From separation between state and religion to religion-freeing state: the changing faces of secularism in Turkey

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Abstract

From the very beginning, the establishment of modern Turkey adhered to the secularisation process, namely to separate the state from religious influence. Although religion has been marginalised, Islam remained a major societal force in Turkey. This scenario raises some questions: What is the idea of Turkish secularism? How can religion possess influence in the context of Turkey as a secular state? What is the form and orientation of secularism in Turkey? Therefore, this study aims to answer these questions by scrutinising the idea, history, and orientation of secularism in Turkey. To fulfil this objective, we scrutinised documents and previous studies related to Turkish secularism. Then, the idea of Turkish secularism was

critically and chronologically analysed from the early time it was implemented up to the present time to assume its orientation. In the early time, Turkish secularism did not solely separate the state from religion, but perceived that the state should control religion as well. Its assertive nature has forced the emergence of a more liberal version of secularism, which treats the idea of separation between the state and religion according to the notion of democracy, and hence, freed religion from the strict, tutelary state. Secularism in Turkey under the present regime is different from before, as religious (Islamic) manifestation is increasingly visible in public spaces even though the state remains secular. We argue that the present Turkish secularism can become a "model" for other Muslim countries that are still dealing with the conflict regarding the religion-state relationship.

Sejak awal pembentukan Turki modern menganut proses sekularisasi, yakni memisahkan negara dari pengaruh agama. Meskipun agama telah terpinggirkan, Islam tetap menjadi kekuatan sosial utama di Turki. Skenario ini menimbulkan beberapa pertanyaan: Apa gagasan sekularisme Turki? Bagaimana agama tetap memiliki pengaruh dalam konteks Turki sebagai negara sekuler? Bagaimana bentuk dan orientasi sekularisme di Turki? Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menjawab pertanyaan tersebut dengan mencermati gagasan, sejarah, dan orientasi sekularisme di Turki. Untuk memenuhi tujuan ini, kami meneliti dokumen dan studi sebelumnya yang berkaitan dengan sekularisme Turki. Kemudian, gagasan sekularisme Turki dianalisis secara kritis dan kronologis sejak awal diimplementasikan hingga saat ini untuk mengambil orientasinya. Pada awalnya, sekularisme Turki tidak semata-mata memisahkan negara dari agama, tetapi memandang bahwa negara juga harus mengontrol agama. Sifat asertifnya telah memaksa munculnya versi sekularisme yang lebih liberal yang memperlakukan gagasan pemisahan antara negara dan agama menurut gagasan demokrasi, dan karenanya, membebaskan agama dari pengawasan negara yang ketat. Sekularisme di Turki pada rezim sekarang berbeda dengan sebelumnya, karena manifestasi agama (Islam) semakin terlihat di ruang publik meskipun negara tetap sekuler. Kami berpendapat bahwa sekularisme Turki saat ini dapat menjadi "model" bagi beberapa negara Muslim lainnya yang masih berkutat dengan konflik hubungan agama-negara.

Keywords: *Turkish secularism*; *Public space*; *Islam*; *Kemalists*; *AKP*

Introduction

Secularism is a broad concept that comprises of religious, social, political, and philosophical dimensions. Secularism initially emerged in the Western world due to conflicts that arose between intellectuals and churches. These conflicts have created a new discourse among the members of European society; it was more grounded in rational and scientific thoughts and rejected religious interference in worldly matters.

Although secularism initially emerged in the West, its phenomenon has spread to the Islamic world, wherein secularism has led to contentions due to two factors. First, the Islamic world has gone through a long experience of being under political regimes, from Umayyad to Ottoman, which made religion the main source of reference in Muslims' administration. Second, Islam as a religion itself, integrates spiritual and worldly matters, individuals, and society as well as religion and state. For Muslims, Islam is not merely a religion in a sense of ritual and worship but a system of life. Thus, the separation of religion from interfering in political and worldly affairs is generally foreign to Muslims.

The Republic of Turkey was established during the nation states era, specifically after the abolishment of Ottoman Sultanate in 1922. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the man responsible for establishing the republic a year after, envisaged the modern state of Turkey with a distinct identity from its predecessor. During his reign (1923-1938), Atatürk tried to build a modern Turkey with secular, Western, and democratic identities. He used Western countries as a reference for his mission to build a modern state and simultaneously marginalised Islam and Ottoman heritage from playing their roles in society, especially in political affairs.[1] He considered religion

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[1] Mohammad Redzuan Othman and Mashitah Sulaiman, *Sekularisme dan Proses Demokrasi di Turki: Pemerkasaan Islam dan Kepimpinan Erdogan*, Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Universiti Malaya, 2015, 36-43.

a burden that hindered the Turkish people from developing into a modern nation. Thus, Islam had to be rejected at all costs to ensure that Turkey may achieve progress and modernity similar to Western countries. Atatürk's sceptic view towards religion was an aftermath of his experience of seeing Ottoman's downfall at the end of the empire's reign. For him, Islam was the main factor in the Ottoman's decline since the former was the major force behind the latter in terms of political, legislation, education, and administration aspects. This premise then became the main reason for Atatürk to marginalise any elements related to Islam by declaring Turkey as a secularised state.[2]

Although religion was marginalised by Atatürk and the Kemalist regime in the name of secularisation throughout the building process of the modern Turkey, religion, i.e. Islam, to date undoubtedly remains a major force among Turkish people. Islam has played a significant role for a long period of time in shaping Turkish identity in terms of belief, practicality, and morality. From here, some questions should be addressed: What is the idea of secularism in Turkey? To what degree has secularism been adopted in Turkey? How can religion remain to possess influence in the context of the secular state of Turkey? What is the form and orientation of secularism in Turkey? Therefore, this paper aims to answer these questions by scrutinising the idea, degree, and orientation of secularism in Turkey.

