Not a “slip of the tongue”: only one religion is recognised as the basis of the Turkish state

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By Halil M. Karaveli

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdo?an recently expressed allegiance to "one nation, one flag, one religion, one state." Indeed, the Turkish republic recognizes only "one religion", Sunni Islam, as the basis of the nation. Erdo?an is nonetheless anxious to preserve the image that he has successfully cultivated as the benefactor of the numerically insignificant non-Muslim minorities in Turkey. What the ruling Sunni conservatives have much greater difficulty in reconciling themselves to, is that Turkey, although nominally "99 percent Muslim" is far from being homogenously Sunni Muslim.

Background

The emphasis on religion has become more pronounced in recent statements by Prime Minister Erdo?an; his vow that "we are going to raise pious generations" has stoked fears that the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), is indeed bent on imposing a religious and culturally conservative order on society. The subsequent introduction of new, religious courses in the school curriculum – even though the new courses, about the life of the Prophet Muhammad and the Quran, respectively, are going to be elective – has nonetheless contributed to sustaining the impression of a conservative drift. Then followed a statement by Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Ar?nç; he warned the producers of television series that contents that run counter to the moral values of society are "straining the limits of our tolerance". It is against this backdrop that two recent speeches by Prime Minister Erdo?an have provoked alarm among religious minorities in Turkey.

Speaking at a local AKP convention in the city of Kahramanmara?on May 4, Erdo?an expressed allegiance to "one nation, one flag, one religion, one state". It was the inclusion of religion that set Erdo?an's enumeration apart from the conventional nationalist catch-phrase. The next day, May 5, speaking before another AKP convention, in the city of Adana, Erdo?an doubled down, further emphasizing that the AKP has four "red lines". He reiterated that "one nation", and "one flag" were two of these; "The third one is one religion. Not language – religion, religion. That is what we have said."

Erdo?an had taken care to make the same distinction – between din, religion in Turkish, and dil, language – in his speech on May 4, when he underlined that the AKP had never talked about "one language". His message was that religious unity is what matters, while linguistic unity is not something that the AKP insists on enforcing. Erdo?an's speeches suggest that the prime minister is preparing the ground for an introduction of Kurdish as a language of education, the principal demand of the Kurds. However, it was not that message that caught public attention. The reference to "one religion", with the implication of religious homogeneity, drew sharp criticism from some secularists, liberals, and not least from several representatives of the religious minorities – Greek Orthodox, Armenians, as well as from Alevis, the heterodox Muslim minority. Laki Vingas, the spokesperson of the Greek Orthodox community, expressed his astonishment and inquired how the prime minister could say such a thing; "in that case we would have to leave". Hüseyin Çelik, a deputy chairman of the AKP and the spokesperson of the party, suggested that Erdo?an's

statement must have been a slip of the tongue.

Erdo?an quickly retracted; on May 8, the prime minister disclaimed his expression about "one religion", saying that it had been a "slip of the tongue". "I was going to say "one fatherland", but I accidentally happened to say one religion, it was a slip of the tongue." Yet, Erdo?an had not referred to religion in passing, but had on the contrary emphasized it, and had done so not only once, but in two consecutive speeches; it is not likely that he would have made his pronouncements, with their evident policy implications, unintentionally, by sheer mistake.

Implications

In a sense, Erdo?an had stated the obvious: the Turkish republic has indeed relied on "one religion", Sunni Islam. Çelik, the AKP spokesperson, emphasized that "the fact that no fighting has broken out among Turks and Kurds, despite the efforts of the PKK, speaks of the crucial importance of religion as a unifying factor". That could change in the future; the merger of Islam and Kurdish nationalism, with the emergence of an Islamist, Kurdish party (see Turkey Analyst, April, 30, 2012) would be a game changer, rendering the religious card much less effective an antidote to Kurdish aspirations.

Historically, however, Sunni Islam has been successfully marshaled to sustain societal cohesion. The efforts to put Sunni Islam to the service of the unity of the Muslim ethnic groups in the Turkish realm were first introduced by Sultan Abdülhamid II at the end of the 19th century. Then as now, the religious component was accentuated in the school curriculum. Although officially "secular", the Turkish republic has also relied on religion in order to ensure national cohesion. The primacy of Sunni Islam is enshrined in the constitution, which mandates compulsory education in its tenets, and with the State directorate of religious affairs assigned the duty of tending to the needs solely of the Sunnis, the republic has indeed to all intents and purposes recognized only "one religion".

