Religious Politics in Turkey

Since the elections of 2002, Erdoğan's AKP has dominated the political scene in Turkey. This period has often been understood as a break from a secular pattern of state building. But in this book, Ceren Lord shows how Islamist mobilisation in Turkey has been facilitated from within the state by institutions established during early nation building. Lord thus challenges the traditional account of the Islamist AKP's rise that sees it either as a grass-roots reaction to the authoritarian secularism of the state or as a function of the state's utilisation of religion. Tracing struggles within the state, Lord also shows how the state's principal religious authority, the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), competed with other state institutions to pursue Islamisation. By privileging Sunni Muslim access to state resources to the exclusion of others, the Diyanet has been a key actor in ensuring persistence and increasing salience of religious markers in political and economic competition, creating an amenable environment for Islamist mobilisation.

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Religious Politics in Turkey

From the Birth of the Republic to the AKP

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Preface

On the night of 15 July 2016, the imams of more than 86,000 mosques, legally overseen by the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, from here on referred to as the Diyanet), the Republic of Turkey's principal religious authority, were called upon in a text message sent by Mehmet Görmez, the Diyanet's former chief, to mobilise against an ongoing coup attempt. Görmez called for imams, as the 'spiritual guides' of the people, to read the *sala* prayer and encourage citizens to take to the streets to counter the putschists. Throughout the night, an endless cacophony of *sala* prayers could be heard, punctuated by battle cries from the mosques, to which people gathering in the streets responded with exclamations of the Takbīr, involving the chants of 'Allahu Akbar' ('God is great'). Over the following days, Görmez declared proudly that 'with the *sala* prayer in its ears, Takbīr in its mouth, and the flag in its hand, the nation defeated the traitors'. Underscoring the importance of this mobilisation through the Diyanet were the comments by Hizb ut-Tahrir's media bureau chief, Mahmut Kar:

> The call to resist against the coup against the terror was not made from the loudspeakers of the municipalities, but from the mosques to the public. The role of Diyanet against the coup attempt is crucial, because from midnight till dawn we heard the *sala* prayers from the mosques. In no city can you see people screaming 'democracy' and marching towards the tanks, the believers courageously stood against bullets chanting 'Allahu Akbar.' Although media may try to portray this as a "victory of democracy," thanks be to God they did not succeed, because the impact of the calls from the mosques is potent on the people. (Tremblay 25 July 2016)

The Diyanet, housing the majority of Turkey's *ulema* (Sunni Muslim religious scholars), long ignored and dismissed as a marginalised actor and an apparatus of the secular Kemalist state for controlling religion, took centre stage on the night of 15 July, cementing its rising status and expanded role in the so-called New Turkey of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP). Yet, one journalist's remark that 'observant Muslims and Islamists find comfort and encouragement in

knowing that Diyanet is now out of the closet' (Tremblay 25 July 2016) appeared to be an acknowledgement of an open secret about the role played by the institution during the lifetime of the Republic.

I first began to think about the Diyanet's role in the mid-2000s when trying to make sense of the increasingly polarised public debate about secularism and Islam that had followed the ascent to power of the Islamist AKP in 2002. Some were accusing the party of having a hidden agenda of Islamisation, while others promoted it as a democratising force. In my attempt to better understand the institution, I began by examining the Diyanet's public discourse, focusing on its publications and particularly its monthly magazines distributed to all its personnel. The state body was established in 1924, taking over from the Ministry of Shari'a and Pious Foundations (Şeriye ve Evkaf Vekaleti, ŞEV), which was set up in 1920 by the nationalist government in Ankara in place of the Ottoman office of the Sheikh ul-Islam (Şeyhülislam), the chief Islamic authority. Having absorbed the Ottoman *ulema*, the Diyanet has been legally tasked with carrying out 'affairs related to the beliefs, worship and moral foundations of Islam, enlighten[ing] society about religion and manag[ing] places of worship': it has a monopoly on overseeing religious life of Muslims and activities in the Republic. Since its establishment, and particularly with the transition to multi-party politics in 1946, its influence, remit and power have grown together with its size: it comprises around 120,000 personnel and has an expanding presence beyond Turkey's borders.

Over the years, my efforts turned into extensive historical research that went beyond the Diyanet, with time spent in archives, libraries and elsewhere, collecting a variety of materials. I was beginning to discover that the Diyanet had an institutional identity and agency of its own (but by no means monolithic or in an essentialist sense) and realised that this did not fit easily into the theories and narratives prevalent in studies on Turkey. For one, the country was classified as a secular state even if the very nature of what this meant – separation, accommodation or control of religion– was the subject of a long-standing controversy. The Diyanet, if mentioned at all, was typically treated as an anomaly or testament to the secular state's control of religion. The state thereby appeared to be a highly monolithic actor, one that has oft been conflated with what was typically described as a staunchly secular military, strictly controlling religion through a passive Diyanet. In part, this reflected the lingering influence of the analytical framework of modernisation theory but, more so, a captivation by the *idea* of the state, which has resulted in efforts to understand the state's nature through its own terms – such as laic and democratic – rather than through the practices of its different elements.

