

Democracy (For Me):
Religious and Secular Beliefs in Turkey and Liberal Democracy

A Conversation with Murat Somer
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ERIK OWENS: Could you give a brief account of the state of secularism in Turkey today, vis-à-vis government and culture?

MURAT SOMER: One thing to understand for an American audience is that Turkey is a laic state, which is, in some ways, similar to French laicism, but also, unlike Elizabeth Shakman Hurd would argue, probably, quite differently. And secularism, as you know, in a political sense, is about strict separation of religion and state.

But there are very few countries that are secular in that sense. The United States is quite an exception. Most secular states have some intermingling of religion and government institutions. Even Britain has some – like a state church, for example. Secularism, in the stylistic definition, is about religious freedom, and separation of church and state.

Laicism is more about control of religion. It does not project freedom of religion. On the contrary, because of ideological reasons as well as the political conditions at the beginning of the emergence of that type of secularism, people thought that a religion needed to be controlled to make religious freedom possible.

So, in Turkey, secularism is enshrined in the Constitution, and separation of state and church is also. Freedom of religion is a principle in the Constitution.

In that sense, Turkey is one of the most secular within the Muslim world, because the legal system is completely secular in Turkey. So that religious authorities have very little influence on the legal system. Education is also mostly secular.

However, the government is not separated from religion. Government, in fact, regulates and subsidizes the majority of religion, which is Sunni Islam.

EO: And the AKP has recently pushed the boundaries of what it means to be a secular government within a religious party. We read a lot about that in the United States.

There has been a lot of conversation recently in American papers about what Sarkozy has called a *laïcité positive*: more accommodating sort of laicism.

Does that model correspond more closely to the AKP model that Turkey is experiencing now? Or what are some of the similarities and differences?

MS: I think I would say that there are some similarities, but the differences are also very important. The AKP has also talked about the American example, or maybe, model, to promote their own degree of secularism.

One can think of secularism having three dimensions: the separation of state and religion, religious freedom, and philosophical secularism. The AKP has emphasized religious freedoms – it emphasizes religious freedoms. And in that sense, it's similar to positive laicism, in terms of being more respectable.

That's the similarity. The biggest difference would be this: France is a very secular society. Secular rights are recognized by government. Turkey is not a very secular society. So the starting conditions are quite different.

Now the secular argument in Turkey, the AKP, argues that there are problems with religious freedom in Turkey, which is true. There are some problems. Having said that, unlike in France, in Turkey religion is much more important, both in society and politics.

For example, in France, politicians are shy to even reveal their religious denomination or preferences. In Turkey, religion is very much in the public sphere. Religious politicians promote their religiosity. And with the AKP, this has become even much more important.

This is, of course, controversial. The AKP denies it, but it's a fact that the structure of the civil service has changed significantly, and that the religiosity of the civil service has become much more emphasized. If this is not a conscious policy, it is certain that people feel that to be the case: to get ahead one has to be more religious, so they need to show more religiosity.

And so the society has also become more, in that sense, outwardly religious. Whether this is true religiosity, or for some religious people, really, the corruption of religion, that's a different question. But in terms of outward expression, both the society and government have become much more religious.

EO: In your paper that you spoke about today, you make an underlying claim that Turks are reluctant, for a variety of reasons, to embrace a robust form of pluralism – the full throated liberal democracy.

Could you say a bit about how you came to that argument, and then we'll talk in the next question about what to do about that?

MS: One is just the observation of Turkish politics, and the reactions of political actors to different events. You realize that they are not upholding the same standards, these different groups for others they see as threatening rivals. They don't uphold the same standards.

In the research then there are many questions about overall liberal democracy and social political pluralism, and questions about specific groups: whether they are an asset at the end of day, or if their expression of their identity, culture, may cause any problems. Is this seen as a problem, or as an asset? And there, we saw that actors don't apply the same standards to all groups.

