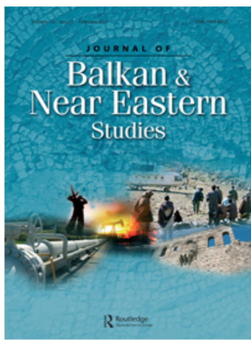

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(Post-)Kemalist Secularism in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between the state and religion established by the founding Republican regime has often had discriminatory consequences for religious plurality in Turkey. From its foundation in 1923, the state maintained a model of secularism in which religious activities and facilities were brought under state control. The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has challenged the so-called Kemalist secularism and claimed to offer a liberal alternative. However, the AKP's policies have also remained controversial. This article focuses on how and in what direction the AKP has transformed Kemalist secularism by examining institutional transformations in the military, the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) and the national education system. It is argued that the AKP has maintained the same authoritarian practices and institutions in relation to religious plurality. In particular, the Diyanet and compulsory religious education have been appropriated by the AKP for the purpose of executing a conservative-Islamic political and social transformation that aims to eradicate plurality and create a monolithic society through indoctrination and a strict state monopoly over religious matters.

Introduction

Throughout the history of the Turkish Republic, the relationship between the state and religion underwent different stages of association, contestation and at times open conflict. The founding elite of the Republic considered religion to be a threat to the modern republican project. From its very inception in 1923 it therefore adopted a particular model of secularism as one of the fundamental principles of the new regime. Accordingly, religious activities and facilities were brought under state control and rights and freedoms of religious groups were largely restricted. The Turkish model of secularism, however, was unable to solve diverse groups' contestation and conflict over the state-controlled model. Specifically, the Kemalist policies and institutions failed to accommodate the cultural and political claims of various religious groups, thus inhibiting and restricting socio-cultural and religious plurality in public and political life.

The founding secular model entered a crisis during subsequent stages of political development when ethno-religious and cultural claims increased, in parallel to the rise

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of political Islam and the revival of Alevism.[1] The crisis of secularism was only one manifestation of the larger crisis facing Turkish modernity, which was characterized by a top-down elite-driven approach. The monolithic nation-state building project ultimately undermined calls for plurality, equality and the extension of religious rights and liberties to various actors in Turkish society. Reactions against the secularist policies went hand in hand with the rise of various groups' ethno-religious and cultural claims. As Kadioglu notes, '[s]ecularization in the form of a project [of laicism] paved the way to a dialectical choreography that negated itself by generating its own rival'.[2] In the end, escalating conflicts between secular elites and religious groups hollowed out consensus on what were to be the Republic's values and turned into a chronic problem of contemporary Turkey.

From the time of its creation in 2001, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) challenged the restrictive and exclusionary practices of the Kemalist model of secularism. As a powerful political force able to form four consecutive majority governments, the AKP also promised to reshuffle the model towards a new democratic alternative. Its political project of conservative democracy as defined in its programme was largely seen as an antidote to the Kemalist model. This new alternative to the established relations between the state and religion helped the AKP gain a large basis of support beyond its immediate Sunni-oriented religious constituency. The liberals, social democrats and leftist political actors, who were critical of Kemalism, welcomed the AKP's alternative. At the end of its 14 years in power as a one-party government, the AKP has gradually but steadily revised some of the institutional set-up of the secular model and successfully removed the old Kemalist establishment from state structures.[3] The outcome of this transformation in reshuffling the restrictions of the Kemalist model, however, has been at best controversial. For some, the AKP-led reforms brought about the end of the Kemalist era and of the authoritarian reflexes of the Turkish state, becoming a turning point in the normalization of politics. For many others, instead of expanding democratic gains, the AKP appropriated key Kemalist institutions and used them to consolidate its own power at the expense of broad democratic rights and freedoms. Most notably, the Gezi events in the summer of 2013 showed that the AKP has reversed, if not suspended, some of the key social-political rights as well as institutional safeguards that enable the accommodation of diverse groups in Turkish society.