Unlike existing literature on Turkish secularism, the present study argues that secularism in Turkey has been portrayed according to different faces and orientations throughout its development. In the beginning, Kemalists have presented secularism as *a worldview* to replace religion as a whole. Later, its orientation was changed by limiting the role of religion in operating in administrative and social realms. This development was

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[2]Mohd. Noor bin Haji Manutty, "A Critical Analysis on Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's Reformism: The Experience of Turkey", *Islāmiyyāt*, Volume 4 (1982), 21.

followed by a narrative proposed by former Islamists, who tried to reconcile between secularism and the principles of democracy, which then opened a space for religion in practical realm.

Structurally, this paper will first explain the process of the establishment of modern Turkey to understand its relationship with the adoption of secularism by the early regime. Then, it scrutinises the idea of Kemalist secularism, i.e., a version of secularism that has been considered an "official state belief" as it was proposed by Atatürk himself. Later on, the present paper will describe the relation between secularism and Islam in Turkey, and how the implementation of the former has been readjusted by giving a role for the latter. Next, it will analyse some crises of secularism in Turkey before going to an in-depth discussion on "another version" of secularism in Turkey which treated liberal values as a precondition for the implementation of secularism.

The modern Turkish State and secularism

The Republic of Turkey, or the modern Turkish state, was officially established on 23rd October 1923, just after the Ottoman Sultanate was abolished by parliament under the leadership of Atatürk. The declaration of the modern Turkish state was followed by reformation and modernisation throughout the nation-building process. In general, the secular Turkish nation-building process involved three main projects, namely secularisation, westernisation, and Turkification. Secularisation was a process undertaken by the Atatürk regime in order to make Turkey a state that separates political and religious affairs. Westernisation refers to the process in which the Atatürk regime tried to portray Turkey as a part of the progressive Western civilisation by adopting several Western models in administration. Turkification on the hand was a project set to spread the understanding of Turkic sentiment as an identity reference for the Turkish nation.

In the process of nation-building, Atatürk focused on a comprehensive secularisation process that covered both the national and societal levels. In the early stages of the nation-building process, Turkey was not immediately made a state with a secular identity. In the first Turkish Constitution that was enacted on March 3rd 1924, Islam was made the official religion of Turkey.[3] However, on April 10th 1928, Atatürk abolished the status of Islam as the official state religion. This action was followed by a constitutional amendment made on February 5th 1937, which made secularism the official ideology of the republic,[4] officially making Turkey a secular state.

Simultaneously, social secularisation was undertaken along with state secularisation. Social secularisation led to the separation of religion from all matters of social life.[5] In order to build a secular society, the Atatürk regime paid special attention to education as the main medium in shaping the way people think. On March 3rd 1924, the Turkish parliament passed the Law of Unification of Education, coinciding with the absolute abolishment of the Ottoman Empire. This law aimed to unify education in Turkey into a secular, educational system under the Ministry of National Education.[6] The unification of education caused religious schools (*medrese*) to shut down and not operate due to the standardisation of the academic syllabus, which did not emphasise religious education.[7] The new syllabus in schools

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[3]See Article 2, Turkish Constitution 1924 in Edward Mead Earle, "The New Constitution of Turkey", *Political Science Quarterly*, Volume 40, Number 1 (1925): 89-100. However, from the administrative practice, Turkey at that time could already be considered as a secular state as religion was no longer played a role in the administration.

[4]Aslı Topukcu, "The Processes and the Principles of Constitutional Design in Turkey: Historical and Legal Perspective", Paperwork, World Congress of Constitutional Law 2014, Oslo, Norway, 16-20 June 2014, 5.

[5]Bahadır Çelebi, "The Failure of Assertive Secularization Project in Turkey", *Turkish Journal Politics*, Volume 2, Number 1 (2011), 92.

[6]Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey*, Montreal: McGill University Press, 1964, 461.

[7]Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor and Muhammad Khalis Ibrahim, "Conflicts of Religious Education in a Secular State: A Study on Turkey's Imam-Hatip School", *Qudus International*

has marginalised religious aspects by replacing them with a more rational and scientific form of thinking as the main methodology of study.[8]

Atatürk's secularisation was also accompanied by the westernisation process, i.e., a process to make Turkey a state with a Western image. Atatürk's interest towards westernisation in building the Turkish nation was influenced by his experience of living in a time when European power was at its peak, while the Islamic world was in decline.[9] This process was carried out in both ideological and practical dimensions. In an ideological dimension, the westernisation process can be seen through the emphasised doctrine of Western superiority. Based on this doctrine, the Western world was perceived as a great civilisation and should be treated as an example to ensure that the Turkish nation can become developed and civilised. Basically, the westernisation and secularisation processes were interrelated. This can be seen, for example in education, in which the secular education implemented in Turkey was inspired by European education. In fact, Atatürk's westernisation process itself was secular, as it described religion, Islam, as the cause of the Ottoman Empire's decline.[10] As a result, Islam has been marginalised to make Turkey a state functioning on par with Western nations.

Whereas in the practical dimension, the westernisation process occurred through the formation of a national legal system adopted from several Western laws, namely the Swiss Civil Code, the Italian Criminal

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Journal of Islamic Studies, Volume 8, Number 1 (2020), 110-111.

