

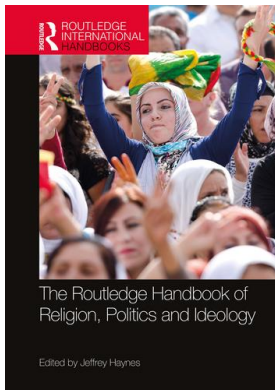
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POLITICS, IDENTITY AND RELIGION IN TURKEY

From Atatürk to the AKP

Jeffrey Haynes

In the two decades since a general election in 2002, Turkey has had an Islam-influenced government.¹ In that election, the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, abbreviated to AK Parti or AKP) won more than a third of the popular vote and took power. A subsequent general election in 2007 saw the AKP win again with an improved result: nearly half (47%) of the votes cast. In the most recent parliamentary elections in 2015, the AKP won just under half of the seats: 295 out of 600. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, leader of the AKP, has been president of the country since 2014.

By 2021, Turkey had been ruled by AKP governments for two decades. Despite the fears of some, Turkey has not developed into an ‘Islamic state’ like those in Iran, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan during Taliban rule (1996–2001), or the large areas of Iraqi territory controlled by Islamic State between 2014 and 2018. Instead, during the AKP’s rule, Turkey was noted for the ‘moderation’ of its Islam-influenced government, an example of a Muslim-majority country which, the AKP government claims, seeks to advance secularism, not to progress the position of one religious group over others (Kandemir, 2020).

This chapter focuses on politics, identity, and religion in Turkey, surveying relevant developments in the country over a century from 1923 when Kemal Atatürk took control, to the AKP government in 2021, a regime dominated by President Erdoğan. The aim is to examine the relationships between politics, identity, and religion in Turkey over time in order to ascertain the ideological roles of Islam, secularism, and political roles of key political actors, both civilian and military. The armed forces are often described as the guardian of the country’s secular national identity, a situation that has endured since the founding of the Turkish republic in 1923. The military’s secular political ideology stems, on the one hand, from the values and policies of the country’s nationalist founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, and, on the other, it is informed by the singular insularity and self-selected guardian role of the military. The latter is regarded as a key political institution long central to the national goal of a secular regime (Sentek, 2020).

This chapter explains that while Islam is part of the national sense of identity, it is not the only one: Islam competes with secularism politically. Finally, the chapter identifies a further key characteristic of Turkish national identity, in addition to Islam and secularism: a pronounced fear of foreigners, expressed by many Turks.

Introduction

The AKP government has been in power since 2002 via reasonably democratic elections. It claims to be anxious to expand religious freedom for all in Turkey. At the same time, the government has sought to ‘de-secularise’ the country in a systematic – yet gradual and initially hesitant – process in order to increase the public role of Islam. The context of the AKP government’s policy in this regard is that for the last century, that is, since the founding of the Turkish republic in 1923 following the demise of the Ottoman empire, successive governments sought to develop a regime that has at its heart the ‘appropriate’ place of religion in the public realm. This has long been very contentious and a key political and social issue (Haynes, 2010).

Turkey is a majority-Muslim country, with around 98% of Turks professed Muslims. Most of them are followers of Sunni Hanafi Islam, overseen by a state agency – the Diyanet – on behalf of the government (Gozaydin, 2021). Following the establishment of the Turkish republic in 1923, the goal of the government was secularisation, seen as a key component of a wider process of modernisation. It was an ideologically informed process. Like several other countries in the wake of World War I, including Russia and Iran, where revolutionary (Russia) or reformist (Iran) governments sought to kick-start modernisation in order to ‘catch up’ with the West, Turkey’s government believed that this was the necessary way forward. It required proactively or aggressively establishing centralised state power and vigorously limiting the public presence and power of Islam. Like in Iran, Turkey’s post-Ottoman government sought to reform the country and an essential step in this process, it believed, was to downgrade the public role of religion (Ozturk, 2018).

