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TURKISH SECULARISM THROUGH THE AGES

From Separation to a Religious Free State

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Abstract

Early modern Turkey embarked on a process of secularisation aimed at separating the state from religious influence. However, despite the marginalisation of Islam, religion remains a significant social force in the country. This raises a number of key questions: What is the nature of Turkish secularism? How can religion have an influence in the context of a secular state? And what are the forms and orientations of secularism in Turkey? This research aims to answer these questions through a comprehensive study of the idea, history, and orientation of secularism in Turkey. The research method is conducted by reviewing documents and previous studies related to Turkish secularism, with critical and chronological analyses from the beginning of its implementation to the current period. The findings show that Turkish secularism initially did not simply separate the state from religion, but rather positioned the state as a controller of religion. The harsh nature of this approach led to the emergence of a more liberal version of secularism, which was in line with democratic principles and freed religion from strict state control. Turkish secularism under the current regime is different from the previous one, characterised by the more visible manifestation of religion (Islam) in the public sphere, although the state still maintains its secular principles. This research argues that Turkey's current model of secularism has the potential to be a reference for other Muslim countries that are still facing conflicts over the relationship between religion and the state.

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Introduction

The concept of secularism has a diverse scope, covering various aspects of life such as religious, social, political, and philosophical. The origins of secularism stem from intellectual struggles in Europe, where there was tension between intellectuals and church institutions. The conflict gave birth to a new way of thinking in European society, which favored logic and scientific reasoning and opposed the dominance of religion in worldly affairs.

Despite its Western origin, the concept of secularism has entered the discourse of the Islamic world and sparked deep debate. This is due to two significant historical and cultural backgrounds. First, the long history of Islamic civilisation, from the Umayyad dynasty to the Ottoman Empire, has always placed religion as the main foundation in governance and social life. Secondly, Islam has the unique characteristic of being comprehensive, not limiting itself to religious rituals, but covering all aspects of human life. In the Muslim view, Islam is a comprehensive system that integrates the spiritual and worldly, individual and collective, and religious and state dimensions. Consequently, the idea of separation between religion and politics is alien and difficult to accept in the context of traditional Islamic understanding.

The Republic of Turkey was formed in the era of nationalism, precisely after the Ottoman Empire was officially abolished in 1922. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the republic in 1923, had a vision of establishing a contemporary Turkish state with a fundamentally different identity from the previous era. During his period of leadership between 1923-1938, Atatürk sought to transform Turkey into a modern, secular, Western-oriented, and democratic state. His main strategy was to use Western countries as models of development, while systematically reducing the role and influence of Islam and the Ottoman heritage, especially in the context of politics and public life.¹

Atatürk viewed religion as the main obstacle to Turkey's development towards modernity. From his perspective, Islam had to be eliminated in order for the country to progress on par with Western nations. His sceptical attitude towards religion stemmed from his close observation of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. He was convinced that Islam was a key factor in the Ottoman decline, which had significantly affected fundamental aspects such as the political system, lawmaking, education, and bureaucracy. Based on this belief, Atatürk then launched a systematic effort to marginalise Islamic elements by declaring Turkey a secular state.²

Although Atatürk and the Kemalist regime attempted to marginalise religion through the process of secularisation during the construction of modern Turkey, Islam remains a fundamental force in Turkish society. Religion has a very substantial role in shaping the collective identity of Turkish society, encompassing aspects of beliefs, religious practices,

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.

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

and systems of morality. This raises a series of critical questions that require in-depth study: What exactly is the concept of secularism in Turkey? How far has secularism been practised? How does religion still retain its influence within the framework of a secular state? And what is the real orientation of secularism in Turkey? Thus, this paper aims to explore and provide comprehensive answers to these fundamental questions through an in-depth examination of the idea, degree, and orientation of secularism in Turkey.

In contrast to the existing literature, this research reveals that the concept of secularism in Turkey has undergone significant transformations throughout its history. In the early stages, Kemalists presented secularism as a worldview intended to completely replace the role of religion. Subsequently, the orientation shifted to limiting religion's involvement in the administrative and social spheres. Subsequent developments were characterised by the emergence of a new narrative from former Islamist activists, which sought to reconcile the concept of secularism with democratic principles, in turn creating a more open space for religious expression in practical contexts.