As a result, many previous studies adopted a binary framework of analysis in which Turkish history was narrated as being marked by a confrontation between an authoritarian secular Kemalist state and a Muslim society. This emerged as the 'master narrative' (Kandiyoti 2012: 515) on which the widespread portrayals of the AKP's rise as a process of democratisation, a 'Turkish model', fundamentally rested and were justified. In this vein, the early years of the AKP period were associated with moderation, democratisation and Europeanisation. This narrative had gained ascendancy, particularly in the aftermath of the attacks of 11 September 2001 and the emergence of the democracy promotion agenda in the United States, as well as the rise to power of the AKP in 2002. Indeed, in some ways, it resembled the projection of Turkey during the 1960s and 1970s as a paradigmatic case for modernisation theory in asserting a positive relationship between capitalist economic development and democracy, which had gained prominence during the Cold War in the context of US anti-communism policies. By the 2000s, with the identification of Islamism as a major challenge to the West, Turkey became repackaged as an example of moderate Islam and was promoted to other (nominally speaking) Muslim-majority contexts as a model Muslim democracy by policy bodies and scholars alike. By then, although modernisation theory was supposedly long buried, it still pervaded thinking on Islamism through assertions that moderation had been achieved through bourgeoisification and capitalist development in Muslim countries.

At the same time, this master narrative of Turkish politics was attractive to those who wanted to rebut the essentialist/culturalist explanations – of which Samuel Huntington's is the classic example – that blamed 'Islamic exceptionalism' for the lack of democratic politics in Muslim-majority countries. According to these accounts, as an authentic bottom-up grass-roots challenge to the secular authoritarian state, it was the Islamists who would lead democratisation. Indeed, the first decade of the AKP was described by analysts as marking an era of change and transformation as they pointed to the (presumed) pacification of the military, which had long exercised tutelary power over the political system, the launch of the Kurdish peace process (subsequently scrapped), expansion of the religious field (i.e. religious education) against the ostensibly secular state and adoption of Europeanisation reforms, such as the scrapping of capital punishment. These were, in turn, mirrored in the self-representation of the AKP in its narratives of 'New Turkey'. It was from around 2011, but especially from 2013 onwards, that these ideas began to show cracks as analysts became less enthusiastic about the Turkish model. Nationwide protests that erupted

in the summer of 2013, triggered by government plans to demolish Gezi Park in İstanbul, and the violent crackdown against peaceful protestors clearly revealed the increasing authoritarianism of the regime. At this point, analysis began focusing on Turkey's 'democratic backslide' and the accumulation and centralisation of power in the hands of the former prime minister and current president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. These domestic developments, together with the increasingly hostile turn of events in the Middle East (including the fall of AKP allies such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt following a military coup in July 2013 and the radicalisation of Islamist actors), were to hasten the demise of Turkey's so-called Muslim democratic model status. Yet assessments of the AKP's building authoritarianism, with the exception of those within the Marxist tradition, have tended to blame contingent events, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's personality, international developments or the so-called Kemalist-secularist state.

Over the course of my research, therefore, my questions became broader than simply the nature of religion and state relations. On the one hand, the trajectory of the AKP, particularly in its later years, appeared to undermine the assumptions of the master narrative, the problematic nature of which was clearly exposed in July 2016 when the struggle within the state and between the Islamists erupted under the full gaze of the public. At the same time, I could see that, contrary to common wisdom, the Diyanet was a formidable institution that adopted multiple strategies in order to pursue its goals and that the boundaries between the official *ulema*, the Islamist movement and various other religious groups, such as the *tariqa* orders, were clearly highly fluid. Consequently, I began to consider the wider relationship between the state and the Islamist movement and the rise of the AKP in the Turkish case – in particular, how institutions can shape more amenable environments for certain types of mobilisation. Yet existing works that drew attention to the importance of the state for Islamist mobilisation chiefly portrayed it as a strategic decision by the secular state to utilise or control these movements. On the other hand, what I was observing through the case of the Diyanet was a far more differentiated state in which different factions, actors and currents were competing to impose and pursue their own political projects.

