

Article

# From Islamism to Civil Religion: Erdoğan's Shift to Secularism

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**Abstract:** In 2002, the Justice and Development Party came to power in Turkey, while Recep Tayyip Erdoğan became its leader in 2003, and both have remained in power until today. Initially, Erdoğan had a predominantly Islamist discourse, and in that period, Islam became gradually more visible in public space and foreign relations. However, that Islamist discourse later increasingly gave way to realpolitik due to domestic requirements and international economic and political changes. This article deals with this transition from Islamism to civil religion and secularism during Erdoğan's power and explores its nature and characteristics as well as the impact on politics. I suggest that while still sometimes making use of an Islamist rhetoric, Erdoğan's focus in recent years has been more on various secular–sacred items of civil religion, like homeland, nation (as a chosen people), national flag, (sacralized) state, and, additionally, national development. I examine the civil religion Erdoğan advocates by analyzing his official and casual speeches, interviews he gave, and some of the slogans he used. I also suggest that Erdoğan's transition to civil religion also represents a shift to secularism, as modern civil religions undermine and subordinate established religions to a great extent and also create their own secular sacredness.

**Keywords:** Recep Tayyip Erdoğan; Islamism; civil religion; secularization; secularism; modernity; Turkey



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## 1. Introduction

As in Europe and North America, secularism in Turkey is a much-contested term despite its central and dominant role in the politics until recently. *Encyclopedia Britannica* defines secularism as “a worldview or political principle that separates religion from other realms of human existence, often putting greater emphasis on nonreligious aspects of human life or, more specifically, separating religion from the political realm” (Preston 2024). However, as this work admits, it is difficult to provide a precise definition of secularism, even for scholars. For instance, as the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor states, “it is not entirely clear what is meant by secularism. There are indeed quite different formulae that go under the name” (Preston 2024). When a concept is still complicated and contested even in a culture that was born long ago, one can guess how it might be perceived, understood, and treated in another culture like the Turkish one. So, in this article I will not deal with the definitions of and debate on secularism in the “West” but focus on secularism as it has been conceived and practiced in Turkey. Therefore, it will be useful to provide a brief historical and ideological background of secularism in Turkey, since otherwise one will not be able to understand the current debate on it and the relevant issues.

## 2. Secularism During One-Party Rule (1923–1950)

The Republic of Turkey was founded on 29 October 1923 by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938) and his friends in the lands that remained from the Ottoman Empire, which

were dismembered decisively following the Balkan Wars and especially the First World War. One might say that the new republic was a sort of Islamic republic, as Item 2 of the 1921 Constitution ([Teşkilâtı Esasiye Kanunu 1921](#)) (which was amended in 1923), as well as Item 2 of the 1924 Constitution, stated clearly that “the religion of the state of Turkey” was Islam ([Teşkilâtı Esasiye Kanunu 1924](#)). Item 2 of the 1924 Constitution was later amended in 1928; the expression of Islam as the religion of the state was completely removed, and nothing about religion was mentioned. The same Item 2 was amended again in 1937 (nearly one and a half years before Atatürk’s demise), and this time, “laicism” (*laiklik* in Turkish coming from the French *laïcité*) was added along with five other elements, namely “republicanism, nationalism, populism, statism, . . . and reformism” as characterizing traits of the Republic of Turkey ([Teşkilâtı Esasiye Kanunu 1924](#)). Today, these six elements are usually considered as the foundational principles of Atatürkism or Kemalism.

In Turkish understanding and practice, as put in simple terms, secularism means separation of religion (i.e., religious affairs) from politics (i.e., political affairs). This understanding, which reflects a notion of secularism as the separation of the church and the state, is explained in Turkish schools and politics as follows: the state and religion should be separate and independent of each other and should not interfere with each other at all. However, such an “explanation” is very problematic, as the religion (Islam and others) in Turkey is strictly under the control of the state ([Burak 2012](#)). This was so from the very beginning, because the one-party rule (from 1923 to 1946) influenced, shaped, and even sometimes determined in a quite totalitarian way all ideological and religious affairs and beliefs. For instance, the Directorate of Religious Affairs, as it is called today, was established by Atatürk only four months after the declaration of the republic, that is, on 3 March 1924, and its duties were governing the affairs pertaining to the faith, creeds, worships, and morality of the religion of Islam, enlightening people about the religion and directing and running the places of worship ([Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı 2013](#)). It was then established as an organization under the office of the prime minister (but came under the office of the president in 2018 when the former was abolished). In short, all kinds of religious affairs have been monitored, controlled, and regulated by the state. Therefore, for example, all imams and preachers in the mosques are civil servants and receive their salaries regularly from the state treasury. As a matter of fact, [Gözaydın \(2008, p. 224\)](#) uses “the terms *laïcité*/*laic*/*laicists* for a preference of the state’s control of religion as opposed to secularism which implies the separation of state and religion”. According to [Gözaydın \(2020\)](#), the Directorate acts in order to meet the state’s expectations and social needs and strikes a balance between the two with regard to debates on secularism, as it has an impact on theological issues and discussions as well. [Gözaydın \(2008, p. 216\)](#) further suggests that the Directorate which was originally established to organize Islamic services “has actually been used as a means of ‘securing’ the secular nature of the state in Turkey”. Moreover, the state even uses the Directorate of Religious Affairs as a tool of Turkish foreign policy ([Öztürk and Sözeri 2018](#)).

As stated above, from 1923 to 1946 the new Republic of Turkey had a one-party regime that was established de facto in 1925 after the adoption of the 1924 constitution. The only political party in the Grand National Assembly was the Republican People’s Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi—CHP) founded by Atatürk on 9 September 1923. Atatürk was the president of the republic from 1923 until his death in 1938, and İsmet İnönü, his friend from the military, succeeded him from 1938 to 1950. I would like to add here that among the first seven presidents of Turkey (from 1923 to 1989), only one, namely Celal Bayar (1950–1960), did not have a military origin. Even after 1989, the army was involved (with or without success) in the election of all other presidents. I personally find this

situation shameful for a country whose main target has been said to be attaining “modern civilization”.

Atatürk carried out political, economic, and social reforms and aimed at transforming Turkey into a modern secular nation state. In fact, many of his sweeping reforms were already discussed in Ottoman intellectual circles in the early 20th century and expressed openly after the Young Turk Revolution, which took place in July 1908 (Hanioglu 2011, p. 55). These reforms aimed at making Turkey attain the level of “contemporary civilization” (*muasır medeniyet*), which of course was believed to exist in the West and especially Europe. So, just like many Ottoman reforms, the republican reforms aimed at catching up with the West, which was allegedly the source and home of modern civilization. In brief, the republican ideal was raising the Turkish nation to the level of modern civilization. Therefore, the CHP, as the founding party of modern Turkey and the only party existing in the country, claimed a monopoly on defining what was modern, modernity, modernization, and civilization, as well as secularism, and officially, there was hardly any political opposition to the political leadership outside the party. Thus, one might suggest that perhaps the most dominant concepts in the political discourse in Turkey following the foundation of the republic until the early 21st century were modernity (*çağdaşlık*), modernization (*çağdaşlaşma*), and secularism (*laiklik*). The republican obsession with modernism was so strong that the authorities “modernized” even cemeteries. They destroyed historical cemeteries in many town centers and established new “modern” cemeteries (*asrî mezarlık*) outside towns with new forms and architectures (İşli 1991). According to some authorities, old cemeteries in town centers (with gravestones with Arabic letters and turbans on them) did not reflect the happiness and bright future, i.e., the salvation brought by the republic to the people (Hacısalihoglu 2018, p. 66).

