

Consolidating New Forms of Citizenship in Turkey

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BERKIN SAFAK SENER, APR 13 2014

Is the Islamo-political Solution to the Kurdish Question Consolidating New Forms of Citizenship in Turkey?

The introduction of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government's Islamo-political approach as a solution to the Kurdish problem brought new perspectives to the already heated debates on an emerging triangle of Islam, politics and society in Turkey. Being traditionally two estranged groups, Islamists and Kurds have formed a unique coalition with the participation of the Turkish state and Kurdish opposition in an attempt to solve the long-standing Kurdish problem, while inevitably confronting the modern, laicist nation-state. The (re)construction of a religion-based, Ottomanistic definition of identity not only challenges the Kemalist roots of the Turkish state and society but also contributes to a postmodernisation of them, with its idiosyncrasies such as the absence of strong civil society, weaknesses in participatory democracy, and the authoritarian tendencies of the central state.

Based on this argument, I will first discuss the estrangement process of Islamists and Kurds under the laicist modernity. Then, I will continue with an analysis of the emergence of societal dichotomies and subsequent affinities between the Kurds and Islamo-political groups. Following a discussion of the postmodernisation of Turkish society and politics, the last section will focus on the recent developments regarding the envisioned Islamo-Ottoman solution of the Kurdish question in terms of the consolidation of new forms of citizenship in Turkey.

The modern Republic of Turkey was founded in 1923 under the leadership of Kemal Ataturk as a result of a revolutionary process that sought to establish a modern, laicist nation state. This state-building project was structured on a vision of constructing a nation based not on a totality of various religious-ethnic groups, but rather on an understanding of national, legal and individual belonging regardless of social, ethnic, or religious differences (Akgonul, 2008:70). According to Heper, national sovereignty rather than popular sovereignty shaped the Kemalist elites' interpretation of the Durkheimian notion of state as "the agent of rationality". The Kemalist state, in other words, was conceived to form and reform the nation's sentiments and aspirations towards creating a progressive society that would reach the contemporary level of civilization (cited in Keyman, 2005: 275).

The status of religion in Turkish society in relation to the overarching objective of secularization was regarded as one of the most contentious issues by the revolutionaries. Contrary to the mainstream arguments that the modernizers regarded Islam as "the antithesis to progress" (Tank, 2005:4), Parla and Davison suggest that religion was indeed "being taught, administered, promoted by the state", as evidenced by the religious education practices and the foundation of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (2008:66). As opposed to the claims that Kemalists utilised Islam as a social morality system for the production of a social cement necessary to bind people together (Ibid.: 70), it might well be argued that the Kemalists sought to establish a new form of Islam of their own. However, this new form would not be allowed to become a significant layer of social identity or included in the definition of citizenship.

Considering the nationalism-religion axis, Turkish nationalism quite decisively prevails over Islam in the construction of social solidarity. This is evidenced in the introduction of national rituals, such as flag saluting and national anthem, and non-religious reinterpretation of Turkish prehistory. As Tank indicates, the Anatolian people who tended to view their identity in religious terms were encouraged to embrace a secular collective identity (2005:6). Moreover, as the boundaries between the notions of membership within the state (i.e., citizenship) and membership within ethno-

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cultural groups (nationality) disappeared over time, ethno-linguistic and religious minority groups challenged the idea of universal citizenship (Soner, 2005:289-90). In line with this, the laicist nation-building process, which aimed to create universal citizenship, was perceived to be exclusionary by two major social groups: Conservatives and Kurds. Whereas the problematic nature of citizenship by means of legitimate political representation and cultural politics concerned Islamo-political groups, Kurdish nationalism identified itself with a separatist movement (Baban, 2005: 52). Despite the changing understandings of Kemalism over time, which can also be described as a shift from Kemalism to Atatürkism – emphasizing stagnation and dogmatization of the Kemalist ideology (Sener, 2012: 44) – the official ideology's attitude has remained dissatisfied with Islam and Islamo-political groups throughout the republican history.

