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RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS IN TURKEY

Ceren Lord

Introduction

The global 'revival' of religious politics since the 1970s, and particularly the Islamist movement has commonly been understood either through civilisational terms as a traditionalist reaction or as a modern, grass-roots reaction to the crisis of the modern secular state and colonialism. While the first has been thoroughly critiqued as essentialising Muslims and Islam as fixed and unchanging (Said 1978; Zubaida 2011), the latter remains the predominant approach, aided by the near 'orthodox' position of 'Asadian' scholarship (inspired by the works of Talal Asad) in the study of religious politics (Enayat 2017). At the core of this approach is a sharp distinction between an authoritarian secular modern state in opposition to what is conceptualised as an authentic religious self in the postcolonial setting. Taking for granted Islamist identity politics, Islamists are viewed from this lens as the authentic representatives of Muslims, with secularists dismissed as colonised minds or imperialist collaborators (Enayat 2017).

The study of religious politics in Turkey has not been an exception to these broader trends. Indeed, the 'master narrative' (Kandiyoti 2012: 515) of Turkish politics conceives of religious politics since the transition to multipartism from 1950 as the reaction of predominantly Muslim society against the top-down modernisation and secularisation project of the authoritarian Kemalist state, understood as a highly unitary entity. Based on this, the ascent to power of the Islamist Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) in 2002 was viewed as the Turkish state's democratisation and the triumph of the 'periphery', or the Muslim masses. An alternative perspective elaborated here traces how the rise and success of Islamist politics have been facilitated from within the state rather than as a reaction to it.

Accordingly, the first section reviews the existing literature before outlining an alternative perspective of state religion-relations. The ostensible secularism of the Turkish state is challenged by the existence of the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, from here on referred to as Diyanet). Continuing the Ottoman incorporation of the Islamic authority within the state, the Diyanet was established in 1924 as a state body legally charged with overseeing Muslim religious life by the Turkish Republic and the majority of the ulema (Muslim clerics) were absorbed within it.² In turn, the Diyanet, which privileges Sunni Muslim access to state resources to the exclusion of others, has been a key state actor driving Islamisation and enjoyed successive waves of expansion of its role since the transition to multipartism in the



1940s. Together with the expansion of state-administered religious education, Islamic charities and Islamic finance, these dynamics have facilitated the persistence of the salience of religious markers in economic and political competition and Islamist mobilisation. In other words, the enlargement of the religious field by the state is crucial for understanding the growth of the Islamist movement and its rise to power.

The second section traces the intellectual roots, main currents, factions and groups within the Islamist movement and their evolving and contrasting strategies over time, together with how they have been affected by the rise of the Turkish [nation-state](#) and post-1980s neoliberal economic restructuring. Alongside the highly influential role of the Naqshbandi and Nurcu communities, Turkish Islamism has been closely integrated within nationalist rightist coalitions and networks. The third section elaborates how these networks contributed to Islamist party political mobilisation. The fourth section considers the record of the Islamist AKP in power, which contrary to widely held expectations has ‘demonstrated less moderation over time’ (Berland 2017: 137), alongside the impact on the wider Islamist movement and its future. The final section discusses the Alevi movement, which is distinguished from the Islamist movement as involving mobilisation for the recognition of equal citizenship rights rather than for political power, catalysed by the sectarian politics of the Turkish state and [Islamists](#).

Religion–state relations in Turkey

Early studies of religious politics in Turkey were based on modernisation theory and approached Islamist politics as a traditionalist reaction to the progress of modernisation and secularisation stretching back to the Ottoman Empire (Berkes 1964; Lewis 1961). Subsequent approaches rejected the positivist and teleological premises of modernisation theory and Orientalist essentialising culturalist analyses distinguishing between a westernising elite and unchanging Islamic civilisation (Said 1978; Zubaida 2011). In response, while the ‘multiple modernities’ perspective has emphasised Islamism as an alternative to Western modernity (Göle 1997; Göle 2002), it also suffers from essentialism in asserting a clear distinction between two cultural patterns treated as discrete and possessing a uniform essence (Zubaida 2011: 4).

Largely mirroring the broader literature on Islamist politics as grass-roots reaction, the dominant paradigm through which religious politics is understood in Turkey, including the multiple modernities approach, is based on Şerif Mardin’s Shilsean centre–periphery (Shils 1975) approach (Mardin 1973). The centre–periphery dichotomy has been subsequently re-articulated as a confrontation between the authoritarian Kemalist state or ‘assertive’ (Kuru, A. T. 2009) state secularism and a majority Muslim society, and viewed as comprising the fundamental underlying dynamic of modern Turkey since the Ottoman era (e.g. Aktürk 2015; Ayata 1996; Göle 1997; Heper and Toktaş 2003; İnsel 2003; Kadioğlu 1996; Özdalga 1998; Taşpınar 2005; Toprak 1981; Yavuz 1997; 2003; 2009). Broadly, there are two (overlapping) versions of this ‘master narrative’ of a struggle between the secular Kemalist state and traditional Muslim society (Kandiyoti 2012: 515). The first emphasises secularisation reforms enacted during the one-party period (1923–1946) as comprising a break or rupture with the Ottoman past leading to the suppression or ‘cleansing’ of religion from the public sphere (Kuru 2009; Sunar and Toprak 1983: 425–426; Yavuz 2000). The second version highlights continuity between the Ottoman and Turkish politics in terms of the state’s control and instrumentalising of religion as opposed to separation or neutrality (Gözaydın 2009; Parla and Davison 2004; Toprak 1981: 38). Building on these, other scholars have described the adoption of the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis Islamisation programme following the 1980 military intervention as the secular state’s instrumentalising of religion (Can and Bora 2004: 150–189; Çarkoğlu and Kalaycıoğlu

2009: 10; Eligür 2010: 20, 85; Sakallıoğlu 1996: 244). These narratives rely on a binary analytical framework and result in perceptions of Islamist success as democratisation, culminating in the ascent to power (or ‘secular centre’), of the ‘Muslim periphery’ represented by the AKP in 2002 (discussed below).³ They overlook structural factors and expansion of the religious field from within the state, including by the Diyanet, and rightist actors (Lord 2018).

