

## **Dirk Tröndle: The Relationship between Islam and Democracy in Turkey: The Islamisation of Politics versus the Politicisation of Islam**

There are two questions that arise in conjunction with the relationship between Islam and democracy: How to correlate Islam as a religion and a world view with democracy as a secular political system? And why is it that the same question never crops up with regard to the relationship between Christianity and democracy? It is erroneous to assume that Islam is incompatible with, or even incapable of, democracy, at least in Turkey, where Islam and democracy are interlinked by a tight nexus of relations that may be considered from two aspects, the Islamisation of politics and the politicisation of Islam. While the first aspect relates to political Islam in Turkey, the second covers all those political, economic, and social areas in which Islam is instrumentalised.

The most important factor regulating the relationship between Islam and democracy in Turkey is laicism, meaning the separation of religious and secular matters which, resulting from a long historical evolution, is believed to guarantee the existence of the democratic system.

In the Ottoman Empire, the sultan was not only a secular ruler but also a caliph, i.e. a successor of the prophet Muhammad. The dualism of sultanate and caliphate was enshrined in the constitution of 1876, Islam was the religion of the state, and the Sharia the foundation of the law. Only the reforms of the Tanzimat era disrupted the strictness of this theocratic system, depriving Islam of its status as the sole authority regulating all walks of life. Thus, for example, the Sharia courts were joined by special commercial courts and a criminal code on the French model.

Because of the dual function of the ruler who, in his capacity as caliph and protector of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, was responsible for managing the pilgrimage routes, the secular and the religious sphere gradually drifted apart. Not least among those who supported Mustafa Kemal in his project were numerous religious scholars. Ultimately, today's laicism manifested itself in the modern republic as a dualism of religion and politics with all its facets, with religion subordinate to the state. Witness the fact that official Islam is organised by the Presidium for Religious Affairs (Diyamet İşleri Başkanlığı), meaning the Turkish or orthodox Sunnite version of Islam.

Turkish laicism knows nothing of a contract between the state and any religion. Thus, the taxes that are raised from all citizens independently of their religion also serve to pay the salaries of the Imams and employees of the Diyanet. This is one aspect that is currently being debated. Another is that laicism is often perceived as anti-religious. Nor is this wonderful in view of the radical nature of some of the reforms undertaken in the early days of the Republic, which many viewed as attempts to marginalise religion. The turning point came when some strictly laicist regulations were dropped, courses for preachers were set up, and a theological faculty was created at Ankara University. The current debate about laicism revolves around three sources of conflict: schools for preachers, mandatory religious education, and the question of whether female students should wear headscarves.

After the proclamation of the Republic in 1923, religion disappeared from public life. In 1924, the government opened the first schools for preachers which, with their rather secular orientation, offered only imperfect training for Imams. In 1967, compulsory schooling was extended to eight years, secondary modern schools were dropped, and attendance figures declined at the schools for preachers which the school council refused to treat on par with the others. The point of all that was to contain re-Islamisation.

The discussion about religious education in Turkey is similarly rooted in the strict implementation of the principle of laicism and/or state neutrality. Children wishing to learn how to read or recite the Quran must resort to extramural courses.

Ever since the eighties, there has been a permanent debate about the headscarf which occasionally bursts into flame. When Ankara University forbade a female student, Leyla Şahin, to wear a headscarf, she took her case to the European Court of Human Rights but lost in 2004: The Court professed itself unable to see how the ban contravened the provisions of the European convention on the freedom of opinion and religion. The debate does not revolve around what Islam has to say about the headscarf but around its prohibition by the laicist republic. In concrete terms, the bone of contention is a discrepancy: The Diyanet, a part of the administration, holds that wearing a headscarf is a religious duty, while the ministry of education and the school council, which are just as much part of the administration, ban precisely that. The significance of the headscarf dispute is so great because it touches upon the controlling position of the Kemalist image of woman. Realising the new ideal woman was supposed not only to reflect the success of the modernisation process; more than that, the new woman as an equal member of society was seen as the moving force of reform. Thus, the headscarf became the symbol of a backwardness that turned against the Kemalist reforms. At the same time, it became a tool with which to provoke the laicist state. To illustrate the latter aspect, there is the case of the newly-elected lady deputy of the Virtue Party who, in 1999, appeared in the Turkish parliament wearing a headscarf and was sharply asked by Prime Minister Ecevit not to challenge the state.

However, the headscarf debate relates to yet another question, that of equal rights for men and women. The Turkish constitution states that all persons are equal, regardless of their sex. While this does not imply that men and women are equal in point of fact, Turkey today is well on its way towards such equality. After the strict separation of the sexes that was practiced in the public life of the Ottoman Empire, the women's position was strengthened when the Swiss civil code was introduced in 1926. In 1930, women were permitted to participate in local elections, and in 1934, they were given the right to vote and be elected in national elections. Even the High Council for Religious Affairs issued a *fetwa* confirming the equality of men and women, although it made no secret of the fact that official Islam does favour the classical image of the family.

Article 6 of the Turkish constitution recognises the sovereignty of the people. Universal and equal franchise has been realised just as much as the rule of the majority and an open party system. The Presidium for Religious Affairs declared that, while Islam has nothing specific to say about forms of government, "democracy is that form of government which is most likely to guarantee and respect human rights". Even in the public debate, there is general agreement that Islam and democracy are not mutually prohibitive.

In the course of the last few decades, Turkey witnessed the establishment of diverse parties that reject the modern state and strive to realise an Islamic model. The first political movement to emphasise Islam was the National Order Party (MNP) which, founded in 1970 under the leadership of Necmettin Erbakan, was banned for being Islamist in 1971. Founded one year later, its successor, the National Liberation Party (MSP), formed a coalition government with the Republican People's Party (CHP) led by Bülent Ecevit in 1973 – the first ringing success for political Islam in the country. After the end of the seven-year period in which all parties were banned by the putschists of 1980, Erbakan became chairman of the Welfare Party (RP) which was returned as the strongest group in the Turkish parliament in the elections of 1995. One year later, Erbakan was elected prime minister.

Next to solving the Kurdish question in the name of Muslim brotherhood, the programme of the Welfare Party criticises the Westernisation of Turkey as a matter of principle, assumes a clearly anti-imperialist stance, and rejects the country's accession to the EU. It pillories 'moral decay' as well as the dependence of the Turkish economy on foreign countries. While the programme is vague on democracy, it does emphasise national pride and national consciousness. At all events, there is no denying that the character of the party that emerges from its programme is Islamist.

The welfare party remained in office for no more than one year: In 1997, it threw in the towel, and it was banned one year later. Even then, 'traditionalists' and 'innovators' were drifting apart. Although the two camps temporarily joined forces again under the common roof of the Virtue Party, that party also foundered in 2001. Whereas the traditionalists proceeded to establish the Felicity Party (SP), the forces of reform joined hands with other players to found what is today the AK Party – a movement that is attractive to diverse segments of the electorate despite its Islamist trappings.

Despite numerous conflicts, Islam and democracy are not diametrically opposed in Turkey. Relations between the two are developing dynamically, and the question is whether equal treatment for Imam schools, facultative religious education, and the abolition of the headscarf ban might not give a positive boost to this dynamism. Another question is whether the AK Party actually represents political Islam in present-day Turkey or, alternatively, paves the way for an Islamic concept of democracy and freedom. If it should emerge, after Abdullah Gül has been elected president, that the party actually regards religion as something individual and not as a model for the establishment of an Islamic society, this would be a source of hope for the future relationship between the state and Islam in Turkey.