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The role of religion in Turkey’s politics has been one of the most contested and controversial topics in the country’s political history. Different views have generated a large number of accounts that attempt to assess whether the country’s system of secularism and the role of religious movements have been an obstacle or a boon for Turkey’s democracy. A review of existing accounts shows that they fall into two clashing frameworks in their assessment of the ideational and institutional design of Turkey’s republic vis-à-vis religion and its religious politics.

The first framework, known as the ‘Rupture Paradigm’, treats the establishment of the Republic of Turkey as a clear break from the Ottoman Empire’s regime and especially from its policies regarding religion. In such accounts, Turkey’s regime is viewed as an authoritarian secularist regime par excellence in which the state constrains the role of religion in the public sphere. According to the Rupture Paradigm, the establishment of Turkey’s Republic in 1923 was a radical and reactionary project that not only tried to undo the institutional legacy of the Ottoman Empire but also to change the role of religion in the entire society (Heper 2001).

A second framework, referred to here as the ‘Continuity Paradigm’, emphasises the institutional and ideational connections and resiliencies between the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish republic and notes how the seeds of many of the Republic’s reformist policies were launched during the late years of the empire. When viewed from the Continuity Paradigm perspective, the common depiction of the newly acquired role of Islam in modern Turkey as the suppressed expression of marginalised masses against the radical policies of the republican elite oversimplifies many political processes.

**Locating the role of religion in Turkey’s political history and party system**

Just as with any other religion in other contexts, Islam plays a multifaceted role in Turkey and matters to party politics on different levels. At the behavioural level, multiple interpretations of Islam influence the daily practices of individuals from the performance of rituals, celebrations and commemorations to the distribution of charity. At the cognitive level different meanings extracted from the main Islamic texts and theological discussions offer an interpretive framework that has an impact on many social and personal practices. The role of Islam also manifests
itself at the formal and informal institutional level, in the role of *imams*, religious leaders, mosques and the state’s offices (such as the Directorate of Religious Affairs, DRA); therefore, Islam also serves as a direct social and ideological force to organise many institutions and exerts influence through them. As noted above, the Rupture Paradigm that treats Turkey’s secularism as a brand-new state ideology privileges the institutional aspect of Islam’s role in society and contends that Turkey’s history can be seen as a struggle between the forces of Islamic groups and ideas that seek to empower marginalised conservative groups against the forces of secularism that promote aggressive modernisation/Westernisation of the secularist elite. Such approaches use the rationale of the cleavage modelling of party formation rooted in the studies of Lipset and Rokkan (1967). According to Lipset and Rokkan’s (1967) approach, the party system of a given country captures the expression of underlying social conflicts that marked the formation of the nation. Such a perspective presumes that the basic social and political cleavages that came to the fore during the formation of the state (e.g. central state and peripheral communities; the central state and a supranational church; the industrial revolution induced urban/rural cleavage, and, later, worker/employer cleavage) shape the formation of parties. In other words, the formation of political parties is the political expression of self-conscious, socially closed groups, representing competing interests between workers and employers; between those living in peripheral communities and central state builders, and between secularists and defenders of the Church (Bartolini 2000; Bartolini and Mair 1990; Marks 1989). Using the rationale of the cleavage model, many accounts of Turkey’s political system attribute the formation of the parties to the conflict between two groups: those who want a more extensive role for Islam and those who want to curtail its influence.

Conventional and uncritical studies of Turkey’s political regime, in line with the cleavage model that dominates studies of parties in Europe, contend that the establishment of the Turkish Republic meant the dominance of secularist policies and its embodiment within the Republican People Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi), while multiple parties were formed to reinstate the role of Islam (Democratic Party and the National Outlook Parties). In contrast, the Continuity Paradigm views the politics of the Ottoman Empire and of Turkey as a struggle between modernisation and Westernisation vs. Islamisation. Although the Westernisation vs. Islamisation paradigm is applied widely to explain many events, such accounts disregard both conflicts within Islamic entities as well as other institutional and political interests. For instance, the Janissary-led popular opposition to the New Order (1792) is often depicted as a conservative resistance, fashioned by Muslim ‘anti-Westernisation’ reactions. Yet careful contextualisation of such events indicates that it was not the religious aspect of the New Order but the top-down disciplinary policies of the central state that unsettled some vested interests in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that primarily sparked opposition to the reforms. While Islam played a role in the opposition, it was not perfunctorily evoked Islamic or anti-Western sentiments but rather intra-religious struggles such as a call for a ‘puritanical’ Islam, efforts to rejuvenate the Muslim order by eliminating invented traditions, or to discipline Muslim souls with the universal principles of revelation and reason; all played a role in the mobilisation of protestors (Yaycioglu 2018).