While religion had comprised a fundamental pillar of the Ottoman regime, secularism was adopted as a foundational principle following the declaration of the Turkish Republic in 1923. Secularisation reforms included the diminished role of Islamic religious authority with the abolition of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Pious Foundations and the caliphate in 1924, the unification of education, the adoption of the Swiss civil code in 1926, the removal of Islam as the state religion in 1928 and the adoption in 1937 of laicism as a constitutional principle (Berkes 1964; Toprak 1981; Zürcher 2004: 186–195). However, Ottoman legacies, including the incorporation of Islamic institutions within the state and the emergence of religion as an ethnic marker ensured important dimensions of continuity in the ostensibly secular Republic. Consequently, despite the break with the Ottoman order, Turkish nation-state building proceeded on a religious majoritarian logic involving both the construction and elevation of Sunni Muslim identity as the basis of the nation and owners of the state and accorded them a privileged status in citizenship and distribution of state resources. The perpetuation of this logic over time was enabled by institutions such as the Diyanet, alongside state-administered religious education, and Islamist associations (Lord 2018).

Established in 1924, the Diyanet emerged as the chief Islamic authority despite its reduced remit in comparison to the Ottoman ~~the~~ Sheikh ul-Islam which it had replaced. Housing the majority of Turkey’s ulema, the Diyanet is key to understanding the mobilisation and salience of religious politics. However, owing to the prevalence of the master narrative, the Diyanet has been viewed as an apparatus or passive tool of the secular Kemalist state or the AKP for controlling, nationalising and utilising religion in line with regime ideology or ‘securing’ the secular nature of the state (Gözaydın 2009; Kara 2014; Kuru, A. T. 2009; Öztürk, Ahmet Erdi 2016). Secularisation in the one-party era diminished the power and status of the Islamic authority, but the Diyanet also absorbed the Ottoman ulema, which thereby remained incorporated within the state. This continuity is an aspect of the Diyanet’s agency in pursuing Islamisation and expanding its role, in cooperation or conflict with other state factions.

In this vein Turkish secularism was not purely about control or separation of religion from the state but evolved as a redistribution of power between factions of within the state comprising differing political visions. However, secularisation reforms did not end this struggle within the state. The power balance between different factions with their contending visions of society and politics shifted over time. Such shifts were driven by the actors themselves alongside external events including the Cold War and neoliberal economic restructuring which created ~~opportunity windows~~ to push for a change of the status quo. For instance, from the late 1940s the Diyanet increasingly lobbied for an extension of its role and Islamisation by positioning itself and Islam as an antidote to communism. The ostensibly secular military agreed, and the Diyanet went subsequently enjoyed successive waves of institutional expansion and was accorded a central role in the 1980’s Turkish–Islamic Synthesis programme. This expansion continues at an unprecedented pace under the AKP. Likewise, with the related growth of state-administered religious education and rise of *imam-hatip* schools as a parallel education system, Islamic charities and associations and Islamic finance have contributed to building a distinct habitus for the mobilisation and reproduction of Islamist cadres (Lord 2018). These underpinned the deepening of social stratification which gathered pace in the 1990s with the rise of ‘Islamic’ business groups and social spaces.

While the Diyanet is not the only institution that matters for understanding religious politics and Islamist mobilisation, as a state institution it has a privileged role and capacity to influence political strategies and life. It can provide spaces, resources and networks for Islamist mobilisation such as by lobbying for Islamisation and ensuring the persistence of the saliency of religious markers in political and economic competition. This is further underlined by the fluid relationship between the Islamist movement and Diyanet ulema which has become more visible in the AKP era (Lord 2018). In addition, the Diyanet's rejectionist stance towards minority Alevi demands for recognition (discussed below), ensures the persistence and reproduction of Islam as a marker of Turkishness, and Sunni Muslim privilege in access to the state and citizenship rights. The augmentation of this sectarian dynamic of the state in the 1980s and Islamist electoral successes were key catalysts of Alevi mobilisation in the 1990s. In sum, the structural environment, including the incorporation of Islamic authority within the state, combined with contingent events such as the onset of the Cold War and neoliberal economic restructuring in the 1980s shaped the nature of religious movement mobilisation together with the agency of these actors.

Islamist mobilisation from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic

Political Islam is a modern phenomenon that emerged in the late twentieth century. However, its intellectual roots stretch to the eighteenth-century, to the idea of a revitalisation of Islam in reaction to European imperialism and the weakening of Ottoman and Muslim power. Together with this, Turkish Islamism was greatly influenced by the intertwining of Islamist and Turkish nationalist currents from the late nineteenth-century. These ties deepened in the lead-up to the establishment of the Turkish Republic and formed the intellectual underpinnings of the 'Turkish-Islamic Synthesis' programme developed by rightist conservatives in the 1970s (Çetinsaya 1999).

The establishment of the Turkish nation-state, and subsequent military interventions, particularly in 1980 and 1997, were consequential for the trajectory of the Islamist movement, reorienting it firstly towards closer integration with Turkish nationalism, and secondly a pro-capitalist neoliberal framework (Lord 2018: 209–210). During the early phases of nation-state building, which by its nature comprised a territorially bound logic, transnational pan-Islamist and traditionalist currents that rejected Turkish nationalism were sidelined, while reformist or nationalist camps including from amongst the ulema remained within the founding coalition and incorporated within the state (Bein 2011: 108–109; Lord 2018: 214). The emergence of a one-party regime from 1925 with the declaration of the emergency Law for the Maintenance of Order (*Takrir-i Sukun Kanunu*) ended space for all political and religious activity beyond that overseen by official religious institutions. Martial law was triggered following an armed rebellion by Sheikh Said, a Kurdish Naqshbandi, which had both Kurdish nationalist and Islamist (reaction to the caliphate's abolition) underpinnings (Gunter 2007: 117–123; Olson 1989; Yeğen 1996: 221; Zürcher 2004: 169–172). Shrines were closed, tariqa orders were denounced as 'centres of reaction' and Law 677 adopted in the same year ordered the abolition of the dervish lodges, the confiscation of their wealth and a ban on religious titles. Regime fears of a counter-revolution were exacerbated by a disputed incident in Menemen in 1930 when a soldier was decapitated by a group of Naqshbandi dervishes calling for the return of sharia law and the caliphate (Zürcher 2004: 179). In reaction to the ensuing crackdown, many Islamist actors went underground (Zürcher 2004: 191–193).

