

*Katerina Mystakidou*

## **The Broadening of the Islamic Grip on Turkey**

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has brought unexpected changes in the political developments of Turkey with the steady rise of an Islamic party to power since 2002. Turkey has always identified itself as a secular country and was considered the example of a Muslim, pro-western society where religion was set apart from politics. Although, Turkey remained secular and the Kemalists together with the military safeguarded this Western orientation, it had a solid Muslim population and there were always strong religious undercurrents that were either politically ignored or manipulated. But, there was never any Turkish politician who had ignored the importance of Islam on the masses who are homogenously Muslim both Sunni and Alevi. Only that this existing reality is changing quickly because today's Islamists are cultivating a political Islam with an aggressive social agenda. Their growing power brought to the limelight many issues like the increase of the imam hatip schools and the spreading of the powerful movement of Fethullah Gulen giving them a new prominence and substantial support. But, such issues were present and nurtured since the 1980s. An encouragement of religion was discreetly supported and manipulated by the military as an alternative to the rising power of communism. Simply, at present, the acquired power of Islam added totally different dimensions to these issues that affect education and upbringing of the young people, bringing to the limelight their importance as political weapons.

After winning a third consecutive term in the parliamentary elections in 2011 the governing Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi (Justice and Development Party), known as AKP became particularly powerful and deepened its image. This term they are trying to write a

new constitution hoping it will be ready by 2014. The fact that AKP managed to engineer in 2008 the election of an avowed Islamist to the presidency was indicative of its determination to challenge the secularist establishment. As a result, for the first time in Turkish history after 2008 the Islamists had total control and a free reign over the appointment of the judiciary and could challenge the system. They could implement fundamental changes that threaten the democratic setup and the secular nature of the Turkish republic starting from the headscarf and moving to the Islamic education. The consolidation of power by the Islamists and their rising power that infiltrated all the social strata, inevitably brought a big clash with the secularists causing a broadening crisis. The rift has spread and divided the society between the secularists and the supporters of AKP covering all the issues with no point of convergence. Turkey has maintained a pro-western orientation since the end of World War II. A multi party democracy only after 1950, with the generals lurking always in the background Turkey had readily identified with western policy objectives. Now Turkey has seen dramatic changes after the Arab spring and the war in Syria. In the past years it becomes increasingly more obvious that it tried to take the role of the spokesman of the Sunni world. Already in his visit to Prague in February 2013, the Prime Minister suggested that as an alternative to EU Turkey might also join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which includes developing Asian nations, in addition to Russia and China. “The economic powers of the world are shifting from west to east, and Turkey is one of these growth economies”, Erdogan said.<sup>1</sup>

Ironically the governing AKP, although, clearly Islamic in its composition, enjoyed from the outset good relations with the EU and the Americans widening eventually the rift between itself and the secularists. But, that attitude did not exclude the cultivation of good relations with the West. Since AKP embraced the free market and the capitalist model it was welcomed by its European and American allies. This rapprochement initially based on economy

---

<sup>1</sup> Jürgen Gottschlich, “They Will Give In: Turkey Pressures Germany on EU Accession”, *Der Spiegel* (21-2-2013).

was accepted by the Kemalists, although some had strong reservations. “Turkey’s recent economic track record of increased growth, the vitality of Turkey’s emerging middle class and its geo-strategic locale raise the prospect of a growing regional role in the Middle East”, predicts in a report the United States National Intelligence Council.<sup>2</sup>

But, the new developments with an encroaching financial crisis that threatened all the western institutions has propelled Turkey closer to its Islamic allies. When the AKP came to power, apparently it had a clear vision and a new strategy and its victory was mostly attributed to the economic reforms it promised. From one point it was leading the country to a re-islamisation or, as some call it, the ‘Middle Easternisation’ of Turkey. If there is an economic crisis the already existing differences between the Islamists and the Kemalists would be beyond reconciliation. Observers now point to an increasingly negative attitude of the secularists for almost any AKP decisions regardless of their importance.

### *Ascension to Power*

When Tayyip Erdogan, an Islamic cleric by training, was first swept to power in the 2002 general election he received the votes of many secularists disenchanted with the previous coalition governments. Not only that, but, the Kurds voted in an overwhelming majority for the AKP as well as the Alevis. Unlike their pro-secular rivals, Islamists have been able to reinvent themselves to appeal to a growing base of voters.

Some Turks had welcomed the change thinking that the division between religion and the state was cemented in the 80 years implementation of Ataturk’s legacy.<sup>3</sup> Secularism was accepted virtu-

---

<sup>2</sup> The National Intelligence Council, which brings together all 16 US intelligence agencies, argues in its recent report, *Global Trends 2025*, published in November 2008 that Turkey’s most likely course in the next 15 years involves a blending of Islamic and nationalist strains.

