Religion and Secularism in Turkey, and The Turkish Elections

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PATRICIA SOHN, SHADI HEIDARIFAR AND SYDNEY POLANIN, MAY 26 2023

Turkey is a fascinating panoply of religion and secularism. Like most of the largest countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), by territory and by population, Turkey in the 20th century experienced a long experiment with secularism. It is an experiment which, in the case of Turkey, continues to present even with the current ruling, religiously-oriented Justice and Development Party (its acronym, from the Turkish-language name for the party, is AKP). The relationship – and some tension – between secularism and religion appear to be at the forefront of the current Turkish elections. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of the religiously-oriented AKP won the largest number of seats, with over 49%; but he did not meet the 50% threshold required to secure victory in the Turkish electoral system. Meanwhile, the opposition candidate, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu of the Republican People's Party (CHP), received over 44% of the vote.

The primary choice for Turkish voters appears to be situated along dimensions of religion and nationalism with regard to two questions: secular political institutions and immigration. Incumbent President Erdoğan and the AKP have sought to downplay the significance of religion in AKP policy vis à vis secular institutions and economics, recently returning to classic liberal economic policies. Likewise, while he oversaw an institutional change from parliamentary to presidential system in 2017, strengthening executive power in the aftermath of a 2016 coup, he did not fundamentally change the secular nature of the country's political institutions or military, such as placing a religious council as highest state body (as in Iran), or installing clerics in important positions of national oversight or political power across the state (and in places where they have not traditionally been located). He has been criticized for tough measures aimed to quell potential irredentist forces on right, left, religious, and secular poles against a future coup, which some have called authoritarian. At the same time, Erdoğan has been responsive to several post-Arab-Spring-related regional crises, creating space for approximately 3 million refugees, some of whom have become immigrants; immigrants are highly supportive of Erdoğan and the AKP.

The 2016 coup appears to have been organized by religious forces significantly right of Erdoğan; some secularists may be opportunistic in capitalizing on the situation to criticize Erdoğan's policies and religious orientation. Meanwhile, Erdoğan has walked a fine line seeking to maintain the rule of law vis à vis both secular and religious forces that might threaten the state. Claims that the "firewall" between religion and state has been eroded by Erdoğan may be overstated; even allowing a prayer at an opening ceremony has been controversial. Meanwhile, the Religious Affairs Directorate (similar to a Ministry of Religious Affairs) was established not by Erdoğan but by Mustafa Kemal in 1924.

The opposition candidate offers a nationalist platform, which some are calling "social democratic;" it seeks to join the interests of "political, ethnic, and religious groups," and it represents a broad coalition of opposition parties from left to right. It is not clear how well that coalition would continue to cohere after an election, although the construction of such a coalition is seen by many as a positive development. Identity politics has emerged as highly significant for the opposition, including announcements that presidential candidate Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu is in favor of hard policy change against refugees and immigrants; he has vowed to send many of them home.

Kılıçdaroğlu has moved his party from a strictly secularist party to one favoring 'reconciliation' across several lines

relating to political ideology, identity, and faith; a former accountant, his policy processes *qua* politician have been seen as dull – in the sense of non-theatrical – which some people favor as a form of getting the job done without drama. He advocates a return to a pure parliamentary system rather than a presidential system with a parliament, and a re-establishment of strong judicial independence vis à vis the executive and legislative branches. It should be noted that Turkey has been engaged in judicial reform to strengthen the judiciary in relation to the same since 2019. Like Erdoğan, Kılıçdaroğlu favors liberal economic policies; Kılıçdaroğlu is more "bullish" regarding Ukraine than is Erdoğan; and, while Erdoğan is widely seen as leaning toward populist politics, Kılıçdaroğlu, similarly, appeals to populist sentiment by claiming humble origins and stating that, if elected, he will not live in a presidential palace.

While Kılıçdaroğlu has positioned his party away from strict secularist politics, the relationship and contest between the AKP and the CHP is widely seen as a referendum on religion versus secularism in the Turkish polity (Gurses, Fox, and Ozturk2023) Secular and religious dynamics have been important in the election process, and the population appears to be closely split precisely on religious-secularism dimensions in its political discourses (with less detail regarding how each would affect specific policies). It is heading to a runoff vote on Sunday with an incumbent lead.

The secularist experiment in Turkey began in the early 1920s with Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Father of the Turks, who established secular political institutions (Shambayti and Kirdiş 2009) and created temporary bans for certain religious artifacts in clothing, such as the fez (a small round hat) for men and the headscarf for women. This experiment with secularism extended across the region in countries including Iran (also beginning 1920s), Iraq, Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria. In at least two of those cases, the experiment was associated with a relatively hard-left and U.S.S.R.-influenced version of secularism; in some, especially those associated with national socialism, they reflected hostility or even violence toward religious leaderships and constituencies, that is, among the majority religion, Islam (e.g., not yet speaking of religious minorities) (Woods and Karadağ 2015)

In two countries, Turkey and Iran, the secularist experiment was *laik* in character, meaning that it leaned toward the right-of-center French model of *laïcité*; in Turkey's case that meant "the subordination of religion to the state" rather than the strict separation seen in France (White 2002, 35). Turkey's experiment with secularism has been among the longest lasting, as its secular political institutional framework still stands regardless of the orientation of its ruling political party, be that orientation religious or secular; that is so despite the state of emergency established in the aftermath of the 2016 coup attempt. Turkey's secularist experiment has been, generally, one leaning right-of-center and associated with the development of robust institutions supporting participatory politics and democracy, albeit with several halting periods of states of emergency, most established in order precisely to protect the secular democratic political institutions (Shambayati and Kirdiş 2009).

