

# Changing Boundaries of Identity and Political Islam in Turkey

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## Abstract

Since its inception in 1923, the Turkish Republic has been subject to political instability as a result of conflicting identity-based movements. Turkish nationalism, political Islam and Kurdish separatism were all to a certain degree by-products of the establishment of the Turkish nation-state and ensuing state nationalist policy, and continue to be the most destabilizing political issues in the Republic.

The current ruling political party in Turkey, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) are seemingly pushing the boundaries of the Kemalist ideologies and policies upheld for almost a century. The party, which is commonly (though somewhat incorrectly) branded as Islamist, seeks to reform the Constitution so as to integrate these identity movements into mainstream political arenas. This is evidently reflected in their attempts at changing the headscarf laws, and the liberalisation of Kurdish cultural expression in public spaces and broadcasting. Their attempted reforms are aimed at bringing Turkey closer to accession in to the European Union, an aspiration of the Republic since its inception.

This paper seeks to define political Islam in the Turkish context, and its relationship to Turkish nation-building and Kemalist secularism. It will be argued that organisations such as the AKP offer a new direction for Islam and politics in Turkey, and it is for this reason that they have considerable influence among the public. Furthermore, it will be argued that this post-Islamist party is more progressive in terms of democratic reform than its secular predecessors and counterparts.

## **Introduction**

In 1997, Metin Heper concluded an article by arguing that the reincorporation of Islam in to the social, economic and political fabric of Turkey during the 1990s indicated an optimistic outlook about the relationship between democracy and Islam in the country (Heper 1997: 44). He stated:

One might even argue that the interactive relationship between democracy and Islam has taken on a new and unexpected twist. Having long been subjected to the dominance of the radical secularists' perception of a zero-sum relationship between their worldview and Islam, the moderate Islamists, who champion the freedom of conscience, many now be instrumental in moving Turkish democracy in a more liberal direction. (Heper 1997: 44-45)

Heper's optimistic prognosis was seemingly accurate. National identity and political discourse in Turkey is changing. The boundaries of Turkishness, set by Atatürk and the

Republicans and upheld by the Kemalist institutions and political parties, are shifting. For the first time in Turkish Republican history, we have seen the emergence of new spaces in mainstream political arenas that accommodate discourse around the issue of identity rights for groups that have previously been excluded. Kurdish ethnic groups in particular, have been provided new freedoms in terms of cultural expression. Furthermore, the late 1990s saw the rise to power of an Islamist party for the first time in the history of the Turkish Republic. Although the party was banned shortly after, its successors continued to occupy a place in Turkish politics. The current ruling party, the *Justice and Development Party* (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) although not Islamist, have their roots in the Turkish Islamist movement. The government led by the AKP has recently introduced policies that make new spaces in the public arena by providing financial and political support for the Alevi religious minority. These changes indicate a level of integration taking place of previously marginalised identities into mainstream political arenas.

The changes that have taken place in Turkish politics have been met reluctantly by some segments of the Turkish population and the state, including the powerful military. Furthermore, a suspicion of the AKP continues to exist amongst people, who fear a hidden Islamist agenda.

Despite the fact that many of Turkey's troubles with democracy and minority rights continue, progress has undoubtedly been made. Although clashes in the South East continue between Kurdish fighters and state security forces, in other ways such as cultural representation, we are seeing some positive steps taken. There are a number of factors that have assisted in paving the way for these changes. Turkey's bid to be accepted into the European Union (EU) is one very important reason. Numerous governments have had to consider and apply Constitutional changes in order to fulfil some of the requirements outlined by the European states, many of them around the recognition of cultural rights for Turkey's Kurdish minority. Other areas that have been the focus of the EU include democratisation of the political system (i.e. the abolishment

of the National Security Council), the abolishment of the death penalty, and more controversially, around freedom of speech and controversial Article 301.

Although Turkey's bid for accession into the EU has been a strong factor influencing these changes, some other factors can also be identified. The AKP itself, whose success is both a consequence and further contributor to these changes, has spearheaded many of the reforms. The Party has managed to open a space that allows for discussion of the grievances of previously excluded 'conflicting' identities. As mentioned previously, the AKP's roots lie with the Islamist movements and political parties of the past. Although their ideologies and political platforms can no longer be classified as Islamist, they have abided by what previous Islamist movements have offered in terms of a solution to the Kurdish and Alevi problems. They have offered a more pluralist approach, where public identity is not just limited to the Kemalist Turk: a publicly secular yet privately Muslim, Turk. The AKP has opened new spaces for discourse in mainstream political arenas that allow for the representation of what was previously considered to be the excluded 'other'.