The fact that Erdo?an felt compelled, uncharacteristically, to retract in the face of criticism suggests that keeping up the appearances of a secular order – where the state supposedly does not enforce a particular religion on society – nonetheless matters. Erdo?an may not normally be sensitive to the opinions of those who feel intimidated by the advance of conservatism; he was dismissive of the objections to the overhaul of the education system, saying "could anything be more rewarding than studying the life of the Prophet?" The AKP government is however anxious to preserve the image that it has successfully cultivated as the benefactor of the non-Muslim minorities in Turkey.

Çelik defended that the AKP government has been more forthcoming toward the non-Muslims than any other previous government. Dositheos Anagnostopulos, the press spokesman of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch in Istanbul concurred; saying that "since the Turkish republic came into being, everything that benefits the minorities has been decided during this government". Yet he also noted that important things, such as the reopening the priest seminar on Heybeliada in Istanbul, still remain to be delivered. Rober Kopta?, the editor-in-chief of the Armenian newspaper Agos in Istanbul, was less diplomatic in his remarks, suggesting that the AKP's relative benevolence toward Christian minorities is less than sincere: "The effort to remedy the mistakes of the past is welcome, but these measures are being insufficiently carried through. They are taken with an eye toward the West, conveying the message, "see how nice we are toward the non-Muslims", when in fact they are trying to calculate how much can be gained while doing as little as possible."

The AKP government can afford to appear to be forthcoming toward Christians and Jews, since their presence on Turkish soil is insignificant – only two thousand Greeks are left, for instance;Turkey is anyhow, as the official saying goes, "99 percent Muslim". What Sunni conservatives have much greater difficulty in reconciling themselves to, is that Turkey, although

nominally 99 percent Muslim nonetheless is far from being homogenously Sunni Muslim. Alevis were also incensed by Erdo?an's reference to "one religion" as the basis of the nation: "The prime minister is discriminating against us. This is yet another reminder that Erdo?an is not our prime minister", said Selahattin Özel, the chairman of the Alevi-Bekta?i federation.

The Alevis are estimated to make up around fifteen percent of the population of Turkey; their deviations from Muslim orthodoxy have earned them the lasting enmity of the Sunnis, and they have been victims of persecution for several hundred years, with the most recent massacres of Alevis dating to the 1970s and the early 1990s. As Muslims, the Alevis have posed a particular challenge to a state bent on securing the national cohesion on the basis of Sunni Islam; mirroring the attempts of Sultan Abdülhamid in the late 19th century, who had dispatched Sunni ulemas to persuade the Alevis to abandon their "heretical" views and join the Sunni fold, the military junta in the 1980's ordered the construction of mosques in Alevi villages. The attempt failed, as the Alevis did not take to praying in mosques; they have continued to hold religious ceremonies in "cem houses", but their demand that these shrines are officially recognized as such has remained unheeded. For Sunni conservatives, compliance with Alevi demands would amount to nothing short of a betrayal of the concept of "one religion" and to a bestowal of legitimacy on what is viewed as "heresy".

Conclusions

Turkey's heterogeneity – ethnic, cultural, religious – remains a challenge for its rulers; while Prime Minister Erdo?an has signaled that linguistic homogeneity is not a "red line" for the AKP, suggesting that the Kurds' main demand might eventually be accommodated, the ruling Sunni conservatives are yet to come to terms with the reality of religious heterogeneity. While it is possible to envision that the present requirement – under the constitution – that every citizen of the republic of Turkey adheres to Turkishness might be relaxed, Turkey will not cease to be what it is under the current constitution, a Sunni state, as long as it is ruled by the AKP. And neither would a change of government necessarily make any difference in this respect. Among the parties represented in parliament, the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), is alone in calling for a radical constitutional change that would deprive Sunni Islam of its preeminence.

The upheaval in the Middle East, and in particular the unrest in neighboring Syria, has introduced a new element to the considerations of the Turkish government; Ankara has come to fear that Alevi-Sunni relations in Turkey might be vulnerable to a Syrian "contamination," despite the large differences between Turkey's Alevis and Syria's Alawis. Indeed, there are indications that the Turkish "sponsorship" of the Sunni rebellion has not gone down well with the Alevis in Turkey. Yet even though Ankara may have become wary of the effects that a Syrian implosion might have for Turkey's own cohesion, the fact that the Alevis have historically kept a low profile and endured oppression and discrimination is bound to comfort the AKP government.

Yet at some point it will reasonably dawn on the rulers of Turkey that insisting on uniformity – be it linguistic or religious – is ultimately untenable.

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