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NEO-CONSERVATIVE ISLAM AND TRANSITION OF
SECULAR EDUCATION IN TURKEY

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Abstract: This article analyses the impact of neo-conservative Islam as an ideology on secular education across different periods of Turkish history, but particularly the past two decades. First, the role of religion in Turkish society is discussed, then, the effects of religion on the educational system during the past 70 years is examined, with examples given of how secular education has been eroded over time. Neo-conservatism emerged after 1990 and has since been infused into Turkey's educational system, with successive conservative governments having changed the structure and curricula at every level. This newly emerged Islamic tendency, called "neo-conservative Islamic Ideology," has become a discourse in education. As a result, it has influenced the very structure of school curricula, as well as the national educational policy and its implementation throughout Turkish society, causing much heated and widespread debate. Neoconservative policies have caused the emergence of a dual education system in Turkey, with one Islamic-oriented and the other secular.

Key words: neo-conservatism, Islam, education, curriculum.

1. Introduction

Conservatism in Turkey reemerged after the 1950's as an approach to resisting the communism and socialism disseminated in countries such as the United Kingdom, Japan, and Turkey. Conservatism even emerged in modern day Russia after 1990. Conservatism aligned itself with religious, economic and racial concerns under the theme of anticommunism and thereby fostered a distinctly modern form of conservatism. The main vehicle of dissemination of old conservatism was the media, as well as political party programs and "National Education Programs" (Guvén, 2017; Houtman, 2001; Jones, 2014; Krasón, 2017; Melville, 2017). Classical Conservatism claims that changes in society take place as a natural course that is organic rather than revolutionary. Thus, it is based on tradition and religious, cultural, or nationally defined beliefs and customs. It strives to defend the status quo or to change society gradually, while others seek to return to the values of an earlier period. Conservatism is opposed to Liberalism and Socialism. Neo-Conservatism is the "new" Conservative movement, which emerged in the United States in opposition to the perceived Liberalism of the 1960's. It emphasizes an interventionists government foreign policy, free trade and free market economics, and a general disapproval of counterculture. There is no single constant for conservatism, and its implementations change depending on the culture and differences in established values. Therefore, it is possible to say that conservatives have differing aims in different societies. However, there are certain common features of conservatism such as favoring an interventionist foreign policy, free trade and free market economics, and a general disapproval of counterculture. The conservative movement entered Turkey and Turkish societal absorbed values. The transformation of Turkey towards conservatism that began in the 1950's has since resurfaced, with clear ideological, economic, and religious outcomes.

Turkey is a religiously homogenous country with a 90% Muslim majority that is composed of orthodox and heterodox units, but there are also heterodox Muslims who usually prefer secularism. The new conservative educational reforms (impositions) disturbed many secular Turkish citizens as they regarded these developments as a threat to secularism (hereafter the term "laicism" is used interchangeably) in Turkey after 2005. The Conservative governments who were liberal in tendency in essence did not intervene in the faith and religious issues of their party programs, but followed the general principles of Conservatism and attempted to reshape Turkish society according to religious principles through educational and social institutions. Their main target was the creation of a new generation with more Islamic tendency rather than secular principles in education. Regarding the separation of religion and

state affairs as superficial, they struggled to restore a past bolstered by religious principles namely the routines of Islamic outlook (Brown, 1988, Lewis, 1993, Zurcher, 1996).

In fact, the current rulers of Turkey care less about secular state principle as they do other principles, and are inherently religious in their views and actions. They see secular constitutional and legal principles and the rules of the country as obstacles to them. They use the discourse of “the old Turkey” and abolish the secular state and secularization at every layer / sphere of the state mechanism. Their greatest tool for achieving this has been the use of faded concepts such as “national will” and dignified interests with capitalism. They exploit a clear and unflinching faith, and are well aware of how profitable “the indulgence” is for both this world and the next. They unite their politics with the fanaticism of a large extent of the populous and do not take into consideration the fundamental human rights’ debates on the principles of the secular state or education (Fildes, 2017; Guven, 2017; Pochta, 2017). The conservative government have placed Islam at the center of educational discourse and imposed it at all levels of the educational system. State affairs are based on fatwas, which is religious determination of lawmaking according to religious rather than secular principles, so that secularism has been put under great jeopardy as a result. These challenges have gained significant impetus during the past five years. However, it would be unfair to say that all these developments are the result of changes seen in the last 70 years. The roots of these changes date back to 1950. Therefore, the role of religion in Turkish society will be discussed first, and secondly the effects of religion on the educational system during the past 70 years, with examples given of how secular education has been eroded.