For seven decades, that is, until the 1990s, Turkey officially sought to conform to the ideological approach of Kemalism, the brainchild of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Turkey’s first post-Ottoman ruler. Atatürk was a field marshal and a ‘revolutionary’ statesman, founding ‘father’ of the Republic of Turkey, serving as its first president from 1923 until his death in 1938. Today, Atatürk has the status almost of a ‘secular saint’ in Turkey. Atatürk believed in aggressive and speedy secularisation, deeming that religion was redolent of tradition and that in order to modernise and to ‘catch up’ with fast-industrialising countries in both the West and the East, it required the forceful removal of religion from the public realm and to substitute it with the revolutionary ideology of Kemalism (Haynes, 2009).

The coming to power of the AKP government in the early 21st century led to a new approach to the public role of religion in Turkey. Officially concerned with joining the European Union (EU) mainly in order to improve the country’s economic position, the AKP government sought publicly to ‘bend over backwards’ to accommodate European demands for improved human rights and religious freedom, including for the minority Kurds and for the Alevis, a minority Islamic sect whose approach to Islam differs from most followers of Islam in Turkey, adherents of the Hanafi school of Islamic law. Over time, however, Turkey’s chances of joining the EU declined so that in 2021 there seems tacit acceptance on both sides that it will not happen (Haynes, 2011, 2012).

In the wake of the apparent failure of the Turkey–EU talks, Turkey sought to position itself as a strategically important regional power, looking both to East and West, while stressing its conservative and, to an extent, its Islamic credentials. Over time, the AKP government brought Sunni Hanafi Islam centrally back into the public realm, while the government retained a very strong degree of religious control. In other words, the AKP’s attempts at developing a secular regime were not necessarily accompanied by across-the-board enhanced religious freedoms for all. Recent reports from international bodies, including Freedom House (2020) and the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (2020), indicate that the AKP

government both strongly supports Sunni Hanafi Islam, both financially and ideologically, while allowing to a limited degree greater religious freedom for some (very tiny) religious minorities: Jews, Armenians, and Christians – but not for Alevi or Kurds (Kandemir, 2020).

The AKP government's approach to religious and ethnic minorities is controversial. Alevi make up approximately 11% of the population (c. 9 million people), although some estimates are as high as 20 to 25 million (c. 25% of Turkey's population). They are the second-largest Islamic entity in Turkey, with followers of Sunni Hanafi Islam the largest. Alevism is regarded by many Sunni Muslims in Turkey as an aberrant and 'mystical' faith, not clearly within ('mainstream' Sunni) Islam. Many Alevi, for their part, have responded to the AKP government with suspicion, deeming that the government wishes to further official Sunni Hanafi Islam at their expense. The Kurds are around 18% of Turkey's population, some 14 million people, and have fought a long campaign for greater autonomy (Sentek, 2020).

The next section looks in more detail at the political relationships between Islam, the military, secularism, and nationalism in Turkey, in order to assess how the AKP 'secularising' government's ideology evolved over time, in opposition to the traditionally dominant secular state ideology of Kemalism.

Islam, secularism, and nationalism: the military and politics in Turkey

Turkey's secularist orientations were originally laid down in the 1920s by the founder of the Turkish republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938). Over the next century, Turkey's political circumstances consistently reflected two key aspects of elite preference for secularism, focused on (1) a strongly secularising and centralising state, and (2) the armed forces' strong political influence.

Although Turkey first democratised in 1950, the following decades saw regular, often dramatic, political intrusions by the military.² The transition from military rule in 1983 exemplified the degree to which outgoing military regimes in Turkey consistently set the terms of their departure from power. Post-1983 constitutional amendments eradicated some legacies of military rule, including a ban on political activity by some former politicians and on cooperation between political parties and some civil society organisations, including various trade unions and professional organisations. In addition, other constitutional exit guarantees, such as the president's power to block constitutional amendments, automatically expired in 1989. On the other hand, the progress of civilisation – and hence democratic progress after 1983 – arguably had less to do with formal constitutional change than with informal practice and adaptation. The point is that, despite Turkey's current status as a 'partly free' country in Freedom House (2020) terminology, implying that the political system is characterised by a relatively mediocre, not a high degree of democracy, the military still retains relatively high political salience in Turkey, which may put in question the country's long-term democratic viability. In sum, the long-term structural effects on the politics of Kemalism – that is, proactive, even aggressive secularisation, and consistent military political significance – significantly influenced the country's political culture and has made it difficult to develop a consistently and progressively democratic regime.