This article analyses the development and reshuffling of institutional arrangements, which characterize the founding model of Turkish secularism, in order to assess in what direction the AKP governance has steered the inherited model of the Turkish Republic. To evaluate the change and continuity in the AKP policies, we critically analyse the main features and restrictions of the Kemalist model of secularism, its principles, institutions and political consequences. Section II investigates the changes and continuities of the model in re-envisaging measures of religious freedom and equality under successive AKP governments. We focus on how and indeed whether relations between the state and religion have advanced towards a more inclusive and pluralist political trajectory, which seeks to accommodate religious freedoms and equality.[4] A critical analysis of the Kemalist model and the direction of the AKP's policies and discourse on religion may not only help us to understand the consequences of specific institutional choices and mechanisms but also to evaluate the crucial role of the state in developing a democratic plural life.

Secularism, the nation-state and modernity in Turkey

The Republican elites tried to incorporate western attitudes, practices and laws into Turkish society in order to engineer a modern nation-state and society. When envisioning this project, Kemalists 'saw religion as a political threat [to the new regime] and Islam, in particular, as a cause of social, cultural, political and economic decline'.[5] Also, as a precaution against the reinstatement of the old regime, which adopted a clear religious orientation, the new state entrepreneurs implemented a series of reforms that limited the visibility of religion and religious practices. Among those reforms were the abolishment of the sultanate and the office of the caliphate, the closure of dervish lodges, the introduction of a new dress code for men and women in public life, the imposition of secular education, the adoption of the new Latin alphabet instead of Arabic script, and the replacement of Islamic law with modern civil and family law. These reforms not only contributed to uniform practices nationwide but also made secularism one of the key determinants of the aspired and homogeneous Turkish national identity.[6]

In this project of state building, both national identity and the national public sphere were marked by the 'secular order of the Republic'. Accordingly, the state elites entrenched their ideal of secularism in the constitutional framework and everyday practices. The model of secularism presented by the state modernizers, therefore, was not the organic outcome of societal development, as it had evolved in western societies. In the case of Turkey, it emerged as a result of intense processes of social engineering or as a political project with authoritarian dimensions.[7] The elite-driven and top-down dimension of this social engineering was problematic from the start, in the sense that the Kemalist *raison d'état* developed as a type of governmentality that reduced politics to a social technique in order to produce a certain social order and to control society.[8] As Davison correctly asserts, the secular reforms 'created a new structure of control and oversight between the state and Islam' while 'the Republic's founders sought to use the powers of state to interpret, oversee, and administer religious doctrine and practice'.[9] The authoritarian element of new relations between state and religion, inherent in the Kemalist model, manifested itself in monopolized decisions on religious matters and imposed orthodoxy on society. This *raison d'état*, moreover, did not insist on an egalitarian political project that guaranteed plurality and diversity of Turkish society. On the contrary, it insisted on a political doctrine that supervises and reproduces social cohesion, a unified national identity, and the primacy of the state at the expense of citizens' individual or collective rights and liberties.

The evolution of the modernization project showed that the state in fact controlled religion to achieve simultaneously two contrary purposes. On the one hand, by placing religion under strict state control, the Kemalist state aimed to eliminate possible reactionary religious movements and disintegrative threats against the Republic and its fundamental reforms. To leave religion to operate independently of the state's monopoly was considered a possible threat with destabilizing consequences for the state's projected values. On the other hand, the state actively defined and reproduced Sunni Islam as orthodoxy in Turkish society. '[T]he Kemalists not only subordinated religion to the state, they also used and manipulated religion, that is, the correct Kemalist Sunni Orthodox version of Islam, for their own particular political purposes.'[10] Accordingly, the Kemalist establishment moved to incorporate and/or suppress the public role of religion, depending on how much 'religion' at any time was needed to reproduce or maintain the nation's monolithic identity, to restrain disruption of diversity and to mobilize the masses against differences.[11]

Overall, secularism in Turkey remained far from being a mediator of different worldviews and cultural practices. Instead, it blocked institutional means to reconcile differences. More specifically, it failed to either solve existing problems or identify the principles and procedures to do so. By incorporating religion into the institutional infrastructure of the state, Kemalist secularism established a monopoly over religious matters; arranged for distribution of public resources in a partial and discriminatory manner that favoured a particular religion; attempted to eliminate and suppress alternative visions of what constitutes a political community and the public good; and used Sunni Islam as a tool for indoctrination in order to create the desired subject and social order.

