Islamic Politics and the Problem of Official Secularism

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Abstract
According to Alfred Stepan’s “twin tolerations” argument, a strictly secular legal system that prohibits political expression of religion is undemocratic. Nevertheless, even in such restrictive systems, unofficial but public expressions of religion can influence politics. To understand the political effectiveness of religious interest groups, we focus on relationships between political actors and civil society organizations, the incorporation of religious morals into policy creation, and religious practices that become part of everyday public life. Based on interviews conducted in Turkey and using the Turkish Justice and Development Party (AKP) as a case study, we argue that by channeling religious interests through non-state actors, the AKP is able to remain an officially secular party. At the same time, the party can represent the interests of Turkish citizens who would like to see a larger role for religion in public life. While this arrangement benefits religiously-oriented Turkish citizens, legal restrictions on religious expression that push religious representation into the unofficial sphere create accountability and transparency problems for the political party in government and disadvantage minority religions and non-religious citizens.

Introduction
Religion is an active force in the politics of many societies, and can be expressed through the involvement of interest groups in public life as well as through the influence of religious values on policymakers and the laws they enact. However, in part due to difficulties associated with measuring religious variables, many scholars have avoided exploring the effects of religion on politics (Wald and Wilcox 2006). While important work has been done on the legal regulation of religion (Barro and McCleary 2004, Fox and Flores 2009, Fox and Sandler 2006) and on the philosophical ties between theology and democratic theory (Hashemi 2009, Woodberry and Shah 2004), fewer political scientists have examined how non-state religious actors affect politics.

In this paper, we analyze how unofficial, yet public, expressions of religious politics affect religion-state relations in officially secular states. Beginning with Alfred Stepan’s (2001) model of the “twin tolerations” between religious groups and states, we explore how religious groups operating in restrictive environments are able to negotiate their role in public life.

Focusing on cases of strict secularism that exclude religious groups from political society, we
pose a series of questions related to their activities: How do religious groups influence politics through the social and economic sectors? In countries where religious parties are banned, how do parties address the demands of religious constituents while remaining officially secular? Can the social and political aspects of religion be analyzed as unique phenomena, or is religion inseparable from political life? We argue that when parties are restricted from religious expression and activity, religious groups can influence politics through civil society. In this context, social and economic issues have religious and political implications that may be difficult to separate.

Stepan (2001) argues that in democracies, proper religion-state relations require that religious groups be allowed to organize in both civil and political society—that is, religious groups must be given the chance to express themselves in public society without a priori restrictions on their activities. Thus, he implies that religious parties should be allowed to compete politically as long as they play by the rules of the democratic game. Stepan’s theory has interesting implications for those countries that interpret secularism in the strict sense of prohibiting religious groups to organize in political society—a trend that is found in several countries, including the Muslim-majority Turkey, Egypt, Syria, and the Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. According to Stepan, such rules clearly violate the conditions necessary for religious groups to coexist with democratic political systems. At the same time, other scholars have warned of the threats that politicized religious movements—particularly Islamist groups—pose to the prospects for democracy (Berman 2003). Yet, even in circumstances where religion and politics are separated legally, the connections between the two are inevitable. To understand the political activities of religious groups, we argue that scholars should direct their attention to the unofficial expressions of religious interests that are transmitted
through relationships between political actors and interest groups, the incorporation of religious morals into policy creation, and religious practices that become part of everyday public life.

We explore unofficial expressions of religious politics through a case study of contemporary Turkish politics. Turkey is one of the few majority Muslim countries that had success establishing democratic institutions. Since 2002, Turkey has also been governed by the Islamic-inspired Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP). Due to strict provisions of secularism outlined in the Turkish Constitution, the AKP has insisted that it is not an Islamist party and has painted itself as promoting “social” rather than political Islam. In this paper, we present examples of the AKP’s conception of social Islam in the party’s support for laws regarding individual religious freedom, their relationship with Islamist nongovernmental associations and foundations, and through examples of increasing societal pressure to express religiosity more publicly. We generalize our argument to other majority Muslim countries that have similar religion-state relations and discuss the implications of Islamic politics on the development of civil society and democracy in these countries. While we limit our discussion to Islamic countries, we propose that it can be extended to all settings in which strict secularism curtails the public involvement of religious groups.

The Turkish example prompts us to question how unofficial expressions of religious politics affect prospects for democratic relations between religion and the state. By examining the ways religious groups have been able to get around official restrictions, we point to the importance of studying non-state actors. While religious actors may not have a position at the political decision-making table, they still exert great influence on national policy. These arrangements may be acceptable to some for they prevent the legal take-over of government by openly Islamist parties while still allowing religious interests to have a voice in the political
process. This type of civil society development might help to create more pluralistic politics in the Muslim world, as groups are required to frame their religious demands in a manner that accepts the separation of religion and politics.

On the other hand, this paper also highlights problems that arise when polities refuse to allow religious interests to compete openly in the political arena. Such a situation threatens competitive politics by forcing religious interests to go “behind the scenes” to have their interests represented. This is potentially dangerous for democracy for two reasons. First, when religious interests cannot express themselves openly, it creates the possibility for unfair competition and corruption, as only those groups with close ties to those in power are able to have their voices heard. That threatens representation for minority groups who do not have access to those in political power. Second, such relations can threaten democratic accountability. If parties are unable to be honest about their connections and alliances, the public will be unable to hold them accountable. Transparency and accountability of political parties regarding their religious interest representation strengthens Stepan’s call for the “twin tolerations” in religion-state relations and suggests that removing restrictions on Islamist politics in Muslim-majority countries may be one way to overcome the Muslim “democracy gap” (Karatnycky 2002).