In this context of modernity, one term used by the secularists of Turkey everywhere, including media, cinema, and official discourses, is *irtica*. This term comes from the Arabic verb root “*r-j-‘a*” meaning to “go back” and “return”. So, *irtija* meant in Arabic “return to an older form or order, reactionism, reaction” (Wehr 1976). Thus, the Turkish *irtica* implied going back to the beliefs, superstitions, and myths that mostly came from religions, customs, and traditions. Its opposite was modernity (*çağdaşlık*), which allegedly came from only sciences and reason. In short, one had *irtica* (backwardness, reactionism, or religious fanaticism) as opposed to modernity, and the mission of the republic was the eradication of *irtica* and the bringing of modernity and modern civilization to the Turkish people.

In fact, the concept of *irtica* was a very useful political tool for the secularist Turkish elite. It “was used by the Kemalist regime in order to delegitimize not only Islamic but all political opposition” (Azak 2010, p. 86). Therefore, one observes that even prime minister Adnan Menderes, who was later executed by secularist and Kemalist generals after the 1960 coup, complained about it: “The danger of *irtica* has always been put forward in order to usurp the political rights of the Turkish nation”. (Azak 2010, p. 88). As Yavuz notes, in their struggle against the traditional “forces of darkness” (Yavuz 2000b, p. 33) the authoritarian military–bureaucratic establishment or the “civilian–military cartel presented Islamic identity claims as an existential threat to justify actions outside the democratic means. (Yavuz 2000a, p. 36). “The sacralization of Kemalist secularism” (Azak 2010, p. 176) served and facilitated this. Although “Kemalist secularism redefined Islam on the basis of an opposition between Turkish Islam (personal, enlightened, rational, national) and reactionary Islam (political, backward, superstitious, Arab)” (Azak 2010, p. 175), I believe that this does not show the complete picture. For instance, it does not explain the outright animosity displayed towards Islam in many cases. To give only one example, for many years scenes of Muslim prayers, call for prayers, religious hymns, imams, and even funeral ceremonies were officially censured in Turkish cinema (Karadoğan and Öztürk 2022), as if

Turkey were like a communist country that had adopted atheism officially. In brief, this fact shows that some of the Turkish secularists were completely against Islam and anything related to it.

The modernizing reforms were mostly wide, comprehensive, and forced. The abolition of the caliphate on 3 March 1924 and of the sharia courts in the following month on 8 April 1924 were two drastic changes made in relation to secularization ([Kararara.com 1924](#)). On 3 March 1924, with the Law on Unification of Education (No. 430), a secular education system was established, and all educational institutions were now attached to the Ministry of Education ([Öztoprak 2020](#)). Furthermore, religious convents and dervish lodges were closed on 30 November 1925. In addition, the education of girls was emphasized and actively supported, while mixed-gender education was also introduced. In 1926, the new Turkish Civil Code, modelled after the Swiss Civil Code, was enacted ([Taş 2018](#)). Under the new code, women had equality with men in such matters as inheritance and divorce. Civil marriage became compulsory, while polygamy was banned. Later, women acquired voting rights in 1931 and the right to be elected to public office in 1934. According to [White \(2003, p. 158\)](#), the Turkish case was “one of the most important success stories of women’s empowerment in the early twentieth century”.

As the republican Turkish modernization meant in practice to a great extent Westernization as well, some cultural reforms were also carried out. As the examples will display, Westernization aimed at the same time at cutting existing ties with “the East” as well. To give a few examples, the weekly holiday was changed from Friday to Sunday, the calendar was changed from the Muslim lunar to the Gregorian, and the alphabet was changed from Arabic to Latin. In addition, the usage of Arabic to recite the Muslim call to prayer from minarets was banned by Atatürk in 1932, and Arabic was replaced by Turkish for that purpose. To give a final example, with the so-called Hat Revolution in 1925, men’s head-covering practices were legally regulated and made compatible with the norms in some Western countries. For instance, the fez and turban were banned, and men were obliged to wear hats. Many people who protested and refused to follow the Hat Law in various cities in Anatolia were sentenced to death and executed ([Akdoğan 2019](#)). Here, it is interesting to note that although Atatürk promoted modern dress for women, he did not regulate women’s clothing in the law. Moreover, we know that he was often photographed publicly with his wife Latife Uşaklıgil (1898–1975), who covered her head in accordance with Islamic tradition. The reason I mention the issue of women’s clothing here is that, as we will see, much of the later debate on secularism in Turkey would go around it, especially that regarding women’s headcover.

The first “democratic” election was held in Turkey in 1946 with the participation of some opposition parties, but it was a rigged election, and the ruling Republican Party won the majority and continued to be in power. However, in the first free and fair elections held in 1950, the Democratic Party, the main opposition party, which was in fact established by some MPs who had left the CHP, had a sweeping victory. It won 55% of the votes and 85% of the members of the new parliament. That was the end of the CHP’s 27-year-old one-party rule. However, this did not bring democracy to the country. In fact, the old establishment was still there and continued its domination of the bureaucracy, including the armed one. So, this was a new era in the sense of the beginning of military tutelage in Turkey, which would dominate the Turkish political arena till the end of the 20th century. In this period, there were four major military interventions overthrowing democratically elected governments. While the first and the third ones were in the form of conventional coup d’états that took place on 27 May 1960 and 12 September 1980, respectively, the second one was carried out on 12 March 1971 by a “coup by memorandum”. In the latter, the military delivered a memorandum instead of sending out tanks. The last one, which

took place on 28 February 1997 and whose effects continued into the 21st century and till the early years of Erdoğan's premiership, was often called a "post-modern coup", since the government was overthrown without dissolving the parliament or suspending the constitution. The military conducted the coup by forcing the elected government to resign via pressures and threats through media.

In brief, the one-party regime ended in 1950 by giving way to multi-party politics, and in the following decade, the country was ruled by a democratically elected government. However, this short period of "democracy" was ended by the country again coming under the control of the establishment represented by bureaucratic, military, and business elites.

### **3. Secularism During the Era of Coup d'Etats and Military Tutelage (1960–2013)**

In this section, in relation to secularism, I would like to dwell briefly on the four major coups that took place in the last four decades of the 20th century in Turkey, before proceeding to analyze the last one, which contributed, among others, indirectly to Erdoğan's rise to power in the beginning of the new millennium. The reason for my concentration on the military coups and tutelage is that they acted as tools of the establishment that controlled the politics and society and imposed its norms by basing its arguments mainly on modernity and secularism.

#### *3.1. The 1960 Coup*

As mentioned above, the Democratic Party (DP) came to power in 1950 and proceeded with some reforms and new policies. It had various liberal policies and carried out privatization initiatives. It supported and achieved mechanization in agriculture and built a network of roads. The party also provided some individual and religious liberties. For instance, it abolished the prohibitions of the recitation of adhan (Muslim call to prayer) in Arabic and of the broadcasting of religious topics on radios. One should add here that the DP continued Westernization and secular policies to a great extent, but unlike the CHP, it did not have a militant secularist attitude in politics. However, one might perhaps suggest that even the DP used secularism as a tool or weapon against the opposition. For example, the Nation Party (Millet Partisi) was closed down by a high court in Ankara on 27 January 1954 for being against secularism, yet this was believed to be a political decision, given the influence of the DP on the judiciary (Limoncuoğlu 2018, p. 150).

The DP also won the following general elections held in 1954 and 1957, as apparently many people were content with its policies and especially with its better economic performance. Nevertheless, with the passage of time, due to a desire to control the power alone and not to lose it, and also to some extent because of some provocations of the old establishment whose privileged position was undermined, the party began to act in an authoritarian way. For instance, it began to pressurize or restrict the activities of other political parties, universities, the press, and associations. With the reactions coming from them, including demonstrations by university students, some violent clashes between the security forces and the members of the public started. The first military coup in the young republic soon came. The coup carried out by around 38 low-ranking army officers did not follow the hierarchy in the military, and the coup leaders even arrested their Chief of the General Staff. Following the coup, various top members of the Democratic Party underwent a trial for their alleged "unconstitutional rule and high treason". Consequently, the Prime Minister Adnan Menderes, Foreign Minister Fatin Rüştü Zorlu, and Finance Minister Hasan Polatkan were given death penalties and executed. In addition, nearly 15 people were sentenced to life imprisonment (Önal 2015, p. 528).