EO: You intimated in your paper that something fundamental would need to change to alter this, and you suggested that perhaps a political event of some sort might lead to a shift in democratic values, or perhaps, some other cultural or religious shift.

Could you speculate a bit on what might create a more robust affirmation of the role of democracy?

MS: I try to stay away from this concept of takeoff. I think important events make a big difference, but it is a process. For example, in Spain, when this democratization really successfully happened, it was a critical juncture. There were some critical decisions made by some political actors: by the King, by the social democratic actors, by the conservative political actors.

So these were very important. But before that, for years, during the Franco regime, Spanish society really came to the conclusion that a totalitarian regime was not desirable. So that conclusion was already there.

So in the case of Turkish democracy, in addition to critical decisions, there is also a need for democratic steps.

In addition to these kinds of critical decisions, I think the political actors in Turkey have to come to the conclusion that they have to accept the other. But they also have to be assured that the others will do the same.

So this is actually a very complicated, interdependent process, I think. And that's a difficulty, I think, of democratization. They have to do it somehow simultaneously. They have to come to that conclusion.

EO: One of the other important aspects of your paper that I appreciated was the attentiveness to internal diversity within Islam, such that the minorities that you're speaking of are multi-faceted, and not simply Alevi or Armenian or Kurdish, but rather, a full spectrum of others.

How diverse do Turks consider themselves, as a people and as a country?

MS: I think the consciousness of that has changed a lot in the last one or two decades.

Before that, I think the perception was that we need to be homogenous, and that we are quite homogenous, and that was also the government's concern.

Now, I think much more diversity is realized and perceived and expressed.

EO: Yes, that seems to be one of the underlying preliminary values that needs to precede the democratization that you're talking about.

MS: Yes, but it also creates this counter reaction. Some people feel threatened by that.

EO: Yes, absolutely.

One last question: What does it mean to Turks to be European versus Turkish or Middle Eastern? And the motivating question, as you know, is: what are the driving factors in the identity issues about EU membership? Not simply the membership in the EU realm, or easy pass transit into Europe. What are the identity issues, as you see them with that issue?

MS: In terms of identity, I think most Turks don't see themselves as European. But that perception is also driven by the European perception of Turks.

I think that if Europeans accept the Turks more as European, then Turks' perception would also change, to some extent.

But it really depends on the question, what it means to be European. If Europeanness is defined by the Europeans as a cultural concept, I think everybody understands religion plays a big role in this. Most Turks would have a hard time seeing themselves as European.

But the more Europeanness is defined in terms of political ideals, economic standards, I think that and more and more Turks begin to see themselves as Europeans.

History plays a very important role here. I think for Europeans, Turks were really the historical other. Turks were really presented to Europeans as this outside threat, you know, Muslimist. That needs to change.

Let me give you one example. When I was teaching undergraduate comparative politics in English at the university level we used English textbooks. We had to use English textbooks.

In this particular chapter there was half a sentence about the 800 years' period of Muslim rule in Spain. And it said the Muslims ruined in Spain. It was phrased like this. And it said blah, blah saved Spain from Muslims.

EO: This is a British textbook?

MS: This is an American textbook.

EO: American textbook.

MS: American textbook – you know, they are published in both.

EO: Right. Yeah. (laughter)

MS: So is this a really accurate historical perception? But this is very much the mainstream of perception of Europeans of themselves.

EO: Presumably Turks are much more aware of the Islamic influence in Europe than Europeans are. Right? Or are the Turks ill informed about it as well?

MS: I think Turks have their own stereotypes and their own biased perception. I mean, when Turks talk about Europe, they also talk about conquering Europe.

Eastern Europe was a homeland for a major portion of Turks for centuries, but Turks also talked about it in terms of conquering Europe.

And it's mutual – you know, Turks probably don't realize how much they are influenced by Europe. also, because Turks are quite different from other Middle Eastern people. I mean, they are Middle Eastern, but they are also different from other Middle Eastern peoples. And Europe must have played an important role in that.

EO: Thank you very much for taking the time. I appreciate it.