The institutional dimension of Kemalist secularism

Contrary to the widespread belief that Kemalist secularists immediately sought to eradicate the role of religion in public life,[12] the state establishment used religion to discipline the new Turkish citizen by controlling religious practices through institutional means. As Davison points out, religion 'was not disestablished in the society, it was differently established'.[13] While the autonomous spheres of politics, law and science began to detach themselves from religious interpretations, Islam and its teachings inserted itself into public life as a part of national identity or in the form of a Turkish–Islamic synthesis. In this framework, Kemalist secularism granted the armed forces, the national education system and the Diyanet a privileged position in controlling and promoting an 'enlightened' version of Islam in society. In these institutions, religion became instrumental in disseminating the new modern and national ideas among society as well as bolstering the political legitimacy of the new state.[14] The congruity of religion, particularly that of Sunni Islam with nationalism, was thus embodied in the state structures and in the official discourse, so long as it remained framed by the state. The management of religion by the respective institutions deserves a closer look in order to understand the interventionist nature of Kemalist secularism.

The military

The civil–military relationship in Turkey has always been uneven and its character at any given time served as a useful indicator to assess who controlled the reins of state power. As 'a self-appointed primary modernizer institution' and 'the vanguard of reform and the harbingers of enlightenment' as well as 'the ultimate guardian of the secular Republic against internal/external threats', the military enjoyed the authority to project its power into the public and political sphere.[15] Specifically, it was awarded 'a variety of privileges, including freedom from control by the elected authorities'.[16] In the Turkish context and history, the armed forces thus enjoyed a high degree of autonomy in the political system, which places them above elected parties and executive power. They were often portrayed and in fact became 'true guardians' of the nation and national interests. Consequently, the military interrupted the civilian rule on several occasions through military interventions. As the protector, educator and disciplining body, in line with Kemalist principles, its interaction with religious groups, political Islam and especially Islamist political parties has not always been easy.

There have been several cases where the military expressed discontent with Islamic movements. One of the reasons why the military intervened to interrupt the political process in

1960 was because the policies implemented by the then centre-right Democrat Party were thought to be out of step with the secular democratic principles of the Republic. The military punished the party leaders and rewrote the Constitution. In 1962, it also established the National Security Council, whose initial role was to provide recommendations to the government on matters of national security and to assist in the formulation of national security policies.[17] In February 1997, the National Security Council played a pivotal role in dissolving the coalition government and banning the then ruling conservative Islamist Welfare Party. Specifically, the Council forced the coalition government to enact a list of measures aimed at eliminating the rise of radical Islam.[18] Finally, in 2007, just before the presidential elections, the Turkish Armed Forces published a warning to the ruling AKP government that read:

> Recently, the prominent problem during the presidential election process has been focused on debating secularism. This situation has been followed with concern by the Turkish Armed Forces. It should not be forgotten that the Turkish Armed Forces has a side in these debates and is an absolute protector of secularism. Moreover, the Turkish Armed Forces is absolutely against the ongoing debates and negative comments, and, when needed, will put forward its attitude and deed, openly and clearly. No one should doubt that … the Turkish Armed Forces is resolute in performing the duties assigned to it by the laws.[19]

With this declaration the military sought to regain its control over the diffusion of religious ideas, symbols and actions and the extent to which it permitted political debate. Listing some of the incidents that it deemed to threaten the secular nature of the country, it called upon the general public, but mainly the government, to act in accordance with the rules governing the separation of state and religion.[20]

However, this 'wall of separation' that the military drew attention to has rarely been concrete. In the history of the republic, relations between the state and religion could be permeable as long as Islam served the interests of the state and homogeneity of the Turkish nation. This was especially apparent after the 1980 military intervention, when the army helped to institutionalize the role of religion and to expand its hegemony by making religious instruction compulsory in public schools, opening up several *imam-hatip* (religious vocational) schools across the country, and ensuring constitutional protection for the Diyanet.[21] In addition to this, and in an attempt to suppress leftist movements and civil unrest, Sunni Islam and its teachings were made available in public institutions under the strict supervision of military leaders. However, this was not exclusive to the period after 1980. Since the foundation of the Republic, Islam has been integrated into military discourse. The ideas of Islam as one true religion, military service as a religious duty and martyrdom as the noblest path that a citizen can follow have been fostered in public and military education.[22] This led to a paradox. On the one hand the military was seen as a part of the differentiated settlement that supported the separation of state and religion, on the other as an authority that promoted specific religious values in national public space. This duality marked and distinguished the secularist model and experience of Turkey. The same holds true for the Diyanet and the education system, as will be illustrated below.