Although some radical officers in the army wanted the continuation of the military rule indefinitely, the coup leaders knew that they soon had to leave the power to the civilians for a few reasons. The first were the possible reactions which would come from the West, which had seen the horrors of the Nazi and Fascist rules and therefore would not tolerate continuous military rule in Turkey, given that Turkey was a member of the European Council as well as NATO. The coup memorandum expressed that the leaders of the coup “are loyal to all the alliances and commitments” of Turkey and that they “believe and are devoted to NATO” and CENTO (Darbelcer.com 2021). Secondly, the junta’s possible failures in the future, especially in the field of the economy, could turn the majority of the people completely against the military. Finally, power struggles within the establishment, which included civilian bureaucrats and businesspeople too, would not tolerate a long military rule.

The coup of 27 May established a military tutelage on politics and based it on legal grounds with the imposition of a new constitution on 9 July 1961. New institutions created by the new constitution institutionalized the system of military tutelage. The military wanted to control the civilian governments that would come to power afterwards. Therefore, they gave their control a constitutional basis. The military established the tutelage against the civilian rulers within the established institutional structure (Akıncı 2013, p. 94). Put simply, the military now was the lord of the land and guardian of the republic and constitution.

As for the relation of this coup to secularism, in the memorandum read on the radios by a coup speaker nothing is mentioned regarding religion, secularism, or the governing party’s possible breach of law pertaining to secularism. The short text of the memorandum portrayed the coup leaders as the representatives of the army that had interfered with politics in order to stop inter-party strife and frictions and to reestablish the rule of law under their neutral administration, which would be above political parties and prepare the way for free and fair elections which would eventually bring the civilian rule (Cumhuriyet 2011). It seems that the leaders of this first coup were very cautious about their words, as they did not know about the possible reactions of the people or the leading Western powers. Therefore, they mentioned nothing about controversial issues, including religion or secularism. However, for example, most of the coup members were completely against the return to Arabic adhan. One of the coup leaders, Alparslan Türkeş (1917–1997), stated in a post-coup interview that the burqa had spread “all over the country like a black fire”. Moreover, for him, the decriminalization of the use of Arabic for religious purposes and especially the recitation of the adhan was a “betrayal” (of Atatürk’s decision) and “treason” carried out by the DP leadership (Başkut 1960). As a matter of fact, “treason” was among the major “crimes” for which the prime minister and two ministers were executed.

### 3.2. The 1971 Coup

The new political order brought about by the coup did not last long, as some serious problems emerged in a short time. Economic problems and protests by syndicates and students were a few of them. So, nearly just a decade later came another coup. This time a very short text of a memorandum signed by top military generals was broadcasted on official radio channels on 12 March 1971. The memorandum (68 Arşivi 2024) had only three items. According to the first item, the parliament and the government put the country into anarchy, chaos, and strife, caused many social and economic problems and could not carry out the reforms required by the new constitution; thus, “the public had lost hope about attaining contemporary civilization that Atatürk set a goal for us”. The second item pointed out the need for the formation of a strong new government that would get rid of the sorrow and desperation felt by the Turkish nation and “the Armed Forces which came from the

bosom of the nation”, annihilate the chaos and anarchy and deal with the required reforms envisaged by the constitution “in a Atatürkist/Kemalist perspective”, and enforce “the laws of the revolution” (brought by Atatürk). And the last item came with a warning and threat: if the required steps are not taken, then “the Turkish Armed Forces is determined to take over the government by fulfilling the duty given to it by law to protect and look after the Republic of Turkey”. In brief, this was the gist of the 1971 coup. As for its relation to secularism, the Kemalist perspective and the laws of the revolution include and emphasize, among others, the secular nature of the republic as well. One should add that unlike in the previous coup, in this coup secularism was not a major concern, as the coup was seen in Turkey as an action against the radical left and socialism.

### 3.3. The 1980 Coup

In less than a decade, still another coup took place on 12 September 1980. The coup leader Kenan Evren cited in the nearly 24-min speech (Evren 2023) he made on that day as the pretexts for the coup some factors with which we are familiar from the previous coups, and some of these are as follows: anarchy, chaos, and terror, which included assassinations of mayors, politicians, state attorneys, lawyers, academicians, and journalists; severe economic problems, like high inflation, shortage of basic goods, and unemployment; and the politicians’ indulgence in nepotism and partisanship and their indifference to the grave problems. Moreover, interestingly, Evren also cited two phenomena that according to him prevented intellectuals from seeing the awful situation in the country: strict legalism and narrow-minded scientism. Finally, the speech also included two topics related to religion: one was the sectarian fighting that had been taking place in some provinces where the Sunnite and Alevite citizens clashed with each other largely because of some politicians’ provocations. The second one referred to some events that took place on 6 September 1980 during the Jerusalem Rally organized in Konya by Necmeddin Erbakan and his National Salvation Party (Milli Selamet Partisi) as a reaction to Israel’s annexation and declaration of East Jerusalem as the capital city. Some events and slogans shouted during this meeting were also counted among the reasons for the coup. Some of those slogans allegedly called for jihad, the establishment of a “shariah state”, and the ending of secularism. Among the events, one especially angered the coup leaders: in spite of Erbakan’s warnings, some people among the participants tried to prevent the recitation of the Turkish national anthem and did not stand up during its recitation (Ata and Karakaya 2020, p. 94).

Finally, I would like to cite an interesting personal observation I had about the coup’s relation to religion. As an 11-year-old boy who had just started to study at a secondary school, on the day of the coup, namely 12 September 1980, I woke up in the morning to go to school and found out that there was a curfew order and therefore everybody had to stay at home. I still remember the broadcasting of calming and soothing music as well as Muslim hymns from state radios on that day.

The 1980 coup abolished the constitution imposed in 1961 by the junta following the 1960 coup. A new constitution was prepared under the surveillance of the new coup leaders and accepted by a referendum in 1982. However, as expected, the new constitution also continued the military tutelage in Turkish politics. One interesting example about a development that came shortly after this coup was in the field of religious instruction. In 1982, a course on religion called “Religious Culture and Ethics” was made compulsory for all the students (except for non-Muslims) in all schools, and this situation continued until 2014. The course, which was about primarily Islam and Muslim ethics, had previously been an elective course since 1948 (Yıldız 2009, p. 245).

### 3.4. The 1997 Coup and Aftermath

One last military intervention into the civilian rule occurred on 28 February 1997, and it was named as a “virtual coup” or “postmodern coup”. As a result, Premier Necmettin Erbakan, as the head of the democratically elected and formed coalition government, was obliged by the army on 18 June 1997 to resign, as he and some members of his party were accused of supporting *irtica*. On 28 February 1997, the National Security Council (MGK) dominated by generals issued their views about the situation in the country as well as what should be done regarding secularism and political Islam. The meeting held that day produced a memorandum (TİHEK 2022, pp. 19–21) that had around 20 “resolutions” about the problems and their solutions proposed by generals, and the Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan was obliged to sign the text. In fact, Item 2 in the memorandum openly stated the purpose of that meeting: to discuss and evaluate “subversive activities carried out in order to overthrow our democratic, secular and social state as well as republican regime whose bases and characteristics are defined in the Constitution and that are loyal to Kemalist nationalism and instead establish a religious political order”. (TİHEK 2022, pp. 19–20) And three of the four conclusions coming out of evaluations were exactly as follows:

1. Those groups that aim at founding an Islamic Republic based on sharia law in our country pose a many-sided threat against our democratic, secular and social state governed by the rule of law as stated in the constitution.
2. Extremist religious groups that are against the republic and the regime try to weaken the democratic, secular and social state governed by the rule of law by making [ab]use of the distinction between secular and anti-secular.
3. Secularism in Turkey is a safeguard of not only the regime but also democracy and social peace and is a way of life (TİHEK 2022, p. 20).

