

Turkey's Secular/Islamic Conundrum



In early February head-scarf-wearing demonstrators in Istanbul show their support for a constitutional amendment that would lift the ban on the Muslim head scarf at Turkish universities.

by Metin Heper

By the summer of 2008, there was an urgent need in Turkey for a consensus on the true meaning of laicism (secularism) between the secularist establishment (primarily the military, the Constitutional Court, and members of the opposition Republican People's Party [CHP]) on the one hand and the centre-right, religiously oriented Justice and Development Party (AKP) government led by Pres. Abdullah Gul and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan on the other. Turkey's ability to solve this conundrum was proving to be rather difficult; members of the secularist establishment believed that the

country was in danger from political Islam and thus subscribed to a kind of didactic laicism for keeping Turkey a secular country, while the AKP government did not accept that Turkey faced such an existential threat and insisted on democratic laicism for advancing liberal democracy in the country.

According to its 1924, 1961, and 1982 constitutions, Turkey was defined as a "laic" (secular) republic. This very concept of laicism, however, had been a matter of bitter conflict since 2002, when the AKP won a majority of seats in the Grand National Assembly and Erdogan formed the party's first government. The secular establishment per-

ceived laicism as an overall way of life. In this view the state has the authority to dictate the manner in which Muslim citizens of the country are allowed to practice their religion; this includes the enforcement of a dress code that forbids the wearing of the Muslim head scarf by female students at primary and secondary schools and at universities. The AKP argued that the state should only ensure that religion is not used for political purposes but should otherwise remain indifferent to the religious preferences of the people and the manner in which they live their faith.

The secular establishment in Turkey adopted a didactic approach apropos of religion because it viewed Islam as a dogmatic threat to the country's secular foundations. In order to render legitimate their self-designated role as guardians of this particular conception of Islam, representatives of this group presented themselves as "Ataturkists." Kemal Ataturk, founder of the Republic of Turkey, was still held in high esteem by a great majority of the Turkish people, although not all of them necessarily had a similar take on their religion.

For those in the secular establishment, Islam should be only an apolitical religious belief and, at most, an ethical system. Thus, the wearing of a Muslim head scarf took on symbolic importance; for many devout Muslims it was regarded as central to the expression of their religious beliefs, while secularists perceived it as a way of injecting Islam into the communal life and politics and thus as part of an organized effort for doing away with the laic republic. Although many people both in Turkey and in other countries disagreed, the secular establishment assumed that the practicing Muslims in the AKP government had a hidden agenda to bring back a

state based on Islam. The issue returned to the forefront when Gul was elected president in 2007 and his wife, Hayrunnisa, insisted on appearing in public wearing a head scarf, despite its having been banned at all official functions.

With these views in mind, the CHP took the lead to prevent the AKP from pursuing what the secular opposition considered antilaic policies. Unable to defeat the AKP at the voting booth, the CHP covertly called upon the military to take a stand against the “Islamist stance on the part of the AKP government” and applied to the Constitutional Court in order to have the AKP’s “anti-laic” legislation annulled by that court. One such annulment concerned a constitutional amendment passed in February 2008 that lifted the ban on the wearing of head scarves at Turkish universities. The Constitutional Court in early June overturned that legislation, effectively reinstating the ban.

After the 2002 election Pres. Ahmet Necdet Sezer frequently vetoed “suspicious” legislation initiated by the AKP government and/or referred these laws to the Constitutional Court, which often annulled the contested legislation. Meanwhile, the military leadership from time to time made public announcements and advised caution to the government on matters related to laicism. On the eve of the 2007 presidential election, an e-memorandum appeared on the military’s official Web

site and registered its opposition to Gul’s assuming the office of president. To what extent the e-memorandum really conveyed the views of the military High Command became a matter of debate, however, because the manner in which it was written and the fact that it was made public rather late at night differed from earlier memorandums.

The secular establishment’s strongly held reservations about the AKP also derived from the way in which previous religiously oriented political parties and their leaders had conducted themselves. The impetus for the founding of the National Order Party (NOP), Turkey’s first religiously oriented party, came from Mehmet Zait Kotku, a sheikh of the Nakshibandi religious order, who said that Turkey was in need of moral development based on Islam. Necmettin Erbakan, the leader of the NOP as well as two pro-Islamic successor parties (the Welfare Party and the Felicity Party), argued that there was an inherent contradiction between Islam and secularism and that religiously oriented people would eventually come to power, although it was not certain whether it would be “a bloody or bloodless” affair. When the Welfare Party formed a coalition government with the secular True Path Party in July 1996 and Erbakan became Turkey’s first Islamist prime minister, the first country that he visited was Iran. The secularist establishment took this and

similar developments and statements as harbingers of worse to come.

When the AKP won the 2002 election, it presented itself as a conservative-democratic party and, on the whole, acted as such. Not unlike other post-1980 governments, the AKP pursued pro-market policies, maintained Turkey’s pro-Western foreign-policy stance, and, among other things, succeeded in getting accession negotiations started with the European Union. Domestically, the government tried to maintain harmonious relations with other political parties and with such state institutions as the military and the Constitutional Court. For instance, when the AKP faced stiff opposition to its efforts to enable the graduates of Muslim prayer leader and preacher high schools to compete equally for university admission with the graduates of other high schools, the government quickly put that project on the back burner.

In the 2007 general elections, the AKP won 46.6% of the vote (up from 34.3% in 2002) and 341 of the Grand National Assembly’s 550 seats (a drop of 22). The CHP became the official opposition after finishing second with 20.9% and 112 seats, and the right-wing Nationalist Action Party was third with 14.3% of the vote and 71 seats. Having now obtained a clear mandate from the people, the AKP government selected Gul as president, initiated the constitutional amendment to drop the head scarf ban, and prepared a draft constitution that, if adopted, would take away some of the powers enjoyed by the military and the Constitutional Court. In March 2008 a prosecutor filed a lawsuit accusing the AKP of antiseccular actions and demanding that AKP leaders be banned from further political activities for five years. The Constitutional Court on July 30 narrowly ruled that the AKP had not violated Turkey’s secular principles to the point that it should be banned but that it had veered too far in an Islamic direction and therefore its public funding had to be cut in half. Although the ruling left the elected AKP government in power, it remained to be seen whether a delicate balance between pro-Islamists and the secular establishment could truly be achieved in Turkey.

Metin Heper is a founding member of the Turkish Academy of Sciences and Dean of the Faculty of Economics, Administrative and Social Sciences at Bilkent University, Ankara, Turkey.

A secularist student waves a flag bearing a portrait of Kemal Ataturk, the founder of the Republic of Turkey, as part of a counterdemonstration against those showing support for lifting the country’s ban of Muslim head scarves on university campuses.

