



## Political studies in Turkey

Metin Heper

To cite this article: Metin Heper (2000) Political studies in Turkey, Turkish Studies, 1:2, 125-134, DOI: [10.1080/14683840008721238](https://doi.org/10.1080/14683840008721238)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683840008721238>



Published online: 18 Apr 2007.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 158

# Political Studies in Turkey

METIN HEPER

---

The task of studying Turkish politics has traditionally been split among an "internationalized set" of researchers, who have produced first-rate scholarship both at Turkish universities and abroad, and local Turkish political scientists, who have been influenced by Ottoman-Turkish society and culture. This latter group was often divided along strict political lines, which tainted academic debates and produced questionable work. In recent years, this situation has begun to improve.

---

In the late 1960s, the leading students of Turkish politics, defined broadly, included C.H. Dodd, Frederick W. Frey, Jacob Landau, Bernard Lewis, Howard Reed, Dankwart A. Rustow, Joseph S. Szyliowicz, Frank Tachau, and Walter F. Weiker. At the time, Niyazi Berkes, Kemal H. Karpat, and Şerif Mardin were virtually the only Turkish students of politics in Turkey with an international reputation. Approximately a decade later, Feroz Ahmad, William Hale, and David Kushner joined this group.

In recent decades, Berkes, Rustow, and Weiker passed away. Frey and Szyliowicz switched their interests to other areas. With few exceptions, the others became less and less prolific. Turkish scholars gradually filled the vacuum, the majority of whom work at universities in Turkey and constitute the "internationalized set" among indigenous students of Turkish politics.<sup>1</sup> The names that appear on the editorial page of this journal are a good representation of this group. These scholars have successfully followed in the footsteps of their prominent predecessors.

Turning our attention to those outside of the "internationalized set," we see a different picture: different standards of scholarship deriving from different interests and priorities. Such a development can be attributed to the fact that, relatively speaking, the political science practiced by this second set of researchers did not unfold according to its own internal dynamics. Rather, it was influenced by the traditional attitudes and values of the Ottoman-Turkish elite, which were in turn shaped by the particular configuration of state-society relations in the Ottoman empire and Republican Turkey.

### The Ottoman Legacy

In the Ottoman empire and until recently in Republican Turkey, there was a cultural rift between the ruling stratum and the ruled. For the former, the state was most important. They equated the long-term interests of the community with the well being of the state. The citizenry was only a source of revenues and soldiers to serve the state. Because this group had virtually complete autonomy from the community and unchecked control over military power, they, representing the state, could easily extract resources from the people. Although the citizenry remained a "black-box" for them, its problems were far removed.<sup>2</sup> As Şerif Mardin has noted, the Ottoman bureaucratic intelligentsia of the late 1890s formed its attitudes toward society by "studying principles and laws, which were abstractions from reality."<sup>3</sup>

This antecedent Ottoman state-society relationship left its mark on the post-1923 Republican elite in the form of a normative and utopian mind-set. Turkish students of politics were part and parcel of this elite. During the early decades of the Republic, top politicians asked university faculties to disseminate Republican ideas.<sup>4</sup> It was not therefore surprising that the latter were always preoccupied with the question of "what should be," instead of "what is" and "why."<sup>5</sup> As late as 1968, a perceptive observer of Turkish university scholarship noted that, "the scientific and intellectual traditions which have taken centuries to develop in the West had only taken fifty years to be implanted in Turkey ... [Thus] scientific and intellectual discipline in the observation of nature and in the expression of ideas was little practiced, while strong attachments to ... beliefs often stood in the way of freely-ranging discussion."<sup>6</sup> Indeed, for a long time there was a paucity of empirical and creative studies at Turkish universities.<sup>7</sup> On the whole, "dogmas with well defined boundaries" carried the day.<sup>8</sup>

From the Republic's early days until about the 1960s, the well-defined principles<sup>9</sup> in question revolved around such Republican principles as secularism and statism. An additional influence was the fact that the Turkish revolution aimed at a transformation of values, with the ultimate goal of substituting reason and science for religious dogma.<sup>10</sup> Due to the efforts of the so-called intellectual-bureaucratic elite, including university faculty members and their former students ensconced in the higher echelons of the civil bureaucracy, reason and science turned into well defined principles that gradually became the Republic's dogma.<sup>11</sup>