Here the last expression, namely secularism as a way of life or lifestyle, is very important and should be noted, because much of the coming debate on secularism in Turkey will concentrate on it.

As expected, the memorandum aimed at redesigning politics and society, and its resolutions ranged from censuring the press and media to interfering with Turkish foreign policy, but the focus was primarily on *irtica* and Kemalism (Atatürkçülük). Therefore, most of them were directly related to secularism (as perceived and understood by the establishment). According to the memorandum, the following steps would be taken against the extremist religious groups and their activities: the principle of secularism would be followed strictly; all the private schools and dormitories run by religious foundations or groups would be transferred to the Ministry of National Education; the 8-year compulsory education would be practiced in order to also cultivate “a consciousness among young generations about the ideal and goal of raising the Turkish Nation to the level of modern civilization”; some youth would be trained as enlightened imams and preachers who would be loyal to the republican regime as well as Atatürk’s principles and reforms; all the activities of Sufi convents would be ended; some media groups would be kept under control, as they tried to show the army as being against Islam due to the dismissal of some military staff on the grounds of *irtica* activities; the rules and measures applied by the army to prevent infiltration of religious extremists would also be applied in all other public institutions, universities and all other educational institutions, and at every level of bureaucracy and the judiciary; the threat of *irtica* coming from abroad would be prevented and necessary precautions and measures would be taken against the Islamic Republic of Iran in order to protect the country; provocative sectarian activities would be prevented; those practices that were against the Law on Clothing Reform and were directing Turkey towards “a non-modern (*çağdışı*) image” would be prevented, especially in public institutions.

One might suggest that there were some events that were used as a pretext for the staging of this coup and were seen by its leaders as provocations. To cite only a few examples, like in the previous coup, some of the activities of Necmettin Erbakan's party drew attention. Sincan municipality in Ankara, whose mayor was from this party, organized an event called Jerusalem Night as a protest against Israeli human rights violations in Palestine. Allegedly, in the building where the event took place, there were also posters of Hamas and Hezbollah. As a reaction to this, tanks moved on the streets of Sincan on the 4th of February, and this was named by a coup leader named Çevik Bir as "a balance adjustment to democracy". Another openly provocative event was that a newly appeared Sufi group called Aczimendis, headed by an obscure person called Müslüm Gündüz, staged a public demonstration in October 1996 where they performed Sufi rituals and asked for the application of shariah in the country. In this event held in Ankara, members of the group with long beards, black cloaks, and turbans and scepters looked like they popped out of nowhere from medieval times. There is a widespread belief among the Turkish people that the leader of this group was recruited by the secret service of the state or military (Opçin 2018). The same is said about another leader of a so-called radical religious group, Ali Kalkancı, who admitted that as his business went bankrupt he borrowed money from a general called Veli Küçük and did whatever he wanted (Haber7 2009). In brief, one can perhaps suggest that there were some obscure aspects about those who dared to openly advocate shariah rule in a Jacobinist secular country.

Nearly one year after the coup, Erbakan's Welfare Party (Refah Partisi) was closed down by the Constitutional Court on 16 January 1998 for violating national sovereignty and sheltering *irtica* activities by acting against the democratic and secular principles of the republic. One such alleged *irtica* activity was the party's declaration that female students should be able to wear their headcovers inside university campuses, as is done in most parts of the world, including almost all Western countries. According to those lawyers who decided about the closure of the party, the party's open support for women's demand to freely wear their headcovers while pursuing their higher education was sufficient evidence for its being against secularism, which justified the closure of the party (Resmî Gazete 1998, p. 19ff). Then, Erbakan was banned from politics for five years. Former members of the parliament and mayors of his party joined the successor, the Virtue Party (Fazilet Partisi). In 1998, Istanbul mayor Recep Tayyip Erdoğan from the Virtue Party was given a prison sentence and banned from politics for five years after he recited at a public function (a previously distorted version of (Bardakçı 2002)) a poem by Ziya Gökalp (1876–1924), who is considered a leading theoretician of Turkish nationalism. Erdoğan was convicted for inciting religious hatred, since the poem compared mosques to barracks and the faithful to an army.

In addition to designing the political arena, the junta started a total war on *irtica* in many fields, which often took the form of a "witch hunt". The army was no exception and hundreds of military personnel were expelled from the army or forced to retire immediately, simply because they were found to be religious or spotted performing Islamic prayers or because their wives wore headscarves (Kaya 2018). In the fields of economy, those companies that did not support the coup were blacklisted and labeled as Yeşil Sermaye (Green Capital, "green" referring to Islam). These newly flourishing domestic companies were blamed for having alleged Islamist agendas. In fact, as Özdemir (2008, p. 1359) suggests, perhaps they were a threat not for the regime but for the (domestic and international) big capital that had their privileges, a sort of monopoly in various fields and naturally a big share in the economy of the country.

Another target of the military junta was the religious vocational high schools called İmam Hatip Liseleri. These schools, which were first opened in 1924 in order to train men

of religion loyal to the republic, taught courses on religion in addition to the “secular” courses taught in other schools. But it seems that this objective had not been met, and a contrary development occurred. So, the reason for the junta’s targeting them was that they believed them to be breeding grounds for *irtica*. Therefore, several pressures, limitations, and obstacles were created for those who study there. One of them was the attempt to block their entry into university faculties other than faculties of divinity by reducing those students’ coefficients at the university entrance examinations held nationwide once a year (Çakır 2024). This is another striking example for a mentality that sees education as an ideological tool used for social engineering.

Yet in the war on *irtica*, the junta’s main target was women. It seemed that women who wore headscarves were an unbearable sight for the hardcore Kemalists, be they generals in the army or bureaucrats in the judiciary. Thus, the biggest battle in the war on *irtica* was apparently fought over headscarves. Firstly, women wearing headscarves were not permitted to work in any government offices, including schools and universities. Those who had been doing that had to remove their headscarves or would simply lose their jobs. Therefore, for instance, in 1997–2001 around 11,000 teachers resigned, while 3527 teachers were removed from office. Furthermore, there were disciplinary investigation of 33,271 teachers (Arkan 2019). Secondly, female students with headscarves were prohibited to enter university campuses. Therefore, millions of them could not attend their classes and examinations and failed in their courses. They had to remove their headscarves before entering campuses or face the consequences. That is why millions of young women had to give up their education or go abroad to cities like Vienna and Sarajevo to pursue university education. As some campuses became like military camps, Istanbul University prepared “persuasion rooms” for newly enrolled students, where some persons tried to “persuade” headscarf-wearing students to remove their headscarves. In those rooms, there was usually a psychologist, a cameraman, and a camerawoman, and the student was pressurized to accept removing her headscarf and sign a paper to show that she accepted it voluntarily. Due to the headscarf ban, some female students wore wigs or hats in order to be able to enter the campuses, but after a while, wigs and hats too were banned (Rakipoğlu 2021; Özer 2015). Thirdly, the headscarf ban was extended even to the parliament. Merve Kavakçı, who was elected as a member of the parliament from Istanbul, entered the parliament hall on 2 May 1999 to take her oath of office at the swearing-in ceremony, but she was prevented from doing so by the members of the Democratic Left Party, since she wore a headscarf (Bek and Kara 2022, p. 99). She was then expelled from the hall. In a short time, she lost her parliament membership and even Turkish citizenship, as it was discovered after the elections that she had not reported to the Turkish authorities her acquisition of American citizenship.

