LAICISTS and ISLAMISTS STUCK in a NATION STATE –

Is it too naive to imagine a peaceful coexistence?

İştar Gözaydın

Introduction

This essay is primarily concerned in a power struggle within Turkey for over the last 80 years, leaving aside a much longer one of 200 years. The escalating irritation between the two groups that may roughly be defined as laicists¹ and islamists² during the whole republican era of Turkey ongoing since 1923, but emerged especially in the 1990’s is my muse to search on means of having a capacitated democracy. Therefore, I will be debating on the basic and crucial questions, as I perceive it, ‘what is a capacitated democracy and how does it get achieved?’ in the context of law and politics in Turkey. Actually, in order to evolve my argument I will initially be focusing on the development of the relations among the state, the groups in society and religion in Republic of Turkey. Then, I will be discussing the need and possibility of a mutually acceptable ground for a peaceful coexistence in Turkey. Obviously my preference to work on the last 80 years instead of the 200 year span of the phenomenon stems out of my acceptance of the republican times to be a more visible stage of the above mentioned contestation.

The argument I put forward in this essay runs as follows:

a) Initial consideration for laicist policies and legislation of the republican decision making elite were to alter not only the supra-structure of Turkey towards a modern/Western body as their predecessors in the late Ottoman times, but also to transform the whole Turkish society into a modern one. Traditional belief appeared there as a threat for this seemingly ambitious project of modernity. Therefore, the

¹ I use the term laicists for ones that prefer the state’s control of religion as opposed to secularism which implies the separation of state and religion. As Rex Ahdar and Ian Leigh point out, “The longstanding French policy of laicité exemplifies … desire to restrict, if not eliminate, clerical and religious influence, over the state. The French Parliament’s ban in 2004 of conspicuous religious clothing and insignia in public schools – aimed at the wearing of Muslim headscarves- illustrates this suspicion of religion and is an attempt to avert the growth and influence of an incipient Muslim fundamentalism in that nation. The modern Islamic society of Turkey is similarly an example of a state founded on strongly secular principles where restrictions on individual religious liberty have been introduced to prevent pressure being exerted by the predominant religious group” (Ahdar & Leigh, 2005: 73). For a comprehensive argumentation on the terms laic and secular, and their derivatives, see Davison, 2003. I totally agree with Davison in his arguments, thus I prefer to use the term ‘laicist’ for republican state practice in Turkey. Furthermore, laiklik (laicité) is the concept that is preferred by the Republican decision-making elite of turkey in all legislations and other legal regulations.

² Islamists are typically defined as those who advocate the shari’a (Islamic law derived from the Qur’an) as basis for a system of government. In order to be consistent, an Islamist has to prefer the shari’a.
Republic of Turkey’s founding elite implemented policies to remove religion from the public realm and reduce it to a matter of faith and practice of the individual, so that the principle of freedom of religion was to protect "individualised religion" only.

b) Such policies found quite a many devoted followers in society; however yet another part of the society preferred to remain faithful to their traditional beliefs. Also, political Islam, a modern ideology rooted in nineteenth century, has been more and more visible in the political arena in Turkey especially in the last decades. Thus, in more than eighty years, divisions became even deeper in Turkey's political and social body. However this has was not a 'revival' as many scholars in the field claim as, it has always been a part of the Turkish social body, but glowed in the last decades in parallel with the worldwide resurgence of religion.

After the foundation of the Turkish Republic, the state elite tried to secure the system they structured through a series of laicist legal regulations. One of the most important legal tools in this context was the Act dated 3 March 1340 (1924) no. 429 on the Abolishment of The Ministries of Şeriyye and Evkaf (Religious Affairs and Pious Foundations). The new law preferred to place the management of religious affairs to an administration, not to a ministry in the cabinet. They did not want to have a unit within the Cabinet dealing with religious affairs. Instead of that, by assigning religious affairs to a administrative unit, the ruling elite took both religion under their control, and managed to break the probable sacred significance of the Presidency of Religious Affairs. Furthermore, laicist reforms abolished the caliphate, established a state monopoly over education, disestablished the institution of the ulema (doctors of Islamic law), rejected Islamic law and adopted a modified version of the Swiss Civil Code, latinized the alphabet, and, in 1928, struck out the sentence in the Constitution of 1924 which stated that the Turks were of Islamic faith (Zürcher, : 194)