In the 1970s, Turkish ethnonationalism promoted Sunni-Islam and gave rise to the concept of Turkish-Islamic synthesis in response to the augmentation of a subversive social polarization between left and right political groups (Somer, 2004:242; Tank, 2005:11). As Tank correctly notes, "religion was enlisted to reinforce national identity as a bulwark against leftist ideology" (2005:10). The Turkish state's utilitarian attitude towards religion envisaged a paradoxical usage of religion either to secure or to threaten the state (Tank, 2005:11). What Islamo-political groups were concerned with was Turkey's status as a country of controlled secularity, and thus controlled religion. The autonomous or decentralised nature of Islamo-political communities contradicted the state's supreme authority over religion and religious groups. Coming to Kurds, the problematic interpretations and subsequent implications of universal citizenship gave rise to dominance of Turkish ethnonationalism, which resulted in its antithesis dialectically. As Somer states, "the ethnic definition of Turkish nationalism preceded, and was causally linked to, the development of Kurdish counter-nationalism" (2004:241).

The common grounds and the ideological coalition between the aforementioned two groups, Kurds and Islamo-political groups, indicate that the Kemalist policies which shadowed the religious brotherhood between Kurds and Turks resulted in the loss of the state's legitimacy among Kurds while the imposed secularism alienated religious Muslims from citizenship (Erdogan, 2007). The emergence of the counter-elites, Islamo-political groups and Kurds is based on their concurrence on four specific suppositions: First, the Kemalist state challenged these groups' autonomy, which was once provided by the Ottoman state; second, the state forced them to integrate into a modernist-progressivist project; Third, it wanted to control and readjust the characteristics of religiosity by the hands of the central state via national education; Last, the official ideology gave utmost priority to national solidarity and social cohesion while disregarding cultural and religious diversity. The next section tries to analyse the emergence of new dichotomies and perception changes following the formation of the AKP government.

It would be more accurate to describe the AKP's electoral victory in 2002 as the AKP's seizure of the utmost power, considering the dramatic and unanticipated shifts in the management of state affairs and societal perceptions since that time. As Asad indicates, "the introduction of new discourses may result in the disruption of established assumptions structuring debates in the public sphere" (2003:185). This introduction of new politics of moderate Islam was not an exception in Turkey. It is important to bear in mind that traditionally, Islamo-political groups and Kurdish nationalism have "directly challenge[d] the unifying discourse of Turkish modernity on the basis of which secularist Turkish nationalism reproduces itself" (Keyman, 2005:268). Having seized the power, the AKP gradually brought up discussions about the Turkish state's conceptions, long taken for granted. Within the framework of these conceptions were citizenship, related social demands, and secularism. As Isin and Wood indicate, "citizenship is neither purely sociological nor purely legalistic but refers to a relationship whose discursive and political conditions of existence are constituted sociologically and legalistically by a set of practices" that allows and limits the individuals' and groups' demands for new rights in relation to a country's current regime of modernity (cited in Keyman 2005:269).

The AKP government aimed to amend the traditional perception of citizenship; Sarigil quotes from the manifestation of the Prime Minister Erdogan that "both Turkish and Kurdish ethnic sub-identities which are tied together under a primary identity: citizenship; within such an understanding of citizenship, Islamic identity is expected to function as unifying factor among the peoples of Turkey" (2010:537). This new perception resulted in augmentation and enlargement of the scope of various identity groups' claims for new rights such as the right to education in the mother tongue, recalling Isin and Wood's mentioned definition of citizenship. Moreover, Erdogan brought a new perspective to the existing secular-religious dichotomy by stating that "one cannot be both secular and Muslim. You will either be

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Muslim or secular. Brought together, these will repel each other" (cited in Somer, 2004:244).