We begin by discussing secularism and religion-state relations. Using Stepan’s (2001) “twin tolerations” framework, we explain how the Turkish system violates democratic standards for religion-state relations. Next, we explore the history of Islamist politics in Turkey and the question of whether the AKP can be considered a religious party. Noting that AKP frames itself as a “conservative democratic” party, we give examples of the party’s policies related to religion. Next, we explore the AKP’s connections to Islamist civil society, explaining how it uses religious interest groups to express its commitment to religion to its base without violating
Turkey’s secular laws. We trace these connections into the personal realm, showing that the political, social, and personal are inseparable, and questioning the effect that increased public religiosity has on the religious freedom of Turkish citizens. Finally, we discuss the implications of official religious restrictions in a broader context, explaining how the framework we have set up can be used to explore religious politics in other settings.

**Secularism and Democratic Religion-State Relations**

Secularization theorists predicted a decline of religious influences on society and politics with the advance of modernization (Berger 1967, Cox 1966, Martin 1978, Smith 1974). However, since the 1980s, when religious revivals such as the Iranian Revolution and the rise of the Christian Right in the United States challenged predictions of the death of religion, scholars mostly abandoned secularization as a valid paradigm to explain religious developments (Stark 1999). With the demise of secularization theory, the debate about the proper relationship between religion and state in democratic societies intensified. While most theorists argue that some degree of separation between the sacred and secular spheres is necessary to safeguard democracy, the actual configuration of church-state relations differs widely across the world’s established democracies (Monsma and Soper 1997). Fox (2007) shows that, in fact, most contemporary democracies do not have a strict separation of religion and state, and argues that researchers should instead focus their attention on which forms of government regulation of religion are compatible with democracy.

Based on actual instances of religion-state relations, Stepan’s “twin tolerations” model describes how religion and state can coexist successfully not through strict separation but through cooperation. Stepan argues that to learn about workable religion-state relations from
existing democracies, we must acknowledge that Western European countries “have arrived at a
democratically negotiated freedom of religion from state interference and all of them allow
religious groups freedom, not only of private worship, but to organize groups in civil society and
political society” (Stepan 2001, 222). He notes that stable democratic patterns of religion-state
relations can be secular or non-secular, but must share the features of allowing for all religious
groups to fully participate in civil society and to compete for power in political society.

According to Stepan, one of the non-democratic patterns of religion-state relations
includes cases in which the state or religious groups preclude the necessary degree of political
autonomy for the other entity. In such a state, secularism is enshrined in the constitution, the
state regulates the internal organization and external expression of religion, the right of religious
groups to participate actively in civil society is controlled by the state, religious parties are
banned, relatively competitive elections are normally held, and the right of private worship is
respected (p.225). This system is non-democratic because the state controls religion and denies
rights of religiously oriented civil and political groups to compete for power. This violates the
toleration that states need to extend to religious groups in society.

Turkey as a case fits this non-democratic pattern described by Stepan. Laicism (laiklik) in
Turkey is intended to impose secularism in political and social life, but instead amounts to
control of religion by the state (Yavuz 2009). The 1982 military-drafted Turkish Constitution
declares secularism an un-amendable core principle of the Republic. The Constitution also
guarantees individual religious freedom, as long as its practice does not threaten the nation or the
secular order. Yet, all religious institutions are under the control of the state’s Directorate of
Religious Affairs (Diyanet), including training imams, building mosques, religious education,
and the content of weekly sermons. The Diyanet limits its direction on religion to Islam, and in
particular to the dominant Hanefi sect of Sunni Islam. Nevertheless, it claims to represent all Muslims, including the Shafi sect among the Sunnis (about 6 percent of Turkey’s population) and Alevi (Çarkoğlu 1999). This allows the state to quell religion’s independent influence while marginalizing minority sects. Moreover, such centralized control of religion assumes homogeneity of religion that does not exist. While the Diyanet controls the practice of Sunni Islam in the country, approximately 12 percent of Turkish citizens belong to the Alevi community, a sect related to Shiism and considered heretical by many Sunnis (Çarkoğlu and Toprak 2006, 37). A small number of non-Muslim communities (Armenians, Greeks, and Jews) are recognized by the state as minorities with rights to practice their own religion in accordance with the Lausanne Treaty, but other non-Muslim minorities lack such rights.

Despite the official policy of secularism in Turkey, religious beliefs and practice remain high, and have been on the increase during the AKP government. Çarkoğlu and Toprak (2006, 41-42) present data from public opinion surveys conducted in 1999 and 2006 to support this claim. In 1999, those that identified themselves as religious or very religious made up about 31 percent of the population. In 2006 this number was 59 percent. Moreover, between 1999 and 2006 there have been increases in those who identify themselves as extremely religious as well as those that identify first as Muslim before other identities, such as Turkish. When asked to rank themselves on a 0-10 scale (0 representing “Secularist” and 10 “Islamist”), 20 percent of the people surveyed identified themselves closer to the “Secularist” side of the spectrum (0-4 on the scale), while about 49 percent identified closer to the “Islamist” end of the scale (6-10). In 2006, respondents who voted for the AKP placed themselves, on average, at 7.1 on the scale, while voters for the secular Republican People’s Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP) placed
themselves at 2.8. Thus, AKP voters considered themselves to be more “Islamist” than those who voted for other parties.

With high levels of religiosity in Turkey, we would expect citizens to demand an outlet for expressing their religious views and preferences in public. In the next two sections, we discuss how restrictions on political party representation of religious views force religion into the realm of civil society. With parties legally constrained by the Constitution to protect secularism, they must turn to non-state partners to help channel religious interests into politics. In Turkey, civil actors have emerged to take on this role.