The roots of the military's political involvement in contemporary Turkey can be traced back to before the founding of the Turkish republic, to the time of the Ottoman empire (1293–1922). Following modern Turkey's founding, there were decades of often aggressive modernisation and secularisation, initially led by Atatürk. For 15 years, until his death in 1938, Atatürk aggressively imposed Western-style civil law in Turkey. The Turkish republic inherited from the Ottoman empire a strong, centralised, and highly bureaucratic state that Atatürk proceeded to mould to his own secularist vision. Believing that Turkey's indigenous religious traditions – including,

most importantly, Sunni Hanafi Islam – were clear expressions of backwardness, Atatürk believed that national progress – that is, ‘modernisation’ – could only come about by emulating, absorbing, and reproducing Western – especially ‘European’ – cultural values and replicating the latter’s political culture and political institutions. This pro-Western ideological and political perspective was henceforward promulgated in state policies and programmes, defended not only by the politically powerful armed forces but also by successive civilian governments (Ozturk, 2016).

For decades following the demise of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey’s armed forces enjoyed almost total control over their own processes of recruitment, training, and promotion, resulting in the creation of a specific military culture facilitating the development of a specific role within Turkish society: the ‘hyper-secular’ defender of Atatürk’s revolution. The armed forces’ institutional autonomy made it impossible to manipulate the military for political purposes from outside its ranks. In recent years it has demonstrated a profound ability to maintain its cohesion and organisational integrity – during a period when Turkish society itself has become increasingly fragmented into competing classes, ethnic entities, religious groupings, and ideological factions. The military’s political clout was demonstrated historically by the fact that the armed forces could – and did – close down political parties that it believed to be ‘extremist’, that is, significantly deviating from the secularist path. This included those deemed too religiously orientated, too ideologically radical, or too separatist in orientation, such as the demanding Kurds. In addition, the military top brass periodically purged the officer corps with the aim of rooting out those suspected of sympathising with Islamist groups or Kurdish rebels.

During the time of military political dominance, the country’s national political leaders, inevitably supported by the military, tended to show little concern for the wishes of the national legislature.³ This resulted in a long-term lack of horizontal accountability between parliament and national political leaders. Consequently, civilian political leaders on occasion have sought to make policy by decree – typically following discussion and agreement with senior military figures. In sum, Turkey’s political culture and the legitimacy of successive regimes was strongly moulded by the heavily politicised armed forces. As a result, Turkey became at best a limited democracy, which failed to make clear and sustained democratic progress.

Military governments tried to overhaul the party system by manipulating electoral laws. In 1983, for example, the government introduced a statute proclaiming that a 10% national threshold – and even higher constituency thresholds – was necessary for parties to take seats in parliament. The hope was that this would lead to the elimination of the most intensely ideological parties, deemed the most ‘extremist’, and would instead lead to a ‘manageable’ system of two or three ‘moderate’ parties, reflecting the centre ground of political competition. However, despite this preference for ‘moderation’, in practice, there continued to be a weakening of the politically moderate centre-right and centre-left, with a rise in popularity of ideologically orientated parties, including those with strongly nationalist, separatist, and Islamist worldviews. For example, in the 1995 elections, the Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*), then the main Islamic grouping, achieved 21.4% of the vote, the ultra-nationalist Nationalist Action Party (NAP) gained 8.2%, and the Kurdish nationalist Halkın Demokrasi Partisi (HADEP) managed 4.2%, amounting overall to 34% of the votes cast. According to Özbudun (1996: 124), this result ‘boost[ed] the combined extremist vote share to one-third and raised the possibility that Turkish democracy [was] facing a systemic challenge’. It also reflected the fact that some parties, including the Islamist *Refah Partisi*, put in much care and attention to grassroots organisation, a strategy which paid off in electoral success (Haynes, 1998: 141–146; Jenkins, 2008: 141–183).

These were the political circumstances that formed the background to the AKP’s electoral triumph in 2002. Five years later, in July 2007, the AKP again won an electoral victory: this time, it was a landslide. Competing with 14 other political parties, the AKP garnered nearly 47%

of the total votes (in 2002, the AKP had won with just over 34% of the vote). Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was re-elected as prime minister, having first achieved that office in 2002. The result paved the way for the party's presidential candidate, Abdullah Gül, to win the presidential election in August 2007, despite strong objections from both military and civilian secularist opposition (Freedom House, 2008). Erdoğan led the AKP to another election victory in 2011, before being elected president in 2014, and re-elected in 2018. As noted earlier, in the most recent parliamentary elections (2015), the AKP won just under half (49.17%) of the seats: 295 out of 600, cementing its political dominance for another parliamentary term.

