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# Post-Secularism in Politics of Turkey: A Comparison with Habermas' Post-Secularism Theory

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## Abstract

In the progress of modernization and Westernization, secularization has been reported in various areas such as politics, among individuals and even religions themselves. Theorizing and explaining such situations, scholars have argued that religious things should be excluded from the public sphere. However, a trend to doubt such secularization theory has recently appeared, which regards society as a "post-secularized" place. This article explores to what extent that the view of "post-secularization" can be adopted to the actual society by focusing on politics in Turkey as one of the examples of "post-secularized" society. While Turkey is known as a country which had experienced a severe secularization in the 1920s by Ataturk, when it comes to the recent political situation, the impacts of Islam cannot be ignored. This article explores the relation between the recent Turkish politics and the "post-secularization" theory, also comparing it with the leading democratic theory argued by Habermas (2008).

**Keywords:** Turkish Politics, Islam, Post-Secularism, Post-Islamism, Habermas

## 1. Introduction

Since the enlightenment movement in Western countries, secularization has been reported in various places such as politics, individuals, and even religions themselves. Many classical sociologists and religious scholars have tried to theorize such phenomena, and some of them argued that in order to modernize and democratize the society, religious things should be excluded from public places. However, after the progress of globalization and the end of the Cold War in the 1990s, the trend which doubts the westernized secularization theory has emerged. This reflecting dynamic is often referred to as 'post-secularism.'

Turkey is known as a country which was drastically secularized in the early of 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, recently, the increasing influences of Islamic parties have been reported (Somar 2007). Focusing on the appearance/revival of Islamic influences and opposing forces against them in the politics of Turkey in the the 1990s, this article

explores how and to what extent Turkish political situation has been 'post-secularized' from combined two perspectives: post-Islamism and post-secularism. Building on the historical analysis, this article sees the political situation as a result of self-reflection of both Islamists and secularists. Furthermore, to the extent its argument and to clarify the problems of the current situation, it compares with Habermas' (2008) leading theory on the relationship between politics and religion.

The structure of this article is the following: it begins with historical analysis to review the background of Turkish politics and its secularization. Then, it is followed by the theoretical approach to analyse how the attitudes of politics have changed, comparing them with Habermas' post-secularism theory in chapter 3. Finally, chapter 4 summarizes and provides conclusion and implications from the two analysis.

## 2. Historical Analysis

It is said that Turkey is a secularized country but at the same time, Islamic country. It is important to understand the history of this unique state in order to analyze the today's large religious influences.

### 2.1. First Secularization by Ataturk

It was Mustafa Kemal, also referred to as Ataturk or 'Father of Turks' that stepped in as a Turkish ruler of the new republic after the first World War, in 1923. His prior reform was to separate the religious, Islamic beliefs from public lives. He would like to change Turkey, based on the brief: 'nationalism, secularism, reformism, statism, populism, and republicanism' (Ansary, 2009, p.302). His drastic secularization, usually referred to as 'Westernizing' (Ibid. 2009), implies that religion is a symbol of 'non-civilized' society, and totally an obstacle of modernization.

His government removed Islamic things from judicial and educational systems, which was then designed after the Western countries to 'civilize' people. For instance, the Islamic calendar and Arabic scripts were replaced by the Gregorian calendar and the Alphabet respectively, and people were encouraged to be educated in the Western music and paintings in schools (Mardin, 1997, p.200). Differentiated from the principle of politico-religious separation in other countries in which politics does not intervene religion and vice versa, Kemal's government-regulated religion through using the power of the parliament, and non-Islamized the public systems (Sawae, 2001, pp.254-255). This includes the abolition of Caliph system and *Shariat*, which is the Islamic law, deletion of statement from the Constitution to establish Islam as a national religion, and so on. The Parliament was predominately ruled by the Republican People's Party which is the party established by Kemal as People's Party and renamed after the declaration of a republic in 1924. According to Sawae (2001), while there were opposing movements against the radical reforms, he regarded them as enemies of modernization and suppressed with the arms, establishing the Maintenance of Public Order Law enacted in 1925.