In brief, for the junta this last coup was not a temporary intervention into politics but the beginning of a permanent process which would put and keep the country on track. Thus, one general, Hüseyin Kıvrıkoğlu, claimed that “28 February will last 1000 years” (Daily Sabah 2021), implying a sort of “permanent revolution”, but this appeared to be just wishful thinking, as only five years later, the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) (AK Party) chaired by Erdoğan came to power in democratic elections held in 2002, and Erdoğan has been in power for more than two decades until today. Moreover, Erdoğan’s party has carried out various reforms to end the military tutelage in Turkish politics, yet this coup too is remembered as another disgrace to Turkish democracy (Pinar 2024).

#### 4. Erdoğan’s Rise to Power and His Odyssey of Secularism (2003–2013)

In the general elections held on 3 November 2002, the AK Party had a sweeping victory and came to power alone. On 15 March 2003, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan became the leader

of the party, and both have remained in power so far. From 2003 to 2014, Erdoğan was the prime minister, and since 2014, he has been the president of the country. While the previous presidents were elected by the members of the parliament, Erdoğan was elected as the president directly by the people in three consecutive elections.

Erdoğan was now in power but was not so powerful. The secularist establishment that saw in themselves the authority to interfere with everything that might be related to secularism or modernity, ranging from education to foreign policy, was intact and in full control in spite of the recent economic crisis caused by the government they brought to power without elections and supported. In addition, the ever-present threat of a military coup was standing like a sword of Damocles over Erdoğan. In fact, another attempt at a military intervention into politics came in 2007 in the form of a military statement called the E-Memorandum or 27 April Memorandum. It was posted on the website of the general staff before the election of the next president. From the academic perspective, the text was quite nonsensical and repeated the usual and worn-out clichés about issues like secularism and modernity. Although it complained about some practices that the army saw were against secularism, the main purpose of the memorandum was the prevention of the nomination of a (religious) candidate from AK Party who could be the next president. One finds out that again an obsession common among the hardcore secularists of Turkey was put on the agenda one year before the presidential election, and this time, “the problem” was about the clothing of the prospective first lady: “the wife of the president cannot wear a headscarf” (Şahin 2022). The text of the memorandum had a quite intimidating and overbearing style, as the following sentences show obviously: “One should not forget that the Turkish Armed Forces are a party in these debates and an unquestionable defender of secularism. Besides, they are against the ongoing debates and negative comments and when needed, will display their attitudes and reactions very clearly. Nobody should have any doubt about it” (Büyükanıt 2007). However, this time the AK Party’s reaction to prospective junta members was unexpected and unusual. In his calm and decisive reply the next day, government spokesman Cemil Çiçek reminded everyone that the general staff is attached to the government and under its command and that the Chief of the General Staff is accountable to the prime minister Erdoğan. The speech had a tone of a rebuke and even mentioned that “some ill-intentioned people” tried to pit the army against the government (Haberdessin 2012) (although the memorandum was penned and signed by the Chief of General Staff himself). Similar reactions came from abroad too. For instance, EU Enlargement Commissioner Olli Rehn stated that the military should not interfere with the electoral process and that it should show its respect for “democratic secularization and democratic values” (BBC News 2007). A similar statement was made by Condoleezza Rice, the US Secretary of State (NTV 2011a).

The headscarf ban was put into effect in 1982 (after the 1980 coup) and carried out radically and strictly following the 1997 coup. Erdoğan’s party could dare to challenge it only more than five years after it came to power. Thus, in February 2008 the Turkish parliament approved a constitutional amendment that ended the prohibition on headscarves at universities to ensure that all women have access to university education. Nevertheless, on 5 June 2008 the Constitutional Court, finding the proposed amendment to be against official secularism, annulled it, and the verdict could not be appealed. The Justice and Development Party tried to lift the ban at universities again in 2010. But the success came only after the military tutelage was ended in 2013, which I will briefly mention below. On 8 October 2013, a bylaw abolished the headscarf ban at universities and many government offices, unless a uniform was required, like in the judiciary, police, and military (Euronews 2013). The ban in high schools ended in 2014 (News24 2014). The lift on the ban extended to the judiciary in 2015 and to the Turkish police in 2016 (BBC News Türkçe 2016). Finally,

in 2017, the Ministry of Defense permitted women in the armed forces to wear headscarves with their uniforms (Sengupta 2017). In brief, Erdoğan's party managed to solve "the headscarf problem" after many years of struggle against the Jacobinist secularist elite. In fact, I agree with Toprak and Uslu (2009, p. 43) who state that "[t]here is no headscarf problem in Turkey in a sociological sense, the real problem lies in the totalitarian/authoritarian approach which stems from groundless fears and/or ideological choices of the social elite or economic power centers".

In addition to running the country, Erdoğan made some symbolic changes too. One of them was changing the seating arrangement at the National Security Council. At the meeting on 18 August 2011, headed by President Abdullah Gül (from Erdoğan's party), premier Erdoğan, some of his cabinet ministers, and various generals sat at the table in a mixed way and according to the protocol order. Until that day, civilians had sat on one side of the long table and generals on the other. This sitting order had given the impression of the existence of "two different sides" in meetings (Anadolu Ajansı 2011). This symbolic change gave signs of coming deeper changes regarding the status of army generals, whose military tutelage determined what secularism was and how it must be practiced.

In the same year, some very surprising words about secularism were heard from Erdoğan, when he visited Egypt as the Premier of Turkey in September 2011 after the collapse of the Hosni Mubarak (1928–2020) regime there. He recommended openly a new secular state system for Egypt and even received a negative reaction from the Egyptian Islamist group, the Muslim Brethren, that in general saw him as a Muslim political hero (NTV 2011b). At an interview given to the Dream TV channel, he expressed the following views:

I do not accept secularism (*laiklik*) as irreligion. I do not accept it as anti-religion. In my party program secularism is defined as follows: Not the person, but the state is secular. A Muslim might be head of a state, but the state he governs should keep the same distance to all faith groups, be them Muslims, Christians, Jews and atheists. And the faiths of all faith groups are under the guarantee of that state. (Haberler.com 2016)

In short, Erdoğan sees secularism as a political system where people enjoy their freedoms of religion and thought, and the state is neutral and protects those freedoms. Erdoğan reiterated this view in 2016, when the head of the parliament İsmail Kahraman (from his party) suggested that the principle of secularism should not have a place in the new constitution, although he later stated that his comments were "personal views" and that the new constitution would guarantee religious freedoms. As a reply to Kahraman's initial suggestion, he reminded him and the people about the importance of his speech given in Egypt in 2011 (Haberler.com 2016).

The AK Party's final blow to military tutelage came a decade after Erdoğan rose to power. The notion that the army was the guardian of the republic came from Atatürk's era. Article 1 of the Army's Internal Service Law made in June 1935 stated that "soldiery is the duty of learning and carrying out warcraft to protect Turkish homeland, independence and republic". Likewise, Article 34 of the same law read as follows: "The duty of the army is to protect and guard the Turkish homeland and the Turkish Republic defined in the constitution" (Resmî Gazete 1935). While the former mentioned protection only, the latter mentioned both protection and guarding. Guarding naturally included monitoring and overseeing and involved "oppression and hegemony" (Çelik 2019). Thus, the army was made the guardian of the regime and political order, and in every military intervention into politics, the generals cited these items in the Internal Law as an alleged legal basis for their actions, although the constitution did not delegate such a power to the army at all. Therefore, the AK Party decided to put an end to the military tutelage by amending the relevant items in the internal law of the army (Anadolu Ajansı 2013). Thus, in the last

version of the internal law made in 1961 (following the 1960 coup), the relevant article (Article 35) was amended on 13 July 2013. The new version of that article is as follows: “The duty of the Armed Forces is to defend the Turkish homeland against the threats and dangers coming from abroad, provide the maintenance and strengthening of military power as a deterrence, perform duties abroad as given by the decision of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey and contribute to international peace” ([Resmî Gazete 1961](#)). As one clearly sees, all the aspects of the duty are related to activities abroad, and nothing is mentioned about protecting the republic, regime, secularism, or Kemalism against domestic or foreign enemies. Consequently, with this legal amendment, the army was no longer “the guardian of the republic” that would overthrow governments and design the politics, people, and country, whenever the secularist elite deemed them necessary.