These changes that are taking place are changing the notions of Turkishness in the Republic and contributing to the democratisation of the country. This paper will discuss the transitions that are taking place in relation to these aspects of Turkish politics. It will be argued that alongside the changing boundaries of Turkishness, we are witnessing the transformation of political Islam in the country. The AKP reflects and embodies this change. It will also be argued that the AKP, whose predecessors and roots lie in the Islamist movements of the past, is reflecting a more progressive position in terms of democracy, human rights, and identity, than its secular counterparts. In order to argue these points, the concept of Turkishness and the boundaries set by the Kemalists to maintain it, will be discussed. As will be seen, a paradox exists in the notion of Turkish national identity specified by the Kemalists, where, although membership to the nation was generally expansionist and inclusive, based on linguistic and cultural homogenisation during the Republican reform period and even today, religious identities were still crucial and competing identities were excluded. The Republicans excluded Islam from the public sphere, but stressed its importance in the private. One could become a Turk, so long as

they were Muslim, and they spoke only Turkish. It will be argued that this contributed to the exclusion of other identities from mainstream political arenas in the country.

Once the boundaries of Turkishness are discussed, the evolution of political Islam will be analysed. As will be seen, the Turkish state's relationship with Islam has been one of a somewhat "controlled secularity" (Tank, 2005: 3), where, despite the restrictions and exclusion of Islam from politics and political activism in general, Islam has played an important role in Turkish identity and politics but only through the control of the state. That is, the state has controlled religious affairs and education throughout the history of the Republic, to limit Islamic political activity and also, importantly, used it as a binding force of identity during periods of polarisation and instability. This complex relationship between Islam and the Turkish state, has contributed to the unique nature of political Islam in Turkey.

### **Nationality, Religion and Citizenship in Kemalist Turkey**

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk perceived one of the most important aspects of nation-building as the secularisation of the new Republic. This was because the new regime regarded Islam "as the binding factor and common denominator of all counter-revolutionary threats in the republic" (Taspınar 2005: 29). The demise of the Ottoman Empire, which hit its peak at the turn of the twentieth century, saw a number of conflicting ideological movements aim to take hold within the power vacuum of Ottoman politics. Various reform movements that had emerged throughout the nineteenth century continued to battle for power. The Islamists, whose loyalty lay with the Islamic empire, had great influence over the population and were therefore seen as a major threat to the Turkish nationalists. Upon abolishing the office of the Caliph in 1924, which caused much upheaval throughout Turkey and within the bureaucracy, the Kemalist government started an active campaign to remove the integral role Islam had played in society. The Ankara government "struggled fiercely to free state institutions, juridical structure[s], the education system and society in general from the influence of men of religion" (Dumont 1984: 36) believing that Sharia law had been incompatible with European ideals of modernity, and

had therefore impeded on the progress of the Empire and the Turkish people. The leaders of the new Republic thus looked to the removal of religion from state institutions and emphasised the creation of a homogenous culture out of the remnants of the multiethnic empire, through the use of education and linguistic reform.

Secularisation in Turkey therefore involved not only the separation of the state from the institutions of Islam, but “also the liberation of the individual mind from the restraints imposed by the traditional Islamic concepts and practices” and the “modernisation of all aspects of state and society” that had previously been moulded by Islamic tradition implemented by the Ottomans (Shaw and Shaw 1977: 384). Karpas argues that the purpose of secularising the new Republic was to “help create a modern national state” and “to bring about a new type of free individual” (Karpas 1959: 271). The process that was undertaken to achieve this included the Republicans’ garnering of full control over religious affairs. As Taspınar argues, “Turkish secularism did not attempt to separate state and religion” but rather “the Kemalist elite adopted the traditional Ottoman pattern of state control over the religious establishment” (Taspınar 2005: 28). As opposed to the Ottoman regime however, it did not incorporate the religious establishment into the state apparatus, but aimed to “base its legitimacy on secular Turkish nationalism” (Taspınar 2005: 28).

The Kemalist government introduced various policies during this process. Religious education was restricted then abolished, the office of the *Ministry of Religious Foundations* was abolished and replaced with small departments for religious affairs (Shaw and Shaw 1977: 384). The Presidency of Religious Affairs was established which, to this day, continues to supervise and regulate the religious realm in contemporary Turkey (Taspınar 2005: 29). In 1924, the Sharia courts were abolished and were replaced by new secular penal codes. The government closed the dervish lodges and cells “as well as religious tombs”, and “prohibited the wearing of clerical garb in public except under special circumstances such as funerals” (Taspınar 2005: 29). Various cultural symbols and practices were transformed, such as outlawing of the *fez* which was replaced with the

Western-style hat, the transformation of the alphabet into the Latin script, and the adoption of the Gregorian calendar.