There is much debate, both in Turkey and elsewhere, regarding the issue of whether the AKP is, in fact, an Islamist party, ideologically orientated to the idea of establishing an Islamic state. Has the AKP overtly courted radical Islamist or even simply mainstream religious sentiment? Can we point to particular policies which demonstrate its desire to establish an Islamic state? To consider this issue, it is necessary to examine the evolution of ideology in Turkey, as it will enable us to delineate whether the AKP's 'Islamic' influence is a fundamental component of its wider ideological approach to governing or, on the other hand, the Islamic handle is given by the AKP's enemies in order to try to discredit the party to show it is deviating from the ideological path of secularism set long ago by Atatürk.

It is very difficult, perhaps impossible, to answer the two questions objectively. On the one hand, it is certainly the case that the AKP government has brought in changes which might be interpreted as showing that it is 'Islam-leaning'. On the other hand, many recent political developments in Turkey can be interpreted as reflective of a fundamental power struggle between 'secularists' and 'Islamists', characterised by controversies surrounding various issues, including (1) the city government of Ankara AKP, then led by the AKP's Melih Gökçek, temporarily banned the sale of alcoholic beverages in 2005 in an area of the city where many bars and restaurants are located. On appeal, however, the ban was lifted⁴; (2) the presidential elections in 2007, won by the AKP's candidate, Abdullah Gül; (3) the first concrete measures to reform Article 301 of the Turkish penal code – which forbids reference to the genocide of Armenians in 1914 – from three to two years imprisonment; (4) the AKP government's decision to no longer ban headscarves from universities (although initially overturned by the constitutional court in July 2008, it is now a widely accepted practice in Turkey's higher education institutions). In addition, in July and October 2008, there was a closure case against the AKP (the Supreme Court eventually agreed by one vote (6 to 5) not to close the party, although it did deprive it of a considerable part of its public financing)⁵ and official charges against a shadowy group known as Ergenekon,⁶ as manifestations of the struggle between secularists and the AKP government (Haynes, 2010). Just as the possible closure of the ruling party would have been a unique case in Turkish history, the charges filed against numerous personalities believed to wish to overthrow the present government, including the self-exiled Islamic scholar and preacher Fethullah Gülen, can also be understood as actions targeting the so-called 'deep state', whose existence was allegedly revealed by the Ergenekon conspiracy and underlined by the Gülen controversy.

The power struggle between 'secularists' and 'Islamists' reflects polarisation between the 'new' Anatolian middle class (many of whom are regarded as 'Islamist' in the sense not only that their cultural roots are in Islam but also that their religious beliefs are central to their success in business), strongly supportive of the AKP since its foundation in 2001, and the traditional Kemalist 'secularist' establishment. This latter constituency is mainly represented electorally by the Republican People's Party (Turkish: *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* or CHP) and in societal terms by the military. This polarisation implies that a monolithic image of Turkey is no longer appropriate – if it ever was.

The unresolved question, however, is whether these controversial policies point to a government that is aiming in the long term to Islamise Turkey, or one that is ‘merely’ socially and culturally conservative and believes it appropriate to pursue policies that are commensurate with that goal. Public opinion research into recent voter behaviour indicates that a vote for the AKP does not mean support for Islamism *per se*. Instead, strong electoral support for the AKP over time strongly indicates that ‘bread and butter’ issues – for example, the government’s overall economic performance and especially the availability of jobs – far outweigh in the minds of most Turkish people religious and ideological issues. As a result, we can conclude that the AKP is not an Islamist party but a conservative and populist entity that seeks to appeal to the mass of ordinary Turks on political, economic, and cultural rather than religious grounds (Dagi, 2008).