### 2-2. Post Ataturk Period

In 1945, since the multi-party system was introduced, Democrat Party which derives from Republican People's Party took the rein of the government. Although Democrat Party certainly added some revisions to the secularization policies by Ataturk, the Democrat government kept them strict in response to the reemergence of Islamic revival groups. For instance, it introduced 'The Law Concerning Crimes Committed Against Ataturk' which restricts the freedom of speech related to the praise of Islam, in particular against the Ataturk reforms to protect memories of him (Bali 2007).

Even after the period Ataturk had died, under the internationally tense circumstance due to the Cold War, the Turkish secularization was held upon by the unique structure, in which the policies suppressing Islamic revival groups were positively or virtually supported by Westernized, Secularized groups, and the Western countries, and Islamic groups admittedly supported the government suppressing communism groups, with Turkish nationalistic

and pro-American groups (Sawae 2001). As shown by this, Turkey still continued to have the peculiar structure of secularization in which the government progressed secularizing policies, consciously intervening, and controlling the influences of religion.

### *2.3 Emergence of Islamic Parties*

The transition to democracy in Turkey had important consequences in terms of the struggle between the secularists and the Islamists. The revolutionary politics was replaced with the democratic ones because of the balanced, and hence, peaceful politics by Democrat Party including the legal systems stipulated in the Constitution not subject to amendment. This is the reason that the recent studies (Toprak, 2005) argue that Islamic movements in Turkey have not been associated with violent but have been democratic and relatively moderate.

During the period of the 1960s to the 1970s, the rise in Islamic identity and the revival of the Islamic group were observed. Among the reports, Sawae (2001) clearly shows the dynamics of Islamic groups in this period.

The Equity Party took the government in 1965 as a post of the Democrat Party, as it gained power by occupying reaping profits grown through policies to develop the domestic capital. During the period of this change of power, although religious things were still restricted in the public sphere, the Islamic groups in Turkey were admitted to be valuable by the government to sustain its power. This is because the Islam was clearly against the leftist communism group, which is fundamentally atheistic, and the government as a part of NATO needs their supports to keep a solid international relationship. The Islamic groups were allowed to reestablish an Islamic institution for higher education as a result of compromise of the Equity Party. However, as long as they were under control by the country, the rise in Islamic movements in Turkey was inevitable, following international Islamic events such as the Kashmir War and the Israel-Palestinian conflicts. This leads to the controversy over headscarves worn by Muslim female students in the university, which is admittedly incompatible with Ataturk secularization. This kind of social movements would move up to the political field from the end of the 1960s (Sawae 2001).

By the campaign period of the general election in 1969, Necmettin Erbakan who would be a top of the National Order Party and at that time ran independent of any party, had strengthened the relationship with the pro-Islamic group within the Equity Party, and eventually won the election. Then in 1970, he founded a new party, the National Order Party. Many of supporters of the party reacted against the radical secular reforms as well as hoped that it would raise their social and particularly economic status for reviving Islamic spirits. What his party aimed was to consider social justice through social welfare, to be free from the social and economic dependence on the Western countries and to develop the country based on "values of Muslim" rather than modernization by Westernization (Sanbay 1985; Sawae, 2001). In 1975, Erbakan published 'Milli Gorus' in which he indicated the perspective of Muslim community. Referring to the secularization/Westernization started from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, he said that national identity (milli suur) had been lost after 200-years foreign invasion and the local cooperation for it (Erbakan 1975: p.9). According to this book, 'reconstruction of great Turkey' is employed as a slogan. Moreover, he suggested that the goal of his party was to accomplish material development based on values of Muslim, which emphasized faith in Islam (Erbakan 1975, p.17). As the National Order Party often referred to the Quran or Hadith as a part of manifestos, it explains the necessity of policies depending on the Islamic view of the world. Here, Erbakan's argument represented by 'Milli Gorus' provided justification to bring religious things into the political fields in Turkey. He continuously showed this political view through the lectures to students from around 1970. These Islam-centered ideas were carried on by the National Salvation Party (NSP, 1972-1980) and the Welfare Party (RP, 1983-1998), which are both Islamic parties afterward (Çarkoğlu & Rubin 2006).