**Religious Political Parties and the AKP**

Islamic politics is often studied in the context of political movements such as parties that try to gain control of political power through elections or other means. Yet, political scientists have generally refrained from theorizing on religious parties. According to Kalyvas (2000, 393), “religious parties are political actors who rely on appeals that incorporate and appropriate religious symbols and rituals.” Gunther and Diamond (2003, 21-22) group religious parties into two types: 1) the denominational mass party, which is pluralist, democratic, and tolerant (e.g. Christian democratic parties in Western Europe); and 2) fundamentalist parties, which are theocratic and proto-hegemonic (e.g. Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria and the Welfare Party in Turkey). Even though both types of religious parties rely on external religious institutions to define their core ideologies with regard to religious values, denominational mass parties advocate an incremental agenda that allows for competing ideas to coexist, while fundamentalist parties seek to reorganize the state and society around a strict reading of religious doctrine. Tepe (2008, 361) proposes a different typology of religious parties, distinguishing between national
religious parties that wish to redefine secular institutions in a religious paradigm, and religious expansionist and revisionist parties that challenge secular institutions by offering equivalent religious alternatives. This categorization provides a useful way of conceptualizing religious parties without labeling them as democratic or non-democratic and gives greater weight to context in analyzing their effects on political systems.

While the literature seeks to define, describe, and categorize parties as religious or not, this study explores how religion influences secular parties—a condition that is likely to exist where religious parties are banned or where religious interests are not large or organized enough to create formal political parties. Such parties can be found in Muslim countries, or in religiously diverse countries where disparate religious denominations, charities, and associations seek to have religion play a role in the politics, social relations, and economic system of the country. In majority Muslim countries, where religious authority is often decentralized and various sects, brotherhoods, and imams compete for influence, parties must cater to diverse religious constituencies, making it difficult for them to be both religious and catch-all parties at the same time.

The Turkish Constitution contains articles that outline restrictions regarding religion and political parties, prohibiting parties from having statutes, programs, and activities that conflict with the fundamental principles of the republic—including secularism. The Constitutional Court has the power to dissolve a party if it violates those principles. Since 1962, the Constitutional Court has banned 24 political parties for violating the principles of secularism, for religious fundamentalism, and for emphasizing Kurdish ethnic identity (Human Rights Watch 2008). The law on political parties prohibits parties from being based on or using names of region, races, persons, families, classes, cemaat, religion, sect, or tarikas. The Constitution was amended in
1995 and 2001 to strengthen guarantees for political parties as a part of the series of reforms for Turkey’s bid to join the European Union. The ban on political parties from cooperating with and receiving material assistance from associations, trade unions, foundations, cooperatives, and public professional associations was lifted.

Despite the restrictions, Islamist political parties have existed in Turkey since the 1960s, formed by leaders based in the trade and commerce sectors of civil society. The Islamist predecessors of the AKP, including the National Order Party (Milli Nizam Partisi, MNP), the National Salvation Party (Milli Selamet Partisi, MSP), the Welfare Party (Refah Partisi, RP), and the Virtue Party (Fazilet Partisi, FP) carried openly Islamist agendas but were closed through state interventions by the military or the Constitutional Court. The most successful of these parties was RP, which was able to enter into a coalition government in 1995 and place its leader, Necmettin Erbakan, in the position of Prime Minister. The RP owes its success to grassroots mass mobilization in poor urban neighborhoods and victories in local elections (Özler 2000, White 2002).

The coalition government under Erbakan paid special attention to education through the İmam Hatip (religious secondary) schools and Quran courses, which are both under government control in Turkey. The visibility of women wearing the headscarf in the form of the türban also increased during this period.¹ The Islamist movement used both these issues as symbols of the strong role that the state plays in regulating the religious freedom of the Sunni Muslim majority. This sparked concern among the military, especially regarding the growth of İmam Hatip schools, which produce more graduates than needed for preaching in mosques and teaching the Quran. The state was also uneasy about religiously-trained students going to the universities to

¹ The türban is a form of head covering particular to contemporary Turkey. Göle (1996) describes türban as a way for young women to distinguish their dress from the traditional forms of the headscarf worn throughout Turkey, and to signal their participation in a transgressive and new type of political Islamist movement.
study subjects that could place them in government bureaucracies and politics. On February 28, 1997, the military gave a strong warning to the government as they found intelligence reports regarding Islamist activities in the country alarming. As a result, Erbakan resigned and a new coalition government without the Islamists was formed. The RP and its reincarnation the FP were closed by Constitutional Court decisions in 1998 and 2001, respectively.

The AKP was founded in 2001 as a result of a split between the Islamists. The more traditional Islamists formed the Felicity Party (Saadet Partisi, SP). The AKP, led by Abdullah Gül and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, represented a younger and more moderate generation of Islamists. It won parliamentary elections in 2002 and 2007, allowing it to form a single party government. The AKP’s victory in 2002 has been attributed to voters’ perception of the party being an alternative to existing corrupt parties (Baran 2008, Yavuz 2009). The party was also able to capitalize on the rightward move in Turkish mass public opinion and appealed to those with strong objections to state centered politics (Çarkoğlu 2008, Kalaycıoğlu 2007, Öniş 2007).

There is continuing debate about the political position of the AKP (Dağı 2008, Yavuz 2003 & 2006). The AKP describes itself as a “conservative democratic” party committed to protecting individual rights, economic development, and membership in the EU. It rejects being characterized as an Islamist party, insisting on its position as a defender of the secular republic. It describes itself as heir to the center-right tradition of the previous Democrat and Motherland Parties and is characterized as representing a shift from the political Islam advocated by the

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2 Imam Hatip schools had been putting out more graduates than needed for preaching since the 1970s. As the government came to be controlled by a political party that could employ these graduates in the bureaucracy, the military and the judiciary became more alarmed. See Aksoy (1990) for a detailed discussion of the increased number of students in the religious schools in relation to other technical schools in the 1970s and 1980s.


