The Turkish State and Alevis: Changing Parameters of an Uneasy Relationship

BEDRIYE POYRAZ

The Alevis constitute the second largest religious community (next to the Sunnis) in Turkey, and number some 15 million people, equal to approximately 25 per cent (Alevis claim 30–40 per cent) of the country’s total population. The vast majority of Alevis are ethnic and linguistic Turks, although about 20 per cent of Alevis are Kurds, equal to about 25 per cent of the total Kurdish population of Turkey. There exists no accurate information or consensus on the number of Alevis present in society, however, because of the effects of the assimilative politics of the Turkish state since the time of the Ottoman Empire, as well as the tendency of many Alevis to hide their identities because of political and social pressure.

Alevis date back over a thousand years; at times the Alevis’ beliefs have flourished and at times been suppressed and even reviled. Sunnis, the dominant Muslim group in Turkey, have for hundreds of years questioned whether Alevis are even Muslim. At the time of the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923 and the implementation of its secular reforms, the Alevis welcomed the formation of the new state and supported Atatürk’s leadership in the hope that with the new state would come new acceptance of the Alevis and greater roles for them in society. But over the years, the situation did not improve for the Alevis.

Today, the Alevis have become one of the most intensely debated issues in Turkish politics and media. Since 1990, there has been a reawakening of interest in, and increased acceptance of their beliefs and a gradual realization that the Alevis are a threat to the Turkish Republic’s modernization process. Referred to by some academics as the ‘Alevis Issue’, the recent increase in popular and academic literature on various aspects of Alevis is in fact re-politicization or revivalism of Alevis in Turkish civil society.

To begin, I will argue that the reason for the increasing acceptance of Alevis in Turkish politics, media and society is due to a realization of their way of life; their understanding of religion, their culture, their ideology and their attitude to the state. Later, I will demonstrate the contributions Alevis bring to the political agenda and how support for the Alevis has become state policy, even if it is not easy to generalize. Finally, within this framework, I will analyze how these developments are reflected in the media and in politics.

Much discussion is taking place today on how to characterize Alevis but near consensus has been reached in academic and popular literature that the Alevis are a primarily secular, democratic and tolerant community. Iren Melikoff, one of the most
important academicians studying Alevilik, explains the phenomenon in a historical context. In late Ottoman times, Bektaşısm became synonymous with non–conformism in religious matters. During the nineteenth century, after the collapse of the Janissaries (Yeniçeri) in 1826 and the closure of the tekkes, the non-conformist Bektaşı became free-thinkers and, in the twentieth century, were considered progressivists. They also joined the Young Turks. Later, when the Turkish Republic replaced the Ottoman Empire, the Bektaşı embraced Atatürk’s cause and supported his efforts to create a secular state. The Alevis went even further and compared Atatürk to Hazret-i Ali.9

In Alevilik, Bilici refers to a form of ‘liberation theology’ in contrast to Sunni orthodoxy – the first branch which defines Alevilik as a popular movement with an ideology supporting the oppressed, may be seen as a type of Marxist–Alevi theology analogous to the ‘liberation theology’ of the 1970s and 1980s in Latin America. Alevilik draws its main support from intellectuals who previously played a part in various left-wing parties and trade unions. This branch, which substantially intensified its activities and its production of material, particularly after the military coup of 1980 and the collapse of the Soviet Union, began to emerge as a movement following in the footsteps of Pir Sultan Abdal (sixteenth century martyr). This approach, which embraced the so-called ‘Kurdish question’, was, according to Alevi ideology, in line with the assertion made in Engels’ The Peasant War in Germany that ‘in every age, religious wars are the reflection of class wars conducted during the same period’.10 On this ground, Bilici emphasizes that this aspect of Alevilik merges with mystical religious dimensions and in its new form establishes tools for liberal interpretations and alternative theology.

One of the most important studies on the nature of Alevilik, however, has emerged quite recently. David Shankland, an anthropologist, has conducted several studies on various aspects of Alevilik and his anthropological findings are that

Alevi doctrines are embedded within the wider sphere of Islam, and the orthodox Sunni practices are not rejected but respected and side-stepped. Ultimately, this means that the Alevi communities in Anatolia define their everyday existence more in terms of peacefully going about their daily lives rather than engaging in any form of proselytising, and that inherent within the very terms of their religion is a sense of tolerance of different beliefs and practices.

According to David Shankland, a sociological argument could be put forward to explain this tolerance: individual believers can take up different individual positions within the Alevi faith. Whatever the sociological explanation may be, there is a built-in respect for other people’s views which, along with emphasis on the mystical inner self, gives Alevilik much of its fascination for the outside world, and indeed for its apologists.11

The other important Shankland study on the Alevi emphasizes the Alevi and Sunni different perceptions of religion and the reasons behind the Alevi more secular, democratic, and tolerant approach, which have led to the reawakening of interest in Alevilik and have made the Alevi one of the most debated topics in Turkish politics and media.12 There are many factors behind the tolerance of the Alevi. One such arises from the circumstances of historical development. Alevi philosophy has not supported struggles for power, which separates it from the Sunni belief system.13
Shankland also suggests that the emergence of the Alevi as a secular community is a reflection of the wider transition to becoming part of the modern nation, and cannot simply be regarded as a desire to be relieved of actual and perceived persecution by the Sunni majority. This is in itself an important aspect of Alevi life in Turkey, but does not explain the way that they have allied themselves so forcefully with the idea that religion is a personal matter, and not something that should influence the state. On this ground, according to Shankland, the theories Gellner developed on the Islamic world should be revised because of the existence of the Alevi. Shankland emphasizes that Gellner, through his desire to cover a very wide range of material using sharply defined arguments, failed to consider the Alevis, which certainly indicates a lacuna in his depiction of the ethnography of the Islamic lands. Consequently Shankland concedes that Gellner's contentions appear to be highly relevant, however, they should be extended and enriched by comparison with the Turkish material. Thus, at the very least, the dismissive criticism that his theories have met with need to be reconsidered, and at best he might provide a profoundly creative focus through which further work might be oriented.

As mentioned, Alevilik became the object of a process of rediscovery in the past two decades. Efforts at community revival were soon brought to the attention of the public, and thus the 'question of Alevilik' became one of the most discussed topics in the Turkish media. For the past fifteen years, Alevis have become known as Shankland has described them – a secular community both in Turkey and in Europe.

One can roughly distinguish sociological and political factors among the reasons for the acceptance of the Alevis by both the Sunni community and the Turkish Republic. These reasons can be enumerated as follows. Sociologically, the rural exodus, which in the case of Alevis reached its peak during the 1970s for economic and political reasons, is surely the most decisive factor. Migration to the cities inevitably imposed new, urban forms of expression on Alevilik which, in the foregoing centuries had existed principally in remote rural areas of the country. Rapid urbanization and a large increase in the number of educated Alevis and the emergence of an Alevi bourgeoisie resulted in new social stratification.

In very broad terms, the political factors can be reduced to three essential points. The first is the collapse of the socialist bloc in Eastern Europe at the end of the 1980s. As a result of this development, socialism, which in the previous two decades had an indisputable authority as an ideological alternative for the young and middle generations of Alevis, lost its former importance. Thus, a large section of the Alevi community, who became politically frustrated, began to redefine themselves as 'Alevi'. They discovered Alevilik as an ideology, which they now regarded as being even more just, egalitarian and libertarian than socialism. Then, they began to strive for Alevi ideals. The return of these circles to the community to which they had previously belonged led to a rapid introduction of modern terms and methods into Alevilik. In other words, in the contemporary Turkish context, trying to ally with neo-liberalism and to establish a relatively organized market economy, rapidly urbanizing Alevi communities have come to mark their identities more with cultural and religious definitions, many of them criticizing the 'strong class emphasis' of the pre-coup era, while the minority who do not, often suppress the class dimension for the time being.
The second and perhaps the most important factor was the rise of Islamic fundamentalism or, more accurately, of political Islam in Turkey. After the 1980 military coup, a new National Security Council (MGK) was established and findings showed that a degree of moderate Islam might counteract leftist influences and in particular the separatist Kurdish movement. The policies of supporting moderate Islam continued into Özal’s ANAP government. But these policies turned out to be counter productive as the Welfare Party (RP) gained popularity. When the Welfare Party won the most votes in the 1995 elections it became very clear to the Turkish Republic that secularism could not be compromised. The seriousness of this situation was seen not only by the secular camp in Turkey, which of course included the Alevi, but also abroad throughout the EU and USA. Academics and politicians alike debated whether Turkey could possibly follow the path that Iran and Algeria had taken. Fundamentalism was recognized as the most serious threat to the Turkish Republic’s modernization projects. Because of their considerable and extensive historical legacy, the Alevis were put on the alert by Islamic reassertion, which had gained a new impetus through the Islamic Revolution of Iran. According to Camuroğlu, the most important motive for the establishment and rapid expansion of Alevi organizations today lies in the defensive instinct of the Alevis against the rise of Islamism, which led to various efforts by the emerging organizations to create political unity. A massacre of participants in an Alevi cultural festival in Sivas on 2 July 1993 by Islamists aggravated this traditional tension and enhanced the tendencies toward politicization of the Alevi community.

The third political factor responsible for the Alevi revival is the Kurdish problem. Since a significant number of Alevis are Kurds, they became aware through this conflict of the fact that nationalist tensions directly affected their community. Thus, when faced with Islamism, the Alevis tend towards the political choice of secularism and express their identity in political terms. When confronted with Kurdish nationalism, however, they tend towards the principle of sovereignty of the national state and stress their religious identity and affiliation as Alevi. On the other hand, the radical parts of the Motherland government, seeking a public recognition of religion as a way to avoid further social conflict, may have felt that emphasizing the overall Islamic basis of the Alevi tradition would be a way to welcome them into the ‘Turkish–Islam’ synthesis that was at that point supported by them as a way of bringing conflicting groups into a sense of greater unity.

The rise of Kurdish separatism and Islamic Fundamentalism started to be defined as a threat to the Turkish Republic. Therefore the State and its institutions tried to take more control over Islamic influences. So as an irony of fate, after the 1980 coup d’etat, the military government used Islam to control the left, which included most of the Alevis. In the 1990s, the policy was reversed and the Alevi became an important part of the struggle against fundamentalism. Today we find that Alevi enjoy both recognition and support by the Turkish state. Their existence is viewed as a kind of insurance against the unthinkable.

Without a doubt the rise of political Islam is highly significant, but it must also be seen in the context of other movements, such as the re-emergence of Alevilik, which contributes toward the overall heterogeneity of life in Turkey. These streams of
thought are part of a much wider and complex process whereby Turkish society, though remaining tremendously varied, appears to be becoming more overtly and sharply divided between secular and non-secular approaches. The military and senior bureaucracy have responded to the danger by deciding to emphasize and teach moderate Islam ever more actively. As the measures of 28 February 1997 indicate, they intend to combine this move with increasingly careful regulation of politics, in the civil service, and the media. It is very clear that most Turkish people do not want the military to return to political power. As the years go by it is becoming ever clearer that the 1980 intervention had profound effects on Turkey. Through this experience, the Turkish people realized that a military coup is not the best solution. When the coup took place it was not just a move against religious fundamentalism, but it also damaged democracy as a whole in Turkey. People realized that during the military regime, no one was safe from arbitrary detention, interrogation, and harsh treatment, not even the prime minister. These experiences made it very clear that democratic solutions are the only answer. In this regard, the Alevis as a community can be considered beneficial and rational supporters. The Alevis form a large community which lends support to democratic and tolerant ideals, while shying away from the some of the more fundamentalist practices found in the Sunni religion. For policy makers, the Alevi community should be considered an important ally in the process towards Turkish modernization.

In the empirical part of this study, I analyse the developments of policies affecting the Alevi identity during three different periods: 1975–80, 1985–90 and 1995–2000. The periodization of the three stages is intended to illustrate changes in the policies with regard to the Alevi identity. The first period covers the years between 1975 and 1980 when Alevis were at best ignored and at worst oppressed and humiliated. I chose 1975 as the beginning only for the sake of analysis. Otherwise I am well aware that Alevi history goes as far back as the period preceding the Ottoman Empire. The second period is between 1985 and 1990, when political parties had begun to realize the voting potential of such a large group of people and to promote an Alevi identity which emphasized its Turkish origins. The third period is between 1995 and 2000 when the common perception of Alevis had completely reversed and they were acknowledged by society as an important secular and democratic entity. In addition to all this, especially in the past decade. In addition to the above developments, I will try to show various current developments such as the increase in the number of cemevi (Alevi house of worship), the increase in academic interest in Alevilik music, etc.

In order to illustrate the shifts which occurred in state policy during these periods, I have chosen an important Alevi cultural festival as the basis for my analysis. This is the Hacı Bektaş Veli festival and is held in the town of the same name, that lies two hours’ drive (around 250 km) east of Ankara. Hacı Bektaş was the fourteenth century leader most revered by the Alevi people. My analysis material consist of three sets of newspapers reports, official government speeches made during the festivals, and current developments.

I examined press reports from three Turkish newspapers: Cumhuriyet - a Social Democrat paper which reflects Atatürk’s ideology, Hürriyet - a relatively liberal paper, and the right-wing Tercuman. Finally, I examined the texts of speeches made by those in authority. The following is a summary of my findings.
In 1975–80 both the State and society chose to ignore the existence of the Alevi. There were very few reports on the festival in 1976 and the only reference made in Cumhuriyet to the town of Hacı Bektaş was in connection with the strong police presence there. The other two papers followed State policies and said little to nothing about the event. In the Hürriyet, the only reference to the festival was found on the back page and did not use the word Alevi at all, but simply reported on the humanistic philosophy of Hacı Bektaş himself, who was described as being ‘of Turkish origin’. The event was not reported in the Tercuman.