<sup>3</sup> Formal ideology of Kemalism was launched in May 1931, when the Third Party Congress adopted the six ‘fundamental and unchanging principles’ of Republicanism, Nationalism, Populism, Statism, Secularism, and Revolutionary/

ally by everyone in Turkey from its beginning since religion was made a matter for individual conscience and was freed from the exploitation of the conservatives. Now the conservatives that link Turkey to a theocratic Ottoman past are back in power for the first time after the foundation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. The essential goal of Kemalism (*Kemalizm* also called Ataturkism or *Ataturkculluk*) was to substitute Turkish nationalism for Islam and Ottomanism so as to destroy the hold of the past on the rising republican generation.<sup>4</sup>

During the 1930s the pressure of secularization in Turkey became very strong indeed. Although, the regime never adopted an avowedly anti-islamic policy, its desire to end the power of organized Islam and break its hold on the minds and hearts of the Turkish people was clear. The prohibition of religious education, tried to reinforce the legal and social reforms in the first stage of the Republic.<sup>5</sup> The prohibition of religious education<sup>6</sup> lasted over 25 years and it was reintroduced again in schools as an optional course in 1949. But, in October 1951, religious education became com-

---

Reformism. The meaning of 'Revolutionary/Reformism' was disputed in the party, the moderates interpreting it as reformism, the radicals as revolutionism. The radical interpretation became official in the 1930's though the liberals continued to oppose the definition, maintaining that the state was committed only to reform. These principles became the six arrows of the RPP, the symbol on the city's emblem. On February 1937 they were incorporated into the constitution so the amended Article 2 read: "The Turkish State is Republican, Nationalist, Populist, Statist, Secularist, and Revolutionary Reformist". Feroz Ahmad, *The Making of Modern Turkey*, Routledge, London 1993, p. 63.

<sup>4</sup> Ahmad, *The Making*, *op.cit.*, p. 61.

<sup>5</sup> D.A. Rustow, "Politics and Islam in Turkey 1930-1935", in R.N. Frye (ed.), *Islam and the West*, The Hague 1957, p. 84.

<sup>6</sup> Also no new mosques were built in the new capital Ankara and the existing mosques were allocated for social purposes. Aghia Sophia was transformed into a mosque by Fatih Sultan Mehmet on his conquering Istanbul in 1453, and for nearly five hundred years it was considered by the Moslems as the symbol of Islamic supremacy over Christianity. In a secret cabinet decision in October 1934 during Ataturk's period it was made into a museum and closed to worship. On the pretext of repairs, it has mostly remained closed to worship since then; it was opened to worship only partially in 1991.

pulsory for the first time in the fourth and fifth classes of the primary schools in Turkey.

In spite of all the efforts of the first reformers and nationalists, there is much evidence that the secularization of Turkey was never complete as was sometimes believed. In the first place, there were many indications of the persistence, beneath the surface, of popular religion in the form of the cult of dervish *seyhs*, especially in Anatolia.<sup>7</sup> Today, the popularity of the brotherhoods in Eastern and Southeastern Turkey is often attested.

When Erdogan headed the first one party government both he and his associates claimed that they no longer believed in mixing politics and religion. He had learned his lessons when he won the municipal elections with Welfare Party and became mayor of Istanbul in 1994 but was booted out in 1997. A year later when he recited a nationalist poem with obvious religious symbolism he was accused of inciting 'religious hatred' and was briefly jailed for doing so. When he formed AKP in 2001 with other moderates from the religious ex Welfare Party they measured their steps very carefully and cloaked their campaign with a very unthreatening western approach at the time. Some shrewd observers and skeptics suspected his tactics thinking that they are unrepentant Islamists, but, AKP had an overwhelming support based on its economic agenda. Erdogan promised economic stability and growth, an end to corruption and a strong pro-EU ticket.

### *Relations between EU and the Islamic Government*

Interestingly enough the Islamists managed to win the support of Brussels rather easily, something that eluded all the previous governments and they cultivated very carefully their Turkish-EU relations. They ingratiated with the EU and the US and rather swiftly privatized a large sector of state companies including the powerful TEKEL and the telecommunications. Britain, an old ally, trying to win Ankara's support on the Cyprus issue offered its services and

---

<sup>7</sup> Berbard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, Oxford University Press, London 1968, p. 416.

paved the way for its positive reception both by the US and the EU. Not unfaithfully Britain and the US, both staunch supporters, pressured Brussels for Turkish membership and broadening EU borders. “American officials should continue to nudge Turkey toward bolder reforms that will strengthen internal democracy and bolster the qualifications for EU membership. In the long run, this is the best way to ensure the emergence of a stable, democratic Turkey closely anchored to the West”.<sup>8</sup>

The EU’s positive response to developments in Turkey during the first term of AKP contributed to managing the tensions and disagreements between different groups. On one hand, Erdogan’s Islamic conservatives hoped that moving towards the EU would help promote a loosening of Turkey’s strict secularism and allow a more relaxed multiculturalism. On the other hand, Kemalists and secularists and some in the military hoped the road to the EU would accelerate modernization.<sup>9</sup> They had thought that with the help of a range of human rights groups and other social and political NGOs the EU membership could consolidate a market economy and a liberal democracy. The EU has a ‘ring holding’ effect in helping to facilitate Turkey’s political reform consensus.

As a result the government embarked on a series of major legal and political reforms in beginning framing a very good picture for itself. Erdogan touched on many serious and sensitive political issues starting from the rights for Kurds. It also tried improving human rights and women’s rights. The role of women in public life-society and government has diminished considerably. But the most serious of all was a stronger civilian control of the military, and the powers of the army were trimmed, an untouched issue since the formation of the Republic of Turkey. Many observers were surprised of how fast and thorough the Islamic government proved with the changes. But, the success of Erdogan’s government was

---

<sup>8</sup> F. Stephen Larrabee, “Turkey’s Broadening Crisis”, *International Herald Tribune* (Saturday-Sunday July 26-27, 2008), p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Kivanc Ulusoy, “Turkey and the EU democratization, Civil-Military Relations, and the Cyprus Issue”, *Insight Turkey* 10.4 (Oct-Nov. 2008), 77-93, passim.

mostly based on his economic performance that allowed him to win a second and a third term.