The Diyanet

Established in 1924 with Law No. 429, which formally recognizes it as a state institution, the Diyanet is responsible 'to execute and administer the affairs of Islam and its places of

worship'. In subsequent decades its existence and role has been further institutionalized by the Constitutional system. In 1965, Law No. 633 granted the Diyanet responsibility 'to execute religious duties in accordance with Islamic beliefs, prayer and ethics, to enlighten the public about religion and to administer places of worship'. Article 136 of the 1982 military Constitution reads: 'The Diyanet, which is within the general administration, shall exercise its duties prescribed in its particular law, in accordance with the principles of secularism, removed from all political views and ideas, and aiming at national solidarity and integrity.' According to Article 89 of the Political Parties Law, the section on the 'Protection of Principles and Reform of Ataturk and the Secular Nature of the State', the Diyanet enjoys also constitutional protection to the extent that the Constitutional Court can close down any political party that challenges it,[23] on grounds that can be found in Articles 2 and 4 of the Constitution.[24] Thus, the Diyanet retained constitutional authority to manage religious affairs and educate the public about Islam.

However, there are many problems with the 'secular' role and structure of the institution.[25] For one, although it is a public organization that relies on the taxpayer's money, the Diyanet informs the public about and administers the affairs of one particular version of Islam; that is, the Hanefi School of the Sunni sect. This specific bias, therefore, compromises the rights of members of other religions and non-believers, who are forced to support the Sunni community and its monetary needs through taxation. Second, as the sole authority responsible for 'enlightening the public about religion', it not only produces, reproduces and circulates knowledge about Islam, together with its practices, but also defines what constitutes 'true Islam'. As a result, the Diyanet claims authority to define what amounts to belief. Finally, in its endeavours 'aiming at national solidarity and integrity', the institution seeks to harmonize Turkish nationhood with Islam. In other words, it aims to homogenize the collective national imaginary by idealizing the combination between nation and Islam as the 'desired' or 'planed' state of Turkish citizenship. The main consequence is that Diyanet ignores and undermines the plural composition of society by leaving out other ethno-national and ethno-religious groups, such as Alevis, Jews, Rums and Armenians. Moreover, by following a particular strand of Islam, the Diyanet's publications and textbooks used in obligatory religious instruction sanctify the Turkish nation and the state,[26] making the institution a tool for legitimizing the established state order.

Although all this contradicts the democratic character of the state, as protected by the Constitution, it does not clash with the model of secularism that the founding elites envisioned for the new Turkish Republic. The place of religion in social life has been both brought under control and made temporal in the context of centralized service provisions within the secular structure.[27] In this way, 'Diyanet is not an institution that shows how Kemalists are short of being secular. On the contrary, it is the institution of the way in which Kemalists become secular. It is the embodiment of authoritative secularism in Turkey.'[28] By holding state security and integrity above democratic rights of inclusion, the Diyanet has become one of the crucial arms of the authoritarian Kemalist establishment.[29]

The restrictions imposed on the practice and promotion of other religious traditions in public services has produced constant tension between state-promoted Islam on the one hand, and other options such as Sufi orders, and especially the Alevi tradition, on the other. According to the Diyanet, these orders fragment national unity and solidarity. Therefore, the institution refuses to leave the interpretation of Alevism to Alevis or to accept the Alevi faith with its traditions and places of worship on an equal basis with Sunnism. In one of

the declarations on its website, the Diyanet sees Alevism as an umbrella name for religious groups such as the Bektaşiler, Erdebil Sufiyan Süreği Talibleri, Tahtacılar and Hubyarlılar, and acknowledges that it plays a valuable role in the social, cultural and historical formation of Turkish society.[30] However, in the same declaration it denies the claim that it is a separate religion on the grounds that Alevism has fragmented formations within the nation-state and abroad, thus does not have a homogeneous structure and that anyway it accepts Islam as a religion, Muhammad as the last prophet and the Qur'an as the holy book. Furthermore, the Diyanet insists that Alevism is instead a rich and valuable 'core of Islam', which cannot be a distinct religion or different from the promoted Sunni version of Islam. The Diyanet thus recognizes the importance of the Alevis in Turkish history, yet sees them more as an ethnic group than a religious one, despite their own claims otherwise. The real issue here is not about how the Diyanet defines Alevism. The core of the problem is that the Diyanet, as a Sunni institution established within a secular state, claims to have the authority to define what Alevi faith is and should be. Through the Diyanet, the secular state positions itself as a theological authority, imposes orthodoxy over heterodoxy, and violates equal citizenship rights and freedom of religion in general.