Reading the Cumhuriyet headlines it is easy to guess the official State attitude to Hacı Bektaş’s followers:

Local governor bans three singers from opening ceremony. (16 August 1976)
Folk bard arrested. (17 August 1976)
Police curtail event to one day. (18 August 1976)
Folk bard and journalist arrested. (20 August 1976)

These headlines make it clear that the State was only at the festival as a suspicious and critical police power. The following year, the chairman of the Hacı Bektaş Association which organized the event said that the Alevi people had been humiliated the previous year. To illustrate Alevi philosophy, a play meant to teach about Alevi traditions was written and produced for the following year’s festival by the Hacı Bektaş Association. However, this play, Görgü Cemi, was banned before its first performance (17 August 1977).

The Turkish State showed its intolerance towards the Alevi very clearly. In 1978, an article by Umit Kaftancıoğlu appeared in Cumhuriyet (16 August 1978) explaining how Alevis had been misunderstood and humiliated. He wrote:

Many lies have been deliberately written about the Alevi and their customs. Researchers, intellectuals and academics have joined together in these misrepresentations which have even been printed in school books. It is claimed that Alevis eat pork and indulge in incest. One professor had even prepared a report to the government advising that mosques should be built in Alevi villages and imams sent before it was too late.

Such reports show how both the State and Sunni society considered the Alevi as ‘the other’ and pushed them to the margins of society.

In 1985–90 politicians became more interested in the Hacı Bektaş Festival because they finally realized the voting potential of the previously ignored Alevi. While politicians wooed them, this change of heart was also reflected in the press. For the first time, the Hacı Bektaş Festival was sponsored by the Ministry of Culture. The Minister, Namık Kemal Zeybek, a member of Özal’s cabinet and a proponent of Turkish–Islamic synthesis made a special effort to promote the festival at international level. This was the period when the Turkish state took action in the east to control the rise of Kurdish separatist movements and when Turkish identity was becoming an ever more serious issue. In spite of this the press paid little attention to the festival between 1985 and 1987. But by 1988, with a referendum approaching, politicians suddenly became interested in the event. The festival took
its place in media coverage. In 1989, for the first time, the government decided to take notice officially of the festival.

As mentioned previously, the Hacı Bektaş Festival had by this time attracted international interest and in 1990 when Namik Kemal Zeybek was Minister of Culture he made a speech in which he said:

You already know how I have promoted Hacı Bektaş events and my one aim is to safeguard this culture. I will do my best to bring the tourists who visit Kapadokya to Hacı Bektaş town as well.

This minister established a *semah* (traditional Alevi folk dance) group and the Hacı Bektaş Veli Cultural Centre was established. Including Hacı Bektaş town in Kapadokya tours was one of the most significant moves of this period because the local people had long asked for it. It is clear that Zeybek worked hard to emphasize that the Alevi were Turks and to distance them from any connection with Kurdish separatists.

Shankland, who participated in the festival as an observer in 1989, asks some questions and through their answers, tries to explain the reason for the government's interest in the Alevi folk festival. He asks why the ANAP government should suddenly decide to intervene, breaking free from the previous government attitude of completely ignoring the Alevis. It is possible; of course, that it was no more than a rather clumsy way to seek votes for the next general election, although the fact that the three main parties were represented would seem to belie this simple explanation. It is possible also that the state was reacting to a feeling, widespread in general citizen-state relations in Turkey, that any large-scale gathering needs careful supervision. As Hacı Bektaş is a sensitive and important site, and the festival is growing ever larger, it is easy to understand that administrators felt close supervision was better than the risk of the size and extent of the gathering growing out of control.27

During this analysis period one of the most important issues, referred to above, is the Alevi vote. This was also reflected in the media reports of the time. *Hürriyet*'s headline was *'Who will have the Alevi votes?'* (15 August 1988). According to newspaper articles which were reportedly based on public opinion research, the Social Democrat Parties was believed to have the support of Alevi voters. According to the news article, the Alevi vote could amount to 5 million which is a significant portion of the voting public in a country of 40 million people. The other articles in *Hürriyet*, *'Votes Sought in Hacı Bektaş'* (17 August, 1988), explained how all the parties went to the Festival to gain Alevi votes. *Tercüman*'s headline reads *'Political show in Hacı Bektaş'* (17 August 1988). This article takes up almost an entire page and gives many details of the political figures that were present at the festival, what they said, what kind of reaction they received, as well as the statistics for the three previous years which demonstrated that Hacı Bektaş on the whole tended to vote for the left wing. *Cumhuriyet* also emphasized in its coverage the importance of the Alevi vote for all parties (17 August 1988).

The most important point when comparing the second period with the first is the complete shift in State policy towards the Alevis. In contrast to the first period, in the second the Alevis are no longer treated with suspicion and distrust by the police. On
the contrary, one can see from newspapers and political speeches that all political parties worked hard to win the approval and support of the Alevi community.

In 1995–2000 Alevis had come into their own – they were acclaimed by both society and the State as an important treasure in the Turkish Republic. At the Hacı Bektaş festival, the State was represented at the highest level – the Prime Minister, government ministers and even the President have attended this traditional celebration, which is now in the official state calendar. One must understand that the main reason for this change is linked with the dangers that the Welfare Party presents to the Turkish Republic’s modernization project. Alevis, with their strong secular political identity counteract the unwanted religious influence of the Welfare Party.

This state policy towards the Alevis is reflected in the press reports that put the Hacı Bektaş festival on the front page and even appeared as headlines in all the three newspapers studied. In this period I had to replace Tercuman with Türkiye as my sample newspaper, since Tercuman ceased to be published. The text of speeches made by the President, Prime Minister, and many other ministers provided me with important data which I have categorized and analysed as follows.

A. The dignitaries who visited the Hacı Bektaş festival during this period went to great pains to emphasize that their presence as President, Prime Minister or Minister, represented the Turkish State itself and that the town of Hacı Bektaş would always be under its protection. The speeches of the previous president, Süleyman Demirel, strongly reflect this. He attended the festival for five years and in his speech of 16 August 1995 he made particular reference to himself as the State personified:

I am here. I am here as the Turkish State President. Mr Vefa Tanir is here as Vice President of the Turkish Assembly and Mr Hikmet Çetin is here as Deputy Prime Minister of the Turkish State, Mr Ismail Cem is here as the Culture Minister.

In the following year Demirel again pursued this theme in his speech of 16 August 1996 by saying: ‘I come here as the Turkish State President but not because I haven’t other things to do. ..... We are looking for peace and we can only have peace when we make time to understand each other, respect each other, know each other and accept each other.’

Even the Minister of Culture in the Welfare Party government tried to continue in this vein when he said, ‘I come here as the Turkish Republic’s Culture Minister and to show that I serve the people who follow the Hacı Bektaş way.’ But in response he was booed!

Headlines of newspapers in this period read: The State is in Hacı Bektaş Festival, or State Summit is held at Hacı Bektas. (Cumhuriyet, 16 Aug. 1998; Hurriyet 16 Aug. 1998; Türkiye 16 Aug. 1998). The Hacı Bektaş Festival and the dignitaries who participated in the festival received much attention in all three newspapers. Newspapers listed all the politicians’ names and the text of their speeches in detail to emphasize how Hacı Bektaş and Alevis are important to them. It can be gathered from the analysis of this period that the Festival is as critical an event for the press as it is for the politicians. There are many reports that the town and festival receive each year more and more investment. In this context, the President Symphony Orchestra,
the most prestigious in the country, gives concerts during the festival (Hürriyet, 18 Aug. 1997).

It is easy to read expressions of regret between the lines of the speeches by dignitaries at the Hacı Bektaş Festival. In his 1999 speech, Demirel stressed the value of the Alevis: ‘There are a thousand towns in Turkey and Hacı Bektaş is one of the most important in the whole country. The Turkish Government is determined to rebuild the town.’ Demirel implied that there had been injustices in the past but he guaranteed that this would not be repeated.

If negative things had happened these are isolated incidents and shouldn’t be connected with state policies. Today, it is impossible for the Turkish Republic to act undemocratically or to support injustice. Give your support to the Turkish State, it’s yours. It’s your country, your flag and Hacı Bektaş belongs to all of us.’

There are many cases where the state discriminated and exerted pressure on the Alevi. However, Demirel encouraged the Alevis to forget about those times and put the bad memories behind them.

In another speech, Demirel asked the Alevis to forget what happened in the past. He addressed them on 16 August 1997 in an apologetic way saying that the Alevis are A first-class people:

My dear citizens. Don’t hesitate, don’t worry about anything – you are full citizens of this country and no one humiliates you these days. Alevi should hold their heads up high, even to the sky. Enjoy all the blessings of this country. Alevi beliefs are no different from others and you are right to be proud of your tradition.

Cumhuriyet used this last sentence as a headline. ‘Alevi should hold their heads up high, even to the sky.’ A few years before they would have hesitated to use the word ‘Alevi’ but as the festival became such a popular cultural and social event, it was now front page news. The newspaper’s change in attitude lies in direct corollary with the level of importance accorded to the festival through the newly found political recognition.

I now aim to show that the State representatives who came to the Hacı Bektaş festival all tried to emphasize the Turkish origins of the Alevis and build up the public’s perception that the Alevis were indeed partners in the country. The Turkish Republic had been betrayed first by the Kurdish separatists and then by Radical Islam. The State now recognized that their beliefs in both democracy and secularism were in line with the principles of the Turkish Republic. This can be seen in an address given by Ismail Kahraman, Minister of Culture in the coalition government with the Welfare Party and True Path Party on 16 August 1996. ‘We are indebted to the Hacı Bektaş Veli for bringing to Anatolia much of our culture, music and language.’ The same ideas were expressed by the Prime Minister, Bulent Ecevit on 17 August 1999 when he said that the festival strengthened national ties: ‘The Hacı Bektaş festival is one of the main supporters of Turkish culture, identity and unity.’
During this period it is easy to see that the press also continued to reflect state policy vis-à-vis the Alevi and there are many articles about the history of Haci Bektaş to be found in Cumhuriyet, Hürriyet and Türkiye newspapers. Cumhuriyet on 18 August 1999 reported on the founding of the Haci Bektaş Cultural and Research Centre and filmed a documentary which discussed the extent of the influence of Hacı Bektaş, from Central Asia to the Balkans. It was also reported that the Prime Minister guaranteed the protection of the new cultural centre. Another interesting point is the change in attitude demonstrated by Gazi University, basically acknowledged as a nationalist university and at one time considered to be critical of the Alevi because of their leftist ideology. But now Gazi University has a foundation whose objective is to protect, support and of course emphasize the Turkish origins of the Hacı Bektaş in order to preserve his legacy for the nationalist Turkish agenda. The other newspapers Türkiye and Hürriyet also emphasized the origin of the Hacı Bektaş in politicians speeches.

All authorities continued to make a special effort to promote the belief that everyone in Turkey was equal. However, in all these dialogues they implied that this equality was only for Turks and Moslems who defend this country as one nation. They made it clear that the Turkish State wanted only to emphasize the Alevi’s similarities with the Sunni community rather than highlight their different identity. President Demirel declared that now the Alevi were partners in Turkey – thus implying that this was not so before and that in the past the State had not accepted them as equals.

On 16 August 1998 speaking at the Hacı Bektaş festival, Demirel said:

In this country there is no difference between Alevi and Sunni. You must believe this.... all of you should say to yourselves, ‘I am recognized as first class in this country and I am a partner here and share all the good things Turkey offers me. This country is mine, this state is mine and this land is mine.

Once again on 16 August 1995 the President appealed to the Alevi through the Hacı Bektaş philosophy to forget the past and bear no grudges against anyone. He asked the Alevi to believe in the Turkish State justice which, he said, was strong like the country of Turkey and in the end everyone would receive the justice they deserved.

Peace should be in your hearts, my citizens; I am addressing you as a peacemaker. Cast out the grudges, forget the humiliations of the past, let go of the grudges and bitterness. Replace all negative feelings with positive ones about the strength of the Turkish state and the justice of this country. I ask you to believe in this and don’t listen to others who tell you otherwise.

I hope I have made it clear that the Turkish State uses the Alevi as a form of insurance against those who oppose secularism. The support of the Alevi was even more vital after February 1998, when the Turkish state declared open war on radical Islam. One of the most controversial issues, education, came to a head when Parliament extended compulsory education from 5 to 8 years. The reason for this was to limit the number of students entering religious schools. Soon after this law was successfully passed, Prime Minister Mesut Yılmaz and Deputy Prime Minister
Bulent Ecevit, went to the Hacı Bektash festival covered in glory. During the ceremony on 17 August 1998 Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz spoke:

Today, unfortunately, there are people who want to change our way of separating religion and the state. They want to control our conscience and change the Turkish–Islamic form of religion. They want to replace it with the Persian–Arab way, which is very radical. But Anatolian people (the Turks–Islam) have for many centuries been very liberal in their thinking – our attitudes to dress, whether we cover our heads or not, what style of beards we have, what style of worry beads. Anatolian people I know will be able to give the right answers to those who want to exercise a monopoly on religious behaviour and customs and I am confident that those answers will be both tolerant and peaceful.

This speech is a clear indication that Yilmaz is asking the Alevi to find answers to this religious challenge through the humanistic approach of Bektasî philosophy. This expectation of support from Alevi–Bektasî people was explained best by Bulent Ecevit at the festival in 1999 when he said on 17 August:

Alevi–Bektasî culture and their perception of this Islamic culture is one of the most important forms of insurance we hold for the safety of our secularism and democracy. Secularism is also insurance for the Alevi–Bektasî people.

