic. In the beginning, state-controlled religious education was given, then banned shortly after until 1947 when state control resumed for high school and college-level religious education. From this period, up until the 1980 military coup, when the constitution was rewritten by soldiers, the presence of religious education in public schools was left to the discretion of parliament. In 1982, this new constitution made Religious Culture and Ethics courses compulsory. The curricula of primary, elementary, and high schools was established by the central government and textbooks were standardized. Of course, it was obligatory to include mention of Mustafa Kemal in all courses (e.g. religious culture, physics, geometry), and educational syllabi were established to control religious messages (Kuru, 2007). The content of these obligatory religious courses usually fell outside of traditional Islamic understandings. For instance, according to orthodox Islamic understandings, daily prayers and fasting during the month of Ramadan are two of the five pillars, which are obligatory for all Muslims. However, students were taught that praying and fasting must come after one’s worldly activities. Furthermore, and perhaps even comically, they taught if the prophet Mohammad lived today, he would wear a hat (a western style one of course) (Gürbey, 2012).

Kemalism views religion as a moral system (Parla & Davison, 2008), a private issue based upon one’s conscience (Mardin, 2012). In turn, this “Islamic individual-conscientious” was used by the state for nation-building (Gürbey, 2012; Sakallıoğlu, 1996). With religion relegated as a functional institution contributing to the formation of national identity, Kemalism created a relationship between Turkified folk Islam and Turkish nationalism (Çitak, 2004, p. 261). This is why Kemalism found controlling religion useful.

The Army and Coups

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3 Kemalism is divided into leftist Kemalism and rightist Kemalism. Rightist kemalists advocate obligatory Religious Culture and Ethics courses, but leftist kemalists wish to abolish it.
Beginning in the later half of the 20th century, the Turkish army intervened several times in political affairs by military coup: 1960, 1971, 1980, and 1997 (coup of February 28th) (Cizre, 2012). The army has historically appeared as a bastion of Kemalism. Individuals who have received religious education, who wear a headscarf, whose mother wears a headscarf, who has a beard, or even whose father has a beard, are extremely unlikely to be taken into the army as an officer. After the February 28th coup, some officers, who pray, do not drink alcohol, have a wife who wears a headscarf - in short, anyone who did not explicitly adopt a secular worldview and lifestyle - were expelled from the army and without the opportunity for legal redress. As Kuru (2006) notes, almost 900 military officers and civil bureaucrats were expelled during this time. Since the forming of the Republic, the military has taken up modernization as its mission:

This mission turned the army into the political symbol of nationhood and the instrument of preserving the nation… The armed forces have always occupied a special position in Turkey… The armed forces continued to think of themselves as the guardians of secular, reformist, and democratic goals (Momayazi, 1998, pp. 3-4).

Not only the army, but all of the state until the 2000’s was largely in the hands of the Kemalists. Indeed, before this period it was almost inconceivable to rise in the Turkish bureaucracy without being a Kemalist. However, the past ten years have seen the emergence of a large anti-Kemalist movement beginning to take hold in Turkey.

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4 1960 and 1980 were full coup, 1971 and 1997 were half-coup (Toprak, 2005).
Current Political Situation

There are some basic political movements in Turkey whose origins can be traced back to the first modernization movement in the Ottoman Empire (see Table-1). In Turkish political history, power has been handled by these ideologies during different periods. With the proclamation of the Tanzimat Charter (1839), the Westernist Ottomanist ideology took control. Then, conservative Ottomanist ideology emerged in response to Westernism. After the idea of Ottomanism lost its effect, Islamism rose to prominence, especially in the Hamidian regime. The CUP, which hastened the end of the Hamidian regime, was comprised mostly of soldiers, and they held power in Turkey for over a decade with strong Westernist-Turkist leanings.

Table-1: Secular and anti-secular political streams and contemporary political parties in Turkey.

Hamidian Regime: It is the name of the period which Abdulhamid II was on the throne (1876-1909).
Kemalism, which largely inherited the base of the CUP, was the dominating political movement, bringing even more progressive Westernism and assertive secularism until 1950 (Mardin, 2012). However, some passive secularist politicians, who were dissatisfied with the Kemalist’s, left and established the DP. This ushered in a new era in Turkish politics, as it generated a center-right political tradition that ultimately brought an end to the RPP’s reign. This situation is an indication of the great silent reaction that was created by the RPP’s assertive secularism, and at the same time, a dissatisfaction on part of the Turkish people’s unwillingness to whole heartedly embrace the RPP’s polar opposite.

