

COMMENTARY

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Erdogan Exploits Islam for Personal and Political Gain

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Anyone who follows Turkish President Erdogan's political career cannot escape the conclusion that he has carefully and systematically crafted policies framed in Islamic clothing. He uses religion to present himself and his political agenda as if it is being sanctioned by a higher authority, surreptitiously uses Islamic symbols to indoctrinate the population with religious precepts, and promotes Islamic studies in schools in order to cultivate a new generation of devout Muslims loyal to him.

To consolidate his powers, he focused on economic development to build a strong constituency consisting of the poorer and less-educated segments of the Turkish population who support him and follow his model of political Islam. He trumpets democracy to pay lip-service to the secular sector of the population to reduce resistance to his attempt to convert Turkey into an Islamic state.

There is nothing wrong in promoting any religion in a democracy, provided there is a clear separation between 'church' and state. In Turkey, though, Erdogan is making religion part and parcel of the state's political process. In fact, as early as 1999 Erdogan went to jail for 4 months for religious incitement after he publicly read a nationalist poem including the lines: "The mosques are our barracks, the domes our helmets, the minarets our bayonets and the faithful our soldiers." Erdogan's notion that Turkey provides a model of Islamic democracy is an empty slogan, as it no longer resonates domestically or among any Arab or Muslim state.

The fact that Turkey has lost any prospect of becoming an EU member was entirely due to Erdogan's severe and methodical undermining of the pillars on which democracy rests, including

free press and speech, human rights, a fair and impartial judiciary, secular public education, and checks and balances between the three branches of government.

To promote his social-cultural Islamic agenda, Erdogan began to systematically issue directives to gradually transform Turkey into a religiously-observant society. He did so without resorting to legislation in order to avoid public resistance from the larger secular segment of the population. To that end, he began to introduce Islamic teaching and images into the public consciousness, as well as build religious institutions, to indoctrinate the population with religious precepts.

As early as 2011, Erdogan began to foster an Islamic fashion revolution. He lifted the ban on headscarves in universities, and women who work in state offices and policewomen are now able to wear headscarves, along with women who serve in the military. The once-stigmatized veil has become socially acceptable. There is a discernible rise in the number of ‘fashionable’ Islamic conservative characters in soap operas, and the portrayal of women as house wives is becoming increasingly prevalent.

Moreover, the modern emblem of Turkey today shows the star outside the crescent which has become the symbol of Islam like the cross is to Christianity. The fast-growing number of mosques offers another vivid symbol of where the country is heading. During the past 30 years, the number of mosques in Turkey has grown from 60,000 to more than 85,000. The AKP uses mosques as a physical symbol of the growth of Islamic values of the state and as a political tool to consolidate its power base.

Perhaps the greatest manifestation of this is the newest, largest mosque in Turkey with six minarets, built on Çamlica Hill in Istanbul, which is the city’s highest point reaching about 1,000 feet above sea level. The site overlooks the Bosphorus in clear view of the entire city.

In addition, alcohol cannot be sold between 10pm and 6am, and can no longer be displayed in windows and restaurants that are located near schools or mosques. Alcohol producers cannot advertise or sponsor social events. Furthermore, the government cancelled a festival celebrating the national drink, raki, due to complaints from Islamists, which Erdogan more than welcomed.

In recent years, the Turkish government under Erdogan’s leadership took many **new initiatives to push Islam deeper into the country’s secular education** to cultivate a new Islamic generation. The plan included the building of 80 new mosques in public universities, and converting one university in Istanbul into a centre for Islamic studies. Erdogan further supported the introduction of compulsory religious classes for all primary school children, and added an extra hour of Islamic studies for all high school students.

One of the most notable expansions of Islamic studies is found in the growth of Imam-Hatip religious schools, where since 2010 the number of schools increased by 90%, from 493 to 936, and the number of students enrolled grew from 65,000 in 2002 to nearly a million by 2016.

Batuhan Aydagül, the Director of the Education Reform Initiative at Istanbul Sabanci University, maintains that the Ministry of Education is driving the demand for these schools, not responding to it. “The government is limiting the supply of non-religious schools and increasing the supply of religious ones...they are creating a situation where some students will have to go to these schools regardless of their will.”

Parents and teachers are bitterly complaining that Ankara is controlling the appointment of head-teachers who enjoy substantial influence on the selection of courses. Several thousand public school teachers were replaced by Imam-Hatip trained teachers. Boys and girls are in separate classes, presumably to create an environment conducive to better learning.