At this point it is relevant to go back nine years and recall a famous speech given on 17 August 1990 by the Social Democrat Party Leader Erdal Inonu, in which he asked the Alevis to fight against Radical Islam, assuring them that they would not be alone. He said:

According to the Hacı Bektas philosophy, women have equal rights with men. And Hacı Bektas himself opposed those who wanted to see women reduced to the sort of slave Radical Islam requires of them. Unfortunately there are people today that want to bring back such subordination of women. I call upon women today to protect their rights and I assure them they are not alone in their fight. Go on ahead, confident of both the Hacı Bektas philosophy and the guidance of Atatürk.

After passing the eight years’ compulsory education law in Parliament, Prime Minister Yilmaz and Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit went to participate in the Hacı Bektas festival. When the two leaders arrived at the opening ceremony everybody shouted, ‘Turkey is secular and will stay secular!’ The newspaper headlines emphasized what Yilmaz had said: ‘Turkey has been rescued from the hand of darkness.’

All these reports show us that the Alevis are valuable supporters of secularism and modernization that have to be accepted at all levels. From being outcast some twenty years previously and undesirable employees in most institutions, many Alevis today occupy good positions in some of the country’s most vital institutions. In February 2002 the closing of an Alevi union by the court was discussed widely in the media.
Many things about state policy towards the Alevis were revealed. One of the most important aspects of the policy was reported in *Cumhuriyet* on 21 February, 2002. According to the report, ‘Army support Alevi’, the GHQ (General High Commander) have always had a rule that members of the Turkish Army cannot join unions, but the Hacı Bektaş Veli Cultural Union is an exception. This news item was in the press on 2 February 1999, at the same time as the army was trying to control Radical Islam.

In another report in *Cumhuriyet* of 8 February 2002 it was revealed that the State had agreed to spend 151 billion TL on Alevi unions. For years, the Alevis had argued that the state should allocate them money equal to that given to the Sunnis for the maintenance and running of mosques in Turkey. The Alevis do not use mosques and, as they represent about 30 per cent of the population in Turkey, Alevis argued that since they pay their taxes and do their military service, they are therefore entitled to a similar proportion of money that is spent on Sunni mosques. This newspaper report confirms that at last something is happening. Even if it is a small concession, the State decided to pay for Alevi houses of worship (*cem evi*).

The other newspapers *Türkiye* and *Hürriyet*, also emphasize the importance of secularism for the modern Turkish Republic and for its modernization project. In this context the Alevi–Bektaşi community was presented in the media as insurance for secularism.

As has been attempted to state throughout this study, the attitude of Turkish State and society towards Alevis has softened substantially during the last 15–20 years. No doubt, this does not mean that the rigid attitude against the Alevis, which ignored their existence, has been completely abandoned or that there is enough data to allow this change to be measured at different social strata. In view of the fact that the complete alteration of policies and attitudes in societies takes a long time, other important data indicating that the policies and attitudes towards the Alevis will be briefly considered.

Important areas where we can observe the indications of the change of attitude toward the Alevis is the surge in the interest in Alevi music and literature. Likewise, thorough consideration of the Alevis in television channels, radios and newspapers and especially the fact that TRT, (public radio and television corporation) produces many documentaries on the Alevis, whom it did not even mention before 1990 may be regarded as important developments supporting this thesis. Another important finding is the number of academic studies on this issue. According to the results of our investigation in YOK documentation centre, no academic thesis was submitted on the Alevis until 1990, whereas after 1991 an increasing number of Master and PhD theses were submitted; this can be attributed both to the decrease in social oppression and to the increasing interest of the Alevis in discovering their own identities. The number of theses published each year gives an indication (see Table 1).

Although they were not officially established as religious intuitions but as associations, almost 60 *Cemevi* offer religious services to the Alevi community. As was mentioned above, Hacı Bektaş Veli Research centre was established on 28 October, 1987, in accordance with 7/d–2 article of YOK law no.2547. This centre, which will research Alevi–Bektaşi culture, was established as an affiliate of Gazi University, with the support of the ANAP–DSP government.
Table 1: Academic thesis about Alevilik

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Master</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: <http://www.yok.gov.tr/tez/tez_tarama.htm>

The ANAP–DSP coalition government was the first to allocate money to Alevi from the national budget. In the fiscal year 1998, 425 billion TL was allocated to Alevi associations and divided between Alevi Associations and Foundations. The first government to recognize Alevi identity was the DSP–ANAP–MHP. The statement in the government programme that ‘our government will try to consolidate the brotherhood of Alevi and Sunni’ places Alevi and Sunni on equal footing.

In addition, the Ministry of Culture has recently supported many projects on Alevi–Bektasi culture. All of these developments helped to reduce the oppression of Alevi and in this setting, the Alevis found the opportunity to express their identity at different social levels.

I have aimed to show how over the past twenty years great changes in attitude and state policy towards the Alevi–Bektas have taken place. Whereas Alevi was once a ‘dirty word’, if you hear it spoken now it is in connection with very different ideas – those of democracy, secularism, and is spoken by intellectuals and followers of Atatürk’s ideology. My only concern now is that having struggled for acceptance and having taken their rightful place in the Turkish Republic they could become, as we have seen so often in history, complacent with their situation, even conservative in their outlook and forget their grassroots of tolerance, democracy and change. As Shankland emphasizes, the very fact of learning to live with a dominant tradition has resulted in a combination of mystical philosophy and a doctrine of peace and equality between the sexes which is remarkably attractive. If, as researchers, we permit this flexibility, inherent within Alevi communities, to be written out of the process of cultural revival, we fail in the one area where we may be of use.

I believe that the most important message to express to the Alevis is always to remind them of their past and discourage them from evolving into a religion like Sunni or another conservative religion. At this point the most important question is how this can be best accomplished? This question is not easy to answer but at least academics can consider this point in the future.

Notes
B. Poyraz


6. Following as T. Erman and E. Göker explained, I have chosen to use Turkish term Alevilik instead of Aleviniss and Alevism because it covers both its ideological construction as a social movement and its social identity aspect.


8. That should not be understood for all Alevi. No doubt many Alevi are also very conservative in many aspects.


15. Ibid., pp.174–82.


19. Ibid., p.80.


22. This case is known as the ‘Sivas Massacre’. In July 1993, 36 mostly Alevi artists attending a cultural festival in the central Anatolian city of Sivas died when an angry mob of radical Sunni Muslims and right wing militants set fire to their hotel. Local authorities and police did nothing to prevent the tragedy.


28. According to the Alevi Dernekleri Federasyonu.


31. TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, Dönem 21, Cilt 1, Yasama Yılı 1.11. Birleşim, 04.06.1999.


Since the establishment of the Republic in 1923, the role of religion in Turkish society and politics has been one of the most contested and conflictual issues. The roots of this conflict go back to mid-nineteenth-century Ottoman reforms that targeted the old institutions of the empire and refashioned some of them on the Western model. This reform effort led to bitter controversy between the “Islamists” who saw Ottoman secularization as the reason for the empire’s decline and the “Westerners” for whom change toward Western modernity was the only solution. This debate ended with the establishment of the Republic, which signaled a victory for the Westerners. However, the tension between religion and secularism continued to dominate Turkey’s politics. The reforms of the early Republican years targeted Ottoman/Islamic culture and institutions. For the Islamist circles, this meant a defeat of their way of life. For the Republican cadres, religion and its societal actors came to be synonymous with “counter-revolution.” Thus, two opposing groups and two opposing worldviews would henceforth confront each other.

Although, originally, republicans had the upper hand and managed to suppress and marginalize the Islamist opposition due to long years of authoritarian one-party rule, in time, the tide turned, to the point that by the first decades of the twenty-first century, secularists had begun to fear that their way of life was under threat. This issue has become so divisive (Esmer, 2006; Toprak, 2009), polarizing the public into such diametrically opposed camps, that foreign observers have described Turkey’s political situation as a civil war without bloodshed.

In the ideological discourse of the founding fathers of the Republic, religious conservatism, along with the ulema’s resistance to change and innovation, was the major reason for the empire’s failure to catch up with the modern world. Reform efforts gained momentum as a result of Western ideas that penetrated the Ottoman Empire. For the Republican cadres, most of whom were former Ottoman generals educated in secular military schools established in the late nineteenth century, religion had to give way to the Enlightenment’s vision of reason and progress. The solution to the question of religion was to suppress its visibility in the public sphere. In this way, the Republic would alter Turkey’s course and place the country among the “civilized nations of the West.”

The reforms of the early Republican years aimed to accomplish this mission. Those who publicly displayed piety were marginalized politically, socially, and intellectually. The caliphate, symbolizing the worldwide unity of Muslims, was abolished and so was the office of the
Şeyhülislam. Instead, a Directorate of Religious Affairs was created that was tied to the office of the prime minister. The Directorate was given authority to oversee the mosques and their personnel, who now became civil servants and were paid, hence controlled, by the state (Çakır and Bozan, 2005). At the same time, all medreses and Koranic schools were closed, to be replaced with secular schools under the supervision of the Ministry of Education.

The Sufi brotherhoods were outlawed; the tombs of holy men, which were popular places of worship, were closed; the daily call to prayer was translated into Turkish, with the pagan word “Tanrı” replacing the Islamic “Allah” (a change that was considered by the pious as blasphemy); no foreign exchange was allowed for the pilgrimage to Mecca; Koran readings over the state-owned radio were banned; and religious schools for the training of imams were closed. Religiosity would henceforth be tolerated so long as it remained a purely individualistic faith.

In the field of legal reforms, the Sharia was replaced with secular civil and criminal codes. Similarly, Islamic courts were closed and replaced by secular courts. Articles in various laws made it a criminal offense to propagate religion for personal or political causes. The new civil code accepted gender equality in marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance, while outlawing polygamy. Women now had unprecedented opportunities for education, employment, and careers. The veil was outlawed for women in the civil service and was discouraged in cities. The fez, the symbol of Muslim identity for Ottoman men, was outlawed.

Along with these, a number of other changes would delete the symbols of an Islamic civilization: the change of the alphabet from the Arabic to the Latin script; the adoption of the Gregorian calendar instead of the lunar; the change of the weekly holiday from Friday to Sunday; and the encouragement of Western styles in clothing (Toprak, 1981).

These reforms came from the top down, and many were implemented only thanks to the authoritarian one-party state. In the 1920s and 1930s rebellions broke out against the secularist and ethnic politics of the regime, but these were suppressed and the Islamist opposition went underground, to reemerge only after the transition to democratic politics in 1946. Hence, it was only a minority of the population who originally accepted these changes, most of whom were civil servants, military men, or local notables. In time, however, the great majority came to defend them.

In a nationwide survey in 1999 (Çarkoğlu and Toprak, 2000), 79 percent of the respondents said that Republican reforms had led to progress. Only around 8 percent preferred Islamic law to the civil code on questions of marriage, divorce, inheritance rights, and child custody. The majority favored no punishment for adultery, and the number who supported stoning to death stood at 1.2 percent. On questions concerning the role of religion in state affairs, the majority wanted these two realms to be separate.

The secularism program of the one-party years changed after 1946 when the ruling Republican People’s Party (RPP) had to reevaluate its policies on religion. Facing opposition parties, it could no longer neglect voter demands. Accordingly, the RPP introduced elective religion courses in primary and secondary schools subject to parental permission, and reopened vocational schools (imam-hatip schools) to train prayer leaders and preachers. It was after 1950, however, when the government changed following the victory of the Democratic Party (DP) in the elections of that year, that significant changes took place.

In the first few months of the DP rule, the call to prayer was allowed in Arabic again; the tombs of saints reopened; foreign exchange was given for the pilgrimage to Mecca; Koran readings over the state radio were introduced; the budget of the Directorate of Religious Affairs increased; elective religion courses became mandatory unless parents filed a written petition for exemption; imam-hatip schools increased in number (Çakır et al., 2004); and a Higher Institute of Islam was established in Istanbul in 1959.
Hence, from 1950 on, religion played an important role in Turkish politics and was often used by center-right parties to get votes. In fact, the DP was able to win the elections partially because of its success in convincing voters who were sensitive on the question of religion that, if brought to power, the new government would relax secularist policies.

It was not until the emergence of the Milli Görüş (National View) movement of Necmettin Erbakan in the 1970s that Islamists circles began to make some headway in electoral politics. Erbakan’s National Order Party (NOP), founded in 1970, took up rapid industrialization as its slogan along with an emphasis on tradition and faith. However, the party was closed by the Constitutional Court in 1971 on charges that its program violated the constitutional principle that the Turkish state is secular. These charges were based on the argument that according to the NOP, there was a basic incompatibility between secularism and Islam.

In its place, Erbakan founded the National Salvation Party (NSP). In the NSP’s view (Landau, 1976; Toprak, 1984; Sanbay, 1985), the reason for Turkey’s underdeveloped status, despite its glorious past as a world power during the classical Ottoman period, had to do with its warped understanding of modernity. According to this view, in its relationship with the West the Ottoman Empire, and later the Turkish Republic, chose to imitate Western culture and civilization while at the same time failing to industrialize. Erbakan’s own experience in Germany had taught him that behind the “German miracle” of economic revitalization following the country’s disastrous defeat in World War II was the work ethic derived from its own cultural tradition.

Accordingly, the NSP talked about building “A Great Turkey Once Again,” which became a party slogan. Classifying other parties as members of the “Western Club,” the NSP argued that it was unique in its attention to endogenous culture. By revitalizing Turkish/Islamic civilization, it would build a powerful, industrial country.