Chart-1: Votes shared by political parties in Turkey (Tepe, 2008, p. 284).
Interestingly, despite being socially liberal, Kemalism advocates for a rather statist and conservative economy. Further, they are also quite nationalist and somewhat non-democratic. According to Doğan (2013), it is because of their assertive secularist ideology that they live in constant conflict between statism and democracy. That is to say that, on the one hand they support democratic values, yet on the other they are forced to take a statist position in order to enforce their specific form of secularism in response to Islamist ideology.

The JDP is economically liberal, yet socially conservative (Lagendijk, 2012). On the other hand, JDP has more democratic policies than RPP (Kalyvas, 2012). In the first period (2002-2007), JDP has made serious effort for EU membership, has reduced the effectivenes of military on politics, improved freedom of expression and speech, worked to expand the civil rights; improved on the granting of cultural rights of minorities and Kurds (Doğan, 2013; Toprak, 2005; Çavdar, 2006). The first and second period of JDP (2002-2011) was more liberal, the third period (after 2011) was more Islamist. Starting in 2007, the JDP began to pass legislation against secularism (Somor, 2007). That same year, and just before the presidential elections, the Turkish Army published an e-ultimatum (e-memorandum) on their website painting the JDP as anti-secularist and declaring that they do not want an Islamist president to be elected. After the memo, in the 2007 elections, votes of JDP increased from 34% to 46% (Lagendijk, 2012). Then, in 2008, the Turkish Supreme Court attempted to prosecute the JDP for its anti-secular policies, however the case was eventually dropped (Boer, 2014). In 2010, the JDP began pushing for pro-Islamist and anti-Westernist policies. In the eyes of many Turkish people, it was the political backdrop of 100 plus years of pro-Western assertive secularist Kemalism that allowed these events to further strengthen the JDP.

During the third period of the JDP (after 2011), for the first time in the history of the Republic of Turkey, women who wore headscarves were permitted to be members of
parliament. The ban on headscarves in universities was also overturned. Some grades of Imam-Khatib Schools\(^5\) were re-opened, and Quran and Siyar (Life of Muhammad) courses were placed in school curriculums as optional courses. However, these reforms were not necessarily all positive, as some freedoms were limited. For example, alcohol was regulated and even restricted in some contexts, and discourses arose within the JDP taking stances against the EU, Israel, and even the West. In combining these policy shifts with the increased visibility of religion in society, the distinction between the JDP and the Islamists became less clear. This has led some to believe that there may be a hidden Islamist agenda within the JDP (Lagendijk, 2012). Indeed, it appears that the anti-Kemalists have begun to trade places with the Kemalists not only in the government, but in business and media as well.

**Secularism vs. Anti-Kemalizm**

The specific type of secularism in Turkey (assertive), and the conditions under which it was first established (post Ottoman anti-Westernism and Islamism), has created a political battlefield. It is assumed that the Kemalist RPP represents the secularist block, while the JDP represents the anti-secularist block. Due to this historical background, some scholars suggest there is a divide between secular and Islamist (Çarkoğlu, 2004; Mardin, 1991; Sakallıoğlu, 1996). This divide has been furthered since the 2002 elections, as the JDP and RPP have been comprise the majority of the voting block. According to Çarkoğlu and Toprak’s (1999) research, the most distant voters to the RPP are political Islamist voters and there is a polarization between the two. Therefore it is claimed that JDP is the continuation of political Islamism, and that it has an anti-secular Islamist understanding. Thus Islamism and the “pro-secular” (represented by Kemalism) may appear to constitute two extreme poles in Turkey. However, we suggest this is an oversimplification of the situation. Instead of a strict division along secular and Islamists lines, perhaps the real division is among Kemalists and anti-

\(^5\) A religious school which trains official Imam’s.
Kemalists, with secularism caught in the middle. What is the reason of that Kemalism could not win any election and could take the government except military coups? Why are anti-kemalist parties successful? Despite 80 years of propaganda and secular education system, why are more Turkish people not Kemalist? Figure 1 offers some clues.

Figure-1: Mainstream Kemal party and antikemalist political party.

* Conservative cultural modernity. After Russia was defeated by Japan in 1905, Japanese-style modernization was brought to the forefront as a model (Mardin, 1991, 2008). According to this new type of modernization approach, the technology of West should be embraced, but Islamic values and traditions must also be conserved.