Upon secularising the Republic, the Kemalist regime sought to replace the integral role of religion with the modern principle of nationalism. Turkish nationalism came to the forefront of the Turkish Republic's ambitions, politics, and philosophies, and became the "supreme force dominating all activities in the society" (Karpas 1959: 60-61). With the new state secured, the government was now to build a nation. The *Turkish History Thesis* emerged in 1930-31 as a result of Kemal's instructions for works on Turkish history to be developed by the 'Turkish Hearths Committee for the Study of Turkish History' and sought to connect the population with a national past. There were four factors addressed in the thesis, first of which being that the "Turks were ancestors of the brachycephalic peoples including the Indo-Europeans, whose origins went back to central Asia" (Çağaptay 2004: 88). Secondly, they asserted that the Turkish race had created civilisations in all the lands they had migrated to. As Çağaptay explains, this made the Turks "the inheritors of the glories of ancient Sumerians, Egyptians, and Greeks, among others" (Çağaptay 2004: 88). The *History Thesis* also claimed that the Turks were the owners "of the earliest Hittite civilisation in Anatolia," then the Turkish homeland, "since the Turks were its, original, autochthonous inhabitants" (Çağaptay 2004: 88). Finally, and very importantly, the *Thesis* claimed that all of Anatolia's inhabitants were Turks in one way or another. The aim of the *Thesis* was to develop a sense of national history that would also be inclusive of the various ethnic groups residing in Anatolia, and aimed at convincing some of the non-Turkish populations of this 'shared' history. For the Turkish people, it was aimed at providing a sense of pride in their national history that had been damaged by decades of war, growing separatist movements, and European hostilities toward the Ottoman Empire.

Alongside the *History Thesis*, language and education reforms were used as part of the nation-building project. During the late 1920s, the language became Turkified under the leadership of the *Turkish Language Society*, which eliminated Arabic and Persian from school curricula (Shaw and Shaw 1977: 61). The new Kemalist education system sought

to implement the principles of the Turkish revolution “by making Turks more conscious than they were under the Ottomans of their unique cultural heritage and pre-Islamic past” (Massialis 1971 quoted in Sahin and Gülmez 2000: 89). The emphasis on Turkish language and culture were deemed necessary in order to uphold the aim of the Kemalist revolution of ‘Turkifying’ the public through a “new set of Turkish ideals (not Ottoman) by eliminating religion from state-related activity” and by introducing “a new Turkish Latin alphabet to replace the Arabic script” (Massialis 1971 quoted in Sahin and Gülmez 2000: 89).

The aim of the Kemalists was thus to establish a modern, Turkish nation-state. They aimed to modernise the remnants of the Empire through the adoption of principles such as secularism and republicanism. The Kemalists sought to homogenise culture and create a new Turkish nation-state. This part of the nation-building project would prove difficult however, due to the diverse nature of the population within the territories of the Republic. The difficulties experienced during this period, were experienced throughout the twentieth century, and were major causes of social and political conflict and instability in the country.

Although the majority of the population during the early years of the Republic were Turkish-speaking Muslims, there were still a number of ethnically varying groups, including a large number of tribes in eastern Anatolia who are today a part of the Kurdish nation. Çağaptay (2004: 86) lists a further number of non-Turkish Muslim groups including Arabs, Lazes, Muslim Georgians, Greek-speaking Muslims, Albanians, Macedonian Muslims, Pomaks, Serb Muslims, Bosnians, Tatars, Circassians, Abkhazes, and Daghestanis. Alongside these non-Turkish speaking Muslim groups were a number of smaller Jewish and Christian communities (Çağaptay 2004: 86). This diversity required that the Kemalists establish a type of citizenship that would allow for many of these groups to be included in the nation-building process and to be part of the new Turkish nation.

As will be discussed, the Kemalist government espoused a notion of inclusive, civic nationalism in order to include the diverse remnants of the population into the Turkish nation, and presented the view that ethnicity was not of concern for Turkishness. In practice however, it seemed that non-Muslim groups were regarded as being *naturally* ineligible candidates for membership to the Turkish nation. This was despite the importance placed on the secularisation of political culture. Furthermore, certain policies and laws implemented by the state implied a perception of varying degrees of Turkishness that was based on ethnicity. Thus, as many scholars agree (Kirişci and Winrow 1997: 96-100, Taspınar 2004: 59- 62, Yeğen 2004: 51-66), whilst the Turkish state *seemingly* exerted a civic form of nationalism on paper, it *actually* practiced a more ethnicised approach. This next section will discuss the difference between Turkishness and Turkish citizenship as perceived during the nation-building process.

The definition of the Turkish nation outlined in the first Constitution of 1924 avoids references to religion and ethnicity, and can therefore be categorised as a civic form of national identity. This definition was outlined in Article 88 and reads as follows:

The name Turk, as a political term, shall be understood to include all citizens of the Turkish Republic, without distinction of or reference to, race or religion. (Constitution of the Republic of Turkey 1924 quoted in Earle: 1925)

Here, the Kemalists indicated a view of a Turkish nation where identity would be based on the sense of an “imagined political community” (Anderson 1991), within a demarcated territory. Through the use of education, the state would incorporate its citizens into a homogenous culture of Turkishness. Taspınar (2004: 62) argues that the incorporation of a civic dimension to Turkish nationalism was made possible by the “fact that a deeply rooted Ottoman state tradition already existed prior to nation-building”. He argues that

...the historical presence of a state-centred political culture and tradition, albeit in a different form than the Kemalists envisioned,

facilitated the systematization of codes of nationalism and citizenship along political and territorial lines, rather than ethnic roots. (Taspınar 2004: 62)

As a result of this attitude to citizenship and nationalism, where everyone was supposedly a candidate to become Turkish, language reforms and linguistic nationalism were heavily emphasized.

