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RELIGION, NATIONALISM, AND POPULISM IN TURKEY UNDER THE AKP

BILGE YABANCI

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Introduction

When Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited the country's largest Kurdish-majority city, Diyarbakır, during the 2015 election campaign, he held a Kurdish-language version of the Quran while addressing the audience with the following words: "Nobody could dare to divide the motherland and the nation, and destroy the flag," and he invited Kurds to unite behind "one nation, one flag, one motherland, and one religion."¹ Five years later, in 2020, the head of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*)² delivered the first Friday sermon in Hagia Sophia following its reconversion into a mosque — after serving as a museum since 1935 — while holding a sword that represents the Turkic/Islamic tradition of conquest.³

Similar performances melding religious symbolism and political agenda are common in Turkey's political scene

1. Bilge Yabanci, "Fuzzy Borders between Populism and Sacralized Politics: Mission, Leader, Community and Performance in 'New' Turkey," *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 21, no. 1 (January 2, 2020): 92–112, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2020.1736046>.

2. Diyanet is a state institution established in 1924 as the highest religious authority after the abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate. It is now totally instrumentalized by the AKP.

3. Upon the conquest of Constantinople, the landmark church of the Eastern Roman Empire was converted into a mosque by the Mehmet II. As a symbol of Turkey's secularization, in 1935, during Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's presidency, it was declared a museum. "Turkey's top religious authority head delivers Friday sermon at Hagia Sophia with a sword in hand," July 24, 2020, *Duvar*, <https://www.duvarenglish.com/politics/2020/07/24/turkeys-top-religious-authority-head-delivers-friday-sermon-at-hagia-sophia-with-a-sword-in-hand>.

under the rule of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP). They combine appeals to national identity, religious tropes, and emotional rhetoric that are mapped onto the collective memory. Such manifestations make the AKP's relationship with religion perplexing for many. They also divide society as for many secular voters, religion's increased visibility in politics means Turkey has become estranged from the republic's foundational values, while others see their values and lifestyles represented more than ever.⁴ However, there is more to the AKP's relationship with religion than the oft-cited secular-pious cleavage. This short analysis aims to shed light on this complex relationship through the lens of nationalism, populism, and performance as a means of political mobilization.

Erdoğan's Politics as Performance

How does religion affect the current state of state of governance in Turkey? Over its two decades in power, the AKP has shaped relations between different social groups based on religious belonging. It altered people's perceptions of national identity by making "being a Muslim Turk" more appealing for many at home and abroad, and created new public spaces and

4. For instance, Hagia Sophia has different historical and symbolic importance for different audiences. For staunch conservative and Islamists, it is a symbol of "a glorious past" of conquest and racial-religious superiority. For secular Turks, Hagia Sophia's status as a museum represented not only Turkey's secularization and Western-style modernization but also its global connectedness and cultural heritage that appeal to an international audience.

collective memories embellished with national heroism that is itself sacralized by religious references. The AKP's increasing resort to religious-nationalist appeals and symbols over the last decade has turned politics into a manifestation of a religious-like mission built onto — besides Ottoman nostalgia — a constant state of crisis fed by conspiracies.

President Erdoğan is the chief promoter of this missionary politics. When the current economic crisis began, Erdoğan called on people to fight against the “economic war” launched by “foreign enemies,” implying “the non-Muslim West.” He also stated that “there is no difference between the attack on our economy and the attack on our prayer and our flag. The aim is the same: to enslave the Turkish nation.”⁵ Such claims are designed to create the impression in the public mind that the current government is engaged in a timeless struggle beyond the material concerns of governing today. The AKP prescribes a single response to these “existential threats and crises”: an eventual redemption through an ever-stronger bond between the Muslim-Turkish nation and the revered leader.