Kamuran Karaca, the president of the left-wing Egitim Sen Teachers’ union, put it succinctly when he said: “...the [AK Party] is using our children for its own ideology ...this is a political project for creating a religious generation. They are forcing students to learn Arabic, the Quran and its interpretation in Sunni Islam.”

Those who have been imbued with Imam-Hatip learning experiences claim that these schools produce people who are more virtuous, work harder, and excel in their professions. They point to the fact that Erdogan himself was a graduate of an Imam-Hatip school. In a speech to the assembly of AKP youth members in 2012, Erdogan stated that “We want to raise pious generations.”

Erdogan uses religion to present his political agenda as being sanctioned by a higher authority, his Islamic credentials to intimidate the opposition, and the Gulen movement as a scapegoat to promote his brand of Islamism. Fundamentally, Erdogan sees himself as a ‘religious man’, i.e. God created the circumstances for him to purge at will any of his fictitious or real political opponents, convincing himself that he is on the right and true path.

During the Ottoman reign, religion played a critical role in governing (a lesson that does not seem to be lost on Erdogan), as was observed by Baruch Spinoza, who in his Theological-Political Treatise stated that “...they [the Turks] consider even controversy impious, and so clog men’s minds with dogmatic formulas, that they leave no room for sound reason, not even enough to doubt with.”

During the debate in the parliament to amend the constitution, Speaker of the Parliament Ismail Kahraman called for the removal of secularism from the new constitution: “For one thing, the new constitution should not have secularism. It needs to discuss religion... It should not be irreligious, this new constitution, it should be a religious constitution.”

Although Kahraman’s proposals did not pass, it is clear that no such statement would have been made unless it expressed Erdogan’s sentiment. Essentially, it is becoming increasingly apparent that Erdogan’s goal is to become the ultimate leader of his country and the Islamic Sunni world. In a visit to Jakarta in July 2016, Erdogan stated that “We have only one concern. It is Islam, Islam and Islam.” And in recent visits to Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, he sent a message to the Sunni world to unite and put differences aside to fight violations against the Muslim world.

To become the supreme political and religious leader, Erdogan has relentlessly pushed to amend the constitution to grant him near-absolute power for which he needs popular support, and he uses religion to garner this support to promote his political agenda. In this way, he “sanctifies” his policies, and placed himself at the highest political and religious pedestal. As Napoleon succinctly put it, “Religion is excellent stuff for keeping common people quiet.”

Religion is meant to provide a moral and ethical compass to promote amity, compassion, empathy, and love, and create social harmony and peace. To be a true Muslim is to adhere to these tenets of the Quranic scripture and follow the pillars of Islam. Thus, no one should be free to exploit religion for the promotion of one’s personal ambition, which, in this case, reduces the sacredness of Islam to the level of the human travails and empties it of its holistic spiritual meanings.

A man of faith does not debase the nobility of Islam to promote a personal political agenda in the name of God. **A religious man** does not imprison tens of thousands of civil servants and leave their families despairing and desolate. **A pious man** does not purge thousands of teachers without any evidence of wrongdoing. **A true believer** does not incarcerate scores of journalists, which stifles freedom of the press and silences dissenting voices. **A devout man** does not subjugate millions of fellow citizens—the Kurds—and rob them of their basic rights to experience their cultural heritage. **A virtuous man** does not build a “White Palace” for hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars while millions of Turks languish in abject poverty. **A righteous man** does not create a police state and use an iron fist to quell peaceful demonstrations. And finally, **a spiritual man** does not choke-off the spirit of others, trample on their dignity, and stamp out their pride.

Islam and democracy are not mutually exclusive as long as there is a clear separation between ‘mosque and state.’ Imams have a role to play in promoting the virtues of Islam, but should have no say on the political processes of the state. For Erdogan to claim that Turkey is a democracy is hypocritical at best, not only because he usurped dictatorial powers but also because he weaved

his religious doctrine into the state institutions and intimidated the civil society to join the ranks of his false piety.

Whereas Erdogan insists that Islam offers a purer way of life and creates social cohesiveness that brings prosperity and happiness, he is in fact raising social tension in Turkey by his relentless promulgation of his own brand of Islam to buttress his political agenda. The country has become increasingly polarized between the secular and the religious, which places Turkey on a dangerous path and robs it of its potential to become a true Islamic democracy.

Note: This article was originally published in the web portal of Prof. Ben-Meir and has been reproduced under arrangement. Web Link: <http://alonben-meir.com/writing/erdogan-exploits-islam-personal-political-gain/>

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