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REPORT

**RELIGION
AND THE POLITICS:**

**A DANGEROUS COMBINATION
FOR TURKEY***

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RELIGION AND THE POLITICS:

A DANGEROUS COMBINATION FOR TURKEY*

INTRODUCTION

It is well-established scientifically that certain chemicals should not be mixed. For example, vinegar and bleach should not even be stored in the same place. Like the rules of chemistry, politics, and religion create their version of danger. The more you mix either one into the other, the results get even more lethal. Neither religion mixed with politics nor politics with religion do good to either its believers or partisans. Faith is the most powerful thing in the world, especially for those who believe the idea of a Creator of the universe. In this context, organized religion's uniting power is more significant than any other ideologies including nationalism. It attracts millions primarily for two main reasons: not only it fulfills the sense of the need to believe, but also it gives hope to faithful a chance to achieve living an eternal life by creating a cause for believers beyond this life. In a way, religion is like a vitamin for the human spiritual experience. With faith, the materialistic side of the humanity matches with its equal and provides an everlasting satisfaction to humankind to believe in something more powerful than them. In most cases, people return to their religious roots to escape the complexity of modern life.

Religion also introduces the humanity the concept of God, who is the Supreme Being also known as Yahweh, Lord, and Allah. The Creator of All does not like

competition and declares itself as the only truth. Indeed, the divine authority of the God on earth has been the subject of humanity's ideological evolution. The issue of God's Sovereignty has been a significant theme for many believers. "The relation between religion and politics continues to be an important theme in political philosophy."¹ Sadly, history recorded many of human tragedies, wars, and persecutions which involved cases for people being choosing the 'wrong God.' Therefore, throughout history disagreements among believers not only stirred conflicts between them but also created factions within them.

The original idea behind the politics was to achieve the "ideal state and the society." The Greek Philosophers Aristotle and Plato always envisioned the politics in that real sense. The government must be a servant not a bull in the china shop. Policies must aim to create a better society than the existing one. Unfortunately, today politics is all about power and less about religion. Political parties want to dominate their spheres. In this context, faith provides bigger, broader and the most cost-effective shield than any other instrument of alliances to those ambitious Machiavellist minded politicians who can get rid of their rivals. This article examines the abusive relationship between religion and the politics in the Islamic context.

DEFINITIONAL ISSUES

Guilain Denoex, a professor of government, defines the Political Islam as "a form of instrumentalization of Islam by individuals, groups, and organizations that pursue political

* H. Arslan, PhD (2018)

¹ Callaway, C. (n.d.) Religion and Politics. Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Retrieved on March 6, 2018 from <https://www.iep.utm.edu/rel-poli/>

objectives.”² In this context, the values and principles for an ideal society must be borrowed from the Islamic traditions. Another definition focuses more on the territorial aspects of the Islam and the Muslims worldwide. It “describes a transnational social movement that seeks to mobilize Muslims into political activities.”³ Unlike moderate Muslims, the Islamists do not believe in the change of religion. Among them, there is a range of loyalism to the strict interpretation of the Qur’an and Islamic law in the modern world. Some hard-core Islamists consider violence and terror tactics to achieve their objectives whereas others heavily rely on seizing the political power through non-violence. They only view the solution in the political power and aims to seize it with all branches. They would “make instrumental use of the ballot box to capture the state, only to subsequently dismantle democracy.”⁴ Frankly, religion becomes an instrument to gain more powers. They start to embed their doctrines of the Islamist ideology as the single political ideology of the state. More particularly, the public education system became a source for their political machine. Eventually, the following dangerous mix would give birth to politically motivated and spiritually vacated group of people who are in love with their executioners. In an ideological atmosphere, pluralism erodes, and dissenters’ loyalty questioned for their religion. “With reform and accommodation, Islam can be compatible with democracy,

but Islamism cannot. In the world of Islam, Islamism aims at reversing the process of cultural modernization.”⁵ In other words, instrument to achieve and maintain power and legitimacy rather than a set of values and principles that have been thoroughly internalized.”⁶ As Hudson Institute scholar Zeyno Baran puts it perfectly, “democratic elections ... [have] proven to be the easiest and most legitimate path to power.”⁷ It is perfectly echoed in the words of Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan when he was the mayor of Istanbul mid-1990s: “Democracy is like a tram. You ride it until you arrive at your destination, then you step off.”⁸ According to Tarek Osman, author of the book, *Islamism* (2016):