### *Relations between US and the Islamic Government*

As for the US that today wages war against the Islamic terrorists it had encouraged the rise of the more militant Islamists from the beginning. Even during the 1980 coup the generals, the core of the Kemalist legacy, under the American tutelage were discreetly supporting the Islamic movement to counteract the rise of communism in Turkey. Although, the generals seem to be at odds with the Islamic government they can easily recognize their own old recipe of the junta that was the cultivation of a “green belt around a red threat”. This had another more intricate dimension since the military encouraged not only the Sunni Islamic faith and the imam hatip schools, but, also the various brotherhoods and thriving orders in the southeast of Turkey. After all the *tarikats* had continued to exist secretly right through the republican era in a more successful way than the repressed official Sunni Islam. It was natural enough that the dervish brotherhoods should be encouraged by the growing official tolerance of Islam to reassert themselves, but, apparently the government was not prepared to extend the same indulgence to popular mystical Islam as to orthodoxy.<sup>10</sup> There was always a government mistrust of the *tarikats*, but the orders had always a big following and a lot of politicians belonged to them. All these various branches of Islamic movements were set against nationalism and this was a policy that Turgut Ozal who succeeded the generals followed religiously. Already, Turgut Ozal the favorite politician of the generals and the US, was an Islamist. Before the 1980 coup Ozal has been a member of the National Salvation Party<sup>11</sup> the ‘Islamic Standard Bearer of the 1970s. Necmettin

---

<sup>10</sup> Rustow, “Politics and Islam”, *op.cit.*, p. 97.

<sup>11</sup> Actually, its president Necmettin Erbakan with the intervention of the US got a preferential treatment from the generals after the coup, unlike the rest of the politicians. It was an act mostly noticed by leaders of other religions in Turkey, who interpreted it, at the time, accurately as a support of Islam.

Erbakan the leader of the National Salvation Party was the political mentor of all the Islamists who came to power after him. Ozal belonged to the powerful order of the Naksibendi who have a stronghold in eastern Turkey, and was a deeply religious person never drinking in public and fasting while his brother Korkut Ozal, a devout moslem, was Erbakan's cabinet minister. When Erbakan died all the top brass were among thousands of Turks at the funeral of Turkey's first Islamist prime minister, on March 1, 2011.

Cast by his secular enemies as a dangerous religious reactionary, Erbakan is now acknowledged as a moderating force on Turkey's Islamists. As the Arab world looks to Turkey as a possible model, Erbakan's legacy has new significance. He was fiercely anti-western, decrying the European Union as a Zionist Christian club and railing against usury and the free market. Yet unlike some Islamists (but like Turkey's *Tarikat* Sufi Islamic fraternities), he disavowed all forms of violence. The army pushed him out in 1997.

Both Prime Minister Erdogan and President Gul cut their teeth with Erbakan from very young and were members of the Welfare Party. Already the religious issue figured in the 1987 election primarily because of the participation of the Welfare Party, headed by Erbakan, as soon as the military had receded to the sidelines. Erbakan was well aware of the fact that he could be prosecuted if he made an open appeal for the establishment of an Islamic state and was usually careful to stay within the letter of the law. While joining the other opposition parties in attacking Ozal's economic performance, his campaign also concentrated on moral issues, accusing the government of laxity on prostitution and pornographic movies etc. He even claimed that if he came to power, the Muslim veil would be adopted as 'national dress' for women and that a separate TV channel would be started purely for religious broadcasts. Apart from the present religious instruction, compulsory lessons on *tasvir* and *hadith* (Koranic interpretation and the Traditions of the Prophet) would be introduced in schools. Interest free credit would be extended to the peasants in accordance with Islamic principles. It may be fundamentalist in the sense that it stretches the limits of the law in its support of an Islamic constitution. The Welfare Party



did not get over 10% from Eastern Anatolia and Eastern Black Sea with a concentration of votes in Konya where Erbakan was standing. But, what Erbakan promised in this campaign in 1987 and failed to enact became reality twenty years later by the President his political heir.

### *Religious Education*

The major issue of *imam hatip*<sup>12</sup> schools, the religious schools that have trained a new class of young religious minded people who are not destined to become clerics and are politically active. This is today a huge problem because it is the hub of a contemporary politicized Islam. Actually the imam hatip schools saw an abrupt increase in the 1980s from a couple of thousand students to 187, 803 in 1997.<sup>13</sup> They had proliferated not only under the Islamic Welfare Party of Erbakan, but, under ANAP (Anavatan Partisi) of Turgut Ozal as well as the DYP (Dogru Yol Partisi) of Demirel, which means that they had an almost uninterrupted expansion. Actually, these *imam hatip* schools turned religion into political awareness. They were not educating passive Muslims, but, people ready and active in the work force who often assumed a militancy in the power struggle. These students of the *imam hatip* schools who exceeded by far the need of clergymen in Turkey had started attending various faculties at the universities, other than the Divinity school, often diversifying their interest to law and administration. As a result today's Islamists were nurtured and were spearheaded by the conservative governments headed by astute politicians like Ozal and Demirel All these politicians were fully aware that they were educating the future Islamists. By the mid-1990s, they were attracting some 11 % of children in the relevant

---

<sup>12</sup> Imam (cleric) hatip (preacher). The *imam hatip* schools are religious schools that train clerics and both Prime Minister Erdogan and President Abdullah Gul have attended them. They were established in the 1950's but, later they emerged as an alternative to secular education. The *imam hatip* schools provide free breakfast and lunch thus attracting a lot of lower class people.