### *2.4 Expanding Influences of Islam in Turkish Politics*

In the end of the 1970s, three Islamic parties, the National Order Party, the National Salvation Party and the Welfare Party, were illegalized by the armed intervention, because they were apparently incompatible with the principle of secularism. After the military coup in 1980, Turkish politics was run by the military government.

Despite the series of suppression of Islamic parties, the new government employed the 'Turkish-Islamic' ideology, which encourage people to strengthen their national identity based on both Turkish identity and Islamic identity. The 1982 Constitution drafted by the military government included the religious education in public elementary and middle schools (Sawae 2001). Although the military administration ostensibly supported the politico-religious separation policy since Ataturk, at the same time, the military officially made use of the Islamic power as its expanding influences could not be ignored.

### 2.5 Emergence of Erdoğan

The greatest crisis for the Islamic groups in Turkey was 'February 28<sup>th</sup> Process' in 1997. This was a suppression of Islamists, particularly who are led by the pro-Islam Welfare Party, from various secularists such as the military, the judicial forces, the economic circles, the journalists and even the universities. The movement expanded to boycotts of the products made by Islamic companies and banning to wear scarfs in universities. At that time, there were few people who criticized such suppression by secularists (Burak 2011). However, from the early 2000s, the idea which opposes to the series of secularism campaign emerged and started to spread out even among the secularistic scholars and intellectuals, following the spreading values of a diverse community, and reflecting on a series of ethnic problems about Armenian and Kurdish people living within Turkey. Furthermore, as Turkey proceeded with accession negotiation with EU and faced the global standard of respect to multiculturalism, there arose a stream that secularists reflected upon contradiction between approval of the political intervention into religion for the purpose of "protection of democracy" and of military power which was based on undemocratic logic (Sawae 2001).

In order to form a sustainable government, the Virtue Party (FP, 1997-2001), taking over the outlawed RP, made a concession to secularists and built good relationships with the Western countries. At the same time, FP tried to form the public system in which religion is not excluded from the public sphere. However, because of this attempt, FP was recognized as an Islamic party by secularists and eventually, was also outlawed. After the dissolving of FP, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who had been one of the younger generation, known as "reformists", founded the Justice and Development Party (JDP, 2015-), which gained power followed by the landslide victory in the 2002 election despite the fact that the JDP was seen to be a successor of the Welfare Party and the Virtue Party. However, Erdoğan, the current Turkish present prime minister and also a leader of the JDP, has consistently shied away from public questioning and discussion of the role of Islam in Turkish society. The JDP called itself as a 'center-right conservative party'. After the election, he and his party were continuously attacked by the secularists in an outlawing trial (Burak 2011). This, counterproductively, strengthened the party's solidarity and undermined the legitimacy of the conventional secularism.

Erdoğan began to be a president in Turkey in the 2014 election, and then won again the 2017 election, in which he asked people to expand the power of the president, which could keep him being in office until 2029 (BBC 2017). Despite the JDP officially claiming itself as not an Islamic Party, the presence of the religion has been increased in public sphere so much after the JDP that it managed to legitimize to wear Islamic headscarves in public places, which had been one of the most controversial issues among the secularists and Islamists. Additionally, when we see the Turkish electoral campaigns in the 2000s, a strategy of the JDP can be found: balancing between secularism and Islamism. On the one hand, it brought religious policies into political fields. For instance, it suggested to restrict alcohol in public places and restaurants<sup>1</sup> during the campaigns for the 2001 and 2002 elections in order to collect the votes from Islamists (Hurriyet Daily News 2013). On the other hand, the JDP employed females who did not wear scarves in the parliament to show its secularized aspect and to avoid being criticized on scarf issues (Sawae 2001). As shown in its balancing attitudes towards secularism and Islamism, it can be seen that the JDP sets the goal in establishing a long-lasting government apart from having a radical ideology.

