

COMMENTARY

Reflections on the religious turn in Turkish politics: Secularism, biopolitics, geopolitics

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When I was approached by the editors of this journal to write a commentary, it had been more than forty years since I last returned to Turkey. During those years, I have made little effort to keep track of the ups and downs in Turkish politics. Yet, a number of questions have persistently intrigued me. It is with some hesitation that I offer the reflections below. The intrigue has deepened since the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) won the elections again, with the intention to make significant policy changes, including changes to the constitution. Then came the confrontation in which the Prime Minister forced his will upon the military. On top of all that are changes in foreign policy over the last few years, which have gained worldwide attention. It is a question thrown up by these developments that I take up here.

These are all developments that have significance beyond Turkish politics, and this has encouraged me to think that I may have something to say after all. I am presently in India on a short visit as the Rajni Kothari Chair in Democracy with the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in Delhi. As a most fundamental problem of Indian politics, religion inevitably resonates in my mind with developments in Turkey over the last half-century. Religion in politics is not just an Indian or Turkish problem, but has become a problem for the world, reversing the secularizing trends of nearly two centuries that began in Europe and from there spread around the world. I have discussed this as a general problem of contemporary modernity in my recent book, *Global Modernity: Modernity in the Age of Global Capitalism*. The intensified presence of religion is a major phenomenon in US politics. But somehow, be-

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ing here in India, it is hard not to think of it in terms of the Global South. Religious resurgences are global, but they do not carry an identical meaning everywhere.

I am not religious. Even if I were, I would insist that religion is a personal matter that should be kept out of politics—for the good of politics as well as religion. I appreciate that, given the ultimately inexplicable cruelty of everyday life and human behavior, many seek solace in religious belief and practice, and the company of like-minded believers, which makes religion at once personal and social. If the definition of religion were to be expanded to cover all search for truth, I suppose we would all be considered religious in some sense or another, and all learning, including scientific learning, would fall within the scope of religion. But then, any serious search for truth needs to recognize its multiplicity and uncertainty if it is not to degenerate into dogma, which is the negation of truth-seeking. Tolerance, or the recognition of the multiple possibilities of truth, is crucial to any secular notion of religion, or for that matter a secular understanding of political ideology (e.g., Marxism) or science. This is also why it is necessary to keep religion out of politics. Dogma and liberty are not compatible. If dogma undermines liberty, the temptations of political power generate dogma.

It is when dogma and community come together that we end up with a communalism of the kind that has plagued Indian politics. Communalism sets one community against another on the basis of irreconcilable difference, as if culture consisted of religious loyalty alone, and it insists on unquestioning loyalty from its constituents. It is internally oppressive and externally divisive. Some of my Indian friends of Hindu persuasion insist on the openness of Hinduism and its tolerance for a multiplicity of truths. Muslims likewise claim that Islam is tolerant of other religions. These may be the case theoretically, and sometimes in practice, but I am not sure whether it is Hinduism or Islam that are tolerant, or whether it is tolerant intellectuals who have a vision of their religions that espouse this view. Their views are not necessarily shared by all—not on the basis of the available evidence of mutual destructiveness especially of Muslims and Hindus (conflicts over religion, mostly intra-Hindu, are elegantly explored by the great Indian writer Rabindranath Tagore in his fictional narrative *Gora*). Nationalism, with its colonialist desire for a homogeneous culture, no doubt has played a major part in fuelling communalism in India, as it has in Turkey where the ethnic cleansing of Armenians and the ongoing oppression of the Kurdish populations remain as badges of shame on the body of the Republic. I have not yet forgotten the attacks on Greeks and Bulgarians that I witnessed in Istanbul as a

teenager. Dogmatic religion and nationalism each on its own is capable of cruel discrimination. Together, they work as engines of hatred and injustice.

The consequences of religion in state power are readily evident at a more trivial but no less significant level in the urge to sumptuary regulation of one kind or another, which not only infantilizes citizens, but also opens the way to the biopolitical colonization of everyday life. There is no need here to dwell on pork and *raki*. The most significant aspect of such regulation is the regulation of women's bodies, which is also the greatest source of controversy globally. I have no objection to women wearing the headscarf or the veil if that is their choice. My aunts did that, and nobody thought the worse of them for that reason. But state or patriarchal regulation—the two are intimately related—is another matter. Having made women into the mothers of the country, a religious nationalism then turns around and burdens them with the responsibility to carry on the traditions that supposedly are emblems of a national identity conceived in terms of a religion dictated from above.

I suppose these reflections leave no doubt about where I stand on a party such as the AKP, the revival of religion in Turkish politics, and the voters who keep them in power. Revival of religion or assorted traditions once taken to be inconsistent with modernity is presently a global phenomenon—from Confucianism in China to Hinduism in India, from Islam in Turkey to the Tea Party in the US. In the case of societies of the Global South, these revivals no doubt serve an anti-hegemonic function as they assert native pasts against Euro/American cultural domination, whereas in the US and Europe the revival of organizations such as the Tea Party expresses more of a response to the waning of that domination. This is what I have described as a fundamental feature of Global Modernity (to be distinguished from a previous period not of modernity *per se* but, more accurately, Euromodernity).