Given the multifaceted role of religion in the Ottoman Empire, any attempt to understand the role of religion and religious parties in Turkey today needs to recognise the resilient approach that pits secularising Turkey and the Islam-centred Ottoman Empire against each other. These accounts obfuscate the multifaceted role of religion in both contexts. For instance, the treatment of the Ottoman past as a religious one ignores a key concern: despite the importance of religion, Islam did not maintain a primary role in the organisation of politics under the Ottoman system. A secular legal system (based on laws, *kanuns*) coexisted with a
religions one based on Sharia, creating a hybrid system (Bottoni 2007). Likewise, for a thorough assessment of the role of Islam under the Ottoman Empire and later under the Turkish Republic, it is important to note that, despite the emphasis on Ottoman religious officials and institutions, the Ottoman state-appointed representatives such as qadis, muftis or teachers were an urban phenomenon. Only in the nineteenth century did the state-run religious institutions and leadership begin to have residence in and thus impact on the countryside. As a result, the institutionalisation of Islam had limited impact on the everyday practices and views of most ‘ordinary’ people. Similarly, in its early years, politics in post-Ottoman Turkey was affected by the fact that most people lived in the countryside rather than urban areas.

While studies of religion often pay most attention to the institutional design of a country’s politics and any room left to the ability of religious authorities and religious parties to mediate between social movements and institutional structures, it is important to assess the impact of religious parties on political outcomes in Turkey. In the studies of Turkey’s religious politics (i.e. how religion and politics interact) many accounts refer to the country’s laïcité, that is, secularism as the root cause of the existing political cleavage. For many scholars, it was Turkey’s choice of laïcité, the decision of the founding elite, especially Ataturk, which caused mass reactions. Thus, one of the main cleavages of Turkey’s party politics, unlike those of the Ottoman era, became the issue of religious and secular conflict. Subsequently, conventional analyses of the newly emergent political system under Turkey’s republic centred their attention on the post-1950 era, when the country moved to a multi-party system. According to the Rupture Paradigm Turkey’s politics between 1923 and 1950 is a perfect example of modernist domination and Islamic backlash; yet according to the Continuity Paradigm any efforts to understand the parties in Turkey’s Republic necessitate a survey of the political movements and parties formed under the Ottoman Empire. A broader historical account recognises the Fedailer Party (1859) as the first political party. Fedailer was formed as a party prior to the adoption of the second constitution and the transition to a parliamentary democracy under the Ottoman Empire in 1908.