A critical milestone was the coming to power of the Democrat Party (DP) in 1950. Compared to the Republicans that had preceded them, the Democrats adopted a more responsive attitude toward the citizens' religious sensibilities.<sup>12</sup> Almost all students of Turkish politics considered this move as an unforgivable concession to the people. Proclaiming themselves the guardians of the Republican reforms (notably, secularization), they adopted a very critical, if not an uncompromising, stance against the DP governments that they thought challenged Republican values. Having had a rather low opinion of the people and their elected Democratic representatives, political scientists became champions of "rational democracy," holding that public decisions should be made by the educated and patriotic elite and not by the uneducated and self-seeking masses and their representatives.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, in the 1950s, one professor of Turkish politics at Ankara University<sup>14</sup> distinguished between "politics in its widest sense" and "active dynamic politics." The former referred to policymaking by experts with a view to the long-term interests of the community "while at the same time coming closest to the preferences of the people." The latter included all those activities aimed at capturing and maintaining political power. According to the professor, politicians were to be involved only in "active dynamic politics." Not unexpectedly, some years later a graduate of that faculty who became a senior civil servant quoted Einstein while writing about politicians: "Two phenomena are infinite — space and stupidity of man. I am a bit skeptical only about the first."<sup>15</sup>

It should be noted that Atatürk espoused a worldview that emphasized rationality, but not a frozen version of Republican values. He believed that it was necessary to raise new generations of Turks who would approach all matters intellectually.<sup>16</sup> For Atatürk, the greatest obstacle to progress was the dogmatic nature of religion "that one had come across in the Ottoman empire." Thus, a new generation had to be educated to form an elite, which would then educate the rest of the population.<sup>17</sup>

The Democrats' electoral victory frustrated this game plan. According to the intellectual-bureaucratic elite, the Democrats appeased the people instead of educating them. Thus, the elite felt obliged to set things right. But they faced an obstacle: democratic elections became the new criterion for political legitimacy. In order to skirt this barrier, they converted Atatürkism-as-a-worldview into Atatürkism-as-an-ideology — a set of principles with fixed meanings. Atatürkism, according to them, was a

prescriptive for political governments. Thus, as noted, academics invented such arguments as “politics in its widest sense” as having priority over “active dynamic politics.”

In 1960, Turkey experienced its first military intervention, which was at least partly a consequence of this particular theory of democracy — rational democracy — which has been promoted by academia. The interveners had concluded that the DP government should be removed from power because, among other things, it had violated one of Atatürkism’s most important principles — secularism. But, the military had no plans for the post-coup period. In the first hours of the coup, the military detained all of the DP parliamentarians. The next day, it released some of them, and called upon law experts from Istanbul University and Ankara University to advise on a new constitution. The professors informed the military that it had intervened against a government that had lost its legitimacy because it had relied only on popular vote and had disregarded the views of the intellectual-bureaucratic elite. Those DP parliamentarians who had been freed were again taken into custody. The professors had turned the limited intervention into a revolution.

Academics also played a determining role in writing the 1961 constitution, which introduced to Turkey a *de jure* “mixed government.”<sup>18</sup> The constitution divided the state’s authority by creating new organs such as the Constitutional Court and the National Security Council (*Milli Güvenlik Kurulu* or MGK). These new bodies were equipped with countervailing powers against parliament and the Council of Ministers, respectively. The constitution also gave universities and the Turkish Radio and Television Agency almost complete autonomy in the hope that they would be instrumental in developing an enlightened public opinion (as opposed to the “unenlightened politicians.”) Finally, the constitution reinforced the powers of the Council of State — the highest administrative tribunal — that could reinstate civil servants dismissed by the government.

### **Academia: Far From Unbiased**

On the whole, political science literature in Turkey has not paid much attention to the “mixed” nature of government created by the 1961 constitution. Instead, it has celebrated the constitution as a “liberal constitution” because, as compared to the previous 1924 constitution, it

had expanded the scope of basic rights and liberties, and carefully stipulated the circumstances under which they could be curtailed.