<sup>13</sup> Soner Cagaptay, "Turkiye'de Laikligin ve Dis Politikanin Geleceyi", The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus No. 67 (2007).

age group and developing into a parallel system of education. For the staunch secularists in power that was too much. By the mid 1990's the schools had become so widespread that in the 1997 conflict between the Islamists of the Welfare Party and the secularists and the military they constituted a hot bottom issue.

The big muddle was highlighted in 1997 with the last great educational reform in Turkey just after the generals pushed out of power an Islamist-led coalition. Back then, the incoming secularist government decreed that Turkish children would have to spend at least eight years in school, instead of the previous five. This reform, along with a campaign to cut truancy and encourage girls to enroll in primary school, would turn out to be the key to getting young Turkish people better jobs. It was a poverty-reduction measure on an epic scale. There was a serious political motivation behind this reform. By requiring that all eight compulsory years of schooling be spent under the same primary-school roof, they abolished middle schools. This meant that children could not enter vocational schools until the ninth grade. Until then it was the sixth grade. The generals had their sight on delaying admission to one type of vocational school in particular: *imam hatip*, which were used to train the Islamic clergy. Never mind that *imam hatip* were less like madrassas than parochial schools in the United States.

After much wrangling and pressure from the military, the government passed new laws raising entry levels to *imam hatip* schools from sixth grade to ninth grade. The new law also ensured that as it had been intended originally that the graduates would go only to the Divinity school. By the time the AK Party took over from the generals, a decade ago, only about 2 % of eligible children attended clerical schools. Since then, the AK Party has been determined to undo the effects of the 1997 reform. Now this is a major issue for AKP. The government allowed the students of *imam hatip* school to transfer to regular high schools so that in the university they can major in different fields.

However, the AKP managed to change the nature and the mandate of these *imam hatip* schools, thus creating an alternative to the secular education dealing the most fundamental blow to the exist-

ing system. This could be the most crucial and essential manipulation of secularism and an overt effort in uprooting it. Now the government tried to change dramatically the existing status. That's why the current reform proposed to both extend mandatory schooling to 12 years and divide that time into four years of primary school, four years of middle school and four years of high school (hence the "4+4+4" slogan).<sup>14</sup> The idea is to revitalize middle schools and allow children to take a large number of elective options. The diversity of the courses is almost a cover up to allow many students the choice of religious studies. Whatever choice the students make being in that environment is enough to be indoctrinated in the Islamic faith and further alienated from a secular mentality. "We opened 411 imam hatip liseleri (Religious high schools) and the rest 730 allowed them to be imam hatip ortaokulu (religious middle schools)."<sup>15</sup>

Now the number of students in the religious or Koranic middle schools is around 110 thousands while in high schools they are about 130 thousands. The number of students enrolled in these schools exceeded all expectations even in government circles.

### *The Movement of Fethullah Gülen*

Apart from the *imam hatip* schools the movement of Fethullah Gülen is growing at an alarming rate to the great concern of the Kemalists and many others. Gülen has invested a lot of money mainly in education, although nobody can answer for his finances. But, he is not restricted to education and his conglomerate includes NGO's, businesses and huge investments in all sectors particularly in the media. In contrast to many Arab Islamists he tries to please Christians and Jews. Turkish sceptics say the Gülen movement is

---

<sup>14</sup> Andrew Finkel, "What's 4+4+4?", *International Herald Tribune* (23-3-2012), 6.

<sup>15</sup> The most recent figures are from the interview Minister of Education Omer Dincer gave to the daily *Sabah* on September 3, 2012 at the beginning of the new school year. "Bakan Dinçer'den İmam Hatip okulları rakamı". [www.sabah.com.tr/Egitim/2012/10/03/bakan-dincerden-imam-hatip-okullari-rakami](http://www.sabah.com.tr/Egitim/2012/10/03/bakan-dincerden-imam-hatip-okullari-rakami).

more fundamentalist, and less liberal, at its hard core than its benign external face would suggest. The fate of several journalists who have tried probing it, and found themselves prosecuted or jailed, lends weight to that belief. People who criticise the movement can face nasty smear campaigns.<sup>16</sup>

Fethullah Gülen, 71, is regarded internationally as the founder of a modernist brand of Islam, but, it is clearly a branch of the Nurcular<sup>17</sup> order. Their founder Nursi actually believed that an Islamic state was not necessary in order to propagate Islamic faith and mores.<sup>18</sup> This is a very convenient philosophy to the West and has a pacifist approach in contrast to the militant Islam. Gülen was claimed to have urged his followers in the judiciary and public ser-

---

<sup>16</sup> “In many ways Turkey’s Islamists seem to have got things right. But it took them a long time to emerge from the country’s army-guided secularism”. *The Economist* (6-8-2011).

<sup>17</sup> It is interesting that the BBC World reported in a piece “Turkish Investigation into Islamic Sect expanded” on Monday June 21, 1999 that: “A senior Turkish prosecutor says an investigation into the leader of the country’s most influential religious sects is being extended after allegations in the media that he has been plotting to overthrow the state. Over the last few days, Turkish television channels have been citing recordings of alleged comments by Fethullah Gülen, leader of the Nur or Divine Rights sect, in which he urges his followers in the judiciary and public service to work patiently to take control of the state. Gülen has dismissed the allegations as a plot.

The Nur sect is enormously wealthy and runs schools and universities in Turkey, Central Asia and the Middle East. The BBC Ankara correspondent says many people regard Gülen as a moderate figure but influential sections of Turkey’s secular establishment are suspicious of a man who wields considerable power. “This piece shows clearly the Gülen identified as a movement is a more recent invention and came into full power under AKP”.