However, not all Islamist currents were excluded from politics or the state. Rather, they continued to engage in and became intertwined with the Turkish right and conservatism,

particularly over their common agenda of anti-communism (Bora 2013: 518–519; Duran 2005, 129–156: 135–139; Kara 2014: 27–28). Particularly from the 1940s, avenues for Islamist mobilisation expanded with the influence of anti-communism following the emergence of the Cold War which catalysed the formation of rightist networks and solidified with the founding of various political parties and associations. This mobilisation within and outside the state chiefly occurred within the framework of the Turkish–Islamic synthesis (Çetinsaya 1999), which subsequently triumphed following the 1980 military intervention as revealed by the junta regime’s adoption of a comprehensive Islamisation programme dubbed the Turkish–Islamic Synthesis (TIS). Broadly, these networks included ‘traditionalist–conservative’ (*gelenekçi–muhafazakar*) circles within the one-party regime, and the emergence in the 1940s and 1950s of a bloc comprising a new generation of Turkish nationalist and Islamist intellectuals called the nationalist–conservatives (*milliyetçi–muhafazakarlar*) or nationalist–sacredists (*milliyetçi–mukaddesatçılar*) (Çetinsaya 1999: 366–370; Taşkın 2007).⁴ At the associational level, three organisations stand out in terms of their influential role in solidifying these rightist networks. Firstly, the National Turkish Students Union (Milli Türk Talebe Birliği, MTTB) established in 1916 as a Turkish nationalist/Turkist organisation, was influenced by growing anti-communism from the 1940s and increasingly incorporated Islamist currents from the 1960s. Prominent MTTB actors include Abdullah Gül (AKP), Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (AKP), Bülent Arınç (AKP), and far-right nationalist Devlet Bahçeli (Nationalist Movement Party, Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, MHP). Anti-communism was also the common denominator for the second organisation, the Association for Fighting Communism (Komünizmle Mücadele Derneği, KMD), founded in the late 1940s (Poulton 1997: 139; Seufert 2014: 7). The KMD’s role in connecting Islamist–nationalist–conservative rightist networks is exemplified by the involvement in the 1960s of Islamist Fethullah Gülen as one of the founders of a local branch, and president Cemal Gürsel (1960–1966), who briefly headed the organisation (Meşe 2016). The third organisation is the Hearth of the Enlightened (Aydınlar Ocağı), founded in 1970 by a small group of influential intellectuals (including the prominent Islamist Hayrettin Karaman), which shaped the 1982 constitution and the TIS programme (Can and Bora 2004: 150–189; Lord 2018: 66, 219, 224–225; Şen 2007: 65; Toprak 1990; Taşkın 2007; Yavuz 2003: 77). These rightist clusters influenced party political mobilisation, including the establishment of the first Islamist party in 1970 and its successors including the AKP. They also found reflection in rightist coalitions in party political life from the Nationalist Front (Milliyetçi Cephe) governments (comprising the Justice Party – Adalet Partisi), the MHP and the National Salvation Party – *Milli Selamet Partisi* (MSP) of the 1970s, the ANAP in the 1980s, the RP’s electoral pact with the MCP in the 1990s, and the AKP from 2002 (including its alliance with the MHP from 2015), indicating an important dimension of continuity (Şen 2007: 65).

From the 1970s, Islamists increasingly extended their transnational networks. Turkish Islamists were traditionally highly nationalist in orientation in comparison to global Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood. However, since the 1970s, Cold War–related developments including the creation of a ‘green belt’ against communism, funded by oil rich Arab monarchies and particularly Saudi Arabia’s Muslim World League, extended resources for domestic Turkish Islamist mobilisation (e.g. facilitating the growth of Islamic finance) but also transnational coalitions and exchanges between Islamist forces (Ahmad 1988: 761–762; Eligür 2010; Köni 2012: 97–110; Lord 2018: 110–111). From this perspective, the 1980 junta regime’s efforts to deepen the integration between Islamist and Turkish nationalist currents was a means to check pan-Islamist currents spurred by these linkages, alongside an effort to strengthen rightist blocs against socialist currents (Lord 2018: 230–231).

A further layer of Islamist mobilisation involved the role of Islamic *tariqa* orders and communities (*cemaat*). The Naqshbandi⁵ orders played a significant role in the Ottoman and Turkish states ‘in merging the revivalist fundamentalism of the lower classes into the established orthodoxy’ (Karpas 2001: 21, 24). They ‘operate as a repository of virtually all cultural and religious traditions that have existed in Turkey; they bridge the gap between the Ottoman period and the current Islamic socio-political revival’ (Yavuz 2003: 134). Naqshbandism has

served as the matrix for the emergence in the 1970s of the four leading contemporary Turkish Islamic political and social movements: the neo-Naksibendi Sufi order of Süleymanî⁶ and other orders; the new Islamist intellectuals; the Nurcu movement of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi, with its offshoot led by the charismatic Fethullah Gülen; and the MGH [National Outlook Movement] of Necmettin Erbakan.

(Yavuz 2003: 11)

Naqshbandis led rebellions against the Republican state during the one-party era but also mobilised outside and within the state including within the Diyanet, spreading through the mosques, a key centre being the İskenderpaşa mosque in Istanbul Fatih (Karpas 2001: 113; Yavuz 2003: 140).