*“Political Islam’s interpretations of deen wa dawla (religion and state) did not pay much attention to theological struggles. The Islamists, practical and pragmatic as they had always been, focused on what the merger between religion and power meant on the ground, among their support bases and constituencies; and how that translated into more presence, power, influence and money.”*⁹

LEADERSHIP AND STATE IN ISLAM

First of all, there is no particular specific state model mentioned in the Holy Quran. The absence has given more autonomy and flexibility for the Muslim community (ummah) to design a system of governance based on the

² Denooux, G. (2002) The Forgotten Swamp: Navigating Political Islam. *Middle East Policy*. 9(2), 56-81, p.61

³ Karagiannis, E. (2016). The New Face of Political Islam in Central Asia. *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*. 36(2), 267-281, p.267

⁴ Hamid, S., Mandaville, P. & McCants, W. (2017, Oct 4). How America Changed Its Approach to Political Islam. *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/10/america-political-islam/541287/>

⁵ Tibi, B. (Winter 2009). Islamist Approach Europe Turkey’s Islamist Danger. *Middle East Quarterly*. 16(1). 47-54.

⁶ Cornell, S. (2017). A Religious Party Takes Hold: Turkey. *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 37(1), 21-38

⁷ Baran, Z. (Jan. 2008). Divided Turkey. *The Journal of Democracy*. 19(1), 56-7.

⁸ Soufan, A. (2017). *Anatomy of Terror*. New York City (NY) & London (UK): W. W. Norton & Company, p.220

⁹ Osman, T. (2016). *Islamism: A History of Political Islam from the Fall of the Ottoman Empire to the Rise of ISIS*. New Haven (CT) & London (UK): Yale University Press

needs of their age and time purely based on the principles of justice.

Furthermore, “the Prophet (pbuh) left no clear instructions as to who should succeed him as the leader of

Islam.”¹⁰ However, comparison to Moses (pbuh) and Jesus (pbuh), Prophet Mohammad (pbuh) had a unique case especially in regards to state and religious affairs. “Whereas Moses was a leader without a state and Jesus was a dissident executed by one, the Prophet Muhammad was a political leader who founded a polity.”¹¹ Therefore, at the time of the Prophet, *deen wa dawla* (religion and state) were not institutionally separate. Therefore, “Islam is understood to be a quasi-comprehensive structure that covers Muslim’s spiritual and material lives.”¹²

The critical thing for Islamic state system is the significance of justice, within the government administration and the quality of the leadership. The Holy Quran talks about leadership by the word *Khilafa* and *Imama* in different verses. “Currently, *Khalifa* refers to the broader sense of authority which includes all types of power and leadership, especially the political supremacy over the Muslim *Ummah* and *Imam* represents as the leader of prayers, religious rituals and spiritual matters.”¹³ Like the Greek Philosophers mentioned above, Islam demands from the leader not only to work for the betterment of a society but also for the humanity in general. In short, the Islamic leadership model requires the person in charge to think of everyone's well-being, where the administration of justice plays a crucial role. The concept of justice is, indeed, one of the four tenets of the Quran in addition to monotheism,

prophethood, and the Judgment Day/Resurrection. A ‘just authority’ in the Islamic sense refers to a state with fair and equal treatment for all its citizens. In other words, the lack of a definite state system in the Quran or Hadith (prophet's words and actions) carries a vital aphorism for the Muslims. Both the leader and the state in Muslim lands must be purely just and fair within all organs and branches. Ironically, this was not the case; history of Islamic civilization has been shaped mostly both by the rooted customs of tribalism and ethnic culture rather than the mentioned Quranic values above. “Hereditary caliphates in which religious and secular power were united in one figure were the model for Islamic polities for more than a millennium.” Starting with the Umayyad caliphate, the Arab-Islamic states showed no sign of separation of *deen wa dawla* (religion and state). Indeed, the companions of the Prophet inherited the system, which functioned very well for a brief of time due to charismatic leadership and strong cohesion among the early Muslims.

