

Review - Democracy, Islam, And Secularism in Turkey

Written by J. Paul Barker

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J. PAUL BARKER, NOV 14 2012

Democracy, Islam, & Secularism in Turkey
Edited by Ahmet T. Kuru and Alfred Stepan
New York: Columbia University Press, 2012

Turkey has always been a land marked by stark contrasts. This is true in its landscape, its history, its politics, and its society. In *Democracy, Islam, and Secularism in Turkey* Ahmet Kuru and Alfred Stepan highlight a collection of capable analysts who cogently address some of the most compelling and significant questions about Turkish politics.

The contributors address these questions from a variety of theoretical approaches and each one brings a different analytical lens to bear on the situation. The goal of this volume is to make sense of some of the stark contrasts that persist in Turkey and to place recent developments in Turkish politics in their broader context in order to better understand both the significance of the progress that has been made and the issues that still remain unresolved.

Five questions sparked the production of this volume and are extremely relevant to and occupy much of the debate in contemporary Turkish politics.

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They are in sum:

1. What are the historical roots and contemporary content of the Kemalist ideology that is now under challenge?
2. Should, and could, Turkey's version of hard, controlling secularism be softened to allow greater space for religious actors in the public sphere, as in other democracies in Muslim-majority societies such as Indonesia and Senegal?
3. How might the "guardian" role of the Turkish military in politics be reduced?
4. Why have many once anti-Western Muslim groups become supportive of joining Europe, while the historically pro-Western military and its Kemalist allies have become Euro-skeptics?
5. Can the constitutional crisis that began in 2007 and continues, as of this writing, result in a deepened democracy in a Muslim-majority democracy? (p.2)

If not the direct questions being asked, these are under-girding the central issues of debate by political actors, scholars, and outside observers of Turkey. By bringing in the voices of a variety of contributors this volume is able to frame these questions within their broader historical background as well as providing detailed consideration of the issues.

The first three chapters approach the issue of diversity from different vantage points and expound on the reasons why diversity has been such a persistent issue of debate – even framed as an existential threat – since the founding of the Turkish Republic. Combined, these three chapters open the book with a strong and multifaceted call for greater freedoms and rights for minority groups as a necessity of a truly strong and robust democratic system.

Karen Barkey opens with a historical account of the legacy of diversity management during the Ottoman Empire. She elucidates what the historical mechanisms and processes were that produced interethnic and religious peace in the first centuries of Ottoman rule (p.13). She would describe the relations between politics and religion in sum as a strong central authority, control over religious institutions, powerful linkages to everyday religious practice, and the integration and acceptance of diversity (p.24). The first three of these were, it would appear, carried over into the Republic, but the fourth, the acceptance of diversity was not. It is on this point that Barkey argues the Ottoman past can be helpful as a challenge to embrace diversity within the context of democratic principles and equal rights for all Turkish citizens (p.28).

The explanation for the rejection of diversity can be traced back to the ideological tenants of the founders of the Republic. M. Şükrü Hanioğlu contributes an incisive critique of Kemalism. While on one hand Kemalism is lacking in ideological depth (pp.32-33) Kemalism has been a profoundly impactful shaping force. Hanioğlu exposes the roots of early Kemalism (circa 1930s) which he argues include an aspect of a personality cult, and the major tenants of scientism, Westernization, and Turkish nationalism (p.37). An informed understanding of Kemalism is essential for understanding the breadth of ideological debates that persist in present political dialogue.

In the first of two chapters in this volume, Ergun Özbudun argues that the founding philosophy is the reason for the monolithic state, despite a relatively pluralistic society. His argument is that embedded within the founding philosophy were some principles that are inconsistent with the development of a "truly pluralistic political system" (p.61). He introduces some explanation of what pluralism looks like through a contrast between pluralism and corporatism. The urgency of confronting these issues is highlighted by the number of issues concerning the rights and representation of minorities. "The most fundamental problem facing the present-day Turkish democracy is to reconcile this social pluralism with an authoritarian state tradition that seeks to impose an artificial homogeneity, even uniformity, on the society" (p.70). The reconciliation of these factors must result in consensual agreements protective of the fundamental rights of every citizen (pp.87-88), and thus without the system succumbing to a swinging of the pendulum from a secularist authoritarianism to a conservative and more religiously expressive authoritarianism.

The remaining chapters of the book focus in on particular issues or explanatory viewpoints to address the current

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state of democratic development in Turkey. The fourth chapter, authored by the co-editors, focuses in on one fundamental legacy of Kemalism – secularism.

Alfred Stepan and Ahmet Kuru have both provided valuable contributions to the literature reflecting on the place of religion in the modern world. In a time where there are so many “secular” states and debates about the dangers of religious extremism this article puts *laïcité* into a global comparative perspective. They consider the particularities of the religion-state relationship in Senegal, France, and Turkey as individual expressions of the “multiple secularisms” of modern states (pp.96-97). This chapter attempts to briefly explicate not only an explanatory framework showing differences between “assertive and passive secularism” traditions or between “respect all, support all and separationism” but also to make an argument for what the causes are that led to the adoption of a particular tradition (pp.102-103). In what is a condensed version of more developed arguments made by the authors in other places, this chapter is a valuable starting point for scholars of religion and politics in international relations.

The chapters that follow can be connected to Stepan and Kuru’s in that the military has for much of the history of the Republic been positioned as “the guardians of secularism,” in recent years the tactics and approaches have changed and Ümit Cizre helps to identify how and why its strategy has become more society-centered and less state-centered (p.123). Alongside of the military as the guardians of the secular system the Turkish Constitutional Court has been a guardian – and definer – of the meaning of “secularism” in the Turkey and protector of the state (p.156).

In the past decade the political landscape in Turkey has been reshaped in multiple ways. Two actors have played central roles in this process, the conservative democratic Justice and Development Party (AK Party) which has been the ruling party since 2002 and the European Union through the accession process. Joost Lagendijk is perhaps better qualified than anyone to narrate the way in which these two actors have interacted due to his position serving as chairman of the EU’s parliamentary accession committee between 2002-2009. Lagendijk helps to explain how it was that strange coalitions were formed with European progressives allied with Turkish conservatives and other bizzare twists and turns in this process (pp.170-171). This rendering is an honest and straight-forward telling of the story with the willingness to point out the short-comings on both sides of the negotiations and the areas that need to be addressed for progress going forward.

The final chapter of the book raises a question of the uniqueness of the Turkish experience and whether or not there is any value to the concept of a “Turkish model” by situating it within the matrix of political Catholicism. Here Kalyvas argues that political moderation away from religious extremism can take place when there is the opportunity for participation within the political structure. It is the reminder of the potential value “sticks for extremism and rewards for participation” in societies that are moving towards establishing democracy (p.196).

Democracy, Islam, and Secularism is a timely commentary on current issues in Turkish politics. The contributors provide a helpful analytical framework that is profitable for seasoned observers and relative newcomers to the study of the politics of Turkey. This volume illuminates democratic short-comings of both past and present and provides insights for future developments in the unique and compelling story of the Republic of Turkey.

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