National Education

The place of religion and religious instruction within the secular state has moved back and forth in the history of Turkey. While the national education system and the school curriculum are controlled and planned by the Ministry of National Education, the military and the Diyanet have agreed that religious instruction must be part of national education. However, its content, the institutions involved in religious instruction and teaching conditions have always been the subject of debate. During different periods and based on the political climate at a particular time, religious instruction and training have been constantly reconfigured. Following its ideology of 'ordering a disordered religious sphere', the state made sure to provide an infrastructure for religious education that does not contradict secularism.[31] Accordingly, a series of laws formalized conditions for training prayer and preacher leaders, organizing Qur'an courses as well as teaching compulsory religious courses in primary and secondary education.

Under the Unification of Education Law in 1924, the state closed all religious schools and opened up *imam-hatip* schools to train religious officials who could serve in places of worship, and in line with the principles of nationalism, secularism and state-sanctioned Islam. Thus, it aimed to impose uniformity in religious practice and set standards of piety throughout the nation-state structure.[32] Since their establishment, the destiny of these schools depended on the interests and policies of different governments. They were closed down in 1930 only to be reopened in 1948, when the state moved from a single-party democracy to a multi-party democracy. After the 1971 military intervention, the first four years of schooling were abolished, allowing *Imam hatibs* to function only at the high school level and for three years. However, in 1980 the military promoted *imam-hatips* again in order to gain popular support and to spread a nationalized and homogenizing version of Islam as an antidote to leftist ideologies and booming claims of diverse ethno-religious communities. In addition to this, the rise of Islamic associations and orders, such as Naqshibandi and the Gulen movement, as well as the increased popularity of the Islamist political parties, such as the Welfare Party and its political idea of Muslim conservatism during the 1990s, raised the

demand for such schools, especially in urban areas. However, in 1997, as discussed above, by making the government comply with the measures of 28 February , the armed forces recommended that compulsory education change again from five to eight years. This led to the closure of the *imam-hatip* secondary schools.[33] By then, secular groups began to see these schools as a potential threat to the secular foundation of the nation because of their raising radical religious groups that aimed to infiltrate the state by occupying high-rank cadres. As a result of the measures of 28 February, the military attempted to reinstate its control over religion, but only after observing that its previous efforts to use religion as a source of homogeneity in the 1980s went too far.

Besides compulsory education, university education has also been controlled by the state. The military regime of 1980 established the Higher Education Council (YOK), which is authorized to control the financial, administrative and ideological aspect of universities, giving way to its close supervision of academic freedom and autonomy. The YOK still maintains close control of academic life via mechanisms that range from the appointments and promotions of faculty members to checking on staff and student activities. Initially, most students and academics celebrated its formation and suggested policies, especially when YOK supported a ban on the headscarf in universities on the grounds that wearing such religious symbols was in conflict with the secular principles of the state. Considered a symbol of political Islam, women who wear the headscarf had to either drop out of university or abandon this particular religious practice. Thus, YOK policies not only created problems of access to higher education for religious women but also affected the lifestyle of many women affected by such policies. This came with several social implications and problems related to women's access to employment opportunities that require a university education, conflicts within families and public resentment towards government policies and groups that supported the ban.

Yet, this state-mandated mode of secularism meant neither neutrality nor enmity of the Kemalist state to religion. On the contrary, its positive biases towards the Sunni majority, as long as it remained under the strict control of the state, caused secularism to justify restrictions over democratic politics and liberal rights. In 2002, the AKP came up with a new political programme promising to reform this model of secularism along a democratic and liberal track while also furthering guarantees of religious freedom.

The AKP's reshuffling of secularism: an alternative?

The AKP, emerging from a split in political Islam, came to power in 2002 after winning 34% of the votes and 363 of 550 seats in parliament. In the 2007 elections, the AKP increased its vote to 46%, in 2011 and 2015 to around 49%. This was a landslide victory in Turkish political history, especially for a party whose original members came mainly from the rounds of former Islamist movements. However, the AKP differed from its Islamist predecessors because it justified the aims of its political and social transformations with reference to democratic values, liberal principles and EU integration. Based on its programme, many scholars have defined the AKP as a centre-right party, Islamic liberal, conservative democrat, moderate Islam or passive secular.[34] Accordingly, the party's version of political Islam is compatible with liberal democracy and its programme should be viewed as a democratizing force in Turkey.

