Keynotes: Islamism, secularism, Turkey, JDP


Reviewed by Ahmet T. Kuru in Contemporary Islam

The mobilization of political Islam in Turkey asks why Islamist political parties, which existed in Turkey since the 1970s, started to win elections in the 1990s and kept doing so in the 2000s. It argues that the recent Islamist electoral success in Turkey has been caused by structural factors (primarily the military's Turkish-Islamic synthesis policy and the malfunctioning of the state, but also other factors such as the flow of Saudi Arabian money to Turkey), Islamists' effective activism and use of resources, and their successful framing of discourses and policies that appealed the votes of the urban poor and the rural traditionalists. The book, which is based on Banu Eligür’s PhD dissertation defended at Brandeis University, employs social movement theory as the theoretical framework while providing a summary of Turkey's recent political history. One of the book’s sources is a large number of interviews that the author personally conducted with an impressively diverse body of political actors in Turkey.

I have some theoretical and methodological concerns, such as the lack of a systematic analysis of the causal relations between various factors listed above. It is not clear, for example, which variables are explanatory and which are intervening. Yet this review will focus on the empirical issues given the fact that the Contemporary Islam is an interdisciplinary journal whose readers are not limited to political scientists like the author and myself.

Empirical validity first requires the appropriate use of concepts. Some concepts that the author frequently uses, such as ‘Islamists,’ need further elaboration. Eligür defines Islamists as those who ‘regard the individual and collective return to the Asr-ı Saadet – the age of happiness during the Prophet Muhammad’s era – as the solution to the political and economic problems of Muslim societies’ (p. 4). For her, Islamist groups ‘never regarded the secular-democratic character of the Turkish Republic as legitimate’ (p. 118) and constituted a ‘non-civil, peripheral, and resource-poor movement opposed to democracy’ (p. 280). She also adds ‘Islamism, unlike Turkish nationalism, does not accept the notion of a Turkish identity’ (p. 283). The book’s cover image summarizes best its pejorative perception of Islamism—a bunch of young and scary males with black beards and green headbands shouting with rage. Based on this image and the definitions above, one would assume that the book was about some very marginal groups. Surprisingly, however, the author defines almost all conservative Muslim actors in Turkey, especially the ruling Justice and Development Party (JDP), as ‘Islamists.’ For Eligür, even conservatives in Turgut Özal's Motherland Party, such as ‘Hasan Celal Güzel’ and ‘Adnan Kahveci’ (p. 121), were ‘anti-Western, Islamic, and [sic.] antiliberal, antiindividualistic’ (p. 120). This perspective neglects the diversity and transformations of Muslim political actors in Turkey.

Another conceptual issue is the author’s frequent references to the ‘secular-democratic’ regime of Turkey. The very first line of the book asserts: ‘Turkey is the only
Muslim secular-democratic state’ (p. 1). This, of course, ignores the fact that there are several other Muslim-majority countries that have secular and democratic states, such as Indonesia, Senegal, and Albania. Moreover, being ‘secular’ and ‘democratic’ do not always co-exist. There is a long list of secular autocracies with Muslim-majority societies, including Uzbekistan, Tunisia, and pre-1950 Turkey. Last but not least, secularism is not a monolithic concept but there are two types of secularism. Assertive secularism, which aims to exclude religion from the public sphere, is dominant in countries such as Turkey and France. Passive secularism, on the other hand, tolerates public visibility of religions; it is dominant in such cases as the United States and India. In Turkey, the Kemalist military and judiciary have aimed to protect assertive secularist policies such as banning headscarves in all educational institutions, prohibiting private Islamic education, discriminating graduates of public Islamic (Imam-Hatip) schools in nation-wide university admission system, and outlawing to teach the Qur'an to children under 15 years old (allowing those between 12 and 15 only in summers). The military and judiciary have imposed these policies although, according to recent surveys about 80 percent of the people in Turkey oppose these policies and only around 20 percent support them (*Milliyet* and Konda, 2007; *Milliyet* and A&G, 2003; Ali Çarkoğlu and Binnaz Toprak, *Religion, Society and Politics in a Changing Turkey*, TESEV, 2007). These surveys also reveal that over 60 percent of women in Turkey wear various sorts of headscarves; thus, they are prohibited from attending schools and universities, becoming public employees, or being elected for any position. The book ignores some of these policies, such as the headscarf ban—originally imposed by the generals who staged the 1980 coup (who are presented by the book, in an exaggerated manner, as the supporters of Turkish-Islam synthesis and therefore the reason for the rise of Islamism). On the other hand, the book tries to justify some other policies, such as the restrictions over Imam-Hatip schools and the Qur'an courses, which were imposed by the 1997 ‘soft’ military coup (pp. 223-5).

