

THE ROLE OF SUFISM AMONG TURKEY'S SECULARISM POLICIES

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Abstract, This paper examines the case of religious political movements and the development of Sufism in a Muslim country, with a focus on Turkiye, a country where secularism is strictly enforced. Since 1924, the Muslim-majority country has established itself as a secular state, which separates religion from state politics. The policy initiated by Kemal Atatürk represented a rejection of the Islamic caliphate system that had been implemented by the Uthmaniyah dynasty since the 13th century. Ataturk sought to modernize Turkiye based on democratic and secular principles. Although secularism has been a long-standing feature of Turkish society, the influence of Islam remains evident in the socio-cultural fabric of the country. Indeed, the passion for Islam has been visible in the political landscape since the early 1990s, particularly in sufism movement and political party. This paper is based on a qualitative study conducted through a literature search, supported by observation of events

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based on information from the mass media. The result of this study is an important finding about the reality of political religion and the Sufism movement in the implementation of secularism in the Muslim country of Turkiye. This insight reveals a paradox between the politics of religion and secularism in the Turkiye state.

Keywords: Sufism, Religion, Politics, Secularism, Turkiye

INTRODUCTION

The teachings of Islam are based on God's revelation, which was spread by his servant and messenger, Muhammad. In carrying out his duties, Muhammad only gave information, explanations, descriptions, and practical examples. Therefore, Islam cannot be called Muhammadanism (Religion of Muhammad) as the term is sometimes used by orientalist thinkers about religious studies.

Islam was born in Mecca in 610 AD and quickly spread throughout the world, including Turkiye. The global population is currently estimated at 7.888 billion, with 2 billion Muslims. Of this total, approximately 1,069 percent, or 85 million, reside in Turkiye. Despite the fact that 89.5 percent of Turkiye's population is Muslim, the country has established itself as a secular state since 1924, formally separating religion from state politics. The policy initiated by Kemal Atatürk represented a rejection of the Uthmanian Islamic caliphate system that had been in place since the 13th century. Atatürk sought to transform Turkiye into a modern state based on the principles of democracy and secularism.

This concept was first introduced by Atatürk a century ago through the gradual erosion of Islamic influence in the nation-state. Nevertheless, the fervor for Islam has persisted, exerting a profound influence on the socio-cultural and political landscape of Turkish society. Islamic culture persists as a salient feature within the complex tapestry of Turkiye's secular state. It has even become a dominant force in the realm of political party dynamics, particularly since the early 1990s.

This paper seeks to address the question of why sufism movement and religious politics can still flourish in the secular state of Turkiye. The results of this study will undoubtedly contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding the implementation of secularism in Muslim countries, particularly in the

context of the paradoxical relationship between religious politics and secularism in countries like Turkiye. This study employs a qualitative methodology, with the literature on sufism movement, religion, politics, and secularism in Turkiye serving as the primary data source. Additionally, observations of relevant events based on information from the mass media have been incorporated.

Meanwhile, the Sufism movement developed in Turkiye since the era of the Ottoman Turkish Caliphate around the 13th century. The presence of Sufi groups in Turkiye is not homogeneous, but rather comprises various groups. These groups are perceived by traditional Turkish society as a socio-religious entity that has differences with others. By the Ottoman period of the thirteenth to twentieth centuries, Sufi groups had formed a large network in the Ottoman Caliphate. Most of them were involved in government. The Sufi groups subsequently spread to almost all parts of Europe and Central Asia. As a consequence, Sufism was able to exert an influence on the social, cultural and political order even in the context of modern Turkiye. In general, they represented the Sufi brotherhoods.

Despite the reforms that disbanded the Sufi movement in Turkiye and banned Sufi teachings in 1925, Sufism survived through underground networks and continues to flourish in Turkiye today. After the dissolution, only a small percentage of Turks became members of Sufi orders, but Sufism continues to have an impact on Islam in Turkiye, especially through the works of popular Muslim leaders such as Said Nursi and Fethullah Gulen. Moreover, Sufi orders have played an important role in Turkish political life. The Naqshbandiyyah, for example, provided crucial support in the election of Turgut Özal, who was also a member of the order. Furthermore, the Nursi and Gulen movements have been referred to as neo-Sufi movements, which have contributed to the increasing popularity of Sufism in Modern Turkiye.

The history of modern secular Turkiye is inextricably linked to the legacy of Mustafa Kemal Pasha, better known as Atatürk, the "Father of Turkiye." Atatürk was the driving force behind the Turkish nationalist movement, which sought to establish an independent Turkish state that was distinct from the previous Islamic caliphate. His vision was to transform the Turkish state into a secular, Western-oriented state. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the wake of

the First World War proved to be a pivotal moment in the establishment of the modern Turkish state.