Given this existential crisis, Erdoğan asks people to tolerate the current failures of the day-to-day governance of the economy, unemployment, social welfare, the environment, or other salient issues for the sake of a greater mission that is still under construction. In fact, Erdoğan's performative style in politics as a man of the mission and personalized power are crucial in keeping AKP supporters mobilized. Erdoğan relies on similar cultural codes, historical heroes, and nationalist and religious imagery from the well-known history of nation-building to create and rally a communal identity. By doing so, he not only efficiently conveys an ethnoreligious message to the public but also engenders a sense of privilege and pride among his supporters both at home as well as among the Turkish diaspora, particularly in Europe.⁶ Integrating ethnoreligious references into politics helps him create an alternative and more effervescent sense of participation among the AKP's supporters beyond “banal” civic or political participation. For example, during a 2014 presidential campaign rally, he addressed the crowds with the following statement:

“We are people. We are the grandchildren of Alparslan, Süleyman Shah, Osman I. We are the heirs to Mehmet the Conqueror, Selim II. We are the ones cherishing the memory of Mustafa Kemal, Menderes, Özal, and Erbakan. We are the followers of martyrs who created a legend by sacrificing their blood.”

While the AKP undermined constitutional rights, democratic institutions (both procedural/deliberative and participatory ones), and the independent media and judiciary in incremental but determined steps, Erdoğan has created a unique performative style in politics that kept a large constituency engaged through affect. All politics and politicians engage in performance to a certain extent, even in liberal democracies.⁷ When performance dominates, however, it makes politics vulnerable to sacralization and autocratization.⁸ A system of beliefs, myths, rituals, and symbols that “demand faith” in the mission and leader replace the political, economic, social, and cultural agenda of everyday governance. Party programs, electoral manifestos, and policy proposals are less important than the personal promises of the leader. Political and civic participation is replaced by “mass spectacles” where “audiences see themselves in the action. They are pulled in; they identify” with a promised glorious future in the making.⁹

The AKP and Erdoğan seem to have created a “success story” in terms of politics as performance. This success cannot be properly evaluated without focusing on: 1) the historical entanglement of religion and nationalism in Turkey, and 2) the AKP's populism that capitalizes on this history to morally valorize “the people and its will” against “the elites and enemies.”

The Entanglement of Religion and Nationalism in Turkey

Modern Turkey's emergence is often depicted through a strict antagonism between a secular republican Kemalist elite that rejected any role for Islam in public life and the pious masses. However, the relationship between Islam and state-sanctioned secularism has always been more of a symbiosis and mutual accommodation.

7. Jeffrey C. Alexander, *The Performance of Politics: Obama's Victory and the Democratic Struggle for Power* (OUP USA, 2011), 85.

8. Emilio Gentile and Robert Mallett, “The Sacralisation of Politics: Definitions, Interpretations and Reflections on the Question of Secular Religion and Totalitarianism,” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 1, no. 1 (June 1, 2000): 18–55.

9. Alexander, *The Performance of Politics*.

5. “Erdoğan: Attack on Economy Same as Attack on Call to Prayer,” August 21, 2018, *Al-Jazeera*, <https://www.aljazeera.com>.

6. Bilge Yabancı, 2021, “Home State Oriented Diaspora Organizations and the Making of Partisan Citizens Abroad: Motivations, Discursive Frames, and Actions Towards Co-Opting the Turkish Diaspora in Europe,” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 21 (2): 139–65.



Photo above: Ali Erbas, the head of Turkey's Religious Affairs Directorate, is seen at the minbar with a sword to deliver the Friday Sermon during the first Friday Prayer in 86 years in Hagia Sophia on July 24, 2020 in Istanbul, Turkey. Photo by Directorate of Communications/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images.

In the second half of the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire faced the threat of slow disintegration driven by several nationalist movements. The initial response was the promotion of “Ottomanism,” a new state ideology that aimed to cultivate an overarching Ottoman identity to keep the various elements of the empire intact.¹⁰ As the non-Muslim subjects of the empire were the first ones to gain independence, the Abdulhamit II era (1876-1909) witnessed the emergence of proto-Islamism as a tool to legitimize political power in the crumbling empire, which was later sustained by constitutionalists of the Young Turk revolution in 1908.¹¹ The ruling cadres decided that non-Muslims had been prioritized at the expense of Muslims.¹² In this new ideology, Muslimhood became the core aspect determining identity and citizenship.

10. Gökhan Çetinsaya, “Rethinking Nationalism and Islam: Some Preliminary Notes on the Roots of ‘Turkish-Islamic Synthesis’ in Modern Turkish Political Thought,” *The Muslim World* 89, no. 3–4 (1999): 350–76, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-1913.1999.tb02753.x>.