Americans often find it difficult to understand the propensity of MENA populations to adhere to and support religion. American experiences of secularism tend toward neither a French *laïque* (in Turkey, *laik*) form of secularism; nor do they gravitate to a Soviet far-left, no-toleration form of secularism in which religion can have little-to-no safe public presence, and in which religious leaders and adherents may be persecuted or even subjected to violence. Secularism in the U.S. has tended, rather, toward the, "open marketplace of ideas" model, or what we might call an, "open conference table." In the "open conference table" model, we choose together, *à priori*, either to leave religion outside the conference room door entirely for the purposes of all discussions therein; or we choose, in advance of meeting, to bring religion to the table as part of the deliberations, everyone with his and her own religion, ethics, and moral values in question.

Fawaz Gerges (Gerges 2019) provides a most cogent analysis of the significance of secular-religious dynamics in MENA politics. He suggests that some of the most important aspects of MENA politics in the second half of the 20th century, and since, can be understood through the relationship between two persons representing those two poles, secular and religious. They are: Gamal Abdel Nasser and Sayyid Qutb, respectively, in Egypt. That is, the miscomprehension between these two men, in Gerges' analysis, led to a fracture between (secular) Arab nationalism, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, (religious) Islamist politics. Likewise, the unwillingness of the (secular) Free Officers to include the (religious) Muslim Brotherhood in the leadership of the state infrastructure after their shared coup against the royal family led to a conflict between the secular Free Officers, who came to represent

Arab nationalism, and the religious Muslim Brotherhood. According to Gerges, neither of these groups was radical at that early date in the way that they would become later; it was through the loggerheads and refusal to work together that each became increasingly radical in their, from that time forward, hard (secular) nationalist and religious radical directions, respectively (Gerges 2019, 126).

Turkey includes, among its secular constituencies, predominantly *laik* secularists, and a far smaller group of socialist influenced (far-left) secularism. Neither is particularly welcoming to religion while holding the reins of power, although the *laik* form does not tend toward violent oppression whereas the far-left form has, historically, in notable cases. Examples of (leftist) persecution of (majority) religious leaders by local regimes in 20th century MENA on "secularist" grounds can be found in Egypt, Iraq, and in other countries. It is a part of MENA history that has been understated in much among general, public-level treatments of the region, as we have focused on the most proximate problem: violently radical Islamist groups, and particularly international jihadist groups. But, as Gerges incisively demonstrates for Egypt, violently radical Islamism emerges after what we might call the secularist debacle, or, the secularist refusal to work with majority religious leaderships and constituencies.

Turkey also includes among its populations those with the more American orientation to secularism that we are calling the, "open conference table." Historically, however, those are fewer both in Turkey and in the region more broadly. As a result, especially, of the more Soviet-styled experiment with secularism in several countries with large populations, religious constituencies across the region – even in Turkey with its more *laik* experience – have developed a skepticism, suspicion, or even a distrust of "secularism" when on sale by MENA politicians (Woods and Karadağ 2015). Which secularism? Whose? And what will it mean, in practice, for religious freedoms?

The overwhelming majority of the Turkish population is Muslim, and most of those believe in God and practice religion to some degree. According to an extensive study of religiosity in Turkey, 85.7% of Turks believe in God to a certainty, and another 8.6% believe in God with some doubts, together, totaling 94.3% belief in God; meanwhile, only 1.5% absolutely do not believe in God, and several percent in addition do not believe in a personal God, or are agnostic (Nişancı 2023, 28). Meanwhile, belief among women is only slightly lower than among men (Nişancı 2023, 29). Belief tends to be higher in higher age groups (Nişancı 2023, 29), and lower among those holding graduate degrees (Nişancı 2023, 30). The rural-urban difference is minimal (Nişancı 2023, 30). Identification with various schools of thought, or not, is also reported (Nişancı 2023, 33). Not unlike other parts of MENA, Turkey does house some small number of religious extremists. It also has a competing ethnic constituency, which seeks expansion of democratic principles, participation, and freedoms (Romano and Gurses 2014).

Whatever the Turkish people decide, ultimately, we would encourage the next President of the Republic of Turkey to be inclusive of the other side of the spectrum from himself – whether secular or religious – rather than exclusionary. The goal of including the opposition in meaningful political deliberations and processes would be to avoid, in the main, the types of loggerheads that emerged in the post-Nasser-Qutb split, the ramifications of which can be nothing short of staggering if we take Gerges' analysis of the mid-twentieth-century Egyptian example into account. We all know that we do not want to sustain extremes in either religion or secularism, certainly not for the seventy years or more that Gerges' analysis implies we have experienced since the Nasser-Qutb rift. If Gerges is right, sometimes momentous political dynamics come down to the relationship between two men. They may not even both be powerful men in political office. One politician and one thinker at loggerheads, Gerges shows us, can change the world – for better or for worse.

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About the author:

Patricia Sohn is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Florida. She has a joint appointment in the Center for Jewish Studies, where she is Undergraduate Coordinator; and she is affiliated with the Center for Global Islamic Studies. She is co-author of, Simone Raudino and Patricia Sohn, editors,*Beyond the Death of God: Religion in 21st Century International Politics* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2022).

Shadi Heidarifar is a Doctoral Candidate in the Department of Philosophy, University of Florida.

Sydney Polanin is a J.D. Candidate, Stetson University, College of Law.