Responding Religious Claims in a Secular Democracy: The Turkish Case

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I would like to thank organizers of this panel and the conference. I hope that we can engage fruitful debate on state-religion relations, un-orthodox communities and religious minorities in a secular state.

What I would like to do in this paper focusing on Turkey are two folds. First, I would like to follow the trajectory of the development of secularism in a Muslim majority society where there is also a meaningful number of un-orthodox Muslims and religious minorities. In this part of my presentation, I will try to analyze the challenges that the modern Turkish state faces in the context of claims by (religious) minorities. The second aspect of my paper will deal with how the state has been responding to demands and claims of its citizens belonging to minority groups. In this context I will look at to what extent laws and regulations are changed to adopt to the new conditions.

Now, let me try to put Turkey into a context in terms of secularization which received increasing attention in sociology and political science. This will allow us to see how far dominant secularization theory can explain what Turkey has been going to.

Classical secularization theory is based on the argument that modernization would lead to decline of traditional forms of the religious life. It also predicts that it loses its influence on social and individual consciousness and eventually disappear.¹ However not all predictions of this theory

came through. Moreover, search for a democratic society and state opened the new window of opportunity to raise claims for freedom of religion. In this context, presence of religious groups in public and political spheres and their wish to be presented and treated equally led to reconsideration of relations between state and its citizens.

Although there are different definitions and interpretations of secularism, broadly speaking there are two basic dimensions of this concept as developed by Bryan Turner, Veit Bader, Jose Casanova, Charles Taylor and Jocelyn Maclure. The first dimension refers to principle which means political secularization referring to separation of state and religion. We can also refer to this aspect of secularization as a normative (i.e. legal and administrative) dimension (as a political system). The political secularization as such includes not only separation religion and state but also equal distance of political authority to all religions. Protection of freedom of religion is a fundamental principle of political secularization.

The second dimension of secularization refers to a 'process' which means decline of religious beliefs and practices in society. Sociologists and political scientists consider this process as social secularization that leads to erosion of the influence of religion on social practices.

Although this ideal type of classical understanding of secularisation raised some expectations with regard to the state neutrality to all religions on the one hand and inevitable decline of individual and collective religiosity, the social reality on the ground tells us that some of the expectations remained unfulfilled. It is true that especially Northern European countries felt the impact of social and political secularisation to a large extent. However, when it comes to some non-Western societies such as Middle Eastern, Asian and South American countries, modernization and secularization took different forms. India, Turkey, Israel and the U.S.A. For example, went through a process of modernization and secularization in contrast to Europe, religious beliefs and


institutions are still influential.

Persistence of religions and claims of religious people in modern societies or nation-states forces us to re-think how we can address questions on state-religion relations on the one hand, and religion in public sphere on the other hand, especially in countries like Turkey where there has been a constant tension between secular and religious forces. As the political developments in Turkey indicate there is a new situation as far as complex relations regarding state, religion, secularism and the presence of faith groups with different claims in public sphere are concerned. I believe that the case of Turkey can shed some light on some of the questions that are raised in this paper.

Let me remind you that time to time Turkey is described as a source of inspiration or a model country because of its experience with secularism and democracy as a Muslim society.

For sociologists and political scientists, Turkey provides a rich material to engage in a debate over state-religion relations and presence of religious claims in public sphere. Turkey offers a unique opportunity to examine the question of religion in public sphere as a case study for several reasons. First, it is a secular country with a dominant Muslim population; second, Turkey tries to become full member of the European Union on the one hand but also it is part of the larger Middle East where Islamic culture is the prevailing force. Third, questions of democratization, freedom of religion for un-orthodox believers and non-Muslim minorities are still not fully resolved. Lastly secularism is still being hotly debated and seems to remain as a source of social and political tension for the foreseeable future. The Turkish political culture produced varying approaches to analyze the experience of Turkey. While some strongly defend secularization policies of the State, some argue that in the process of EU membership and rising tide of democratization, Turkish secularism should be re-defined.