Apart from these manifestations, more structural and large-scale dichotomies both emerged and were severed under the AKP government. First, republican versus Islamist dichotomy became evident with regard to the Ottoman governance, specifically a "heterodox communal structure", or a millet system which will be discussed broadly in the following section. While Republicans aimed to "separate individuals from their traditional kinship, ethnic, and religious ties" for making people "equal members of modern national society", Islamists favoured "independent and autonomous communities similar to those of Ottoman Empire" (Baban, 2005:53). The main source of conflict between Republicans and Islamists was Islamo-political groups' preferential attitude towards community over society. As Sarıbay puts it, Kemalist elites envisaged a society with its diversified division of labour and independence from religious and communal restraints rather than a community that would permit individual autonomy (cited in Baban, 2005:55). In the framework of this conceptual discrepancy, it can be argued that further antagonisms became explicit. Whilst the characteristics of the universal citizenship (Kemalism) were rationalism, progress, the modern nation, and secularism, those of the private realm (Islamopolitical groups) were ethnic identities, religion, and traditional social relations. As Parla and Davison argue, the dichotomy was not between two distinct "kulturkampf", real progressivists versus reactionaries, but "a schism and clash between two sects of Islam vying for power and competing politically" (2005:72). It can well be argued that, at the time being, the conflict became increasingly severe. A new phase has recently emerged in the Kemalist-Islamist dichotomy, as the government's project for the solution of Kurdish problem ripened. In the framework of the solution, a new aspect, Sunni Islam, has been incorporated into the definition of citizenship as exemplified in the mentioned example of the Prime Minister's articulation of Islam as unifying factor among Turkey's sub-identities. Thus, the conflict gained a new axis: the laicist definition of citizenship in the modern nation-state, and the pluralist, anti-laicist definition of the postmodern state. The question, at this point, is whether the aforementioned dichotomies, motivations, and policies of the AKP government dominated by Islamopolitical groups can be considered in the framework of the "postmodernisation" of Turkish society.

Keyman indicates three shifts concerning the major socio-economic change in Turkey, from the 1980s onwards, by quoting Delanty's terminology: from ideology to identity, from state to society, and from structure to agency (2005:278). These shifts were accompanied by "the articulation of identity claims to citizenship rights" with three distinctive features: postnational, or not reducing the concept of citizenship to the legal/political membership of nation-state; differential, meaning individual rights as well as cultural group rights; and constitutional, or common grounds for the constitutional guarantee (Keyman 2005:285). This analytical framework may provide a useful reference point to examine the postmodernisation of Turkish society and politics.

Starting with the very first shift, it is now a widely-accepted argument that identity politics gained significant popularity in Turkey since the 1980s (Sarigil, 2004:533). The existence of multiple identities resulted in the identification of the self on the basis of race, class, ethnicity, gender (Isin and Wood, 1999:16), as well as religion, and faiths. In the scope of these identity claims, Islamists and Kurdish nationalism challenged the unifying provision of Turkish modernity in which secularist Turkish nationalism was embedded (Keyman, 2005:268). However, there is still little evidence that the rise of Islamopolitical and Kurdish identities occurred as a result of the postmodernisation of Turkish society. Continuing to investigate this causality, Isin and Wood suggest that "the basic conflict between citizenship and identity arises from a specific concept of each: citizenship as universal and identity as particular" (1999:3). It can be stated that while universal citizenship is more of a project of modernity, identity is of postmodernity. Among the reasons of postmodern identity formation (Isin and Wood, 1999:156), besides the intensification of struggles on race, ethnicity, sexuality, and ecology rather than class subordination, and the aestheticization of everyday life through consumerism, the existence of postindustrial economy cannot be counted among motivations behind the rise of Kurdish ethnonationalism regarding the socio-economically underdeveloped standing of south-eastern Turkey.

Among different or deficient motivations of ethnic rise in Turkey in comparison to the rise of ethnic identities in the West can be listed as: the absence of strong decentralized civil society (a necessary condition to enable and facilitate the rise of cultural identities); the ethnic-awakening mainly projected by the Islamopolitical elite's government being the major opponent of the modern, central, secular nation-state; the identity-awakening only intensified in certain

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cultural groups, such as Kurds, but not others, i.e Laz or Circassian minority (most likely because the project was under the state supervision/control); the emergence of decentralized particular identities was not accompanied by the consolidation of participatory democracy, thus it fell short to further reproduce and consolidate democracy. Instead, it might be argued that the Kurdish awakening, in the last decade of Turkey, was a state-controlled project for the sake of challenging secular modern nation-state and to give rise to universal Islamic interpretation of citizenship, which will be discussed broadly in the following section with reference to the Ottoman millet system.