## 5. Erdoğan’s Consolidation of Power as a Secular Muslim Leader (Since 2013)

Annihilation of the possible legal pretexts for future military coups did not guarantee that the country would be always free from them. In July 2016 came another coup attempt by some generals. Erdoğan resisted it and gave a short live video speech via cellphone, which was broadcasted by the TV channel CNN Türk. He affirmed that he would resist the coup attempt and invited the people to go to the streets to react against it. Millions of people did it in many cities that evening, and more than 250 people were shot dead by the coup forces, while the coup was crushed the next morning. The coup memorandum which was read that evening on the state television channel TRT focused on corruption, human rights violations, and terrorist attacks and accused Erdoğan of annihilating “the secular and democratic rule of law” ([Yeni Şafak 2017](#)). So, the leaders of this coup too were complaining about the erosion of secularism in the country. However, it was ironic that the coup was carried out by generals who were the disciples of a cleric, F. Gülen (1941–2024), who was the spiritual leader of a religious cult and lived in Pennsylvania, USA (from 1999 until his death in 2024) under CIA support and protection.

Erdoğan government’s struggle against military tutelage included the trial, conviction, and punishment of all the coup plotters. This started with the perpetrators of the 1980 coup. General Kenan Evren, who later became the president of the country, and General Tahsin Şahinkaya, former Commander of the Turkish Air Force, were sued for their role in the coup. Both were given life imprisonment on 18 June 2014 by a court in Ankara ([Yazıcıoğlu 2014](#)). In addition, both were demoted to the lowest rank of private ([Evrensel 2014](#)). Similarly, many plotters of the 1997 coup also faced a similar fate. They were “sentenced on charges of attempting to overthrow legitimate government through use of force”. Some were not arrested due to old age and health problems. Many were given life imprisonment and spent some years in prison ([Daily Sabah 2018](#)). Relatives of the mighty and arrogant generals of the coup times now began begging Erdoğan for a presidential pardon due to alleged health problems and the old age of the prison inmates. Recently, Erdoğan pardoned the rest of their punishments on the ground of the inmates’ chronic illnesses and senility ([BBC News Türkçe 2024](#)).

Was there a change in Erdoğan’s views about secularism after Turkey ended military tutelage legally and the threat of coups decreased drastically, especially following the people’s physical resistance on the streets against coup plotters in July 2016? Could Erdoğan now proceed with his alleged “hidden Islamist agenda” as many secularists in Turkey often claimed? I will now examine this matter by analyzing Erdoğan’s use of “secular” (*laik*) and “secularism” (*laiklik*) in all the speeches he made in a decade, starting with his presidential inauguration speech on 28 August 2014. These speeches were made at home and abroad on different platforms, ranging from factory openings at home to UN speeches in New

York. Their texts (in Turkish) are found on the official website of the presidency. I have gone through all the speeches, which number more than 1700 (as of the 13 February 2025). In addition, I have also examined all his articles that were published in foreign newspapers and journals between 2017 and 2022, as well as all his interviews between 2015 and 2023. Likewise, their Turkish versions are all found on the same website. Unfortunately, there was no opportunity to do the same for the previous period (2003–2014) when Erdoğan was the prime minister of Turkey, because there is no similar website containing similar material, as I was informed by the Office of the Private Secretary of the Presidency.

According to Erdoğan, secularism should be evaluated within the sociological structure of the country and, from an administrative perspective, take its place within a hierarchy of values. As it is already clearly stated in the constitution, Turkey has “a democratic, secular and social rule of law”. Previous hardcore secularists put secularism on top and neglected or even ignored democracy and did not care at all about sociological facts (Erdoğan 2015b). Thus, Erdoğan states that secularism (as they understood it) cannot be the foremost and top value of a country or regime. In a speech he made in 2015 during his visit to the command headquarters of the Turkish War Academies, Erdoğan reasserted that they would never compromise the principles of the democratic, secular, and social rule of law, in spite of all the problems the country experienced in past decades. He said that “Turkey will never go back from secularism that is the safeguard of its citizens’ freedom of faith”. (Erdoğan 2015a). On another occasion, he expressed that they belonged to a tradition that sees justice as the basis of the political power and preached that “the religion of the state is justice” (Erdoğan 2022c).

Erdoğan believed that secularism was widely abused in Turkey. For him, Turkey’s weaknesses with respect to modern sciences and technologies were not due to the nation’s incapability nor to the country’s inadequacy. Turkey was kept outside scientific and technological processes and advancement by use of various political, social, and economic tools in different eras. “One-party fascism” (that is, CHP rule between 1923 and 1950) was one of them. Coups and military tutelage were other tools. Terror was another tool. Yet another tool was the polarizations created under dichotomies like right–left, Alevi–Sunni, Turkish–Kurdish, and religious–secular (Erdoğan 2021b). Thus, we see that secularism as propagated by the establishment was mainly a tool for their self-interests, as they divided the country into parts like progressive versus backward or secular versus anti-secular (Erdoğan 2015c). Here, Erdoğan implies that the self-interest of the establishment often coincided with the interests of some (Western) powers that wanted to keep Turkey weak, divided, controlled, and dependent.

According to Erdoğan, in times when the national will was suspended, the establishment saw some of the citizens as a source of threat. The authorities busied themselves with people’s outward appearances, clothing, women’s headscarves, and even men’s (long) hair and beards. They divided people as secular versus anti-secular and modern versus backward and stigmatized those whom they saw negatively. Millions of citizens were marginalized and otherized and experienced injustice, just because they wanted to practice their religion freely or spoke their mother tongues (i.e., Kurdish). The cost of all these was paid by the democracy, state, and nation (Erdoğan 2024). We learn from Erdoğan that even he became a victim of hardcore secularists’ paranoid obsession with beards. Following the 1980 coup, a colonel became the head of a section of the Istanbul Municipality. He immediately prohibited the growing of beards. Erdoğan, who worked there and had a beard at that time, had to resign, as he refused to shave his beard (Erdoğan 2019). For Erdoğan, women in Turkey experienced the most discrimination in the years following the 1997 coup when the elite marginalized and otherized people by yelling slogans like “modernity, secularism, *irtica*”. The alienated elite carried out their fight against the values,

faith, history, and culture of the nation through the clothing preferences of men and women (Erdoğan 2022b).

But who were the establishment and the elite? For Erdoğan, they were the many members of the bureaucratic oligarchy and the powerful capitalists that used the army, media, and also non-governmental organizations (i.e., so-called organizations of “civil society”). The bureaucratic oligarchy included the military and the judiciary as well. Erdoğan believed that he and his party “reestablished the sovereignty of the national will in Turkey by strengthening civilian politics, making bureaucratic oligarchy regress and widening [the spheres of] rights and freedoms” (Erdoğan 2021a).