Because the secular nature of the state and modernization process in Turkey did not lead to social secularism completely, as manifested in long running and inconclusive discussions. In so far as challenges to secularism are concerned the headscarf issue has been the main focus of discussions in Turkey. In my view one should go beyond the headscarf problem in public sphere simply because the issue of democracy and laicite or secularism should also include wider discussions about religious minorities and un-orthodox faith groups because they increasingly claim their rights from the state as citizens. Although the founding ideology of Turkish state was to construct a homogeneous society, ethnic and religious pluralism survived despite the fact that the main political parties turned a blind eye to their complaints and demands for many years. Today however many of these groups utilize modern methods and languages to present their views to the

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public and the state. Among such faith groups one can mention to following: Shia (Twelvers\Jafari School) (500.000), Armenian Orthodox Chistians (65.000), Jews (23.000), Syriac Orthodox Christians (15.000), Bahais (10.000), Yazidi (5.000), Jehova’s Withnesses (3.300), Protestants (3.000), Greek Orthodox Christians (3.000), Chaldean Christians (3.000) and Alevi which is estimated to be %25 of the population.

In general, one of the issues which we can analyze as regards the scope of religious freedom is the Alevi community. Before looking at this issue in detail, we need to contextualize the debate about religious freedom which requires an understanding of ideological constructions of state and society in Turkey.

Let me explore to the founding ideology with regard to religion. Turkish Republic was established in 1923 as a laic and democratic state based on the rule of law. The four characteristics of the new Turkish state which distinguishes its form from the Ottoman state system may be summarized as follows: Transition to the concept of administration based on rules and laws instead of authority of individuals; transition from religious world view to the concept of scientific knowledge (positivism) to understand the universe; transition from the class based society shaped by the ruling and the ruled towards a concept of democratic community; transition from religious community towards a nation state.\(^4\)

Turkish state, for the purpose of controlling religion and for the protection of its citizens from intervention and influence of all kinds of religious authority, aimed at structural and institutional Westernization.\(^5\) Following the removal of Sultanate on 1 November 1922, abolishing the Caliphate, the Office of Shayk-al-Islam on 3 March 1924, Presidency of Religious Affairs affiliated to Prime Ministry and General Directorate of Foundations were established.

The most important reform which shapes Republic’s relation with religion on institutional level is the foundation of Presidency of Religious Affairs upon the law enacted on 3 March 1924. As a matter of fact, Presidency of Religious Affairs is seen as the unique institution of the Republic, enabling the state to keep religion under its supervision. It is possible to summarize the duties of Presidency of Religious Affairs which functions to control religious hierarchy, framework of religious education and streams defined as heterodox Islam as “services related to prayers and functions related to enlightening the society on religious matters; services related to religious education; foreign relations and services related to foundations which are relevant with the

\(^4\) Şerif Mardin, Türkiye’de Toplum ve Siyaset, (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2002), p. 205.
organization itself”.

In Turkey, Presidency of Religious Affairs is accepted the single official authority in relation with Islam, although there are different Muslim groups including un-orthodox groups such as Alevis, Nurcu’s, Suleymancı’s. However the presence and functions of this institution are subject to controversies. In this context primarily two issues emerge: The first controversy is whether such an institution can be present in a secular state which is supposed to be neutral to all religions and religious groups. The second controversy revolves around the fact that Presidency of Religious Affairs in Turkey adopts only Sunni interpretation of Islam and the Hanafi legal school, but not serving to other sectarian groups such as Alevi, Shafii and Caferi.\(^7\) That is to say, it is claimed that it provides religious services based on Sunni Islam and it is a part of state's ideology and identity that restricts freedom of religion by excluding non-Sunni groups. One can argue that the mandate given to the this institution indicates that the state is not impartial and therefore state policies seem to provide privileges to some groups (Sunnis) over the other (Alevis). As the human rights discourse emerged, minorities such as the Alevi community, began to question the state policies, which brought the position of Presidency of Religious Affairs under the spotlight. Although Alevi groups voiced their concern and demand some kind of representation and equal treatment their claims largely remained unheard off. That means the state did not respond properly to the demands of Alevis. until Turkish political culture became relatively more democratic and open to more pluralist views.