Given the mentioned deficiencies of Turkish experience of postmodernisation, it might be concluded that this process occurred under state control, not under the control of civil society. It could further be concluded that the state targeted only certain cultural groups, without the accompaniment of advancements toward a participatory democracy, and for the sole purpose of challenging the established secular Turkish modernity. Should the consolidation of participatory democracy and civil society be crucial for postmodernisation, then the Turkish case falls short of being genuine postmodernisation; however, if there is the multiplicity of postmodernisation(s), then Turkish case can be regarded as following its own sui generis path.

The idiosyncratic postmodernisation of Turkish society and politics led to two significant results. First, it gave rise to the affinities between Islamo-political groups in power and Kurds, due to both group's confrontation with the secular Turkish nation-state, and the promotion of identity-awakening as a counter-modern project, undertaken by the Islamo-political government. This resulted in Kurds' and conservatives' positioning themselves on the same side of the postmodern, decentralised, pluralist state against the secular, modern nation-state. As Isin and Wood argue, the dialogical process between these groups allowed individuals to recognize "resemblance and affinities between each other" (1999:19). The most evident affinity, besides its counter-modern orientation, was Islam, through which the dialogic politics was operated.

The second significant result of the postmodernisation occurred in the characteristics of Kurdish conflict as, according to Yavuz and Ozcan, it "shifted from the military sphere (80s and 90s) to the social and political spheres. It is not the Turkish state that is confronting the Kurds any longer but Turks and Kurds confronting each other" (cited in Sarigil, 2010:534). With the rise of identity-awareness and postmodernisation, the identification of conflict shifted from the Turkish state's south-eastern problem to Turkish society's Kurdish problem (as mentioned before, this shift is in line with the shifts from structure to agency, state to society and ideology to identity). The following section discusses the progress of postmodernisation in the Turkish case. It looks at identity-awakening and the utilisation of religion in ethnonationalist conflicts in the framework of current affairs regarding the Kurdish question, and focuses on the Islamo-political government's negotiations with Ocalan, the convicted leader of the PKK (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan).

Subsequent to the negotiations between the Turkish state and Ocalan, on 21st of March (Newroz, marks the coming of Spring) Ocalan's letter was announced and largely interpreted as the articulation of a ceasefire. The letter, which can be regarded as the declaration of the affinities between the AKP government (Islamio-political groups) and Kurdish politics, publicly articulated the Islamio-political solution of the Kurdish question. The significant statements of Ocalan, emphasizing the affinities, can be summarized in three areas. First, his criticism of Turkish modernity:

"The creation of geographies based on ethnicity and a single nation is an inhuman fabrication of modernity that denies our roots and our origins (...) The last century's repressive, annihilationist, and assimilationist policies, based on capitalist modernity, represent the efforts of a ruling elite to deny a long history of amity." (2013)

Second, his emphasis on Islamic brotherhood between Turks and Kurds:

"The Turkish people who live in what is called Turkey today – the ancient Anatolia – should recognise that their common life with the Kurds, under the flag of Islam, rests on the principles of amity and solidarity (...) But in the hands of the narrow and ruling elitists, "we" has been reduced to "one." It is time to give the "we" concept its old spirit and to implement it." (2013)

Third, his use of religious concepts, theoretically contradicts with his ex-Marxist background: "The truths in the

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messages of Moses, Jesus and Mohammed are being implemented in our lives today with new tidings. People are trying to regain what they have lost.” (2013)

As Mitchell states, “using Islam as a primary form of identification and common ground, the AKP government is applying a unique step for rapprochement with Kurdish minority” (2012). Islam emerges as a new instrument of the government that promotes a new form of modernity replacing the old one. In line with their assertion that modernity cannot be equated with secularism and westernization (Baban, 2005:58), the new elites of the new modernity, conservatives and Kurds, propose a new societal ontological unit: communities under the unifying “umbrella” of Sunni Islam. The new modernity, which Alogan calls, “Islamic democratic modernity” implies the shift from nation-state to multi-ethnic Islamic ummah society (2013). Besides the ideological concerns of AKP critics, Belek warns against the likelihood of the diffusion of ethnic/sectarian conflict in Turkey (2013). The barriers in front of the unification of Turkish and Kurdish ethnonationalisms in the context of “Islamically shaped territorial identities” are summarized by Somer as: the possibility of deepening secularist-Islamist and Sunni-Alevi cleavages; the possibility of Kurds favouring “the ethnicisation of Islamic identity rather than the Islamicisation of ethnicity”; and the likelihood of Turkey’s relations with the EU being undermined (2004:243).