11. Howard Eissenstat, Alexei Miller, and Stefan Berger, “Modernization, Imperial Nationalism, and the Ethnicization of Confessional Identity in the Late Ottoman Empire,” *Nationalizing Empires*. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2014.

12. Haldun Gülalp, “Using Islam as Political Ideology: Turkey in Historical Perspective,” *Cultural Dynamics* 14, no. 1 (2002): 21–39, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09213740020140010201>.

Following World War I and the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, the pressing question for the republican elites was to “invent” a modern nation and its traditions. Except for a brief and failed search for purely secular ethnonationalism that emphasized pre-Islamic Turkish society and culture,¹³ the modern nation-building effort in Turkey was built upon religious morals and tradition as an inalienable part of the national identity and culture. The ruling elites and pro-republic intellectuals of the era gave Islam a new cultural and civilizational meaning. According to this cultural Islam perspective, Turks have assumed the characteristics of a real nation under Islam. At the same time, intellectuals of the era also claimed that Turks’ pre-Islamic lifestyle and culture were suitable for Islamic requirements, hence Turks found their “true self” and realized their potential as “a great people” only after they consensually accepted Islam.¹⁴ In this view, Islam’s modernization was to contribute to the new national unity. It was also believed that a nationalized

13. Hugh Poulton, *The Top Hat, the Grey Wolf, and the Crescent: Turkish Nationalism and the Turkish Republic*, First Edition (Washington Square, N.Y: NYU Press, 1997).

14. Çetinsaya, “Rethinking Nationalism and Islam.”

and modernized Islam in Turkey would guide or lead the Islamic world by example.

This understanding of Islam as a source of national identity had three long-lasting consequences. First, a strictly governed public religion emerged on two pillars: the state-organized Diyanet and the oppression of ideas outside the official line of state Islam. Second, it entailed re-interpreting “the West” as a technological and scientific role model while repudiating the (non-Muslim) cultural side of it. The motivation was to “catch up with” the scientific and economic advances by emulating “the West,” while “the authentic culture and traditions” of Muslim Turks were considered superior in all aspects of social life.¹⁵ Third, this early invention of the nation as an ethnoreligious community created enmity toward the remaining non-Sunni Muslim and non-Turkish minorities as “eternal enemies within” and justified state and communal violence against them.

These three long-lasting consequences have shaped conservative and right-wing political ideologies in Turkey up until today. The transition to a multi-party system gave rise to new actors that promoted “a nationalist-conservative ideology” from the 1950s onwards. This ideology endorsed a top-down cultivation of society (especially youth), anti-Western and anti-Semitic, conspiracy-driven historiography, and Ottoman nostalgia.¹⁶ This ideology was not unique to a single party but claimed and fashioned by several nationalist, conservative, and Islamist movements and political parties to promote the further unity of ethnic nationalism and Islam.

Turkey’s Islamist parties (the long lineage started with the National Salvation Party), as well as the far-right nationalist parties (the largest one is the Nationalist Action Party [*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP], which is currently in coalition with the AKP), empowered themselves out of this nationalist-conservative fusion. Due to the secular state’s suspicion of “radical Islamism” as a challenge to the secular republic, mainstream Turkish Islamism has grown not against but out of the statist tradition that defines Islam in cultural terms as a part of national identity. Equally interesting, in this same period, ultranationalists (*ülküçüler* as they call themselves) expelled

15. Tanil Bora, *Türk Sağının Üç Hali [The three phases of Turkish right]* (Istanbul: İletisim, 1998), <https://www.iletisim.com.tr/kitap/turk-saginin-uc-hali/7288#.WtrP5C-B2qA>.

16. Yüksel Taskin, *Milliyetçi Muhafazakâr Entelijansiya [Nationalist-Conservative Intelligentsia]* (Istanbul: İletisim, 2007).