Turkish national identity and secularist-Islamist relations: the EU issue

Atatürk’s desire to turn Turkey from an Eastern to a Western nation long found expression in the desire of the country to join the EU. Europe, on the other hand, has consistently shown significant elite and popular reservations in many regional countries regarding the prospect of Turkey joining the Union. What of Turks’ views of the EU and, more generally, of the West? To what extent is their view of the world influenced by a religion-informed nationalism? The first thing to note is that there is a lack of clarity regarding how Turks, over 90% of whom are Muslim, view the prospect of joining the EU. A 2007 opinion survey found that ‘negative views... appear to be growing among Turks with respect to the EU and to Westerners in general. Such negativity toward the EU is likely associated with disillusionment over Turkey’s stalled bid to join the union’. The survey also reported that ‘the favorability rating for the EU dropped from 58% in 2004 to 27% in 2007’ (Grim and Wike, 2007). Another poll, from 2009, indicated that ‘around 63 percent of respondents believed Turkey should join the European Union’, while by 2018, fewer than half believed that Turkey should join the EU. Only one in five Turks believed that European governments wanted their country to join the EU. On the other hand, Europe is still an attractive destination: nearly two-thirds of Turks would like to travel, study, or work there. Only 8% believed that relations with the EU were strong, and around two-thirds of Turks considered that Europeans were most to blame. More than 60% of Turks believed that the EU–Turkish migration deal of 2016 was bad for Turkey, informed in part by resentment at the presence of around 3.5 million Syrian refugees (Hoffman, 2018). What Turkish responses might be overall is an indication that many Turks are not particularly enamoured or trustful of Western European countries yet recognise that joining the EU would almost certainly improve Turkey’s economic prospects.

Overall, these findings indicate that Turks both dislike and admire Europe. It may be that Turkey – politically, culturally, and ideologically – is not too far from the West ideationally, while admiring some aspects of Western modernity. Why is this the case? One major factor might be that Turks never experienced Western control, unlike most neighbouring countries. In other words, suspicion of the EU and of the West more generally is not necessarily due to Turks’ religious, cultural, or civilisational reservations. Apart from umbrage being taken by many Turks who believe that failure of the accession talks is due mainly to the EU’s prevarication and action, there is another factor to consider: continuing fallout from 9/11, including the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan from the early 2000s, and, more recently, the impact of the Syrian civil war and associated refugees on relations between Turkey and the West (Haynes, 2020).

On the other hand, Turkey’s political direction and sense of national identity is a cause for concern not only for many Turks but also for entities beyond Turkey’s frontiers. In addition, as already mentioned, Turkey is still officially seeking to join the EU, while European countries

continue to fear 'Islamic' extremism and terrorism, a concern likely to be exacerbated if Turkey did ever succeed in joining the EU. The overarching issue is this: does Turkey have the necessary credentials and clear signs of commitment to European norms and values, including democracy, human rights, and religious freedom, to make the country a 'suitable' partner for the West? Do such values find expression in the ideology of the ruling AKP government?

One important indication in this regard is the state of the relationship between secularists and Islamists in Turkey. There is political polarisation between Kemalist secularists and the pro-Islam AKP. The background is that, over the last few years, Turkey has experienced notable and continuing internal political conflicts focusing on the problematic relationship between, on the one hand, the country's secular establishment, with its large and powerful presence in the military and, on the other, the ruling AKP and its supporters. Many secularists regard the AKP as a 'closet' Islamist party, secretly plotting eventually to impose *Sharia* law on the country. It is, however, important to draw a distinction between most AKP supporters and those that might be termed political Islamists, i.e., people who wish to see some form of Islamic state in Turkey. Despite secularist fears, their natural ideological home is not the AKP, whose leaders deny that the party is an Islamist party or has any intention of becoming one, but the tiny Felicity party, which in the 2002 elections gained just 785,489 votes (2.49%), followed in 2007 by 820,289 votes (2.34%). In the June 2015 elections, it won 2.06% of the votes. In 2021, the Felicity party had no seats in parliament and minimal political influence – continuing a trend of political irrelevance which has now lasted for two decades.