<sup>18</sup> The people in Anatolia, whose beliefs and identities they felt to be threatened by the secularizing and Westernising measures. With their proofs of the teachings of the Qur’anic revelation and accommodation with science, and rebuttal of “philosophy”, Nursi’s writings the *Risale-i Nur*, articulated the people’s problems and offered them a restatement of their beliefs relevant to their situation. Nursi died in 1960. However, the *Risale-i Nur* was not intended and does not function as substitute for the Qur’an; on the contrary, it is a commentary on the Qur’an in light of the modern sciences and the tremendous challenges affecting the modern Muslim world. Sukran Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, SUNY Press, Albany 2005, pp. 349-350.

vice to “work patiently for the sake of establishing an Islamic state”. As a result a trial was opened in 2000 and Gülen was prosecuted for inciting his followers to plot the overthrow of Turkey’s secular government. Fethullah was finally cleared of trying to topple the state after being charged over footage in which he apparently urged civil service supporters to await his orders to overthrow the system. According to him the film in question was taken out of context. In a very long trial that final decision acquitted him in 2006.

Gülen, who has lived in the US since 1998, is credited with establishing a global network of schools, in Central Asia, Indonesia, Pakistan, Indochina and Africa, which preach Islam in a spirit of tolerance.<sup>19</sup> The Gülenists who are extremely active and correctly targeted the most sensitive area of education have founded more than 500 places of learning in 90 countries spreading all over the world. In its homeland the Gülen movement is seen as a counterweight to ultra-nationalism. But, in places far from home, the movement cultivates a Turkish nationalist flavour, teaching Turkish

---

<sup>19</sup> The Guardian’s religious affairs correspondent, Riazat Butt, reports from Istanbul. A hitherto largely unknown Turkish Islamic scholar, Fethullah Gülen, has been voted the world’s top intellectual in a poll to find the leading 100 thinkers. Gülen, the author of more than 60 books, won a landslide triumph after the survey –which is organised by the British magazine, Prospect, and Foreign Policy, a US publication– attracted more than 500,000 votes. The top 10 individuals were all Muslim and included two Nobel laureates, the novelist Orhan Pamuk, who is also Turkish, at No. 4, and the Iranian human rights lawyer Shirin Ebadi in 10th. The result surprised organisers, who attributed it to a sustained campaign by Gülen’s followers, known as the Gülen Movement, after Turkey’s biggest-selling newspaper, *Zaman*, publicised the poll. Prospect’s editor, David Goodhart, admitted to not having previously heard of Gülen and said his supporters had “made a mockery” of the poll. But he said the result flagged up significant political trends in Turkey. “The victory of Gülen draws attention to the most important conflict in Europe, played out in Turkey between the secular nationalist establishment and the reforming Islamic democrats of the AK (Justice and Development) party”, he said. The AKP is allied to Gülen supporter, Bulent Kenes, who is editor-in-chief of *Today’s Zaman* newspaper, denied the poll had been hijacked. “There are many people who promote Gülen’s ideas, which contribute to world peace by urging international dialogue and tolerance”. [www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/jun/23/turkey.islam](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/jun/23/turkey.islam).

to students in different continents. Amazingly enough the Gülen movement has built up a significant presence in Northern Iraq, through schools, a hospital and a university. Although, this arena of Turkish-Kurdish conflict is not the easiest environment for a Turkish-based institution, the movement has deftly built up relationships with all the region's ethnic and religious groups.<sup>20</sup>

In an interesting way Gülen was always shrouded with a mystery concerning his funding with almost unlimited amounts of money. There are well informed sources that insist that Ankara provides the money. After all Turkey has often a different approach in its foreign policy implementing tactics that would not be permissible in its own territory. But, it also serves Turkey's new foreign policy that has often expressed its interest to have a more visible international role. Many people also suspected a heavy Saudi hand in his dealings and attributed a lot of his extravagant spending in areas such as Sudan and the new Islamic republics as consistent with the Saudi policy. In the West, he has been praised for promoting dialogue and his condemnation of Osama bin Laden as a monster after September 11, was timely and was particularly welcomed in the States since it was coming from an Islamist. He mixes the vocabulary of Sufism with language that is broadly pro-business and pro-democracy. In It was the ultimately politically correct act. Fethullah resides in Pennsylvania, but, the Americans have turned down his recent petition for green card.

Today there are many allegations of a serious infiltration of Gülen's followers known as *fethullahci* into the police force.<sup>21</sup> But, Gülen also managed to have a huge access in the media with *Zaman*, the daily newspaper as the flagship of numerous publications that support him openly.<sup>22</sup> Now it is Turkey's largest and

---

<sup>20</sup> Amberin Zaman, "Bishkek and Istabil", *Economist* (6-3-2008).

<sup>21</sup> Zahide Ucar, *Gorunmeyen Dusman ve Cokus*, February 3, 2009. [www.internetajans.com](http://www.internetajans.com).

<sup>22</sup> *Zaman* started back in the eighties as an obscure religious paper, but today it has according to Fatih Altayli a sales circulation of 30,000, but distribution of over 600,000. It is a quite well known fact that they pressure people for subscription. It is also indicative of political preference particularly in smaller towns and villages where interrelations with authorities are very important.

most influential paper having driven the secularist press into second place. Of course it is owned by the Fethullah Gülen movement. Some insiders are afraid that the West allowed him to become the embodiment of moderate islam and are afraid that if he returns to Turkey he will assume a status very much like Khomeini. Over a quarter of a century, this movement that was nascent a long time ago, fought against odds to spread its roots. During the early part of 1987, various incidents occurred in which the Islamic fundamentalists made their presence felt for the first time since the 1980 coup.<sup>23</sup> A plot was uncovered in the top military academies and a series of expulsions of cadets followed, apparently infiltrated by the fundamentalist Fethullahci religious order as a long term strategy to penetrate the armed forces.

