

# The rise of political Islam in Turkey: how the West got it wrong

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*Political Islamism has undermined the Turkish Republic's secular social order, education and legal systems and Western pundits manifestly failed to see this coming, argues Turkish opposition MP, Safak Pavey.*

The end of the Cold War did not free the world of polarised ideologies. Once the Berlin Wall fell, we hoped a new world would finally move beyond the conflict ridden past. Yet, not only did we face continuous conflicts but with the revival of religious traditions, God's role in politics was rekindled. We thought that the time for belief systems and politics which derive their legitimacy from God was over. But we were wrong. The current administration of Turkey, which was lauded as an example of a modern Islamic democracy, derives a considerable part of its mandate from the belief that they are carrying out God's mission of revenge against the godless secular system.

Islamism has hijacked my country, the Middle East and the 'Arab Spring', not only politically, but culturally as well.

Let us take the case of ISIS. It gave the Christians of Rakka [three options](#): convert to Islam, remain Christian and pay the protection tax of the non-Muslim believers and submit to strict rules, or be prepared to die. The protection tax amounts to 14 grams of pure gold per capita. Some of the rules include prohibitions on making repairs to churches, wearing the cross or other religious symbols outside church and ringing the church bell.

Turkey's Islamists have not implemented these restrictive practices and rules formally because this would still require a major overhaul of the legal system, and they see ISIS as "uncivilized". But in everyday life social pressure is exercised in more subtle ways and people are intimidated through quiet repression on the street.

Our current situation is explained away by Western intellectuals who had nothing but praise for Erdogan ten years ago, and now claim he has transformed into a tyrant. The latest conclusion of these international commentators who sing the praises of Islamic democracy is that democracy befits our culture, but that the problem is with Erdogan's personality.

It would be a mistake to underestimate Erdogan. Ever since he entered politics at a young age, he aimed to become head of state because he believed only he could abolish the 'infidel / heretic' social system; that is how the secular state is perceived by political Islamists. But attributing the Islamic transformation of Turkey only to him, would be paying him too generous a compliment.

It would also be wrong to explain this turn of events with reference to differences between right and left, since these distinctions are far more complex in Turkey. The biggest chasm between left and right in our politics now is religion; it all hinges on whether "you are pious or not."

The cosmetic reforms that have been attributed to Erdogan and his Government, bringing him high repute, turned out to be window dressing to impress the West. Indeed, they all melted away swiftly within the repressive structure of emerging political Islam. Law came at the top the list of

casualties. Government supporters are granted privileges and are above the law, while opponents are meted out the harshest sentences. Formal law is no longer implemented with the purpose of delivering justice but rather as a tool to deliver punishments to detractors.

It was only his Western counterparts and pundits who were hoping that someone with strong loyalties to Sharia would abide by secular law. By now, they must be amazed at how wrong they got it.

AKP has transformed Sunni identity into the dominant one in Turkey through religious references. Addressing the West, the AKP claimed that it was waging war on deeply rooted nationalism, but all the while it was spreading a far more insidious ideology. In fact, any scholar who works on Turkey knows that Middle Eastern style nationalism has always relied on religious pillars to survive.

In the course of Turkey's republican history we had the best attempts at democracy that could have come out of Islamic countries, despite stumbling, interruptions and the tests of perseverance we had to endure. AKP has been calling this political system the regime of secular elites who think it is their right to govern the republic. Yet political Islamists have been involved in various centre-right organizations and parties, and have been the recipients of many privileges - strengthening their presence progressively. For example, some of the staff who have served Erdogan include ministers and high level bureaucrats who have held these positions ever since they became civil servants decades ago.

However, Turkey's political Islamists were not content with the symbiotic relations they had created with the centre-right parties. They worked diligently to take over the host organization and reached managerial positions with a perseverance that is praised and advised in Islam through the act of *taqiyya* (a form of religious dissimulation that permits believers to conceal the truth in pursuit of their goals).

So we have come to this situation. The system that protected social rights and liberties, and was supported by a considerable number of citizens, has been destroyed by an invisible bulldozer, and the political Islamists now claim absolute victory. In their eyes, 'the infidel, heretic' secular republic has been defeated.