Yet, despite a strong tradition and decades of aggressive secularisation in Turkey, Islam remains central to the identity of most Muslim Turks, that is, the vast majority of the country's population. In 2006, five years after the AKP won power, religious identification for many Turks was quite strong. Roughly half of Turkish Muslims (51%) surveyed in 2006 said they thought of themselves first as Muslim rather than Turkish, while 19% identified primarily with their nationality, and 30% volunteered that they thought of themselves as both. This represented a significant change from just one year earlier, when only 43% of Turks identified themselves primarily as Muslim. In addition, the percentage of Turks claiming a very or somewhat favourable opinion of Muslims changed only minimally in the early to mid-2000s: 88% in 2004, 83% in 2005, and 88% in 2006. Finally, the percentage of Turks saying that they are very favourable toward Muslims generally increased from 66% in 2004 to 74% at this time (Pew Global Attitudes Survey, 2006). Over the next few years, things changed only a little; the percentage-point change for many of the questions is not dramatic: respondents identifying as 'pious' slid from 13% in 2008 to 10% in 2018, while those choosing 'religious' as their designation dipped only a little, from 55 to 51%. Figures for 'nonbeliever' and 'atheist', which barely registered in 2008, are now at 2% and 3%, respectively (Kenyon, 2019).

While there are some limited signs that Turks overall are becoming slightly less religious, the country now appears to be less inclined to look to Europe or the West more generally for solutions to its economic, political, or social problems, despite a high level of appreciation of some aspects of Europe (Pew Research Center, 2017). This is *not* to claim that Turkey is (1) increasingly influenced by culturally or civilisationally distinct 'Muslim values', which could threaten the West's integrity and cultural homogeneity if Turkey should ever join the EU or more generally move closer to the West, and (2) moving closer to Islamic extremism with a goal of 'Islamisation' of the West. Instead, there appear in Turkey to be two simultaneous developments that may or may not be related. On the one hand, opinion poll data show growing xenophobia and, on the other hand, it may be that significant numbers of Turks regard themselves as 'religious'. How, if at all, are the two trends related?

To shed light on this issue, we briefly compare opinion polls from 2006 and 2018. The polls were conducted by Konda, one of Turkey's most respected polling organisations. The 2006 poll

surveyed over 6,000 people in half of Turkey's 81 provinces (Biz Kimiz, 2006). The 2018 survey involved face-to-face interviews with 2,762 people in their homes in 153 neighbourhoods and villages in 106 districts, including the central districts of 31 provinces. The 2006 survey was titled, 'Who Are We?', and that of 2018 was called 'Individualism in Turkey'. The two Konda surveys, undertaken a dozen years apart, were among the most representative studies of Turkish society ever completed. According to Robert Tait (2009), writing in the British *Guardian* newspaper, the 2006 poll found that 'Turks are xenophobic, socially conservative people who rarely read books, relegate women to second-class status and harbour ambivalent views about democracy'. These views echo findings in a 2008 study entitled 'Being different in Turkey. Alienation on the axis of religion and conservatism', which surveyed public opinion in 12 Anatolian cities. It was conducted by Professor Binnaz Toprak of Boğaziçi University for the Open Society Institute (OSI). Toprak's survey supported some of the findings of the 2009 Konda survey. Toprak claimed that for some members of Turkish society – including women, 'Kurds, Alevis and seculars' – experienced consistent social pressures to behave in certain ways in order to fit in with mainstream Turkish cultural views (Pope, 2008).

The 2006 Konda survey identified opinions on three crucial aspects of Turkey's political and social position: gender equality, how foreigners were regarded, and the desirability of democracy. Referring to gender equality, nearly 70% of respondents in the 2006 Konda survey believed that wives required their husband's permission to work outside the home. In addition, over half (57%) believed that a woman should never leave home wearing a sleeveless top, and 53% favoured allowing women judges, prosecutors, teachers, and other public servants to wear the Islamic headscarf on duty, something to which Turkey's secular establishment was opposed for ideological reasons – believing that such an act was unacceptably 'religious', out of place in a secular society. Finally, four-fifths (80%) thought that a woman and a man must be married in order to live together.

The 2018 Konda survey did not show major cultural differences compared to that of 2006. However, different questions were asked in the 2006 and 2018 surveys. While an overall interpretation is as a result rather difficult, it is apparent that increasing numbers of Turks believe that both men and women have rights that are to some extent, dependent on gender. For example, more than four-fifths of those surveyed (83%) believed it was the decision of a woman alone whether she wore a head covering – often identified as a characteristic of a 'pious' woman in Turkey. The 2018 survey also indicated that those surveyed stated that boys/men should be patriotic first and virtuous second, while for girls/women, the order was reversed: virtuous first and patriotic second. In sum, the results of the two Konda studies a decade apart, and both carried out during AKP rule, suggest that the pursuit of gender equality and social progress in Turkey is to some extent held back by continuing gender inequality ('Individualism in Turkey', 2018).