Later in its tenure in government, the AKP presented its political programme as a struggle against military oversight and/or oppressive, elitist and exclusionary features of the secular model. By contrast, the party claimed to defend the neutrality of the state towards religion, and to contest the headscarf ban.

Over the course of its governance, the AKP has certainly challenged the Kemalist establishment and dismantled it as a state ideology. Especially after its first term in government, the AKP managed to limit the control of the military in civilian affairs. The e-declaration of 2007 was the final fight between the AKP majority and the military over the future of the secular system and what form it should take in public life. Additionally, the Constitutional Court also gradually lost its status as the guardian of Kemalist ideology, and all the remaining institutions of the Kemalist 'establishment', such as the Higher Board of Education, the Diyanet, and the High Council of Judges and Prosecutors, came under the effective control of the AKP majority.[35] There is no doubt that Turkey has undergone significant transformations under the AKP. However, what is contested is the direction of these changes in relation to the goals and structures of the founding Kemalist model. Those who consider the AKP to be a liberal or passive secular party make their arguments by showing how authoritarian the Kemalist model used to be, instead of checking how the AKP has transformed the institutions of the Kemalist state and its restrictive approach to plurality in society.[36] A closer examination of the AKP's transformation of the Kemalist model can inform us as to whether the AKP has institutionalized a more democratic and pluralist alternative, or it has merely appropriated the same repressive model to subject society to its own dictate of Islamization.

In its party programme, the AKP states that 'it considers religion as one of the most important institutions of humanity and secularism as a prerequisite of democracy, and an assurance of the freedom of religion and conscience. It also rejects the interpretation and distortion of secularism as enmity against religion.' In the programme, the AKP defines secularism as 'a principle which allows people of all religion and beliefs to comfortably practice their religions, to be able to express their religious convictions and live accordingly, but which also allows people without beliefs to organise their lives along these lines. From this point of view, secularism is a principle of freedom and social peace.'[37] Here, the AKP not only states its commitment to secularism defined along pluralistic lines, but also condemns discrimination based on religious beliefs. Specifically, the AKP 'considers the attitudes and practices which disturb pious people, and which discriminate them due to their religious lives and preferences, as anti-democratic and in contradiction to human rights and freedoms'.[38]

Based on its programme, one can expect the AKP to reform the state in order to make it neutral towards any beliefs or non-beliefs, but also to institutionalize freedom of religion so that discriminatory practices favouring Sunni Islam would be abolished, thus moving the Kemalist secularism towards a more egalitarian and inclusive model. Yet, AKP-led reforms regarding the relations between state and religion show that the state architecture, which served to discriminate against religious groups and beliefs by favouring Sunni Islam, remained intact. In general, only Sunnis benefited from the AKP's overhauling reforms; repressive practices and institutions that targeted others did not change much.

For one thing, the AKP failed to question and reform either the status of the Diyanet as a state institution or its Sunni character. To the extent that it mobilizes around one specific school of Islam, it is very difficult to reconcile the Diyanet with values of state neutrality and freedom of religion, which the AKP claims to defend. In fact, rather than dissolving

or downsizing the Diyanet, the AKP has substantially increased its share of the budget, its personnel and its influence. In 2015, the Diyanet's budget amounted to 5.7 billion Turkish Lira, which is more than the sum of eight major ministries' budget. The real inflation-adjusted increase in the Diyanet's budget between 2002 and 2012 is around 176%.[39] During the same period, the number Diyanet personnel has also increased from 74,000 to 141,000.[40] It is crucial to note that, despite its substantial enlargement, the Diyanet has not become more representative. That is to say, all the increased budget and personnel have been solely used in the service of the Sunni brand of Islam.