A critical survey of Turkey’s political history reveals that the country’s early institutions, constituted during the country’s single party rule between 1923 and 1946 under the Republican People’s Party (RPP), were rooted in broader historical conflicts and compromises. Although the RPP was established on 9 September 1923, it was the continuation of ‘The Union for the Defence of Rights in Anatolia and Rumelia’, a national resistance movement that was formed to prevent the occupation of the disintegrating Ottoman Empire. Thus, the RPP’s roots predated the republic and adopted its current name in 1935. The four principles of the party, which became the state’s founding ideology, namely Republicanism, Nationalism, Populism and Secularism, were adopted in 1927. The ideal of ‘Republicanism’ was presented as a governance structure in which the ultimate sovereignty belonged to the people. It was a radical statement, especially from an Islamist-traditionalist perspective, due to its refutation of the motto that ‘the ultimate sovereignty belongs to God’. Although later it acquired a more ethnically specific meaning, the principle of Nationalism referred to the unity of different ethnic groups as one nation, defining the nation as consisting of all those groups who joined forces to establish Turkey’s Republic during the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The Nationalism principle further cultivated the idea of nation as the source of sovereignty. The principle of ‘Populism’ centered on a notion of the ‘people’ (halk) that is not rift by social and class divisions. One of the most contested principles, which is often translated to English as secularism, was laïklik, a Turkish appropriation of the French term, laïcité, which sought to limit significantly the role of religion in the state’s politics and society.
Due to its pivotal role in regard to religion and religious parties, the principle of laiklik requires special attention. The contested principle of laiklik promotes the idea that it is the separation of religious affairs from worldly or state affairs that creates an ideal political regime and social system. From the perspective of laïcité ‘religion’ is a matter of conscience and a personal issue; thus, its impact on political life should be curtailed. Such an approach to religion raises questions regarding the political claims of a monotheistic religion and whether and how Islam can be confined to personal domains. However, it is not only the principle of laïcité but, in part due to their broad terms and the specific history of the country, all of the state’s founding principles have evoked many controversies as did the state’s organising principles after their initial implementation (Dural 2009). The contestation around Turkey’s laiklik was among others shaped by the role of fatwas, religious opinions, issued by Sheyhul Islam in the late Ottoman Empire. For the proponents of laïcité, religiously sanctioned decisions and policies did not support the national interest (especially during the final years of the empire), indicating the need to create policies and institutions that cannot be legitimised by religious authorities alone. Sheyhul Islam’s complacency with regard to the invasion of Istanbul and efforts to suppress national resistance by religious verdicts (e.g. the fatwa of 11 April 1920) created an environment where national policies were contested by various publics depending on the weight they placed on such verdicts (Özçeli 2012). The centralised nature of formal religious education and the decentralised nature of dervish lodges created a pluralistic religious environment for the emerging republic.

**Turkey’s pro-Islamic parties?**

As noted above, a thorough review of the role of religion and political parties in Turkey requires both a careful review of the existing frameworks as well as the specific context of state policies. Despite broadening interest in Turkey, many analyses continue to reiterate uncritical observations such as the adoption of drastically secularising policies in 1923, rendering the Ottoman Empire a religious and Islamic state without recognising the roots and context of the Republican Party’s policies. In fact, despite the assumption of an aggressively secularist model, the first constitution (1924) stated that the religion of the Turkish state was Islam. In April 1928, the statement regarding the state’s religion was removed. Removed also was the statement of religious phrases like ‘vallahi’ (by god) that were used in the official oaths of the members of parliament. On 3 February 1928, the delivery of Khutbas (Friday Sermons) in Turkish was accepted and a committee was formed to translate into Turkish the call to prayer and other prayers. Turkey’s republic became secular (Laik) on 5 February 1937, with the replacement of Article 2. Religiously and ethnically motivated revolts, challenges to the state (e.g. Sheik Said Rebellion of 1925) and violent attacks (e.g. the beheading of an army officer in 1930 during an attempt to contain one religiously oriented protest) created an environment where the establishment of the new state meant the adoption of many policies to subdue counter-state challenges.

One of the main challenges to the RPP’s policies came from Turkey’s first successful opposition party, the Democratic Party (DP). Due to its opposition to the RPP the DP was perfunctorily considered a religious party. However, a review of the DP’s 1946 programme shows that, although the party stressed the importance of religious values, it did not adopt any overtly Islamist ideology (i.e. an ideology that treats Islamic sources as the only ones for state policies). Instead the party noted that its laicism was defined in the context of the state’s disinterest in religion, implying that religious beliefs would not have a role in either the formation or enactment of law, while still believing in religious freedom of individuals to practise the religion of their choice (Leder 1979). Likewise, the first election manifesto of the RPP in 1954, four years after the party lost its political dominance over the DP, focused on the negative impact of prevalent corruption, the use of state
power and economics but not on the DP’s policies regarding Islam. In fact, the DP’s policy focused on the provision of religious education and services and addressed public discontent about the changes in some well-established daily religious rituals (e.g. changing prayers from Arabic to Turkish). The DP’s own programme noted that it was necessary to prepare a programme to address the religious education issue and to train religious clergy so that theology departments, placed in regular universities, should have authority over the issues they teach just as in other national education institutions. In July, 1932, the call for prayer was delivered in Turkish, ending a traditional practice of having prayers in Arabic. One of the most important policies of the DP was to remove the ban on Arabic recitation of *Ezān* (call for prayer) which had alienated religiously conservative groups (Kirkpinar 2018).

