

Postsecularity *Alla Turca*: Religious and Secular Citizens in Contemporary Turkey

Ateş Altınordu

In what may be one of the most influential scholarly articles written on Turkey, Şerif Mardin argues that the key to understanding Turkish politics lies in the relationship between the center and the periphery.¹ According to Mardin, under the Ottoman Empire, Islam provided the major link between the imperial center and the Muslim subjects, and political authority legitimized itself as the protector of the Muslim realm. With the radical secularizing reforms of the Turkish Republic in the 1920s and 1930s, this tie was largely severed, and Islam became the idiom of the peripheral masses against the culturally alien—that is, secular and Westernized—central bureaucracy which imposed reforms on the former from above.

Taking this perspective beyond the foundational decades of the Republic, Mardin argues that the same dynamic explains the mass appeal of conservative populism in the 1950s and the response of the military with the coup of 1960 which restored the privileges of the secular center. Since Mardin's influential essay appeared in *Daedalus* 1973, many students of Turkish politics have interpreted further interactions between secular and religious actors as variations on this theme of an asymmetrical struggle between the urban, educated, Westernized secular center, with its political power base in the military, judicial, and civil bureaucracies, and the pious periphery of the countryside, small towns, and migrant neighborhoods in urban areas for whom Islam provides a deeply entrenched ethos and who find their political representation in conservative and religious parties.

The picture presented by the Gezi Park protests in summer 2013, the most significant wave of popular protest in recent Turkish history, is difficult to reconcile with this configuration of the center-periphery model. The protesters were largely urban, educated, and secular, and the target of their criticism was the increasingly authoritarian policies of the AKP, the Islamic party that has established itself as the hegemonic force in Turkish politics in the course of its three consecutive terms in government. It seemed that Islamic actors now firmly occupied the center, and secular citizens, no longer having recourse to their traditional strongholds in the military and the high judiciary, resorted to street protest in defense of their freedoms. Can it be, then, that center-periphery relations still offer the key to Turkish politics, but with the important qualification that the former occupants of the center and the periphery have reversed places?

A closer look at the composition and discourses of the Gezi protesters reveals that interactions between religious and secular actors in contemporary Turkey are more complex than can be captured with the center-periphery trope. To start with, while the protesters overwhelmingly came from the secular sectors of society, there were significant Muslim voices within the Gezi Park protests from the very beginning. Moreover, a large portion of the secular participants not only *could* no longer turn to the

¹ Şerif Mardin, 'Center-Periphery Relations: A Key to Turkish Politics?' *Daedalus*, 102:1 (1973), pp. 169-90.

politically subdued military for support, but also did not *want* the military to be involved in the political process, as they considered such intervention to be undemocratic as a matter of principle. Finally, secular protesters approached the religious practices of pious citizens with careful respect, as revealed in their decision not to consume alcohol on the premises of the Gezi Park on the day of the *Miraç Kandili*, a Muslim holy night.

If the center-periphery model is no longer viable as a key to understanding the interactions between religious and secular actors in Turkish society, how can we make sense of the recent transformations in this country? Postsecular society, a concept increasingly central to discussions of religion and secularism in democratic societies, may allow us to better capture novel aspects of the Turkish case. Unfortunately, existing applications of the concept to this case have been rather cursory, with analysts jumping to quick conclusions about the evolution of Turkish society towards the postsecular. I will use this concept in a critical manner, underlining not only the complex ways in which religious and secular citizens coexist and interact with each other in the public realm, but also the serious obstacles against the formation of a postsecular society in Turkey. To examine religion and secularism in Turkey from this perspective, I will first track the tectonic shifts in the political power constellation since the 1990s, and then evaluate changing relations between religious and secular citizens against this political context.