In the June 2015 elections, the AKP vehemently criticized proposals from the CHP (Republican People's Party) for creating a more neutral and equidistant Diyanet. According to one of the founders of the AKP and current President, Erdogan: 'The religion of this nation is clear… The members of other religious communities have their own institutions, and those are clear.'[41] Erdogan's statement shows that he views Sunni Islam as the religion of the nation, thus excluding both non-Muslims and other Muslims from his understanding of the nation and the role of state institutions. When admitting that the Diyanet is an institution for Sunnis, he moreover fails to take into account that the huge budget comes from all Turkish taxpayers, irrespective of their religious affiliation. Erdogan was even more threatening to the HDP's (Peoples' Democratic Party) proposal to close down the Diyanet when he said, 'to those who promise to abolish the Diyanet, it is clear what kind of a lesson our nation will teach them.'[42]

The Alevis' objection to the role and structure of the Diyanet is crucial for understanding the implications of the institution as well as the AKP's efforts to use it in function of an 'integrationist' policy towards various religious groups. Alevis have demanded formal equal recognition of their religion through the granting of legal status as places of worship to *cem* houses (Alevi prayer places) and the abolition of compulsory religious education. In 2009, the AKP attempted to address some of the Alevi demands by organizing seven workshops. The Alevi opening, as presented by the ruling party, was supposed to change established state policies towards the Alevi population. On the contrary, the Alevi opening has shown that the AKP adopted the same strategy as the Kemalist state in its treatment of religious differences and identity claims. During the workshops the crucial disagreement between the AKP government and the Alevis concerned the nature of the Alevi issue. For the Alevis, their problems and concerns are political in nature and should be addressed as issues of freedom of religious worship and equality. However, the AKP insisted that it is necessary to clarify the relation between Alevism and Islam before responding to Alevi demands. The AKP's main concern is to define the Alevi faith and to determine its main characteristics rather than to recognize the Alevi identity and their equal citizenship rights. Hence, the Alevi question, which is a political matter for the community concerned, is a theological question for the AKP.

The existence of a variety of interpretations of the Alevi faith among the community, and hence the lack of any single definition, is registered by the AKP as a problem and even one of the main sources of the issue. Instead of dealing with the political reasons for discrimination and exclusion of the Alevis, the AKP seems to accuse Alevis for their otherness. Whether such a single definition of the Alevi faith is reached by Alevis or made by the state is not the real issue. What is important is that such a definition excludes them from becoming part of a political debate. That the Alevis may or may not reach such a uniform definition of their faith, or celebrate the existence of a variety of interpretations as well as diversity

and plurality of practices as a constitutive part of the Alevi tradition, has no relevance to the Alevis' demand for recognition and equality.

The Alevi opening shows that the AKP has no intention to approach the Alevi question as a demand for equality and recognition of their identity. The AKP's concern is to deal with the Alevi question by defining the Alevi faith, its actors, rituals and spaces in order to make it acceptable for Sunni orthodoxy. To this end, the AKP aspires to organize the Alevi faith within the state by establishing educational institutions for Alevis, by appointing their leaders and regulating their sacred spaces.[43] As Yalcinkaya and Ecevitoglu accurately explain, the AKP's main aim is to reconstruct the Alevi tradition, similar to how the Kemalist state dealt with religion and plurality: organizing and regulating Sunni Islam within the state in order to enforce orthodoxy.[44]

As Borovali and Bayroz note, the Alevi issue represents two challenges for the unitary Turkish state.[45] First, it raises the problem of recognizing ethnic and religious minority groups. For the Turkish state, any recognition and democratization in these matters could lead to the emergence of similar demands from other groups. This in return would lead to the second challenge of 'weakening national unity and harmony'. As mentioned earlier, selecting and controlling an official religion for the society has been a central mechanism to construct the monolithic social structure the state aspires to. The equal recognition of Alevism and of *cem* houses as a place of worship would jeopardize the state's monopoly. Constructing the recognition of Alevi as a security issue that threatens national unity is common to both Kemalist secularism and the AKP's policies on religion.

The status of compulsory religious courses in public schools has been another source of conflict. Not only Alevis but also many other citizens who would prefer their children not to receive a religious education that is biased towards the Sunni interpretation of Islam are strongly opposed to these classes.[46] Alevis took the issue to the European Court of Human Rights on two occasions. In both cases, the ECtHR ruled that compulsory religious classes in the Turkish education system violate certain basic human rights. In its recent decision on 16 September 2014, the Court called on Turkey to introduce 'a system whereby pupils could be exempted from religion and ethics classes without their parents having to disclose their own religious or philosophical convictions'. Despite the objections of Alevis and the rulings of the ECtHR, however, the AKP insists on the necessity of compulsory religious education and its current content—teaching only the Sunni interpretation. The reason behind this insistence was clearly explained by Erdogan, who saw the compulsory religious courses as a policy in line with the ruling party's aim to raise a pious generation.[47] Without responding to Alevi objections and irrespective of the ECtHR's decision, in 2012 the AKP introduced three optional religious courses on the Qur'an, the Prophet Muhammad's life and the fundamentals of religion.