Back in the 1980s attention was focused on the demand by some women university student that they should be allowed to wear 'Islamic' headscarves in class. Large demonstrations by the fundamentalists' supporters were also organized in Istanbul and Konya. This caused some foreign observers to wonder whether Turkey was about to be engulfed in the Islamic resurgence witnessed in other Middle Eastern lands. Erbakan had wanted the headscarf to become a national dress. When Erbakan formed a coalition government with Tansu Ciller in 1996 everybody got alarmed. The military had made a serious intervention to block the infiltration of political Islam into power and started some procedures in 1997. The so-called "February 28 Process" had started with a meeting of the MGK in which the army had harshly warned the government formed by Islamist Welfare Party and the center-right True Path Party (DYP), to be very careful. It was a serious confrontation and many commentators and politicians referred to that event as soft or post-modern coup. The General-Secretary of MGK Tuncer Kilinc has been very outspoken ever since insinuating that Turkey could see a repetition and a new "February 28 Processes" if the rise of political

---

<sup>23</sup> Andrew Finkel-William Hale, "Politics and Procedure in the 1987 Turkish General Election", in Andrew Finkel-Nukhet Sirman (eds), *Turkish State, Turkish Society*, Routledge, London 1990, pp. 119-120.

Islam continues. After all it is a fact that the AKP has its roots in the Welfare Party.

AKP does not want to impose a Muslim order not in the foreseeable future. By contrast, it lives comfortably in a world of 'lighter' states, where other agencies, including NGOs, the private sector and academia can play a bigger role.

Today many intellectuals point out that probably all the changes adding to the Islamic character of the country indirectly serve the Europeans for blocking Turkey's accession to the EU. The EU has already stated that whether accession negotiations fail or succeed it is important that there is a 'European anchor' of Turkey. There are member states most keen to see a shift to a 'privileged partnership' not membership, as the basis for the EU-Turkey relationship.<sup>24</sup> For once, it is not the economy driving plummeting political morale. Until the world economic crisis began to bite in Turkey in the second half of 2008, growth was high and foreign direct investment finally started to grow rapidly. But, this negative feeling of the Europeans towards Turkey was always detected, and was often plainly voiced. Only the British and the American exerted pressure for and EU enlargement and Turkish membership, but in essence the British have a strained relation with the EU and the Americans are outsiders if not competitors.

After the election of Abdullah Gul to the Presidency the EU goal that contributed to hold people together in a political reform con-

---

<sup>24</sup> At the EU's Helsinki summit in December 1999 Turkey was also accepted for the first time as candidate country. Meanwhile under Erdogan's leadership Turkish reforms had picked up speed and by autumn 2004 it became apparent Turkey would get a positive signal of having met the EU's Copenhagen political criteria covering human rights and democracy. While in the long-term, it was clear that Turkey could not join a Union where it did not recognize one of its members. It was also clear that in the absence of a comprehensive settlement of the Cyprus problem, Turkey would not recognize the republic of Cyprus. Erdogan backed a 'yes' vote to the Annan plan, directly supporting the British interests. According to the Annan plan the British bases would acquire territorial waters and airspace thus becoming a sovereign country.

Fuel was added to the flames when Turkey issued a declaration also in July 29, 2005 saying its signature did not mean it recognized the Republic of Cyprus or its jurisdiction over the north of the island.



sensus appears to have crumbled. As disillusion with the EU began to spread in the past couple of years their cause has become easier and nationalism has grown. Today a lot of Kemalists simply oppose EU and are emotionally set against the West as a statement against AKP. Meanwhile many Turkish nationalists and other elements of the so called deep state who were never in favor of this EU reform road have continued to do their best to obstruct implementation of reforms and promote anti EU sentiment. The opposition Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halkci Partisi) with the acronym CHP has also become increasingly nationalist and anti-EU. The CHP calls itself 'center-left', but the correct description is really 'statist-nationalist', and whatever you call it, it appears moribund. Although, the party is the pure embodiment of Atatürkist policies, today is in total disarray and unfortunately not anymore a truly liberal party. With the successive economic crises in the EU member states all the euro skeptics were justified and for the time being everything is shelved, although, the Prime Minister made a direct point this year in Prague that the Union members delay unnecessarily and Turkey may change sides.

### *An Islamist President*

After the election of Abdullah Gul to the Presidency in August 2007 the Kemalists never fully recovered from the shock. They were right that the Islamists had taken the reins and they were not going to loosen them. From the beginning the military was restless about the election of such a committed Islamist to the top post. The Chief of Military Staff, Yasar Buyukanit, reminded Turks of the dual threats of Islamic fundamentalism and ethnic separatism. Some of Turkey's urban elite even claimed that living in a military dictatorship would be better than an Islamic fundamentalist regime that they feared might come with Erdogan and his AKP. The generals had issued a warning on the internet against the choice of Abdullah Gul. But, its unspoken reaction was frosty. Once the lawmaker, secular Ahmet Necdet Sezer was replaced by Abdullah Gul and the obstacle of unsigned Presidential Decrees was lifted the

Islamists started to toughen up. President Gul is a person truly committed to Islamic values and is considered an exceptionally shrewd politician. He jumped into action immediately after taking office. As part of the 2009 program for the State Supervision Institute known with the acronym DDK he demanded for the supervision of all the activities of some regulatory and supervisory bodies. Among the regulatory and supervisory bodies are the Radio and Television Supreme Council, Information Technologies and Communications Authority, Capital Markets Board, Banking Regulation and Supervision Agency, Energy Market Regulatory Authority, Public Procurement Authority, Turkish Competition Authority, and Tobacco, Tobacco Products and Alcoholic Drinks Market Regulatory Board, according to the written statement released by the presidential press office on January 30, 2009.