While the DP’s policies pertaining to Islamic practices were reactionary, they refrained from using explicitly Islamic language and focused on the policies of the RPP; the first overtly Islamic party entered into Turkey’s politics with the establishment of the National Order Party in 1970. The discourse of the National Order Party focused on economic development yet also criticised the state’s *laïcité* directly and sought to change the role of religion in society. Under freedom of conscience, the party noted that:

> **Our approach to *laïcité* is to oppose any understanding that turns it into an anti-religious institution. It is not acceptable to deprive our nation of religious knowledge—a nation that offered the best example of the protection of beliefs and conscience when in the Middle Ages Europe was marred by Inquisition courts and dark conservatism.**

(Le Parti National Ordre 1970)

Although the state’s founding ideals define broad guidelines and not specific policies, Turkey’s state founding ideology with its basic principles has become subject to a wide range of criticisms. Nationalism and republicanism have been questioned for not recognising class differences and ethnic plurality in defining the nation, while laicism has been questioned based on whether and how religion can be a question only of conscience without any public presence and policy impact. Turkey’s party politics generated movements in which some groups tried to strengthen and eliminate the principle of *laïcité* while other groups sought to promote the fusion of a laïc state and religious public through a Turkish-Islamic synthesis. Those who sought to promote an Islamic secular synthesis with the motto of secular state and religious public created a genre of parties under the main name of the National Action Movement.

Along with the presence of movements and ideas that claimed both the creation of a strong state and the importance of incorporating Islam to a state structure without turning it into a theocracy, those who argued that *laïcité* dominated the RPPs ideology and turned the entire state into an anti-religious institution, created a genre of anti-secularist parties. For these parties, despite its promises, Turkey’s *laïcité* sought to eliminate the role of religion in public and cut off Turkey’s cultural and institutional ties to the Ottoman Empire. One of the anomalies for critics of *laïcité* was the creation in 1924 of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (DRA). The DRA replaced Sheyhul Islam and assigned a place for religion in the state structure. For one group, the formation of DRA was meant to preserve the role of Islam in the state structure. For another group, the establishment of DRA was meant to create a version of Islam that is compatible with its goal to create a more Westernised regime. For the critics of *laiklik* as articulated by the National View movements and parties, the exclusion of Islam from state policies meant policies with excessively materialist ideas without enough consideration of moral growth. The reforms also included the closure of dervish lodges, thereby undermining different Islamic networks and pushing some underground. For the proponents of secularism, the goal of building a
new state required, among others, not only centralisation of once decentralised government institutions but also limitation of the role of Islamic networks and foundations. Given the demographic conditions of the state, laicism was a necessity.

Despite the plurality of views regarding Turkey’s state founding ideology, the use of anti-systemic language and the undermining secular structure of the state were protected by Turkey’s constitution, presenting one of the paradoxes of Turkey’s party system. According to Turkey’s constitution, ‘The statutes and programs, as well as the activities of political parties shall not be contrary to the principles of a secular republic; they shall not aim to promote or establish class or group dictatorship or dictatorship of any kind, nor shall they incite citizens to crime’ (Constitution of the Republic of Turkey n.d.). Although the 2010 and 2017 constitutional changes, enacted under the current rule of the Justice and Development Party, altered the composition of the constitutional courts making such closures difficult, ethnic and religious based public discourse was banned under the constitutional system. However, the presence and enactment of the constitutional ban created an environment in which religious or ethnically oriented parties developed a hybrid public discourse to avoid any closure. Therefore, one can talk about an invisible rule in Turkey’s politics whereby parties convey their messages through a coded language in the public sphere; a more ethnically and religiously centred language is used at the local level or behind closed doors. The presence of a multiplicity of discourses not only resulted in terms such as ‘takîyya’ (intentional deception) to capture the idea that Islamist parties concealed their real and long-term goals but also decreased the level of public trust in parties and institutions. Although Turkey’s party closures are seen as the result of policies enforced against religious parties, a historical review of the parties that faced the closures shows that they were not always religiously focused parties. Two of the first parties that faced closure, the Progressive Republican Party (Terakkiperver Cumhuriyet Fıkrası) and the Free Republican Party (Serbest Cumhuriyet Fıkrası), articulated resentment against the RPP’s single-party government between 1923 and 1945. It was not the parties’ programmes that indicated that they were deferent to religious opinions and beliefs but the context of revolts against the state that played a crucial role in the first closures in 1925 and 1930. In fact, it was the 1925 Seyh Said Uprisings, one of the main rebellions against the newly formed state that combined both Kurdish and Islamic discontents against the new Republican regime, that formed the background of the closure decision. Research shows that, out of 45 cases, a total of 27 parties were banned in Turkey on two different grounds: (1) political Islamists and violation of secularism (separation of religion and politics); and (2) Kurdish left and violation of territorial integrity/national unity (Celep 2014).