If it is assumed that the JDP represents the Islamist bloc, and the RPP represents the secularist bloc, then it is easy to see why there has been political polarization between secularism and Islamism or secularism and anti-secularism for not only the past 10 years, but stretching well into the past. However, between these two poles there is a center position caught in the rhetoric of two extremes. For example, the JDP is a combination of some Islamists and those more to the center-right. Figure-1 depicts at least two possible types of
secularism, and at least three combinations of stances on secularity. The problem is one of
interpretations over the meaning of secularism itself:

[T]he state-religion debate in Turkey is not merely between secularism and Islamism; instead it centers on the true meaning and implementation of secularism itself. The two powerful movements in Turkey - the Kemalists and pro-Islamic conservatives - defend two opposite meanings of secularism - assertive and passive secularism (Kuru, 2006, p. 185).

Walton (2009) addresses two types of secularism in Turkey, liberal secularism and illiberal/laicist (Jacobin secularism) secularism. As mentioned in the introduction, it is due to the socio-political history of this region that find Turkey with a laicist secularism, as compared to a more passive secularism, such as in the United States. Passive secularism seeks only to limit religions influence – through distance from government - in the public square, while assertive secularism seeks not only limiting religious influence, but actively controlling and working towards its abolishment as part of its own ideology (Kuru, 2006, 2007, 2012). Therefore, assertive secularism is nondemocratic (Tezcür, 2007). However, there is a portion of the JDP bloc which advocates for a type of Anglo-soxson (USA, England, and Canada) passive model of secularism in Turkey. The pragmatic political principle of passive secularism is even advocated by some center right parties and even some Islamists in Turkey. According to Büyükkara (2008), moderate Islamism is also moderate secularism (passive secularism). Therefore, it is not necessary to define the JDP voters as anti-secularist. Perhaps the JDP is not so much anti-secularist as they are anti-Kemalist.

Kemalism “has tended to be an authoritarian state ideology to stamp out religious and ethnic differences in the name of Enlightenment values” (Yavuz, 2003, p. 60). As a result of Kemalism’s adherence to assertive secularism, it has had to construct itself as much more nationalistic in its raison d’être. Thus, it was forced to fabricate a “modern Turkish identity”
as the rallying call in accordance with its own ideology which equated Turkish modernity with the demise of religion. However, anti-kemalism in Turkey embraced Islam as a cultural repertoire, and henceforth did not reject religion (and importantly religious culture) on its path to “modernity”.

The general characteristics of Islamism are anti-Westernism, anti-secularism, and anti-Kemalism. One interpretation of Islamism, which is a part of the political understanding of the JDP, is anti-Kemalist, passive anti-secular, anti-Westernist, modernist and democratic. Other interpretations of Islamism and extremist Islamism, are anti-Kemalist, assertive anti-secular, anti-Westernist, traditionalist, and non-democratic. Both interpretations of Islamism see the economical and technological superiority of the West as a shared threat and wish to Islamize society. Where they differ, however, is in terms of democratic attitudes. Here, the extremists are against the folk-Islam. They reject cultural and historical Ottoman heritage, and regard the Ottoman Empire as not being “Islamic enough”. However, it is because of Turkey’s democratic and secular culture, which can not be found in other muslim countries (Mardin, 1991), that extremists Islamists make up a very small percentage of Turkey.

Çarkoglu and Toprak (1999) conducted a survey with the participation of 3053 respondents from 16 provinces in greater Turkey. Following their research they arrived at the following conclusions: (1) The majority of the population identifies as Muslim, but this does not mean that the “Islamists” will soon have political majority, or that every Muslim is an Islamist (2) There is almost no possibility of establishing a Sharia state, and fears about this are unfounded (3) The majority of the population engage in religious activities, they fulfill what they see as their worship obligations, and remain tolerant of other’s beliefs. Furthermore, Çarkoglu and Toprak (1999) found that the majority of Turks do not want a religion based political party (60%), while only 25% did. Thus, many in Turkey find the
mixing of politics and religion at the official level harmful. This rejection of the religion/politics mix is a secularist stance.

One tenant of Islamic Sharia law dictates that a man can have several women as wives. If this is an Islamic position, do the Turks embrace it? To this point, Çarkoğlu and Toprak (1999) asked participants the following: “If the civil code were rearranged to allow marrying up to four women, would you support this?” They found that 85% responded “no”, and only 10.7% replied “yes”. 71.7% of those who identified as “extremely religious” responded “no” and only 22.8% responded “yes”. Importantly, even the most religious people did not want to change secular civil code in favor of this religious principle.