Alevi groups differ in their approach to the Presidency of Religious Affairs and in using the service it provides such as praying mosques, performing a religious marriage ceremony and a funeral ceremony etc. What makes Alevi groups different from the majority Sunnis can be observed in different areas. For example Alevi’s generally do not go to mosques regularly, do not pray five times a day and do not fast in the month of Ramadan. Nevertheless Presidency of Religious Affairs stated that there are no differences in basic religious matters between Sunnis and Alevis except issues around some local custom and beliefs. The Presidency argues that the difference people talk about is political in nature. Generally speaking the Alevi villages do not have mosques, instead they have house of worship (Cemevi) for their religious and spiritual ceremonies. Given this reality mosques were constructed in Alevi villages, thus a sort of pressure has been put on the Alevi communities for adopting Sunni interpretation of Islam. These policies and practices indicate that a


\(^{7}\) İrfan Bozan, Devlet ile Toplum Arasında, Bir Okul. İmam Hatip Liseleri, Bir Kurum Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, (İstanbul: Tesev Yayınları, 2007), pp. 62-69.
social reality on the ground ignored given the nature of Alevi’s demands.8

Although Alevi groups differ their opinions on the question of their representation in Presidency of Religious Affairs, there is a consensus among Alevi groups that the current status of this Institution is in conflict with the principle of laicism. Moreover in their opinion, this Institution is Sunni in nature and discriminates other religious faiths. However Alevi’s also have differences as far as the relations between Islam and Alevism are concerned. Some part of Alevi’s in Turkey considers Alevism as part of Islam, whereas some others argue that Alevism is a different religion than Islam. Some other Alevi’s, on the other hand, define Alevism as a specific philosophy and lifestyle belonging to Anatolia people which has nothing to do with religion. That is to say Alevism is a secular faith enriched by folkloric elements. Sometimes Alevism is also defined as a struggle for democratization, modernization and secularization and a social opposition and focus of resistance. Claims of Alevi groups who underline secularism in their critique of Presidency of Religious Affairs may be summarized as follows: Abolishment of Presidency of Religious Affairs; official recognition of their places for pray (Cemevi) where different rituals than the Sunni tradition are performed; the provision of financial support by the state; and representation of Alevi’s in relevant state organizations as well as removal of compulsory religious education.9 Until so far non of these demands have been met by the state which creates a feeling among the Alevi community that they are not treated as equal citizens. As far as recognition and the legal states are concerned the Alevi community argue that they do not enjoy the rights given to Christian churches. Because Cemevis as Alevi houses of worship are not officially recognized as such and even Alevi encounter several problems when they want to open a new Cemevi. Though they are tax payers as citizens of Turkey, Alevi’s are not able to receive financial support from the state.10 Their long running demand for a legal statutes for Cemevis remained un-fulfilled.

Compulsory religious education is another controversial issue in relation with Alevi’s demands. Religious education has been re-arranged following The Law on Unification of Education dated 3 March 1924 in the earlier Republican period. Until 1939, religious education was removed

10 Davison, p. 137; Bozan, p. 73, Şuayp Özdemir and Ismail Arıç, Alevilerin Din Hizmeti Beklentileri, (İstanbul: Arı Sanat Yayınları, 2011), pp. 49-54; Ali Fuad Başgil, Din ve Laiklik, (İstanbul: Kubbealtı Neşriyat, 2003), p. 220.
from the curriculum gradually. Although religious education was optional between 1948-1983, following 1980 Military Intervention, it was made compulsory (in primary school; 4.-5., secondary school; 6.-7.-8. and high school; 9.-10.-11. classes). These compulsory classes named as the Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge lessons include the elements reflecting the Sunni tradition in line Ministry of National Education. Different Alevi opinions on the question of compulsory religious education may be classified as the following: (a) Some Alevi people argue that this course should be optional and parents who should be able to send their children to these lessons if they wish so. (b) Some Alevi groups claim that the curriculum is one dimensional, that’s to say it has been prepared according to Sunni faith, and does not provide information on the Alevi faith. Therefore religious policy should be revised accordingly.\textsuperscript{11} Alevi parents do not wish their children to attend these courses because they believe that their own traditions are not reflected and taught. Additionally, children of Atheists and Alevi community are obliged to attend these classes while children within non-Muslim minority communities are exempt.

In response to Alevis' demands several changes were made in the curriculum of religious education forces to reflect Alevi interpretation of Islam. Although the state authorities claimed that a compulsory religious education now includes enough material to satisfy members of Alevi community, the Alevi organizations claim that religious education text books largely reflect Sunni interpretation of Islam. As the above discussion on the claims of Alevi community and response of the state indicate the tension and the controversy will continue for some time to come. These days the government is expected to introduce a new democratisation packet in which some of the Alevi claims will be part of. It is reported in the media that cemevi's might be given a legal status which will enjoy the financial support by the state. This might partly please some Alevi groups, yet it remains to be seen.

