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RUKIYE SAYGILI

Selcuk University, Turkey

HÜLYA EŞKI UĞUZ

Selcuk University, Turkey

RELIGION, POLITICS AND EDUCATION IN THE LIGHT OF FEBRUARY 28 DECISIONS IN TURKEY

Abstract:

The decisions known as “February 28 Decisions” in Turkish political life consist of the “measures required to be taken against the reactionary initiatives opponent to the regime” comprising 18 articles, which were taken at the National Security Council that lasted for 9 hours in the period of the 54th Government formed between Refah (Welfare) Party and Doğru Yol (True Path) Party within the framework of the Coalition Government Protocol dated 28 June 1996 and chaired by Necmettin Erbakan. Five of those decisions aimed at preventing politicization of the religion directly involved the education policy. Though the government programmes decisively expressed that no compromise would be made on the education policies that were rearranged in line with the said decisions by the 55th, 56th and 57th Governments formed following the February 28 Decisions, it did not take long for the decisions, which could not gain public legitimacy, to begin to be questioned. As a matter of fact, one of the most remarkable actions of AK (Justice and Development) Party, which came to power in 2002 by taking strength from the reaction shown against the decisions following the February 28, designated as post-modern coup d’etat, has been to cease the education policies put into practice in line with the National Security Council decisions. Elimination of the field coefficient problem took place in 2009; opening the secondary school sections of the religious vocational high schools as a result of increasing the duration of compulsory education to 12 years with the formula 4+4+4 took place in 2012; ensuring dress freedom at schools took place defacto in 2010 and dejure in 2013.

In view of the foregoing, this paper will try to address and study the relationship between education, religion and politics, which has been an ongoing area of debate from foundation of the Republic to present, particularly in the light of the February 28 Decisions. It should be noted that an analysis to be conducted in this respect by centering upon the concepts of education, religion and politics targets at the same time to shed light on the fact of “retreat of the military tutelage” in Turkey.

Keywords:

Religion, Politics, Education, 28 Febuarty Decisions, Turkey

JEL Classification: I28, D73, D78

Introduction

Modern Turkey has always been a place where education has occupied a prominent stance. Education played a leading role in constituting identities, mentalities and attitudes of new generations. Public education may be employed by politicians with an ideological motivation as a means to impose a specific presentation of a country's history, a particular ideology, and to establish some behavioral patterns (Kuru, 2014: 150; Nohl, 2008: 15). Secularism in Turkey is an issue that must be particularly addressed in order to comprehend well the sensitive and political significance of education as well as the relation between the Turkish state and religion. Although the majority of the Turkish population is Muslim the Turkish government and leading social institutions have been secular since the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923 following the demise of the Ottoman Empire. Secularization was regarded as vital for the establishment and consolidation of a modernized nation-state by this newly-established Republican Government led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Establishment of the modern Turkish state brought with it a range of changes, one of which is the secular and compulsory general education which substituted and banned all traditional Ottoman 'medrese's which gave religious education. This new Republican Government founded the Ministry of National Education, which since then has controlled education besides developing a general educational system and curriculum. This educational system was used as an instrument to constitute a common moral and cultural identity; a Turkish identity, for the nationals of the new nation. This identity included a very particular interpretation of Islam that was encoded in official religious educational practices and institutions, while alternative interpretations were condemned and often declared illegal by the Turkish government (Shively, 2008: 683, 684, 685). Although officially banned or abolished, many religious and traditional institutions and practices, such as dervish lodges and religious education institutions, survived unofficially. Religious communities and Sufi orders have been the major medium of these local survivals or, in other words, passive resistances (Çağlar, 2012: 22).

It is possible to read best the value attributed to secular education in Turkey as well as the resistance developed against it by religious sections through the period known as 'February 28' in the Turkish political life. February 28 Process refers to a long-term Project by the military aimed at re-establishing the social and political system in Turkey which had brought to Office the Islamist *Refah Partisi* (RP- Welfare Party, or sometimes referred to as Prosperity Party) in the 1995 general elections. Following seizure of power by the military over Milli Güvenlik Kurulu (MGK- National Security Council¹) on 28th February 1997, it resolved on taking strict precautions against the spread of Islamic

¹ The Turkish president chairs the NSC meetings. These meetings were held on a monthly basis until 2003. Aside from the president, four government representatives, five members from the military were included in the NSC. MGK's structure was modified with an amendment in 2003. NSC's secretary general had to be a serving member of the military and had unlimited access to all kinds of civil agencies and authorities for the sake of executing NSC recommendations in accordance with the requirement, which were then abolished. A transparency process began in regulations concerning appointments to the NSC Under secretariat, which culminated in a general 25 percent decrease in NSC personnel as opposed to an increase in the rate of civilian employees. Not least, probably, NSC meetings, previously held monthly, were reduced to once every two months, which aggravated using NSC as a tool of prolonged pressure by the TGS (Jenkins, 2007: 343, 346, 347).