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<sup>1</sup> Alcohol restrictions were officially adopted by the Turkish Parliament in 2013. According to Hurriyet Daily News (2013), the bill was proposed by the Justice and Development Party. Alcohol retailers are no longer allowed to sell alcohol beverage between 10 pm to 6 am in Turkey.

### 3. Theoretical Analysis

Building on the historical analysis described in chapter 2, this chapter theoretically analyses the relation between politics and religion in Turkey. In particular, it critically explores how and to what extent the Turkish politics has been secularized and not secularized from two perspectives: post-Islamism and post-secularism.

#### 3.1. *Post-Islamism*

There is no substantial definition of the idea of post-Islamism. Its usage and definition varies by scholars, but this article borrows the definition by Bayat (2013) who is a professor of Sociology and Middle Eastern studies. In contrast to the conventional Islamism which strongly emphasizes universal control of states based on the exclusive and mandatory thoughts, the post-Islamism includes pluralism and is tolerant to various rights. Although Islamic governments, as a principle, run the state with little compromise, post-Islamism gives a wide range of compromises in order to last its governing. In Turkey, the Virtue Party and the Justice and Development Party made an effort to get wide supports by compromising to secularists and the Western countries and hesitating to express Islamic statements particularly avoiding officially referring to the scarf issues. This religious situation is close to the post-Islamic state described by Bayat (2013).

The policies by the JDP are conducted along with the idea of post-Islamism. When Erdoğan visited Egypt in September 2011, when the Arab spring had already started, he expressed his opinion that "secularism" is not "anti-Islam" and advised Egypt should form a new government which is based on (post-)secularistic ideology. Additionally, to show its liberality, the JDP has adopted policies contributing to the improvement of women's social status, such as revising the civil law to achieve equal right between husbands and wives, encouraging to send girls to schools and conducting an education project for mosques and teachers to eliminate abuse or violence from education. These policies may not be carried out without post-Islamism.

According to Sawae 2016, this trend emerged from the economic growth. With the rapid economic development especially after the Second World War, people who support Islamic revival were raised upon the upper to middle class. This social mobility gradually grew the inclusive culture rather than exclusive, which allows more diversity in the Turkish public sphere. Furthermore, as the increasing number of women received higher education and worked with men, the general social norm was developed with the post-Islamic culture.

While the JDP positions itself as a center-right party, as shown in chapter 2, Sawae (2001) points out that the higher proportion of the member of the JDP who deeply involves in Islamism. According to her, when looking at their academic careers, family backgrounds and acquired languages, most of them are educated or grown up in Islamic institutions or groups. Besides that, they are engaged in politics while sharing Islamic beliefs both privately and officially. However, the beliefs are much less radical than before and put distance from the extreme thoughts to maintain political supports both domestically and internationally. This represents the post-Islamic way to involve in politics while believing religion.

#### 3.2 *Post-secularism*

The characteristic of post-secularism in Turkey can be found in the variation of secularists groups. As I described above, the groups represented by Atatürk, the military forces, the Westernized elites and intellectuals progressed drastic reforms based on Westernization and modernization as a 'defender of democratization'. This attitude was represented the most in the 'February 28th process', in which the government ignored political intervention by the military forces. According to Sawae (2016), secularist groups had used the Islamic parties as 'scapegoat' by making them illegal to distract attention away from the undemocratic ways. In contrast to the pretext of a protection of democratization, the radical Turkish secularization has been strongly associated with undemocratic ways particularly after Atatürk.

After the 2000s, however, conflicts between the resolute 'democratization' and 'undemocratic' actions by secularists appeared in the public and even within themselves, leading to criticisms and self-reflection for themselves. This reflection was accelerated by touching the global standards such as the importance to diversity and multi-culturalism. Under such circumstances, they could not stop falling their approval ratings without changing themselves. When we look at elites and scholars in the 2000s who used to be the center of secularism supporters, you can find changes in the undemocratic way of governing. For example, it appeared in some reforms including abolishing the post of various departments of servicepersons and reorganization of National Security Council which was practically a supervisory bodies of the government by the military forces (Sawae 2016).