4 Website of the AKP, http://eng.akparti.org.tr/english/, accessed 3/1/09. See in particular the party’s responses to the indictment by the Constitutional Court, 6/5/08 and 7/15/08.
Islamist parties of Erbakan toward a more social form of Islam that keeps religion off the political agenda (Dağı 2008). Introvigne (2006) describes the AKP as occupying the conservative-moderate center niche in the varied religious marketplace of Turkey.

Some scholars have claimed that the AKP can be compared to Christian Democratic parties in Western Europe (Hale 2005). Others take this comparison further by creating a new category of movements referred to as “Muslim Democracy.” According to Vali Nasr (2005), Muslim Democrats are different from Islamists in that they do not have as their ultimate goal the imposition of Shari’a based rule. Instead, they are committed to democratic principles and recognize the need to shape their party programs based on what will win the most votes. Thus, Muslim Democratic parties arise in situations where there is already some measure of democracy. They are pragmatic politicians who primarily appeal to Muslim values indirectly and deemphasize the Islamist aspects of their party’s agenda. In fact, Nasr argues that Muslim Democratic leaders are less conservative than their populations, backing conservative Islamic policies as strategic moves designed to gain votes. Nasr does not, however, delve into the specific ways in which these Muslim Democrats mobilize supporters.

While Nasr groups the AKP into the Muslim Democrat category, the AKP rejects the label to emphasize that it considers religious values to be important, not Islamist politics (Akdoğan 2006). Instead, the party has invented the term “conservative democracy” to describe its ideology. As Prime Minister Erdoğan described this ideology during a seminar in 2004, the “AK Party believes religion is important as a social value, but does not think it is right to use religion as a political tool, change state ideology, and organize around religious symbols.”

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Thus, the party has tried to distance itself from a specific religious identity while it praises strong religious identification and pride as important virtues in citizens. However, the problem with how the party explicates conservative democracy is that it does not rest on an established ideology. Instead, it combines a variety of ideas that are unique to the party and the Turkish setting—making the AKP both a “catch-all party” while also representing a very large religiously conservative base. The AKP claims to look to the Republican Party in the United States as a model for the type of party that promotes economic liberalism yet also upholds social conservatism through traditional cultural values, including religious faith (Insel 2003).

The AKP has distinguished itself from other Islamist parties by trying to pursue the demands of its religious constituents without having an openly religious political identity. Yet, it has taken up the same issues of its Islamist predecessors but frames religious issues as matters of human rights and freedoms. Since coming to power in 2002, the party has introduced laws to abolish the university score differential for trade school graduates that would benefit İmam Hatip schools, a constitutional change to relax headscarf restrictions in higher educational settings, and a change in the Turkish criminal code to make adultery a crime. Despite having a majority in parliament, the party failed to pass any of these measures due to opposition from other parties, feminist civil society, and the courts.

While the AKP claims to hold a conservative democratic identity that represents all religious people, in actuality the party represents the interests of the dominant religious group. They have worked on the priorities of the Sunni Muslim majority while denying requests to aid religious minorities. For example, despite decisions of the European Court of Human Rights, the party has denied the minority Alevi religious group the right to opt out of compulsory religious education and open Cem (prayer) houses with state support. It also has refused to reopen the
Greek Orthodox Halki Seminary (closed since 1971), on an island off the coast of İstanbul.

According to Yavuz:

  Although the rhetoric of the AKP is libertarian, its practices are deeply sectarian and intolerant towards different conceptualizations of Islam. One would expect the AKP government not to discriminate against any religious groups, including the Alevi minority. However, the AKP’s definition of Islam is solely defined by the Sunni-Hanefi teachings. Moreover, the AKP does not appreciate the significant difference between religious and secular reasoning…. A close examination of the AKP’s policies indicates that the party wants religion to play an important role in policies and also favors only the Sunni-Hanefi version of Islam (Yavuz 2009, 163).

The party has also failed to live up to promises of internal democracy within its organization, and has made little progress on women’s issues since coming to power (Tepe 2006).

  Even if the AKP does not fit a strict definition of a religious party discussed at the beginning of this section it still promotes policies that the previous Islamist parties and dominant religious community consider to be high-priority issues. There is an ongoing debate among scholars of Turkish politics as to whether the AKP is an Islamist or Islamic party (Dağlı 2008; Yavuz 2009; Yıldırım, İnüş and Özler 2007). For the purposes of our study, we accept the AKP’s refusal to be labeled as such, noting that the party has not been subject to closure by the Constitutional Court. Rather than studying the official representation of religious interests in party platforms or in government, we instead argue that shifting the focus to unofficial sectors might help to illuminate the current situation in Turkey as well as to understand religion-state relations in other majority Muslim countries. We thus present our research on religious interest groups in Turkey to examine what effect they have on the country’s politics and policies. While
religious interest groups have been studied in the Western context, there has been less research on such organizations in the Muslim world (exceptions include Bayat 2007, Berman 2003, Jamal 2007).

**Islamic Civil Society**

The creation of Islamically-oriented institutions and the participation of religiously motivated Muslims in civil society has led to a gradual “Islamization of society from below” in many Muslim-majority countries (Esposito 2003, 76). Several Islamist groups have demonstrated their ability to provide social goods. This social success has translated into political success, as was seen with professional organizations in Iran before the Revolution, religio-cultural organizations in Tunisia and Algeria, and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (Esposito 2007). Even though Turkey remains officially secular, we observe similar developments in recent decades.

