

Political Power and Social Conservatism in Turkey

[Binnaz Toprak](#)

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On June 4, 2009, Dr. Binnaz Toprak, chair of the Political Science Department at both Bahcesehir and Bogazici universities in Istanbul, addressed a special Policy Forum luncheon at The Washington Institute, introducing her latest study on social conservatism in Turkey. Dr. Toprak's research, cosponsored by Bogazici University and the Open Society Institute, sheds light on the role of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government in consolidating and promoting existing social conservatism across Turkey's Anatolian hinterland. Dr. Soner Cagaptay, director of the Institute's Turkish Research Program, moderated the conversation with Dr. Toprak. The following is a rapporteur's summary of the event.

Political System Remains Secular

For many years the issue of secularism versus Islam has been an important and politically divisive issue in Turkey. One can trace the issue back to the nineteenth century when the Ottoman Empire initiated Western-oriented reforms, leading to a period when the public was divided into Islamists and Westerners.

The establishment of the Turkish Republic ended this division when it officially sanctioned Westernization by enacting a series of reforms to secularize not only the state structure but also the society at large -- a first for a Muslim country and a definite setback for Islamists. According to the republic's founding fathers, the West represented the civilized world. Although the republic's early legislation discriminated against Islamists, this attitude eased somewhat with the transition away from one-party politics in the 1950s. After that, various political parties began to pay attention to the Islamic sensibilities of their voters in order to broaden their electoral base.

With the emergence of Islamic political parties in the early 1970s, Islamists and secularists both learned valuable lessons. Realizing the impossibility of an Islamic state in Turkey, Islamists abandoned their demand for sharia (Islamic law). Over the years, Islamist parties mellowed their discourse, and today even the most radical groups recognize that Turkey will remain secular.

Society Faces Islamization

The main issue today is the Islamization of Turkish society, which until the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power, most secular Turks thought was out of the question. Although Islamic parties were kept out of political power for many years, religion has been an integral part of Turkish life, even during Turkey's most radical republican period. Islamic holidays, for instance, were always observed as national holidays.

Dr. Toprak conducted studies in 1999 and 2006, asking Turks about the connection between religion and discrimination in society. In 1999, 47 percent reported discrimination in some form, with the official ban on turbans (Islamic-style headscarves) in universities playing a large role in this perception. In 2006, however, this figure dropped to 17 percent. The AKP's rise seemingly reduced the level of discrimination felt by religious and conservative Turks.

While Dr. Toprak's previous work argued that secularists isolate Islamic groups from mainstream society, her most recent study shows the opposite is true; rising social conservatism is creating an environment of discrimination against secular and liberal Turks, particularly women. Dr. Toprak and her team interviewed 401 people from twelve different cities, including individuals from the lower-middle-class districts of Istanbul where the AKP is quite popular (the cities were chosen according to their level of development and political affiliation). Although the surveyed group was relatively small and not necessarily a representative sample, individuals from different regions voiced similar stories and patterns of discrimination. For example, uncovered female nurses and doctors from across the country reported being assigned to night shifts, while their colleagues who wore turbans were given day shifts.

In a different case of government-led discrimination, an Alevi doctor from a public hospital stated that before the AKP came to power, approximately 178 Alevi doctors worked at a particular hospital; now the number was only three. In addition, some teachers are promoting prejudice. For example, an Alevi student told the research team that when he approached a teacher to inquire why he scored lower than expected on an exam, the teacher ridiculed him in front of the class -- calling him a "dirty Alevi" -- and added that given his background, he should be happy just to be attending the class.

Rising Social Conservatism and Intolerance

Dr. Toprak's study is seminal for several reasons. First, for many years, people have defined conservative Turks as the "other" Turkey, a group facing discrimination. This study proves that there is an "other other" Turkey of liberal and secular Turks outside the middle-class neighborhoods of big cities who now face discrimination by the government's bureaucrats and employees.

Second, the research shows that government-appointed bureaucrats use signs of social conservatism, such as the wearing of turbans and disdain for alcohol, as benchmarks for making appointments and promotions and handing out government contracts. Since no recourse exists for people who face such government discrimination, most Turks feel that to succeed, they need to at least act conservative. In other words, it is not religiosity that is ascendant in Turkey, but rather social conservatism. Furthermore, the problem is not social conservatism per se, but government-imposed social conservatism, an idea that among other things is incompatible with a European Turkey. In this regard, outward signs of social conservatism are gaining strength, since many Turks feel the need to blend in with Turkey's new social norms and curry favor with government officials.

Third, Turkey has always had a strong tradition of social conservatism. But while earlier bureaucrats and teachers would not have expressed prejudice toward liberals, women, and secular Muslims for fear of disciplinary action, discrimination is now practiced openly. Accordingly, because the state bureaucracy is imposing on Turkish society its idea of what constitutes a "good Muslim," intolerance is on the rise.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Melis Evcimik.