In research conducted by the Directorate of Religious Affairs in 2013 with 37,624 respondents, 61.1% agreed that secularism (laiklik) is necessary to for Muslims to “live freely”, with only 20.1% disagreeing (Directorate of Religious Affairs, 2014). Although 97% of Turkey identify as Muslim, and only around 10% go on to then identify as not-religious (Çarkoğlu & Toprak, 1999; Directorate of Religious Affairs, 2014), these results can be taken as an indicator of secular culture on an important level. As suggested by Çarkoğlu and Toprak (1999), it is very interesting that a large portion of Turks (67.2%) - the same ones who arrange their working times in accordance with Friday prayers, don’t support headscarf bans, and who disagree with “atheist publications” - still find the suggestion that religion and politics should be intertwined in governmental affairs a harmful one.

A more recent study by Çarkoğlu and Toprak (2006) looked at the extent to which the Turks value democratic culture in Turkey. Notably, between 75% and 80% of their sample agreed with the following three “democratic values”: (1) Democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government, (2) Freedom to choose a religion and way of living it should not be restricted in any way, (3) Freedom to speech and way of expression
should not be restricted in any way. As compared to other Muslim countries, it appears that a
democratic and secular culture has settled in Turkey.

Çarkoğlu and Toprak (2006) found that 61.3% of Turks see no evidence of a push by
fundamentalist movements to establish an Islamic state in Turkey over the past 15 years. For
those who felt there was such a push (32.6%), the number one reason for this, were people
feeling that the number of women wearing headscarfs was increasing (20.6%). While this
2006 study also found that 63.5% in Turkey did wear either the hijab or Turkish Style
headscarf, the number who did not increased from 27.3% (1999) to 36.5% (2006). Thus,
contrary to a small percentage of the population perceiving an increase in head coverings, the
opposite is occuring. In Çarkoğlu and Toprak’s (2006) data, we see the distrubiton by
political affiliation of those who think that the number of “covered women” is increasing and
found that the highest porportion was comprised of those respondents identifying as RPP
(44.3%). Toprak, Bozan, Morgüll, and Şener (2008) conducted face-to-face interviews with
401 participants from 12 provinces of Turkey and found that Alawites, seculars, Kemalists
and other left-wing voters report they have been “othered” and discriminated against under
the JDP government. These are most likely all RPP’s voters, as almost half of RPP voters
think that secularism is under threat in Turkey (Çarkoğlu & Toprak, 2006). Given the RPP’s
understanding of secularism, these results may indicate that it is not so much “secularism in
general” that is under threat, per say, but specifically, assertive secularism. Perhaps the
Kemalists may be unfounded in their fear that society is becoming Islamized (Berger, 2008).
Kemalists criticize conservatives for having a hidden Islamist agenda, and conservatives
criticize Kemalists for being anti-religious, rather than being “real” secularists (Kuru, 2006).
Chart-2: “There are ‘Islamists’ and ‘Laicists’ in Turkey. Where would you place yourself on this scale?” (Çarkoğlu & Toprak, 2006, p. 39).

At first glance, it is seen in Chart-2 that there is a secularist – Islamist polarization in Turkey. However, rather than a clear polarization around opposite ends of an assertive secular-Islamist dichotomy, as Chart-2 demonstrates, there is a substantive and veritable center position. In speaking to the diversity of secularism in Turkey, Paker (2005) conducted interviews with 77 university students (average age 22.5) in 1999 and found at least three approaches to “laicism” in Turkey: (1) full secularization of daily life, (2) the requirement of democracy, (3) a reconciliation of religion with modern life. Based on these types, Kemalism, as an ideology, can only embrace the first. The second and third types, however, correspond to the passive secularism largely represented by the center-right. Paker (2005) suggests that the first group largely has negative attitudes toward tradition/religion, supports daily affirmations based on reason and science, views science and religion in conflict, and sees modernity and tradition as opposites. Parker finds that the second group sees little, if any, contradictions between modern life and religion/tradition. In the third group he suggests that
tradition and religion are very important, and that tradition, religion, and science do not stand in contradiction to one another. While the first and second types appear to be the positions that polemically garner the attention of the public eye, there lies a substantive center position that would align itself with neither, respectively. The secular-Islamist debate seems to involve much more than mere arguments over the proper understanding of secularism. Perhaps this debate is better considered by taking into account arguments over modernity and tradition.