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s policy on religion and state affairs was to remove religion from social realm and "to confine it to the conscience of people," and make it a set of beliefs that would not go beyond the personal lives of people. Thus the aim was to reduce religion to a matter of faith and prayer, and the principle of freedom of religion and conscience was to protect only individualised religion and prayers. Religion was to remain in the personal domain and to necessitate state intervention to the extent that it concerns and objectifies the

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3 For some such usage see, Esposito (1985); Davison (1998); Howe (2000: 7, 8, 15, 305); Kramer (2000:55-84); Karpat (2001: 527); Nachmani (2003: 90). I assert that ‘revival’ may limitedly be used for the revitalizations of the religious orders (see Mardin, 1989: 149) in the 19th century that was part of emergence of political Islam which in fact was completely a modern ideology. (see Türköne, 1991)
social order. "Turkish Republic" was designed to be a strictly temporal state. Mustafa Kemal stated this clearly: "We get our inspirations not from the heavens or invisible things but directly from life." ( Atatürk, 1945: 389) The purpose in this period was to secularise not only the state and the ‘political’, but also society and the ‘social’. In my opinion, this is the biggest difference between Republican and Ottoman modernizations.

Kemalist nationalists preferred a risky path. Although it actually was not so, they declared that all the ties with the Islamist and the Ottoman past were cut off. They chose to join totally to a mythic ‘universal civilization’ believed to be represented in an idealized form by Europe. (Gülalp, 2003a: 35) However, while the Kemalists denied Islam as a civilization project, they continued to imagine the Turkish nation as Muslim 4. 5 By some time after the establishment of the republic, assuming the regime to be secured, a tendency appeared to include Islam in the legitimating ideology of the political power (Sakallıoğlu, 1996). Meanwhile two ‘very different conceptions of life’ (Howe, 2000: 243) formatted in Turkey: on one side is a secular life while, on the other, is a religious life. In Metin Heper’s words, “those in the secularist camp are troubled by the ‘fact’ that a significant part of the population in Turkey does not think the way they do, and are not convinced by the assurances of those in the Islamist camp that if the latter capture power they will respect the secularists’ life styles. Consequently, the secularists are hostile to virtually anything that smacks of Islam. In turn, those in the Islamist camp have lost all hope that the secularists will eventually accept them into their fold, and, as a result, have adopted an equally uncompromising attitude” (Heper, 2001).

A new middle class became visible after the 1980’s, accepting the ethical standards and cultural values of the traditional order but also adopted the rational business rules and the profit motive of the capitalist market system. Actually, as the late Ernest Gellner put it, “Of the Western monotheisms, Islam is the most Protestant. That is, … Islam … has certain

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4 “Turkey is often defined as a predominantly Muslim country; Islamists especially delight in repeating at every opportunity that 99% of Turkish people are Muslim. But this is mostly a definition given to them by the secular state. Unless declared otherwise, every child born in Turkey is registered as Muslim and this is clearly indicated in every person’s government-issued identity card. Moreover, there is a limit to the choice of religions that could legally be stated in a person’s identity card – only those religions officially recognised by the state are acceptable, identifying oneself as ‘atheist’ or even just leaving that box blank is not. ‘Muslim’ is evidently a social identity conferred upon the Turkish people by the ‘secular’ state”. (Gülalp, 2003b: 394)

5 In areas other than the national capital Ankara, and some metropolitans like Istanbul and Izmir, also the ‘nation’ shared this perception. Michael E. Meeker points out a curious strategy of the local elite in the town Of to take part in the sovereign power of the state system. Meeker characterizes the phenomena as a fusion of identities, and presents two brilliant terms to the literature as ‘Kemalo-Islamism’ and ‘Libero-Islamism’ (Meeker, 2002: 51-54).

6 For overviews of the ‘new middle class’, see Insel 2003: 297; Raudvere 2004: 168n.2;

7 Kemal Karpat makes a very similar statement for the last decades of Ottoman times. (Karpat, 2001, 21)
appropriate ‘Protestant’ features: rule orientation, strict Unitarianism, a kind of completeness, the stress on the doctrine, and the finality of doctrine. Now, if this is a correct sketch of Islam, and if the Weberian thesis is correct …”, (Gellner, 1997: 234) than the new Turkish Islamic middle middle, and upper middle classes are very good examples of capitalistic spirit both as believers and entrepreneurs. Although coming not exactly from the same spiritual/philosophical sources, many in the cadres of AKP in government⁸, and the followers of Fethullah Gülen (b. 1938) who is a leading contemporary disciple of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (1873-1960) are typical specimens of such. Gülen specifically stresses the compatibility of Islamic ideas and practices with the market economy⁹, and his followers control a complex web of businesses and significant broadcast and print media in Turkey and in Central Asia. (Eickelman, 2002:123-127).