Hence, through a vision that combined Islam and rapid industrialization, the NSP was able to appeal to the many discontented members of the electorate who had marginal social status because of the Republican elite’s ostracism of their lifestyle and/or who were unable to make inroads into the circles of power in order to advance their entrepreneurial ambitions. It is telling, for example, that Erbakan’s decision to found a political party followed his attempt to become head of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry—an attempt that ended in failure even though he had been elected to the post, due to the results of the voting later being canceled on ambiguous grounds.

Given that entrepreneurship in a closed economy based on import substitution required government connections, the founding of a political party that catered to the interests of those outside of secularist social and political circles was indeed crucial for members of the movement. In the next two decades, Erbakan was instrumental in creating the political and economic network that enabled the growth of what he later called the “Anatolian tigers,” corporations (often headed by pious, conservative businessmen from the heartland) that became the financial and industrial backbone of the movement (European Stability Initiative, 2005).

This combination of faith-based solidarity with the promise of financial success served to carry the NSP into government as a partner in the coalitions of the decade. Its 11.8 percent vote in the 1973 elections allowed it to form a government with the staunch enemy of the Islamist opposition, the RPP—which, however, had changed its program under a new leader and now emphasized center-left policies rather than the issue of secularism. Erbakan’s Islamist party, with its emphasis on the plight of the poor, seemed closer to the RPP’s new left-leaning program than did the parties on the right.

Although the NSP’s vote declined to 8.6 percent in the next elections, in 1977, the party was nevertheless able to participate in several center-right coalitions of the second half of the decade,
thanks to its position as “the key party,” meaning that it held the key to opening the doors to coalitions.

The NSP’s lifespan, too, was short. It was closed following the military coup of 1980, together with all other parties. It reopened as the Welfare Party (WP) (Oniş, 1997; Gülalp, 1999), when competitive politics was once again allowed in 1983. Using a veritable army of men and women committed to the cause, Erbakan’s new party engaged in successful grassroots organization work in the poor neighborhoods of Turkey’s cities.

Covered women (i.e., those wearing the Islamic headscarf), who had hitherto had no experience in politics or public campaigns, were now knocking on doors, explaining the party’s program, distributing food, and recruiting other women to the movement (Arat, 2005). Those working for the party would also deliver food and coal, find hospital beds for the sick, go to funerals, attend weddings (bringing a gift), find jobs for the unemployed, provide scholarships to students, and organize summer camps. The party received the support of the poor in the slums through such grassroots activity, while recruiting those with entrepreneurial skills to Islamist economic networks, thus creating a new industrial class (White, 2002; Toprak, 2005).

The 1980 military coup also helped the Islamist movement to enlarge its influence. Although the Turkish military is staunchly secular, the leaders of the coup used Islam as a panacea to counter the left-wing politics that had been partially responsible for almost plunging the country into a civil war between the left and the right during the previous decade. The first half of the 1980s witnessed a major change in state ideology. Called the “Turkish-Islamic Synthesis” and formulated by ideologues of the right in response to the leftist generation of 1968, this new ideology emphasized order, obedience, and deference to tradition (Toprak, 1990).

In a pattern typical of a fascist tripod, the three pillars of the synthesis were the mosque, the barracks, and the family. It was hoped that the Islamic concept of ummah (community of believers) would help to prevent the younger generation from drifting toward foreign ideologies, such as Marxism, and would draw it back under the sway of establishment values such as obedience to authority. Hence, leftist publications and organizations disappeared, while bookstores were filled with Islamic literature; religious programs were frequently broadcast on state television; generals referred to the Koran to substantiate points they made in public speeches; and Islamist organizations flourished, as they took advantage of a tabula rasa for organizational activity (Birtek and Toprak, 1993).

The Welfare Party’s appeal to the upwardly mobile in search of connections with power centers and its approach to the poor, coupled with changes in state ideology, resulted in a steady increase in votes. Compared to 7.2 percent in the first elections that it entered in 1987, it increased its votes to 16.9 percent in the 1991 elections by means of an electoral coalition with two minor parties to pass the 10 percent national elections threshold. The party’s success in the municipal elections of 1994, winning 28 municipalities including Istanbul and Ankara, was followed by its electoral victory in the 1995 national elections. The party received a higher percentage of the votes (21.4) than any of its rivals, and Erbakan became prime minister in a coalition government with the center-right True Path Party (TPP) in 1996.

The Welfare Party’s program differed little from that of its predecessor in its basic outlines. However, new ideas and projects were added to it. This time, the slogan of the party was “A Just Order” (Adil Düzen), which was based on an economic “model” that would supposedly get rid of bank interest and inflation. The model involved the collection of taxes in kind to be kept at government depots and later sold to consumers; the setting up of neighborhood committees to distribute business permits on basis of “honesty”; and the purchase by the government of all future production at current prices to be sold immediately to consumers, with goods to be delivered after production.
At the center of this “just order” was the notion that middlemen, who produced nothing themselves but thrived on their role between the producer and the consumer, were to blame for both bank interest and inflation. The party published illustrated pamphlets, which pictured poor peasants toiling on the land, whose products were bought by greedy-looking local merchants to be sold in nearest towns for higher prices; the town merchants then sold these goods for yet higher prices to merchants in the big city, who earned even greater profits—some of which they spent on weddings in five-star hotels, and the rest of which they sent to New York banks. Via these banks, the money would travel to Israel to contribute to its expansionist aim of creating a “Greater Israel” with Turkey annexed to it.

A second vision of the WP program was what it called “separate law for separate communities.” Those who considered themselves Muslim would be subject to Islamic law, and the secularists to secular law. In a country where 97 percent considered themselves to be Muslim and professed to practice at least some of the religious requirements (Çarkoğlu and Toprak, 2000), this was tantamount to forcing people to either accept Islamic law or be declared as outside the Muslim community.

It was this part of the WP program that got it into trouble with the Constitutional Court. The decision to outlaw the party was based on the charge that it was attempting to change the secular foundations of the Republic. When the WP appealed to the European Court of Justice, the Court upheld the closure, reasoning that the WP’s proposals for a new legal system would indeed have changed the secular basis of the Turkish state.

The Welfare Party’s program in foreign policy was based on its rejection of what Erbakan called “the Western club,” designating all other parties as its loyal members. Accordingly, the WP promised that once in power, it would cancel the Customs Union agreement with the European Union (EU); Turkey would join what Erbakan called the “M8” to found a Muslim Countries’ Union with a common Islamic dinar; the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance would be canceled, to be replaced with a defense grouping of Muslim countries; and so would membership in the United Nations (UN), with a new organization of united Muslim nations to be formed instead.

The closure of the Welfare Party came after a period of intense polarization between the Islamists and the secular establishment. Each evening, the secular media bombarded the public with alarming news of one incident after another involving the party leadership and its followers. For the secular public, the scariest was a statement by Erbakan that his party would come to power by bloodshed if necessary. Demonstrations on the streets and in stadiums, with protestors displaying banners proclaiming that Turkey would not become another Iran, were followed by declarations from various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) calling on the Erbakan government to step down.

What eventually forced the government to resign was a military declaration following the staging of a play in an Anatolian town with the participation of the WP-controlled municipality. The play was about the Palestinian intifada, but the dramatic portrayal of stone-throwing youth was interpreted by many as a symbolic reference to an uprising in Turkey. Erbakan resigned and his party subsequently was banned by the Constitutional Court in 1998 (Toprak, 2005).

In its place, a new party was founded under the name of the Virtue Party (VP) by the same cadres, except for Erbakan and a few of his close associates, who were banned from political activity for five years. The VP program differed significantly from the Welfare Party’s in several respects. It abandoned the latter’s “Just Order” economic program and foreign policy. The new party now supported Turkey’s entry into the EU. The WP’s proposal for a different legal system was similarly abandoned. The VP program called for the expansion of basic rights and
liberties and promised to amend the 1982 Constitution, which had been designed and approved under military auspices. Nevertheless, the Virtue Party, too, was unable to escape the fate of its predecessor and was closed by the Constitutional Court after its failed attempt to have a woman member of the National Assembly, elected on the VP ticket, take the parliamentary oath of allegiance with her head covered.

The movement then split up. Those who were loyal to Erbakan and his Milli Görüş movement founded a new party called the Felicity Party (FP). This party’s program further elaborated the VP’s themes of rights and liberties and similarly voiced support for Turkey’s entry into the EU.

A second group, called the “reformists,” including the charismatic mayor of Istanbul, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and his close friend and colleague, Abdullah Gül, founded an alternative party called the Justice and Development Party (JDP) (Oniş, 2007; Kalaycıoğlu, 2010; Eligür, 2010). The JDP’s program was a clear break from the programs of the earlier Islamist-oriented political parties and showed how much these former Milli Görüş cadres had learned from the saga of the previous parties.

Their outlook was based not only on what was by now long familiarity with the restrictions of the secularist state, which had forced the closure of one after another of the Islamist parties, but also on the recognition that the Turkish public did not support the kind of polarization that the Milli Görüş movement had caused. Indeed, a study conducted in 1999 immediately after the WP was banned indicated that the majority did not approve of Islamist parties or religious influence in politics. Furthermore, survey participants’ responses to the question of whether they approved of the Welfare Party’s closure indicated that the public was divided exactly in half on this issue. This figure alone revealed the polarization that had taken place under the WP government (Çarkoğlu and Toprak, 2000).

The JDP declared that its aim was to be a centrist party that appealed to all sectors of the electorate. The party program had a section on human rights, committing the party to implement the international human rights charters signed by Turkey; a section on women’s empowerment, equally committing the party to abide by UN agreements; a section on secularism that protected the right not only of belief but also of nonbelief; a section on ethnic and linguistic rights for minority groups; and a section on foreign policy that prioritized Turkey’s entry into the EU.

On the basis of this program, the JDP entered the 2002 elections. It won 34.3 percent of the votes, enabling it to form a single-party government. The party of the old guard within the Milli Görüş movement, the FP, was almost wiped out, with only 2.5 percent of the votes. The JDP increased its share of the votes to 46.6 percent in the 2007 elections, reinforcing its position as the major party on the center right. Thus, the electoral legacy of Erbakan was taken over by the JDP.

During its eight years in power to this point the JDP has managed the economy well; implemented legal reforms to allow for the teaching and public use of the Kurdish language; started a state TV channel in Kurdish; changed legislation to reduce military interference in civilian politics; promulgated a feminist-friendly penal code that toughened sentences for honor killings and violence against women; and started a series of what the party calls “openings” to alleviate the problems of Kurdish, Alevi, and Roma minorities. It has also undertaken new foreign policy initiatives in such areas as its initial efforts to speed up Turkey’s EU accession process, resulting in the start of negotiations; its search for a peaceful solution to the Cyprus issue; and its “zero problem” approach based on establishing good relations with Turkey’s neighbors.

However, in its second term, the JDP’s tenure in office has also been marked by serious political polarization and conflict in the country. Part of this is due to mistrust of the party by
the secular public and media and secular state institutions, such as the military and the judiciary, as well as the strained relationship between the government and the opposition. This makes it difficult for the party leadership to put projects into effect. For example, the party has retreated from many of the so-called openings, with the “Kurdish opening” being mishandled by the party itself, leading to protests by ultranationalists and backtracking on the part of the government due to fear of losing votes over the issue.

The party itself is also to be blamed for its failure to engage in consensual politics, as Prime Minister Erdoğan has increasingly used conflictual language to address his opponents, whether workers, labor unions, the unemployed, the media, NGOs, or opposition parties.

Although the JDP performed well in its first term in government, it has become overconfident and hence unwilling to compromise and search for consensus in its second term. Part of this overconfidence is due to its strong electoral showing in the 2007 elections, although there are other factors as well. One such factor is the party’s success in marginalizing military influence in politics. In this, it has been aided by a controversial court case known as Ergenekon, the name designating an alleged secret organization of retired generals, columnists, and university professors, who were taken into custody on the charge of plotting to stage a military coup against the government.

A second factor is the government’s crackdown on one of the country’s most powerful media companies, Doğan Holding, which owns several mainstream newspapers and television stations, on charges of alleged evasion of taxes amounting to millions of dollars. Although the holding company has won the first lawsuit against the government, its media outlets are perceived to be exercising much more caution than before in their criticisms of the government.

A third factor has been the rejection by the Constitutional Court of the public prosecutor’s call to close down the party and to ban its leadership and cadres from political activity for five years. The court did decide that the party had become a locus of activity that was contrary to the secular foundations of the Republic, and hence reduced by half its share of state financing from the treasury. Nevertheless, the fact that the JDP was able to remain in existence at all was enormously encouraging for its leadership, especially in view of the fact that all previous indictments of this sort had ended in party closures.

One more significant victory for the JDP was the election of Abdullah Gül, the second most powerful man in the party after Erdoğan, to the presidency in 2007. Gül’s candidacy had led to bitter controversy between the party and the secular establishment. Already suspicious that the JDP had a “hidden agenda” to establish an Islamic state in Turkey, the secularists were strongly opposed to having a president with a “covered” wife at the head of the state, especially in view of the fact that the prime minister’s wife—as well as the wives of most cabinet ministers and JDP members of parliament—also wears a headscarf. This issue took on symbolic significance for both sides, given the problem of the headscarf that has been occupying the political agenda for several decades (Arat, 2005).