[8]Suna Kili, "Kemalism in Contemporary Turkey", *International Political Science Review*, Volume 1, Number 3 (1980), 384-385.

[9]Atatürk's admiration towards West was the result of his reading on the works of European philosophers such as Rosseau, Voltaire, Auguste Comte, and John Stuart Mill, as well as saw for himself the progress of the West while living in Bulgaria. See Pauline Lim Meng Juak, *Kemal Ataturk and the building of Modern Turkish Civilization*, Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 2004, 21-23.

[10]Ayşe Kadioğlu, "Republican Epistemology and Islamic Discourses in Turkey in the 1990s", *The Muslim World*, Volume 88, Number 1 (1998), 9.

Code, and the German Commercial Code.[11] The implementation of West-inspired laws was aimed to replace the sharia law inherited from the Ottoman Empire. Besides the adoption of general law, Atatürk's westernisation process also affected the social system in Turkey. For example, civil marriage was gazetted as mandatory for all, in which any marriage that only followed Islamic tradition was not recognised by the official state registry. In addition, the Western lifestyle was encouraged by the state and has been portrayed as an advanced and civilised way of life, contrary to the traditional Islamic lifestyle which has been treated as backwards and uncivilised.[12]

Along with secularisation and westernisation processes, the Turkification process was also implemented; it was intended to create a sense of pride among Turkish people towards their Turkic identity. It served as a symbol of identity for the Turkish nation based on the Turkic sentiment to replace religious identity based on Islam. Hence, all elements related to Islamic values have been replaced with Turkic sentiments. For example, beginning on November 1st 1928, the Turkish government at the time obligated the use of Latin script in lieu of that of Arabic, a form of writing that related closely to Ottoman and Islam. The Islamic call to prayer (*adhan*) was directed to be delivered in Turkish, not in Arabic.[13] To further strengthen the proud sense of Turkic identity among its people, efforts to rewrite history for the Turks were made. Students at all levels taught were the history of the Turkish lineage according to Hitte and Hun ancestry. As a result, the newer generation of Turks was no longer proud of their identity which also came from the Seljuk and Ottoman ancestors.[14]

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[11]Ihsan Yilmaz, "Secular Law and the Emergence of Unofficial Turkish Islamic Law", *Middle East Journal*, Volume 56, Number 1 (2002), 118.

[12]Redzuan and Mashitah, *Sekularisme dan Proses Demokrasi di Turki...*, 40-41.

[13]Redzuan and Mashitah, *Sekularisme dan Proses Demokrasi di Turki...*, 38-40.

[14]Mashitah Sulaiman, "Islam dan Pembinaan Peradaban Turki Moden Melalui Proses

Kemalist secularism as an official state belief

Secularism as an ideological framework has shaped the social discourse in Turkey. By referring to the state ideology, Turkey is indeed a secular state, in which, its secular nature is clearly stated in the state's constitution.[15] In fact, after almost 100 years since the founding of the modern Turkish state, the Turkish people can accept the implementation of secularism despite the on-going conflict over how secularism is supposed to be implemented.[16]

As the man responsible for establishing the modern Turkish state, Atatürk's idea of secularism has been admitted as a legitimate ideology or "belief." Atatürk's view of secularism was loyally supported by Kemalists, staunch advocates of his ideas. Later, Kemalists have further developed Atatürk's secularism discourse to become an "official state belief," which can be denoted as "Kemalist secularism." Kemalists often described secularism as an agent of progress for the Turkish nation. This view has led to the comprehensive implementation of secularism in every aspect of life, in which, religion was considered an obstacle to development and modernisation.[17] However, this does not explain the application of Kemalist secularism as there are several forms of secularism either *Anglo-Saxon*, French, or Soviet version. Conflicts and debates over secularism in Turkey were due to the lack of clarity on what form of secularism should be executed, and to what extent secularism should be implemented.[18] Thus, it is important to clarify the principles of the Kemalist version of secularism in order to evaluate the form of secularism that has been

Politik", Master Dissertation, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya, 2004, 34.

[15]See Article 2, the latest Turkish Contitution.

[16]Recep Sentürk, "State and Religion in Turkey: Which Secularism?", in Michael Heng Siam-Heng and Ten Chin Liew (eds.), *State and Secularism: Perspectives from Asia*, Singapore: Wold Scientific Publishing, 2010, 320.

[17]Mohd. Noor, "A Critical Analysis on Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's Reformism"..., 22.

[18]Amélie Barras, "A Right-Based Discourse to Contest the Boundaries of State Secularism? The Case of the Headscarf Bans in France and Turkey", *Democratization*, Volume 16, Number 6 (2009), 1241.

implemented in Turkey as the national ideology.

In general, Kemalist secularism was an assertive idea in terms of its interpretation by emphasising the notion of rejecting religion rather than freeing religion. In this case, it was similar to the French version of secularism, i.e., *laïcité*. According to Anne-Cécile Robert and Henri Peña-Ruiz, *laïcité* treats every single individual on an equal footing to ensure that no one is discriminated due to their inclinations and preferences in religions, belief, etc.[19] *Laïcité* is ideally a neutral principle as it advocates equality and guarantees the freedom of private space to all. This aspect of universalism is the core principle of *laïcité*, in which the state is supposed to build a homogeneous society and provide equal rights to all.