A relatively new friction between the laicists and Islamists emerged in the 1990’s when the critical approach of a group of Islamist writers gained an unprecedented popularity. Ruşen Çakır marks the book titled Üç Mesele: Teknik, Medeniyet, Yabancılaşma (Three Issues: Technique, Civilization, Alienation) by Ismet Ozel that was published first in 1978, as an initiator of such a line of criticism (Çakır, 1990: 252-253). This new literature was not only popular in Islamic wing, but also ignited the widespread debate of the 80’s and 90’s among the Turkish intelligentsia about the conduct to be taken in issues of modernity.

In February 1997, the mayor of Sincan, a town on the outskirts of Ankara, organised ‘Jerusalem Day’, to call liberation of the city from Israel. The mayor was from the ‘pro-Islamic’ Welfare Party, a partner of the coalition government. The Iranian ambassador was invited and, making anti-secular statements, he called for the establishment of Islamic law in Turkey, while the crowd demonstrated in support of Hamas and Hizbullah, two Islamist groups waging armed struggle against Israel. Laicist forces in Turkey were infuriated and appalled by the rally so close to the capital, and the generals of the Turkish Joined Forces responded by sending tanks through Sincan as a warning. The mayor was arrested, the Iranian ambassador declared a persona non grata, and an investigation launched against the Welfare Party. “The Welfare Party had provided the generals with a pretext to curb the Islamic movement and they did so, with what is described as a soft or ‘post-modern’ coup” (Ahmad, 2003: 171-172) which may be named as February the 28th regime.

⁸ For the religious lineage that takes us to Recep Tayip Erdoğan, Turkey’s current prime minister, see Mardin, 2006: 15-18.
⁹ For an overview of the significance of the movement, see Yavuz 1999, and Aras 1998.
The parliament that emerged from the general elections on November 3, 2002, in Turkey has created an unexpected possibility of exit from the authoritarian regime established after the military coup of September 12, 1980 (Insel, 2003: 293), and empowered by the regulations after February 28, 1997. The currently governing AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi / Justice and Development Party) persistently rejects being Islamist, defines itself as a conservative democratic party, and emphasises the democratic character of the party organization, its spirit of teamwork, and the importance of consensus-seeking in politics. “Turkey’s secularist establishment, they believe will respect moderate religiosity in a pro-Islamic party if it refrains from employing a rhetorical discourse and if it maintains a transparent political agenda” (Cizre & Çınar, 2003: 327). As Keyman and İçduygu analyze, the AKP’s economic program is a communitarian-liberal synthesis operating on the basis of three principles:

a) an effective and post-developmental state which is democratic, transparent and accountable in its interaction with society, but at the same time ‘caring and assuming a supervisory role in its relation to the economy.

b) a regulated free market which is not destructive and corrupted, but enriching contributing to economic development and socially just.

c) social justice, which is to be established both in terms of the distribution of wealth and welfare services and with respect to the domain of recognition in which social segments will not be discriminated in terms of their different cultural practices. (Keyman and İçduygu, 2005: 5-6)

I agree with Alev Çınar’s statement that, “It is … possible … to interpret the AK Party’s full incorporation into the secular political system as another victory of secularism in successfully assimilating a rival political ideology. Indeed, secularism still enjoys an unchallenged status in the public sphere”. (Çınar, 2005: 177) I also agree with Heinz Kramer whom very clearly states that Turkey especially currently lacks a ‘grand strategy’, a fact which, in large measure, is attributable to the relatively chaotic domestic situation and the challenges faced by the regime (Kramer, 2000).