Alongside the various Naqshbandi *cemaat* is the prominent offshoot called the Nurcular, with an estimated five to six million members (Yavuz 2003: 140), who are the followers of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi (1877–1960), a prominent Islamist of Kurdish origin. Nursi’s association with Naqshbandism is contested given his critique of Sufism, leading some to distinguish the Nurcu from traditional *tariqa* orders or Islamism (Çakır 2002: 89–90; Kuru and Kuru 2008: 108–109). However, both the various Naqshbandi and Nurcu groups ‘stressed the constitutive role of Islam as a shared language and practice for a community to have a meaningful life’ (Yavuz 2003: 56). During his lifetime, Nursi was involved with the Turkish nationalist Committee of Union and Progress (İttihad ve Terakki Cemiyeti) in the Ottoman Empire, as well as Kurdish nationalist and Islamist movements (Mardin 1989; Özdalga 2000: 85; Seufert 2014: 12). Following a period of reclusion triggered by disappointment in the new Republican regime, the Nurcus became highly active in political life from the 1940s, particularly through staunch anti-communist engagement within the right (Bora 2017: 424).

Following the death of Nursi in 1960, several Nurcu offshoots emerged, the most prominent being the Gülenists led by Fethullah Gülen (1941–) who grew from the 1970s into an ‘autonomous faith-based societal movement’⁷ (Yavuz 2003: 180). Alongside his anti-communist activism, Gülen is a Diyanet imam, a highly statist Turkish nationalist,⁸ who leads one of the most powerful Islamist movements in Turkish history. The Gülenists engaged in education provision to build a Golden Generation (Altın Nesil) infused with Islamic morality with whom they targeted state power by building cadres of followers within the bureaucracy (Çobanoğlu 2012: 403; Lord 2018: 219–225; Şık 2014). At its height, the movement had a vast education and business empire, including more than 1,000 schools in over 120 countries (Hendrick 2013: 3). Gülenist activities continued to expand even after Gülen’s self-enforced exile in the United States following the 1997 military intervention. Gülen had supported the military, which was in keeping with his gradualist strategy of advancing his project while avoiding direct confrontation. This strategy and a seeming tendency to try and establish a monopoly was why the group was often regarded with suspicion and relations with other Islamist currents and leaders were uneasy. However, until their fallout, a fruitful alliance was struck from 2002 between the AKP and Gülenists that enabled them to expand their cadres within the judiciary, and security forces to remove any opposing factions (Çakır 2002: 113–116; Şık 2014: 125–130). This was

chiefly achieved through allegations of coup plots and the existence of clandestine or deep state forces targeting the AKP through *coup-plot* trials (Cizre 2016; Lord 2018: 269–278; Seufert 2014). The government's initial public disavowal of the *Gülenists* followed the 2013 corruption investigations targeting the AKP by the judiciary. As the fallout deepened, they were finally designated as the Fethullah Gülen Terrorist Organisation (Fethullahçı Terör Örgütü, FETÖ) in 2015, with the AKP blaming their former partners for the 2016 failed putsch.

Islamist political party mobilisation

Following the 12 September 1980 military coup, the junta regime closed the MSP alongside all political parties. The intensifying class-based politics, severe left–right polarisation and economic crisis in the 1970s had stoked a ‘hegemonic crisis’ (Yalman 2015: 237) following which the junta regime adopted far-reaching political and neoliberal economic restructuring including the TIS programme. The TIS was a comprehensive policy of social engineering reorienting society towards ‘the mosque, barracks and the family’, to create a ‘pious’ nation through expansion of religious (Sunni Islamic) education and widening Diyanet activities from beyond the mosque to all spheres of life including hospitals, prisons and families (Lord 2018: 66–67; Toprak 1990: 11). This shift in the balance of power within the state towards rightist factions catalysed expansion of religious infrastructure including Sunni religious education, Islamic associations and foundations, Islamic finance and the self-styled Muslim or conservative business organisations. The state's increased privileging of the majority religion through the distribution of resources and incentives in turn provided greater opportunities for Islamist mobilisation over other types of movements (Lord 2018: 66–67). This dynamic is also revealed by the soaring membership of the Islamist trade union Hak-İş only after the junta regime closed all other labour unions and only allowed the right-wing nationalist and Islamist ones to operate (Duran and Yildirim 2005: 233; Öztürk, Aykut 2018: 461).

Against this background, the MSP was reborn as the Welfare Party (Refah Partisi, RP) in 1983. In the 1980s, the RP's electoral showing was weak. It failed to cross the 10% threshold with 7.2% of the vote in the 1987 elections. This was partly owing to the governing ANAP's prominence as an umbrella party for rightists. The fragmentation of political parties in the 1990s, together with successive economic and political crises including short-lived coalitions, corruption and armed conflict with the Kurdish nationalist movement, proved a boon for the electoral fortunes of the Islamists. With efforts of the Hearth of the Enlightened, the RP struck an alliance with the rightist-nationalist National Work Party (Milliyetçi Çalışma Partisi, MÇP, the heirs of the MHP) in the 1991 elections and raised their joint share of the national vote to 16.9% (Şen 2010: 64). In 1994, the RP gained 19% in the municipal elections including control of major cities of Istanbul, Ankara and Diyarbakir and won a plurality of the national vote (21.4%) in the 1995 general election.

Factors underpinning the RP's success included its cross-class appeal compared to the MSP's petty-bourgeois base (Gülalp 1997: 434, 444–445; Şen 2010: 66). The party was able to appeal to the urban poor partly owing to the 1980 junta regime's obliteration of the left and post-1980s expansion of faith-based organisations engaged in welfare provisioning (Göçmen 2014), alongside the new Anatolia-based capital groups benefiting from 1980s economic liberalisation. The rise of Anatolian capital or pious Muslim business groups has been associated with the rise of a pious ‘Muslim bourgeoisie’, widely taken for granted as underpinning Islamist moderation (Atasoy 2009; Demiralp 2009; Gümüştü 2010, 835–861; Nasr 2005, 13–27; Tuğal 2009; White 2008). A by-product of these dynamics was the founding of pious Muslim business organisations, the first of which was the Independent Industrialists' and Businessmen's

Association (Müstakil Sanayici ve İş Adamları Derneği, MÜSİAD) founded in 1990, followed by the Association of Anatolian Businessmen (Anadolu Aslanları İşadamları Derneği, ASKON) alongside the Gülenist Turkish Confederation of Businessmen and Industrialists (Türkiye İşadamları ve Sanayiciler Konfederasyonu, TUSKON) which was closed following the 2016 attempted coup.⁹ Reflecting the ‘master narrative’, scholars commonly asserted that they were initially stifled by the ‘secular’ Kemalist state and capital based in the traditional business centres of Istanbul and Izmir (Demir, Acar and Toprak 2004; Gümüşçü and Sert 2009: 961; Yavuz 2003; 2006). Various studies show that such claims of victimhood are without basis and take for granted Islamist discourses (Bedirhanoglu and Yalman 2009; Cengiz 2013; Lord 2018: 167–178).