“pure Turkists,” the defenders of Turkishness based on racial and ethnic determinants, among the party ranks and defined themselves as “uncompromising Muslims and conscious Turkish nationalists.” At the same time, Islamist parties promoted “Islamic nationalism” by making references to Turkey as “the greatest and the most glorious nation” of Islam.¹⁷

The 1980 coup further entrenched the nationalist-conservative ideology through a policy known as the Turkish-Islam synthesis.¹⁸ A state-controlled indoctrination of society with *the Turkish-Islam synthesis* introduced compulsory religious teaching at public schools, the expansion of nationalist historiography and Quran courses, and the use of mosques by the Diyanet. The 1997 military intervention that removed the right-wing coalition from power was not an exception to the ideal of an ethnoreligious nation but an attempt to defend it against the perceived threat of different and more radical interpretations of Islam. For the AKP, this available script of a fusion between ethnic nationalism and Islam provided a strong discursive and political agenda that would easily resonate with large segments of society. However, as the next section discusses, the AKP also added populism to the equation.

The AKP’s Populism and Ethnoreligious Borders of “the People”

Before the AKP came to power in 2002, the national-conservative ideology remained mostly a right-wing intellectual tradition. Political parties that capitalized on it had been divided and received around 35% of the vote at most. The AKP has made it a key strategy to unite diverse right-wing voters by injecting populism. Populism is a political strategy that claims an incessant antagonism between “the people” and “the elites and enemies.”¹⁹ It morally valorizes the people, who are considered a homogenous and organic community. However, it has a “chameleonic” nature that allows adaptation to changing political and social conditions.²⁰ Depending on the changing conditions, different

17. Çetinsaya, “Rethinking Nationalism and Islam.”

18. Erkan Akin and Omer Karasapan, “The ‘Turkish-Islamic Synthesis,’” *Middle East Report*, no. 153 (1988): 18–18, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3012127>.

19. Kurt Weyland, “Populism as a Political Strategy: An Approach’s Enduring — and Increasing — Advantages,” *Political Studies* 69, no. 2 (May 1, 2021): 185–89, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00323217211002669>.

20. Paul Taggart, “Populism and the Pathology of Representative Politics,” in *Democracies and the Populist Challenge* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

social, ethnic, class, and religious groups can be “made” and “unmade” a part of “the people” by populists.

During its formative years, the AKP’s self-proclaimed ideology of “conservative democracy” already incorporated a populist plea. The party defined politics through an antagonism between “the Muslim-Turkish people” and “the Kemalist secular elite.”²¹ Although the AKP has combined various and sometimes conflicting ideological approaches, it capitalized on an established tradition that defined the nation as an ethnoreligious community. However, the way that ethnoreligious references are utilized to determine “the people” shifted. Initially, the AKP followed “politics of co-optation” and then switched to “politics of exclusion.”

The early reconciliation initiatives toward Alevi and Kurdish minorities exemplify the AKP’s earlier politics of co-optation. In 2007, the AKP attempted to integrate Alevis — a religious minority combining elements of Sufism and Shi’a Islam — within the Muslim-Turkish nation. Alevis have been subjected to discrimination and state and communal violence since the Ottoman era. The government proposed the establishment of an “Alevi Directorate” under the prime minister’s office similar to the Diyanet and the provision of state funds for *cemevis* (Alevi sites for religious practice).²² The AKP representatives emphasized the common culture and coexistence between the Alevi and Sunni communities. The AKP’s message was that Alevis were Muslims and they could be incorporated into the nation as such. The Alevi demands for equal status and legal recognition for *cemevis* and exemption from compulsory religious classes at schools that prioritize Sunni Islam were effectively ignored. Recently, another attempt at reconciliation was launched during the Alevi holy month. Yet, for many Alevi associations, the AKP’s attempt remains top-down and assimilatory.

Similarly, the early Kurdish reconciliation initiative emphasized common religion as a basis for national unity between Turks and Kurds. In fact, the Kurdish reconciliation policy was later renamed “the national unity project” by Erdoğan. The AKP emphasized that Islam can overcome divisions based

21. Kürşad Ertuğrul, “Akp’s Neo-Conservatism and Politics of Otherness in Europe-Turkey Relations,” *New Perspectives on Turkey* 46 (March 2012): 157–86, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0896634600001540>.

22. “AKP Alevileri Asimile Etmeye Çalışıyor [AKP Aims to Assimilate Alevis],” November 25, 2007, *Radikal*, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=239791>; Murat Borovalı and Cemil Boyraz, “Turkish Secularism and Islam: A Difficult Dialogue with the Alevis,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 40, no. 4–5 (2014): 479–88, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453714522476>.

on ethnicity and create a collective identity. The party elites harkened back to the Ottoman policy of categorizing the population according to religious belonging (the *millet* system), whereby Kurds and Turks would belong to the same nation, as a key solution to incorporate Kurds into “the people.”