Structurally, this paper will begin by outlining the process of formation of modern Turkey in order to provide a comprehensive context for the early regime's adoption of secularism. Next, the paper will examine the Kemalist concept of secularism, which Atatürk positioned as the 'official creed of the state'. Then, it will discuss the dynamics of the relationship between secularism and Islam in Turkey, focusing on how the implementation of secularism has been modified to accommodate the role of Islam. In the next section, the paper will examine the various crises that secularism has experienced in Turkey, before finally entering into an in-depth discussion of the 'alternative version' of secularism in Turkey that takes liberal values as the fundamental basis for its implementation.

The Modern Turkish State and Secularism

The modern Republic of Turkey was officially formed on 23 October 1923, soon after the Ottoman Empire was abolished by parliamentary decree under the leadership of Atatürk. The declaration of the new state was followed by a series of reforms and modernisation efforts in the nation-building process. Basically, Turkey's secular nation-building included three fundamental projects: secularisation, westernisation, and Turkification. Secularisation was the Atatürk regime's process of separating the political sphere from religious affairs. Westernisation was an attempt to integrate Turkey into progressive Western civilisation through the adoption of Western administrative models. Turkification, meanwhile, was a project aimed at disseminating and affirming Turkish national sentiment as the foundation of collective identity.

In the context of nation-building, Atatürk implemented a comprehensive secularisation process, encompassing both the national and social dimensions of society. The transformation towards a secular identity did not happen instantly. The first Turkish constitution, ratified on 3 March 1924, still recognised Islam as the official state

religion.³ However, on 10 April 1928, Atatürk expressly abolished the status of Islam as the official religion. This move was later reinforced through a constitutional amendment on 5 February 1937, which definitively established secularism as the official ideology of the republic and confirmed Turkey as a secular state.

The process of secularisation was carried out simultaneously at the level of the state and society, with the main focus on the separation of religion from all aspects of social life.⁴ The Atatürk regime placed education as a strategic instrument to shape the mindset of a secular society. On 3 March 1924, the Turkish parliament passed the Education Unification Law, which coincided with the definitive dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. This law was intended to integrate the Turkish education system into a secular framework under the control of the Ministry of National Education.⁵

The consequence of this policy was the total closure of religious educational institutions (madrasahs) through the standardisation of academic curricula that systematically ignored religious education.⁶ The new curriculum in schools was designed to marginalise religious elements, replacing them with a more rational and scientific approach to thinking as the main methodology in the learning process.⁷

In an effort to build a modern Turkish state, Atatürk undertook a process of secularisation alongside westernisation. This impulse stemmed from his experience of the dominance of European powers and the decline of the Islamic world during his time. His Westernisation had two important dimensions: ideological and practical.⁸ Ideologically, Atatürk emphasised the idea of the superiority of Western civilisation. He regarded the European model as the standard of progress that had to be adopted in order for the Turkish nation to develop and become civilised. This view led to fundamental changes in various aspects of life, especially education. In the field of education, the secular system that was implemented was directly inspired by the European model. Furthermore, Atatürk's westernisation process was highly secular, even considering Islam as the main

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

⁴ Bahadır Çelebi, "The Failure of Assertive Secularization Project in Turkey," *Turkish Journal Politics* 2, no. 1 (2011): 92.

⁵ Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1964), 461.

⁶ 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 Journal of Islamic Studies* 8, no. 1 (2020): 110-111.

⁷ Suna Kili, "Kemalism in Contemporary Turkey," *International Political Science Review* 1, no. 3 (1980): 384-385.

⁸ Atatürk's admiration towards the West was the result of his reading on the works of European philosophers such as Rousseau, Voltaire, Auguste Comte, and John Stuart Mill, as well as seeing for himself the progress of the West while living in Bulgaria. See Pauline Lim Meng Juak, *Kemal Atatürk and the building of Modern Turkish Civilization* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 2004), 21-23.

factor that led to the decline of the Ottoman Empire.⁹ As a result, the role of religion was restricted with the aim of making Turkey an equal and modern state like Western countries.

In the practical dimension, Atatürk implemented westernisation through a systematic transformation of Turkey's legal framework. He directly adopted several codes from European countries, such as the Swiss Civil Code, Italian Criminal Code, and German Commercial Code.¹⁰ The main objective was to replace the sharia legal system inherited from the Ottoman Turkish Sultanate with a legal system that was considered more modern and rational. This change not only affected the legal system, but also the social structure of Turkish society. The government officially made civil marriage compulsory and did not recognise marriages solemnised only according to Islamic traditions. Furthermore, the government aggressively promoted the Western lifestyle and campaigned for it as a model of advanced civilisation, while simultaneously portraying the traditional Islamic way of life as backward and uncivilised.¹¹ In essence, Atatürk's westernisation was a comprehensive attempt to change the legal and social fundamentals of Turkish society, replacing traditional Islamic practices with European models that were considered more progressive.