Secularism in Turkey is more commonly known as *laiklik*, derived from the word "*lai*," taken from the Greek word "*laos*," which means "people."[20] During the Ottoman era, religious scholars (*ulama'*) were given power and authority in state administration, especially as sultans' advisers in religious affairs. Oppositely, religious scholars were not given authority in the republican era, which made them no longer relevant because their role had been replaced by political bureaucrats. This explains the logic of Turkish secularism being named *laiklik* rather than *sekülarizm* or *sekülarleşme* by considering that *laiklik* is derived from the word *lai*, i.e., people.[21] In practice, Turkish secularism or *laiklik* operates to fulfil two main aims, namely, to distance the State from any religious influence and to give freedom to the people from the influence of religious authority.

According to Ufuk Ulutas, secularism and any form of laicism, including that which has been practiced in Turkey, have differences in both

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[19]Anne-Cécile Robert and Henri Peña-Ruiz, "State and Secularism, the French Laïcité System", in Michael Heng Siam-Heng and Ten Chin Liew (eds.), *State and Secularism: Perspectives from Asia*, Singapore: Wold Scientific Publishing, 2010, 123.

[20]Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey...*, 5.

[21]Şentürk, "State and Religion in Turkey"..., 326.

etymological and practical aspects. The word 'secular' that means 'worldly,' as opposed to 'religion,' makes secularism more of a separation of worldly affairs from any religious influence. On the other hand, the word laicism or *laiklik*, derived from the word *lai*, reflects the conflict between people and clergy or religious authority. Hence, laicism and *laiklik* are practically more towards distancing laypeople from religious authority rather than separating the state from religion, and handing over political power to the people.[22] However, secularism and laicism are two different surfaces of the same coin because both are basically inclined to marginalise the role of religion. According to Niyazi Berkes, although secularism is technically an idea that emphasises worldly affairs while laicism stresses the difference between the clergy and the people, both refer to two aspects of the same meaning. In essence, regardless of how the terms secularism or laicism are being used, both carry the meaning of dualism and conflict between religion and state.[23]

Ideally, Kemalist secularism emphasised the people's freedom from any religious interference by the state. Although Kemalist secularism has often been associated with French *laïcité*, technically there are differences between the two, especially regarding the practice of separation between state and religion. The French *laïcité* clearly states the separation between church and state through the Act of 1905, which is not clearly emphasised in the context of Turkey. For a country that practices the separation between state and religion policy, the government would not fund any religious institution or activity. However, this is not the case in Turkey as the state has played the role of providing funds and monitoring the Department of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*-Diyanet) and the religious Imam-Preacher

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[22]Ufuk Ulutas, "Religion and Secularism in Turkey: The Dilemma of the Directorate of Religious Affairs", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Volume 46, Number 3 (2010), 390-391.

[23]Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey...*, 5.

School. The French government is not totally free from any involvement in religious affairs since the state has funded 80 percent for the budgets of Catholic schools. Turkey, however, differs as it *both* funds and monitors religious institutions as compared to France that *only* funds them.[24]

Secularism became the main pillar of Kemalism—an idea introduced by Atatürk in building the modern Turkish state. Kemalism was formulated based on six principles, which are symbolised as the "Six Arrows of Kemalism." These "arrows" consist of Republicanism, Nationalism, Revolutionism, Secularism, Populism, and Etatism. Generally, Turkish secularism aimed to replace the existing religious worldview inherited from Ottoman tradition. Contrary to the Islamic worldview, Turkish secularism promoted a rational, empiric, and scientific way of thinking in solving problems and searching for the truth.[25] This, in turn, influenced civilisational building and the modernisation process of Turkey according to the secularisation approach. Secularisation in Turkey was positivistic by viewing Islamic tradition or anything related to religion as a symbol of backwardness and should be rejected in building a modern, civilised, and progressive Turkish nation. Here, Kemalist secularism can be related to the doctrine of positivism as proposed by Auguste Comte by looking into its tendency to marginalise religion from the process of development and progress of the Turkish nation. Foundationally, the idea of Atatürk's secularism itself attempted to become "a new theology" or "a new set of beliefs" to replace religion in Turkey.

In principle, Kemalist secularism adhered to the premise of public space neutrality, which opposed any religious symbol in the public space.

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[24]By comparing to French *laïcité* and Turkish *laiklik*, the practice of secularism in the United States is more truly neutral from religion. In US, the state treasury earned from taxpayers cannot be used to fund any church or religious school. One of its law regarding this matter states that: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." See Ahmet T. Kuru, "Secularism in Turkey: Myths and Realities", *Insight Turkey*, Volume 10, Number 3 (2008), 107.

[25]Redzuan and Mashitah, *Sekularisme dan Proses Demokrasi di Turki...*, 37.

Hence, the headscarf worn by Muslim women in public became one of the most debated issues since it was perceived as a religious symbol.[26] Turkish Constitutional Court, the most authoritative institution to interpret the Turkish Constitution, asserted that an individual's religious expression could be limited in public space in order to protect the principle of Turkish secularism.[27] This interpretation shows that Turkish secularism tends to exclude religious elements in public space to retain its neutrality from any religious influence. However, unlike *laïcité*'s principle of universalism, Turkey's practice of secularism was different from the French in terms of religious exploitation by the state as the agent for social universalism. In Turkey, the state authority was provided legitimacy in controlling religious interpretation, where the aim was to shape the people's understanding of religion.[28] As Amélie Barras argued, the state-controlled religious interpretation was meant to promote a "republican Islam" and standardising the people's understanding of religion based on the state's will.[29] This role has been played by the Diyanet as a religious agency directly under the state government.