Since 1995, there have been changes to the laws governing civil society, resulting in part from Turkey’s negotiations with the European Union. Legal changes affected both secular and religious organizations, expanding their freedom of association and expression. Beginning in 2001, civil society groups were allowed to engage in political activities (Özbudun and Yazıcı 2004). Yet, the changes have not had a meaningful effect on freedom of religion for minority groups, and there is an ongoing struggle to find where religion fits in political life under the current state-imposed restrictions.

Islamic civil society—and in particular the segment that represents the Anatolian bourgeoisie—has been cited as one of the main reasons for the AKP’s success (Yavuz 2006). Nevertheless, the effect of such organizations on Turkish politics in general and the AKP’s
policies in particular has not been closely studied since the party gained control of government. To examine the effect of religion on Turkish politics from the non-state sector, we conducted interviews with leaders of civil society organizations and the major political parties in İstanbul and Ankara in the winter of 2008-09. We targeted 12 major Islamist nongovernmental organizations dealing with economic development and human rights—two issues on which the AKP has focused since coming to power. We also spoke with representatives of six major secular associations and foundations and nine members of parliament and party officials in charge of civil society relations from the AKP, the CHP, and the Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, MHP). During the interviews, we asked the civil society leaders to describe how Islam inspires their organization. We also asked them to assess their relationship with political parties, in particular the AKP since it has been in government, and the current political situation in Turkey regarding democracy, the economy, and human rights. While these groups have no official ties to the AKP, their informal ties through the socio-economic and intellectual realms are important for bringing Islam into the political sphere.

Islamist groups have been known to use social service provision as a means of gaining support for their movements. Groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, and Hezbollah have attracted mass followings by providing services that governments have been unable to sufficiently provide, such as education, housing, and food aid. Islamist parties in Turkey have also used these methods to attract support. For example, throughout the 1990s the RP and FP used door-to-door grassroots organization, making their outreach efforts more effective than those of other parties. In the 1994 local elections, the RP took control of several municipalities

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6 As this study is concerned with the informal influence of religion on Turkish politics, we focus our discussion on interviews with religious organizations. The Islamist organizations were selected from the Common Mind Movement–New Constitution and Democracy Platform (Ortak Akıl Hareketi–Yeni Anayasa Platformu, www.demokrasiplatformu.org), which brought together about 400 organizations during the attempts of the AKP to amend the Constitution to legalize the headscarf in the universities in 2008.
and mayoralties in major metropolitan areas. They converted their charitable organizations affiliated with the party into municipal operations and rapidly initiated a wide range of programs creating health clinics, coal, and food distribution programs for the urban poor, to be allocated regardless of political affiliation.

The AKP has continued some of the policies of its Islamist predecessors, creating self-sustaining businesses in order to provide social services. Some municipalities have independent foundations that administer their charity programs. Mayors interviewed in 2001 and 2005 admitted that they would “kindly ask” those seeking to do business with the municipality to make donations to their foundations.7 Akinci (1999) provides evidence of this practice by Islamist local officials prior to the AKP’s formation, noting that those who submitted proposals for municipal contracts or permits were asked to make mandatory “contributions” to the party or the foundations it supported in exchange for approval. Thus, charity-based work has been closely tied with local government control by the AKP and their continued success in connecting with local businesses.

The AKP has forged relationships with Islamist civil society groups that go beyond contracting out of service provision. These ties are mostly intellectual but inevitably spill over to the political arena where AKP is dominant. We interviewed several groups representing Islamist businesses that are emblematic of the types of groups that have had good relations with the AKP. The Independent Industrialists and Businessmen’s Association (Müstakil Sanayici ve İşadamları Derneği, MÜSİAD) is one of the largest of the groups that represents the economic interests of small and medium-sized enterprises. While not explicitly referring to Islam in its goals, the organization states its desire to “contribute to the emergence of a society of people who have inner depth” and a “common business ethics model fed by cultural and spiritual values brought

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7 The mayors interviewed in 2001 later joined the AKP.
along from past to present,” (http://www.musiad.org.tr/). MÜSİAD represents those businesses referred to as the “Anatolian Tigers”—firms from central and southern Anatolia where inhabitants are religiously devout but society is described as being entrepreneurial (Turgut 2006). MÜSİAD favors increasing ties to other Islamic countries rather than building connections with the European Union.

Similar to other Islamist organizations we interviewed, the MÜSİAD representative emphasized the group’s independence from the AKP, and refused to acknowledge any sort of cooperation with the party (Personal Interview, December 2008). This was in contrast with an AKP top official who noted that they have close relationships with anti-systemic civil society organizations like MÜSİAD (Personal Interview, January 2009). Party leaders are often in attendance at events sponsored by the group and it regularly publishes reports pertaining to economic policy and meets with government officials to promote its ideas. The MÜSİAD representative focused instead on the problem of human rights in Turkey. He argued that the liberal focus on the rights of minorities ignores the fact that the majority in Turkey is repressed by restrictions against religion such as the headscarf ban in universities.

The MÜSİAD representative also noted that one of Turkey’s biggest internal disputes—the “Kurdish problem”—could be solved by emphasizing the common Muslim brotherhood of Kurds and Turks rather than focusing on ethnic differences. Another example of this type of reasoning comes from a report on the Kurdish problem published by the Islamist umbrella organization, the Volunteer Organization of Turkey (Türkiye Gönüllü Teşşekkürler Vakfı, TGTV). The report argues that separatists are not a majority in the region and that the cultural and religious bonds between the people are strong. It suggests that that the solution to the social problems of Kurds in the southeast region should come from civil society—that is, Islamist
foundations should take care of people’s needs. The report emphasizes the common Islamic identity of the Kurds and Turks in fighting against the “Crusaders” (TGTV 2007, Section A3). Similarly, in debates surrounding the laws regarding Kurdish citizens, AKP leaders have used images of Kurds and Turks fighting against enemies together and Kurdish and Turkish mothers using the same prayers for children lost to civil conflict.