A distinguishing feature of the RP and its successors compared to other parties has been the successful vertical mobilisation of the poor through faith-based associations and the horizontal mobilisation of business and middle-class networks through involvement in these associations affiliated to and or brought together by the political party (Akinçi 1999; Öniş 1997: 755–756; White 2002). Reflecting its diverse social base, the cornerstone of the RP’s political programme was the Just Order (Adil Düzen) ideal, viewed as socialistic, Third Worldist, populist politics that offered ‘a compromise between the ideal Islamic order [...] and a classical welfare state’ presented a third way between capitalism and socialism (Tuğal 2002: 105–106; 2009: 137–140; also see: Toprak 2005: 185; Çakır 1994: 131–149; Gülalp 2001: 442; Yavuz 2003: 221–222). Yet, ‘the Just Order program was not radical enough for the radicals and too radical and unrealistic for the emergent capitalist sectors within the [Islamist] movement’ (Tuğal 2009: 249). Overall, the RP maintained the RP’s main themes of anti-Westernism, anti-Zionism, the championing of Anatolian capital, the critiquing secularism and adopted a majoritarian emphasis at the ballot box. The constitution restricted the call for an Islamic state, but the RP’s promotion of legal pluralism akin to the Ottoman *millet* system constituted an implicit call for sharia law (Toprak 2005; see also: Bulaç 1998; Guida 2010).

The rise of the AKP

The splintering of the RP based on these internal divisions was spurred by the ‘post-modern coup’ on 28 February 1997 which had resulted in the resignation of the RP-led coalition government. The RP was subsequently closed by the Constitutional Court for anti-secular activity. Two currents emerged within the RP: ‘traditionalists’ (*Gelenekçiler*) sought to be an ideological cadre party, while the ‘reformists’ (*Yenilikçiler*) wanted to become a mass party (Çakır 1994: 76). Beyond differences in political strategies, the reformists were mindful of their experience of the 1997 military intervention and represented the rising Anatolian capital and pious Muslim bourgeoisie. Once the RP’s successor, the Virtue Party (Fazilet Partisi, FP), was also closed by the Constitutional Court in 2001, these divisions crystallised in the formation of the AKP by the reformists and the Felicity Party (Saadet Partisi, SP) by the traditionalists. The AKP rebranded itself as a ‘conservative democratic’ party (Akdoğan 2003) by dropping the Just Order programme, renouncing its Islamist roots and ties to the National Outlook movement, and adopting a liberal economic programme coupled with a pro-European Union, pro-Western and human rights discourse. This reorientation continued a trend that had begun with the FP in contrast to the SP which maintained the National Outlook agenda (Cizre-Sakallıoğlu and Çınar 2003: 326–327). Compared with the FP’s 15.4% of the vote in the 1999 general elections, the SP gained just 2.49% of the vote in the 2002 elections, while the AKP won 34.3%.

Both structural and agency-based factors underpin the AKP’s successive electoral victories: 46.6% in 2007, 49.8% in 2011, 40.9% in June 2015 and 49.5% in November 2015, and

42.6% in 2018. Structural factors include the post-1980 neoliberal restructuring and the rise of the pious ‘Muslim bourgeoisie’ and business groups (e.g. Gümüşçü and Sert 2009; Hosgör 2011: 354; Özcan and Turunç 2011; Tuğal 2009: 6–10; Yavuz 2006); economic achievements (Kalaycıoğlu 2010; Öniş 2009: 23); the highly majoritarian Turkish political system (Lord 2012; 2018: 241–281); the disintegration of the centre-right political parties following a deep political and ~~2000–2001 economic crisis~~; and corruption scandals, following which the AKP emerged as the main party of the right in 2002. Agency-based explanations focus on party mobilisation and discourse strategies (Baykan 2018), how ‘activists intervene in ordinary people’s lives’ (Tuğal 2006; 2009); the extension and monopolisation of clientelistic mechanisms, including neoliberal reforms and the development of particularistic social welfare policies (Bermek 2019; Buğra and Candaş 2011; Köse and Bahçe 2009, 492–509; White 2012); attempts to establish and promote a pro-AKP business class (Buğra and Savaşkan 2014; Esen and Gümüşçü 2018; Gürakar 2016; Köse and Bahçe 2009); vertical mobilisation through party membership giving voters access to opportunities (Doğan 2016); and the AKP’s initial rebranding as a ‘conservative democratic party’ to appeal to a wider audience beyond its traditional base of pious voters (Hale and Özbudun 2009; Şen 2010: 64–65).

Islamists in power and future prospects

The AKP government’s record has undermined the widespread expectations of Islamist moderation through inclusion, political learning, pragmatism, Europeanisation and capitalist absorption, resulting in inevitable democratisation against the Kemalist authoritarian state or the emergence of a ‘conservative democracy’ (Cizre 2008; Demiralp 2009; İnsel 2003; Kalaycıoğlu 2007; Kuru and Stepan 2012; Müftüler-Baç 2005; Özbudun 2006; Somer 2007; Sayari and Hasanov 2008; Yavuz 2009). This conviction was underpinned by the ‘master narrative’ (outlined above) and AKP’s early liberalising measures targeting civilisation of the military, engagement with ethnic and religious communities, market-friendly economic policies, the start of EU accession negotiations in 2005 and the expansion of the (Muslim) religious field. Consequently, the AKP era is commonly periodised as involving liberalisation and civilianisation between 2002 and 2007, consolidation of power from 2009 to 2011 and a drift towards authoritarianism and Islamisation from 2011 onwards (e.g. Sezal and Sezal 2018). However, while the AKP ‘always worked from the premise that Turkey is a Sunni Muslim-majority country’ (Akan 2017), the party’s early authoritarian tendencies, including efforts to criminalise adultery in 2004 and periodic sectarian outbursts,¹⁰ were largely overlooked owing to the dominant democratisation narrative. Important junctures catalysed the augmentation of the AKP’s authoritarianism including the 2007 military e-memorandum, the coup plot trials during 2008–2014 targeting the military, the 2013 Gezi Park protests, the outbreak of the Arab uprisings in 2011, the power struggle with the Gülenists marked by the December 2013 corruption investigations targeting the AKP and the 2016 failed putsch. The trend towards a highly personalised autocratic regime was consolidated by the 2017 constitutional referendum which instituted a highly centralised presidential system with further weakened checks on executive power.

