

Turkey at the End of the Second Decade of the 21st Century: A Secular or Religious Country?

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Abstract : Islam has been an important topic in Turkey's institutional identity. Since the dawn of the Turkish Republic, at the end of the First World War, the new Turkish leadership was urged to deal with the religious heritage of the Sultanate. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Turkey's first President, led the country in a process of internal change, substantially modifying not merely the democratic stance of it, but also the way politics was addressing the Muslim faith. Islam was banned from the public sector of the society and was drastically marginalized to the mere private sphere of citizens' lives. Headscarves were banned from institutional buildings together with any other religious practice, while the country was proceeding down a path of secularism and Westernization. This issue is demonstrated by the fact that even a new elected Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, was initially barred from taking the institutional position, because of allegations that he had read a religious text while campaigning. Over the years, thanks to this initial internal shift, Turkey has often been seen by Western partners as one of the few countries that had managed to find a perfect balance between a democratic stance and an Islamic inherent nature. In the early 2000s, this led many academics to believe that Ankara could eventually have become the next European capital. Since then, the internal and external landscape of Turkey has drastically changed. Today, religion has returned to be an important point of reference for Turkish politics, considering also the failure of the European negotiations and the always more unstable external environment of the country. This paper wants to address this issue, looking at the important role religion has covered in the Turkish society and the way it has been politicized since the early years of the Republic. It will evolve from a more theoretical debate on secularism and the path of political westernization of Turkey under Atatürk's rule to a more practical analysis of today's situation, passing through the failure of Ankara's accession into the EU and the current tense political relation with its traditional NATO allies. The final objective of this research, therefore, is not to offer a meticulous opinion on Turkey's current international stance. This issue will be left entirely to the personal consideration of the reader. Rather, it will supplement the existing literature with a comprehensive and more structured analysis on the role Islam has played on Turkish politics since the early 1920s up until the political domestic revolution of the early 2000s, after the first electoral win of the Justice and Development Party (AKP).

Keywords : democracy, Islam, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey

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