In interviews with economic organizations, strong Islamist beliefs were rarely expressed openly. Yet, in an interview with another Islamist organization representing small and mid-sized Islamist businesses it was noted that the group would support banning interest in banking—in the spirit of Islam—if the global economic environment would allow for it (Personal Interview, December 2008). Otherwise, these organizations were careful in constructing responses that allied with the AKP’s economic position and emphasizing social policies regarding the headscarf, religious secondary schools, and minorities. All the Islamist economic organizations we interviewed emphasized their independence from the AKP, yet, at the same time, all the Islamist economic groups interviewed admitted that they believed the AKP was more effective in dispersing capital toward their businesses and toward Anatolia (where much of their membership resides). Some also admitted the close personal relationship that their leadership may have with people in the AKP.

Even though the AKP does not have official links to these organizations, it does have very close ideological and leadership ties to them. Like the civil society leaders interviewed, Erdoğan and others in the AKP associate their ideology of conservatism with the concept of hizmet, which means rendering social services in the name of Islam and implies a move away from state-provided social welfare. In interviews of party officials from the AKP and representatives of Islamist charity-based foundations and associations, individuals repeatedly
hearkened back to Ottoman history and used Islamic ethics and morality as a guide to policy, not abstract political ideologies. Thus conservatism in Turkey has a unique meaning, with a stress on morality and orderly change, giving religion an important role in defining the public good and how it should be achieved. As Yavuz (2009, 87) describes it, Turkish conservatism is “not anti-statist but rather pro-nation, pro-state, and especially pro-Ottoman Islam.” A shared Ottoman history and identity has been used by Islamists to counter the secularist version of Turkish identity (Çinar 2005).

Islamic organizations focus on encouraging a social type of Islam instead of a political one by constantly emphasizing that during Ottoman times there existed a society in which the religious foundations took care of providing for education, food aid, cultural preservation, building and maintenance of infrastructure, and other services. They argue that this is a way of keeping the government secular while allowing Islam to play a larger role in society. While it is not uncommon for such faith-based organizations to play a role in public service provision even in Western democracies, the AKP and its supporters favor religious organizations to provide these services. However, proponents of this view neglect to acknowledge that religious groups may have conditions attached to the charity they provide, potentially posing problems for minorities or those people who do not want to abide by religious rules.

The ability of the AKP to combine grassroots organizing, charity-based local government aid, and contracting out service provision to supporters in the business sector has contributed to the party’s success. These strategies help to meet the immediate needs of the urban poor, and have served the businesses with which the party contracts. Islamist associations and foundations have served as mediators in this process by providing charity aid, identifying aid recipients, and representing the businesses that the party uses to provide social services. When constituents see
Islamist businesses providing subsidized food or other aid in AKP-controlled municipalities, they associate the party with Islamic morals and ideals. While the party organization remains officially secular in its platforms and national-level policies, through its local service provision it conveys to its base that it retains the principles of its Islamist predecessors.

It is not only economically focused groups but also humanitarian and rights-based organizations that are involved in the civil society-party nexus. Many Turks feel an obligation to give because of their religious beliefs and requirements (Çarkoğlu 2006). The Islamic requirement of charity thus shapes the civic activities of foundation and associations. Religious organizations such as mosque-building associations (which make up about 20 percent of all associations in Turkey) have the largest volunteer and donor base (Bikmen and Meydancıoğlu 2006). Islamist foundations throughout the country provide scholarships and housing to students and aid to the needy.

Some of the largest provider organizations have ties with the Gülen Movement, a moderate Islamist movement organized around the religious leader Fetullah Gülen. They stress inter-cultural dialogue and tolerance as part of their ideology (www.fetullahgulen.org). Despite the self-imposed exile of its leader, members of the movement occupy important positions, and the movement runs several media outlets, including a major newspaper (Zaman) and television stations. In addition, scores of affiliated foundations and associations exist to disseminate the group’s message to Turkish citizens as well as politicians and academics abroad. Gülen supporters are also successful business people organized in their own association, the Confederation of Businessmen and Industrialists of Turkey (Türkiye İşadamları ve Sanayiciler Konfederasyonu, TUSKON). A representative from the organization admits that the group has
benefited from its relationship with the AKP government (Personal correspondence, January 2009).

While the movement has been officially non-partisan, it has had recent close ties to the AKP. The Gülen Movement openly supported the AKP in the 2007 national elections, breaking tradition with their previously non-partisan stance (Kuru 2007, 143). The intellectual connection between the AKP and Gülen movement can be illustrated through the annual Abant Platform meetings, a forum in which invited academics, civil society leaders, and politicians gather to discuss issues related to Turkish society, international affairs, and Islam. Past meeting topics have included “Islam and Secularism,” “Religion, State, and Society,” and “Pluralism and Social Compromise” (www.abantplatform.org). An official we interviewed from an affiliated Gülen organization, the Journalists and Writers Foundation (Gazeteciler ve Yazarlar Vakfı, GYV) explained the informal connection between the Gülen Movement and AKP:

The first Abant meeting was about Islam and secularism. Because it was the first time people from different sectors came together, there were intense debates. The intensity reached a point where there was almost a fight. But everyone took advantage of each other’s knowledge. Many people who were founding members of the AKP attended these meetings, and they openly declared that they learned a lot from these experiences. Some people say that if a radical Islamist party has moved to the center today—a party like AKP—in this, the Abant meetings have been influential. As far as I know, there are seven or eight ministers in the cabinet, also the president, Abdullah Gül, who have attended our meetings more than two or three times. Also Professor Mehmet Aydın, the Minister of State, was the Secretary General of the Abant Platform, and then he was the President of the Abant Platform for six years (Personal Interview, December 2008).
The founders of the AKP have embraced some of the ideas from the Gülen Movement, illustrating the effect that non-state religious actors can have on politics. Consistent with the overall argument made in this paper regarding Islamist civil society, Kuru (2007, 150) forwards a similar argument about Gülen Movement-AKP relations: “scholars who simply focus on the ‘political’ actor (i.e., the AK Party) of ideational transformation of Turkey make a mistake by undermining the important role of a ‘social’ agent (i.e., the Gülen Movement).”