The political interactions of religious-political actors with secularist state institutions in the 1990s can be seen as a struggle between a peripheral political movement on the rise and a center seeking to stem this tide by resorting to extra-electoral methods. Conditions for the electoral rise of political Islam had been in the making since the early 1980s. In the aftermath of the coup of 1980, the military policy of promoting religious nationalism as a safeguard against the left helped build an extensive infrastructure of mosques and religious schools and provided a tolerant political environment for the activities of religious brotherhoods. In the meanwhile, the liberalization of the Turkish economy throughout the 1980s and the early 1990s allowed the rise of a Muslim capitalist class whose relative economic power improved vis-à-vis the old capitalist class dependent on the state. The repression of religious actors and practices by secularist state institutions—most importantly, the ban on wearing headscarves in universities—gave rise to significant grievances in religious-conservative constituencies, making them prone to religious-political mobilization. Finally, the deep disillusionment of Turkish voters with existing parties in the mid-1990s, a period characterized by pervasive corruption, economic crisis, and violent conflicts with the Kurdistan Workers' Party in southeastern Turkey, created a political vacuum.

Making use of these favorable conditions, Necmettin Erbakan's Welfare Party first scored a striking success in the local elections of 1994 and then won the plurality of votes in the parliamentary elections of 1995. However, in what came to be known as "the February 28 process," a secularist alliance led by the military toppled the Welfare-led coalition government, followed by the dissolution of the party by the Constitutional Court in 1998 on grounds that it endangered the secular regime. The Virtue Party, the successor of the Welfare, was similarly banned by the Court in 2001. While political Islam had gained the support of a considerable section of the electorate, secularist state institutions—most importantly the military and the high judiciary—managed to contain it for the time being through extra-electoral measures. In this process, secularist state actors

enjoyed the support of the mainstream media, big business, and secularist civil society organizations.

The ensuing developments significantly changed this political constellation. Tayyip Erdoğan, the popular ex-mayor of Istanbul convicted by secularist courts in 1998, emerged from the prison as the leader of the AKP, a new party founded by the reformist wing of the banned Virtue. Following its victory in the elections of 2002, the AKP government carefully sought to avoid confrontation with secularist state elites in order to preempt a military intervention or a judicial dissolution. Erdoğan and other AKP leaders de-emphasized the role of Islam in the party's identity—its ideological orientation was dubbed “conservative democracy”—, adopted a positive stance towards the symbols of the republican regime, and consistently pursued a policy in favor of Turkey's accession to the European Union. Not incidentally, the “harmonization packages” passed in the parliament between January 2003 and July 2004 to further the EU accession process entailed curtailing of the military's capacity to intervene in domestic politics. While skeptical of these reforms, the military did not openly oppose them in order not to be perceived as an obstacle against Turkey's membership to the EU.

While AKP leaders in general managed the party's relations with secularist state institutions skillfully, the perhaps inevitable final conflict occurred during the presidential election of 2007. In a “secularist backlash” reminiscent of the late 1990s, the military and the Constitutional Court worked in cooperation with the Republican People's Party and secularist civil society organizations to prevent the election of Abdullah Gül, the AKP candidate, to presidency. The AKP responded by calling for early general elections, and succeeded in electing Gül president following its landslide victory. In the last-ditch effort of the secularist bloc to contain the political hegemony of the AKP, the chief public prosecutor filed a case with the Constitutional Court in seeking the dissolution of the party; this attempt failed when the Court declared its decision not to ban the AKP in July 2008.

The period following the elections of 2007 was characterized by the political pacification of the Turkish military and the restructuring of the high judiciary, resulting in the elimination of the main sources of bureaucratic opposition to the AKP. Two major lawsuits, dubbed *Ergenekon* and *Balyoz*, resulted in the arrest and sentencing of hundreds of former and active duty military officers for conspiracy against the government, including three former top commanders and a former chief of general staff. The constitutional amendments adopted in a referendum in September 2010 changed the compositions of the Constitutional Court and the High Council of Judges and Prosecutors (HSYK), allowing the appointment of judges that are favorably disposed towards the AKP. Throughout these initiatives, the party benefited from the open support of the Gülen movement, a powerful religious network which controls a number of influential media organs and is said to have strategically placed members within the police force and the judiciary.