As an integral part of the secularisation and westernisation process, Atatürk implemented a Turkification programme aimed at building a sense of national pride among the Turkish people. This process was designed to replace an Islamic-based religious identity with a strong and modern Turkish ethnic identity. The government undertook a systematic transformation to remove elements associated with Islamic heritage. One of the concrete steps was a radical change in the script system and language. On 1 November 1928, the use of the Latin script was made mandatory, replacing the Arabic script that had been synonymous with Ottoman and Islamic traditions. Even religious rituals were changed, such as the announcement of the call to prayer, which now had to be delivered in Turkish, not Arabic. Efforts to shape a new identity narrative were made through historical reconstruction in educational institutions. The history curriculum was modified to emphasise Turkish lineage according to Hitte and Hunancestry's theories, effectively displacing the younger generation's pride in Seljuk and Ottoman heritage. As a result, Turkish national identity was reconstructed to break ties with the religious past and promote a secular national spirit.¹²

⁹ Ayşe Kadioğlu, "Republican Epistemology and Islamic Discourses in Turkey in the 1990s," *The Muslim World* 88, no. 1 (1998): 9.

¹⁰ Ihsan Yilmaz, "Secular Law and the Emergence of Unofficial Turkish Islamic Law," *Middle East Journal* 56, no. 1 (2002): 118.

¹¹ Redzuan and Mashitah, *Sekularisme dan Proses Demokrasi di Turki*, 40-41.

¹² Mashitah Sulaiman, "Islam dan Pembinaan Peradaban Turki Moden Melalui Proses Politik," (Master Dissertation, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya, 2004), 34.

Kemalist Secularism as an Official State Belief

Secularism has been a fundamental ideological framework in the formation of Turkey's social and political structure. In the country's constitution, Turkey's secular nature is explicitly stated, making it a model secular state in the Islamic world. Although it has been almost a century since the establishment of the modern Turkish state, society has basically accepted the principle of secularism, although there is still debate about the practical implementation of the concept of secularism itself. The process of acceptance of secularism by Turkish society demonstrates the success of the social transformation carried out since the Atatürk era, in which secular ideology managed to take root in the collective consciousness of society, although not entirely without internal friction and conflict.¹³

Atatürk, as the architect of the modern Turkish state, developed the concept of secularism, which was later accepted as an official ideology. The Kemalists, his loyal followers, not only accepted this idea but also developed it into a kind of 'official state belief' that came to be known as 'Kemalist secularism'. In their view, secularism was seen as the main instrument for achieving the progress of the Turkish nation. Consequently, religion was seen as an obstacle to modernisation, so secularism was applied across the board in all aspects of society.¹⁴ However, this approach faced its own complexities as there was no clarity on the model of secularism that should be applied. There are different models of secularism, such as the Anglo-Saxon, French, and Soviet versions, which have led to ongoing debates in Turkey. This uncertainty raises fundamental questions about the limits and implementation of secularism as a national ideology.¹⁵ Therefore, an in-depth clarification of the principles of Kemalist secularism is needed to understand the extent to which this ideology has been applied in the context of Turkish social and political life.

Kemalist secularism is characterised by a strict interpretation of the relationship between state and religion, with a tendency to reject the role of religion altogether. This approach is similar to the French concept of *laïcité*, which emphasises the equal treatment of every individual regardless of their faith background. According to thinkers such as Anne-Cécile Robert and Henri Peña Ruiz, *laïcité* aims to create a neutral public space where there is no discrimination based on religious preference or belief.¹⁶ The principle of universalism is at the core of this concept, which expects the state to be able to build a homogeneous society by guaranteeing equal rights for all citizens.

¹³ 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: World Scientific Publishing, 2010), 320.

¹⁴ Mohd. Noor, "A Critical Analysis on Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's Reformism," 22.

¹⁵ Amélie Barras, "A Right-Based Discourse to Contest the Boundaries of State Secularism? The Case of the Headscarf Bans in France and Turkey," *Democratization* 16, no. 6 (2009): 1241.

¹⁶ 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: World Scientific Publishing, 2010), 123.