SUFISM IN TURKIYE: A SOCIO-CULTURAL FORTRESS AGAINST SECULARISM

In order to reinforce secularism, Atatürk established the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP) as the sole governing party in Turkiye. This condition persisted for an extended period, even evolving in 1945, when the party system underwent a transformation to accommodate multi-party governance, thereby facilitating the emergence of diverse political aspirations through the formation of numerous political parties. In the 1950 multiparty elections, the Democratic Party, which had emerged as an opposition to the CHP, won the election, indicating that the people were dissatisfied with Atatürk's policies. However, there were a series of Turkish military coups (1960, 1971, 1980, 1997, and 2016) against the elected government. These were military reactions to situations that were considered to be threats to the secular character of the Turkish state. In this context, the military is regarded as the guardian of Turkiye's secularization. This implies that various religious and ethnic groups that diverge from the secular regime will be suppressed or even prohibited from residing in the Turkish state.

Although Turkiye's secularism is supported by the authority of the party and even the military, Islamic culture continues to exert a significant influence on the socio-cultural and even political landscape of the Muslim-majority country. Islamic culture remains a prominent feature of society. In point of fact, Islamic politics has gradually returned to reinforce the constellation of Turkiye's secular state since the 1990, as evidenced by the victory of the Refah Party in the 1995 elections. This phenomenon occurred primarily because of the profound roots of the spiritual tree planted by the Naqshabandy tariqah figures, which can be traced back to the Uthmaniah Islamic caliphate, which was established in the 13th century AD.

An examination of the evolution of Islamic spiritual movements in Turkiye, from their inception as Sufi orders to their eventual transformation into political entities, is inextricably linked to the Naqshabandiyyah mujaddid Maulana Halid. During the Usmaniyyah Dynasty (1820s), the followers of Maulana Halid (the Halidis) proposed that the sultanate implement societal reforms based

on Islamic law. However, the sultanate appeared to favor the Western-oriented version of reform proposed by the *Tanzimat*. The Naqshabandis, on the other hand, consistently opposed this version of reform, which was driven by the Young Ottomans between 1839 and 1876 CE. In fact, Sheikh Ahmad of the Sulaemaniyah region led a rebellion against it. The unsuccessful event in 1859 AD (Mardin, 1993: 213) resulted in the Halidis being no longer able to move freely. It was only during the Russia vs. Turkiye war (1877-1878) that they became visible again on the political scene, as many Naqshabandiyyah sheikhs volunteered as soldiers to defend the Usmanid dynasty. Ahmad Ziyaeddin, known as Gumushanevi, a Naqshabandi Sufi leader, endeavored to fortify the community against the Russians and to initiate a new phase of Sufi resistance to *Tanzimat*. Gumushanevi established banks as a conduit for providing loans to his followers. He constructed four libraries, one of which was situated in Istanbul City. Through educational innovation, he aspired to enhance the caliber of Naqshabandiy followers. The substance of Gumushanevi's educational program was to facilitate an understanding of *kaffab* (comprehensive), relying on the correct interpretation of texts and the advice of Sufi figures. The combination of texts and the opinions of spiritual guides was expected to guide Gumushanevi's followers into a solid social structure.

The establishment of the secondary Turkish Republic saw Naqshabandiy Halidi led by Said Nursi, a Sufi figure with considerable experience in political movements, both during the Ottoman sultanate and the modern Turkish era. Nursi was exiled to Anatolia in 1909 for a year due to his involvement in a rebellion against the Ottoman government. In the modern Turkish era, precisely in 1925, Nursi was exiled to a mountainous region in western Turkiye as a result of being accused of involvement in a Kurdish rebellion led by Sheikh Said Palu, who was also a Naqshabandy figure. During this period of exile, Nursi was able to establish a network of leaders and merchants, as well as gain the support of middle-class farmers. Said Nursi's writings, collected in *Risale-I Nur*, were distributed in secret in order to strengthen the network. As a result, Nursi was imprisoned on several occasions for his activities against Atatürk's secularization (Mardin, 1993: 218). From this depiction, it can be observed that the primary force

opposing secularism in Türkiye has been the Naqshabandy Sufis, both during the sultanate era (*Tanzimat*) and in the modern era.