Turkey’s first overtly Islamist parties are often clustered as ‘National View (Millî Görûs)’ parties, indicating the impact of the ideas of Necmettin Erbakan, the leader of the movement. The Justice and Development Party (JDP) (in Turkish, Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) is seen as a splinter of the movement while the leadership of JDP argues that they completely shed their National Outlook skin. The name comes from a manifesto entitled ‘Millî Görûs’, published by Necmettin Erbakan. Millî referred to ‘Millî’ a term that was used under the Ottoman Empire to distinguish different religious communities. The first party of Millî Görûs, the National Order, was established in 1970 after Erbakan won a seat in the parliament as an independent candidate. Due to the restrictions on party discourse and practices, the National Order Party was outlawed and re-entered Turkey’s politics as the National Salvation Party in 1971. Challenging the focus on economic development, the programme of the National Order Party and its reincarnation emphasised the critical role of moral growth to overall development. Adopting a rather different discourse from other parties, the party’s programme argued that:
Drawing on the historical experiences and maturity acquired by our nation without damaging national and spiritual values within a democratic order, our party offers a heedful and focused synthesis of the moral and material development movements; doing so seeks to enlighten humanity and bring about welfare and prosperity and establish an exemplary civilisation and calls for our citizens to serve.

(National Order Party 1970)

While the party adopted other parties’ economic development ideals, such a development would require a nationally rooted moral foundation and incorporation of Islamic ideals and norms. The party closure indictment included many examples, such as the leadership’s classification of other parties as ‘batil’ those who are aberrant due to their inability to follow the ‘hak’ (right). ‘Batil’ and ‘hak’ were terms used in the Qur’an to describe the cosmic war between ‘good’ and ‘evil’. Use of such religious references, according to the chief public prosecutor, meant the deployment of religious terms and ideas to promote a political agenda.

Sixteen parties were closed down by a military coup in 1980, including the Salvation Party, which in 1983 reorganised as the Welfare Party (Refah Partisi). When the party was closed down, it was reorganised as the Virtue Party (Fazilet Partisi) in 1998. The closure of the Virtue Party proved to be a critical event; a splinter from the party, considered to be the branch of the party that represented a new view, formed today’s ruling JDP while the traditionalists continued their activities as the Felicity Party. Unlike its predecessor, the JDP’s programme does not use any overtly religious terms and ideas. Regarding laïcité, the party’s 2002 programme noted that:

In essence laïcité facilitates the expression by all faith groups of their beliefs and conducting their lives according to their beliefs as well as expression by those who do not have any beliefs. In this regard laïcité is the principle for freedom and societal peace. Our party refuses the abuse of beliefs and ethnicity for political purposes. Our party objects to the mistreatment of people who are religious and deems anti-democratic the treating them differently due to their practices. It also objects to the use of religion to oppress and economically dominate others who may think differently.

(Justice and Development Party 2002)