Despite these notions however, various factors indicated that there were manifestations of a more ethnic approach to identity coming from the state. Kirişci and Winrow (1997: 97) agree, for the two decades following the late-1920s, developments in the Republic “were not conducive to the development of a genuine civic nationalism”. Firstly, despite omitting religious identities in the notion of nationalism in the Constitution and the policies of secularisation, religion played a determining role as to who could be incorporated in the Turkish nation. As Taspınar (2004: 62) states, behind “this civic facade of official Turkish nationalism, religion continued to play a thinly disguised role in determining what can be cynically called ‘the level of Turkishness’”. Kirişci and Winrow (1997: 96) and Yeğen (2004: 60) look to the parliamentary sessions prior to the formulation of Article 88 in 1924 which defines Turkishness and Turkish citizenship. When the article was first introduced into the Assembly, it read as follows:

The people of Turkey regardless of their religion and race would be called Turkish. (1924 *Anayasa Hakkında Meclis Görüşmeleri* 1946 quoted in Yeğen (2004: 59))

In the studies of both Kirişci and Winrow (1997: 96) and Yeğen (2004: 60), a description is provided about the debate surrounding the wording of this draft article. The controversy sparked concerned the fact that this definition was too inclusive. The intervention of Hamdullah Suphi Bey, the deputy of Istanbul, played a crucial role in changing the draft article into that which was adopted by the Constitution. His intervention correctly summarises the preliminary stages of government practice with regard to nation-building and the exclusion of non-Muslims:

It may be an objective to call everybody within our political borders Turkish. Yet, as you see, we have just got out of a very difficult struggle and none of us is of the view that this struggle is over. We say: the subjects of the state, the Republic of Turkey, are all Turkish. Yet, on the other side, the government strives to fire the Greeks and the Armenians working in the organizations established by the foreigners. When we intend to fire these people because they are Greeks and Armenians, how would you reply if you were told ‘no, according to the law enacted by your Assembly these are Turkish’? The word subjection (citizenship) is not adequate to remove the objective which exists in minds, which exists in hearts. Verbally, we find an expounding (...) Yet there is a truth. They may not be Turkish. (Hamdullah Suphi Bey quoted in Yeğen 2004: 60)

After much deliberation and debate during this process, the following statement was accepted for Article 88 as suggested by Hamdullah Suphi Bey (Yeğen 2004: 61):

The people of Turkey regardless of their religion and race would, in terms of citizenship, be called Turkish.

The Article therefore reflected the varying notions of citizenship- Turkish citizen and Turk. The “founding constitution of the Turkish Republic built a political definition of Turkishness only by virtue of entailing that there is another, more authentic Turkishness other than the political one” (Yeğen 2004: 61). Numerous official and non-official government statements and publications further indicate these different ideas of Turkishness. A Law introduced in 1926 “specified Turkishness, instead of Turkish citizenship as a requirement for becoming a state employee” (Yeğen 2004: 57). Legislation adopted in 1928 stipulated that “doctors in the country had to have a degree from the Medical School of Istanbul Darülfünun (University) and that they had to be Turks” (Çağaptay 2003: 603). This also applied to dentists, midwives and nurses (Çağaptay 2003: 603). In 1937, an announcement was published which specified that “being a subject (citizen) of the Turkish Republic” was a condition “for enrolment in the student dormitory” (Yeğen 2004: 56). In another announcement published in 1938,

“being a subject (citizen) of the Turkish Republic and being of the Turkish race were specified together as the necessary conditions to be admitted to the Military Veterinary School” (Yeğen 2004: 56).