Nevertheless, leaving ongoing politics aside, it is evident that the Kemalist model eroded. I personally feel that it would indeed be an ingratitude to the republican founding elite should we only hold them guilty for their deeds and their consequences, even though I think that especially it was extremely harsh, to say the least, to sever a culture by a means of changing and implicitly banning a script (the outcome unfortunately happened apparently to be an amnesiac, or at least, an aphasic society in terms of intellect). It also seems acceptable
to me to come to a conclusion that all groups in Turkey somewhat benefited from the change created by the late Ottoman and early republican decision-making elite. Thus, it seems best to try to find some grounds of communication for negotiation and bargaining among different groups in Turkey. The Kemalist / laicist elite of Turkey enjoyed very many ‘faces’ of power as decision-making, as agenda setting, as thought control, almost all through the republican times. However, as one may find in an introductory material for the study of the field 10, politics is inextricably linked to the phenomena of conflict and cooperation.

In order to overcome ossific issues several means may be sought. For an example, deliberative democracy provides opportunities when citizens, or their representatives disagree morally. In order to fulfil a deliberate democracy, it is required that the parties to continue to reason together to reach mutually acceptable decisions (Gutmann and Thompson, 1996: 1). Another process of negotiation may be exemplified by a work run in an Islamic context. A current project carried under the working title, ‘The Future of Shari’a’ by Prof. Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na’im, Charles Howard Candler Professor of Law at Emory Law School, focuses on the struggle of Islamic societies to define themselves and positively relate to the local and global conditions under which they live11. The fundamental concern of the project is how to ensure the institutional separation of Shari’a and the state, despite the organic and unavoidable connection between Islam and politics. The first part of this proposition sounds like ‘secularism’ as commonly understood today, but the second part indicates the opposite. This is a permanent paradox, which is part of the thesis, namely, that the relationship among religion, state, and society is the product of a constant and deeply contextual negotiation, rather than the subject of a fixed formula, whether a claim of total separation or total fusion of religion and the state. The project thesis proposes that the paradox of separation of Islam and the state while maintaining an organic relationship among Islam, politics and social interaction, can only be mediated through practice over time, rather than completely resolved through theoretical analysis. Insisting on ‘a constant and deeply contextual negotiation, rather than the subject of a fixed formula’ is evidently very similar to the basics of ‘deliberate democracy’, or any attempt alike that stems out from a need to communicate.

As to scholarly work on republican issues, Şerif Mardin points out a far too heavy emphasis on macro models and too little interest in micro aspects of social change, which he describes as ‘life-worlds’. (Mardin, 1997: 72). I totally agree with that only by reintegrationing

11 See [http://people.law.emory.edu/~abduh46/#1](http://people.law.emory.edu/~abduh46/#1)
life worlds as a central component of the study and practice of modernity in Turkey will be able to move beyond the shortcomings of the existing historical experience and analysis. That may be a step for a communication between the laicist and Islamist groups in Turkey\textsuperscript{12}.

On the one hand, the existence of rival opinions, different wants, competing needs and opposing interests guarantees disagreement about the rules under which people live. On the other hand, people recognise that, in order to influence these rules or ensure that they are upheld, they must work with others, hence Hannah Arendt’s definition of political power as ‘acting in concert’. This is why the heart of politics is often portrayed as a process of conflict resolution, in which rival views or competing interests are reconciled with one another. Both parties in Turkey has to come to the grips with the fact that without reconciliation, it is not possible to coexist. Obviously this means sacrifice for both sides. Nevertheless, I think that to reconcile\textsuperscript{13} is the key word to be hopeful for the times to come in Turkey.

\textsuperscript{12} With due respect, I beg to differ to Professor Mardin in his statement that “the history of Turkey is not a … strife framed by Islam and secularism” (Mardin, 2006: 18). I admit that it is a complex, many-tiered encounter between ‘traditional’ forces and modernity, however indeed a strife exists between groups that I roughly define as ‘laicists’ and ‘islamists’, especially somehow is rooted and has emerged almost in ‘class’ distinctions due to these groups not to be in ‘propinquity’ at all.

\textsuperscript{13} The Free Dictionary gives the following definitions for ‘to reconcile’:

1. To reestablish a close relationship between
2. To settle or resolve
3. To bring (oneself) to accept: \textit{He finally reconciled himself to the change in management.}
4. To make compatible or consistent: \textit{reconcile my way of thinking with yours.} See Synonyms at adapt (http://www.thefreedictionary.com/reconcile) I strongly believe each of these definitions should be taken for consideration in order not to face an affirming answer for my initial question, which is, “Laicists and Islamists Stuck in a Nation State – Is it too naive to imagine a peaceful coexistence?”
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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