Here, one might ask the following question: if Erdoğan is a sincere secular, then why has he been carrying out policies which look like Islamization of the country? For instance, why does he insist on opening more and more new semi-religious İmam Hatip Schools (that was criticized even by some of his followers)? Firstly, Erdoğan was a graduate of one of these schools, and he has a high opinion of them. Secondly, he probably thinks that there is a strong correlation between religion and ethics. Therefore, for him this is a justification of raising a “religious generation”. Thirdly, his emphasis on “religious values” can be compared to that of Christian democrat parties in Europe and elsewhere. For example, the very first item of the party constitution of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) in Germany states that it “wants to democratically shape public life in the service of the German people and the German fatherland *out of Christian responsibility and according to the Christian moral law on the basis of personal freedom*” (emphases are mine) (CDU 2024, p. 5). If this is usually not considered against secularism, then why should Erdoğan’s emphasis on religious values be against secularism? The difference probably stems from seeing the Turkish case from an orientalist perspective. Fourthly, one should not forget that millions of religious people in the country vote for Erdoğan’s party and form its political base. Finally, as Eroler (2019) does, one might perhaps also see the project as a republican legacy of social engineering for nation and citizen building and relate it to neo-liberalism as well.

A similar objection might be expressed by the sceptics of Erdoğan’s secularism. For them, many of Erdoğan’s symbolic moves reflect a sort of Islamization. In fact, most of those actions would probably be used as “evidences” for Erdoğan’s intentions to undermine secularism and bring shariah to Turkey, if the bureaucratic oligarchy had still kept its former power. As far as I observe, it is true that Erdoğan gives much importance to symbolic actions as well as political myths and imagination, as he is aware of their significant role in politics. For example, in 2014 Erdoğan moved to the newly built Presidential Complex from Çankaya Köşkü (Mansion) that had been used as a residence by presidents since 1923. For him, the new complex (which was initially called the Presidential Palace) better represented the glory of the new Turkey that was developed by his party and had nothing to do with changing the regime. To give another example, Merve Kavakçı, who was kicked out from the parliament because of her headscarf in 1999, was given back her Turkish citizenship in 2017 and was appointed as an ambassador to Kuala Lumpur in the same year (Erkuş 2017). This was obviously a restoration of honor for her as well as a symbolic reaction to hardcore secularists who in the past interfered with people’s clothing and even facial hair.

Still another example for a symbolic move is the case of Taksim Mosque. Since the 1950s, it had been one of the fiercest battles of hardcore secularists in Turkey to not allow the construction of a mosque near Taksim Square in Istanbul in spite of a real need for it, although there were various churches and cathedrals nearby. It looked like they saw the square as a sacred place of their own faith and displayed an aggressive reaction against any plan or attempt to erect a mosque there. But eventually, Erdoğan opened in 2021 the Taksim Mosque built by the square. He called it the realization of a “150 year old dream” (as there were plans to build a mosque there after Ottoman–Russian War of 1877–1878) (Erdoğan

2021c). From the speech he made at the opening ceremony, one gathers that Erdoğan saw the event not as a jihadist triumph, but as a political victory against those who had abused secularism by interpreting it as anti-religion.

The final example I will discuss as another symbolic move by Erdoğan had international impact as well. On 24 July 2020, Ayasofya (Hagia Sophia) Museum was reopened as a mosque after 86 years. Although it had served as a mosque since 1453, it was closed for restoration works in the 1930s and was converted officially to a museum in late 1934. However, in July 2020 the State Council ruled the 1934 decree to be unlawful under both Ottoman and Turkish law. Hagia Sophia, was considered the personal property of the sultan Mehmed II, who endowed it as a *waqf* and designated the site a mosque. For Erdoğan, the new change was the restoration of the law about the site as well as Turkey's use of her rights of sovereignty. It concerned only Turkey's internal law and historical rights, although he referred to the site as "the common legacy of humanity" (Erdoğan 2020).

In fact, there was something very interesting about this symbolic move, since Erdoğan was against the conversion of Ayasofya Museum into a mosque just a year before. In March 2019, he said that there was a political dimension to it and that it was a trap, although he then added that they knew when and how to do it (Öz 2020). According to him, the reversal of Hagia Sophia to a mosque involved a heavy cost to pay, which he could not disclose in public. Then, he said that the cost would involve thousands of mosques all over the world, some of which became victims of arson from time to time. He reiterated that as a responsible political leader he would not fall into that trap (Cumhuriyet 2020). One can say that he was afraid of attempting to reopen the museum as a mosque mainly due to its political costs. If so, why did he proceed with legal and administrative affairs to enable the conversion just one year later? My personal guess is that "the deep state" with which he was in contact directly and also through his coalition partner Devlet Bahçeli, head of the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), asked him to start with the change. The main reason I mention this mere guess of mine (with no evidence) is that other factors cannot explain the fast change in Erdoğan's attitude regarding Ayasofya's status. The second reason is that Erdoğan's symbolic moves (including this seemingly most glorious one) that look like Islamist policies to secularists are actually results of well-calculated political moves as well as occasions of political victory against the old regime.

Before proceeding to the conclusions, I would like to point out a few observations regarding the current scenery of secularism in Erdoğan's Turkey. Today, perhaps the country looks in many aspects more Islamic than it was a few decades ago, but is it really the case? First, there are various studies that suggest a widespread secularization of the youth in the country both among the Sunnites (Ertit 2015) and Alevites (Ertit 2017). Some other studies claim that Erdoğan's project of "raising a religious generation" has failed (Gültekin 2020). Second, White (2012) draws attention to "how Turkish national identity and the meanings of Islam and secularism have undergone radical changes in today's Turkey" and "how Muslim nationalists blur the line between the secular and the Islamic". As White (2014, p. 356) noted nearly a decade ago, "Muslim and Turkish identities have been transformed to such an extent that it is nearly impossible to assign people to one end or the other of a secular-Islamist divide" and this is more so for many young people who "have heterogeneous identities, composed of seemingly contradictory positions and affiliations". Furthermore, as White (2014, p. 358) notes, both the so-called secular and the pious youth now have similar lifestyles and aspirations. Third, there are confusing pictures with respect to the adventure of secularism in Turkey. For instance, it has become fashionable for some young women with headscarves to have their photos taken at Anıtkabir, i.e., Atatürk's mausoleum, which is perhaps the most sacred place for the hardcore secularists (MedyaTava 2024). In the past, not to visit Anıtkabir was seen by them

as a sure sign of one's clear opposition to the secular republic. Finally, as [Haenni \(2011\)](#) suggests, under the shadow of traditional Islamism, a new political Islam has appeared in Muslim geography, primarily in countries like Egypt, Turkey, and Indonesia. This "market Islam" is a product of an eclectic consensus with Western values and far from the long-awaited "Muslim Enlightenment". Under the ownership of a new urban bourgeoisie, these new conservatives lead a life of a "virtue axis" formed around the religion, ethics, charity, and market.