How could a Constitution that had introduced a "mixed" government, be labelled as a liberal constitution? In all probability, because the intellectual-bureaucratic elite in Turkey were interested in protecting themselves from the masses and their representatives rather than promoting political participation. Such a move had a precedent in Turkish history. In 1839, the declared intention of the Rescript of the Rose Chamber (*Gülhane Hatt-ı Hümayunu*) was to bring equality to Muslims and non-Muslims alike, but it had in fact aimed at protecting the newly emerged Westernized bureaucratic elite,<sup>19</sup> and it too was taken as an important milestone in the development of constitutionalism in the Ottoman empire.

In the post-1961 "liberal" period, academia gradually became ideologically fragmented. Some continued to subscribe to the Atatürkism of the post-1950 period, many adopted different shades of leftist thinking, and a minority group embraced rightist views. There were also a few who did not belong to any of these three groups. As a consequence, the question "Who belonged to which group?" became far more important than what that person had to say. Legitimate critics of ideas were suspected of belonging to another ideological group.

The three groups in question had developed into closed communities with no dialogue among them. There was strong communal pressure on members of each group not to deviate. "Knowledge" was segregated. The groups did not read what other groups published, did not participate at the same panel discussions, and groups did not wish to test their views and ideas against those of others.

Each group was convinced that its views were superior to those of the others and felt that it was fulfilling an ideal. Other groups were accused of harming the country. Independents who did not belong to any group were dubbed "ideal-less" — sheer opportunists — and were ostracized by all three groups. This could have been a mixed blessing, both for the ostracized and for Turkish political science. Some of those shut out worked with colleagues outside of Turkey and were thus able to raise the level of their scholarship and become part of the internationalized set.

The competition, or rather conflict, among these groups and sometimes among the subgroups bordered on blood feud. There was a fervent effort to use history in order to prove one's theory rather than

expand upon it. The interest in answering "what should be" at the expense of "what is" and "why" became even more intense. Consequently, there was, for instance, a great interest in political theory at the expense of comparative politics and Turkish politics. Virtually nobody wrote about how Turkish politics functioned and what were the economic, social, and cultural dynamics behind it. Turkish politics were judged against ideal models of democracy, particularly those on the left that called for "full democracy," which meant unhindered political participation. There was a widespread interest in making Turkey more democratic, but hardly anybody raised the question of how to make democracy in Turkey viable.<sup>20</sup>

In those Western democracies that Turkey has been trying to emulate the state is a "liberal-democratic state" where there is a delicate balance among individual rights and liberties (liberalism), group rights (democracy), and the long-term interest of the community (the State). Democracy in these countries became viable only because such a balance could be achieved.

As noted, Turkey has a strong state tradition. There is no tradition of civil society, and when a multi-party system was introduced, there was no politically efficacious aristocracy and/or entrepreneurial middle class that could temper popular demands and inject a certain degree of rationality into politics. Under the circumstances, Turkey increasingly had political parties that placed party interests or, in some cases, personal interests of the party leaders above the common good. From time to time, this state of affairs obliged the state to intervene and re-equilibrate the political system.

The bulk of the social scientists in Turkey, however, could not appreciate the critical role officers in that country tried to play — moderating political demands and political participation in the interest of democracy. The military thought that if left to its own devices, unbridled majoritarianism could bring about the demise of democracy itself. One could rightfully argue that, in principle, political parties rather than officers should have played such a moderating role. But political parties were overly fragmented and polarized. Until recently, many blamed the military for being power hungry but did not remind the political parties of the need to put their houses in order. They insisted that Turkey should have full, unhindered democracy. In so doing they increased the tension in the polity, caused the military to further lose confidence in the political system, and encouraged some politicians to recklessly challenge the

military. Their knowledge of how democracy functioned in advanced democracies seemed rather superficial. They were unaware of the fact that politicians in those countries with a consolidated democracy thought of the future generations as well as the next elections.

It follows that the academics in question placed an emphasis on democracy and not the state dimension of a liberal democratic state. On the other hand, for some among them, democracy had an instrumental and not an intrinsic value. On the eve of the military's intervention in 1971, some academics along with some "men of culture" toyed with the idea of capturing power in alliance with the military.<sup>21</sup>

As noted, in the 1950s, the bulk of the academia defended the state and such Republican principles as secularism and statism in economics. In the 1960-1980 period, it adopted an anti-state attitude due to at least two instrumental factors. One was the transformation in the Republican People's Party. From the late 1960s onward, the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* or CHP), which had been in power in the 1923-50 period, began to part company with the intellectual-bureaucratic elite and the military. Another was the fact that during these two decades, most of academia tended to hold leftist views.