It would not be wrong to state, at the time being, that the last two obstacles were thrown out of the agenda of the Islamo-political government. First, Kurdish elites chose to cooperate with Islamists; this became largely evident after Ocalan’s letter. Second, after coming into office in 2009, Foreign Minister Davutoglu’s main foreign policy focus shifted from the EU project to other alternatives such as Eurasia and the Middle East. This regional shift is widely regarded as a part of neo-Ottomanism which re-gained its importance and popularity after Ocalan’s letter. The millet system, the Ottoman social order, occupies a central place in neo-Ottomanism discussions. In the hierarchical millet system, comprised of the sovereign nation (*millet-i hakime*) and subjected nation (*millet-i mahkume*), the non-Muslim groups were separate millets, having their own leader mediating between the community and the administration, and they were autonomous in social affairs such as religion, education, and marriage (Baban, 2005:61-3). As Sarigil quotes from Prime Minister Erdogan, “Turkish and Kurdish identities should be treated as ethnic sub-identities which are tied together under a primary identity: citizenship, within such an understanding of citizenship, Islamic identity is expected to function as unifying factor among the peoples of Turkey” (2010:537). Having articulated Islam as the social glue among Turk and Kurds, it can be argued that the AKP prefers establishing pax-Ottomana, or a millet system. This gives rise to a compatible definition of identities which, according to Somer, is a positive-sum relationship that allows the simultaneous holding of identities, known as composite identities (2004:245). However, the promotion of Sunni Islam as a social cement excludes Alevis, atheists, and other faith groups; this challenges the positive sum nature of a compatible definition of identities. Referring to Somer’s conception, rival identities with zero sum and an oppositional nature are likely to emerge between Sunni Kurds, Turks and the non-Sunni population as a result of so-called pax-Ottomana. As Guler highlights, Kurdish peace will inevitably lead to the exclusion of Alevi-Bektashi community (2013).

Furthermore, referring to Anderson’s statement that “nationalism employs highly abstract concepts of time and space to tell a particular story” (cited in Asad, 2003:193), the transformation of characteristics of social unity in Turkey replaced secular concepts of shared history with religious attributions to its Ottoman past as evident in the aforementioned conception: multi-ethnies coexisting under the flag of Islam. The employment of a religious “story” for the common history and the new modernity project might serve the Islamo-political government’s holistic Islamicisation project as the pillars of the new modernity are being established through the solution of the Kurdish problem.

In conclusion, despite being one of the backbones of the Islamo-political movement, Kurdish society (Akturk, 2012), for the first time in the Republican period, is projected to unify with Turkish society in terms of common religion, Sunni Islam, common history, Islamic Ottoman past, and shared apathy towards a secular modern nation-state. In order to critically evaluate whether this unification project will eradicate Kurdish ethnonationalism, and by this way the Kurdish question, it is worth referring to Sarigil, as he statistically concludes that it is not the increase in religiosity but the level of education and income that decreases the likelihood of ethnonationalism (2010:535). This conclusion not only disproves the Islamo-political project but also raises significant questions about sustainability of the postmodernisation in Turkey. The rise of Islamic modernity in general can be regarded as the postmodernisation of

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Turkish society and politics. The AKP's overarching project of Islamo-Ottoman modernity, which consolidates new forms of citizenship in Turkey, includes vital complications about: the exclusion of non-Sunni population; the augmentation of Islamicisation of "secular" institutions of the *ancien regime*; the denial of enlightenment heritage of Turkish modernity; the increasing likelihood of ethnic-sectarian conflict due to the immaturity of civil society and democratic institutions providing a checks and balances system in Turkey.

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