The concept of secularism in Turkey is known as ‘laiklik’, which has its etymological roots in the Greek word ‘laos’, meaning ‘person’.¹⁷ This reflects a fundamental shift in the power structure from the Ottoman Empire era to the modern republic era. During the Ottoman Empire, the ulama had a central role in the administration of the state, acting as the sultan’s main advisors on religious matters. However, with the establishment of the republic, their position drastically changed. The ulama lost their authority and were replaced by political bureaucrats, signalling a complete transformation in state governance. The term ‘laiklik’ was not just terminology, but reflected a new philosophy of the relationship between state, religion, and society. In practice, the laiklik had two main objectives: first, to ensure the state was free from religious interference, and second, to protect the people from the domination of religious authorities.¹⁸

In Ufuk Ulutas’s view, secularism and laicism have fundamental differences both etymologically and practically. The word ‘secular’, which means ‘worldly’, tends to emphasise the separation of worldly affairs from religious influence. Meanwhile, ‘laicism’ or ‘laiklik’, which comes from the word ‘lai’, reflects more of a conflict between the general public and religious authority. In practical terms, laicism focuses more on distancing the common people from religious influence and handing over political power to the people, rather than simply separating the state from religion.¹⁹ However, both have fundamental similarities in terms of the tendency to marginalise the role of religion. Niyazi Berkes adds the perspective that although technically they have different emphases—secularism on worldly affairs and laicism on the distinction between the clergy and the people—they essentially refer to the same aspect. In essence, both secularism and laicism contain elements of dualism and conflict between religion and the state, with the ultimate goal of limiting the influence of religious institutions in public life.²⁰

Kemalist secularism ideally aims to free people from state interference in religious affairs. Although it is often compared to French *laïcité*, there are significant differences in the practice of separation between state and religion. France has a clear legal foundation through its 1905 law on the separation of church and state, something that is not strictly enforced in Turkey. In ideal theory, a secularised state should not fund religious institutions or activities. However, the reality is much more complex. Turkey has a unique approach by actively funding and supervising the Department of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı-Diyanet) as well as the Imam and Preacher School. Even France is not entirely free from religious involvement, with the state funding 80 per cent of the budget of Catholic schools. The difference lies in the level and intensity of state

¹⁷ Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey*, 5.

¹⁸ Şentürk, “State and Religion in Turkey,” 326.

¹⁹ Ufuk Ulutas, “Religion and Secularism in Turkey: The Dilemma of the Directorate of Religious Affairs,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 46, no. 3 (2010): 390-391.

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

involvement, where Turkey is much more active in overseeing and funding religious institutions than France.²¹

Kemalism, the idea developed by Atatürk to build the modern Turkish state, places secularism as its main foundation. This concept materialised in the ‘Six Arrows of Kemalism’ which included Republic, Nationalism, Revolutionary, Secularism, Populism, and Ehatism. Turkish secularism had the fundamental mission of replacing the religious worldview inherited from the Ottoman Empire with a more rational and scientific approach. In contrast to the traditional Islamic framework, this model of secularism encouraged empirical and logical thinking in dealing with problems and searching for truth.²² In the process of modernisation, secularisation in Turkey was carried out with a positivistic approach that was highly critical of religious traditions. Islamic tradition was seen as a symbol of backwardness that had to be removed in order to build a modern and progressive Turkish nation. This idea was in line with Auguste Comte’s doctrine of positivism, which sought to marginalise the role of religion in national development. Kemal Atatürk’s secularism did not simply separate the state from religion, but sought to create a ‘new theology’ or an alternative set of beliefs that could replace the role of religion in Turkish society.

Kemalist secularism promotes the principle of strict neutrality of the public sphere, which strictly rejects the presence of religious symbols in the public sphere. One of the most controversial issues is the wearing of headscarves by Muslim women in public, which is considered a direct representation of religious expression.²³ Turkey’s Constitutional Court played a key role in upholding this principle, affirming that religious expression can be restricted in the public sphere in order to protect the essence of Turkish secularism. This approach differs from the French model of secularism (*Laïcité*), especially in terms of how the state treats and controls religion. In Turkey, the state does not simply separate itself from religion, but actively takes a role in shaping and controlling religious interpretations.²⁴ Through institutions such as Diyanet, the government seeks to create what it calls ‘republican Islam’—a version of religion that is tailored to the interests and vision of the state.²⁵ The main goal of this approach is to

²¹ 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* 10, no. 3 (2008): 107.