A key dimension of the AKP’s authoritarian politics has involved the pursuit of Islamisation (Kaya 2015; Lord 2018; Pupcenoks 2012; Rubin and Yeşilada 2010; Şen 2010). This means an unprecedented expansion of the role of the Diyanet; religious education (reflecting the desire to raise a ‘pious generation’ as declared by Erdoğan) (Çakmak 2009, 825–846; Coşkun and Şentürk 2012, 165–177; Kandiyoti and Emanet 2017, 869–876; Lüküslü 2016, 637–649; Ozgur 2012; Türkmen 2009, 381–397); and the growth of faith-based associations and Islamic

capital in the context of neoliberal transformation of the economy (Başkan, F. 2004; Buğra and Savaşkan 2014; Eder 2010; Hosgör 2011; Yankaya 2014). In turn, the enlargement of the religious field has extended the Islamic habitus involving growing social stratification with the emergence of Islamic holidays and fashion and the restructuring of social spaces with venues without alcohol and gender segregation (Crăciun 2017; Gökarıksel and Secor 2010; Öncü and Balkan 2016). Moreover, the AKP has promoted conservative gender roles and patriarchal religious values including the adoption of pro-family social policies (Arat 2010; Coşar and Yeğenoğlu 2011; Kaya 2015; Yılmaz 2015) and the sectarian targeting of minority Alevi (Lord 2019). Foreign policy, too, particularly since the 2011 Arab uprisings, has become more sectarian and been conducted through an ‘Islamist interpretive frame’ (Ayata 2015; Başkan 2018; Çınar 2018; Hinnebusch and Tür 2013; Hintz 2018; Ozkan 2014).

Concomitantly, the AKP’s discourse has shifted from its earlier, relatively more pragmatic presentation of itself towards a more explicit ‘exclusionary’ populism (Çınar and Sayın 2014: 375) involving a re-emphasis on its Turkish–Islamist ideology and anti-Western civilisational discourse. Islamist discourse has largely mirrored the master narrative in exuding a ‘politics of *resentment* that encourages the projection of hatred onto groups or classes seen as privileged and exclusionary and as oppressors of the national “underdog”’ (Kandiyoti 2014; italics in original). This politics is underpinned by a narrative of

victimhood in relation to the rising secularist Western world and Kemalist elites [which] is a constitutive element of the hegemonic imaginary of Turkish–Islamist ideology in Turkey. [...] Turkish–Islamist intellectuals have constantly promoted the idea that devout Sunni Turks from Anatolia were the real victims of the elitist top-down modernisation process.

(Yılmaz 2017: 487)

Islamists including the AKP have employed this victimhood narrative together with an anti-Western ‘civilisation discourse’ in their quest for power to enlarge their hegemony (Açıkel 1996; Yılmaz 2017: 484).

Two factors will be consequential for Turkey’s Islamist movement. Firstly, from its initial founding in 2001, the AKP had emerged as the primary umbrella under which diverse groups and factions of Islamists, conservatives, nationalists and rightists gathered. However, this is fracturing owing to the augmentation of the AKP’s hold on the state and crackdown on dissent which has catalysed an unprecedented power struggle within the Islamist movement, as revealed by the violent fallout with the AKP’s former allies, the Gülenists, and animosity against other Islamist groups such as the Süleymancı and the Furkan Foundation.¹¹ Secondly, shifts in the external field, including geopolitical upheavals and conflict since the 2011 Arab uprisings, which have resulted in the AKP’s involvement in the Syrian conflict and its support for and collaboration with Islamist forces across the region, raises the spectre of growing ‘salafisation’ and radicalisation of Turkish Islamism (Cakir 2015; Hammond 2017, 417–435; Tezcur and Ciftci 2014; Vicini 2018). These dynamics also include the AKP’s strengthening ties with the Muslim Brotherhood since 2011, viewed as part of a wider ambition to establish an AKP-led Islamic union across the region (Başkan 2019).

The transnational Alevi movement

In contrast to the Islamist movement which is focused on the attainment of state power, the Alevi movement emerged in the 1990s as a transnational movement in both Turkey and

Western Europe focused on asserting Alevi distinction from Sunni Islam (Dressler 2008: 282) and demanding equal citizenship rights. In addition, while the Islamist movement was facilitated from within the Turkish state and enjoyed a privileged status owing to their Sunni Muslim identity, the Alevi movement has emerged partly in reaction to the sectarian politics of the Islamists and the state.¹² Given the rights-based focus and demands, and internal debates as to whether Alevism can be considered a 'religion' comparable to the Abrahamic religions, the designation of the Alevi movement as a 'religion' one comparable to Islamism is also contested.

Alevi are estimated to comprise 10% to 30% of Turkey's total population (Shankland 2003: 21) but remain officially unrecognised and subject to discrimination by the Turkish state. The nature of Alevi identity is highly contested, with questions centring on origins, including its relationship to Islam, ethno-linguistic roots (e.g. Turkish, Kurdish, Zaza) and whether it is a religion, philosophy, way of life or culture (Şahin 2005: 479; Sökefeld 2008). Consequently, in modern usage 'Alevi' has emerged as an 'umbrella term' referring to heterogeneous communities with different ethno-linguistic and regional characteristics (Açıkel and Ateş 2011: 717; Erdemir 2005: 938; Karakaya-Stump 2017: 66).