In order to understand Turkey's experience with regard to secularism and freedom of religion one should also look at the case of non-Muslim minorities who are also citizens of Turkey whose rights have been violated for many years. Some of their institutions were close down and properties were confiscated by the state especially in the formative period of republic.

\textbf{Non-Muslims Citizens of Turkey}

The Lousanne Treaty which recognized the establishment of Turkey has some provisions regarding non-Muslim citizens of the country. Articles 37-47 regulates the rights of minorities. According to these articles all Turkish citizens have the right to practice their beliefs and religions. Non-Muslim minorities are equal before the law with that of other Turkish citizens. Religious and

Sectarian difference will not deprived anybody from citizenship rights such as state employment or private enterprise. They will have the equal right as far as teaching and learning their own religion and establishing social and religious institutions are concerned. Moreover their temples and cemeteries will be protected by the state. And they will not be forced to do anything against their beliefs and rituals.

Although Lousanne Treaty has such articles, in the course of history their rights have not always been recognized and violations to place. Time to time they were forced to migrate, the properties of non-muslim minority foundations were taken over by the government and their schools were closed. Non-muslim minorities demanded for the return of their properties and for the opening of their schools on a number occasions. But the state authorities did not give a positive response to such claims. Although in recent years there is a positive trend to engage in constructive discussions with representatives of minority religious groups in the context of Turkish-EU relations and harmonization reforms, not all demands were met. After the introduction of foundation law some of the properties of these foundations were returned. However this is far from what is expected by minority foundations. Since 2003 minority foundations applied for the return of 1542 properties of which only 253 were returned. This indicates that there is still a long way to go to establish equal treatment of Turkish citizens regardless of their religious belongingness. In this context the long awaited opening of the Halki Seminary is yet another example that illustrates the challenges that Turkey faces in dealing with its non-muslim citizens.

The Halki Seminary was closed in early 1970’s as part of further centralisation of the education system in Turkey. At that time private schools such as Heybeli Seminary faced the dilemma of becoming under direct state control or being closed. The Administration of Heybeli Seminary rejected the state control therefore the school was close down which was a center of training and education for Greek Orthodox community. Since then a number of applications were made by the Administration of Heybeli Seminary to re-open the school, but the state did not respond positively. However there is an expectation that the forthcoming democratisation package that is to be announce by the government soon might include an article that might facilitate the opening of the seminary. Yet it is to be seen.

Conclusions

Now let me conclude my main findings and arguments. When we look at problem areas as far as representation of religion and response of the state to the claims of minority religious groups (non-Sunnis and non-Muslims), we might argue that majority Sunni Muslim population seem to enjoy freedom of religion and religious rights more than minority groups such as non-Muslims and un-orthodox groups. Although there is a legal and constitutional recognition of religious freedom,
when it comes to non-Muslim and un-Orthodox groups their claims are not taken on board as much as that of majority Sunnis. In recent years however, claims of minorities as citizens are heard in the context of a much larger debate concerning human rights issues. By looking at the state practices however one can conclude that since the Sunni interpretation of Islam is at the center of Turkish state identity no matter how secular the system and its structure is, the ‘others’ (non-Sunnis and non-Muslims) are discriminated when it comes to responding to their claims.

The current debates and developments indicate that in the Turkish case, one can argue that there is a need for an approach that would embrace not only the protection of freedoms for religious people but also rights and freedoms of secular as well as un-orthodox Muslim and non-Muslim groups. In Turkey although there is a public discussion of liberties concerning religion which is a positive development, claims of un-Orthodox religious groups are not fully addressed until now and also due to the influence of a particular religious orientation, rights of other Muslim groups as well as atheists are neglected and even violated.

In my view at particular religious interpretation and preference of this interpretation over others seems to have shaped the political and institutional structure of the state in Turkey. A concept of democracy based on principle of rationality where the public sphere is effectively functional has not taken roots so far. Thus the plural social reality and demands based on religious diversity is somewhat ignored, and such demands are neither considered as citizenship rights nor fulfilled in a reasonable framework to a large extent.