Politics of co-optation sought to define “who belongs to the people” by incorporating more elements into the people from the margins. It was rejected by Alevis and Kurds because the AKP’s core policy was top-down and autocratic, aimed at asserting the party’s role as “the representative” of all groups. After the 2007 electoral victory and the 2010 constitutional referendum, the AKP adopted a more exclusive version of populism. With “politics of exclusion,” the AKP now focuses more on “who do not belong to the people” through ethnoreligious criteria. Instead of referring to Islam as a unifying element across ethnic and sectarian lines, Islam is given a nationalist character in defining “the people” or the ideal citizen, particularly after the 2013 Gezi protests and the 2015 June elections.²³ The government’s motto “one state, one nation, one flag, and one religion” emerged during this period, marking the shift from politics of co-optation to politics of exclusion. The AKP also established a close alliance with the far-right nationalist MHP, facilitated by the shared ideological roots discussed previously.

More importantly, the AKP has sought to micro-manage an ideal citizenry loyal to both national unity and faith. This approach has found its concrete substance in policies for youth and education as well as women and family. The youth policy has been crystallized in the goal of “cultivating religious generations.”²⁴ Erdoğan later entrenched the goal by emphasizing the “July 15 youth” — referring to the date of the July 15, 2016 coup attempt — and pitting them against “the Gezi youth” or “the LGBT youth.”²⁵ The “July 15 youth” have been praised as national heroes “who were on the streets for the flag and prayer” while youth who participated in protests are often labelled as “traitors” and “terrorist youth.”²⁶

23. Jenny White, *Muslim Nationalism and the New Turks*, Updated edition with a new afterword (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

24. “Dindar Gençlik Yetiştireceğiz [We Will Raise a Pious Generation],” February 2, 2012, *Hürriyet*, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/dindar-genclik-yetistirecegiz-19825231>.

25. Bilge Yabancı, “At the Intersections of Populism, Nationalism and Islam: Justice and Development Party and Populist Reconfiguration of Religion in Politics,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* online first (2021): 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2021.1972794>.

26. “Turkey’s Erdoğan Denounces LGBT Youth as Police Arrest Students,” February 2, 2021, *BBC News*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-55901951>.



Photo above: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan makes a speech during the grand finale of the holy Quran recitation contest in Istanbul, Turkey on April 27, 2022. Photo by Murat Kula/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images.

The AKP adopted a similar approach of polarization and marginalization in its women and family policy. Mothers and family-oriented women are praised as ideal citizens who protect the nation by being “primarily responsible for raising healthy individuals and future generations.”²⁷ Religious references to chastity and morals and the importance of motherhood in Islam are widely employed to legitimize the AKP’s gender politics targeting women’s reproductive capacities to ensure the sustainability of the nation. Meanwhile, minority sexual orientation, cohabitation, and single motherhood are declared immoral. Abortion, birth control, and C-sections have been declared as plots “to wipe out the nation” by Erdoğan himself. Working women, compared to stay-at-home mothers, were labelled as deficient and shunned for neglecting children and family.²⁸ In fact, Erdoğan encouraged women to raise at least three children on several occasions, while blaming feminists for being alien to the nation’s authentic culture and traditions.

27. AKP, “Party Programme,” n.d., <https://www.akparti.org.tr/parti/parti-programi/>.

28. Rose Troup, “Turkey’s President Reckons Women Are ‘Deficient’ Unless They Have Children,” 2016, *BuzzFeed News*, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/rosebuchanan/women-without-children-are-incomplete-says-turkish-leader>