²² Redzuan and Mashitah, *Sekularisme dan Proses Demokrasi di Turki*, 37.

²³ Dilek Cindoglu and Gizem Zencirci, “The Headscarf in Turkey in the Public and State Spheres,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 44, no. 5 (2008): 792.

²⁴ Kerime Sule Akoglu, “Piecemeal Freedom: Why the Headscarf Ban Remains in Place in Turkey,” *Boston College International & Comparative Law Review* 38, no. 2 (2015): 286.

²⁵ Merve Kavakci Islam, *Headscarf Politics in Turkey: A Postcolonial Reading* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 49-50.

standardise people's religious understanding according to the will of the state, by limiting religious expressions that are deemed to threaten the principles of secularism.²⁶

Another Perspective on Secularism in Turkey

Turkey was officially established as a secular state, and this principle is clearly stated in Article 2 of the Constitution, which has been consistent since the first constitution in 1924 to the last constitution in 1982, which is still in force today. The removal of Islam as the official state ideology had two significant impacts on the status of religion in Turkey. First, it triggered an increasingly comprehensive process of secularisation in various constitutional provisions. Turkey's 1961 and current constitutions show a strong emphasis on the principles of secularisation in various aspects of national life. Secondly, as Article 2 is the cornerstone of Turkey's state identity, this clause effectively makes secularism the main foundation of every state policy. Whether in the political, social, or administrative dimensions, secularism becomes a fundamental principle that limits the role of religion in state affairs.²⁷

Despite Turkey's secularism, religious institutions still have a place in the constitutional structure, which is most clearly reflected in the existence of the Diyanet since the Atatürk era. It was established to replace religious institutions such as Şeyhülislâm and the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Endowments that had been abolished after the dissolution of the Ottoman Turkish Sultanate.²⁸ In contrast to the official clerical system during the Ottoman Empire, the Diyanet assumed a new role as a government institution directly under the Prime Minister's office. Its strategic position allows this institution to convey religious interpretations that are in line with the interests and vision of the government. Substantively, the existence of Diyanet is a state instrument to standardise religious understanding in society. Through its role, this institution seeks to stem the influence of religious interpretations that are considered not in line with the government's will, while still maintaining Turkey's image of secularism.

Although the Diyanet exists within the structure of the Turkish government, it has a very limited role and does not exert significant influence in the state administration. It has relatively narrow technical functions, such as regulating Islamic religious matters, determining the location of places of worship, and managing the appointment and dismissal of religious officials. The Diyanet's main function is actually to control religious

²⁶ Barras, "A right-based discourse to contest the boundaries of state secularism?" 1241.

²⁷ 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 Kayıtsız Şartsız Milletindir, n.d.

²⁸ Technically, the job scope 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 10.8.2024).

interpretations to conform to the interests of the state, with the aim of preventing the emergence of alternative interpretations among Turkish society.²⁹ Ali Bardakoğlu, a former leader of the institution, emphasised that the existence of the Diyanet does not contradict Turkey's principle of secularism. Turkish authorities view religion as a political instrument that needs to be controlled, with four main principles: 1) Preventing the domination of religion in state affairs; 2) Protect freedom of belief constitutionally; 3) Prevent the abuse and exploitation of religion; and 4) Guarantee religious rights and freedoms in order to maintain public order. Thus, the Turkish state positions itself as a watchdog and controller of religious discourse, ensuring that religion remains within the frame of the state's secular identity.³⁰

The decade of the 1980s was a critical period in Turkey's political history. Earlier, in the 1970s, the country was plagued by political unrest involving various opposing groups: right-wing ultranationalists, left-wing radical groups, as well as Turkish and Kurdish communities, and Sunni and Alawite groups.³¹ Responding to the unstable situation, the Turkish military staged a coup on 12 September 1980. During the period of military rule (September 1980–November 1983), they implemented an ideological strategy called the Turkish-Islamic synthesis. The main objective was to reduce the influence of radical leftist groups that were seen as threatening national stability. The military viewed Sunni Islam, which is the majority in Turkey, as a potential instrument for creating social unity and building national loyalty. This policy was systematically designed to limit the influence of the communist movement that had been growing since the 1960s.³² Ideologically, this approach sought to fuse Turkish nationalism with Islam through a reinterpretation of history that placed Islam as a shared identity. Through the Turkish-Islamic synthesis, the military regime aimed to encourage people to reflect on their historical identity, in the hope of strengthening social cohesion and loyalty to the state.