In order to assess the impact of the JDP’s policies regarding Islam it is important to note that parties that promote religious policies pursue several goals: (1) to advance public discourse that offers a religious account of events and political processes; (2) to promote policies that are informed by religious principles (e.g. discouraging alcohol consumption); (3) to expand the role of religious institutions and religiously sanctioned public roles (e.g. imams and religious foundations); and (4) to address the needs of people who are considered religious and conservative. At the discursive level, despite the party programme’s language, the party leadership refers to Islamic symbols extensively in daily discourse, as well as recitation of the Qur’an during many events, a practice that was once considered anti-secular. At the policy level, the party adopted or attempts to promote many policies (e.g. criminalising adultery) that are informed by Islam or to promote the rights of practising Muslims. The party also removed a long-standing headscarf ban in higher education institutions in 2010 and allowed the use of a headscarf for women working for the state in 2017. At the institutional level, the JDP has changed the structure of Turkey’s governance drastically. For instance, the 2007 constitutional amendments turned the symbolic position of the presidency of the republic into an elected position (elected directly by the people), reducing the presidential term from seven to five years with the possibility of re-election. The 2010 constitutional changes made the military more accountable to civilian courts.
and changed the procedures to appoint judges. The last round of constitutional changes altered Turkey’s governance structure, turning the symbolic non-partisan office of presidency into the partisan head of executive power and granting the JDP unchecked political power.

A review of the JDP’s policies beyond its constitutional reforms indicates that the party removed the restriction on political and public expression of Islam and also promoted not only Islam but those who ascribe and practice Islamic principles in the country’s governance system. While each one of JDP’s policies, alone or in combination, can be seen as the promotion of Islam, one important question is whether or not any of these policies/practices forms a political end in and of itself or promotes other non-religious electoral and political interests. In other words, the non-religious aspects of the party’s policies are worth attention better to assess if or how material and non-material, or religious and non-religious, interests interact. For instance, the use of religious language is not only thought to increase the popularity of the party among the religious public but it may also provide legitimacy to the party’s policies in a context where parties suffer from a low level of support. Likewise, the expansion of the role of religious institutions under JDP rule allows the party to use its control of the state apparatus to offer more jobs to its political base. The party’s use of religious ties in forging its policies makes the party an important player in regional and global politics.

The JDP faced the risk of being closed in 2002 and 2008 and the military, which assumed the role of protecting Turkey’s laïcité, issued what came to be known as an electronic memorandum which emphasised the importance of maintaining the secular nature of the republic during the presidential election process when the presidential candidates were overtly critical of laïcité-related policies such as the headscarf ban. The memorandum did not prevent the election of the JDP’s Abdullah Gul as national president (Yeni Şafak 2007). The indictment referred to the public speeches of the current president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, makes explicit references to common religious values and institutions by imbuing different meanings, once citing a poem which compared minarets to bayonets, domes to helmets and believers to soldiers (Milliyet 1998). The scope of the indictment covered the JDP leadership’s foreign visits. For instance, on one of his foreign trips (to Spain) Erdoğan, the leader of the JDP and now national president, argued that even if a headscarf is a religious symbol, it should not be prohibited in the public sphere and he challenged the main idea of secularism which contends that public spaces should be protected from the use of any religious symbols since such symbols were deemed divisive and inclusive of religion in the public sphere. The joint proposal of the Nationalist Action Party and the JDP attempted to remove the ban on the headscarf with a constitutional amendment in 2008. The JDP avoided closure by one vote (six of 11 members of the court approved the closure while 10 of 11 agreed that the party had become the centre of anti-secularist policies), reducing state funds to the party.

The JDP’s policies can be seen as successful integration of religion to Turkey’s politics. However, a failed coup attempt in July 2016, allegedly launched by the followers of Fethullah Gülen, a religious leader, who had worked as an imam employed by the DRA between 1959 and 1981, showed that the role of religion in Turkey’s democratisation efforts remains controversial. Over the years, Gülen has established a global grassroots movement known as Cemaat or Hizmet. The movement developed an elaborate educational network specially to recruit the urban and rural poor; its mix of religious–business–educational networks has grown stronger under the charismatic appeal and teachings of Gülen. At the same time, the support of the JDP granted the movement access to many state positions, police and military forces and gave it an international presence (Badar 2018). As the network’s organisational capacity, resources and public appeal were expanded by its access to state power granted by the JDP, the movement became one of the most successful Islamic international networks with branches in more than 50 countries.
As noted above the withdrawal of the JDP’s support for the Gülenists, after the corruption allegations against the party and the subsequent closure of the group’s schools and boarding houses, undermined one of the movement’s most effective recruitment tools – its educational network. Attesting to the intricate nature of Islamic organisations, intra-Islamic block rivalry and the expected and unexpected outcomes of the involvement of religious networks in politics, the Gülenists did not focus on maintaining their network as a civil society group but sought to master the state’s control. The failed coup attempt of 15 July 2016, tied to the Gülenists by the regime, indicates that the group’s success as a faith group hinged on their access to the state’s power (i.e. controlling education, state employment); the weakened state access and lack of commitments to maintain group’s power could lead to a violent take-over. Although the Gülenists vehemently deny any involvement, the clandestine and extremely hierarchical nature of the Gülenist networks raises concerns about the credibility of such denunciations. While the group’s charismatic leader-centred organisation makes it difficult to study, the government’s increasingly ambiguous description of what it refers to as the ‘Gülenist Terrorist Organisation’ enables it to demobilise a range of groups critical of the JDP’s policies.

