



Exploring Turkishness: Rights, Identity and the EU Essay Series
Laicite, Religion and Socio-Political Dissociative Personality Disorder in Turkey

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Ever since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the young Turkish Republic has struggled to formulate and actualize a coherent socio-political narrative. While the military successes of the founders have clearly marked the borders and independence of the Republic, their political visions and the tensions it created remains to be unresolved.

First of these is the vision of a homogenized nation state, formed by a mono-race with one language and one religion and expressed with the archetypal identity of a 'Turk'. While formulation of such a macro nation making vision only took a handful of intellectuals educated in Europe, its actualization has been a painful and ultimately unsuccessful process. After more than 80 years of forced assimilation, ethnic minorities, such as Kurds, still continue to refuse being consumed into being branded a 'Turk' and use their own languages as their native tongues. Kurdish demands for cultural, if not political, autonomy are as strong as the first days of the Republic.

The second of the political visions is the place of religion in the new nation project. In order to develop a unifying identity of 'Turkishness', the founders of the Republic used Islam as a marker separating the Turks from the others. Islam was the only available common denominator for bringing together large sways of ethnic groups including Kurds, Turks, Alevi and Circassians. The non-Muslims, who were always seen as inferior and unequal to ruling Muslims in the Ottoman Empire, were to be the eternal internal enemies, who work with foreign powers and want land and autonomy. They had three options; assimilate, or leave or accept a non-visible existence.

However, while Islam could serve as a separation from the 'other', it was also a threat. The founders saw Islam and the clerics to be guilty of stopping reforms and hindering the Empire from adopting into the modern era. The demolition of the caliphate system by the Republic and closing down of independent Islamic centres were part of the attempts to break the hold of religion. Just like in the minds of 19th century 'learned' European thinkers, for the founders, religion had to be a matter of personal faith and ultimately done away with the progress of modernization- a wish that never came true.

That is why the official interpretation of secularism in Turkey meant that while religious establishment should be hindered from power over the political establishment, the state should regulate religion. Through the creation of a Directorate of Religious Affairs and employment of all of the imams as civil servants, the Turkish state has de facto established an enforced state religion, even though the Turkish constitution does not include any reference to a state religion and Article 2 of the constitution declares Turkey to be 'secular'. In effect, the state has developed and forced one particular officially sanctioned version of Islam on its citizens. This meant that the Muslims who did not already fit into the official Islam also had no option but to assimilate.



Almost all of the political and social problems in today's Turkey stem from these ill conceived and faulty political visions. Whether in armed conflict with the Kurdish militias or in continual tensions over the use of headscarves in public spaces or in ongoing persecution and exclusion of non-Muslim, we witness the end of know-how of political ideas developed in previous centuries. Religious Muslims demand to be free from state regulation and limitations. Ethnic minorities demand to be free to use their languages and express their cultures, and non-Muslims still demand to be free from persecution and to feel protected.

Yet, the state structures continue to see any identity but that of the archetypal 'Turk' a threat to nation's existence and to see its enforcement as a duty. This has made 'Turkishness' a tightly controlled club with ambiguous membership requirements and high demands for unquestioning allegiance to state. The elites of Ankara bureaucracy, Armed Forces and Istanbul businesses have seen themselves as the guardians and gate keepers of that club till now. This silent class division in Turkey- those who are the real Atatürk following Turks and who rule the land versus the peasants who need to be controlled and tamed, is currently facing a major derailing in the forms of landslide electoral successes of AKP.

Unlike the traditional political elite of Turkey, AKP has symbolized the reality of majority of Turkey; culturally conservative yet economically liberal and pragmatic. The record breaking ratio of votes given to AKP has expressed the disillusionment of the country with the old guard, which has proved itself to be impotent and self serving. While many people gave AKP the benefit of the doubt in 2002 and took their promise of reforms and liberalization at its face value, after eight years of AKP rule, AKP's votes still remain high.

Without a doubt, the first reason for this is AKP's economic performance, which has not only protected the country from the global recession but also dropped inflation and attracted never-seen before levels of direct foreign investment to the country. Today's economic forecasts of the future of Turkish economy signals a steady increase in Turkey's ranking among G20 countries and future place among BRIC countries. This is a far cry from the collapse of Turkish economy under the Ecevit government in 2000.

Yet, one cannot ignore the core fact that AKP has done what no other party has been able to do so thus far and appealed to broader segments of the country from central Anatolian Turks to liberals of Istanbul, Kurds and even to non-Muslims. AKP's remarkable commitment to EU membership and improvement of human rights in Turkey resulted in land mark developments in freedom for minorities. Through reforms such as lifting the ban on languages other than Turkish, addressing registration and property problems of non-Muslim groups, allowing change of religion section in national ID cards and granting non-Muslim children exemption from compulsory Islamic religious education in schools, AKP has indeed showed promising democratic attitudes. Recent loosening of the headscarf ban in universities is slowly ending a disgraceful era of discrimination that denied the right to education to hundreds of thousands Muslim girls.



While, these developments signal positive changes in the state structures, sadly, one major black hole still remains, even with the cosmetic touches of reform. As Turkish state and society seem to be maturing into handling Islam, democracy and laicite¹ in balance, this cannot be said so for the attitudes towards non-Muslims. Last ten years have seen substantial deterioration in attitudes against non-Muslims and a fresh come back of violent mob attacks on non-Muslim individuals and religious centers.

As the turbulent political atmosphere in the country continually portrayed the country to be at the brink of destruction from within by groups seeking to derail Ataturk's legacy, non-Muslims once again emerged as the eternal other, who should not be in Turkey. If, one can name it a 'success', those who have desired a country with no non-Muslims are close to achieve their dream. Today, the total number of non-Muslims in the country is not more than 120,000, a scandalous decline from millions 50 years ago.

The never ending desire to find internal enemies and foreign powers under every rock signals a deep anxiety and a picture of country that is ultimately at conflict with itself. On one hand, it enforces Islam as the marker of who a Turk is, yet at the same time it does not allow Islam to be lived with its most logical expressions. On one hand, the country markets itself as a place where East meets West and where civilizations have born, yet at the same time it sees any form of religious and cultural difference a threat to its existence. On one hand, the country longs to be seen as a modern and future oriented country and shuns its Middle Eastern neighbors as backward nations. On the other hand, its perceptions of human rights, handling of minorities and low level of public accountability and debate, it reflects a previous century.

This does raise serious questions about the future of Turkey, even with the promising and often limited reforms of the AKP government. It is still far from clear whether yesterday's excluded religiously conservative Muslims of Turkey will not turn into tomorrow's exclusive guardians of new Turkey. Given the immense polarization of the Turkish society along conservative and secularist lines, and high levels of anti non-Muslim feelings and dead ends of the Kurdish issues, we have every reason to fear that future can get better or worse.

Simply put, while the visions of the founding father of Turkish Republic carried the country thus far, unless they are updated to accommodate the world as it is now and give Turkey a new unifying vision, they will continue to stifle the country's future and cause serious human rights abuses. It is high time for Turkey to focus on equal citizenship rather than race based national allegiance. Only such a convivial Turkey that cherishes and protects its ethnic and religious diversity as equal pieces of its identity can flourish in the globalised world, thus fulfill the ultimate vision of Ataturk to make Turkey a leading modern country.

¹ The separation of religion and state