

The Transformation of Turkey in the 1980s: Turgut Özal, the 1980 Coup, and the Islamic Synthesis

Introduction

The 1980s were a time of significant change in the Turkish Republic, marked by two major events: the military coup of 1980 and Turgut Özal's rise of power, along with his subsequent policy implementations. These events reshaped Turkey's political scene and had a deep impact on its society. The coup, driven by the military's desire to suppress political instability, violence and social divide, resulted in radical societal changes and reshaped the republic's view of secularism, as later discussed in the essay. Afterwards, with Özal's leadership, Turkey saw major economic changes and a shift in its approach to politics and religion, including the shifts towards the Islamic Synthesis. This essay looks at how the 1980 coup and Özal's time in power helped political Islam grow in Turkey, effecting social and political norms. It will also focus on how these events changed Turkish secularism, moving it away from the strict French model of *laïcité*, to a more encapsulating and tolerant understanding, which consequently enabled the rise of political Islam within Turkey.

How does *laïcité* differ from other forms of secularism?

Laïcité is distinct from other forms of secularism in its strict approach to the separation of state affairs and religion. This approach prohibits any kind of governmental involvement in religious affairs and restricts religious expression in public life, emphasizing neutrality in public spaces. While other forms of secularism, such as in USA, may allow expression of religion in public spaces, and by government officials to some extent, *laïcité* does not. (Soner Cagaptay, 2017, Chapter 4)

The 1980s Coup D'état

The 1980s Coup was primarily driven by the military's desire to suppress societal unrest and anarchy amongst the society, mainly marked with the clashes between left-wing and right-wing groups. The government's failure to follow the Kemalist principles, Kurdish separatism, the economic crisis, and the growing concern over "İrtica", which refers to the increasing influx of extremist Islamic groups in Turkey, also played significant roles. In response to these challenges, the military, led by General Kenan Evren, took complete control of the country in September 1980. The coup's immediate actions included a strict crackdown on the societal turmoil and dissent, leading to the arrest of about 122,600 people within the first year (Soner Cagaptay, 2017, Chapter 4). To avoid future conflicts, the military wanted to unify and depolarize the country. Their strategy was to unify the country amongst one common axis: religion. The military decided to follow the notion of Islamic Synthesis, created by the Association of the Intellectuals Heart (Aydınlar Ocağı) (Üstündağ, 2023). As part of this goal, General Kenan Evren, often referred to the Quran during his talks (HIST300, week 10-11, 1980 Coup Lecture) an unusual practice for the Turkish military leaders and considered to be controversial due to the country's secular values. The military also mandated religious lessons amongst public schools, trying to control

the religion and indoctrinate the youth against the left-wing ideologies, a measure in line with the unification and depolarization efforts and the Islamic Synthesis, which also undermines the principles of laïcité. The Iranian Revolution which took place in 1978-1979 (HIST300, week10-11, 1980 Coup Lecture), and the subsequent problem of İltica was also planned to be opposed with the military's strategy of a "controlled" Islam. In short, the military's goal was to standardize a milder Islam, a version less extreme compared to others like Iran's Sharia, amongst the society, so that both the effects of left-wing ideologies and extremist Islamic movements could be neutralized (Hemmati, 2014). However, even though the aim of these strategies were to protect the State from the left-right clashes and the radical-Islam, the shift in secularism of the state, namely the shift away from laïcité, and a trend of increasing tolerance for Islam, opened the path towards the rise of Politically Islamic parties in Turkey by creating a power vacuum after the destruction of left and nationalistic right (Üstündağ, 2023). These effects were further reinforced during Turgut Özal's era.

Turgut Özal as the Deputy Prime Minister

Özal's era was the beginning of a new chapter in Turkish politics, before becoming the Prime Minister, Özal served as the Deputy Prime Minister in charge of economic affairs during Kenan Evren's tenure. His policies during his time as a Deputy Prime Minister are known as the 24 January decisions, which are mainly characterized by liberal economic reforms. With 24 January decisions, Özal introduced the open-market policies, which were a vast change compared to the State's usual controlled market policies. He initiated financial sector reforms, restructuring the banking sector to promote a more liberal financial environment, and he devalued the Turkish lira to boost export by cheapening the Turkish products for the outside world. Overall, the economic policies during this period can be seen as steps towards an economic integration with the outside world by the means of liberal policies.

After the military government allowed the resumption of civilian political activities, Özal founded the Motherland Party (ANAP), due to Özal's economic policies being very influential and popular amongst the electorate, ANAP won the general elections held in 1983 by gaining the 45% of the votes (HIST300, Week11-12 slides). As the leader of the leading party, Özal was appointed as the prime minister. He continued his efforts in integrating liberal policies and developing the country further. He encouraged the Foreign Direct Investment by creating policies to attract foreign capital, continued the liberalization of the financial sector by establishing a free exchange system, and made strives for infrastructural and technological development by initiating large projects such as the construction of the first Bosphorus Bridge and the Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP).

One notable characteristic of Özal, which is amongst the qualities that set him apart from his contemporaries in office, is that unlike his predecessors, he openly embraced his Islamic identity, which was a steep change from the secularist stance of previous Turkish leaders. His administration marked the normalization of the usage of Islamic values within the Turkish Politics and the public sphere. Özal's approach to Islam in politics was not about imposing Islamic values, rather, he acknowledged the religious identity of the majority of the Turkish citizens, a move that made him even more popular. His stance was evident in his policies and in his public appearances, Özal, similarly to General Kenan Evren, often used Islamic references

and quotations in his speeches and public life. Similarly, Özal increased the funding of İmam Hatip Schools, which are state sponsored schools with a wider focus on religious education, raising their educational capacity and attracting top performing students from conservative backgrounds (Soner Cagaptay, 2017). All of these changes, and many more, led to the normalization of Islamic values in the political and public sphere, which consequently prompted a transition away from the strict French model of laïcité, Özal's era publicized more inclusive and tolerant form of secularism.

Turgut Özal's tenure as a leader left a long-lasting effect on not only the political sphere, but in Turkey as a whole. While radically reshaping the developing country, he also indirectly facilitated the rise of political Islam by weakening the secular ideals of the country and paved the way for an electorate that would be motivated by the inclusion of Islamic values in the state, setting the stage for future political movements and leaders who sought to integrate Islamic values into governance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the 1980s, marked by the military coup and Turgut Özal's policies, were pivotal in transforming Turkey as a whole. Not only did Turkey experience major economic changes and rapid neo-liberalization during this era but there were also fundamental changes in the governance style of the country, specifically about the secularism. In the end, these changes resulted in the normalization of Islamic values in the political sphere, and a weakening in secular ideals, compared to the laïcité of Atatürk, consequently leading to the rise of political Islam.

References

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