These ‘degrees of Turkishness’ were seemingly based on one’s religion. Non-Turkish Muslim groups who remained in the Republican territories were considered natural candidates for Turkishness. The Republican government sought to assimilate these groups through cultural and linguistic homogenisation. As stated by Recep Peker, General-Secretary of Kemal’s *Republican Peoples’ Party*:

In today’s political and social community of the Turkish nation, we consider of our own those citizens whose minds have been inculcated by ideas of Kurdish, Circassian or even Laz or Pomak identity. (Recep Peker quoted in Kirisci and Winrow 1997: 97)

The distinction made with regards to non-Muslims was also highlighted by the population exchange that took place immediately following the Independence War, whereby Turkish-speaking Orthodox Christians were deported to Greece, and non-Turkish speaking Muslims were deported from the Balkans to Turkey.<sup>1</sup>

The implementation of such policies, despite an inclusive approach to citizenship, generates much debate among scholars of this subject. Various reasons have been provided for this disparity, a useful one of which comes from Yeğen (2004: 51-66). Yeğen argues that this inconsistency is not an accidental instance, nor is it a violation of the theory of Turkish citizenship. Rather, it appears “that the inconsistency found between the theory and practice...is actually an inconsistency, more specifically an undecidability, in theory” (Yeğen 2004: 61). Yeğen points to the very wording of Article 88 of the 1924 Constitution, which he argues that by stating “*in terms of citizenship* [my emphasis], be called Turkish” simultaneously “envisages two separate ideas of Turkishness in one sentence” (Yeğen 2004: 61). The defining article of Turkish identity distinguishes between Turkishness and Turkish citizen, which in turn, allows for the

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<sup>1</sup> This shows that religion was important to Europe too- not just the Turks.

implementation of ethnic nationalist policies whilst ideologically being committed to the idea of a civic national identity. That is, being a citizen of the state was distinguished from being a Turk.

The Article was reworded in the Constitution of 1961 and maintained in the Constitution of 1982 to read:

Everyone who is tied to the Turkish state through citizenship ties is Turkish. (Republic of Turkey 1961)

Unlike the definition in 1924, here the article equates Turkish citizenship with Turkishness. As Yeğen (2004: 61-62) argues however, the “undecidability” with regard to the idea of Turkishness did not entirely disappear, and the “the gap between citizenship and Turkishness remained to condition the general spirit” of the two constitutions (1961 and 1982).

Thus, it can be summarised that the Turkish Republican nation-building policies were centred on both civic and ethnic connotations of nationalism (Taspınar 2004: 59-62). This ambiguity resulted from the attempt to balance ‘the old with the new’ in the new Republic’s quest to define its criteria for nationality and citizenship. Whilst attempting to redefine its notions of citizenship and identity in order to accommodate the multi-ethnic remnants of the Empire, the Turkish state was inconsistent in its ideology and practice. Whilst it called on the establishment of a civic national state, the Republicans practiced a form of exclusivity with regards to membership to the Turkish nation and Turkishness. Furthermore, in accordance with the Ottoman or pre-modern perceptions of identity, the Turkish state looked to religion as the defining factor and criteria for admission, despite the fact that it introduced stringent policies of secularisation. As a result, non-Muslims living within the boundaries of the new Republic were generally considered citizens, whilst Muslim non-Turks were assimilated and made Turkish.

### **Political Islam in Turkey: A State of “Controlled Secularity”**

Throughout the twentieth century, Islamic identity was used by the state to not only add to the definition of Turkishness, but also to maintain cohesiveness at times of political and social instability and conflict. The eradication of spaces for discourse for identities other than Turkish or those that did not meet the Kemalist picture, that of a privately Muslim but secular Turk, saw the marginalisation of various identity-based movements. The rise of the terrorist group the *Kurdistan Workers' Party* (*Partiya Karkaren Kurdistan*, PKK) in the 1970s could be seen as an example of the product of this marginalisation. The emergence and development of the PKK onto the Turkish and Kurdish political landscapes were caused by the marginalisation of Kurdish politics through the eradication of spaces for discourse. Furthermore, such marginalisation caused polarisation between Turk versus Kurd, Alevi versus Sunni, and secular versus Islamist. This polarisation on many occasions caused severe national political and social instability, which were then often followed by military intervention.<sup>2</sup>

Religion was frequently used to maintain cohesiveness during these periods of unrest. That is, a version of Islam controlled and disseminated by the state that generally espoused a privately Muslim but publicly secular Turkish individual. Despite the eradication of spaces for Islam in politics, education and instruction in religion and ethics were compulsory but only to be conducted “under State supervision and control” (Republic of Turkey 1982). Article 24 goes on to state:

No one shall be allowed to exploit or abuse religion or religious feelings, or things held sacred by religion, in any manner whatsoever, for the purpose of personal or political influence, or for even partially basing the fundamental, social, economic, political, and legal order of the State on religious tenets. (Republic of Turkey 1982)

As a consequence of this, aside from the state’s own Islamic policies and programs, the Turkish government outlawed Islamic political activity, considering it a threat to the

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<sup>2</sup> Three military coups have taken place in Turkey as a result of state concerns due to growing dissident movements and conflict caused. These coups include 1960, 1971 and 1980.

secular state. Although the government generally respected religious freedom in practice, there were limitations on Islamic and other religious groups, with significant restrictions on Islamic religious expression in government offices and state-run institutions and politics more generally (UNHCR 2008). The headscarf for Turkish women has been banned from public places, including schools and government buildings, since the 1982 Constitution. Various political parties and religious organisations have been monitored and banned under the suspicion that they are in “conflict with” the “secular republic” (Republic of Turkey 1982).