When Gül’s candidacy was voted on in the Assembly, the opposition appealed to the Constitutional Court on charges that the necessary 367 votes were lacking, although previous presidents had been elected by fewer votes in the third round. The Court’s controversial ruling was that 367 were required. The JDP won the general elections on 22 July 2007, and Gül was elected by the parliament as president of Turkey a month later. This constituted a major success for the party.¹

Now in possession of a much stronger hand vis-à-vis its opponents, the party leadership was less willing than before to engage in conciliatory politics. It fell into the same trap as had previous Islamist parties: that is, it neglected to keep in mind the Republic’s past history of radical secularism, and the existence, along with the secular institutions of the Republic, of an
ever-watchful secular public that had long been very much concerned about the Islamists and their aims. Additionally, the JDP fell into a second trap by interpreting democracy as a mathematical game that allowed a party with a majority of even a single vote to do anything it chose in the name of “the people’s will”—thus disregarding a major tenet of liberal democracy, namely, the need for compromise, consensus, and concern for minority opinions.

Is the fact that the RPP is itself not willing to compromise, always insisting that the JDP accept intact whatever it thinks is appropriate and stating that it will otherwise take the issue to the Constitutional Court, not another factor in the JDP’s increased unwillingness to consult the RPP on some matters? The JDP is extremely careful to function within the limits of secular laws, and its leadership uses a liberal democratic discourse that is difficult for its opponents to combat. It is telling, for example, that the indictment by the public prosecutor against the party was a document that did no more than take press reports about what the party leadership had said, which the prosecutor interpreted as being contrary to secularism, rather than what it had actually done to overturn it. As such, the indictment indeed lacked any reasonable proof that the Constitutional Court could have cited as a basis for closing the party.

Given the JDP’s careful approach to secular law, the fears of the secularists that the party has a “hidden agenda” to establish an Islamic state has given way to more immediate concerns that it has taken over all state institutions by placing its supporters in positions of power, and that the country is gradually becoming more conservative and Islamized. Almost all state institutions are in fact staffed by JDP supporters, especially at the top echelons, but in the lower ranks as well, so that this situation pervades the bureaucracy, extending to the local offices of the ministries, and all the way down to the management of schools, hospitals, government bureaux, state recreational facilities for employees, and the like.

A recent study based on in-depth interviews in 12 Anatolian cities (Toprak et al., 2009) revealed the extent of this “takeover” in those cities. Combined with the power of a religious organization, the Gülen movement (Yavuz and Esposito, 2003), which has built a financial empire through its networks both within Turkey and in other countries, the JDP seems to be in control not only of the bureaucracy in these cities but also of business circles. Residents who were not part of what one might call “the JDP-Gülen coalition,” complained of being discriminated against in finding employment, seeking promotions, doing business, obtaining government contracts, and the like. They also called attention to what they perceived as the increasing conservatism in their cities, with JDP mayors ordering establishments selling liquor to relocate outside city limits, with the sexes being segregated in social gatherings, with residents feeling compelled to appear and behave as if they were pious, and so forth. Although there is no formal connection between the party and the Gülen movement, their collaboration appears to be helping to transform the social life of many Anatolian cities, as well as to replace their power holders.

Coupled with this growing conservatism, which secularists have found alarming, were the government’s foreign policy moves, which included attempts to form close relations with Muslim countries, and dealings with such figures as the leaders of Iran, Sudan, and Hamas; the severing of nearly all relations with Israel; and the neglect of efforts to forward the process of Turkey’s accession to the EU. (On the latter point, although government officials stated that they were continuing the negotiations with the EU, not much ground has been gained since the start of negotiations in 2005, in part as a consequence of the negative attitudes of several EU countries toward Turkey’s accession.) These changes in foreign policy have led both the secular public in Turkey and Western governments to question whether Turkey is changing its historic course.

Nevertheless, the overall tension between the secularists and the Islamists, and the controversy over the role of religion in politics have come to be less intense than at previous points
in recent history. Over the years, the Islamist opposition has been gradually integrated into mainstream democratic politics. In that, Turkey stands forth as a noteworthy example, as the only country in the Muslim world where an Islamist political party has come to power through democratic elections, accepted the secular foundations of the state, and governed within those limits. This the country owes to the earlier reforms of the single-party government, which removed religion from state affairs, and to the later democratic transition. Without this democratic phase, the secularization effort might have ended in backlash, as in Iran. As stated earlier, surveys have shown that the majority of people in Turkey are satisfied with the early reforms of the Republic and do not want an Islamic state. The country is today much more democratic than in earlier years, without any threat of another coup, as the military has been stripped of most of its former role in civil institutions and has also begun to question the wisdom of its intervention in politics. Turkey’s democracy, however, is not yet consolidated. The nation does not yet have an independent judiciary able to keep vigilant watch against government intrusions—nor has it firmly institutionalized the guarantees of rights and freedoms that liberal democracies enjoy.

Notes
1 Before a referendum in October 2007, the president was elected by the Grand National Assembly, with provision for three rounds of voting, the third asking only for a simple majority. Gül was elected in the third round with 339 votes. The opposition then argued that the election was void because the assembly did not have the necessary quorum for opening the third session. On the basis of the 2007 constitutional changes, the president is to henceforth be elected by popular vote.
2 The leader of the movement, Fethullah Gülen, is a Muslim preacher. The movement is organized around economic activity and wealth, combined with religious teaching and a concomitant way of life.

Bibliography

225


Islam and politics in contemporary Turkey

Jenny B. White

Introduction

The role of Islam in the public and political spheres has been a matter of contestation throughout the history of the Turkish Republic. After its founding in 1923 under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal, the state institutionalised the acquisition of Western cultural habits and the banishment of Islam from public and political arenas, although movement in this direction had begun a century earlier. It was not until the 1950s that Islam regained a foothold in the political arena, and only in the 1980s did the first Islamist political parties become popular. Since the 1980s, the re-emergence of religiously identified parties has reshaped the Turkish political scene, both challenging and accommodating official state secularism.

The Turkish state’s position on religion (laiklik) is more accurately translated as ‘laicism’, the subordination of religion to the state, than secularism, a separation of church and state. The term ‘secular’ is used here to refer to a non-religious identity or one that consigns religious beliefs to the private, rather than public, realm. The laic state controls the education of religious professionals and their assignment to mosques, controls the content of religious education, and enforces laws about the wearing of religious symbols and clothing in public spaces and institutions. In the early Republican period, the state established control of religious affairs and institutions, although independent religious brotherhoods continued clandestinely.

Supporters of Mustafa Kemal’s laicist reforms are called Kemalists, as distinguished from Islamists, selfascriptive terms referring to groups of people polarised around certain issues and representing extremes on a continuum of beliefs about the proper role of religion in society and politics. Generally speaking, the Kemalist position combines a kind of authoritarian democracy with a westernised secular lifestyle. Kemalists are concerned about safeguarding laicism and its guarantees of free choice of lifestyle, particularly for women,
but to do so are willing to limit choice in the realm of religious expression. Kemalists have tried to ensure a laic state and secular Turkish society through the government, judiciary and education system.

As a political doctrine, Kemalism cohered loosely around certain early Republican principles, of which three concern us here: laicism, discussed above; statism; and populism. Under statism, the state intervened in the economy and, in principle, guarded the economic well-being of the people through development and social programmes. Reference to the populist basis of the state expressed an ideal of national solidarity that, in principle, put the interest of the nation (and ‘the people’) before any group or class. Indeed, the populist principle denied social class altogether and, when these principles were formalised in the 1931 programme of Atatürk’s Republican People’s Party (RPP, Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi), political activity based on class interests was forbidden. The denial of class differences in the face of great disparities in distribution of the benefits of economic development and a widening chasm between rich and poor has been an important spur to the development of social movements in Turkey in general and, since the 1980s, to Islamist populism.

Islamists are Muslims who, rather than accept an inherited Muslim tradition, have developed their own self-conscious vision of Islam, which is then brought to bear on social and political events. This vision can involve liberal, modernist interpretations of the Qur’an or more restrictive positions on the characteristics of a proper Muslim life. Central components of an ideal Muslim society in Islamist thought – obligation to authority, communal solidarity and social justice – are contested among Muslims as to what they entail in practice. In Turkey, education does not grant direct access to theological literature, which is still memorised and recited in Arabic, since the Qur’an was dictated by Allah to the Prophet Muhammad in that language. Translated, the Qur’an would no longer be ‘the word of God’. Most Turks have no knowledge of the Arabic language and rely for Qur’anic interpretation on the sermons, lessons, or published Turkish-language works of their teachers. There are lively debates among Islamist intellectuals who either are able to read and understand the Qur’an or have access to internationally circulated interpretations. Turkish Islamist intellectuals also have brought into their debates wide-ranging literatures from Western social and political sciences.

Despite state suppression of the public expression of Islam, religion has remained a powerful part of most people’s lives. Turkey’s population today is almost entirely Muslim, with small minorities of Jews and Christians (including Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant and other
Islam and politics in contemporary Turkey

denominations). About four-fifths of the Muslim population are orthodox Sunni Muslims; the rest are Alevi, a non-Sunni syncretistic Muslim minority that cross-cuts Kurdish and Turkish ethnic designations. The Bektashi order is a similar, but less widespread, religious order. A 1999 survey showed a high level of religious practice, with nine of ten adults fasting during the holy month of Ramadan and almost half praying five times a day. The extremes on the scale of religiosity roughly reflected a Kemalist/Islamist split, with supporters of the secularist RPP least likely to rate themselves as very religious (2 per cent, compared to 14 per cent for supporters of the Islamist Virtue Party) and most likely to claim to be not at all religious (8 per cent, compared to below 3 per cent for all other parties). Between 40 and 60 per cent of all respondents rated themselves as religious, and 40 per cent would define themselves as Muslims or Muslim Turks before Turkish citizens.

The early Republican state

Mustafa Kemal’s plan for a secular, Westernised Turkey led him to distance the nation from what he perceived to be the corrupt, religion-bound traditions and institutions of the old regime. Under his leadership, the Republican government de-emphasised the legacy of the multi-denominational and multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire and its Muslim leadership. The regime changed the language of state from Ottoman, written in Arabic script, to a reformed, modernised Turkish, written in the Latin alphabet, cutting younger generations off from pre-Republican documents and literature. A new Turkish national history, taught in schools and honoured in monuments and museums, replaced the Ottoman past with a history rooted in the pre-Islamic civilisations of the Hittites, who inhabited the Anatolian plateau in the second millennium BCE, and the Turkic tribes that had migrated to Anatolia from Central Asia starting in the eleventh century. These reforms provided ideological support for the new secular national identity and legitimised a Turkish form of Islam supposedly influenced by Central Asian Turkic practices that were more gender-equalitarian and democratic than those of Arab Islam. This notion of a special, Turkish form of Islam was suggested by the late Ottoman nationalist scholar Ziya Gökalp, whose ideas were influential in the development of Turkish nationalist thought, and the idea later found new adherents in the 1990s.

2 Ibid., pp. 43, 27.
The new Republican state abolished first the sultanate, then the caliphate, a venerable institution encompassing leadership of the entire Muslim world that had been vested in the Ottoman sultan. The state also outlawed religious brotherhoods. The religious expression of Islam was to be a private affair. Thus, the state took religion out of the classroom and all public functions. Under Turkish law, religiously symbolic clothing is forbidden in public and civic spaces; religious specialists are not allowed to wear insignia of their office in the street; civil servants and university students are not allowed to cover their heads. In a bow to custom, the veil was not outlawed, but it was strongly discouraged. Women who covered their heads found no place in the banks, hospitals, schools and civil service of the new nation. While urban women increasingly dressed in European fashion, in the dense artisanal and working-class neighbourhoods and in smaller cities and the countryside, most women continued to cover their heads and wear the loose, enveloping clothing called for by customary concepts of modesty.

Religious leaders who were angered by the erosion of their judicial and administrative powers, the abolition of the caliphate and the secular nature of the reforms challenged the new Republican government, some organising revolts. In the eastern part of the country, religious sentiment overlapped with Kurdish aspirations for an autonomous Kurdistan and resistance to the Republic’s repression of Kurdish identity. In its effort to establish a new national consciousness, the government prohibited the public use and teaching of Kurdish and forcibly resettled influential Kurdish landowners and tribal chiefs in the western part of the country. In February 1925, Şeyh Said, an influential member of the Nakşibendi dervish order, led an ill-fated rebellion. The rebels were motivated by a variety of goals ranging from Kurdish independence to restoring the caliphate and Islamic law. The rebellion failed in part because the Sunni Kurds under Şeyh Said were attacked by Kurds belonging to the heterodox Alevi community, which supported the secularist republic because it offered protection from Sunni persecution. Şeyh Said was captured and executed by government forces in April, effectively ending the rebellion.

As a result of the Şeyh Said rebellion, the government’s policies towards religion and the Kurds hardened. Kurdish leaders were executed or forcibly resettled and Kurdish identity was officially denied. Kemal used a new Law on the Maintenance of Order to suppress the press and to close down an opposition political party, the Progressive Republican Party, on the grounds that its members had supported the rebellion and tried to exploit religion for political purposes. This move left Mustafa Kemal and the RPP in complete control of the political arena, allowing them to push through their reforms.
Islam and politics in contemporary Turkey

The development of party politics

The Republican state under the RPP monopolised all legitimate political expression until the introduction of multi-party politics in 1945. In order to court the Muslim vote, both the RPP and the new Democrat Party (DP, Demokrat Parti) became more tolerant of religion. After 1947, the RPP allowed elective religious education in schools and opened institutions to train preachers. In 1949 Ankara University established a faculty of Divinity to teach religion with a scientific methodology. That same year, shrines and tombs of saints were allowed to reopen. To safeguard the secular nature of the state’s modernisation project, however, the RPP enacted article 163 of the penal code, which prohibited attacks on the secular character of the state.