The aim of raising a pious generation has not been limited to compulsory religious courses. The AKP reformed the education system substantially for the same purpose. In 2012, the ruling majority extended the eight-year compulsory education to 12 years with a new structure known as '4+4+4 Reform' (Law no. 6287), with four-year phases of primary, secondary and high school. With the new system, the AKP reopened the *imam-hatip*'s secondary sections, enabling children to commence *imam-hatip* schooling at an earlier age. The new system also brought about a new placement procedure. As a result, '40,000 students were automatically enrolled in *imam-hatip* schools against their will, including numerous Alevi and several Armenian students'.[48] The AKP's education system also changed

the regulations regarding Qur'an courses by lifting the age restriction, which used to be 12 years old. In addition to supporting the role *imam-hatip* schools in the education system, the AKP substantially increased their number. Between 2010 and 2014, the number of *imam-hatip* schools increased by 73%.[49] With these new arrangements, as Orhan Kemal Cengiz underlines, the AKP has transformed *the imam-hatip* schools 'from a selective option to a central institution in the education system' and is now able to effectively raise a pious generation from an early age.[50]

Conclusion

The relationship between the state and religion established by the Republican regime has had discriminatory and repressive consequences for religious plurality in Turkey. Since the 1990s, different groups including political Islam and the Alevi movements have increasingly challenged this relation as enabling discrimination and violation of equality.

In 2002, when the AKP came to power, it differentiated itself from the previous Islamic parties that propagated a radical agenda of political Islam. The party, moreover, promised to reform the established relation between state and religion towards a more liberal and pluralist approach. In this article we have discussed the outcome and direction of the AKP-led transformation process with a special emphasis on secular arrangements to accommodate religious plurality.

We have argued that seeing the AKP as a liberal and pluralist alternative to Kemalist secularism, is, first of all, based on a misleading diagnosis of the Kemalist model. We cannot limit our understanding of the problems concerning religious freedom in Turkey, be it the headscarf issue or the Alevi question, by defining the Kemalist state in terms of privatization of religion or anti-religion. The Kemalist state, since its inception, adopted various policies in relation to religion, mostly depending on its perception of threat and enemy at a given time. On occasion, the state tried to restrict religion, seeing it as a threat, but at other times,it established educational institutions and increased the influence of religion in the society and used it as a source of empowerment, legitimacy and mobilization. The Kemalist state's strategy in approaching religion and religious plurality was to control religion by reconstructing orthodoxy through state institutions. Religious authorities within these institutions have claimed the monopoly in determining the true and correct interpretation of Islam, while the state established the necessary policies and mechanisms to make the Sunni version of Islam hegemonic in Turkish society.

If we are to document the authoritarian tendencies of Kemalist secularism in the way it reconstructs, regulates and disseminates a particular version of Islam as a building block in the formation of society and the individual, then, the AKP and its policies in relation to religion would mean a continuity of the same authoritarian practices and institutions. The functions of the Diyanet and compulsory religious education have been appropriated and used by the AKP, for the purpose of an even more conservative-Islamic political and social transformation. The AKP-led transformation, much like the old system, aims at eradicating plurality and creating a monolithic society through indoctrination, a strict state monopoly over religious matters, and discriminatory policies against alternative visions and beliefs. The litmus test for the AKP and its commitment to religious freedom should particularly take into account the Alevi question. The state's attempt to reconstruct the Alevi faith demonstrates preservation of the repressive format of state–religion relations. Specifically,

the way the government handled the Alevi openings testified not to the AKP's openness to dialogue and deliberation, but to its urge to suppress differences, especially when it comes to religious heterodoxy.

To understand the AKP and current conditions of religious plurality and freedom in Turkey, we have to approach the AKP and political Islam not as victims of Kemalist secularism but as its benefactors. Ultimately, by looking at the Turkish experience of secularism, old and new, we can demonstrate that a democratic and pluralist arrangement that guarantees equality of all citizens is possible when the political actors give up the mechanism and benefits of a repressive state.

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