The AKP’s attempts to micro-manage “the ideal citizenry” have not remained limited to a discursive polarization with religious and nationalist references. On the policy side, the AKP collaborates with resourceful government-oriented youth and women’s organizations in charge of reaching out to target groups across Turkey. These organizations initiate and implement projects in line with the ethnoreligious ideal. Youth organizations engage youngsters from primary school to working age through what can be termed “politicized leisure.” They run various educational, social, and sporting activities through school clubs, summer camps, and extra-curricular training within close-knit communities at city or district branches. During these politicized leisure activities, youngsters are imbued with nationalist-conservative views. To give some examples, youngsters are taught the Islamic value of self-sacrifice, the role of non-Turkish and non-Muslim minorities in the downfall of the Ottoman Empire, an essentialist and anti-Semitic civilizationism, as well as current domestic and foreign politics in line with the AKP’s agenda (such as Turkey’s military excursions in northern Syria or the constitutional referendum). While cultivating the youth with religious values is the oft-cited

goal of these organizations, their aim is not only to convince youngsters to practice religion in their private lives. Indeed, religion is important to the extent that it defines the self-perception of youngsters as equally proud Muslims and Turks.²⁹

Similarly, pro-government women's organizations promote an alternative gender perspective by combining Islamic principles and random concepts from post-colonial feminist theory.³⁰ Government-oriented women's organizations have become the major interlocutors for the Ministry of Family and Social Policy in pre-legislative consultations. For many controversial legal changes that undermine women's gained rights, these organizations prepare public opinion by forming a counter-bloc to feminist women's organizations to legitimize proposals with references to traditions and values.³¹ For example, during debates about legal changes that provide *muftis* — state religious officials employed by the Diyanet — with the authority to conduct civil marriages, pro-AKP women's organizations argued that the practice would encourage civil marriages in rural areas. Similarly, during heated debates about granting amnesty to men for marrying underage girls, pro-AKP women's organizations argued that the government sought to strengthen traditional family union because such marriages might have the mutual consent of the parties.³² They also defended Turkey's eventual withdrawal from the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (known as the Istanbul Convention) by arguing that it was hijacked to promote LGBTQ+ propaganda and that traditional family values in Turkey would provide the basis for a better national framework for the protection of women.

29. Bilge Yabancı, "Work for the Nation, Obey the State, Praise the Ummah: Turkey's Government-Oriented Youth Organizations in Cultivating a New Nation," *Ethnopolitics* 20, no. 4 (August 8, 2021): 467–99, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2019.1676536>.

30. Selin Çağatay, "Varieties of Anti-Gender Mobilizations. Is Turkey a Case?," January 9, 2019, *LSE Gender Studies* (blog), <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2019/01/09/varieties-of-anti-gender-mobilizations-is-turkey-a-case/>.

31. Bilge Yabancı, "Compliance and Push-Back: Politicization of Turkey's Civil Society and Interest Groups under Autocratization," *APSA Newsletter* 19, no. 3 (2021): 16–22.

32. The Turkish Federation of Women's Associations notes that the total number of such consensual marriages that includes one minor party is merely 264. In contrast, according to the Ministry of Justice statistics, between 2010 and 2018, there were more than 150,000 court cases of sexual assault and harassment concerning minors. "Adalet Bakanlığı istismar verilerini açıklamadı [Ministry of Justice did not publicize abuse statistics]," 2019, *Evrensel*, <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/389176/adalet-bakanligi-istismar-verilerini-aciklamadi?a=83133>.

Impending Post-Autocratic Transition: The Role of Opposition and Civil Society

Does the public endorse this marriage of populism, Islam, and nationalism? Can we foresee a post-autocratic transition that would reverse and replace the dangerous mixture of nationalism, religion, and populism? There is no unified public opinion given the stark polarization in Turkey. Undoubtedly, the AKP has created a significant group of proud "Muslim Turks" by generating a sense of nostalgia and pride with references to a glorified "national history." The AKP claims a historical tradition — the rapport of nationalism and religion — and crowned it with populism. The AKP still skillfully uses the learned anxieties toward those who are non-Muslim/non-Turkish and the cultural pretexts of nation-building to create or amplify socio-political polarization. Ethnoreligious identity, imagery, symbols, and narratives marginalize and even criminalize groups and individuals who do not fit into the Muslim-Turkish ideal citizenry. Beyond the search for material benefits, the affective force of nationalist-religious appeals and missionary politics performed by the leader maintain the enthusiasm of AKP voters.

This template resonates well with the right-wing, nationalist, and conservative audience that constitutes the majority of the electorate. For staunch AKP supporters, nationalists, and Islamists, the ethnoreligious boundaries of the nation are natural and define one's *true* belonging to Turkey. They support the government not necessarily because of clientelist ties like the conservative business elite, who thrived under the AKP through corruption. Instead, they are motivated by an affective attachment to the ethnoreligious imagination of the nation modelled on an imagined past.