The RPP was defeated, and for the first time an opposition party, the DP, came to power in the 1950 elections. In the period before and after the election, rural areas were galvanised by extensive grassroots organisation and political participation. DP representatives were drawn not from bureaucratic or military circles, as had been the case in previous governments, but from a sector of Turkey’s elite with backgrounds in commerce and law and with local roots in their constituencies. Unlike the RPP, the DP had a populist approach to politics. It aimed to transform the country through free-market economic policies, and by bringing electricity, roads and other services to hitherto-isolated villages. Thus began a mutual transformation of country and city, as villagers migrated to work in cities, and as new ideas and ways of doing business transformed village life. The DP’s attitude towards Atatürk’s secular modernisation project did not differ appreciably from that of the RPP. The DP government continued the absorption of religious institutions into the Directorate of Religious Affairs. However, the party also courted the Muslim vote by expanding religious education and making it compulsory unless parents opted out, expanding the number of preacher training schools, and allowing the sale of religious literature. The call to prayer, which the early Republican regime had restricted to Turkish, was again allowed to be broadcast in Arabic. The number of mosques built nationwide increased. The DP tacitly allowed the existence of officially banned religious organisations, such as the Nurcu brotherhoods, by accepting their support in the 1954 and 1957 elections. Religious brotherhoods were able to deliver blocks of votes from their followers. The RPP and the military, which saw its role as the keeper of Atatürk’s legacy, reacted strongly to what they perceived to be the Islamisation of the country. This perception was magnified by the migration of masses of peasants to the cities after the 1950s, bringing their conservative cultural practices with them. In other words,
this renewed visibility of religion was not a resurgence of Islam or political Islam, but rather a reassertion of a mass culture that contradicted, in many ways, the secularist world vision of the Kemalist state.\(^3\) The military used this and other charges to justify overthrowing the DP government in a coup on 27 May 1960.

In the 1970s, the RPP became the biggest political party, claiming up to 42 per cent of the national vote and twice ruling as the leading party in government. The RPP appealed to the new social groups that arose as a result of the mechanisation of agriculture, industrialisation and urbanisation: the working class, organised into unions; agriculturalists in developed regions; and an educated middle class. Politics in the 1960s and 1970s were dominated by sometimes violent disputes between leftist and rightist nationalist forces. Islam played only a minor role in these ideological disputes. The first overtly Islam-identified political party, the National Order Party (NOP, Millî Nizam Partisi), was founded in 1970 by Necmettin Erbakan to represent small independent businessmen, merchants and craftsmen who felt threatened by industrialisation. The NOP took a firm stand against pro-West big business. Shortly after the military coup in 1971, the constitutional court closed the NOP down for violating the constitutional separation of politics and religion. Erbakan fled to Switzerland, but returned in 1972 to restart the party under a new name, the National Salvation Party (NSP, Millî Selâm Partisi).

The NSP was a conservative party with a marginal following among provincial businesspeople and adherents of religious orders. Erbakan led what became known as the National View Movement (NVM, Millî Görüş Hareketi), which was critical of Turkey’s Westernisation programme. The NVM proposed an alternative and ostensibly more authentic ‘national order’ that revived traditional (that is, Islamic) values and Ottoman institutions, albeit ambiguously defined ones. It advocated economic integration with the Islamic world to balance the power of the West. This stance did not entail a rejection of technology or industry. Rather, the party proposed that state-led industry be supported by large numbers of small capitalists, each owning no more than a 5 per cent share, thus giving small business a stake in industrialisation.\(^4\)

More radical than its predecessor, the NSP organised rallies that attacked the laicist system and even Atatürk himself, and called for the restoration of şeriat (Islamic law). The party did not do well in elections in the 1970s, however, suggesting that religion was an insufficient factor for mobilising political support.

Islam and politics in contemporary Turkey

The RPP, which had become a social democratic party drawing support from workers and urban intellectuals, won the 1973 election with about one-third of the vote. Lacking a majority, it formed a coalition with the NSP, which had polled over a tenth of the vote. In the 1977 elections the RPP won two-fifths of the vote, meaning that the balance of power in the Grand National Assembly was again held by the smaller parties. A sharp rise in world oil prices and a fall in remittances from Turkish workers abroad increased political instability. A series of ineffective coalition governments were unable to deal with rapidly rising inflation, unemployment, the trade deficit and political violence. The NSP was part of three coalition governments in this period, until the 1980 coup.

On 12 September 1980, the army carried out a bloodless coup that was generally supported by an increasingly frayed public. A five-member National Security Council (NSC) took control and declared martial law throughout Turkey to quell political violence. The coup was followed by executions and thousands of arrests, with most of the repression falling on the political left. The junta also arrested leading politicians and dissolved parliament, political parties and trade unions. A new constitution, approved by referendum in 1982, created a stronger central government. In an effort to reduce the influence of smaller parties, no party polling less than 10 per cent of the votes cast was to receive seats in parliament. Political parties, the press and trade unions came under increased government surveillance. New parties were formed, as the pre-coup parties remained banned. The new centre-right Motherland Party (MP, Anavatan Partisi), a coalition of liberal, social democratic, nationalist and Islamic groups, won the first post-coup election in 1983. The party’s leader, Turgut Özal, had designed the previous government’s economic reform package and headed the successful post-coup economic stabilisation programme.

In a bid to counter the appeal of leftist ideologies, the military and government encouraged a new model of nationalist religion that came to be known as the Turkish–Islamic synthesis. The military intended Islam to be a socially unifying force that would heal the societal rifts that had precipitated the 1980 coup and replace the left-wing ideas of Turkey’s youth with a more cohesive religious culture. With the support of the military, the Özal government encouraged the building of mosques and the expansion of religious education. In the 1980s, about 1,500 new mosques were built every year, until by 1988 there was a mosque for every 857 people.5 The Özal government also gave religious conservatives positions in ministries and state bureaucracies.

Under Özal’s leadership, the MP ruled Turkey until 1991. Its economic policies were based on free-market principles, removing state controls and encouraging foreign trade. The state began to privatise its industries and to dismantle the entitlements and protections that had been a central aspect of its relationship with the population, thereby abandoning its role as guarantor of economic security. Instead, it encouraged and subsidised businesses producing for export. Products also flowed the other way, creating a globalised consumer economy. Television and radio were effectively deregulated in the 1980s as cable and satellite television made them impossible to control. By 1991, 90 per cent of Turkey’s households owned colour televisions.6 There also was an explosion of new publications and other forms of communication. The number of telephone subscribers increased from 1 million in 1979 to 6 million in 1989, and the number of villages connected to the telephone grid increased during that period from 6,000 to 38,000.7 The widespread use of cellphones has further increased that number.

After 1987, a global recession and Turkey’s rising budget deficit caused a downturn in the economy, as inflation and unemployment rose. Different social groups carried disproportionate shares of the burden and benefits of the new economy. The new economy created great wealth for some, while the lives of industrial and agricultural workers, retirees, public-sector workers and other people on fixed incomes became more precarious. Urban living conditions declined under the pressure of population growth and lack of investment in infrastructure. Amid the economic boom and expansion of the export and service sectors, the economic decline of the average family continued through the 1990s. As a result of this and accusations of corruption, the popularity of the MP fell rapidly after 1987 and it was defeated in the 1991 elections, replaced by a centre-right–centre-left coalition.

Since the 1940s, Turkey has undergone tremendous economic and political changes that have substantially rewritten the balance of power between the secularist urban elite and the largely culturally and religiously conservative masses. Large-scale migration from the countryside to the cities has changed the nature and aspirations of the masses. Political organisation, civic activism and deregulated media have broadened the nature of political tools at their disposal. Government inability to protect the economic interests of the masses and state repression of social movements has changed the relations between

Islam and politics in contemporary Turkey

the masses and the state. This renegotiation of power has been accompanied by a polarisation of economic status and a sharpening of the perception of social differences. These conditions and other political and social factors contributed to the rise of explicitly Islamic political parties and an Islamist movement.

The Islamist movement

The Islamist phenomenon has been studied as a political ideology focusing on the role played by Islam-inspired political parties or organisations in Turkish political life; as a social and political transformation fuelled in part by differences in social class and culture; through the ideas, backgrounds and intellectual histories of its leading figures; and as a form of cultural politics in which Muslim elites struggle to attribute social status to Islamic symbols and lifestyle by developing high Islamic clothing styles and Muslim popular culture. The characteristics associated with Kemalism and Islamism, however, overlap these categories in Turkish society, which varies along a continuum of lifestyle, social practices and ideological thought. While Islam has long played an important role in Turkish society and been used by political parties to gain votes, a truly Islamist movement did not come into being until the 1980s.

The Islamist movement of the 1980s encompassed a variety of ideological positions. There was a liberal, pro-democratic movement composed of conservative pragmatists willing to work within the system. There also were a small number of Islamic activists who aimed to replace the secular state with one based on Islamic law. One example was the Hizbullah group, held responsible for killing pro-Kurdish and secularist businessmen, journalists and educators in the 1990s. Hizbullah is more accurately described as a political terror group than as a religious order. The Ticani, a minor group, were known mainly

for their periodic attacks on statues of Atatürk, which they condemned as idols. The majority of Islamist activists, however, were interested in instituting change within the existing democratic system.

The Welfare Party

In 1983, Necmettin Erbakan founded a new Islamic party, the Welfare Party (WP, Refah Partisi). While the NSP had drawn its main support from towns in the underdeveloped eastern and central Anatolian provinces and did not do well in the cities, the WP’s voter base included the urban poor living at the margins of cities, particularly small shopkeepers and urban migrants, many of whom had previously voted for the centre-left social democrats. Erbakan’s proposal for a ‘Just Economic Order’ called for the elimination of social inequality and corruption, state withdrawal from economic activities and the promotion of individual small enterprise. In the 1987 election, the WP failed to obtain 10 per cent of the vote and thus was not represented in parliament. However, throughout the rest of the 1980s the WP added to its supporters, including members of an expanding Islamist business and professional community that did business explicitly within a framework of Islamic principles. They provided a stable economic underpinning for various aspects of an emerging Islamist movement, whether in the form of contributions to political parties, support for charitable organisations, scholarships or the building of schools and gender-segregated dormitories.

In nationwide municipal elections held in 1994, the WP doubled its votes from the 1989 elections, winning twenty-eight of seventy-six mayoral seats in provincial capitals, including six of Turkey’s largest fifteen cities. Istanbul and Ankara both elected Islamist mayors. The election results shocked Kemalists, who organised to counter ‘the fundamentalist threat’. Middle-class urban women’s groups were particularly active, since they felt they had the most to lose in the restrictive şeriät-based state that they feared was the WP’s ultimate aim.

Erbakan invoked National View principles, speaking out against laicism, Westernisation and Turkey’s military cooperation agreement with Israel. He pledged to withdraw Turkey from NATO and the European Union Customs Union signed in 1996, in favour of political and economic alliances with other Muslim countries. He planned to pursue a brotherhood of Muslims around the world, replacing Turkey’s ties with and reliance on the West. After the 1994 elections, several attacks were reported on women in Western dress in downtown Istanbul, and attempts were made to separate women from
Islam and politics in contemporary Turkey

men on public transport. Some WP mayors had statues of nudes removed from parks and tried to close or restrict restaurants and nightclubs that served alcohol. On the anniversary of the founding of the Republic, WP mayors found reasons not to attend the festivities, which featured Kemalist symbolism, or made disparaging remarks about the events. Party zealots proposed building a mosque in Istanbul’s Taksim Square, a direct affront to the institutional legacy of Kemalist secularism. The square is dominated by the Atatürk Cultural Centre, home to opera, ballet and a classical symphony, cultural traditions imported by Atatürk as part of his Westernisation programme. The Taksim mosque was never built, but other icons of Kemalism were transformed. When the WP won the 1994 municipal elections in Ankara, the new mayor changed the official city symbol from a Hittite sun to a symbol containing elements of a mosque. However, most WP mayors improved city services, an achievement that encouraged even secularist voters to favour the WP in 1995, when two-fifths of those voting for it identified themselves as secularist.

In the 1995 national election, the WP emerged as the largest party with 21% of the vote (compared to the True Path Party’s (TPP, Doğru Yol Partisi) 19 per cent and the MP’s 20 per cent) and 158 of 550 seats in parliament. Called upon to form a government, the WP was unable to do so because the two leading centre-right parties refused to join it in a coalition government and thereby concede power to the Islamists. Yet due in large part to the personal enmity between their leaders, Tansu Çiller and Mesut Yılmaz, the two centre-right parties were unable to agree to a coalition themselves. Ultimately, Erbakan became prime minister in a coalition with the TPP’s Çiller in the summer of 1996. This deal was remarkable, since for many years TPP had represented itself as pro-Western, laicist and a bulwark against Islamism. In exchange for Çiller’s support, Erbakan agreed to shield her from parliamentary investigation for corruption. In the 1996 municipal elections, the WP received a third of the vote in forty-one districts.