movements in Turkey, and it is the name bestowed on this restructuring process. In this regard, perception of political Islam as a threat to the public domain in early 1990s was increasingly adopted, which resulted in the fourth military intervention in Turkish political life, and was finally concluded with the Welfare-led government. On the other hand, although it was the extension of the consequences of NSC decisions as well as a delay in normal politics until the secular reprocessing was finalized, the 28th February process did not end following the break-up of the True Path-Welfare coalition on 20th June, 1997, or RP's dissolution by the Turkish Constitutional Court on 21st February, 1998 for nesting anti-secular activities. Turkey's political, social, cultural and economic life were affected in the long-term by this process of central importance (Taş, 2011: 4).

1. A Brief Look Over The 28 February Process in Turkey's Political Life

The March 1994 local elections in Turkey were concluded with the Islamist *Refah Partisi* winning the largest votes and gaining dominance over a number of the largest cities in Turkey including Ankara and İstanbul. The RP came out as the largest party in parliament despite its vote rate of 21.4 per cent in the 25th December 1995 general elections, and received 158 seats out of the 50 seat unicameral assembly in the parliament. A coalition government was formed with *Doğru Yol Partisi* (DYP-The True Path Party) in June 1996, with 135 seats in parliament, making WP chairman Necmettin Erbakan Turkey's first prime minister with Islamist sentiments (Jenkins, 2007: 345).

The relative silence under the RP-DYP coalition government was broken in October 1996, when increasing tensions were witnessed in the new administrative year. According to the traditional practice, in the first assembly of the administrative year, each bureaucratic sector organizes a ceremonial meeting which hosts other bureaucratic sectors as well as state elite and where a speech on the expectations of institutions from other bureaucratic sectors is delivered by heads of the host institution. Such meetings and speeches are where the official state agenda is accounted since Kemalist spheres dominate them. Although the beginnings of the 1996-1997 administrative year maintained the form of the preceding years, it involved a significantly different content characterized by these two major topics: (1) the "threat of enhancing reaction" and (2) the "requirement of preserving the secular state". The issue underlined with these topics were the translation of a pre-warning for the approaching campaign against the coalition government. This discourse was further developed by Mesut Yılmaz, who was then leader of the main opposition party and the chief of general staff when they substituted civilian bureaucrats and mentioned of the "requirement of preserving the secular state" and the "threat of enhancing reaction". The media emphasized the requirement of reaction through an enhancing number of news reports, joining the Kemalist cadres. Through feeding the media with sensational incidents, like Erbakan's controversial visit to Islamist countries including Malaysia, Indonesia, Egypt, and Libya, the RP played a role in raising the danger of reaction itself. This visit by the RP officials led to huge resentment around its opponents due to its timing, form and presentation although the former Turkish prime minister also visited these countries. It made it even harder for Erbakan followers to explain the way Colonel Qaddafi treated Erbakan (Çağlar, 2012: 26-27). The already raised tensions were further prompted with

the Sincan incidents which attracted the attention of the state elite and the military, leading them to engage in a political intervention on 28th February 1997. Bekir Yıldız, the then Sincan Mayor, organized the events in Ankara on 2nd February 1997 with the aim of protesting Israel. The Ambassador of Iran was also present in the schedule, and the event turned into calls for sharia regime and symbolic assaults against secularism in Turkey (Köni, 2013: 218).

The dominantly critical secularist media organized a campaign to bring the events to public attention. The civilian government was presented by the military with a list of anti-Islamist measures with 18 articles to be executed at the NSC meeting of February 28, 1997. The NSC Undersecretariat cooperated with TGS working groups for designation of the list (Jenkins, 2007: 346). Political Islam was labeled as the most serious threat to the democracy, secularist constitutionalism and national security of Turkey. Among the 18 provisions were (1) abolishment of unofficial Koran courses, (2) banning the turban in universities and schools, (3) suspension of Welfare Party members from civil service appointments, and (4) inspection of religious communities' and organizations' bank accounts. Erbakan was warned by the military to implement necessary measures against religious organizations, and was informed that the army would intervene in the situation unless he remained inactive or failed (Köni, 2013: 218).

2. The 28th February Process: A Step Towards Re-secularization of Education or an Initiative to Restrict the Upward Social Mobility of the Conservative?