What of the issue of dislike of foreigners that seemed pronounced in 2009? Did this change over time? According to the 2009 survey, many Turks believed that foreigners have designs on Turkish territory, aiming to dismember the nation state. A fear of foreigners was also reflected in the fact that nearly three-quarters (73%) of respondents opposed allowing outsiders to own Turkish land or property. It may be that the opposition to foreign property ownership stems from a preoccupation with the 1919–1923 war of independence that established modern Turkey, which saw significant foreign interference. A century later, many Turks still appear to fear that Turkey is constantly under the preying eyes of its neighbours, hoping to carve it up at the first opportunity. This may be to some degree a phobic remnant of late Ottoman times, although more research would be needed to ascertain if this was the sole or even a contributory factor in some Turks' views of foreigners. In addition, the role of the ruling AKP government in this issue would benefit from further study.

Turning to the issue of democracy, a key concern when it comes to the question of whether Turkey is a fit country to join the EU, nearly nine out of ten respondents in the 2009 survey (88%) agreed that Turkey should be governed by democracy 'under each and every condition'. On the other hand, nearly half (48%) claimed that the military should intervene 'when necessary'.⁷ Tait (2009) contends that this finding indicates that Turks 'harbour ambivalent views about democracy'. It is claimed that this shows, on the one hand, significant popular support for a political role for the military in some circumstances, indicating that many Turks retained reservations about the efficacy of democracy as 'the only game in town'.⁸

In conclusion, the 2006 Konda survey paints a picture which, on the one hand, Turkish society is a relatively conservative society regarding the place of women and foreigners in society. On the other hand, the study also indicated that a huge majority of Turks are committed democrats, with about half seeing a political role for the military only *in extremis*.

Conclusion

The AKP government, in power since 2002 via reasonably democratic elections, has stated its intention of democratising the country, via secularism, that is, not preferring one religious tradition over others in public policy. The AKP government's stated aim is to increase the political roles and power of civilian institutions and diminish those of the military. For most of the century since the establishment of the Turkish republic, the military was a key political player, sometimes threatening, often undertaking, military *coup d'états* in order to maintain both its own societal and political position and the 'purity' of the country's secular Kemalist ideology and institutions.

We cannot justifiably conclude that Turkey is a politically and socially conservative country built on religious values that makes it difficult to move closer to the West. While the country is relatively politically and socially conservative, this is not due to the prominence of religious values in politics. The ruling Islam-leaning AKP does not make concerted efforts to Islamise the country. Instead, it appears to be ideologically committed to a secular regime, albeit one where Sunni Hanafi Islam is privileged over other religious expressions. In other words, even though Turkey is led by an Islam-leaning government, it does not exemplify an inward-looking political religiosity.

Second, Turkey is a politically, socially, and to some extent culturally diverse nation of around 80 million people, which simultaneously presents several contrasting images. On the one hand, Turkey not only indisputably constitutes an essential part of European heritage, going back to Greco-Roman times and early Christianity (Byzantium), but also appears strongly to value representative government and democracy, except when there appears to be a fundamental breakdown of law and order, such as that which occurred in the 1970s when the country was torn by extreme ideological polarisation and accompanying extremist violence involving the secular right and secular left. At this time, many Turks welcomed a military government for the stability and security which they felt would ensue.

Third, many Turks do not believe in full gender equality while also claiming to fear or distrust foreigners. It is difficult, however, to argue that the conservative position of some Turks is attributable to 'Islamic values' and even harder to demonstrate that such values are central to the ideology of the ruling AKP. Instead, many Turks' adherence to unequal gender relations is more explicable by a cultural conservatism that is also found in, for example, the neighbouring country of Greece, with its huge Orthodox Christian majority (Tzilivakis, n/d). Approximately 97% of Greeks are Orthodox Christians. A study measuring the 'Global Gender Gap' published by the World Economic Forum (WEF) in May 2005 highlighted the severity of the problems

facing Greek women. The study assessed patterns of inequality in five dimensions – economic participation, economic opportunity, political empowerment, educational attainment, health and well-being. Greece ranked 50th in the study of 58 countries and Turkey ranked 57th. However, we cannot usefully conclude that it was Turkey's 'Muslim values' which explains its even poorer position in the rankings compared to Greece, which also did very badly. In fact, several Muslim-majority countries, including Indonesia and Malaysia, did as well or better not only than Greece but also several other Christian-majority, EU member states, including Italy, Malta, and Romania (Lopez-Claros and Zahidi, 2005: 9).