This complex relationship between Islam and the state can be further highlighted by the use of religion in the post-1980 coup climate, when the *Turkish-Islamic Synthesis* was used to maintain cohesiveness in the country. A discussion of this period highlights the important role Islam continued to occupy in the Republic, and paves the way for the argument regarding the unique character of Turkish Islam, and the fact that the gaining of power of the current Islamic government is therefore no surprise.

Islam was used by the state as a binding force to counter the polarisation and instability from the 1960s through to the 1980s caused by conflicting identity-based movements. The state redrew on Islamic identities as a means to unite (most of) the people of Turkey, over the ideals of Kurd versus Turk, right-wing versus left-wing, and Sunni versus Alevi. By disseminating its own version of Islam into the public sphere, strictly under state control, it aimed to reignite nationalist-Islamic sentiments. As will be seen, the use of Islam in this manner saw further cracks appear in the Turkish political landscape, which although restrictive and always temporarily, saw the emergence of Islamist movements in civil society and even in the political system. These cracks allowed for the first Islamist party in the history of the Republic, to gain power in parliament.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, this paved the way for the leadership of the AKP who still remain in power today.

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<sup>3</sup> Although this was very short lived.

In the 1980s, to counter growing left-wing and right-wing fighting, and Kurdish separatist movements that were destabilising the republic and causing ideological and identity based societal polarisation, the Turkish state adopted the Turkish-Islamic ‘synthesis’ following the 1980 military coup. This program emphasised “authoritarian politics and social control through the use of cultural and religious motifs” and was the “perfect ideology for Turkish decision-makers expecting a protracted period of social and economic dislocation” (Akin & Karasapan 1988: 18). The Report of the Special Experts Commission on National Culture, prepared by the State Planning Organisation in 1983, clearly stated the importance of “religion in ‘safeguarding the state and national unity’” in the current period of ‘rapid industrialization and social change’” (Akin & Karasapan 1988: 18). This was aimed to counter growing left-wing movements (Akin and Karasapan 1988: 15), as well as Alevi versus Sunni, and Turk versus Kurd identity-based conflicts, through the articulation of and toleration of Islamic elements in the political-public realm that had until that point been under the monopoly of secular standards and criteria (Sakallıoğlu: 206). With the adoption of the ‘synthesis’ during this period, religious and moral education came to enjoy a larger share of secondary school curricula, dozens of religious secondary schools were established and Qur’anic schools enjoyed “an unparalleled boom in an atmosphere” which encouraged their expansion (Akin & Karasapan 1988: 19).

Through the adoption of the ‘synthesis’ the Turkish state continued its control over religion despite the fact that it opened new spaces for political and social participation and interaction. This saw that Islamism in Turkey would not be radicalized or drawn to the more fundamentalist or fanatic religious advocates and movements. By “propagating the study of Islam in the education system a double goal could be attained: the control of the state over Islamic education would ensure that Islam was not left to the fanatics” (Kushner 1997: 230). Instead, “it would be the ‘right’ Islam, stressing the common denominator among the various groups in the Turkish nation and promoting brotherhood and love among all of them” (Kushner 1997: 230). This period in Turkey’s political history “represents yet another modality in a series of complex interactions between Islam and the state” (Sakallıoğlu 1996: 232).

## **New Spaces, New Directions: Political Islam in Turkey**

The political climate of the 1980s and the *Turkish-Islamic Synthesis* saw new spaces open in mainstream political arenas for Islamist political activity. Heper (1997: 32) argues that the inclusion of religiously-oriented parties into mainstream politics was “facilitated by the increasing secularization of the Turks that made support for radical religious revival less likely”. This provided some, though uneasy, confidence for the state to allow for minimal Islamic political activity. Of course, many political parties were shut down, closely monitored, or restricted in their activities. Despite this however, they continued to operate and in the late 1990s, gained considerably influence.

The Welfare Party’s (*Refah Parti*, RP) rise to prominence reflects this new stage in the relationship between political Islam and mainstream politics in Turkey. RP, an openly Islamist party with welfare-based election platforms, rose to power and through the formation of a coalition, came to govern the country. This was a major point in Turkish history, the first Islamist party to power in government. Although this did not last long, when a soft-coup took place pushing them out of power in early 1998, it represented yet another important moment reflecting the establishment of new political spaces in Turkish history. RP was formed in July 1983 and eventually came under the leadership of long-time Islamist activist Necmettin Erbakan, who had also led *Milli Görüş*. Erbakan’s politics and leadership style was inspired by the teachings of the Sufi tarikat Nakshibendi order, with whom he had grown up and been educated with. The party argued that through the adoption of Islamic values in economic, social, and political policy, a more equal and just society would emerge. RP proposed the adoption of ‘The Just Order’, which they claimed to be a political and economic system in opposition to capitalism, and that was based on Islamic perceptions of social justice. Furthermore, the party romanticised the Ottoman era to unify Kurdish and Turkish elements within the Turkish nation-state, arguing that religious identities should surpass national identities. RP argued for the implementation of welfare based policies, backed by Islamic moral codes. The Party called on Turkey to sever its ties with the US and with Europe, and instead to move