The architects of the February 28 legitimized their actions by addressing the necessity to take for granted the continuity of essential understanding of the Kemalist model (Cizre and Çınar, 2003: 310). Five of these decisions taken to prevent politicization of religion were aimed at educational policies. Considering the function the diverse social sections in Turkey attribute to education and its controversial scope, it is not surprising that five out of the eighteen decisions dealt with education. These were:

(i) *Implementation of the principle of secularism must be strict, and relevant laws must be amended for that purpose if and when deemed necessary.* This provision formed the basis of the essential idea underlying the remaining four recommendations of the NSC.

(ii) *Tevhid-i Tedrisat Kanunu (The Law on Unified Education)² requires affiliation of all kinds of private dormitories, schools and foundations affiliated with Sufi religious orders (tarikats) to the Ministry of National Education.* This regulation in educational policies is about tarikats which were frequently discussed prior to 28th February, and their operations in the field of education. It was decided that tarikat/cemaat schools be linked up to the Ministry of National Education as per The Law on Unified Education in order to prevent regressive actions of tarikats, which had occupied the agenda lately with the

² One of the earliest legislative acts of the newly established Turkish Republic was The Law on Unification of Education after the multiethnic Ottoman Empire was dissolved in 1922. Accordingly, all educational institutions except military academies were to be controlled solely by the Ministry of National Education, which meant that all curricula, policies and personnel would be inspected by the state alone. This legal action was grounded in the belief that Turkish people could not actualize themselves as a nation due to the contradictory ideological and pedagogical goals in the several educational systems implemented by the Ottoman Empire. Based on this, it was assumed that unification of the educational system was the only solution to integrate such cultural and moral diversities (Kaplan, 2006: 39).

iftar (fast-breaking) gathering organized in the office of Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan, who signed the MGK decisions, and with their specific clothes and anti-regime discourses. Inspections were carried out in more than 100 tarikat foundations as per this decision, and 20 of these were sued for performing regressive and separatist operations, and merely 10 foundations were closed after their assets were confiscated (www.sabah.com.tr).

(iii) In order to orient young generations' minds towards patriotism, love of Atatürk, the republic, the nation, and the purpose and ideal of raising the Turkish nation to the modern civilizations' level, and to save these assets from the impact of a variety of sections: 1) *An education system which will be eight-year long and uninterrupted shall be implemented all over the country.*³ 2) *All required actions shall be taken on the legal and administrative levels in order that Koran courses, which are taken by students solely with the consent of their parents, perform their activities under the control and obligations of the MNE* (Günay, 2001: 7). This practice, which was directed towards the military, not only eradicated Islamist agents from political life, but also demolished the instruments through which Islamists could infiltrate within the state mechanism. In this respect, this intervention had its implications on education. The ultimatums issued by the National Security Council meeting on February 28 were concluded with the legislation of the 8-year of uninterrupted primary education on August 18, 1997. This practice translated in damage to Imam Hatip schools⁴ due to abolishment of their secondary-level branches. Imam Hatip schools had been previously available both at middle school and high school grades, so with extending the educational requirement to eight years, middle-grade Imam Hatip high schools were abolished with the 1997 regulation. This practice was grounded with the idea that middle school children (11 to 14 years of age) were sensitive in terms of intellectual development, making them easy targets for brainwashing at Imam-Hatip high schools. Consequently, a formal education for children would ensure their protection from the underlying thought of Imam hatip schools (Taş, 2011: 180). Another regulation concerning Imam Hatip Schools was the coefficient practice. In accordance with the 28th February decisions, the Council of Higher Education introduced the department-based coefficient practice in entering

³ Although extension of basic education to eight years is correlated with MGK decisions dated 28th February, these actually were among the governmental program of the then Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan (www.tbmm.gov.tr). Adoption of the 8-year long compulsory education which could not be implemented in the term of the 54th government took place in the 55th Government's program designated by ANAP-DSP and DTP, was enforced with the law no 4306 and dated 16.08.2015 (www.mevzuat.meb.gov.tr).

⁴ Imam-Hatip schools are public vocational secondary educational institutions aiming to raise students knowledgeable about Islam, and get such jobs as imams and muezzins in the mosques throughout the country upon their graduation. A number of Imam Hatip graduates can become Koran teachers as well as teachers of other subjects. The strict specifications of the the Ministry of National Education and Ministry of Religious Affairs which include establishing and implementing the national curriculum as well as the manner Islamic knowledge is compiled and presented are to be abided by all Imam-Hatip schools (Pak, 2004: 326). Imam-Hatip schools have occupied the central stance of the conflict between Islamist and secularist forces in Turkey, and have been a central subject of discussions in the framework of social and political issues since the early 1920s. The ruling governments' standpoint over the schools characterized both their declines and prosperity terms. While Imam Hatip schools were regarded as a threat to the secularism in Turkey and worked to prevent their development by some governments, others considered them as instruments to manage the religious discourse and took measures to enhance their positions. The present government attaches credence to sufferings of religiously conservative communities and have called them "invaluable institutions that graduate generations of youth who vitalize Turkey's future (Ozgür, 2012: 27).