Secularism *vis-à-vis* religion: another story of secularism in Turkey

Secularism in Turkey, which was inspired from the French *laïcité* and positivism (where Auguste Comte as its founder, was also French) has affected the status of religion in the State. When referring to the state ideology, Turkey is indeed a secular state. This is clearly stated in Article 2 of the Turkish Constitution

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[26]Dilek Cindoglu and Gizem Zencirci, "The Headscarf in Turkey in the Public and State Spheres", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Volume 44, Number 5 (2008), 792.

[27]Kerime Sule Akoglu, "Piecemeal Freedom: Why the Headscarf Ban Remains in Place in Turkey", *Boston College International & Comparative Law Review*, Volume 38, Number 2 (2015), 286.

[28]Merve Kavakci Islam, *Headscarf Politics in Turkey: A Postcolonial Reading*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, 49-50.

[29]Barras, "A right-based discourse to contest the boundaries of state secularism?"..., 1241.

since its first constitution (enacted in 1924 and amended in 1937), the second constitution (enacted in 1961), and the latest one (enacted in 1982 and being used to date). The abolition of the constitutional provision that stated Islam as the state ideology has affected the status of religion in Turkey in two aspects. First, it enhanced for a more comprehensive secularisation of some provisions in the later Constitutions. This can be seen through the Turkish Constitution of 1961 and the current Constitution, which emphasised many aspects of secularisation.[30] Second, as Article 2 of the Constitution is a provision that shapes the basis for the Turkish state identity, it has legitimised secularism as the basis for all state policies especially in political, social, and administrative aspects. In other words, the provision in Article 2 made religion incapable of fully functioning in state affairs.

Even though the Turkish state adheres to secularism, this does not mean that religious institutions have no role in the state administration. This can be seen by the existence of Diyanet,which has been established since the Atatürk era. At first, the establishment of Diyanet was aimed to manage religious affairs by replacing the role of *Şeyhülislām* as well as the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Endowment that had been abolished earlier following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire.[31] As discussed above, official religious scholars that were granted autonomy during the Ottoman era no longer existed in the republican era, as its role and position were replaced by the Diyanet. As an official government agency, which was directly under the Prime Minister's office, Diyanet plays a role

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[30]For example, please refer to Article 8, 19, 57, and 77 in the 1961 Constitution, as well as Article 14, 68, 81, 103, and 136 in the 1982 Constitution. The 1961 Constitution can be referred to Sadık Balkan, Ahmet E. Uysal and Kemal H. Karpat, *Constitution of the Turkish Republic*, Ankara, 1961. While for the 1982 Constitution, see Constitution of the Republic Turkey, Egemenlik Kayitsiz Şatsiz Milletindir, n.d.

[31]Technically, the jobscope of Diyanet focuses more on administering religious affairs that are related specifically to Islam. See A Short Historical Background of the Directorate of Religious Affairs, Presidency of Religious Affairs official website, *https://www.diyanet.gov.tr/en-US/Content/PrintDetail/1*, (accessed 10.8.2020).

in submitting religious interpretations that represent the government's aspirations. Implicitly, the role of Diyanet regarding the interpretation of religion can be understood as a measure to standardise religious understanding among people and to overcome the influence of religious understanding that is not in line with the government's will.

However, the existence of Diyanet does not mean that religion has been given a big role in the state administration as the scope of work of the agency is relatively small compared to other state agencies. On the one hand, Diyanet's roles are more technical such as making decisions in matters related to Islamic beliefs, worship, and ethics, determining the location of worship places, and managing the appointment and dismissal of religious officials.[32] On the other hand, Diyanet's major role focuses more on controlling the interpretation of religion according to the state interest to prevent other versions of religious understanding among Turkish people. Ali Bardakoğlu, the former president of Diyanet (2003-2010) mentioned that the existence of the agency did not contradict Turkish secularism as it did not violate the red line of the state secular principles, namely: i) religion cannot be dominant over the state affairs; ii) unrestricted individual freedom for religious belief and religious liberty are under constitutional protection; iii) prevention of abuse and exploitation of religion are necessary in order to protect the public interest; and iv) the state has the authority to ensure the provision of religious rights and freedoms as the protector of public order and rights in general.[33] In other words, the Turkish authority saw the importance of exploiting religion for political gain to ensure that religion remained under state control and the secular identity of the state could be maintained.

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[32]Gazi Erdem, "Religious Services in Turkey: From the Office of *Şeyhülislām* to the *Diyanet*", *The Muslim World*, Volume 98, Number 2-3 (2008), 207.

[33]Ali Bardakoğlu, *Religion and Society: New Perspectives from Turkey*, Ankara: Publications of Presidency of Religious Affairs, 2009, 26-27.

The 1980s era became an important phase regarding the status of Islam in Turkey. In the 1970s, Turkey experienced political unrest due to clashes between right-wing ultranationalist groups and left-wing radicals, Turkish and Kurdish, as well as Sunni and Alawi.[34] Following the political unrest, the Turkish military staged a coup on September 12th 1980 to stabilise the situation. After the coup, the military took over the state administration beginning from September 1980 to November 1983, a period during which the military implemented a policy known as Turkish-Islamic synthesis specifically to curb the influence of the radical leftist groups, which were seen as a major threat to the State's stability. The political crises during the 1970s made the military perceived Sunni-oriented Islam, i.e. the most dominant religious sect among Turkish people, an agent that could create social unity and loyalty to the state.[35] Hence, the Turkish-Islamic synthesis was implemented to curb the influence of left-wing groups, especially communists, who have been gaining influence since 1960s. From an ideological point of view, this policy blended and harmonised Turkish nationalism and Islam, where historical reinterpretation has been made by taking into account Islam as a common identifier for the Turkish nation. Turkish-Islamic synthesis was implemented so that the Turkish people would reconsider their common historical identity based on Islam, which could strengthen their loyalty to the State as an entity that patronages the Turkish-Islamic identity.