The implementation of the Turkish-Islamic synthesis did not mean a total abandonment of the Kemalist principle of secularism. Kenan Evren, the architect of the 1980 military coup, asserted that secularism was not incompatible with religion, demonstrating the military's retention of the basic principles of secularism despite implementing pro-religious policies.³³ Essentially, the Turkish-Islamic synthesis was a strategic socio-political project designed to achieve three main goals: gaining mass support, facilitating state control over religion, and strengthening social solidarity. The military implemented various control policies that reflected this approach, such as

²⁹ Gazi Erdem, "Religious Services in Turkey: From the Office of *Seyhülislām* to the *Diyanet*," *The Muslim World* 98, no. 2-3 (2008): 207.

³⁰ Ali Bardakoğlu, *Religion and Society: New Perspectives from Turkey* (Ankara: Publications of Presidency of Religious Affairs, 2009), 26-27.

³¹ Banu Eligür, *The Mobilization of Political Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 85-87.

³² Eligür, *The Mobilization of Political Islam in Turkey*, 93.

³³ Cited from Mustafa Sen, "Transformation of Turkish Islamism and the Rise of the Justice and Development Party," *Turkish Studies* 11, no. 1 (2010): 67.

imposing compulsory religious subjects in schools based on official state interpretations; conducting strict supervision of the content of Friday prayer sermons; and banning religious organisations deemed fundamentalist.³⁴ However, the Turkish-Islamic synthesis was not just a policy, but a significant turning point in the transformation of Turkish religious and political discourse. It fundamentally changed the way the relationship between religion, state, and society was viewed, while maintaining the existing framework of secularism.

The Crisis of the Legitimacy of Secularism in Turkey

The ideology of secularism in Turkey faces a number of complex challenges in its implementation, which can be identified in at least four main crises. E. Fuat Keyman, adapting Peter L. Berger's thinking, distinguishes secularisation into two levels: objective and subjective secularisation. Objective secularisation involves the institutional separation of politics from religion by removing the influence of religion in state authority. Subjective secularisation refers to the process of changing the consciousness of society as a whole towards a secular way of thinking.³⁵ Secularisation theory initially assumed that objective secularisation at the state level would automatically result in a secular-minded society. However, the Turkish experience shows an interesting paradox: people tend to accept the separation of state and religion at the institutional level, but reject secularisation at the level of social consciousness.³⁶ This phenomenon reveals that Islam remains a fundamental force in shaping the social identity of Turkish society. They can accept secularism as a constitutional principle, but reject it when it threatens their cultural and religious references.

Secularism in Turkey has the unique characteristic of being heavily centred on the role of the state in interpreting religion. The state takes full control over religious interpretation, aiming to limit the influence of religion in the public sphere. This strategy is an attempt at state control to manage religious practice by monopolising religious interpretation, rather than by removing it altogether. However, this approach poses serious problems in the context of democracy and pluralism. The state tends to discredit Islamic religious groups and political parties by portraying them as a threat to secularism.³⁷ The critical question that arises is whether the accusation of 'threat to secularism' is really valid or simply a state mechanism to reject religious interpretations that differ from the official government version. Ultimately, the Turkish model of secularism recognises only one single interpretation—that of the state—and rejects the diversity of religious interpretations. Consequently, alternative religious groups are seen as illegitimate and vulnerable to state suppression.

³⁴ Eligür, *The Mobilization of Political Islam in Turkey*, 94.

³⁵ E. Fuat Keyman, "Modernity, Secularism and Islam: The Case of Turkey," *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, no. 2 (2007): 217-218.

³⁶ Peter L. Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 126.

³⁷ Ümit Cizre Sakallıoğlu, "The Anatomy of the Turkish Military's Political Autonomy," *Comparative Politics* 29, no. 2 (1997): 154.

Secularism in Turkey faces a significant legitimacy crisis in relation to the definition of public and private space. In theory, secularism is meant to separate religious matters from private spheres,³⁸ but in practice, the state violates this boundary by intervening in the name of ‘protecting secularism’. The headscarf issue is a concrete example of this complexity. For Muslim women, wearing the hijab is a religious obligation and a personal right, while the state views it as a threat to the neutrality of the public sphere. This conflict demonstrates the fundamental paradox in Turkey’s concept of secularism: on the one hand, it guarantees personal freedom, but on the other hand, it restricts religious expression. In essence, secularism in Turkey fails to guarantee a balance between public neutrality and individual rights. The state tends to impose a rigid definition of secularity, which leads to restrictions on individual religious expression in the public sphere. As a result, religious obligations that should be personal are threatened and discriminated against for the sake of maintaining a narrow narrative of secularism.