Changes not only in undemocratic ways of secularists but in the attitudes towards religion can also be found in the degree of tolerance to it. This is mostly represented by the permission to wear Islamic headscarves in public places by the JDP government. Since the Ataturk reforms, headscarves were prohibited into wearing in public, which was a symbol of secularism and the most controversial issues between secularists and Islamists. However, as shown in chapter 2, women were eventually allowed to wear scarves following the religious rules from the period between 2010 and 2013 to respect diverse cultures and values. This tolerance represents the post-secularistic way of politics in Turkey.

### *3.3 Theoretical Analysis of Turkish Post-Secularism/Islamism from Habermas' Theory*

Although having some features as an Islamic party, the Justice and Development Party has provided a common ground with secularists, which would never be abolished unilaterally. They partly achieved post-secularized politics ideally that Habermas (2008) argues in that there has been an interaction between politics and religion. Despite these self-reflections of Islamists and secularists, however, it is still hard to say that Turkish politics has completely changed to post-secularism that Habermas (2008) suggests.

First, he claims that religious language should not be brought into national systems. While religion can or should exist in the public sphere, it has to be translated into neutral languages in terms of the world view (Habermas 2008, p.29). According to him, in the public sphere especially in political fields, it is necessary to conduct deliberation (conversation) under the circumstance where both religious and secularized things are equally and mutually admitted. In today's Turkey, the presence of Islamic things in politics cannot be ignored. For instance, the establishment of the crime of adultery by Erdoğan in 2004 is still criticized as an Islamic rule. At the final stage of advancement of women's status, he declared that adultery would be subject to punishment in Turkey. This law amendment has caused a lot of criticisms among domestic secularists, EU countries and even academic fields. Although others argue that it is just Erdoğan's authoritarianism or traditional clientelism rather than Islamism (Sawae, 2011), it is generally seen to derive from the view of the Islamic world. Here, Turkish politics is incompatible with what Habermas thinks of the ideal post-secularized politics.

Second, when considering post-secularized politics, Habermas put emphasis on deliberation between the Sacred and the Profane, namely, Islamists and secularists in this case. The JDP has been taking the government for three terms since 2002, which could deflect the balance in the public sphere between religious and political opinions to the former. Furthermore, Erdoğan has continuously expanded executive privilege and extended his term of office, and actually, as described before, some laws related with Islamism are submitted under the present of Erdoğan. There seem no rooms for deliberation between him and others from the equal position in the public sphere. Therefore, it should be suspended to affirm that Turkish politics has realized post-secularized society which Habermas idealized.

## **4. Conclusion**

This article described the Turkish history of politics from the perspective of the relations between politics and religion. Turkish government drastically introduced secular reforms, strongly restricting religious things. After the Ataturk reform, the government used Islamic groups to confront the communism as a part of the West country. As

the presence of Islamic revival groups increased within such situations, the Islamic parties gradually gained power. After the February 28<sup>th</sup> Process, the Justice Development Party has taken the government as a technically Islamic party since 2002, balancing to get supports between Islamists and secularists.

Building on the historical analysis, it theoretically analysed how far Turkish politics has been secularized and not secularized until today from two perspectives, post-Islamism and post-secularism. On the one hand, reflecting upon its too radical world view, Islamists have adopted to secular and liberal policies to secure their political power. On the other hand, secularists come to show a certain compromise, touching the globally spreading liberal thoughts such as respecting cultural diversity. Despite their self-reflection, this article points out problems Turkish politics still has, referring to Habermas' (2008) argument. According to him, to achieve the ideal post-secularization, introducing religious view of the world should be avoided in public sphere. Rather, those things should be translated into neutral language in order to carry out deliberation or conversation between secular and religious groups from mutually equal position. In contrast to this view, however, there is actually little deliberation between them, mainly because the Justice and Development Party under Erdoğan has been keenly interested in sustaining their political resources. In this sense, this article concludes that although post-Islamism and post-secularism have been developed well in Turkey, Turkish politics has not completely been post-secularized yet.

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