## 6. Conclusions

For a long time, secularism in Turkey meant in practice the control and regulation of religion (primarily Islam as the religion of the vast majority) by "the state", i.e., the establishment or bureaucratic elites. This naturally led to a tension between the secularist elite, whose alleged aim was modernizing the society through education and indoctrination, and the people who wanted to enjoy their democratic rights, including following their religion as they understood and practiced it. The people, of course, included also the political opposition ranging from so-called Islamists, conservatives, and traditionalists to some of the nationalists. Even atheists and some others were part of this tension created by secularists, because they were not spared by the civil religion of the hardcore secularists and, for instance, could not have "atheist", "Shamanist", or "Buddhist" written on their identity cards, which in the past had a section on a person's religion. This human rights violation was not unexpected, as the secularist bureaucratic elite in Turkey always emphasized the republic, but not democracy, as republics do not necessarily require the existence of a democracy, as the examples of dictatorial regimes like the People's Republic of China, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, and the Islamic Republic of Iran show. This is also noted by [Yavuz \(2000b\)](#), p. 34), who maintains the following: "Kemalism has been superficially Western in form while remaining rigidly authoritarian and dogmatic in substance. It continues to stress republicanism over democracy, homogeneity over difference, the military over the civilian, and the state over society." Therefore, the Kemalist elite idealized and sacralized republic and portrayed it as the door to national salvation. Naturally, as the high priests of the republic, under the shadow of the savior Atatürk and through the guidance of a positivist and Jacobinist spirit, only they knew what was good for the people and only they could define what was modern (and backward (*irtica*)) and secular. This was so during the eras of one-party dictatorship as well as military tutelage. Kemalist elitism that advocated an enlightened despotism sacralized secularism and made it into a kind of secular political religion ([Karakuş 2018](#)). As [White \(2012\)](#), p. 182) states, secular Kemalism "has become sacralized to the extent that it has taken on elements of religion, replete with veneration of Atatürk's image, mystical appearances, rituals of worship, and assertions of truth taken on faith".

In fact, Kemalist secularism was not a secularism at all. The state monitored, regulated, and controlled religions and religious practices officially under the Directorate of Religious Affairs. Furthermore, it allowed or favored only a sort of Islam (Sunni and Hanafid) and marginalized or rejected others. Thus, non-Muslim faiths like Christianity and Judaism were not represented at the directorate, nor did they receive much financial and administrative support from the state. Moreover, secularism was used as a powerful ideological tool in support of political power enjoyed by the establishment and in blaming opponents for blasphemy against the secular faith. I should state that except for the last one, the situation is still the same in Turkey, as the state control of religion and its favoring of Sunni Islam and Hanafism continue.

In the last two decades, Erdoğan and his party have decisively changed not only the political atmosphere, but also the political language in Turkey. I observe that especially

in the last decade the political language of many political parties and actors has begun to become similar to that of Erdoğan and his party. Just as I do, Yavuz too observes that the secularists are increasingly “using Islamic discourse to defend their secular identities and ideas”. According to him, one witnesses a “gradual blending of religious and secular languages and practices”. Thus, a “new form of political language is evolving. This new language is neither secular nor Islamist; it is syncretic and creole” (Yavuz 2009, p. 279). Thus, for instance, *irtica* is now hardly heard and instead, perhaps in line with the international tendency, the word Islamist (*İslamcı*) is used by secularists and others. Atatürk and Atatürkçülük (Kemalism) are mentioned much less and often in a different sense. They are not seen any more by the majority of the people and politicians as a sacred and unquestionable person and an ideology. Erdoğan too often talks positively about Atatürk and his contributions to modern Turkey, yet does not see him as an unquestionable super-human personality. In short, the political theology of Kemalism is already dead in spite of the survival of some of its political rituals, like the country-wide practice of a moment of silence every year at 09:05 on 10 November to commemorate the death of Atatürk. The terms secularism and modernity (*çağdaşlık*) are also not used in Turkey that much any longer. During the years he spent in power, Erdoğan has managed to remove secularism and modernity from their positions as the dominant concepts of Turkish politics. Today, even the CHP does not mention them that much, but instead uses religious terminology more. In brief, Erdoğan has disarmed the Kemalist elite both physically and metaphorically, that is, verbally.

According to my observation and evaluation, in his political career and struggle Erdoğan moved from a predominantly Islamist discourse to an advocacy of civil religion. I believe that there was a shift in his thought which was also supported by realpolitik due to domestic requirements and international economic and political changes. While Erdoğan still sometimes makes use of an Islamist rhetoric, his focus in recent years has been more on various secular–sacred items of civil religion, like homeland, nation (as a chosen people), national flag, (sacralized), state, and, additionally, national development. His famous formula “one nation, one flag, one homeland, one state”, which he expresses from time to time, shows this clearly. Unlike in the past, Erdoğan often resorts to nationalist discourse and imagery, while he asserts that his nationalism is not an ethnic one. For him, all the people living in Turkey, be they Turks, Kurds, Arabs, Circassians, or Georgians, without regard to their ethnic origins, are of the same nation (Erdoğan 2022a). In addition, starting in 2016, active support of Devlet Bahçeli’s Nationalist Movement Party to the AK Party in crucial moments accelerated Erdoğan’s shift to civil religion and nationalist discourses. Bahçeli’s party supported the AK Party in the passage to the presidential system and the referendum on constitutional change. Furthermore, it formed a political alliance and later a coalition government with the AK Party. International developments too, like the formation of the Organization of Turkic States, fed and was fed by Turkish nationalism. I suggest that Erdoğan’s transition to civil religion also represents a shift to secularism, as modern civil religions make use of, subordinate, and also often undermine established religions to a great extent and create their own secular sacredness (Çaksu 2012). Finally, Erdoğan’s open advocacy of secularism and the recommendation of it to other Muslim countries makes his secularism obvious and the claims about his alleged “hidden Islamist agenda” invalid.

To conclude, Erdoğan, his friends, and tens of millions of people carried out in Turkey a transition from a French version of secularism (*laïcité*) marked by an aversion to religion to an Anglo-Saxon version of secularism which celebrates religious freedom and does not have a problem with public visibility of religions, including religious symbols in public spaces. Seen and expressed from another perspective, “*laiklik* has been slowly, subtly, but significantly shifting in the direction of a “passive secular” type of state-religion relation”

(Warhola and Bezci 2010, p. 453). So, the people in Turkey now try to adapt to this new type of secularism, and the political system is in search of a reconciliation of Islamic culture with the contemporary world. In this context, there are official and academic attempts to create what I call a sort of “northern Islam” with two pillars. The first one is an attempt to revitalize and reproduce Maturidism, a Sunni school of theology that gives more weight to human freedom and rationality and theological rationalism and was once influential from Uyghuristan to Bosnia (i.e., in northern Muslim lands), as opposed to Ash’arism, another Sunni school of theology, that was seen as more traditionalist and literalist and has spread all over the Muslim lands (even to those that previously followed Maturidism). The second pillar is Yasawism, a Sufi school that originated in Turkestan and spread to the Balkans. I believe that this project of “northern Islam” too is part of a secular nationalist project which aims at promoting Turkey in Eurasia and Africa as a regional superpower. As White (2012, p. 188) notes, for Muslim nationalists the imagined and ideal future “is of regional Turkish-led economic and political unions, not an Islamic *umma* in which Turkey will take equal place beside other Muslim nations”. Here, one should note that both Imam Maturidi (863–944) and Ahmad Yasawi (1093–1166) came from predominantly Turkic regions, a fact that might support my view. We should also note that as Karakuş states, even some theoreticians and politicians among the secularist republican elite preferred in the past the Hanafid–Maturidi line due to its alleged rationalism and emphasis on human freedom. For instance, Kemal Atatürk asked scholar Elmalılı Hamdi Yazır (1878–1942) to follow the Hanafid–Maturidi method while translating the Qur’an to Turkish (Karakuş 2018, p. 255). This attempt to create a “northern Islam” might also be seen as part of a discourse in civilizational populism that displays “how Islam and nationalism are socially and politically coded as friendly categories” (Bacık and Şeker 2023, p. 394) in Turkey. However, there is also another rationalist development in Turkey in a different direction. For instance, some modern Turkish theologians, like Hüseyin Atay (1930–2023), Yaşar Nuri Öztürk (1951–2016), and İsrail Balcı, have challenged mainstream Sunni understanding of Islam. Bacık (2023) labels them as “rationalist” rather than “reformist” and suggests that their theology is inherently anti-establishment and thus presents a religiously oriented challenge to the hegemony of the state-sanctioned Islam. I believe that one needs to wait only one or two decades to see in what direction Islamic thought and culture in Turkey will mainly proceed.

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