In a bid to bridge the gap between the theory and what I was observing, I therefore adopted an eclectic approach, drawing on different theoretical traditions, specifically (but not exclusively) historical institutionalism, and nationalism and ethnicity studies. This proved useful in two ways. Historical institutionalism focused my attention on the mutually

constitutive manner in which institutions shape the nature of political struggles and also agents. Meanwhile, nationalism and ethnicity studies, particularly the modernist school that emphasises the constructedness of identity, helped to underline the importance of not taking the identity politics of Islamists for granted. In other words, it should not be assumed that Islamist mobilisation is a natural outcome within a nominally Muslim majority context. After all, we do not expect political mobilisation to occur automatically along religious lines in a Christian, Buddhist or Hindu majority setting. At the same time, helping me to break with the master narrative of Turkish state–society relations were a series of works spanning different disciplines, including Yael Navaro-Yashin's anthropological study *Faces of the State* (2002), which uses a post-structuralist framework to examine secularism as a discourse of state; political economists within the Marxist tradition, such as Galip Yalman, who have drawn attention to the changing hegemonic strategies of the Turkish state; and a new generation of revisionist historians who are challenging the accounts of early republican history as a purely top-down modernisation project. Consequently, this text builds on these theoretical frameworks and perspectives in understanding the state not as a monolithic actor that is autonomous from society, but rather one that is an arena of struggle between different actors, factions and currents (or, following Bob Jessop (2007: 37), an ensemble of competing power centres), with blurred and fluid boundaries with society.

This book offers both an alternative historical interpretation and an analytical framework that I call 'religious majoritarianism' to understand two interconnected questions:

- Why has Islamist politics arisen and become viable and successful in the Turkish case?
- More broadly, why have some contexts proved to be more conducive to this religious identity politics compared with others?

Resting on a two-level analysis involving a reconceptualisation of state–religion–society relations, the prism of religious majoritarianism refers to the political structures through which a religiously defined group's monopoly over political and economic resources is legitimated on its numerical majority in the nation. The extent to which a nation-state becomes religious majoritarian is determined by two factors:

- the degree to which majority–minority boundaries were defined along religious lines during early nation-state building; and
- whether these boundaries were subsequently reflected in state institutions.

These institutions, in turn, trigger path-dependent effects which impact the salience of religious markers for political and economic competition and, thereby, patterns of group mobilisation. In the Turkish case, nation-state building was fundamentally affected by the Ottoman legacy in terms of both the importance of religious communal boundaries and the intertwined nature of religious institutions and the state. Despite the diverse nationalist coalition in the early Republic, therefore, Sunni Muslim-Turkish identity became elevated as the basis of the nation-state and was institutionalised in various ways, including by the establishment of the Diyanet to the privileging of a 'Muslim bourgeoisie'. These in turn had path-dependent effects because institutions enable social groups and identities to be carried over the generations, building coalitions within and outside the state with those that have overlapping political visions. Institutions such as the Diyanet meant that, far from being eliminated, conservative and Islamist currents and the *ulema* had remained part of the state, albeit subdued for a time. What tipped the balance of power increasingly in favour of these factions within the state were contingent events such as the Cold War-related anti-communism policies alongside the neo-liberal restructuring policies adopted from the 1980s, which facilitated the expansion of the infrastructure behind religious mobilisation, including the Diyanet, religious education, charities and business associations. The Diyanet, together or in coalition with other factions within and outside the state, in turn, played a critical role in providing a more favourable environment for Islamist mobilisation.

In short, the main proposition of this book, therefore, is that the rise and success of religious identity politics in Turkey did not result from a break in secular nation-state building. Rather, it should be situated as the outcome of a dynamic struggle within the state, the terms of which have been shaped by the path-dependent processes related to the longer-term dynamics of nation-state building mediated by contingent events. Yet the aim is not to deny the contributions, value or truth of existing works but rather, by extensively drawing and building on these with my own research, to offer a window into another dimension of the story that has been neglected, and has, as a result, distorted our understanding of religious identity politics. Accordingly, rather than extensive discussions of secularism or Kemalism, or how religion has been 'used' by the 'secular' state, this book focuses on the other side of the coin. Factions of the state, such as the military, may have tried to control religion, but how has the Diyanet responded, what strategies has it adopted and to what extent has it been successful? This book shows that this is by no means a one-way relationship and that the Diyanet has strategically

manoeuvred to expand its domain and authority by seizing on these very opportunities in order to push for the Islamisation of public space and morality in a manner that has been largely neglected within the literature. In this way, the text also offers an alternative account of the rise of the Islamist movement and of the AKP.