The most significant fallout of political Islam is its destruction of secular education.

This issue is so important to Erdogan that he did not trust even his most loyal advisors, and instead put his [own son in charge](#) of the Islamization of education. In 2002, the number of pupils studying and graduating from the *imam-hatip* schools set up to train clerics was seventy thousand, now their number is one million. This number does not include the pupils who attend schools known as "hidden" cleric schools that are functioning under the guise of being regular public schools.

According to legal judicial investigation tapes, Bilal Erdoğan has himself stated that the handful of "the remaining pupils in the secular secondary education" have been integrated into the hidden imam-hatip cleric schools in order for them not to pose a threat to the Islamic regime in the future.

This aim has been achieved by assigning eleven hours of the forty hour week of lessons to Sunni religious education in state schools and prep schools. This is because the future generation cannot be left to the guidance of science; it must be conditioned to collective obedience through religion as the political Islamists demand.

Yet another policy devised by Erdogan's son has been the creation of a fraudulent demand for

imam-hatip cleric schools through mosques and the media.

Women's behaviour, the [laughter of a young woman](#), how much beer a young man drinks, who shares a house with whom and what kind of toilet they use (whether traditional or modern), all have to be under their surveillance. Living arrangements outside the prescriptions of the Holy Book are not crimes, but are considered to be sins to be eradicated. For instance, AKP politicians have destroyed as many modern toilets as modern sculptures. Tradition dismisses the comforts of modern life far too easily and readily.

Islamists define the morality of society in terms of woman's virtue and her relations with the opposite sex. This is why, in their eyes, girls and boys have to be segregated. Boys and girls cannot be on the same school grounds, and this includes university dorms. Students of different gender cannot be taught in the same building prior to university. Most school grounds have been gender-segregated in the past ten years.

My cousin has been a physics teacher for twenty years. During the last five years she was made to hand over her physics classes to a member of an Islamic *tariqat* (order). She was told to remain at the teacher's common room during her class periods, so that it looked as if physics was being taught at that hour as stated in the curriculum. For five years those pupils learned nothing about physics - and all about jihad. She felt incapable of changing the situation and therefore she resigned.

Unfortunately this hidden policy has been implemented surreptitiously and frequently over the past ten years, and is now being implemented openly. Boys are pushed to attend boarding schools, and thus kept away from their families, and girls are being encouraged to marry young and become housewives.

Now that Turkey has gone off the rails from its journey towards modernity, where does that leave us?

The Islamists in Turkey are at the zenith of their power. They can be a difficult partner and even threaten to become an enemy to the West. Indeed, hostility towards the West is part of the conspiracy discourse that is widespread all over the Middle East.

Nonetheless there are significant numbers of people in Turkey who are resisting, and who struggle for the survival of civility and modern life. And the outcome of our struggle for survival will have much broader global repercussions than Western policy makers would like to think. Can you imagine a Turkey without its secularists? It would lead to a Europe that is confined to its continent, and it would turn it into a prison for us.

"No one can leave this woeful story with their head held high" said Dani Rodrik, an academic at the Institute of Advanced Study in Princeton. Not the so-called secular-military elite that governed the country harshly for years, that scorned and yet used the Islamists and thus almost single-handedly guaranteed their reactionary attitudes; not Turkey's Western friends who pretended not to see the colossal infringements of social liberty; and certainly not the pseudo-intellectuals with their egregious interpretations of the events that legitimised the butchering of secular law in the hope that political Islam will produce democracy.

Those who ten years ago expected an Islamic reform from Turkey that would serve as a model for the world are, at this point, striving to prevent Turkey from turning into a hostile country model.

To conclude with a sentence from Turkey's political Islamists: "Those who expect Islam to reform

want us to give up our religion. We will not rise to the bait of the infidel." If this is a clear statement of intent, so too is the resolve of those of us who intend to resist and struggle in defence of our freedoms and our Human Rights.

*This article is based on a presentation given by the author at the [Secularism 2014 Conference](#) held on 11-12 October, 2014 in London. It was originally published on [Open Democracy](#) and is reproduced here under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 3.0 licence.*

*The views in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the NSS.*

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