The marriage of religion, nationalism, and populism is, however, not without limits. A strong oppositional civic space is alive and kicking, opening up new channels of mobilization and alliances with the political opposition, despite violence and judicial harassment targeting civil society and activism. These alliances seek to overcome polarizing and marginalizing scripts of nationalism-religion-populism fusion. Perhaps more unexpectedly, counter-mobilizations and narratives have also arisen from self-identifying devout Muslims. One example is the mobilization of Muslim feminists. They challenge the AKP's

instrumentalization of Islam (particularly the headscarf issue), male theologians' hegemony in interpreting Islamic texts, and the use of these interpretations to justify discrimination and violence against women.³³ Another example is the Muslim-left movement in Turkey that brought together leftist and (ex-)Islamist circles through several informal networks and solidarity organizations. They contest the AKP's use of Islamic and nationalist references such as fatalism and sacrifice to justify precarity and work accidents. More importantly, they seek to overcome Muslim-secular, left-right cleavages in the long term.³⁴

Civic and grassroots democratic mobilizations from various corners of society can entrench civic participation and active citizenship, and eventually bridge the old and new cleavages. They might be an effective antidote to the mobilizing power of populism-religion-nationalism and the obvious undemocratic repercussions by highlighting the importance of civic citizenship and human rights, and by inventing new localities and means of alternative democratic demands and channels.

The role of political opposition is also crucial. However, for political actors, the temptation of using the potent combination of ethno-religious appeals in Turkey is omnipresent as being historically embedded and mainstream. Except for the People's Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP), no other major opposition party openly denounces or avoids the use of ethno-religious references. The current opposition coalition that will run against the AKP-MHP alliance in the forthcoming elections includes — besides the main opposition party Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP) with Kemalist roots — three small parties with Islamist/AKP backgrounds, one party that split from the far-right nationalist MHP, and one tiny right-wing party. Although nationalism and religion are not priorities for the opposition coalition at the current stage, their leaders have engaged with ethno-religious ideas to different degrees and in different ways in the past. More worryingly, when it comes to disadvantaged groups and minorities, such as Kurds and refugees/migrants, they staunchly continue to do so. Only persistent and organized mobilization by civil society could make them denounce

parochialism and adopt a civic, egalitarian, and democratic conception of "the people" in an impending post-autocratic transition period. In this sense, the major opposition coalition has a lot to learn and emulate from grassroots citizens' initiatives and rights-based organizations.

In short, Turkey's impending re-democratization (or better democratization) depends on the extent to which civic and political opposition empower each other and incorporate previously excluded and subaltern groups. However, those familiar with the Turkish context can recognize the limits of this recipe. When the AKP came to power, it rallied millions on this exact promise of giving a voice to the previously voiceless masses, namely mostly conservative and religious groups but also other minorities. The AKP is a perfect cautionary tale that claims to represent previously excluded groups can evolve into an exclusionary populist political project. We have no a priori warrant to believe that any single political or civic actor can promise or "install" democracy. Democracy can and should acquire social significance through a collective effort based on: 1) delineating the limits of power and powerholders under a strong and democratic new constitution that protects freedoms and pluralistic participation; 2) promoting and respecting the rights of all groups, including minorities and non-citizens (migrants and refugees), without privileges granted to Turkish and Sunni-Muslim identity; and 3) building socio-economic justice by eliminating inequalities associated with the neoliberal obsession with economic growth and exploitation of labor and natural resources.

Bilge Yabancı is Marie Curie fellow at Northwestern University (USA) and Ca' Foscari University of Venice (Italy). She researches social movements and civil society under autocratization. Her research also covers populism, populism-religion relationship, and the role of affect and performance in political mobilization. Previously, she was Open Society fellow as a part of the human rights cohort of the OSF fellowship program in 2017-19 and a Swedish Institute post-doctoral fellow.

33. Bilge Yabancı, "Acts of Compliance and Tactful Contention: The Polarized Terrain of Women's Organizations in Turkey under Authoritarian Pressure," in *Lobbying the Autocrat*, ed. Max Grömping and Jessica Teets (Michigan University Press, 2022).

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