2. Islam and Education in Turkey’s Historical Context

Religion has deeply influenced the social, political and educational developments in Turkish society as a powerful tool that has shaped social institutions. Islam has changed the way of life and habits of the masses in the geography in which it spread since its emergence. Along with the orders of the Qur’an, the core text of Islam, Islamic lifestyle was developed through the interpretation of religious texts with Sunnah, which composed of the hadiths and recommendations of the Prophet Muhammed. These prescriptions were created as Sacred Law, namely Sharia (Gibb, 1970, p. 5). Sharia claims to constitute commonalities among Muslims in everyday practice and uniformity of the habits and customs seen in social institutions throughout all Muslim majority countries. The Turkish people have experienced Islam since the 9th century. After they embraced Islam, the way of life and traditions of the Turkish people changed fundamentally (Guvén, 2008). Islam has influenced the education

of Turkish society in different ways throughout history. Islam was a dominant educational factor during the Ottoman Period. After the westernization period of the Ottoman Empire, the degree of Islam's impact on education gradually decreased and western secular lines began to appear. The Republican Period, which started in 1923, changed the organization and content of Turkish education aimed at creating a new secular society and made significant efforts to lessen the impact of Islam on education. After the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, the education system was reorganized based on a new understanding and the influence of Islam was further decreased. Arabic characters were substituted for Latin, and European values were introduced into Turkish society. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey, made it clear to all that religious practices were to only be used in the religious arena (Ahmad, 1994, Kaplan, 2002; Saleem, 2017).

Secularism was brought to the fore in social and cultural life. In order for secularism to be fully implemented, religious courts were abolished by Atatürk and western-style courts were established. The Directorate of Religious Affairs replaced the Ministry of Pious Foundations and Sharia in 1924 as the public agency to represent the "true" interpretation of Islam.

The level of religious lessons in the national curriculum was decreased, but remained a part of the curriculum in order to avoid fanaticism and fatalism (Timur, 1999). In spite of the abolition of the Caliphate and Sharia in 1924, Turkey has never been secularized fully in the hearts of a segment of the general populous and even some classes of the country's officialdom. Secularism meant that Islam was no longer the official faith of Turkey, but merely one of the religions of the country, and in fact was subjected to stricter government supervision than all others religions. Governments focused on formal education and left the religious teaching to families (Güven, 2005; Lewis, 1961; Salmoni, 2000; Under, 2016). However, these attempts did not fully succeed as society was not ready for such dramatic changes, and hidden sects still imposed the old Islamic way of life among the rural communities. They created an opponent ideology which was Islamic, and criticized secularism and supported Islamic political parties at every occasion. These attempts led to the revitalization of Islam in Turkey, which consequently became an important element of the language of both social control and dissent, with many political parties appealing to Islam in order to attract voter support from the outset of the Turkish Republic's formation (Onis, 1997; Sakallıoğlu, 1996). Almost every government and political party in Turkey perceived religion as a reasonable way to approach the solution of social problems. As Lewis (1961) pointed out, the reason for government using religion was that "Islam has profound roots among the Turkish people. The deepest Islamic roots of Turkish life and culture are still alive in many regions of Turkey" (p. 418). It therefore seemed reasonable to employ religion as a mediating apparatus between the state and its citizens until religion and religious

parties turned into a threat to secular democracy. Notably, all of the right wing political parties referred to themselves as “liberal,” which equates to conserve in Turkish political jargon. They all aimed at the acquisition of votes, and usually preferred secularism against the extreme would of fundamentalism.

After World War II, national and international developments impacted state policy, and these developments pushed the government to create a multiparty order in Turkey. Islamic tendencies reappeared in education after the transition to the Multiparty System in 1946. Political parties regarded education as an important powerbase for transmitting Islamic values and virtues to the masses, and it was used extensively (Guvén, 2017). In 1949, the government included religious lessons (Orthodox Islam) into the curriculum of 4th and 5th grade elementary schools, and middle level religious schools were opened. In the same year, a Faculty of Divinity was created at Ankara University (Guvén, 2000). The liberal-conservative oriented Democratic Party won the 1950 General Election with a landslide victory and which saw secular education put under threat. The new government immediately lifted restrictions on religious education. Prayer Leader and Preacher Schools for Imams (Imam-Hatip schools) were opened, and the dispensing of religious instruction was refreshed in schools (Guvén, 2017). All of these developments were evidence of the appearance of Islam in education until the coup d'état of 1960.