The military was increasingly more cornered and in a striking move Erdogan managed to put distance between the government and the military, indirectly questioning their authority. In his third term Erdogan has managed to marginalize the generals. The Premier made no effort to reach out to secularists. When AKP was trying to rewrite the constitution, replacing the one written by the generals back in the days of the 1980 coup d'état, the first thing was to pass a law to allow women to wear headscarves at the universities. Without consulting the opposition the Islamists had passed the law. As a result, there was a big issue and the headscarf became the symbol for the dispute, and a point of contention between the two sides. It is a recurring issue of Islamic awareness in Turkey as well. The new constitution that Erdogan prepare will have significant amendments from the one written by the military junta in the 1982 and implemented for thirty solid years.

The rift became obvious in March when Turkey's chief prosecutor, Abdulrahman Yalcinkaya forwarded a 161 page indictment to the Constitutional court asking the AKP and 70 party officials including the President Abdullah Gul and the Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan<sup>25</sup> to be barred from politics for five years. The in-

---

<sup>25</sup> The two forerunners of AKP, the Welfare Party and the Virtue Party were both banned from politics.

dictment charged them of violating secularism, and covertly trying to establish an Islamic theocracy, but, this time the Court on August 2, 2008 decided against the case, though by just one vote. The victory of the Islamists over the generals has not been resolved, although, it is widely believed that the military was behind the judiciary's decision to file a case against AKP.

### *The Ergenekon Case*

But, in a swift move the AKP in retaliation opened another case against Ergenekon, a shadowy organization with members from the academia, the intelligentsia, media, the intelligence services and the military all undoubtedly staunch secularists often critical of the government's policies. The prosecutor Sekeriya Oz, in an indictment in July, accused Ergenekon of having to do with the deep state,<sup>26</sup> and charged 86 members of plotting a coup against the government. In an unprecedented move in modern Turkish history the Islamists imprisoned many generals and top officials for participating with the Ergenekon and focused on the former top officers' "terror activities" since the day they were retired.<sup>27</sup> Some of the

---

<sup>26</sup> Elements from within the shadows of the Turkish intelligence community, security services and the armed forces, were known by some Turkish liberals before the advent of the AKP as the 'deep state' that acts independently from the elected governments.

The concept of the Turkish deep state is not new, but only surfaces at times of crises in governance. The most ominous warning came in an April 2005 speech by former Turkish President Suleyman Demirel, who not only cited the existing of a 'deep state' within Turkey but defined it as "the state itself" including the military, which "always fears the collapse of the state". He further described the "deep state" as only becoming active when the state is "brought on the verge of collapse" and noted that "they are not a separate state, but when they intervene in the administration of the state, they become the deep state".

<sup>27</sup> In the article "Political murders find way into Ergenekon terror indictment" the pro-government Islamist newspaper *Zaman* on July 10, 2008 builds the cases against the military. But, in the ensuing months the case has broadened and its suspects almost engulf everybody who opposes the AK Party. Turkey's state-run Anatolian Agency (AA) said police raids had been conducted simultaneously in twelve provinces around the country.

people who were arrested are utterly astonishing. Nobody could believe that all these people, left, right, and centre despite all their glaring differences were working in a gigantic conspiracy to commit every political murder in Turkey over the last two decades and to overthrow the government.<sup>28</sup> This is a case of lists and names being pricked and many believe the government use the Ergenekon case as an excuse to suppress its opposition.<sup>29</sup> AKP literally expurgated all its opponents with swift movements often shrouded in shadowy evidence.

Turkey is coasting down a very dangerous path that has created an unparalleled social and cultural dichotomy. Yet, the country, especially the so-called intellectuals are divided into two camps and fighting over it. Those who supported the case and those who said that it was a trick by the Islamists to intimidate those who oppose the Erdogan government. Not only that, but, the Ergenekon trial revealed divisions within the army. The case of former Commander in Chief Hilmi Ozkok, who is considered crypto Islamic, because he has not taken any steps against AKP and also because he supported EU. Also Tuncer Kilinc, the former General-Secretary of the National Security Council (MGK), has also been detained in the operation. Kilinc was a member of the MGK during the military's intervention into rising political Islam in Turkish politics in 1997. These cases are indicative of the split. The Islamists proved the stronger and they managed to pave the way for more substantial changes. Any judicial case which is so submerged in politics could not proceed according to the basic tenets of jurisdiction.

All this took place in a country where debate, suspicion and political stand off has tended to be the norm between the Kemalist and some secularists. Defending Ataturk's western modernization dream against what they see as the combined attacks of Islamists,

---

<sup>28</sup> Claire Berlinski, "The Looming Crisis in Turkey", 19-12-2008, filed under World Watch. P.3.

