



**Universiteit
Leiden**
The Netherlands

Religion and Public Policy in Turkey
Çarkoglu, A.

Citation

Çarkoglu, A. (2001). Religion and Public Policy in Turkey. *Isim Newsletter*, 8(1), 29-29.
Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17521>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)
License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)
Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17521>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Turkey

ALI ÇARKOĞLU

Despite the centrality of the rising tensions between secularist and pro-Islamist groups with respect to the future of Turkish politics, little empirical analysis exists on the cleavages between the two groups. The Political Islam in Turkey (PIT) project* provides extensive opportunities for such an analysis as well as analyses of many other aspects of Islam in modern Turkey. The following focuses on the levels of support for the controversial policies in recent years aimed at regulating the role of religion in Turkish social life.

Several memorable incidents occurred during the establishment of the secular Republican regime and its immediate aftermath in which the reactionary peripheral forces gathered around a loud reactionary demand for *şeriat* and the protection of the sultanate and caliphate. Tension between the secularists and pro-Islamist forces resurfaced with the success of the pro-Islamist Welfare Party (Refah Partisi), first in the local elections of 1994 and then in the general elections of 1995. Ever since, questions concerning the popular bases of *şeriat* rule have been used in public opinion surveys. The wording of the questions usually refers to an unspecified group of people that supposedly think that Turkey should be governed according to *şeriat* rules. The respondents are asked whether they would agree with this idea. These simplistic evaluations cannot be taken as a reflection of a demand for *şeriat* rule. Perhaps more seriously, the respondents are not even given a description of what is meant by *şeriat*, nor are they asked about specific implications of *şeriat* rules.

Table 1 shows the findings in three consecutive opinion polls conducted in 1995, 1996 and 1998. What is striking in these figures is that over the years concerned at least one out of five voters expressed their approval of *şeriat* rule in Turkey. A year before the peak of tensions between the military and the pro-Islamists during the so-called '28th of February process', the approval rate peaked with slightly more than 25% of the voters supporting the idea. Nearly a year after the start of the 'process' the approval rate dropped to its 1995 level.

The straightforward wording of the question used in the PIT stressed the necessity of the establishment of *şeriat* rule: 'Would you or would you not favour the establishment of a *şeriat*-based religious state in Turkey?' Answers to this question in February 1999 indicate that approximately 21% of the voters approve.

Table 1. Approval of *şeriat* rule

	June 1995	March 1996	May 1998
Approves	19.9	26.7	19.8
Does not approve	61.8	58.1	59.9
Don't Know/No Opinion	18.4	15.2	20.2

Source: TÜSES (1999, 68–69)

Would you favour the establishment of a <i>şeriat</i> -based religious state in Turkey?			
	Would favour	Would not favour	DK/NA*
Total	21.0	67.9	11.1

Source: Çarkoğlu and Toprak (2000, p. 16)

*Don't know/No answer

Several additional questions (Table 2) in the PIT concerning the Civic Code could be used to provide some content to the above findings. When posing these questions on the present-day Civic Code regulations on marriage, divorce and inheritance, the wording specifically allowed for a clear comparison with arrangements in accordance to the Islamic law.

The overwhelming support for the secular Republican Civic Code is evidence of the problematic nature of the word *şeriat* for the Turkish electorate. A significant number of the

Religion and Public Policy in Turkey

Table 2. Evaluations of the Civil Code

According to Islamic law a man is allowed to be married to up to four women. However, at present polygamy is outlawed. Would you approve of changing the system of marriage in accordance with Islamic law, so as to allow the marriage of men with up to four women?

	Approves of marriage according to Islamic law	Does not approve of marriage according to Islamic law	DK/NA*	
Total	10.7	85.0	4.3	100

According to Islamic law women receive a smaller share of their parent's inheritance. However, according to the present Civil Code both men and women get an equal share from inheritance. Would you accept changing the Civil Code so as to give men the right to obtain a larger share of the inheritance than women?

	Would accept changing the present Civil Code	Would not accept changing the present Civil Code	DK/NA*	
Total	13.9	81.4	4.7	100

According to Islamic law a man can divorce his wife without going before a judge. However, according to the present Civil Code, divorce requires a court case and a judge's decision. Would you accept changing the present Civil Code so as to allow divorces to be regulated according to Islamic law?

	Would accept changing the present Civil Code	Would not accept changing the present Civil Code	DK/NA*	
Total	14.0	78.5	7.5	100

In Turkey only the civil wedding is legally accepted but those who wish may go through a religious ceremony (imam wedding). Would you approve of having a religious wedding as legally valid or should the present regulations continue?

	Present application should continue	Religious wedding should also be legal	DK/NA*	
Total	50.5	45.3	4.2	100

*Don't know/No answer

electorate seems unable to refute *şeriat* rule. However, as Table 2 shows, once given a clear choice between the secular and Islamic legal arrangements, preferences clearly shift toward the secular arrangements.