For more than a century, there has been a dispersion of several ideas and thoughts among the Muslim world. More particularly, since the collapse of the Ottomans, the politicization of Islam gave birth to the radicalization of Islam mainly in the Middle East region. Nevertheless, the expansion of Western colonization of Muslim lands made certain Muslim thinkers to pursue more radical means including religious rhetoric to achieve political victories. One of those Muslim intellectuals, Hassan al-Banna, an Egyptian Sunni scholar who established the Muslim Brotherhood organization (*Ikhwān al-Muslimīn*) in 1928, adopted the militancy. According to Banna, “it is the nature of Islam to dominate, not to be dominated, to impose its law on all nations and to extend its power to the

¹⁰ Forst, B. (2009). *Terrorism, Crime and Public Policy*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, p.111.

¹¹ (2017, Aug 26). Can political Islam make it in the modern world? *The Economist*. Retrieved on March 11, 2018 from <https://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21727061-auguries-are-mixed-can-political-islam-make-it-modern-world>

¹² Osman, 2016: p.38.

¹³ Monjour, M. (2010). Characteristics of leadership: Islamic Perspective. *Journal of Dr. Serajul Haque Islamic Research Centre*. Department of Islamic Studies, University of Dhaka

entire planet.”¹⁴ Unlike his older brother, Gamal al-Banna was more flexible to understand the role of the religion in state affairs. He viewed Islam as an intellectual system guiding mind and soul that should not have a place in the intricate details of its adherent’s daily lives.¹⁵ While the seeds of Islamism were thrown, interestingly, the United States intelligence community was busy to focus on reshaping the world during post-World War II era. Indeed, “a 1946 U.S. intelligence report identified the Brotherhood's Islamism as posing almost as much of a threat to Western liberalism as did Communism”¹⁶ but this would change by the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran.

Between February 11, 1979, and September 11, 2001, many political and armed conflicts shaped the Islamism significantly. More particularly, the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviets followed by the ethnic war in Bosnia in early 1990s created a direct militant response from the young Muslims. In between these two conflicts the cold war ended, which also shifted the American foreign policy more towards to threats emerging in the Muslim world. The U.S.-led world gave enough skepticism to the conservative parties in many Muslim countries to energize their political base around the memories of the colonialism past of the Western world. Before the new millennium, conservative parties with religious agenda began to achieve small-scale election victories in the Middle East

and North Africa including Turkey. “For the Islamists, their accession to power seemed like a long-awaited arrival at a destination.”¹⁷ In many of the middle eastern countries, political Islam and nationalism-populism have become the principal sources of legitimacy of the regimes, which each ideology interpenetrates and support each other mutually to the extent that often makes it hard to tell them apart.¹⁸

ISLAMISIM IN TURKISH

POLITICAL HISTORY

The founding fathers of modern Turkey led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk established a secular state system in 1923. Atatürk’s vision for the administration of new nation was always in the form parliamentary system. From 1923 until 1946, there was a single-party regime, in which the party, the Republican People’s Party (in Turkish: Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi - CHP) meant everything; it was the state itself. “Constitutionally, Turkey is a secular state but, in reality, both Turkish civil society and its institutions are weak.”¹⁹ “Although the Turkish state always has tried to use Islam for its own goals, it never allowed the free expression of religion and religious practices.”²⁰ In contrast to this, the Turkish Islamists always discredited the secular state and denigrated its authority in many cases. The country’s democracy has been the victim of several military coup d’états since 1960, and the last one was a failed military coup that has occurred on July 15, 2016. However, “before July 15, civil liberties in Turkey were de facto in the deep freeze.

¹⁴ *The Economist* (2017, Aug 26). Retrieved on March 11, 2018 from <https://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21727061-auguries-are-mixed-can-political-islam-make-it-modern-world>

¹⁵ Osman, 2016: p.38.

¹⁶ Rubin, M. (2013, September 30). Roll Back the Brotherhood. *National Review*. <https://www.nationalreview.com/magazine/2013/09/12/roll-back-brotherhood/>

¹⁷ Osman, 2016: p.21.

¹⁸ Razi, G. H. (1990). Legitimacy, religion and Nationalism in the Middle East. *American Political Science Review*, 84(1), 69-91.

¹⁹ Tibi, 2009: p.47.