In the Ottoman Empire, the Turkish community was divided into two parts: the urban center (Istanbul) and the country (everything else, respectively). The “commoners” lived in the country and the “elites” lived in the city and associated the concept of “civilization” with only themselves (Mardin, 1969). This elite and commoner distinction has continued into the republican period. While Kemalists saw themselves as modern, urbanite, intellectual, and educated, they saw others as rural, redneck, backward, and ignorant (Çınar, 2005, p. 2012). Assertive secularist ideology in Turkey can be, as Berger (2008, p. 277) writes, “located between Kemalist political and military elites”. In elucidating the entanglement of notions of modernity with secularism, and according to the Kemalists:

Secularism is public, Islam private; secularism is knowledge, Islam is belief; secularism is modern, Islam is traditional; secularism is urban, Islam is rural, secularism is progress, Islam is reactionary (ırtica); secularism is universal, Islam is particular (Çınar, 2005, p. 47).

Turkish secularization appears to be a struggle between the elites of “the city,” with the religious people of the countryside (Doğan, 2013). Secular elites consider Kemalism as the foundation of the country, which will be threatened along with liberalization and democratization in Turkey if “the ignorant people” are not kept under control (Oğuzlu & Özpek, 2008).

In Turkey, secularism (laiklik), modernism (çağdaşlık), and Westernism (batıcılık) appear synonomous with one another to the Kemalists (Momayezi, 1998; Berkes, 1964;
Çınar, 2005). The West was taken as “model” by the Ottoman’s in its period of stagnation and decline (1683-1908). The first performers of this modeling were the educated elite ruling class and the military. Just how Westernization is to be conceived of has led to at least two types, much like secularism. The first, being a radical westernization, namely taking its secularism and culture. The second, desired only the West’s science and technology, however, aimed to maintain Islamic values and culture (Tepe, 2008). The first has been referred to as Westernism (Kemalism) and the latter as anti-westernism (anti-Kemalism).

Further, in Turkey there are actually two understandings of modernity. The first one is West-oriented or Western-style and other is East-oriented or Islamically grounded and more conservative (Findlay, 2010; Çınar, 2012). The term modern (çağıdaş) refers to the West-oriented modernity intertwined with being non-religious. Westernization and secularization are the basic principles of this type of modernity: “To be modern is to have broken ties with the past” (Çınar, 2005, p. 23). Therefore, on behalf of the modern, Kemalists entered into a conflict with traditional Turkish-Islamic culture and lifestyle (Öncü, 2012). For example, Kemalists think that clothing, music, drinking alcohol etc. are indicators of modernity (Hanioğlu, 2012). Because of that, they see Islam as a threat for modernist reforms (Yılmaz, 2002). However, not only the political Islamists, but also many other groups, think the Kemalists are mimicking the West, however this is not so (Mardin, 1991). According to results of a survey conducted by Paker (2005), these different groups (Islamists, moderates, Westernists etc) are attributing different meanings to modernity. There is a conflict between Westernism and the authoritarian and repressive traditionalism. This conflict consists of the perception that tradition and modernity are opposite. In contrast, there is another image of tradition that overlaps with modernity. While Kemalists see modernity as Westernization, others see modernity as democratization and development. This discussion around the concept of modernity shows that the polarization or conflict is between traditional forces and
other forces that want to change the tradition. Therefore, as indicated by Berkes (1964),
secularism in Turkey is predominately the separation of social values from the authority of
tradition. Basically, the conflict is over whether Turkey should be a “traditional” or “non-
traditional” society. Berger (2008) paints a quite accurate picture:

A country in which the challenge to secularism is politically prominent right
now is Turkey. The Turkish Republic was founded in 1923 by Atatürk, who
was decidedly anti-Islamic and probably antireligious in general. He wanted to
“civilize” Turkey, and civilization for him meant the secular culture of Europe.
His political model was the French one; public life made, as it were,
antiseptically free of religious symbols and behavior… This secularist
ideology was firmly established in large sectors of Turkey’s society,
particularly in the Kemalist political and military elite. It was dominant in
urban, middle-class populations. Back in the Anatolian hinterland, a deeply
Muslim culture continued to prevail, with people paying lip service to the
Kemalist ideology but at the same time passively resisting it in family and
community life. In recent years, this resistance turned politically active (p.
277).

Conclusion

This brief historical overview of forces that contributed to contemporary Turkey as
perhaps a unique contemporary country, steeped in Islamic history yet striving to be a
contemporary secular culture, is far from exhaustive. However, it does serve to suggest the
complexity of modern Turkey as it strives to be both secular and tolerant of not only other
faith traditions, but of Islam which remains a powerful cultural force within a culture striving
to become secular. Within this context Turkey is a useful test case for studying the many
facets of secularization that can be empirically explored within a country where Islam has
been and continues to be expressed in relatively unique ways compared to other countries
where Islam is also a significant cultural force.
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