Secularism in Turkey is vulnerable to social engineering, which is the state’s attempt to systematically shape people’s attitudes and mindsets. Referring to the statement of Jacques Chirac, former President of France, the concept of *laïcité* is intended as a neutral space that allows different religions to coexist harmoniously.³⁹ However, the Kemalist interpretation of this concept tends to lead to the formation of a uniform and modern society through an artificial process. This practice of social engineering is problematic because it seeks to make radical changes in the social structure of society. From a democratic perspective, the idea of forming a homogeneous society has the potential to be abused by the state, which could ultimately curb the freedom of citizens to practice their faith. Basically, such an approach contradicts the true principle of democracy, which is the recognition of the plurality and diversity of society. In essence, the secularisation project is not simply about separating religion from the state, but rather attempting to form a society with uniform thinking, which has the potential to inhibit freedom and diversity.

Turkey Today: A Country that Gives Freedom to Religion

The harsh implementation of secularisation in Turkey has led to various debates, which in turn have led to a discourse on a more open and inclusive approach to secularism. Interestingly, the idea of liberalising secularism was initiated by the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*-AKP), a conservative and Islam-oriented party.⁴⁰ In contrast to previous Islamist parties that tended to be sceptical of

³⁸ Keyman, “Modernity, Secularism and Islam,” 219.

³⁹ Barras, “A right-based discourse to contest the boundaries of state secularism?” 1240.

⁴⁰ AKP is a conservative party with Islamist roots, which emerged after a breakaway of the 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’s secularity. This argument, however,

secularism, the AKP sought to present itself as a party with a conservative democratic identity that could accept the principles of secularism.⁴¹ Through a conservative democratic approach, they attempted to bridge the two different sides by trying to combine conservative values-such as morality, national identity, historical pride, and tradition-with modern democratic principles such as free market economy, pluralism, rule of law, and protection of human rights.⁴²

The state's harsh policy in implementing secularism, which resulted in restrictions on people's religious freedom, was utilised by the AKP as a political opportunity. The party then developed a new narrative around secularism that emphasised empowering freedom, democratic principles, and upholding human rights. Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who at the time was the Prime Minister of Turkey (now President of Turkey) and a central figure in the AKP, emerged as the prime mover in campaigning for this new perspective. He said:

“As for secularism, we define it as the institutional attitudes and methods that guarantee the state remains impartial and fair towards all religions and thoughts, a principle that aims to guarantee peaceful social life among different faiths, sects, and schools of thought. We also believe that secularism needs to be crowned with democracy so that basic rights and freedoms are constitutionally guaranteed. This allows secularism to function as a mediating institution and provide an enabling environment for compromise.”⁴³

The statement highlighted two key points in the AKP's view of secularism. Firstly, the state must maintain a neutral and fair stance towards all beliefs and thoughts. Second, secularism needs to be understood in parallel with democratic principles. These two principles form the foundation of the liberal interpretation of the concept of secularism, which includes two fundamental aspects: the prohibition of the state from intervening in religious affairs and the need to integrate secularism with democratic values.⁴⁴ The

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 the 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* 11, no. 3-4 (2006): 544-547.

⁴¹ Gökhan Çelen and Ahmet A. Altay, “From an Intellectual Movement to Political Parties: The Transformation of Turkish Islamist Groups,” *Politics and Religion Journal* 14, no. 2 (2020): 437.

⁴² 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* 2, no. 2 (2009): 121.

⁴³ 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 29/12/2024)

⁴⁴ For further reading on the AKP's view on secularism, please refer to the party's program at Parti Programı, İl-Temel Haklar ve Siyasi İlkeler, AK Parti official website, <https://www.akparti.org.tr/parti/parti-programi/> (accessed 7/2/2024).

consequence of this approach is the focus on the democratisation process, which has become one of the main agendas in the AKP's political programme.