Needless to say, in social sciences in general and in political science in particular, complete objectivity — which is a strong contributor to the reliability of research and analysis increases — is impossible. In Turkey, over and above the difficulty of overcoming this problem, the fact that academics in the 1960s and 1970s were primarily *advocates* seeking answers to the question of "what should be" rather than *researchers* addressing the questions of "what is" and "why," compromised the reliability of their "findings." There were several instances of pre-election surveys where election results were far below the accepted statistical levels of error. In empirical studies, there was a tendency to try to substantiate pre-conceived ideas instead of producing new knowledge. Similarly, often the expression of one's views substituted the discovery of what was not known before.<sup>22</sup>

Academics, known as exponents of ideologies, did not endear themselves to members of the Establishment. The latter thought that the ideologies in question threatened national unity and the territorial integrity of the country. In all probability, this resulted in the establishment of a major state institute for research in the natural science that was not matched by a comparable institute for the social sciences. Turkey does not



have many non-state funding agencies, which constituted a major obstacle for those who did not belong to the three groups. Another more dramatic result of the polarization of academia in the 1960-1980 period was the dismissal of quite a number of faculty from the universities following the 1980 military intervention. It was likely that, in the process, many innocents were wrongfully indicted. Some of the guilty took up journalism and continued to act as advocates rather than scholars.

Turning to the universities, in the post-1980 period, the polarization among academics decreased. The dismissal of some of the polarized academics as well as the establishment in 1981 of the Council of Higher Education (Yüksek Öğretim Kurulu or YÖK) improved the teaching and research at universities and upgraded the level of scholarship. While in 1982, only 371 university faculty members were published in international journals, that number climbed to 1451 in 1987.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, the establishment of a number of such private universities as Bilkent University (Ankara), Koç University (Istanbul), and Sabancı University (Istanbul) which placed special emphasis on high-level research and publication, and the efforts of such leading state universities as Boğaziçi University (Istanbul), Hacettepe University (Ankara), the Middle East Technical University (Ankara), and Istanbul Technical University not to fall behind also had a favorable impact. Virtually all students of Turkish politics who belonged to the "internationalized set" worked at these seven universities. Only at these universities did serious scholarship lead to prestigious publications at the international level.<sup>24</sup> Still, these universities' contribution to scholarship in the social sciences has not been adequate to upgrade Turkey's ranking in the international academic arena.

This must be due to the fact that the provincial universities were universities in name only. Research at these universities was very poor; teaching only a little better. None had a decent library. Reportedly, many were controlled by those who subscribed to different soft and hard ideologies. To make things worse, the number of these universities continuously increased, thanks to politicians whose interest in getting re-elected far surpassed their concern for academic standards.

### **The State of Turkish Scholarship**

Where does Turkey stand today in respect to the quality of its political science? Compared to the past, what has changed and what remains?

Despite the gloomy picture this article has presented, a great deal has started to change. The cultural rift between center and periphery and an indifference to how the community functions are now things of the past. There is now a dialogue between members of different groups and glimmers of a general learning process. Among students of Turkish politics, some of those who had an animosity toward the state have been taking a more balanced view. Some now discuss how to render democracy viable in addition to promoting further democratization.

All of these positive developments are very recent. There are still some who cling to past orientations, and many of those are quite vocal. On such matters as political Islam and ethnic nationalism, some still have too strong opinions. There is still a paucity of empirical studies and many of such studies are of dubious quality. Some still wish to shape the polity and society according to their pet ideologies while continuing to call for "full democracy." Despite these shortcomings, there is reason for optimism. Things have started to change.