While Islamist business associations emphasize Islamic morals and business practices in their platforms, Islamist human rights associations in Turkey almost exclusively focus on issues related to religious freedom for the majority Sunni community, including overturning the ban on headscarves in public offices and universities and improving the higher education prospects for the graduates of İmam Hatip schools. These human rights groups have mainly focused on symbolic issues that have become a point of contention between Islamists and secularists in Turkey. The Organization of Human Rights and Solidarity for Oppressed People (İnsan Hakları ve Mazlumlar İçin Dayanışma Derneği, MAZLUM-DER) is one of the largest and most prominent human rights groups in Turkey. While the group was founded to protect the rights of people to wear the headscarf and practice religion without repression, their leaders have expressed a desire to expand their repertoire to reflect that of a universal human rights organization (Personal Interview, January 2009). The group has made efforts in this direction by having joint campaigns with secular human rights associations. Despite the leadership’s efforts, the organization remains focused on more narrow issues as its membership has a “moral” stance that is more rigid (Kadroğlu 2005, 35-37).

While the AKP makes claims to broader representation through its “conservative democratic” identity, they have addressed socio-economic and human rights issues according to
the narrow definitions of the Islamist community. Rights advocates in Turkey have demanded expansion of educational and religious freedoms for all groups. The AKP could have used the headscarf issue as a symbol of limitations on freedom of expression and religion in Turkey and addressed issues of access to education, freedom of expression in academia, and religious freedom for all groups in their suggestions for constitutional reform. Instead, the party has limited its efforts to repealing the headscarf ban and improving the position of İmam Hatip school students. Rights advocates have interpreted this as a disingenuous attempt to solve problems of religious freedom in Turkish politics. Like the AKP, none of the Islamist organizations that we interviewed spoke about the problems of other religious groups—including Alevi Christians—as a priority for democratization. Similarly, on socio-economic issues the AKP limits its focus to charity-based aid in line with the Islamists’ emphasis on the Ottoman heritage.

The Cycle of Religiosity: From Social to Political Islam, Back to the Personal

In defining how religion crosses over from the realm of social and economic civil society into party politics under the AKP government, we also consider how these relationships affect citizens living under an officially secular system. In democratic societies, citizens are expected to have religious freedom, which includes the right to not to practice religion at all. Yet in Turkey, scholars have argued that social aspects of religious life cross personal boundaries, challenging the notion of a secular society. Şerif Mardin (2008) has characterized this phenomenon as mahalle baskası (neighborhood pressure). The concept refers to a “watchful eye” on the part of citizens in a neighborhood to protect Islamic values as they are interpreted by the group. As Mardin characterizes it, Islamic values are not necessarily static but nevertheless they have
strong implications for the behavior of all citizens living in the neighborhood—especially for the lives of women. He proposes that a common morality is imposed through the process of “being watched” by the self-appointed moral authority of the neighborhood.

Mardin explains that the *mahalle* is a well-developed concept in Turkey because it comes from Ottoman times. This is in contrast to the Republic, an idea imposed upon Turks by the state without reference to shared tradition. Mardin’s argument implies a close connection between Islam and local politics carried out through the informal structure of the neighborhood and reflected in its formal governmental institutions. While in the previous section we explained the connection between the party and civil society organizations at the municipal and societal levels, here Mardin expresses the importance of these connections for the daily lives of citizens. In a study that documents these daily experiences, Toprak et al. (2008) report on religious moral pressure at the local level, especially in the provinces. They document the presence of the “watchful eye” from the perspective of minorities and secular people, and the perceived role of the AKP in exacerbating discrimination against these groups.

The Anatolian provinces have always contained a conservative majority that has tried to exert moral pressure on citizens. The Toprak et al. (2008) study shows that Alevis, Kurds, Romas, and the non-religious feel that they are being further marginalized socially, economically, and politically under the AKP government. The study reports on numerous examples of secular Turks and minorities who feel that they cannot get government contracts for their businesses or promotions for their jobs unless they hide their identity (see also Oehring and Ceyhan 2009). These groups feel that outsourcing of services has gone to Islamist firms that sympathize with the AKP. In the provinces, merchants without connections to either the AKP or
the Gülen Movement reported feeling like they could not survive in the current marketplace (Toprak et al. 2008, 163-170).

There is also a sense of religion creeping into public life, with the non-religious and members of non-majority religions feeling pressured to participate in religious rituals. As prayers have been more openly practiced by AKP-appointed teachers, health care workers, high level administrators, and elected officials, those that work for the AKP appointees feel that they cannot get promotions unless they practice prayer and fasting in public (Toprak et al. 2008, 108-10). Workers have also expressed the need to feign religiosity by joining the appropriate labor union. Between 2002 and 2008, Memur-Sen, the Civil Servants Union that is closely affiliated with the AKP, gained 263,000 new members and 10,000 transfers while other unions lost membership (113). Even the simple act of individuals greeting each other has become a symbol of one’s ideological position. Some workers report that they have started using the religious greeting selaminaleykum [peace be upon you] instead of merhaba [hello] in order to impress their more devout superiors (148). While these are just a few examples of how everyday life is affected, the study documents interviews with 401 individuals regarding their experiences with the unofficial manifestation of religious pressures and its connections with the government.