Ironically, although the JDP offers a critical assessment of the Gülenist network’s enmeshing of religion and politics, the party has been centralising political power and expanding the budget of the DRA drastically, in part to demobilise Gülenist-like religious networks and prevent the spread of Gülen’s ideological ideas through the country’s state-run religious network. Once criticised by the National View parties, due to its control of all of the mosques and ability to offer religious opinions, the DRA became an important institution for the JDP’s policies. In 2012 the DRA’s budget exceeded the budget of 11 ministries, including the ministries of health and the environment and energy (Badar 2018). Despite the current state of emergency and declining economic performance, the JDP continued to increase the DRA’s budget by 34 percent, five times larger than that of the national intelligence service, making it one of the main state institutions. Meanwhile Turkey’s 2017 constitutional amendment and transition to executive presidency ended Turkey’s parliamentary regime, created ministers who are appointed and not elected, and put centralised power in the hands of the president. The JDP’s centralisation of political power, a position the National View parties once opposed, and investment in the institution that pro-Islamic parties once considered the secularising hand of the state, indicates that religion’s role in politics and pro-religious parties’ political stances cannot be simplified; instead they require finding a delicate balance between empirical foundations and theoretical approaches. The Turkish case becomes less an exception and more an ideal site that exemplifies the intricate interface of religion and politics when its analyses are released from the binaries of secular vs. Islamic positions.

Conclusion

Although Islam plays an important role in Turkey’s politics, its role cannot be seen as the perfunctory rejection of the country’s secular practices, resentment against or break from the Ottoman Islamic past. A broad historical perspective indicates that many of Turkey’s so-called new secular policies adopted after the declaration of its republic were initiated under the Ottoman Empire. Thus, despite the dominance of the Rupture Paradigm accounts, the Continuity Paradigm based accounts seem more plausible from historical records. Likewise, despite the tendency to reduce Turkey’s pro-Islamic parties to a singular group, they differ significantly not only in their specific interpretations of Islam but also in their economic and foreign policies. For instance, Turkey’s first-generation Islamists, the National Order Parties, in one form or another adopted state-led industrialisation, seeking to use state power to promote nationalised...
production against the dominance of Western markets. Likewise, the National Outlook Parties called for the state’s disengagement from the religious sector while forging loose coalitions with Turkey’s religious orders. In a drastically different fashion, the JDP opted for rapid integration to the global economy by removing the state’s protective hand from many areas. The party also forged close political ties with Islamic groups like the Gülenists which eventually led to a power struggle in controlling state power.

Despite their attachment to Turkey’s secularism, pro-secular parties also promote policies to appeal to religious groups although such policies have never gained the disproportional support extended by the JDP. The JDP’s exponentially growing support of the state’s directorate of religious affairs and state’s religious education shows that the pro-Islamic parties’ quest to remove state from the religious sector may be discursive. When given state control, the state’s authority is used to promote a certain Islamic theology through religious education, mosques and foundations. Thus, the secularist or laiklik ideal of establishing Turkey’s state neutrality vis-à-vis religious groups remains a work in progress. Various parties use religion discursively, and tap into the power of religious networks and Islamic idioms’ ability to legitimise certain policies while the country’s ban on the parties that rely on religious differences remains effective yet largely ignored.

Note

1 For the full list of the parties that were closed see www.tesav.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/3.1923ten_Bu_Yana_Kurulan_ve_Kapatilan_Siyasi_Partiler.pdf.

References


**Additional source**