Fourth, fear of foreigners similarly does not seem to be clearly linked to 'Islamic values'. Instead, this perception may be rooted in cultural memories that go back at least to the time of the decline of the Ottoman empire in the early 20th century when the country faced a clear threat of foreign intervention and dismemberment. Overall, viewed through the lens of differing perceptions and understandings, it is clear that current political and social views in Turkey do not depend upon the entrenchment of religious worldviews among Turks. Having said this, however, it is almost certainly the case that the AKP's electoral triumphs since 2002 suggest to many secular Turks that the country is being increasingly affected by conservative religious and cultural values, such as the increasing proportion of women in Turkey who regularly cover their heads in order, it is presumed, to demonstrate their adhesion to cultural and religious conformity, encouraged by some leaders of the AKP, including President Erdoğan.

In 2021, the AKP government had a strong position in the parliament single-handedly, with just under 50% of the seats (at the high point, the AKP held 338 seats in the then 550-seat chamber, that is, 61.45%). The party controls Turkey's executive branch of government in the commanding figure of President Erdoğan. Among the remaining institutions still beyond the AKP's control, both academia and the judiciary still feature significant numbers of non-AKP appointees, appointed by former presidents. However, this situation will not last indefinitely. As time goes by, attrition will mean that replacements will be required. The job of choosing them will fall to President Erdoğan, although his status as head of state renders him officially apolitical.

After years of incomplete or at least inconclusive democratisation, Turkey is at a political impasse. On the one hand, it seems very unlikely that military rule will return to Turkey in the present circumstances, that is, strong civilian control under the rule of the AKP and President Erdoğan. It appears that military rule would neither please most Turks nor find favour with the country's key allies in Europe, including the United Kingdom; for these reasons, in the present circumstances, armed forces rule seems highly unlikely.

On the other hand, the national position of the military remains untouchable: It has overthrown four elected governments since 1960, two of them for being 'too Islamist'. It has made it known – for example, via the unsuccessful but serious coup attempt in July 2016 – that it would step in if it deems that the secular order is seriously threatened. Because of this factor and two others – that is, growing incompatibility between secularist and religious worldviews and a significant threat to national unity posed by Kurdish demands for autonomy or independence – it has proved impossible so far to institutionalise democracy in a manner commensurate with full democratic consolidation.

Notes

- 1 The notion of an 'Islam-influenced' government in Turkey is captured in the following: 'Currently...it seems that religion has become a new or re-born element of the new Turkey and has been transforming many areas such as: the media, the Kurdish issue, implementation of the rule of law, foreign policy and gender issues' (Yavuz and Öztürk, 2019: 1).

- 2 Turkey has undergone four successful military coups, in 1960, 1971, 1980, and 1997. The most recent, in 1997, is often described as a 'soft coup', when the generals edged from power a government they considered Islamist, by using both public and behind-the-scenes pressure not taking troops to the streets.
- 3 The Grand National Assembly of Turkey (Turkish: *Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi – TBMM*), usually referred to simply as *Meclis* – 'the Parliament'.
- 4 Later, in 2008, the mayor of Istanbul sought to do the same thing in parts of Istanbul, with greater long-term success.
- 5 The charge against the AKP to be a 'centre of anti-secularism' not only threatened the existence of the governing party but was also combined with an attempt to forbid the continuous political engagement of more than 70 of its members, including the-then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the-then President Abdullah Gül.
- 6 'Ergenekon' or the 'Ergenekon network' is an alleged clandestine ultra-nationalist organisation in Turkey with ties to the country's military and security apparatus.
- 7 The powerful armed forces have toppled four elected governments in coups in the past 50 years.
- 8 Unfortunately, the full findings of the poll were not translated into English.

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