We also observed the strong presence of religious expression in the Islamist organizations during our fieldwork. While many charity, human rights, and economic organizations do not serve an expressed religious function, we noted important differences between the offices of the Islamist and secular NGOs. Islamist organizations tended to have a room set aside for prayer, while secularist organizations did not. In fact, on one occasion we were asked to pause our interview so the interviewee could pray. AKP headquarters in both Istanbul and Ankara also contained prayer rooms, while the other party offices we visited did not. Second, most women in
the Islamist organizations and the AKP offices covered their hair, almost exclusively in the **türkban**, while secularist organizations did not have any female employees who wore headscarves. Finally, while all businesses in Turkey are required to display images of Atatürk, we found these to be displayed more prominently in the secular nationalist organizations, whereas the Islamist organizations tended to display Arabic calligraphy wall art more prominently. Thus the public expression of religion was strongly present in these Islamist organizations—and in the offices of the AKP—despite the fact that the organizations may not have had stated goals that required religious commitment.

**Conclusion**

Stepan’s “twin tolerations” model recognizes various types of religion-state relations that exist in both democratic and non-democratic societies. Although scholars have traditionally considered the separation of religion and state to be an important feature of democracy, recent work has demonstrated that even the most advanced and longstanding democracies do not have strict separation between the two spheres. Moreover, countries that try to impose strict secularist systems face problems both in guaranteeing religious freedom for their citizens and in preventing the rise of extremism. Countries that are strictly and officially secular provide a fertile field to study these questions, for they help to show how religion can never be taken off the table, and how politicians can still find ways to integrate religious interests into their policies and platforms despite legal impediments.

The case of Turkey provides a good example of the way that religious groups can be influential in politics in an officially secular setting. Despite the fact that the political activities of religious movements are severely restricted, civil society groups have been able to have
intellectual and ideological connections with leaders of the AKP to influence the direction of policy in the country, and to retain a system in which the policy preferences of the Sunni majority take precedence over the protection of minorities. Turkey has made important advances in personal freedoms since adopting the EU’s Copenhagen criteria, yet it has still managed to deny extending rights to religious groups. The increasing social dominance of religion in daily life makes it difficult for religious minorities and the non-religious to feel that they have an equal opportunity to advance under the AKP government. Under the cover of “conservative democracy,” the party continues to advance a view of freedom that is tied to traditional Islamic ideas about charity, religious expression, and the role of women in society. We have argued that the secular legal system of Turkey does not guarantee that Islam remains outside of politics in Turkey. Thus, the AKP’s relationship with civil society creates a new model for understanding how religion and politics intersect through social ties.

This type of analysis can be extended to study other countries in which religious expression is restricted in the civil or political realms. For instance, like Turkey, the Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan have laws forbidding religious parties. While the republics have had varying success with democratization, each continues to face problems with incorporating demands for Islamist representation in government. By banning Islamist politics—including moderate groups—the governments have found themselves confronted with challenges to their rule by foreign-based radical movements (Akbarzadeh 2003, Gunn 2003, Khalid 2007). Examination of the civil society sectors in these countries can help us to understand whether Islamists are being given alternative outlets for religious expression. If so, this may help moderate extremist tendencies, as appears to be the case in Turkey today.
The implications of this study extend to the body of literature that attempts to explain why majority Muslim countries have been democratically disadvantaged (Fish 2002, Ross 2008). Looking to macro-level factors such as dependence on natural resources or female representation in government, scholars attempt to identify characteristics unique to Islam and/or shared by Muslim-majority countries to explain the democratic deficit in the Muslim world. Our analysis suggests that to understand how religion affects national-level politics, we need to look past the religion itself and examine the effects of regulations set up to govern relations between religious groups and the state. By forcing religious groups to circumvent official channels to have their interests represented, restrictions jeopardize the transparency and accountability of government as well as the rights of those who are unable to access those in power, such as religious minorities and the non-religious. This situation is not unique to Muslim countries, however. Any country with strict regulations on religious group activity is subject to the mechanisms we outline.

This study also speaks to research on uncivil society. As Jamal (2007) and others have shown, civic associations do not always create the type of social capital that enhances democratic government, as they often reflect the social context in which they exist. Civic groups in patronage-based societies thus reproduce the types of vertical relations that have been shown to be detrimental to producing the type of society that supports democracy (Putnam 2003). Keeping in mind the potential positive and negative effects that nongovernmental organizations can have on democratic development, our study suggests that we need to incorporate analysis of these groups into a discussion of both the social and regulatory context in which they exist. That is, we argue that regulations interact with social context, and thus politics cannot be understood without examining this interaction. By paying attention to how groups are able to evade official
restrictions against their activities, we can evaluate both the effectiveness of religious regulations and the effect that religious groups have on politics.

Finally, our study points to the need to consider the effects of religious restrictions on religious movements. Scholars have argued that including previously excluded religious groups in the political process contributes to their moderation, while excluding them leads to radicalization (Yılmaz 2009). It is thus possible that by including Islamists in the voices that are being incorporated in policymaking, the AKP is contributing to the development of a moderate and democracy-friendly form of Islam in Turkey. However, on the other side we may witness radicalization of secular nationalists and religious minorities as groups representing increasingly excluded interests from the political process. One of the challenges facing Turkey as it proceeds with democratic consolidation is developing a system that provides opportunities for voices from all sides to be heard and represented.

Future research should expand the study of informal effects of religion on politics to other countries, particularly those in the Muslim world, to examine how religious voices are being incorporated into the public sphere. Researchers should also consider how Muslim countries might follow the example of countries where religious interest groups function like other civil society organizations and play an important role in public debates. The main obstacle to such a situation developing in Muslim societies to date has been the presence of strong states that restrict the expression of independent and oppositional speech.
WORKS CITED