Periodization of Islamic struggles in Turkey shows the continuous efforts of Islamists to demonstrate their existence in the context of the secularization imposed by Kemal Atatürk. Their existence is inextricably linked to the Naqshabandy Sufi movement, which has a significant number of followers. They have been present since the era of the Usmaniyyah Dynasty, proposing to the sultanate to reform public life using Islamic law as a guide. They persisted in the authoritarian modern-secularist Türkiye, surviving in the cultural sphere (community development) and eventually even in the political sphere. When the secular Republic of Türkiye came into being, the Naqshabandy Sufi leader in Türkiye was Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, a product of Halidi education. Said Nursi succeeded in establishing a network of followers through the distribution of his collection of writings, *Risale-I Nur*. This collection played an important role in strengthening the network of followers. Nursi died in 1960, but his followers, known as the *Nurcu*, continued to be active in education. One of them was Fethullah Gülen. They built *Nur evleri*, student dormitories affiliated with *Nurcu cemaati*. *Nur evleri* are apartments for students in separate buildings. Each flat is inhabited by seven students who are close to the location of the campus. The organization under Gülen's leadership has *Mutevellis* (community administrators), *Abilers* (brothers) and *Ablalars* (sisters) who each run cemaat activities at the lowest level. The precise number of adherents is unknown, but it is evident that the movement has spread throughout Türkiye, as evidenced by the growing number of individuals appointed to oversee cemaat activities.

Those who are eligible to join the *mutevellis* have demonstrated a high level of commitment to the teachings of *Risale-I Nur*. They are selected from among the most dedicated *Risale-I Nur* students who have received a higher level of advanced education, called *Nur talebesi*. Their education is based on the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet, as recorded in Said Nursi's *Risale-I Nur* and books written by Fethullah Gülen. Periodically, the *mutevellis* administer oral and written examinations.

In *Nur Evleri*, *dersanes* is sometimes held, which is a course or tutoring before entering university. Fethullah Gülen's group even organizes *dersanes* for free or for a very low fee. These are guided by

abiler and *ablalar*, both related to subjects for university tests and Islamic subjects through religious lectures and discussions. Additionally, they read Said Nursi's guidebook *Risale-I Nur* and the writings of Fethullah Gulen. The primary objective of *nur evleri* is to cultivate a cadre of educated individuals who adhere to Islamic teachings. Students at *nur evleri* are consistently reminded to perform the five daily prayers and strive to align their lives with the principles espoused by Islam. The outcomes of the training of these Naqshabandy Sufi figures eventually manifested as cadres in the face of the secularization of the Turkish regime. Furthermore, they subsequently constituted the mass base of political parties that received support from the *Nurcu* (Naqhabandy Sufis).

Nursi died in 1960, and his struggle was continued by the *Nurcu*, even later taking the strategy of cooperation with political parties. Consequently, when Turkish politics was gradually directed towards democracy, "Islamist" parties developed significantly, armed with the mass base of *Nurcu*'s generation. With the introduction of democratic elections in 1995 AD, the Islamists were able to consolidate their position through the Prosperity Party (*Refah Partisi*). The party emerged triumphant in the contest, and its leader, Necmettin Erbakan, was appointed Prime Minister. This political event may come as a surprise to the international community, given that Islamic politics can exist and even eventually exert control over the political landscape of the secular Turkish state. However, for academics who are familiar with the core principles of Islamic teachings and have conducted consistent research into the religio-cultural aspects of Turkish Muslims, this political fact will not be a surprise.

CONCLUSION

Since coming to power, Mustafa Kemal Attaturk conducted a series of reforms through secularization and industrialization towards a modern state. Under Attaturk's leadership, modern Turkiye adopted Western social values to a greater extent and carried out legal and political reforms based on the principles of secularism and Western-oriented. Attaturk sought to rapidly transform Turkiye into a modern state without abandoning the Islamic identity of the Turkish people. Based on this vision, Attaturk and other supporters sought to limit

the role of religion to a private belief system excluded from the public space.

Although the political rationale of Kemalism was to make Turkiye a modern and democratic country, the face of Kemalism during the leadership of Turkiye has become an authoritarian government. Attaturk's policy, continued by the Kemalists, consisted of a single power oriented towards implementing the doctrines of Kemalism. This type of government clearly didn't have a modern character and wasn't characterized as a democracy. One of the characteristics appears to be "modern Turkiye" or secular Turkiye, closely related to the secularism patterns exceeding the Western countries and even to the intervention in the private domains, such as the Adzan, Iqomat and prayers required in a Turkish language.

The most interesting aspect of politics religious in secular Turkiye is the existence of Sufism and religious movement, which never claimed to be Islamic political parties. For example, the Refah Party only uses Islamic and humanitarian jargon. Officially, the Refah Party's political jargon prioritizes social justice, tradition, ethics and opposing Westernization. However, the Refah Party also claims to fight for an Islam suitable to the characteristics of the Turkish people. Based on this fact, the Refah Party can be classified as a moderate party upholding the values of democracy and pluralism.

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