The AKP has adopted a liberal version of secularism through a series of democratisation efforts since coming to power in 2002. The party has actively reformed the political system with reference to democratic perspectives common to European countries. As evidence of its commitment, the AKP has shown very strong support for Turkey's membership in the European Union and views the Copenhagen Criteria as an important benchmark in the democratisation process. The AKP's strategy is to use the Copenhagen Criteria as an instrument to empower domestic democracy according to EU standards, which could indirectly undermine Turkey's rigid practice of secularism. Despite doubts about the party's true intentions, the democratisation process under AKP rule has been significant.⁴⁵ The party has undertaken a series of reform initiatives and constitutional amendments aimed at improving the democratic system as well as institutional restructuring, particularly in the military and judicial institutions that have been the main bastions of strict state secularism. Through this approach, the AKP seeks to transform Turkey's political landscape is moving towards a more open, democratic, and inclusive system.

The process of democratisation has had a pivotal significance in driving internal reforms in Turkey. The push for EU membership has not only led to institutional changes but also to fundamental transformations in political orientation, democratic practices, and the fulfillment of individual rights. Turkey's secularism, which had been seen as a regime that severely restricted individual freedoms, underwent a significant shift through the democratisation process. The main focus was on empowering individual rights by realigning the discourse of secularism towards a more liberal and accommodating approach. This transformation resulted in a new model where the state retains its secular principles, but in a more flexible way that respects individual beliefs. The main principle is to guarantee freedom of religion and belief as long as it does not interfere with the political domain. In other words, the state maintains its neutrality without interfering with the personal territory of citizens in exercising their beliefs.

Conclusion

Initially, secularism in Turkey was built on Atatürk's vision. Although it was strictly implemented during the Kemalist era, religion was not completely separated from the state, but rather controlled by the state. In practice, the state acted as a supervisor and controller of religious interpretation, with the aim of marginalising the role of religion from interfering in government affairs. The implementation of secularism in Turkey

⁴⁵ 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* 21, no. 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* 19, no. 2 (2017): 153-170.

faces a crisis of legitimacy due to several critical factors. Firstly, there was public resistance to the secularisation process. Second, the state-centric orientation of secularism that ignores pluralism and democratic values. Third, the inability to define a clear boundary between public and private space. Fourth, its vulnerability to social engineering. The crisis was exacerbated by Turkish secularism's interventionist approach that went too far in interfering with individual rights, especially those related to religious freedom. This further fuelled the emergence of a more liberal, accommodating and democratic variant of alternative secularism, which aims to liberate religion from strict state control.

This article argues that the landscape of secularism in Turkey has changed significantly from Atatürk's original vision. Erdogan and the AKP have endeavoured to develop a more Islam-friendly model of secularism, which has led to the establishment of moderate secularism. The AKP leadership period was characterised by the increasing visibility of Islam in the public sphere, which led some scholars and observers to fear an 'existential threat' to Turkish secularism. However, the author of the article believes that such concerns are overblown.

By referring to the essence of secularism as the separation between religion and state, Turkey can still be categorised as a secular state. One of the main evidences is that the Turkish constitution, which explicitly affirms the secularity of the state in Article 2, still maintains the principles of separation. The role of religion in the AKP government is not as extreme as in other Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan, Indonesia or Malaysia. The increasing visibility of religion in the Turkish public sphere cannot be directly interpreted as religious intervention in politics, but rather as a consequence of a more lenient practice of secularism. The AKP is perceived as simply guaranteeing freedom of religion, while the visibility of religion (especially Islam) is an expression of people's awareness of their faith that was previously repressed by the secular regime. However, the article also acknowledges the process of 'impoverishment' of secularism in Turkey, namely the weakening of the essence of Atatürk-style secularism and its diminishing influence. This phenomenon illustrates that Islam, as a social force with a long history and tradition in Turkey, cannot be completely contained by the radical secularist practices of the previous Kemalist regime. In other words, people's religious identities cannot be completely suppressed or eradicated through harsh state policies.

With continued electoral support, as seen in the 14 May general election, the AKP is expected to be able to maintain its version of secularism in Turkey. The authors do not see the possibility of radical change in the near future regarding the AKP-Erdogan model of secularism. The AKP's approach of providing religious freedom has constructed a new understanding among Turkish society, namely that the state can remain secular without intervening in the personal lives of citizens. Secularism will continue to be the official state ideology, but with more space for citizens to practice religion freely and openly. The AKP's success in implementing this 'soft secularism', which can be referred to as Turkey's version of the Anglo-Saxon secularism model, is seen as a political breakthrough that has the potential to influence the dynamics of religion-state relations in other Muslim countries. The article recommends further research to examine the dynamics of Turkish

secularism and its potential as an alternative model for resolving religious conflicts in the political sphere.

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