Under the Ottoman Empire, groups viewed as beyond the pale of orthodox Sunni Islam were designated as Kızılbaş Alevi and persecuted by the state (Deringil 1990: 555; Gündoğdu and Genç 2013; Ocak 1998: 15–17). These dynamics were exacerbated by confessionalisation of the Ottoman state (Karakaya-Stump 2019) until the turn of the twentieth century when Turkish nationalists became interested in Alevi, fearing Christian missionaries and relations with Armenians. Alevi were subsequently re-articulated as 'genuine Turks', in contrast to Sunni 'Arabised' Turks, and as carrying pre-Islamic and pre-Ottoman Turkish traits traced back to Central Asia. Previously 'heretical' Alevism was reformulated by Republican Turkish nationalist historians as a 'syncretic' religion and Turkish heterodox Islam. This came to be known as the 'Köprülü paradigm', becoming the primary paradigm through which Alevism is understood (Dressler 2013; Karakaya-Stump 2019; Karolewski 2008). Recent works challenge this narrative: Dressler (2013) situates modern Alevi identity as being shaped by the Turkish nation-building project, while Karakaya-Stump (2019) traces the emergence of [Kızılbaşism](#) in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries from within the cosmopolitan Sufi Middle East environment.

In theory, the ostensibly secular Turkish Republic offered equal citizenship regardless of religious belonging, but in practice, as outlined above, it privileged Sunni Islam, consigning Alevi to invisibility (Zırh 2012) at best, or targeted them with violence (e.g. Gazi massacre of 1995) and ethnic cleansing (e.g. Dersim massacre 1937–1938) at worst. In the multiparty era, Alevi continued to be subjected to periodic bouts of violence and pogroms perpetuated by rightist mobs with the complicity of the state authorities (e.g. in Maraş in 1978, Çorum in 1980, Sivas in 1993), particularly following engagement with the left from the 1960s and 1970s. In general, reflecting the dynamics within the state outlined above, two types of state strategies against Alevi emerged: i) nationalist factions particularly in the military which sought to assimilate Alevi as Turkish Muslims; and ii) the Diyanet, as carriers of Sunni orthodoxy, which maintained a rejectionist stance towards Alevism and Alevi distinction but also adopted a more assimilationist from the 1980s. As the balance of power within the state has shifted towards more rightist factions, especially under the AKP, sectarian targeting and discrimination against Alevi amplified. The AKP's 'Alevi opening' between [2007](#) and [2011](#), comprised a renewed assimilationist strategy (Lord 2016b).

While Alevi activism can be traced to the 1960s, emergence of a transnational Alevi movement seeking communal mobilisation and recognition (Sökefeld 2008) only occurred in the 1980s. It was catalysed by the post-1980 augmentation of the Turkish state's Sunni

majoritarian character and the rise of Islamism resulting in increasing sectarianism, collective trauma (owing to sectarian violence), the left's annihilation, and the global shift from class to identity politics including Kurdish nationalism, transnational networks and organisation emerging amongst European Alevi migrants, liberalisation and expansion of media communications (Massicard 2013; Şahin 2005; Sökefeld 2006; 2008: 37; Zırh 2012). The reconstitution of Alevism as a 'social movement' as opposed to a 'religious community' (Sökefeld 2008: 37; see also: Dressler 2008, 280–311; Massicard 2007; Şahin 2001; Zırh 2012) was facilitated post-1960s migration and urbanisation which weakened Alevi religious traditions and practices and resulted in the emergence of lay elites who have shaped associational life since the 1990s.

The diverse Alevi movement comprises groups organised around traditional religious networks, alongside village, regional and national associations, federations and transnational confederations. The contestation over Alevi identity also delineates factions within the movement that can be broadly distinguished as comprising 'traditionalists' who view Alevism as within Islam and 'progressivists' who construe it as a distinct belief (Zırh 2012: 183–187). Across Europe, the leading Alevi organisation is the largely progressivist Alevi Associations in Europe Confederation (Avrupa Alevi Birlikleri Konfederasyonu, AABK, est. 2002), with smaller Kurdish and traditionalist groups. In Turkey, the picture is more fragmented, with divisions crystallised under three major federations: the Alevi Bektashi Federation (Alevi Bektaşî Federasyonu, ABF, established 2002), Alevi Associations Federation (Alevi Dernekleri Federasyonu, ADFE, established 2008), and Alevi Foundations Federation (Alevi Vakıfları Federasyonu, AVF, established 2005), which represent progressivist, in-between, and traditionalist factions, respectively. Despite the lack of a hierarchy within Alevism and diversity within the movement, common demands from the state include the following: i) abolition of the Diyanet; ii) abolition of compulsory religious classes; iii) official recognition of *cemevis* as Alevi places of worship; iv) ~~conversion into a museum the site of the 1993 Sivas massacre~~; v) the ending of mosque construction in Alevi villages; vi) restitution of dervish lodges appropriated in 1925 (Karakaya-Stump 2017; Zırh 2019).

There have been two attempts at party political mobilisation, the establishment of the Turkey Union Party (Türkiye Birlik Partisi, TBP) in 1965 and the Peace Party (Barış Partisi) in 1995, both of which failed to garner mass Alevi support. The movement's political preferences involve close engagement with leftist politics and social democratic parties (Ertan 2019; Schüler 1999). Since 2015, an unprecedented engagement with pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi, HDP) involved election of Alevi activists to parliament.

In contrast to the Islamists' success in capturing state power, the Turkey-based Alevi movement's demands remain elusive owing to the AKP's Islamisation drive. In comparison, the European leg of the movement has achieved major successes in gaining official recognition of Alevism as a distinct faith community across Europe (currently 12 countries including Germany, France and Britain), with numerous attendant rights such as Alevism lessons in schools and recognition of religious holidays. These achievements and spaces for activism in Europe will be consequential for the future of Alevism and the movement which faces several internal and external challenges. Internally, the contestation over the definition and nature of Alevism, the questions over religious authority, and ethnic polarising between Turkish and Kurdish Alevis will be exacerbated by the diverging processes of recognition and non-recognition in Europe including Turkey. On the external front, the Turkish AKP government's violent sectarian targeting of Alevis and its Islamisation drive coupled with assimilationist measures (Lord 2019) constrict spaces for future mobilisation of the Alevi movement and increase the insecurity of Alevis and the future of Alevism.