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Abbreviations

AKP	Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party)
ANAP	Anavatan Partisi (Motherland Party)
AO	Aydınlar Ocağı (Hearth of the Enlightened)
AP	Adalet Partisi (Justice Party)
AUK	Anayasa Uzlaşma Komisyonu (Constitution Reconciliation Commission)
BCA	Başbakanlık Cumhuriyet Arşivi (Prime Minister's Republic Archives)
BDP	Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi (Peace and Democracy Party)
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party)
CHP	Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (Republican People's Party)
CKMP	Cumhuriyetçi Köylü Millet Partisi (Republican Villagers Nation Party)
DİTİB	Diyanet İşleri Türk-İslam Birliği (Turkish–Islamic Union for Religious Affairs)
DİYK	Din İşleri Yüksek Kurulu (Religious Affairs High Council)
DoA	Dernekler Dairesi Başkanlığı (Department of Associations)
DoF	Vakıflar Genel Müdürlüğü (Directorate General of Foundations)
DoS	Mezhepler Müdürlüğü (Department of Sects)
DP	Demokrat Partisi (Democrat Party)
DPT	Devlet Planlama Teşkilatı (State Planning Organisation)
DSP	Demokratik Sol Parti (Democratic Left Party)
DV	Diyanet Vakfı (Turkish Religious Foundation)
DYP	Doğru Yol Partisi (Right Path Party)
EIA	environmental impact assessment
EU	European Union
FETÖ	Fethullahçı Terör Örgütü (Fethullah Gülen Terrorist Organisation)

FP	Fazilet Partisi (Virtue Party)
HSYK	Hâkimler ve Savcılar Yüksek Kurulu (Supreme Board of Judges and Prosecutors)
IHH	İnsani Yardım Vakfı (Humanitarian Relief Foundation)
IHS	İmam Hatip Okulları (Imam and Preacher Schools)
INC	Indian National Congress
ISI	import substitution industrialisation
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
ISO	İstanbul Sanayi Odası (Istanbul Chamber of Industry)
ITC	İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti (Committee of Union and Progress)
İYC	İlim Yayma Cemiyeti (Association for the Dissemination of Science)
KCK	Koma Civakên Kurdistan (Union of Communities in Kurdistan)
KMD	Komünizmle Mücadele Derneği (Association for Fighting Communism)
KPSS	Kamu Personeli Seçme Sınavı (Public Personnel Selection Examination)
MBK	Milli Birlik Komitesi (National Unity Committee)
MEB	Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı (Ministry of National Education)
MGK	Milli Güvenlik Kurulu (National Security Council)
MHP	Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (Nationalist Movement Party)
MİT	Milli İstihbarat Teşkilatı (National Intelligence Organisation)
MNP	Milli Nizam Partisi (National Order Party)
MP	Millet Partisi (Nation Party)
MSP	Millî Selâmet Partisi (Islamist National Salvation Party)
MTTB	Milli Türk Talebe Birliği (National Turkish Students Union)
MÜSİAD	Müstakil Sanayici ve İş Adamları Derneği (Independent Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PKK	Partiya Karkerên Kurdistani (Kurdistan Workers' Party)
PR	proportional representation
RP	Refah Partisi (Welfare Party)
ŞEV	Şeriye ve Evkaf Vekaleti (Ministry of Shari'a and Pious Foundations)
SHP	Sosyaldemokrat Halk Partisi (Social Democratic People's Party)
SMEs	small and medium-sized enterprises
SoE	state of emergency

SP	Saadet Partisi (Felicity Party)
TBMM	Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi (Turkish Grand National Assembly)
TBP	Türkiye Birlik Partisi (Turkish Unity Party)
TIS	Türk-İslam Sentezi (Turkish–Islamic Synthesis)
TMMOB	Türk Mühendis ve Mimar Odaları Birliği (Union of Chambers of Turkish Engineers and Architects)
TOBB	Türkiye Odalar ve Borsalar Birliği (Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey)
TOKI	Toplu Konut İdaresi (Mass Housing Association)
TRT	Türkiye Radyo ve Televizyon Kurumu (Turkish Radio and Television Corporation)
TRY	Turkish lira
TSK	Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri (Turkish Armed Forces)
TÜRGEV	Türkiye Gençlik ve Eğitime Hizmet Vakfı (Foundation of Youth and Education in Turkey)
TÜSIAD	Türk Sanayicileri ve İşadamları Derneği (Turkish Industry and Business Association)
TUSKON	Türkiye İşadamları ve Sanayiciler Konfederasyonu (Turkish Confederation of Businessmen and Industrialists)
UMNO	Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Melayu Bersatu (United Malays National Organisation)
USD	US dollars
YİE	Yüksek İslam Enstitüsü (High Islamic Institutes)
YÖK	Yüksek Öğretim Kurulu (Council of Higher Education)