<sup>29</sup> Three retired generals, two academics, a journalist and a colonel, still on active duty, are among those who were taken into custody. Lawyers of the detainees pointed the finger at the ruling AKP ([www.hurriyet.com.tr/index/ AKP/](http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/index/ AKP/)) and pro-government media for the latest string of detainments. [www.hurriyet.com.tr/index/Ergenekon](http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/index/Ergenekon).

leftists and the separatists Kurds. Erdogan's statement that "Turkey as a modern Muslim nation can serve as an example for the harmony of civilizations" is a very veiled and eloquent opinion, but the Turkish Premier is a real hardliner who is bidding for time. The AKP has promoted Islamic values, but, until recently it has not attempted to pass laws inspired by the Koran. The generals and their allies believe that nothing less than the future of Ataturk's secular republic is at stake. Similar ramblings were voiced when the now defunct Welfare Party first came to power in 1996. It was banned from politics a year later, but apparently the Islamists come back stronger.

Today, the fact that AKP has reduced substantially through reforms the military's direct role has not been well received by the secularists because they can detect the scheming Islamists and suddenly they feel less protected. Although, the distancing of the army from politics was a long standing demand of all liberals, when it was finally implemented by the Islamists, it raised a lot of questions. Actually, the Islamists orchestrated the distancing of the generals from power succeeding in a well planned infiltration of the system. Unfortunately, the reserved Western reactions did not come as a surprise to those closely watching the rise of the Islamists.

### *The Alevis and the Islamic Government*

From the beginning of his second term Erdogan was loaded with problems and observers could clearly see a clear disintegration of the pro-EU consensus that was everywhere in 2003-4. This ambiguity combined with growing domestic political infighting made things even more complicated. Another front that has recently opened is with the Alevis who are the second largest religious community in Turkey. Although, no official statistics are available, it is estimated that 20 million Alevis live in the country. There is a big contrast between the Sunni majority and the Alevis, who are a branch of Shiitism in Turkey espousing a more liberal doctrine of

Islam.<sup>30</sup> With the growing correspondence between Sunni Islam and right-wing nationalism, young Alevi moved gradually towards the secular left and sometimes actively turned against the *dede* and religious practices. Aleviness could not attain the place occupied by orthodox Islam in political discourse, and the Alevi did not succeed in transforming their religious system into a mobilizing political ideology.<sup>31</sup>

Recently adding to its woes the AKP came under fire for not listening to Alevi problems. Despite its advocacy for broader religious freedoms, the AKP government has done little to honor its promises for reconciliation with the Alevi. The Alevi are demanding equal religious rights from the government.<sup>32</sup>

The Alevi called for the abolition of the Religious Affairs Directorate. Alevi claim the Directorate of Religious Affairs is conducting missionary activities to assimilate Alevi into Sunnism by posting imams in Alevi populated villages. The Alevi accused the government of closing down their prayer homes the *cemevi*. They also demanded the removal of the compulsory religious courses at schools seen as an indirect effort to proselytise the Alevi by indoctrinating them with the official Sunni religion. The Alevi asked from the government to legalize the community's *cemevi* prayer houses. Some political parties, including the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) and the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society (DTP), are also backing the Alevi claims. In Turkey, the majority of the Alevi community traditionally votes for social democrat and leftist parties. But, the Turkish government signalled it

---

<sup>30</sup> Esat Korkmaz, *Alevilik Temel Egitim Ders Notlari*, Fransa Alevi Birkleri Federasyonu Yayinlari Egitim Dizisi:1 2004, passim.

<sup>31</sup> Jean François Bayart, "La question Alevi dans la Turquie moderne", in Olivier Carre (ed.), *L'Islam et l'état dans le monde aujourd'hui*, Presses Unversitaires de France, Paris 1996, p. 114.

<sup>32</sup> "Alevi Rally in Turkish Capital of Ankara to Seek Basic Rights", *Hurriyet Daily News Online* (9-11-2008). [www.hurriyet.com.tr/english/domestic/10886898.asp](http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/english/domestic/10886898.asp).

would not accept the demands of Alevis,<sup>33</sup> the liberal wing of Islam.

Another unwarranted side effect would be in Turkey's relations with its Kurdish minority. The AKP enjoys strong support among the Turkish Kurds. Erdogan has done very little to improve their lot and as a result PKK has a field day for new recruits. Apart from the obvious problems the unexpected severity of the world economic crisis put an unexpected strain for the Islamists both on domestic as well as on foreign issues.

Now with all the involvement of Turkey against Syria the Turkish Alevis feel threatened. Erdogan has come out as the Islamic spokesman of the Sunni world. There is deep rift that the Islamic government is facing as far as religion is concerned at home. That has been accentuated with its recent stand against the Alawite government of Syria and will become increasingly painful if it takes an open stand against the Iranian Shiites.

Turkey is expecting to have a stronger profile with the new American government that is more open to dialogue. Its potential to emerge as the serious mediator particularly between Iran and the US was never underestimated. The fact that Israeli President Benjamin Netanyahu apologized to his Turkish counterpart in March restored the relation of the two American allies in the Middle East. Erdogan had broken relations and all diplomatic ties to Israel after the attack and killing of 9 Turkish citizens by Israeli commandoes on the flotilla Mavi Marmara carrying humanitarian aid to Gaza in 2009. After all the Israeli lobby in Washington is discreetly helping Turkey all these years. The political developments in the Middle East indicate that Turkey's position and involvement in the area will be strengthened.

Due to its geographical position and the recent division of the world into a Christian and Islamic front Turkey has an obvious advantage, as a secular country with a homogenous Muslim population. Turkey will be able to exploit the rise of political Islam to

---

<sup>33</sup> "Turkish government rules out demands of Islamic sect Alevis", *Hurriyet Daily News Online* (10-11-2008). [www.hurriyet.com.tr/english/domestic/10886898.asp](http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/english/domestic/10886898.asp).

power and become the natural stepping stone between the West and the more hostile or remote segments of the Islamic world.