Even though the implementation of Turkish-Islamic synthesis seemed a kind of diversion of the state orientation from what Kemalists envisioned, this did not mean that Islam was made a central reference for the State's policy and marginalised the principle of secularism. Kenan Evren,

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[34] Banu Eligür, *The Mobilization of Political Islam in Turkey*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 85-87.

[35] Eligür, *The Mobilization of Political Islam in Turkey...*, 93.

the main leader of the military coup in September 1980, viewed that secularism did not conflict with religion. This portrayed the military's stance on secularism as a vital political and societal force that remained unchanged despite the implementation of pro-religious policies of Turkish-Islamic synthesis during the military's administration.[36] Practically, Turkish-Islamic synthesis was a socio-political project by the military to gain mass support, act as a political tool in facilitating state control over religion, and strengthen social solidarity. Under that policy, the military implemented several control policies, such as introducing compulsory religious courses in schools based on the state's religious interpretation, monitoring the content of weekly Friday prayer sermons, and banning religious organisations that were considered fundamentalists.[37] However, it is undeniable that the Turkish-Islamic synthesis was a starting point for the change of religious and political discourse in Turkey, which later influenced the orientation of secularism.

Legitimacy crises of secularism in Turkey

The thinly formulated ideology of secularism in Turkey has faced at least four crises throughout its implementation. First, the implementation of the secularisation process in Turkey has shown an opposite result from its original aim. E. Fuat Keyman has developed Peter L. Berger's premise of secularisation by categorising the secularisation process in Turkey into two levels, which are objective secularisation and subjective secularisation. The former involves an institutional differentiation of politics from religious means by removing religion from the authority and legitimacy of the state, while the latter implies the secularisation of consciousness or in other

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[36]Cited from Mustafa Şen, "Transformation of Turkish Islamism and the Rise of the Justie and Development Party", *Turkish Studies*, Volume 11, Number 1 (2010), 67.

[37]Eligür, *The Mobilization of Political Islam in Turkey...*, 94.

words, the secularisation of society as a whole.[38] Berger's point of view on secularisation mentioned that the process will result "...in a widespread collapse of the plausibility of traditional religious definitions of reality... manifestation of secularisation on the level of consciousness ('subjective secularisation,' if one wishes) has its correlation on the social-structural level (as 'objective secularisation')."[39] By considering this dichotomy, objective secularisation from the state level, theoretically, will lead to the formation of a secular-minded society as the product of subjective secularisation. However, Turkey's experience of secularisation presented a paradoxical correlation between objective secularisation and subjective secularisation. The former appears to be successful, while the latter has faced difficulties in its implementation. In this case, the separation of state and religion, which manifests the idea of objective secularisation, is not much debated and can be accepted by people compared to subjective secularisation, which is shaping a homogeneous Turkish secular society. This scenario proves that religion, particularly Islam, remains as a strong force in the social identity formation of Turkish people, where they could accept the idea of secularism at the state level but not at the societal level. The idea of secularising society is perceived as too-secular for Turkish people, who still view Islam as a significant cultural reference in their identity.

Second, secularism in Turkey is state-centric in its orientation, where the state holds the absolute legitimacy in interpreting religion. As mentioned above, the state elite of Turkey tended to shape the people's understanding of religion based on the state's interpretation. From the secularisation point of view, this initiative can be understood as the state's aim to curb religion from becoming too influential, as the state was unable to totally

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[38]E. Fuat Keyman, "Modernity, Secularism and Islam: The Case of Turkey", *Theory, Culture & Society*, Volume 24, Number 2 (2007), 217-218.

[39]Peter L. Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion*, London: Faber and Faber, 1969, 126.

eradicate the influence of religion. Hence, it was easier for the state to control religious activities and practices by monopolising religious interpretation rather than totally excluding religion. However, this practice was problematic since the tendency of the state to control and standardise religious activities and interpretation had denied pluralism and democratic values. The denial had always happened to religious groups and Islamist political parties, where they had been portrayed as a threat to secularism.[40] In this regard, the notion of "a threat to secularism" can be questionable, whether those groups and parties were really threatening secularism or they were banned by the state due to their views of religion that were not in line with the state's interpretation of Islam. For whatever reason, this scenario portrays that secularism in Turkey only allowed the state version of religious interpretation and denied religious claims from other entities as only the former was considered legitimate. Thus, those groups and entities were considered illegitimate and susceptible to denial by the state.

The third legitimacy crisis of secularism in Turkey was its failure in explaining the boundary between public and private spaces. Theoretically, secularism was perceived as the mechanism which created the boundary between public and private spaces, in which religious claims were considered as a private matter.[41] However, in practice, it was permissible for the state to intervene in the private space based on the argument "to protect secularism." This scenario portrays the problem of secularism in Turkey, i.e., the blurry separation between public and private spaces. In Turkey, the headscarf worn by Muslim women became one of the main social issues subjected to societal debates as it was considered as a religious symbol, while public space was shaped to become secular and

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[40]Ümit Cizre Sakallioğlu, "The Anatomy of the Turkish Military's Political Autonomy", *Comparative Politics*, Volume 29, Number 2 (1997), 154.