closer to the Middle Eastern states. Erbakan relentlessly argued that Turkey had been injected with a “virus of imitation” of the West, who used this situation to exploit the country, leaving it socio-economically and politically underdeveloped (Erbakan 1991: 13). RP asserted a clear division between the Muslim world and the West, perceiving the history of humankind as “the struggle between two civilisations: the one which prefers ‘power’ (Western) and the other which prefers ‘right’ (Islamic)” (Erbakan 1991 in Duran 1998: 112). RP argued that the secularisation of the state had created and exacerbated divisions that had previously not mattered. The party believed that the adoption of western-style nationalism had contributed to these divisions, and caused major problems.

The beginnings of the transformation of political Islam in Turkey can be seen immediately following RP’s expulsion from politics. It is during this period that Islamism in Turkey seemingly turned towards the consolidation of liberal democracy. RP’s parliamentary group joined the *Virtue Party (Fazilet Partisi, VP)* which had been formed by Erbakan’s colleagues (Dağı 2005: 27). The VP’s stance on a number of issues including its attitude towards the West and the European Union had radically shifted (Dağı 2005: 27). The group decided that it would no longer use concepts such as “‘national view’ and ‘just order’” because they had been “misunderstood, misrepresented and misinterpreted by some” (Dağı 2005: 28). The party seemed to abandon not only its opposition to the West, but had also adopted Western political values such as democracy “human rights and the rule of law as part of its new discourse” (Dağı 2005: 27). The new language the VP and the wider *Milli Görüş* movement were using reflected the perception that modern or western values were no longer “anathema to Islamic political identity” (Dağı 2005: 27). The VP advocated Turkey’s integration into the EU, in stark contrast to the movement’s previous position. The party went on to seek assistance from Europe, stressing “the centrality of meeting the EU standards on democracy, demanding a civic constitution that would meet the Copenhagen criteria for individual rights and freedoms” (Dağı 2005: 28). The VP was shut down by the Constitutional Court.

Despite the state’s backlash against RP and VP, the next decade in Turkish politics saw some major changes take place that reflect a transition in the realm of Kemalist ideals and

politics. The Kemalist state was forced to accommodate a) the recognition of a Kurdish ethnic minority, and b) a new government that calls on closer connections between Islam and politics. As a result of a number of both domestic and international pressures, the Turkish state has had to make some major changes to its laws, including its constitution and penal codes. Although still restricted, and somewhat reluctantly, new political spaces have opened in Turkish public spaces for some discussion around Islam and politics, and minority rights of ethnic groups.

These changes can be attributed to a number of reasons. One major factor has been the popularity of the governing AKP, whose roots undoubtedly belong to the previous Islam-based movements in Turkey, sharing many of the same predominant figures, politicians and activists. Formed in 2001, the AKP came to power in 2002 garnering 34% of the national vote, and 46.6% of the vote in 2007. In the local elections in 2004, the party won 42% of valid votes. These are outstanding figures in Turkish politics. The 2002 election represents a historical break in terms of providing to a socially Muslim party an opportunity to restructure the political landscape and expand the public sphere (Yavuz 2003: 256). Among the 18 parties that competed for seats in Parliament, only two won seats because a party is required to obtain 10 percent of the nationwide vote to be able to send representatives to Parliament (Yavuz 2003: 256). The AKP obviously came in first, with the CHP (Republican Peoples' Party) obtaining 19.4 percent of votes. Some independent candidates won other nine seats (Yavuz 2003: 256).

The success of the AKP reflects some important points. Firstly, it shows that Islam continues to be important to a large enough Turkish population who chose to vote for a party that has its roots in Turkey's Islamist history. Secondly, the AKP's distance from the Islamist parties it comes from reflects a shift in political Islam in Turkey. Many commentators call this shift into one of post-Islamism, which can be described as the evolution of Islamist ideology into the practice and belief that liberal democracy can be reconciled with Islam (Eteraz 2007). Post-Islamism, thus, is the recognition that while "religion may provide salvation in the next life, politics is what provides for welfare in this one" (Eteraz 2007). This is reflected in the ideologies and practices of the AKP. The

AKP's religious ideals mainly relate to value and identity, rather than Islamic law. Ethnic and religious identities, for the AKP are co-determinant (Yavuz 2003: 260). Their nationalism is not a state-driven, secularist ethnolinguistic one, but rather an ethnoreligious and society-centric nationalism (Yavuz 2003: 260).