As prime minister, Erbakan tried to implement some of his ideas about reorienting Turkey towards the Muslim world. At an assembly of diplomats, he praised the Iranian revolution. In February 1996, he dined with Louis Farrakhan, the American Nation of Islam leader who was visiting Muslim countries. However, Erbakan’s efforts met with little success. Turkey’s control of the water of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers through its massive South-East Anatolian Project of over twenty dams had already strained relations with downriver countries Iraq and Syria. On Erbakan’s state visit to Libya, its leader, Muammar el-Qaddafi, criticised Turkey before the Libyan and Turkish press for its treatment of the Kurds.
The more radical and confrontational elements within the WP heightened public anxiety. WP radicals within the state bureaucracy tried to move hundreds of secular-minded judges to posts in rural districts and replace them with Islamist judges who would stretch the interpretation of Turkey's secular legal code, especially in the area of family law. This prompted a public outcry, and the move was blocked by a government supervisory council. The press kept a watchful eye on the WP's actions, and public and civic organisations were quick to mobilise and demonstrate their displeasure. After winning municipal elections, the WP closed some community libraries and educational centres for women by withdrawing funds and rooms, sometimes replacing them with Qur'an courses. Many of the party radicals' attempts to undermine the political and cultural dominance of secularism were ultimately unsuccessful, but the pressure for systemic change remained strong.

The activities of the WP came under intense scrutiny from the military. Islamist officers were expelled from the army in December 1996. Early in 1997, the mayor of the small town of Sincan outside Ankara came under fire for hosting the Iranian ambassador, who gave a speech in which he called for an Islamic state. (The military responded by 'coincidentally' routing a column of tanks through the town.) Giving in to the military’s demands, conveyed through the NSC, Erbakan eventually broadened Turkey’s agreements with Israel. His party’s radicalism, however, led to Erbakan’s ouster and ultimately the party’s demise. In June 1997, the army engineered what has become known as a ‘soft coup’, edging Erbakan out of power without actually taking over the government itself. In 1998 the constitutional court closed the WP for allegedly threatening the secularist nature of the state, and banned Erbakan from political activity for five years.

The reasons for the WP’s success in elections in the 1990s were multifold. Polls showed a lack of popular support for a mix of religion and politics, and voters have proven this sentiment by moving their support to parties across the political spectrum – for instance, first voting for the left-of-centre RPP, then the WP. However, the laic state’s continued repression of religious expression occasioned great social upheaval, leading to public demonstrations and political activism, particularly among the conservative sector of the population that aspired to education and economic upward mobility. Islamists often railed against the headscarf ban at universities as an attempt to keep conservative young women from getting an education and entering the professions. Issues

12 Çarkoğlu and Toprak, Türkiye'de din, p. 58.
of poverty and social class fuelled what appeared on the surface to be a purely religious issue.

The Turkish–Islamic synthesis of the 1980s meant that the government allowed a great variety of Islamic ideas and material to be published and broadcast. The newly opened economy of the 1980s brought wealth to conservative and provincial entrepreneurs. The Özal government brought them into the bureaucracy. All of these things led to the development of a new Islamist public culture. Almost immediately, it came into conflict with official public culture, as young women developed a popular, chic style of veiling, and headscarved women began to appear in middle-class areas that had formerly been the exclusive realm of secularists, and as Islamic ideas were debated in the media.

The platforms of the WP and its successor, the Virtue Party, were influenced by a new generation of Islamist intellectuals. Their ideas attracted members of the professional middle class, students and intellectuals who were questioning Kemalism, nationalism, and even the modern, centralised nation-state, which some saw as totalitarian. The decisive imprint on the Islamist movement was the translation in the 1970s of works by Fazlur Rahman and, later, the works of Muhammed Abduh and other Arab Islamist thinkers. Islamist intellectuals were writing in the context of a global rethinking of the basic tenets of the Enlightenment: rationalism, universalism, modernity and the inevitability of human progress along a normative trajectory set by the West. This questioning gave impetus and credence to attempts to develop models for a non-Western political order, the principles of which were based on Islamic philosophy rather than secular rationalism. Many Turkish Islamist intellectuals had graduated from secular universities, and buttressed their radical ideas with references to Western thinkers. Some rejected Western solutions, despite reference to Western authors in making this argument. The views expressed in Islamic publications covered a wide range from pro-şeriát views to articulations of a feminist and modernist, some say postmodernist, Islam.

What accounted for the WP’s appeal to non-religious voters? Since the 1991 elections, the WP’s advertising campaigns, designed by a professional marketing agency, avoided religious language and presented the WP as a forward-looking party with a vision that encompassed all strata of society, regardless of their views about political Islam. WP advertisements referred to

---

13 Meeker, ‘The new Muslim intellectuals’.
14 H. Gülalp, ‘Globalizing Postmodernism: Islamist and Western Social Theory’, *Economy and Society* 26, 3 (August 1997).
issues such as pensions, affordable housing, health care, and the environment. Istanbul mayor Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s efforts to protect the city’s endangered green areas won sympathy and support from the public. WP municipalities brought some order to municipal services and seemed, on the surface at least, to be less corrupt than previous administrations. Streets were cleaner, buses ran more often and the rubbish was collected in a timely manner.

The WP also had a face-to-face, personalised political style that mobilised informal ‘cells’ of activists as well as formal organisations. The metaphor of family and its associated responsibility and obligations was carried over to the neighbourhood, where it meshed with cultural and religious norms giving fellow human beings (in the form of neighbours, employees, etc.) rights to assistance and just treatment. Human rights and citizens’ rights were made personal obligations. People were asked, as their religious duty, to take personal responsibility for their neighbours. Unlike the top-down, highly centralised parties that brought their projects to the voters for support, the WP built on local solidarities and wedded local needs to the party’s overall project. The involvement of grassroots organisations lent flexibility and endurance to the Islamist political project, even in the face of the banning of the WP in January 1998 and the jailing of some of its politicians.

The WP also profited from widespread disenchantment with other parties tainted by corruption, inter-personal feuds and ineffectualness. The party was not immune from corruption charges, however. A WP official was accused of embezzling funds that had been collected for relief aid in Bosnia. Nevertheless, the corruption accusations against the WP paled in comparison to accusations of gun-running, assassinations, unaccounted funds and self-enrichment that clung to several other leading parties.

The party also had the advantage of a strong ideological message that appealed to people across class, ethnic and gender divides. In previous decades, the Turkish left had carried the ideological banner of resistance to economic injustice, but it had fallen victim to the post-coup military crackdown and the global decline of socialism. Islamists took up their role as champions of economic justice, although the Islamist conception differed quite substantially from the class-based ideas of the left. Erbakan’s notion of a ‘Just Economic Order’ appealed to the working class and to marginal people in the squatter areas, as well as to small businessmen and entrepreneurs. The opening of the Turkish economy to the world market in the 1980s, and the state’s abandonment of a controlled economy, created enormous economic dislocations. Despite improvement in the economy, unemployment and income differentials increased. The segment of the population left behind by the economic
transformation found a voice in the WP, which emphasised issues such as social justice, unemployment, poverty and social security, while respecting the more conservative lifestyle of the masses.

Islamists also came up with controversial new designs for dealing with Turkey’s ethnic diversity. One much-discussed proposal was that of a ‘confederation of faiths’, a decentralised, pluralist political system of ‘multiple legal orders’ under which each community of believers could live under laws corresponding to their religious beliefs. The state’s role in the confederation would be to guarantee each community’s autonomy. This proposal, modelled on the Ottoman millet system, was part of a still-developing set of ideas called neo-Ottomanism. This system was proposed as a multiculturalist alternative to hierarchical and bureaucratic Western political models. It would respect the rights of both majority and minorities by replacing ‘democracy’, which Islamists tended to define as the rule of the majority over the minority, with ‘pluralism’.16 Some Kurds were attracted to this model and by the party’s openness to ethnic diversity. In a 1999 national poll of the Turkish electorate, 47 per cent of Kurdish speakers expressed support for the Virtue Party, compared with 40 per cent of non-Kurdish speakers.17

In the late 1980s, conservative and religious women for the first time became important actors in urban political and civic networks. They canvassed for votes, organised and participated in demonstrations, and attended rallies. Female WP activists, many from working-class neighbourhoods and conservative families, were responsible for getting out a large part of the vote for the WP in the 1994 and 1995 elections. In the month before the 1995 elections, in Istanbul alone, the WP’s women’s commission worked with 18,000 women and met face-to-face with 200,000 women.18 Women made up a third of WP membership in Istanbul in 1997.19 However, women were not administrative or financial decision makers within the WP, except within the autonomous women’s commission. Nevertheless, as activists, women were visible at rallies and in the streets in their distinctive tesettür clothing, a fashionable form of veiling that developed in the late 1980s. In June 1998, hundreds of women in tesettür demonstrated in front of universities and marched on Ankara to demand the right to wear headscarves at university.

17 Çarkoğlu and Toprak, Türkiye’de din, p. 65.
In sum, the political success of the WP from 1983 until its demise in 1998 reflected the increasing role of Islam in Turkish public life, as evidenced by the growth of Islamic schools and banks, Islamic businesses and a politicised Islamist movement with its own organisations, publications and distinctive dress. State repression of religious expression had galvanised Islamist activism. The WP’s success also expressed voter dissatisfaction with the performance of the centrist parties and revelations about government corruption, cronyism and inefficiency. Support for the WP came not only from the smaller towns in its traditional strongholds of central and eastern Anatolia, but also from major cities, where the WP drew support from the secular left parties. The WP expanded its voter base from conservative rural people and small businessmen to include big business owners, young urban professionals, women, intellectuals and crossovers from the left. It presented itself not as a religious party, but as a modern party with a vision that encompassed issues of concern to all strata of society. Campaign advertisements depicted people such as pensioners, civil servants and unveiled women. The party’s approach to organising took advantage of local grassroots organisations that brought it closer to the people. The WP promised support for Kurdish linguistic and cultural rights, protection of the environment, and the elimination of social inequality and corruption.

The Virtue Party

The WP was succeeded by the Virtue Party (VP, Fazilet Partisi), which had been founded pre-emptively by Erbakan’s lawyer, İsmail Alptekin, in preparation for a negative outcome in the constitutional court case against WP. The WP’s experience of persecution pushed the VP’s platform and rhetoric in the direction of democracy and human rights, political freedom and pluralism. While the WP was a political party defined by its relation to Islam, the VP represented itself as a Muslim party defined by its relation to politics. It claimed to be a moderate, modern meritocracy, took populist, environmentalist stances, and proclaimed itself open to women and minorities in its organisation. Kemalists were cynical about the party’s sudden discovery of democratic principles, and saw its positioning simply as takiyye, a practice of hiding one’s true purpose in the interest of achieving one’s ultimate goal, which they presumed to be making the Turkish state a religious one.

Banned from politics, Erbakan tried to run the VP from behind the scenes through the figurehead party leader, Recai Kutan, but power moved inexorably into the hands of younger, populist, charismatic leaders such as Istanbul mayor
Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Erdoğan appealed to the new Islamist constituencies—young, middle-class professionals, students and intellectuals, who were radical in their ideas, but moderate in approach. The younger Islamist generation was invested in current political issues, not loyalty to regional patrons or religious brotherhoods. Many were urban youth in their twenties and thirties, educated in secular institutions or theological schools, desiring upward mobility and economic security, but with few opportunities to participate in the global economy and booming service sector. They were open to new ideas and models of society that would incorporate these aspirations, while retaining an Islamic lifestyle and moral values. Erdoğan’s populism bridged the gap between conservative religious culture, the rising aspirations of disenfranchised youth and the new ideas and ideologies of educated Islamists. News reports in spring 2000 began to refer to the split within VP as the Renewers (Yenilikçiler) versus Erbakan’s Traditionalists (Gelenekçiler). Although Erdoğan entertained Islamist ideas, he pulled the party further away from religion and towards politics as its engine.

Erdoğan’s political orientation did not mean he was uninterested in systemic change. For instance, he favoured a secular system ‘like the American system’ instead of Kemalist laicism. Kemalism, he argued, was a form of religion. Secularism, on the other hand, would give people the freedom to do things such as found an Islamic university or wear a headscarf in parliament. He expressed moderate views on a variety of issues ranging from women working outside the home (which he supported) to Islamic law (which he believed to be a metaphor for a just society). He had no interest, he insisted, in changing Turkey’s laws, just in making sure that the laws already on the books were actually enforced.

Although Erbakan found himself more and more isolated within the VP, he continued to try to manoeuvre party activities and policy from behind the scenes, including what some in the VP saw as badly timed confrontational tactics. For instance, in 1999, the female deputy Merve Kavakçı, newly elected on the VP ticket, tried to take her seat in parliament while wearing her headscarf, causing pandemonium in the chamber. When she refused to unveil, she was not allowed to take the oath of office and was escorted out. She was later stripped of her Turkish citizenship when it was discovered that she had taken out United States citizenship without informing the Turkish authorities.

In January 1998, Erdoğan was banned from politics and charged with violating article 312 of the Turkish constitution, which refers to the crime of ‘inciting people to hatred and enmity on the basis of ethnic, religious, regional, and sectarian differences’. The national security court, a military-backed tribunal
that tried cases related to subversion, accused him of having ‘provoked religious hatred’ and of having called for religious insurrection when, during a campaign speech in 1997, he read a verse from a poem written in the 1920s by the nationalist hero Ziya Gökalp: ‘The mosques are our barracks, the minarets are our spears, their domes are our helmets and the faithful are our army.’ His supporters demonstrated and signed petitions, to no avail. Sentenced to a ten-month jail term and banned from politics for life, Erdoğan continued to manage party affairs from his jail cell. The leadership of the reformist faction was taken up by Abdullah Gül, a forty-nine-year-old former economics professor from Kayseri. Gül was a leading figure in restructuring the VP, moving it further away from an ‘Islam-referenced’ party to what he called a ‘new politics’ based on democracy and freedom of belief.