## NOTES

1. I owe the term "internationalized set" to Ayşe Öncü, in Metin Heper, Ayşe Öncü, and Heinz Kramer (ed.), "Academics: The West in the Discourse of University Reform," in *Turkey and the West: Changing Political and Cultural Identities* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1993), p.171.
2. Inter alia, Şerif Mardin, "Power, Civil Society and Culture in the Ottoman Empire," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 11 (1969), pp.255-8; Aydın Yalçın "Center-Periphery Relations: A Key to Turkish Politics?" *Daedalus*, 102 (1973), pp.169-90; Metin Heper, "Center and Periphery in the Ottoman Empire with Special Reference to the Nineteenth Century," *International Political Science Review*, 1 (1980), pp.81-105.
3. Şerif Mardin, "Religion and Secularism in Turkey," in Ali Kazancığil and Ergun Özbudun (eds.), *Atatürk: Founder of a Modern State* (London: C. Hurst, 1981), p.205.
4. Donald E. Webster, "State Control of Social Change in Turkey," *American Sociological Review*, 4 (1939), pp.247-56.
5. Metin Heper, "Üniversitelerin İşlevleri ve Toplumsal Değişim," *Amme İdaresi Dergisi*, 6 (March 1973), p.50.
6. Osman Okyar, "Universities in Turkey," *Minerva*, 7 (1968), pp.223-4.
7. Aydın Yalçın, "Üniversitelerimizde Bilimsel Çalışmalar," *Forum* (then Ankara fortnightly), August 1, 1955, p.19.
8. Aydın Yalçın, "Aydınların Ferdiyetçiliği," *Forum*, June 1, 1955, p.17.
9. Metin And, "Türkiye'de Aydınlar," *Forum*, January 1, 1956, p.25.
10. Şerif Mardin, "Ideology and Religion in the Turkish Revolution," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 2 (1971), pp.197-211.
11. I have elaborated this development in my *The State Tradition in Turkey* (Walkington: The Eothen Press, 1985), Chapter 4.
12. Feroz Ahmad, *The Turkish Experiment in Democracy, 1950-1975* (London: C. Hurst, 1977), Chapter 2.
13. On this definition of rational democracy, I draw upon Giovanni Sartori, *The Theory of*

*Democracy Revisited. Part I: The Contemporary Debate* (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House, 1987), pp.51–5.

14. The School of Political Science was a direct descendant of a late nineteenth-century Ottoman school of higher learning that provided for its students an education in the ways of the state. See İlder Turan, "Siyasal Bilimler," in *Cumhuriyet Döneminde Türkiye'de Bilim: Sosyal Bilimler* (Ankara: Türkiye Bilimler Akademisi, 1999), p.188.
15. Cahit Kayra, "Aytür'ün Bıraktığı Miras," *Milliyet* (Istanbul daily), November 21, 1981.
16. Kemal H. Karpat, *Turkey's Politics: The Transition to a Multi-Party System* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), p.54.
17. Metin Heper, "Atatürk'te Devlet Düşüncesi," in Ali Gevgilli (ed.), *Çağdaş Düşüncenin Işığında Atatürk* (Istanbul: Dr. Nejat Eczacıbaşı Vakfı, 1983).
18. By "mixed government" the reference here is to the pluralization of government, its division between the state and society, and attribution to the state of the responsibility of safeguarding the common good. See A. H. Birch, *Representation* (London: Macmillan, 1970), pp.94ff.
19. Şerif Mardin, *The Genesis of Young Ottoman Thought: A Study in the Modernization of Turkish Political Ideas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), p.448.
20. For an elaboration, see Metin Heper, "Turkish Democracy Reconsidered: Illusion Breeding Disillusion?" in Heiko Körner and Rasul Shams (eds.), *Institutional Aspects of Economic Integration of Turkey into the European Community* (Hamburg: Verlag Weltarchiv, 1990), pp.17–46.
21. For a candid account of the mind-set of those who came up with such a scheme, see Hasan Cemal, *Kimse Kızmasın Kendimi Yazdım* (Istanbul: Doğan, 1999). Cemal was an insider; he later realized that they were on a wrong track.
22. Turan, "Siyasal Bilimler," p.197.
23. Yüksek Öğretim Kurulu, *Kasım 1981–Kasım 1988 Döneminde Yüksek Öğretimdeki Gelişmeler* (Ankara: Meteksan, 1988), p.51
24. In a case study that the author conducted in the early 1970s, he concluded that the Middle East Technical University was the first university in Turkey that "represented a clear break with a tradition where universities have remained scholastic, 'theoretical,' and non-research oriented." "Decision-Making and Information Flow Systems in the Middle East Technical University," in Victor G. Onushkin (ed.), *Planning the Development of Universities — III* (Paris: The Unesco Press, 1974), p.411. Unfortunately, during the rest of the decade, that university was virtually taken over by left-inclined staff members and students. During recent decades, however, the Middle East Technical University again developed into a fine research university.