Eligür rightly notes that the Kemalist state embraced exclusionary policies from the mid-1920s to the late 1940s, such as the ban on pilgrimage to Mecca, closure of tombs (*türbes*), and elimination of all institutions teaching Islam. Yet she asserts that ‘[t]he state's secularization policies did not lead to widespread public protest....Thus unlike the alienated Islamic-oriented people, the public as a whole did not have a problem with the republic’ (p. 48). In reality, majority of the people in Turkey have had problems with assertive secularist policies of the republic. That is why the parties that have ever won a majority in the Turkish Parliament, Menderes' Democrat Party, Demirel's Justice Party, Özal's Motherland Party, and Erdoğan’s JDP, have all been passive secularists. The opponents of Kemalist assertive secularism are not even confined to these liberal/conservative parties. For example, the Turkish daily *Taraf*, whose editorial board and columnists are composed by atheists, agnostics, former socialists, liberals, and conservatives, has recently emerged as an active critic of Kemalist ideology and practice, including assertive secularist policies.

The JDP received 34 percent of the votes in 2002 and 47 percent in 2007 parliamentary elections. The constitutional amendment package that it brought to the referendum (after the publication of the book) received 58 percent despite the challenge
of all four opposition parties in Parliament. The book takes JDP’s achievements as an Islamist electoral success and tries to explain it accordingly. In reality, the JDP is not an Islamist, but a passive secularist, conservative party. Yet the JDP could not change any of the major assertive secularist policies discussed above because the military and judiciary have contained it by anti-democratic interventions, such as the ‘e-coup’ (2007) and ‘judicial coup’ (2008) attempts. Therefore to entitle a book section as ‘Justice and Development Party Mobilizes against the Secular-Democratic State’ (p. 261) is misleading.

Some other concepts that the author repeatedly uses also demand a rethinking. Referring to the Turkish military, Eligür notes, ‘during the WP-TTP [Welfare Party-True Path Party] coalition government, 170,000 Islamists infiltrated to state bureaucracy’ (p. 230). She uses the word ‘infiltration’ in other parts of the book as if a broad range of Turkish citizens, from pious Muslims to Islamists, are like KGB spies trying to infiltrate the Pentagon. Along the same line, while discussing the recent controversial Ergenekon case, the author only narrates one side of the story, by not mentioning the High Court of Appeals’ decision that acknowledged evidences which were highly indicative of a connection between the Council of State attack (in 2006) and the Ergenekon—the ‘deep-state’ terrorist organization. The author also makes some generalizations such as the following which requires empirical evidence: ‘[T]he balance of strength between Islamist sympathizer [sic.] and guardians of secularism within the military might have tipped in favor of the Islamist sympathizers’ (p. 283).

To conclude, although The Mobilization of Political Islam in Turkey is a serious scholarly work, its overemphasis on a perceived zero-sum game between the Islamists and the secularists prevented it from capturing the complexity of Turkish politics. Scholars such as Nilüfer Gölé (‘Snapshots of Islamic Modernities,’ Daedalus, Winter 2000) and Berna Turam (Between Islam and the State, Stanford University Press, 2006) already revealed the mutually constitutive relations and dynamic interactions between Islamic and secular actors in Turkey by highlighting the grey areas and avoiding Manichean polarizations. That is how social sciences literature helps us understand the vibrancy of Turkish democracy and the changing roles of Muslim conservatives within it.