Conclusion

Religious movements in Turkey have been fundamentally shaped by the interaction of the institutional framework with groups' internal dynamics and their wider networks and alliances. The institutional framework encompassed the nature Turkish nation-state building, the privileging of Sunni Muslim Turkish identity as the basis and rightful owners of the nation-state, alongside important dimensions of continuity with the Ottoman state that saw the integration of religious authority within the state. Contrary to the common wisdom of Islamism emerging as a reaction to the ostensibly secular Kemalist state, the imbrication of religion and state in the early phases of nation-state building ultimately facilitated Islamist mobilisation through the provision of spaces and state resources for a movement that claimed to be the authentic representatives of a nation imagined as a Sunni Muslim majority. Through time, this integration with state power involved negotiations of the bounds of the Islamist project, to influence a more Turkish nationalist rather than pan-Islamist current, which was solidified through Islamist involvement within rightist networks. Accordingly, the Turkish-Islamic synthesis, with its intellectual roots in the late Ottoman cooperation between Islamist and Turkish nationalist currents, not only continued but was augmented as the power balance within the state shifted towards conservative currents in the multiparty era.

The discrepancy between the promise of secular citizenship enshrined in the Republican constitution and the Turkish state's institutionalised privileging of the Sunni Turkish majority was consequential for the development of the Alevi movement. While in the Islamic Ottoman Empire, those designated as *Kızılbaş* were increasingly regarded as heretical, early Turkish nationalists sought to incorporate them into the nationalist project, but only through rearticulating Alevism as Turkish Islam. With the nation imagined solely as Sunni Muslim, there was no room for Alevi distinction, and this was an area where there was an overlapping consensus between different factions within the state. The augmentation of the Sunni majoritarian character of the state over time and accompanying sectarian violence were catalysing factors in the growth of Alevi movement from the late 1980s. The movement has maintained its focus on equal citizenship rights and forged alliances with leftist, secular and democratic forces while utilising transnational spaces for mobilisation. Overall, the development and evolution of religious movements in the ostensibly secular Turkish case suggest a need for a reconsideration of dominant understandings of religious politics that present stylised descriptions of state and society.

Notes

- 1 Modern Islamist movements mobilise in the name of an interpretation of Islam which they instrumentalise and seek the transformation of state and society in line with this vision, harkening back to a re-imagined golden age of early Islam (Ayoob 2008: 2).
- 2 Since 2018, the Diyanet has been tied to the presidential office, and has over 120,000 personnel and controls over 80,000 mosques.
- 3 Similar designations include 'Black Turk' (i.e. Muslims) vs. 'White Turks' (secular Turks) (Demiralp 2012).
- 4 For overview of evolution of Islamist thought and debates, see: (Guida 2010; Köseoğlu 2019; Pirický 2012; Şentürk 2009; White 2005; Çetinsaya 1999)
- 5 The founding of the Naqshbandi Sufi tariqat order, with an estimated 8-10 million followers in Turkey (Karpas 2001: 108), is dated to the fourteenth century. Naqshbandim in Turkey is rooted in and represents different offshoots of the Khalidi branch, inspired by the 'revivalist' Naqshbandi teachings of Mevlana Halid (1776-1777/1827). The Khalidi-Naqshbandi have been among the most active tariqa orders during both the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic. Yavuz notes that 'One of the major reasons that the Khalidi branch managed to penetrate the Ottoman state was the religiously orthodox and politically activist doctrine of the order. Both the state and the Naksibendis were critical

- of heterodoxy in society. The ulema of Istanbul favoured the order, too, in their fight against the heterodox Bektaşîs' (Yavuz 2003: 136). In Turkey's Naqshbandism, the Menzil, Erenköy, İskenderpaşa, İsmailağa, Işıkçı and Süleymancı communities are amongst the most prominent alongside the Nurcus and their various offshoots including the Gülenists. For further analysis of Naqshbandis, see: (Karpuz 2001; Yavuz 2003: 133-150; Mardin 1989: 57-59).
- 6 The Süleymancı, the Naqshbandi followers of Süleyman Hilmi Tunahan, are a powerful traditionalist branch active within the Diyanet and religious education provision, with an estimated 2-4 million followers (Eligür 2010: 57; Yavuz 2003: 145).
 - 7 For critical scholarship on Gülenists see (Lord 2018: 219-225; Çobanoğlu 2012; Şen 2007).
 - 8 Regarding Gülen's approach to Turkish nationalism (and animosity towards Kurdish nationalism) see: (Çobanoğlu 2012: 237, 251; Yavuz 2003: 202; Lord 2018: 219-225; Seufert 2014: 13; Turam 2007: 35; Bora 2017: 428, 434; Bulaç 2008: 318).
 - 9 For a detailed overview of pious business organisations see Buğra and Savaşkan 2014; Hoşgör 2011; Şen 2010; Lord 2018: 166-178; Demir, Acar and Toprak 2004; Durak 2013; Önis and Türem 2001; Balkan, Balkan and Öncü 2015; Yankaya 2014; Çokgezen 2000.
 - 10 These include remarks made by Erdoğan against opposition CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu and his Alevi roots during the 2010 referendum, references to alleged domination of the judiciary by Alevites and referring to the citizens murdered in a 2013 terror attack in Reyhanlı as "Sunni martyrs".
 - 11 e.g. the Menzil tarîqa order recent rise within the bureaucracy (Middle East Eye 12 June 2018; Kandiyoti October–November 2016).
 - 12 Commonplace assertions of an alleged allegiance between Alevites and secular state elites or affinity of secularists towards Alevites are undermined by historical evidence (Lord 2016a; Lord 2016b; Lord 2019) and underpinned by a deep 'Aleviphobia' (Karakaya–Stump 2013).

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