An integral part of the Republican civic law was the abolishment of religious ceremonies or clerical marriages (*imam nikahı*). Under the Republican arrangement the only lawful marriage is civil marriage. However, it is well known that a sizeable proportion of the couples that marry in a civil ceremony also undergo a religious ceremony in which an imam concludes the marriage contract. When asked whether the religious wedding with an imam and the civil marriage ceremony should both be counted as official, nearly 45% of the respondents answered favourably to having both become legally binding.

Table 3 presents answers in support of some assertions concerning the role of religion in Turkish society and general evaluations of the social and political life of the country. It seems that nearly three quarters of the respondents support assertions about women having the right to cover their heads if they want to in the universities as well as in government jobs. Other statements about religious expression in social life were strongly supported. However, despite overwhelming agreement with statements backing a religious point of view, nearly 67% agree with the statement that having religion as a guide in state affairs is detrimental. Could these agreements be taken as a disguised support for secular principles? The fact that those who agree with this statement seem very unlikely to support *şeriat* rule seems to support this view. Similarly, nearly 77% of the respondents agree with the statement that Republican reforms have helped Turkey to progress.

Recently the role of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı) in regulating the role of religion in Turkish society has come under attack. Despite its large budget, the Directorate's services concentrate

ship (practice) requirements of Islam. Those who indicated that people in Turkey are not free to fulfil these requirements totalled nearly 31%. People were also asked whether religious people are oppressed in Turkey. Compared to the question concerning the freedom to fulfil requirements, those who believed that oppression exists with respect to religious people is higher – at approximately 42%.

Those who indicated that oppression of religious people exists in Turkey were also asked in an open-ended question to provide examples of this oppression. Of the 1,254 respondents who indicated that oppression exists towards the religious people, 812 – or nearly 64% – gave an example related to banning of headscarves or the turban. Interestingly, the closure of Imam Hatip schools and Qur'anic courses constitute the second largest group of examples, which were given by about 13% of the respondents. In short, examples of policies that are directly related to oppression in the perceptions of the people are primarily related to education policies. These examples were evoked by 77% of respondents who claim that religious people are being oppressed in Turkey. The very low number of examples for oppression of religious people that included oppression of worship practices such as daily prayers (*namaz*), fasting and the like is

Table 3. Approval of various assertions

	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	DK/NA*
All Muslim women should cover their heads.	58.9	6.4	32.6	2.1
I don't approve of teenage boys and girls being educated together in the same classroom.	38.5	6.8	51.9	2.7
I don't approve of girls and young women wearing short skirts.	57.1	8.8	31.6	2.5
Women state employees should be allowed to cover their heads if they want to.	74.2	5.8	17.4	2.5
Girls should be allowed to cover their heads in the universities if they want to.	76.1	5.6	16.0	2.3
I don't approve of men and women sitting next to one another in inter-city bus travel.	60.2	7.1	30.7	1.9
Selling of alcohol during the month of Ramadan should be banned.	70.5	5.4	22.3	1.8
Religious guidance in state affairs and politics is detrimental.	67.2	9.5	16.4	6.9
Work hours should be arranged according to Friday prayer.	66.4	7.5	22.2	3.9
Earning interest from money invested in banks is a sin.	62.6	6.1	28.1	3.2
Republican reforms have advanced this country.	77.3	9.0	8.3	5.4

Source: Çarkoğlu and Toprak (2000, p. 59)

*Don't know/No answer

primarily on Sunni rather than Alevi communities. Nonetheless, the harsh reactions to the Directorate do not seem to find much support among the population at large; only about 8% seem to support the idea of abolition of the Directorate. But when it comes to the functions it fulfils the reformists dominate the answers: nearly 70% of the respondents agree with the statement that the Directorate should provide services to the Alevi as well as the Sunni communities.

Another facet of state-society relations in Turkey concerning religiosity, religious services and worship practices is an implicit concern, or explicit claim, that religious people are being oppressed. Although some state policies are not fully supported by the people, it is not clear whether these policies are perceived to be oppressive.

The PIT includes a question as to whether people in Turkey are free to fulfil the wor-

also worth noting. Similarly, very few answers note oppression targeted at the Alevi community. Despite Turkish media's intense coverage of the closure and prosecution of Islamic brotherhoods (*tarikats*), answers indicating this comprised only about 1% of all examples given. Surprisingly, the military appears only in a total of 33 answers as an example. Clearly, within the context of an open-ended question about oppression of religious people, the military does not receive much blame.

Note

* Carried out by myself and Binnaz Toprak with the funding of the Türkiye Ekonomik ve Sosyal Etüdler Vakfı-TESEV.

Ali Çarkoğlu is associate professor at the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Boğaziçi University, Istanbul, Turkey.
E-mail: carkogla@boun.edu.tr