²⁰ Yavuz, M. H. & Espesito, J. L. (2003). Islam in Turkey: retreat from the Secular Path. Edited in a book “Turkish Islam and the Secular State”. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press

Now they are de jure in the deep freeze.”²¹

Güven states political Islam in the Republic of Turkey began rising during the 70s and reached its peak in the 80s.²² Necmettin Erbakan was the first politician who established a series of Islamist political parties in Turkey and briefly served as a Prime Minister during a coalition government between 1996 and 1997 as well. He was like a mentor for Erdoğan, who became the mayor of Istanbul when he ran his campaign under the ticket of Erbakan's Welfare Party during municipal elections of 1994. By the new millennium, however, the apprentice had separated himself from his master, Necmettin Erbakan and his 'National Outlook' view and established a new party called the Justice and Development Party (in Turkish: Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi). The AKP rose to power in 2002 in its first elections. Initially and understandably, the majority of the Turkish liberals and secularists had serious suspicions about AKP's political agenda since its' founders had “learned their trade under Turkish Islamism's modern founder, Necmettin Erbakan, the political and theological driving force behind the Milli Görüş (“National Outlook”) movement.”²³ Nevertheless, the AKP was hailed as a successful moderate Islamist reform party with a strong commitment to democracy due to the successful economic programs and harmonization of the laws in the first

decade of the millennium. “The rise of AKP in Turkey has served as an example of convergence between Islam and parliamentary democracy.”²⁴ After third consecutive general election victory in 2011 followed by a victory in the Presidential elections in 2013, the political rhetoric began to change significantly. Gradually, a blurry line began to appear whether the state is a party state or not. “The AKP first tested and mastered surveillance methods over its key opponents and dissidents in the process of capturing the state apparatus and later applied similar repressive methods to govern the entire society.”²⁵ Furthermore, the ruling party also laid its eyes on the educational institutions of Turkey to spread its version of the Islamist doctrine which consists of reinvented Islamic values, and de-Westernize society.²⁶

After the failed July 15th coup, the Turkish government immediately blamed Fethullah Gülen, a Turkish-Sunni scholar, who has been on self-exile in the United States since 1999. Gülen vehemently denied his involvement; the government started a purge in all levels of the society. The crackdown was so sudden and so severe that it created its outlandish theories.²⁷ By then, the Gülen Movement, mostly known as the *Hizmet movement* which broadly refers to *service to the faith* has been in the public eye for a half century. The civic organization opened schools worldwide and emphasized the importance of secular and science-backed education system heavily. The movement “strongly objects to direct involvement in

²¹ Belkdis, B. (2016, July 28). Crushing Dissent in Turkey. Middle East Forum. Retrieved on March 11, 2018 from <http://www.meforum.org/6148/turkey-good-news-bad-news>

²² Güven, İ. (2010). “Globalization, Political Islam and the headscarf in education, with special reference to the Turkish educational system”, *Comparative Education*, 46(3), pp. 377-390, p.378.

²³ Ezikioglu, C. (2017, March 22). The rise of Turkey's 'hypocritical' Islamists. <http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:DmUqO4CdJyJ:independentturkey.org/akp-turkey-hypocritical-islamists/&num=1&client=safari&hl=en&gl=us&strip=1&vwsr=0>

²⁴ Karagiannis, 2016: p.275.

²⁵ Topak, Ö. E. (2017). The Making of a Totalitarian Surveillance Machine: Surveillance in Turkey Under AKP Rule. *Surveillance & Society*, 15(3/4), 535-542.

²⁶ Tibi, 2009: p.49.

²⁷ Soufan, 2017: p.221

politics, which members believe would create a conflict of interest. Hizmet volunteers strongly believe in “civil Islam” in contrast to “political Islam.”²⁸ Despite contact oppression, persecution and the harassment by the government, not even single violent incident including a protest that involved clashes between the police and the Hizmet volunteers had occurred yet. Instead, some members were forced to leave Turkey, some went in isolation and self-exile, but all of the members of the movement have been refraining from supporting political Islam and its tentacles of violence and extremism.