higher education with its meeting dated 30th July, 1998 as per Article 45 of the Law no 2547 (Bahçekapılı, 2012: 121-122). This restricted IHL graduates from studying the departments they wanted and limited their choices only to religion-related positions. Closure of middle education in IHLs and launching the department-based coefficient practice, or obstacle in university entrance exams (TİMAV, 2012: 103) brought along a quantitative regression in IHL. Koran courses, like Imam Hatip schools were regarded by secularists as inordinate instruments conveying and disseminating the Islamist message. In Koran courses in Turkey, practices include teaching the Koran, its Turkish translation and general principles of Islam. Courses are delivered after school or during summer holidays in a traditional manner. They were managed by the MNE, but de facto controlled by private entities and organizations before the February 28 process of 1997 (Günay, 2001: 7). Implementation of this decision was made in accordance with Article 3 annexed to the Law no 4415, adopted on 22.07.1999 as per Law no 633. According to this Article:

“The Ministry of Religious Affairs opens Koran courses for those people who graduated from primary school and want to learn the Koran and its meaning, work as a hafiz, and learn more about religion except from the religious culture and moral knowledge courses compulsory for primary and secondary education institutions. Religious education in such courses depends on personal interests and demands of legal representatives when small children are concerned. Moreover, summer Koran courses are opened under the scrutiny and inspection of the Ministry of National Education for those who finished 5th grade. Provisions relating to opening, educational implementation and inspection of Koran courses as well as opening and operation of dormitories and pensions where students will accommodate are stipulated under the regulation” (www.resmigazete.gov.tr).

Upon amendment of this law article, merely primary school graduates could apply to these long-term Koran courses, while those who failed to graduate could not even attend summer courses. As a result of this practice, the number of students attending Koran courses decreased while the average age of those attending Koran courses increased.

(iv) *Our national education institutes responsible for raising enlightened clergy loyal to Atatürk's principles and reforms and the republican regime must comply with the essence of the Law on Unified Education.* The "education institutes" referred to here are the IHL. With the dramatic increase of the number of Imam Hatip High Schools (IHL) established for the sake of raising clergy loyal to republican values as of 1980s, and with students educated here being increasingly successful in university entrance exams, those who assumed a threat of regression in Turkey attempted to mold public opinion by constantly alleging that these schools, characterized as “the backyard of political Islam” created duality in education and damaged unified education (TESEV, 2007: 4, 21, 30). With the implication of this, the military bureaucracy decided to regulate schools giving religious education in accordance with The Law on Unified Education,

implement an eight-year compulsory education and abolish secondary schools of IHLs in the MGK meeting.

(v) *All kinds of practices that contradict with law and give Turkey an unmodern image shall be prevented. Images of veiled women and men with cassocks and beards serviced by the media in the years 1996- 1997* disturbed the secular cadres who avoided the threat of regression. As a result of reflection of this disturbance on the MGK decisions, Hikmet Ulugbay, the then Minister of National Education issued a decree that banned putting on headscarves in schools and educational institutions during the 1998-1999 academic year on January 12, 1998. Ulugbay confirmed the decree to teachers and principals in February 1998 with a guideline, and emphasized the necessity to fully implement dressing rules and to instruct ministry inspectors to monitor compliance thereto. Investigations of 265 teachers were carried out all over the country following this decree (Günay, 2001: 14). The Higher Education Council (YÖK) banned entrance of veiled and burqa-wearing female students and male student with round-shaped beards, cassocks, and skullcaps into universities with its memorandum dated 15th September, 1997 (Toruk, 2010: 487). For a painstaking execution of this memorandum across the country, the Turkish General Staff communicated with administrative bodies of universities, (Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 2010: 30) and senior managers of the MGK and YÖK even inspected universities to monitor the extent to which this regulation is implemented (Bahçekapılı, 2012: 52).

Conclusion

The political life in Turkey after 1997 was followed by a constant extension of the restrictions imposed by the February 28 process. The 55th, 56th and 57th governments established after the February 28 decisions had to step back after increasing social opposition despite resolvedly announcing that no concessions will be made in the reorganized educational policies designated in accordance with the relevant decisions, and the impacts which had been supposed to “extend for a thousand year” started to vanish. It also took the AKP, which came to power in 2002 too much time to terminate the educational policies imposed by force through MGK decisions and MGK’s enforcements. Abolishment of the department-based coefficient problem took place in 2009, reopening of secondary education sections of Imam Hatip schools after extending compulsory education to 12 years with the 4+4+4 system took place in 2012, and freedom in dressing took place defacto in 2010, and dejure in 2013.

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