And yet the anti-hegemonic implications of these revivals in the Global South are deeply compromised by their entanglement with capitalism, and its culture is expressed most cogently in the culture of consumption. The Islamic revivals seem to be no exception. To refer once again to the accoutrement of women's attire, such attire not only has opened up a whole realm within the fashion industry, but is grist for the mills of a tourist industry that feeds off exoticism when there is little left around the world that could be described as authentically different. Authenticity itself has become a term of approbation in postmodern/postcolonial criticism. The struggle against the hegemony of Eurocentrism more often than not seems to be oblivious to the more fundamen-

tal hegemony of a capitalism which has gone global. What I understand from a perfunctory reading of political analyses is that the AKP's appeal in Turkey lies as much in its successful negotiation of a neoliberal global economy as in its insistence on the revival of Islamic belief and institutions. It is not very different from, say, Confucianism in China. As the pasts are revived in defense of identity, they are rapidly overtaken by the integration in a capitalist economy that imposes its own norms on how and how successfully these revivals may reach their professed goals. A challenge to the hegemony of Eurocentrism that does not simultaneously address the question of capitalism is a half-hearted challenge indeed, and one that is not likely to alter significantly the problems of nations or the world—except perhaps to give them an identity and a voice in world politics, which may not be discounted from a national perspective, but which is woefully inadequate.

What then is the intrigue? Despite my distaste for the religious politics of the AKP, I cannot but admire its domestic and foreign policy accomplishments, and wonder what the one might have to do with the other. I may not like religious nationalism, but I like militarism and racist nationalism even less. Since I became a China specialist, I have on and off thought of writing something about the novels of Nihal Atsız which I read as a child. I still remember the racism palpably, even though I did not know enough at the time to call it that. His may have been an extreme case of a pan-Turkism that partook of Fascism, but I suspect that in more moderate form his kind of thinking has been quite widespread in the military and the public alike (I do not know enough about the murky Ergenekon case to make any kind of informed judgment). But militarism in a more general sense certainly has been a feature of Turkish politics. Whatever may have been its functionality in a youthful Republic, the military certainly has no place in a democratic society. Assumptions of guardianship over the country corrupt the military as they corrupt democratic institutions. The AKP certainly must be given credit for addressing this problem head-on. It also must take credit for at least making some moves toward recognition of the problems of the Kurdish population, trivialized by corrupt generals who refused them their identity. Whether Turkish chauvinism may be overcome and a political solution found are big questions, but recognizing the problem, instituting cultural reforms, and engaging Kurds as political subjects is no mean achievement.

The foreign policy accomplishments are even more impressive. The AKP has put in place a "Look East" policy without turning its back on "the West." This has been necessary for a long time, and yet it has been

beyond the ken of liberals, social democrats, and Kemalists alike with their unwavering commitment to “escaping from Asia.” The Islamism of the AKP is no doubt a significant factor. But it is highly significant that their Islamism has not issued in a desire to dissolve Turkey into some imagined Islamic Community, which also has made Turkey into something of a model for Arab societies in search of democratic and independent alternatives within an Islamic framework. During the so-called Jasmine revolutions this past spring, Turkey was frequently held up as an example for North African and Western Asian Islamic societies looking for alternatives not only to *their* militarisms, but also the domination of the Islamic world by corrupt theocratic monarchies in league with imperialism.

Rather, it would seem that the AKP has moderated an earlier contempt for Islam and Asia in general, which is a legacy of the Kemalist Republic. To be fair, social democratic leaders such as Bülent Ecevit were also keenly aware of the price of compliance with Euro/American hegemony and sought to overcome it, but their vision was limited by a fascination with Europe (in its socialist guise) and a continued refusal to engage Asia seriously. The miniscule Maoist left of the 1960s and 1970s may have gone farthest in terms of a recognition of Asia, but their comprehension of either Asia or the Maoism they professed was too elementary, not to say misguided, to permit any kind of serious engagement. On the other hand, AKP policies are effective at least partly because they coincide with the economic and political resurgence of both Islam and Asia, and because they draw considerable plausibility from a new global context.

Equally, if not even more admirable, is the new policy toward Israel, which once again may have something to do with the overcoming of contempt for the Arab cause, and the recognition of the apartheid that Israel has visited upon Palestinians, which is a blot on humanity. The AKP has not only abandoned but also challenged slavish adherence to disgraceful US policies that perpetuate what in a more just world would be recognized as crimes against humanity. One hopes that Turkish policies will contribute at least in some measure to the empowerment of the Palestinian search for autonomy and dignity.

Finally, for the rest of Asia, one wishes that the new moves toward China would issue in closer relationships with the so-called BRIC nations (Brazil, Russia, India and China plus South Africa, increasingly embracing the Central Asian Republics as well). Turkey’s position in NATO makes this unlikely, as it would lead to a break with Euro/America beyond just turning East. On the other hand, as the adventures

in Afghanistan and Libya indicate, NATO, having lost its defensive pretensions with the end of the Cold War, increasingly appears as an instrument of Euro/American hegemony and expansionism in a “clash of civilizations.” Looking both East and West has its advantages, but also makes for inconsistencies in foreign policy, which are yet to be addressed and remedied.

Given what I have said above concerning my feelings about religious politics, I wish that some of these changes had occurred under a social democratic state (I have little faith in liberalism except as a constituent of socialism). From my distant vantage point, the liberal center and the social democratic left both seem to have disappeared from Turkish politics, which is cause for deep regret. I also wish that Turkey, among others, would seriously engage with the pitfalls of the developmental path under a global capitalism which sacrifices human goals to accomplishment in an economic horse-race. The search for alternatives is an indispensable task of the present, even when credit needs to be given where credit is due. Contradictions!