[41]Keyman, "Modernity, Secularism and Islam"..., 219.

religious-neutral. In the context of Turkey, the right to wear a headscarf showcased a conflict between public neutrality and personal rights. For Muslim women, wearing a headscarf and covering their hair is considered obligatory. Wearing a headscarf for an individual should be treated as one's right to fulfil a religious obligation, and one's commitment towards religion is supposedly a private and personal matter. However, wearing a headscarf has been perceived by the state as contrary to the neutrality of public space when women with headscarves enter public spaces, which are supposedly neutral from any religious symbols. Secularism in Turkey was problematic in guaranteeing individual rights within public spaces even though religious claim to identity is subjected as a private or personal matter. Thus, any religious obligation, which should be subjected to the personal affair(s), is susceptible to be denied to protect the neutrality and secularity of the public space.

Fourth, secularism in Turkey was susceptible to social engineering projects, i.e., the process made by the state to standardise particular attitudes and thoughts on a large scale of people. Barras cited from Jacques Chirac, the former French President (1995-2007), whom asserted *laïcité* as: "…the privileged place for meetings and exchanges, where everyone can come together bringing the best to the national community. It is neutrality of this public space that enables different religions to harmoniously coexist."[42] This assertion tells us that the French *laïcité* is centred on the idea of universalism from the neutrality of public space. Inspired by French *laïcité*, Kemalists envisaged creating a homogeneous society that adheres to secular and modern identities through social engineering processes. In a practical sense, social engineering is problematic as it tends to force radical change on people in order to create a "modern" and homogeneous society. From a democratic point of view, the notion of creating a homogeneous

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[42]Barras, "A right-based discourse to contest the boundaries of state secularism?"…, 1240.

society is susceptible to exploitation by the state, which suppresses the rights of people to practice their faith freely. In other words, the project is contrary to the spirit of democracy, which acknowledges plurality and diversity.

Another version of secularism: the religion-freeing state

The strict implementation of secularisation in Turkey has triggered debates, which, in turn, led to the idea of a more liberal and accommodative version of secularism. Interestingly, the idea of liberalising secularism has been championed by the conservative and pro-Islamist Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*-AKP).[43] Contrary to previous Islamist parties that were more sceptical on secularism, AKP has been imaged by its leaders as a party with a conservative democrat identity that embraces secularism.[44] By adopting conservative democracy, the party attempts to synthesise conservative values, such as morality, national identity, historical pride, and culture with democratic values like free market economy, pluralism, the rule of law, and human rights.[45]

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[43]AKP is a conservative party with Islamist roots which emerged after a breakaway of previous Islamist Virtue Party (*Fazilet Partisi*-FP). Due to the court's decision on the abolishment of FP, disputes had occurred among the party members regarding the survival of Islamist-rooted politics in Turkey. Some of the 'young blood' led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Abdullah Gül argued, a more liberal approach and discourse must be adopted to ensure the relevance of Islamist-leaning politics in facing the state secularity. This argument, however, was opposed by the 'old guard' which perceived that the challenges and constraints by the state were a part of the struggle to uphold Islam, thus the existing approach must be conserved. This, in turn, led to the splitting among them in which the 'young blood' established the AKP, while the 'old guard' formed Felicity Party. See Ergun Özbudun, "From Political Islam to Conservative Democracy: The Case of the Justice and Development Party in Turkey", *South European Society & Politics*, Volume 11, Number 3-4 (2006), 544-547.

[44]Gökhan Çelen and Ahmet A. Altay, "From an Intellectual Movement to Political Parties: The Transformation of Turkish Islamist Groups", *Politics and Religion Journal*, Volume 14, Number 2 (2020), 437.

[45]Bilal Sambur, "The Great Transformation of Political Islam in Turkey: The Case of Justice and Development Party and Erdogan", *European Journal of Economic and Political Studies*, Volume 2, Number 2 (2009), 121.

Due to the state's policy of secularity, the assertive atmosphere, which resulted in constraining rights for the people to practice religion freely, was treated as a political opportunity by AKP. Here, the party proposed a new narrative of secularism, which empowers freedom, democracy, and human rights values. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the then Prime Minister of Turkey (now the President of Turkey) and the AKP's prominent leader asserted that:

> As for secularism, we define this as an institutional attitude and method which ensures *the state to remain impartial and equidistant to all religions and thoughts*, a principle which aims to ensure peaceful social coexistence between different creeds, sects, and schools of thought. And we also believe that *secularism needs to be crowned with democracy* in order for fundamental rights and freedoms to be accorded constitutional guarantees. This allows secularism to function like an arbiter institution and provides an environment of compromise.[46] [emphasis mine]

The above assertion emphasises on two main points regarding the AKP's stance on secularism, which are "...the state to remain impartial and equidistant to all religions and thoughts..." and "...secularism needs to be crowned with democracy..." These two points are significant as the core premises for a liberal interpretation of secularism, namely a non-interference policy by the state towards religion and the need for secularism to be paralleled with the principles of democracy.[47] This, in turn, led to the democratisation process as one of the main agendas for the AKP's party programme.

To adopt this liberal version of secularism, AKP focuses on liberalising Turkish secularism through the democratisation process. Since 2002, AKP

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[46]Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Conservative Democracy and the Globalisation of Freedom, speech at the American Enterprise Institute 29/1/2004, *https://www.c-span.org/video/?180311-1/democracy-turkey* (accessed 29/12/2020).