Once the resistance of the secularist bureaucracy against Islamic political actors was conclusively eliminated, however, this alliance quickly gave way to a naked struggle for power between the party and the movement. The point of no return in the souring of relations came in February 2012, when a public prosecutor reputed to be a member of the Gülen movement sought to question Hakan Fidan, the chief of intelligence and a close confidant of the prime minister. The AKP responded in March 2013 with a legislative

proposal to shut down prep schools for university entrance exams, a crucial financial and recruitment source for the Gülen movement. The feud reached a peak on December 17, when the sons of three cabinet ministers and several businessmen close to the AKP were detained in a corruption investigation allegedly led by Gülenist public prosecutors. This was followed by leaks of recorded phone conversations which implicated Erdoğan and several of his ministers in serious cases of corruption.

The period leading to the local elections of March 2014 saw a no-holds-barred conflict with between the AKP and the Gülen movement, each camp pitting its newspapers, television stations, news agencies, think tanks, and business associations against the other. The prime minister accused the Gülenists of having established a “parallel structure” within the state, and the government has already purged thousands of police officers and hundreds of judges and prosecutors it believed to be under the influence of the movement. Fethullah Gülen, the Muslim cleric who leads the movement from his residence in Pennsylvania, issued a curse on those responsible for the purge, while the prime minister signaled an impending legal witch hunt against the Gülenists within the country.

What does this political picture suggest for the prospects of postsecularity in Turkey? Existing analyses of contemporary Turkish society that utilize this concept are too eager to identify the manifestations of the postsecular and insufficiently mindful of the significant crosscurrents. A recent study presents the increased visibility of Muslim agency in the public sphere as a challenge against the secularist hegemony in Turkey, which, it assumes, brings Turkey closer to postsecularity,² while another author characterizes the AKP as the midwife of a postsecular society ‘bridging ... different sectors of Turkish society: Kemalist and Islamists, Kurds and Turks, Turks and Armenians, Sunnis and Alevis, Muslims and other religious minorities.’³ If we are not to use the term in a one-sided, uncritical manner, then we have to clearly define the characteristics of the postsecular society and include the obstacles against its realization in our analysis.

First, postsecularity does not merely refer to the empirical fact of the coexistence of religious and secular voices in the public sphere, but also to a normative commitment to this pluralism on the part of both religious and secular citizens.⁴ Secondly, as Rosati and Stoeckl emphasize, ‘a postsecular society is not a de-secularized society.’⁵ In a postsecular society, religious authority and political authority are separated, civil society has autonomy from both, and state-imposed religious monopoly is rejected. Finally, religious and secular citizens in a postsecular society not only coexist in the public realm, but also participate in a complementary learning process.⁶

² Uğur Kömeçoğlu, ‘Multifaceted or Fragmented Public Spheres in Turkey and Iran’ in Massimo Rosati and Kristina Stoeckl (eds.), *Multiple Modernities and Postsecular Societies* (Ashgate, Surrey, 2012), pp. 41-60.

³ Massimo Rosati, ‘The Turkish Laboratory: Local Modernity and the Postsecular in Turkey’ in *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁴ Jürgen Habermas, ‘Notes on Post-Secular Society’, *New Perspectives Quarterly*, 25 (2008), pp. 17-29.

⁵ Massimo Rosati and Kristina Stoeckl, ‘Introduction’ in Rosati and Stoeckl (eds.), *Multiple Modernities and Postsecular Societies*, p. 4.

⁶ Jürgen Habermas, ‘Religion in the Public Sphere’, *European Journal of Philosophy*, 14 (2006), pp. 1-25.

Judging by these criteria, the Gezi Park protests presented important manifestations of a postsecular orientation in contemporary Turkey. While Kemalists largely continue to hold on to a militant secularism informed by positivist assumptions, a self-conception as the representatives of progress against the forces of reaction, and a deep distrust of the masses, many other secular participants in the Gezi protests formed a different relationship with religious actors. Within the confines of the park, anarchists, revolutionary Marxists, and LGBTQI activists peacefully coexisted with pious groups holding Friday prayers. As discussed earlier, secular protesters honored the observance of *Miraç Kandili*, not only voluntarily giving up drinking alcohol on the park for the day—despite the fact that they condemned government restrictions on the public consumption of alcohol in their protests—but also by helping distribute the traditional *kandil* bagels in the park. Some religious groups such as the Anti-Capitalist Muslims worked in cooperation with secular associations to organize the demonstrations, while women’s rights activists, religious and secular, marched together to condemn recent assaults on women with headscarves. Prominent members of MazlumDer, a Muslim human rights organization, issued a public declaration in support of Gezi protesters, making a plea to pious citizens in Turkey: “The fact that we have been oppressed in the past does not require that we become oppressors or support oppressors now.”