In the transformation of the Islamic movement in general, and the electoral victory of the AKP in particular, a 'new' urban class that had been previously excluded politically has gained influence. The excluded segment of the population utilized Islamic idioms and networks to overcome their exclusion. Thus Islamic networks both facilitated this group's integration into modern opportunity spaces and offered it a hope for social mobilisation (Yavuz 2003: 257). As Yavuz states:

Sociologically, the AKP engages people of very diverse backgrounds, from teachers, policemen, vendors, traders, and new Muslim intellectuals to humble shopkeepers and businessmen. The AKP, however, was only formed in August 2001. Thus it was not so much the AKP that utilized traditional solidarity networks in neighbourhoods to mobilize voters; rather, these religiously inspired networks mobilized themselves to redefine the political center of Turkish politics in terms of their values. In short, this is a bottom-up political change in which civil society wants to expand the boundaries of the public sphere and make the political institutions representative of the people rather than of the official state establishment (Yavuz 2003: 257).

Since gaining power in government, the AKP has enforced a number of policies that have contributed to the democratisation of Turkey. The exclusion of 'conflicting' identities from mainstream political arenas and state policies and actions used to repress dissent in relation to this, has, as mentioned earlier, been a hindrance to the Kemalist ambition to create a modern nation-state that would achieve the utmost levels of progress. These policies and practices have become detrimental to Turkish democracy. Since the AKP has come to power however, some major reforms have taken place, including the adoption of a new Penal Code that revised the highly contentious Anti-Terror Law and abolished the State Security Courts. The AKP has also changed the composition and the role of the

military-dominated National Security Council (NSC), which once set the boundaries of policy making. The NSC is now confined to only making recommendations. The Party has an increased discussion of human rights, outlined in the Party Program. Furthermore, the government abolished the death penalty in 2002.

Very importantly, the AKP has assisted in the shifting of the boundaries of accepted Turkish identity. Although these are minor changes, they are highly significant as for the first time in the history of the Republic, there has been a recognition of ‘conflicting’ identities in public discourse (including government and media). For example, there is a new official recognition of the Kurdish ethnic minority. This recognition can be seen in political discourse, media and education. Politicians have more openly discussed the Kurdish problem, or ‘Kürt sorunu’, Kurdish music with Kurdish lyrics has broadcast on Turkish radios and television. Furthermore, Kurds now have the right to broadcast Kurdish television shows on private channels. In terms of education, the Kurdish language can be taught in private schools.

The AKP has also focused some new attention on Turkey’s Alevi minority, providing state funding for Alevi community groups and their worship centres (*cemevleri*). In the past, the Turkish state has withheld funding to Alevi groups and has not listed them as a separate religious sect by the Directorate of Religious Affairs. Furthermore, Alevi groups have generally supported the more secular parties, fearing oppression and further exclusion under an exclusively Sunni-representative government. For the first time however, three Alevi representatives were elected into parliament in the 22 July, 2007 elections (Alpay 2007). Furthermore, during that election campaign, the Prime Minister and President (both from AKP government) visited Alevi clerics and shrines (Alpay 2007). As Alpay discusses,

There are signs that Alevis, for the first time ever, have in significant numbers voted in favor of the AKP in this election. The AKP, by displaying sensitivity to the grievances and demands of citizens of Kurdish origin, has succeeded to become the party of choice for Turkey’s Kurds in the recent elections. It is now conceivable that the

AKP may eventually become the main party of the Alevis, too, if it succeeds in addressing their grievances and demands. (Alpay 2007)

## **Conclusion**

This paper has tried to discuss and argue that Turkish identity and political Islam are changing. Through a discussion of Turkish identity, the importance of Islam to Turkishness has been highlighted. At the same time however, the complexity of the relationship between the two has also been discussed. As a result of a number of factors, new spaces have opened in mainstream political arenas in the country, that have allowed for discourse relating to previously excluded issues. These include Kurdish claims to identity rights and to a large extent, Islamic political identity. Although heavy state restrictions remain in place, some leniency has been granted. This leniency has taken place as a result of pressures from both within the government and the population, whose votes reflect a support for change. The AKP in particular, has proven to be incredibly popular among the Turkish population. Their policies have contributed to the democratisation of the country and its political system, more than any other political party. Seemingly, the religiously oriented political party in Turkey, has proven to be more progressive than the secular ones.

Although such progress has been made, it is important to note that there is still a long way to go in terms of identity rights for minority groups in Turkey. Clashes between military forces and Kurdish activists in the South East continue to take place and destabilize the country. Furthermore, the Turkish population continues to be suspicious of the AKP and its policies, with fears of a hidden Islamist agenda.

Despite this, I believe that Heper's (1997) optimistic outlook for the consolidation of democracy in Turkey has seemingly proven to be true. Turkey is in transition- the boundaries of its national identity are shifting, and its Islamic political identity has transformed. It is interesting to wonder what Atatürk would think.

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