In April 1999, the constitutional court opened a case against the VP on charges of anti-laic activities. In the 1999 elections, many of the VP’s supporters moved to the Nationalist Action Party (NAP, Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi). The VP’s share of the vote dropped from 21% to 15%. The VP platform shared some characteristics with that of the NAP, but the NAP was traditionally far right, strongly pan-Turkist and nationalist. The deciding factor in its showing may well have been that the election took place in a highly charged nationalist atmosphere after the capture of the Kurdish separatist PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan. The secular nationalist Democratic Left Party (DLP), led by Bülent Ecevit, also did well in the 1999 elections, and Ecevit became prime minister.

The VP was banned in June 2001, with the conservative faction, under Necmettin Erbakan, and the reformists, under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, going their separate ways, each founding a new party. Under the figurehead leadership of Recai Kutan, the conservatives founded the Felicity Party (FP, Saadet Partisi). This party continued the strong, centralised leadership and religious rhetoric that had characterised previous Islamist parties and did not do well in subsequent elections, unable to pass the 10% vote threshold to take a seat in parliament.

The Justice and Development Party

In August 2001, Erdoğan founded the Justice and Development Party (JDP, Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi), whose acronym in Turkish is AK (‘white, unblemished’), with a lightbulb as its symbol. Its seventy-one founders included twelve women. The party platform avoided reference to Islam and expressed support for laicism as a fundamental requirement for democracy and freedom. Laicism, however, was defined in the party principles as state impartiality
towards religion, rather than state control of religious affairs. Shortly after the party was founded, the state prosecutor warned the party it was in violation of the law on two counts: founding members of a political party may not wear headscarves, but half the female founders of JDP did; and Erdoğan’s previous conviction made him ineligible to found or lead a political party. Erdoğan was unable to formally assume leadership of JDP and become prime minister until the law was changed.

Turkish Islamists reacted in a variety of ways to the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States. The more radical and confrontational newspapers and politicians, including some from the FP, claimed there was insufficient proof to implicate Osama bin Laden and repeated conspiracy theories positing Israeli involvement in the attacks. Moderate politicians in the JDP spoke out against terrorism in general and the al-Qa’eda terror network in particular, and tried to delink the incidents of 11 September from Islam.

On 3 November 2002, the JDP won Turkey’s national elections, sweeping away all other established parties, with the exception of the RPP, which remained in weak opposition. The JDP government faced a number of immediate challenges. Protocol dilemmas created tension with the state and the military, as conflict arose over the illegality of JDP politicians’ wives appearing with headscarves at official functions. The party’s refusal to allow US troops to deploy into Iraq from Turkish territory was based less on Islamic identity than on the Turkish population’s widespread opposition to the war and its civilian casualties, concern about its possible spread to neighbouring states including Turkey, fear of a catastrophic effect on the already weak Turkish economy, and a reluctance to commit Turkish soldiers’ lives to a project opposed by both devout and secular Turks.

The JDP began to assert that it no longer made policy decisions on the basis of Islamic philosophy, that its platform was secular and that it had no intention of changing the secular nature of the state it governed. Rather, it presented itself as a conservative democratic party running a secular government apparatus. Government officials took pains to point out, however, that they retained their Muslim ethical values. Despite its disavowal by party leaders, Islam remains a motivating rationale for at least some of its supporters. One indication is that the issue of veiling remains one of the most important domestic issues on the party’s agenda.

Some prominent JDP members, such as theology professor and minister of state Mehmet Aydın, are influenced by a Turkish brand of Islamic philosophy developed by group of reformist intellectuals at Ankara University’s school of theology. It entails a rejection of Arab reformist Islam and links between Islamic
law and the state. Instead, it views religion as human nature or an internal state and the secular state as an administrative mechanism, thus positing that there is no contradiction in political leaders of a democratic secular government holding personal Muslim values. While these scholars faced criticism from more orthodox Muslims and radical Islamist intellectuals, their influence in the JDP brought their ideas into the mainstream.

The Alevi and religious brotherhoods

The political affiliations of the heterodox Alevi minority and Sunni religious brotherhoods have also affected the relationship between religion and the state. The Alevi, of both Turkish and Kurdish background, are the largest non-Sunni religious group in Turkey. Alevi collective rituals differ from Sunni rituals particularly in the incorporation of music and mysticism, and the participation of both men and women. Alevis do not subscribe to the Sunni requirements regarding prayer and fasting, and their ceremonies (cem), in which music plays a prominent role, are not gender segregated. Alevi society is based on inherited religious leadership. Some Alevi customs and beliefs share similarities with Shiite Islam, and others are believed to be pre-Islamic in origin. For centuries, the Alevis were marginalised and sometimes persecuted by the Sunni majority for their beliefs, which some considered heretical.

Although traditionally socially liberal and politically to the left of centre, the Alevi are often overlooked in discussions of moderate Islam in Turkey. This omission may be due to their association with leftist activities in the turbulent 1960s and 1970s. In the 1980s, however, the Alevis were perceived to be allies of the state in countering the supposed threat of Sunni Islamism. They were granted permission to reopen their lodges, which had been closed along with other Islamic institutions after the founding of the Republic, and were allowed to hold their cem ceremonies openly. These reforms led to what some have called an Alevi revival or re-politicisation, including the founding of numerous Alevi associations and foundations and local and national radio stations. Participation in Alevi activities increased, particularly in cities. Like the Sunni Islamist movement, Alevi presence in the public sphere took the form of mass demonstrations, civic organisations and media publications – books, periodicals and newspapers. This process created a crisis in authority within the Alevi community, as the new, civic and culture-oriented Alevi identity challenged traditional leaders whose authority is based on membership in holy lineages.
Several powerful Sunni religious brotherhoods (tarikat) exist in Turkey, among them the Nakşibendi, Süleymani and Nurcu. Although religious brotherhoods and dervish orders were banned shortly after the founding of the Turkish Republic and their lodges closed, they continued to operate clandestinely. They reappeared in political life after 1945 when multi-party politics were introduced and politicians realised the potential for religious leaders to deliver votes. Religious groups vary across the political spectrum from the conservative to left of centre. Fundamentalist orders such as the Nakşibendi and Süleymanî have tended to support Islamist or conservative centrist parties, while philosophically left-of-centre sufi orders such as the Bektaşi and Mevlevi and the socially and politically liberal Alevi tended to ally themselves with secularist parties such as the RPP.

Similarly, a more moderate Turkish Islam also is advocated by the Gülen Movement, an offspring of the Nurcu movement, based on the Risale-i Nur, the writings of Said Nursi (1877–1960). Said Nursi argued that there was no contradiction between religion and science. The Nurcu movement spread throughout Turkey in the 1950s and held particular appeal for those who had been educated in the secular school system. An offspring of the Nurcu developed around the religious ideas of the charismatic preacher Fethullah Gülen. The Gülen Movement is organised as a web of associations in Turkey’s major cities, runs a large publishing industry to disseminate Gülen’s teachings, and is noted for opening high-quality schools in Turkey and Central Asia. Gülen teaches that there is an ‘Anatolian Islam’ that differs from Arab Islam in its tolerance and openness to dialogue with other religions and sects. He promotes a liberal interpretation of Islam and an Islamised Turkish nationalism with links to the Turkic republics of Central Asia. In his writings, Gülen emphasises that religion is a private matter and its requirements should not be imposed on anyone. He believes that it is important to seek knowledge and to integrate with the modern world, even if that includes incorporating Western technology, clothing and, to some extent, lifestyle. To spread Gülen’s message, his followers have sponsored educational and cultural facilities, student dormitories, summer camps and media organisations. The movement has attracted businessmen and educated members of society.

Its success raised suspicions among secularists, however, that behind its liberal front, the movement aimed to impose an Islamic state. Relations between the Gülen Movement and the state ranged from tacit support by individual politicians in the 1980s to repression in the 1990s to ideological influence in the 2000s. In the 1980s, the Turkish military and government encouraged the Turkish–Islamic synthesis in a bid to counter the appeal of leftist ideologies.
Gülen’s brand of Turkish Islam, emphasis on Islamic education and belief in the compatibility of religious ethics and modern state institutions seemed ideal and initially was supported. As Islamist parties won power at the polls in the 1990s, however, relations with the state and military cooled. At the time of writing, Gülen is living in the United States, where he initially came for medical treatment, and is unable to return to Turkey under threat of arrest. Some of his followers are in influential government posts.

The issue of veiling

Most visible among the symbols of political Islam was a distinctive form of Islamic dress called *tesettür* that became emblematic of the ‘new Islamic woman’ and was claimed as a central symbol by the Islamist movement. A long, loosely tailored coat was paired with a matching extra-large silk headscarf decorated with abstract motifs that varied with each fashion season. The scarf entirely hid the hair, forehead and neck, and usually, though not always, covered the shoulders and bosom. These carefully composed ensembles with their own fashion houses and a global market differed from earlier, less elaborate and locally produced forms of covering. *Tesettür* emerged as a fashion in the 1980s. By the 2000s, the headscarf could be seen paired with jeans and form-fitting skirts. Less common was the all-enveloping black or dark blue cloak (*çeşaf*) worn by followers of conservative religious sects.

The spread of *tesettür* veiling and its legitimisation as a political symbol allowed conservative Muslim women to redefine the spheres of activity available to them. The Islamist movement provided an avenue for conservative, veiled women to become politically active. Islamic corporations established professional training centres and issued certificates for men and women. They funded segregated dormitories and scholarships that allowed women to attend universities (although they were hindered by variable enforcement of laws banning veiling on campus). This effort allowed some women to establish professional footholds, however precarious, and provided the foundation for the development of the concept of ‘the new Islamic woman’. Islamist intellectual discourse described the Islamist project as introducing ‘real Islam’ to social groups with lower levels of education and culture who otherwise experienced ‘folk Islam’.\(^2\) The Islamist top-down approach relied, as did Kemalism, on the leadership of educated elites and their modelling of elite styles and lifestyles.

---

One consequence of the commercialisation and media popularisation of an Islamist identity and its symbols has been the development of a self-consciously Islamist bourgeois lifestyle based on Islamic commodities. In the 1990s, developers built Islamist luxury gated communities. Islamist fashion shows displayed fashionable new veiled designs that clearly identified the wearer as middle class.\textsuperscript{21} This reflected the changing economic make-up of sectors of society and the strength of self-identified devout Muslim businesses (known as ‘Islamic capital’ or ‘green capital’) in the post-1980s economy.

The JDP government promised to further open the door to religious women’s participation in the public sphere by changing the laws that ban veiled women from universities and parliament, but the male-dominated make-up of the party hierarchy and resistance by Kemalist elements in the military, government and judicial system make this unlikely. While the role of women in the success of Islamist parties since the 1980s has been undeniably important, they have not been at the forefront of shaping the parties’ agendas. Islamist women were given public voices in magazines and newspaper columns, but these generally were limited to an audience of other women.\textsuperscript{22} In the 1980s the Islamists did not field female parliamentary candidates (blaming state laws that would not have allowed a veiled woman to be elected), female mayors, municipal councillors or provincial governors. No women led or spoke publicly for Islamic brotherhoods. When women were needed for public presentation or debates, instead of using women from their own ranks, the Islamists often put forward women who had come to the movement from outside and who did not veil. Public conversations and conferences about the role of Islam in the Turkish state and society rarely included women speakers. In the 1990s, the JDP incorporated more women into the party administration, although still not in the numbers or positions of authority one might expect given women’s important role in mobilising party support. Thus, while veiling as a cause did present an opportunity for women to play a central role in the movement, it also presented a dilemma related to the veil’s cultural and symbolic dimensions, in which it is still linked to patriarchy and exclusion from the public sphere.

After the founding of the Turkish Republic in the early twentieth century, Kemalism redefined public space as appropriate for women, encouraging them to become educated and to enter politics and the professions. Similarly, in the 1980s and 1990s, the Islamist movement redefined public space as an

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{21} Navaro-Yashin, ‘The market for identities’. \textsuperscript{22} R. Çakır, ‘Dindar kadının sertüveni’, Birikim 137 (September 2000).}
appropriate space for veiled women. The Islamist, like the Kemalist, ideal, however, applies primarily to women of the middle classes and elites, and has opened the door only marginally to the public participation of working-class, poor or rural women. In conjunction with the market and media, elite Islamist women continue to develop a commodified Islamist private sphere, including exclusive forms of veiling and lifestyle, that marks them as middle class. While new public spaces are opened up to women and private space is redefined, lower-class women are less likely to be able to take advantage of these openings, despite their activism.

Conclusion

Islamist politics in Turkey are the result of a complex history of state suppression, control and deregulation of Islam. This history, combined with other economic and political factors, brought about a proliferation of institutional bases for Islamic engagement in the political arena in the 1980s. Despite Kemalist state controls, Islam remained an important element of Turkish social and political life. Beginning in the 1980s, there was an increase in political activism centred on Islamic principles and that drew new social groups into the political process across social class and, to some extent, ethnic lines, including large numbers of conservative women. Opposition to the Kemalist platform centred on certain issues and symbols, such as the veiling ban. A series of Islamist political parties were sequentially closed down and re-emerged with different constituencies and platforms. Within these parties, power struggles played out between younger Islamists, committed to a populist style with a power base in urban networks, and older leaders, whose political style lay within the centralised, authoritarian, top-down political mould of Turkish political culture.

In contemporary Turkey, Islamist understandings of Islam and the role of Islam in national political life exist along a broad range, from radical to moderate, and are linked with both nationalism and pluralism. Islamist intellectuals have put forth a variety of positions on women’s roles, the rights of ethnic minorities and economic practice. Since the 1990s, Turkish Islamist politics have displayed a general movement away from Arab modernist-inspired radical Islam. The result has been the articulation of a more moderate Turkish political Islam, which does not envision a secular government run by devout Muslim politicians as a contradiction.