While the reality of the Gezi Park thus largely represented the ideals of a postsecular society, Erdoğan’s public speeches throughout the protests deliberately sought to reinforce the religious-secular cleavage in Turkish society. Referring to the use of a mosque as a makeshift infirmary by protesters affected by tear gas, Erdoğan repeatedly claimed that the protesters desecrated this sanctuary by drinking alcohol in the mosque. The prime minister also recounted the story of a woman violently attacked by the protesters for wearing a headscarf, although the incident could not be confirmed. Erdoğan has since recurrently invoked the theme of a religious majority oppressed by the secular elite—a formula that has brought him success throughout his political career—to consolidate his conservative support base. Judging on the results of the local elections of March 2014, he seems to have succeeded in this effort to a large extent.

Beyond the political discourse of the AKP leadership, there are also structural obstacles against religious pluralism in Turkey. The Directorate of Religious Affairs, a state agency supporting a vast religious infrastructure of mosques and religious personnel, reinforces the hegemony of Sunni Islam in the country. Thus, while the constitution defines Turkey as a secular state, it would not be a stretch to talk about the existence of *de facto* establishment in Turkey. This picture is confirmed by the fact that the Turkish state has consistently failed to meet the demands for parity by the Alevis, the largest non-Sunni Muslim group in Turkey.

The increasing religious-conservative hegemony in Turkey can be observed in many arenas. The widely discussed research report of Binnaz Toprak and her associates published in 2009 showed that Alevis, non-Muslim minorities, and individuals with non-conservative lifestyles regularly experienced discrimination in employment, housing, and business interactions.⁷ A survey conducted by Yılmaz Esmer in 2009 revealed that 75% of the Turkish people did not want atheists, 67% did not want cohabiting couples, 64%

⁷ Binnaz Toprak, with İrfan Bozan, Tan Morgül, and Nedim Şener, *Being Different in Turkey: Religion, Conservatism and Otherization* (Boğaziçi University, Open Society Foundation, Istanbul, 2009).

did not want Jews, and 52% did not want Christians as neighbors.⁸ In 2013, two atheist public figures, a composer/pianist and an author, have been convicted by the courts for “publicly insulting religious values.”

Thus, despite some promising recent developments, the Turkish setting is characterized by serious obstacles against the construction of a postsecular society. Ironically, despite three consecutive terms in government and an unprecedented concentration of political power, Erdoğan continues to derive political capital from depicting himself and the AKP as the representatives of a religious periphery that is being oppressed by a secularist center. Thus, while the center-periphery model has offered crucial insights about Turkish politics until the turn of the century, approaching the relationship between religious and political actors with these categories today would not only be counterproductive but also risk serving an ideological purpose. While not exactly an analytical alternative, the concept of the postsecular is more attuned to the interactions between religious and secular citizens in the contemporary world, and if used from a critical perspective, might provide us with a normative yardstick against which we can measure our progress towards a new ethics of citizenship.

Ateş Altınordu is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Sabancı University, Istanbul. His work focuses on religion and politics, secularism, and political parties. Altınordu’s doctoral dissertation analyzed German political Catholicism (1848-1914) and Turkish political Islam (1970-2010) in comparative perspective. He is currently engaged in a research project on religion and science in Turkey. Altınordu's articles have been published in the *Annual Review of Sociology, Politics and Society*, and *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*.

⁸ ‘4 kişiden 3’ü İçki İçen Komşu İstemiyor’, *Milliyet*, 31.05.2009.