In fact, many liberals who had supported the ruling party concluded that “the AKP at the very least abandoned its adherence to democratic ideals as soon as it consolidated power.”²⁹ More specifically, using pro-government mass propaganda machine, the government created an unhealthy environment where dissidents either labeled as being ‘anti-Islam’ or accused as the Gulenists. “Yet, rather than a sudden shift, Erdogan’s policies have been characterized by a gradual transition from soft authoritarianism to hard authoritarianism or totalitarianism.”³⁰ Such transition can be documented in so many levels; however, the ongoing political hypocrisy can be observed if one reviews the AKP’s general election declarations over the years. For example, in their first declaration during 2002 general election, the following principles were stated in all capital letters: AKP is a democratic,

conservative, an innovative, and contemporary party.³¹ Moreover, in its 2015 general election campaign declaration, the party promised the following: “Human dignity and fundamental rights will be the main focus.”³² The AKP has been destroying all of the mentioned promises systematically and shamelessly; “controlling both parliament and the presidency, have worked to preserve their power and to move Turkey toward authoritarianism.”³³ “Repeated experience with Islamists show that they go to the ballots but fail to compromise when they win.”³⁴

CONCLUSION

The three major problems, civil turmoil, poverty, and ignorance that have frequently been observed in the Muslim Lands provide a significant momentum and cause not only for the political Islamists but also for the extremists. Once religious fundamentals mix their faith with politics, the emerging picture becomes blurry and distorted for the people outside mainstream Islam. It is because the nature of politics consists of lying and deceiving, which conflicts with the core values of any religion. Not long ago Muslim Brotherhood wanted to Brotherize the Egyptian state and society with their version of Islamic policy. They failed and caused a military coup which enabled the continuance of authoritarian leadership that has been going for decades. In recent years, the ruling party has been politicizing the Islamic principles and values to justify the policies of cruel and unusual punishments towards to insiders and outsiders of the faith in Turkey. “Erdogan increasingly

²⁸ Cornell, 2017: p.24

²⁹ Cornell, S. (2017). A Religious Party Takes Hold: Turkey. *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 37(1), S-21-S-38. Johns Hopkins University Press.

³⁰ Topak, 2017: p.536.

³¹ AK Parti Secim Beyannamesi. (2002). TBMM Kutuphanesi. Ankara, TR. Retrieved on March 11, 2018 from https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/eyayin/gazeteler/web/kutuphanede%20bulunan%20dijital%20kaynaklar/kitaplar/siyasi%20parti%20yayinlari/200304063%20ak%20parti%20secim%20beyannamesi%202002/200304063%20ak%20parti%20secim%20beyannamesi%202002%200000_0000.pdf

³² AK Parti Secim Beyannamesi. (2015). AKP Official Website. Retrieved on March 11, 2018 from <https://www.akparti.org.tr/site/haberler/iste-ak-partinin-secim-beyannamesi/78619#1>

³³ Guercio, I. (2017). What does it mean to talk about democracy in Turkey? *Juridical Current*, 20(1), 42-58, p.44

³⁴ Tibi, 2009: p.52.

uses Islamism as a tool for his personal political interests, paying lip service to religious ideals only when

it suits him.”³⁵ It is, indeed, very concerning that the AKP has been trying to synchronize all state, civil, and social institutions like the Brotherhood attempted to do in Egypt. Their rhetoric of respecting democracy and inclusiveness has been only a pretense; they have camouflaged themselves as “democratic Islamic conservatives.”³⁶ “The more that the Justice and Development Party and its supporters have embraced religious rhetoric, the more they have acted in ways that run counter to the most basic Islamic values.”³⁷ However, the politicization of religion, however, did deform not only the image of Islam but also its Islamic terminology. Most likely, it will also tarnish the legacy of the Justice and Development Party. Evidently, the compound of politics and the religion is far more destructive than certain chemicals.

³⁵ Ezikioglu, C. (2017, March 22). The rise of Turkey’s ‘hypocritical’ Islamists. <http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:DmUqO4CdJysJ:independentturkey.org/akp-turkey-hypocritical-islamists/&num=1&client=safari&hl=en&gl=us&strip=1&vwsrc=0>

³⁶ Dagi, I. (July 2008). Turkey’s AKP in Power. *Journal of Democracy*. 19(3), 25-30.

³⁷ Ezikioglu, C. (2017, March 22). The rise of Turkey’s ‘hypocritical’ Islamists. <http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:DmUqO4CdJysJ:independentturkey.org/akp-turkey-hypocritical-islamists/&num=1&client=safari&hl=en&gl=us&strip=1&vwsrc=0>

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