An Imposed or a Negotiated Laiklik?
The Administration of the Teaching of Islam in Single-Party Turkey

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An increasing number of studies over recent years have looked at the question of Islam and how it was managed in Republican Turkey. Most of them raise doubts about the wisdom of comparing Turkish laiklik and secularity as the concept is understood in France. They reject the idea of a separation between the religious and the state sphere, preferring instead to speak of the control exerted by the latter on the former, and of the nationalisation of Islam. As Hamit Bozarslan argues, taken in conjunction with the other reforms, this may be viewed as a radical policy for the exercise of power that was imposed by the nationalist and westernised elites, a hegemonic syntax devised in response to an “obsession with civilisation.” Gavin Brockett suggests in his most recent study that laiklik be seen as having both a negative facet—the destroying of pre-existing Islamic institutions—and a creative facet—exploiting religion to fashion national Turkish identity.

Within this context the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Reisliği), which was set up in 1924, is frequently presented as an instrument to control the religious sphere. Umut Azak views it as “the main administrative instrument for the diffusion of official Islam throughout the country,” under the direct supervision of the Prime Minister. For İsmail Kara it is a “muzzled”

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4 Gavin Brockett, How Happy to Call Oneself a Turk: Provincial Newspapers and the Negotiation of a Muslim National Identity, Austin, TX, University of Texas Press, 2011, p. 45.

institution “wedged” between religion and the state, with limited prerogatives and subject to the political realm. More generally, it would seem that the religious sphere was particularly subject to constraint and repression by the authoritarian Kemalist regime. Whilst this view is particularly pronounced amongst authors of Muslim sensibility, for whom the religious actors were the victims of this policy, a recent study by Amit Bein offers a more nuanced perspective and shows that there was considerable variation in the positions adopted by the ulemas, ranging from cooperation to resistance, with most having opted for a middle course.

The paradigm of collaboration/resistance leads to a certain number of problems that I return to later on. However, Amit Bein’s approach has the advantage of placing the attitude of the religious actors at the heart of his analysis. It also moves beyond the paradigm of reaction (irtica), that has also been deconstructed by Gavin Brockett. Yet it is still the case that all these analyses have but little to say about how laiklik and the reforms were conceived and applied on a daily basis. There is of course the issue of the limitations arising from the sources that tend to be used, preponderantly normative ones (debates at the Grand National Assembly, political speeches, legislation and other decisions, curricula, and the press which was subject to censorship and control). The memoirs of those involved at the time are highly subjective. Whilst using administrative sources could well deliver a more detailed analysis of public policy and the way it was received, they are not easy to obtain.

In order to better understand the administration of Islam in single-party Turkey I wish to put forward a different approach, building on work by Amit Bein and Gavin Brockett in this field, as well as by Yiğit Akin on petitions and by Alexandros Lamprou on People’s Houses (Halkevleri). The latter two both emphasise how complex the relationship between society and the Kemalist state was. Society, via its interaction with state bodies, also played a role in fashioning the state. An institution such as the People’s Houses was a locus of tensions between actors of varying social profiles, who interpreted the regime’s policies and discourse in the light of power relations at the local level.

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