[47]For further reading on the AKP's view on secularism, please refer to the party's program at Parti Programı, II-Temel Haklar ve Siyasi İlkeler, AK Parti official website, *https://www.akparti.org.tr/parti/parti-programi/* (accessed 7/2/2021).

as the ruling party has been actively pursuing the democratisation agenda, especially in reforming the political system. Since the AKP's perspective on democracy is in parallel with the perspective adopted by most European countries, the party has shown tremendous support for Turkey's European Union (EU) full membership. The party perceived Copenhagen Criteria as preconditions for any country to join the EU, which adheres to universal democracy and human rights values, as crucial for the democratisation of Turkey. The AKP knew that fulfilling the Copenhagen Criteria allowed it to empower domestic democracy according to the EU's standard and able to undermine the assertiveness of Turkish secularism. Although there are disputes over AKP's commitment and the party's true intention for gaining the state's EU membership, especially after the party's third term of governance,[48] the democratisation process has undoubtedly been done impressively under the AKP administration. A series of reformation initiatives along with several constitutional amendments have been made, which aimed at improving the democratic system as well as restructuring military and judiciary institutions, where both entities were the main defenders of the state's assertive secularism.

The significance of the democratisation process can be seen based on its capacity to enhance Turkey's internal reform. EU membership would not only urge Turkey to undergo institutional reform but internal reform as well, which includes political orientation, democracy, and individual rights. Turkish secularism, which can be said as the stiffest constraint towards personal freedom, became the most affected subject due to the

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[48]For further reading on the disputes over AKP's commitment on EU membership, please refer to Münevver Cebeci, "De-Europeanisation or Counter-Conduct? Turkey's Democratisation and the EU", *South European and Politics*, Volume 21, Number 1 (2016), 119-132; Jakub Wódka, "Institutional Aspects of the (De-) Europeanization of Turkish Political Parties. The Case of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Republican People's Party (CHP)", *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Volume 19, Number 2 (2017), 153-170.

democratisation process. Since the democratisation process empowers individual rights, the orientation of Turkish secularism has to be realigned towards a more liberal stance. This included readjusting secularism discourse from being assertive towards a liberal and compromising one by warranting more leeway for individual rights. As a result, individual rights, including the right to practice religion, were guaranteed under state assurance as long as it does not interfere political realm. In other words, the state remains secular, but the secularity of the state does not affect individual beliefs.

Conclusion

At an early stage, the implementation of secularism in Turkey was based on Atatürk's vision. Even though secularism was implemented assertively during the Kemalists' dominion, religion was still given a role in the state administration by controlling religious interpretation. This conveys the idea that secularism in Turkey was actually not a separation between the state and religion in the true sense, but the state acting as the controlling entity of religion while marginalising religion from interfering in state affairs. Throughout its implementation, Turkish secularism has faced legitimacy crises due to the rejection of secularisation at the societal level, the state-centric orientation of secularism that denied pluralism and democratic values, its failure to explain substantive boundaries between public and private spaces, and its susceptibility to social engineering. The crises occurred because of the interventionist approach of Turkish secularism towards individual rights, especially those related to religious matters. The assertive nature of Turkish secularism then led to the emergence of a more liberal and accommodative version of secularism, which treats the idea of separation between the state and religion according to the notion of democracy and freeing religion from the strict state tutelary.

In this paper, we argue that "the present face" of secularism in Turkey is different from the one that was proposed by Atatürk. Erdoĺan and his party, AKP, aimed for a more "Islamic-friendly" orientation of secularism, which, in turn, led to an establishment of moderate secularism towards religion. Under the AKP, Islamic visibility keeps taking place in public space. This scenario led some scholars and observers to argue that Turkish secularism is "under an existential threat." In this case, we perceive that the notion is exaggerated. By looking into the essence of secularism is a separation between religion and state, Turkey can still be considered a secular state due to two reasons. First, the Turkish Constitution, as the highest reference of law, still denotes the state's secularity (as stated in Article 2). Second, religion is still not playing a tremendous role in AKP's administration if we compare it to what has been practiced in other Muslim countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Malaysia. Religious visibility in Turkish public space cannot be argued as a manifestation of religion's intervention in the political realm, as it is a consequence of the soft practice of secularism, in which AKP only acts as the one that guarantees any form of religious freedom. Therefore, religious (or Islamic) visibility in Turkey is a product of people's consciousness towards their faith, which previously has been denied by secular regimes to be manifested publicly. However, one cannot deny that under the AKP, secularism in Turkey is being impoverished. By "impoverishing," we mean that secularism in Turkey with "Atatürk's essence" is weakening and losing its influence. This phenomenon portrays Islam, a major societal force that has undergone a long history and tradition in Turkey, as uncontainable merely by a radical practice of secularism as what has been done by the Kemalist regime.

As the AKP succeeds in maintaining its popularity among voters, as can be seen clearly in the last May 14 general election, secularism "with the AKP's

face" (or "Erdoğan's face," if one wishes) will be able to keep its existence in Turkey. We do not see a drastic change can happen, at least in the near future, regarding the existence of AKP-Erdoğan secularism. The freedom and space for practicing religion initiated by the AKP promote understanding among Turkish people that a state and its apparatus can remain secular without intervening in their ways of life. Secularism will remain the state's ideology, but Turkish people will continue to practice religion freely and publicly. The AKP's success in applying soft secularism towards religion, which can also be denoted as the "Turkish model" of *Anglo-Saxon* secularism, is a political practice that can have implications for some other Muslim countries which are still dealing with the conflict regarding the religion-state relationship. In this regard, we view that several tutelage Arab countries can benefit by looking into Turkey's experience in dealing with the question related to how religion can reconcile with democracy and secularism. Future studies are recommended to pay attention to the dynamism of Turkish secularism and to what extent it can become a model for settling questions related to the religion-state relationship.

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