3. The Rise of Islamic Education under the Shadow of the Military

Turkish democracy saw a number of military interventions after 1960; however, the defenders and creators of the 1980 military intervention included religious (Islamic) elements, and a very different discourse was seen compared to the coups d'état of 1960 and 1971 (Heper & Guney, 2000, p.635). The 1980 junta established a temporary government that gave priority to religious discourse related to educational regulation. The military cadres regarded the causes of sociopolitical problems that had brought Turkey to the edge of civil war as the lack of religious dignity and the domination of left wing discourse in society (Guvén, 2005). The military government appointed high-level bureaucrats with religious tendencies. Once these bureaucrats subsequently took over power from the military junta, they started to impose Islamic conservative principles into the social and cultural life of Turkey (Timur, 1999, p.153). Using religious discourse, they created an atmosphere disposed to the development of conservatism and Islam through support of the state apparatus (Karpat, 1988).

It is possible to claim the 1980's as the critical turning point in Turkey's new economic strategy, and also for the rise of Political Islam as a populist movement in Turkey. The link between the new socioeconomic trends and themes that Islam raised as an opposition movement can be observed through certain social, economic, and international indicators such as creating "Green Belt Project" and "Moderate Islam." The policy of the governments toward Islam caused radical changes in style and essence. First, religious instruction in primary and secondary schools was made mandatory in the 1982 Constitution of the Republic of Turkey (Republic of Turkey Constitution (1982). Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Anayasası, Article, 24.). Diverse conservative religious orders gained power by penetrating all ranks of political society, including political parties, the government, civil service, intelligentsia, as well as the business and banking worlds. These orders favored poor children from rural areas and ran unofficial Qur'an courses and Islamic education in line with conservative Islam. The activities of these orders expanded largely through the acquisition of funding from abroad, including Saudi Arabia (Mumcu, 1993).

During the period of 1980 to 1990, the socioeconomic changes, migration from rural to urban areas, and the socioeconomic gaps among the masses, pressure on the other political groups and the effect of Islam on education in the state's secular schools prepared the way for the reemergence of political Islam in Turkey, that first appeared in 1974 at a meeting of the Conservative National Salvation Party in Turkey. The Ministry of National Education paid attention to Islamic units by making religious lessons mandatory based on the constitution, recommending that books with an Islamic tendency be used in schools, and appointing directors who tended towards an Islamic way of life in particular. The national schools curricula placed special emphasis on the Turkish component of historical Islamic civilization and thereby transmitted Islamic messages to the subsequent generations of Turkish youth. Thus, Islam was accepted as a resource for educational policy (Salmoni, 2000, p. 41).

The conservative parties benefited from Islam by encouraging the expanding role of religion in society; increasing the number of Islamic schools, religious foundations, businesses, banks, social services and the media (Esposito, 1997, p. 6). The rise of Islamic tendency in education disturbed the military leadership who showed an expectedly strong reaction on February 28, 1997. They claimed a new reform and the duration of compulsory education increased from five years to eight years in order to reduce the power of religious secondary schools (Prayer Leader and Preacher schools for Imams, or Imam-Hatip schools), which were originally designed to educate the Muslim clergy, but which increasingly became a powerbase for groups as the defenders of political Islam and those political parties based on such an outlook (Guvén, 2000). However,

these interventions rebounded and led to the growing powers of conservative governments employing the concept of victimization. Islamic-leaning conservative parties gained power after winning elections following the financial crisis of 2000.

4. Islamization versus Secular Education

The Islamic-leaning conservative governments, which were significantly empowered in the 2000's, were closely interested in educational activities. With the help of non-governmental organizations and trade unions sharing the same opinion, they negatively criticized the existing educational system and introduced fundamental widespread changes. Compulsory religious instruction was introduced into primary and secondary schools, and religious education was expanded throughout the country with religious schools legitimized as an alternative to secular schools established since the beginning of the Republican period (Kongar, 2000, p. 253 Douglas, S. L., & Shaikh 2004). Using Islamic discourse, the government began to devalue all contemporary educational practices. They established close contact with certain sects and began to employ its members in units of the Ministry of National Education and the education system as a whole. They made recommendations to government policy on many issues, from school textbooks to the appointment of school administrative heads. Arabic words began to be used more and more in textbooks, and several Islamic publications were suggested on the reading lists for primary and secondary schools (Guvén, 2005). Recently, active Islamic orders and other substantial elements that used to rely on funding from abroad were channeled into educational facilities, supporting a departure from the strict traditional secular establishment. Islamic orders and other religious elements became more influential in the military, the bureaucracy, education and the government. Some members of the ruling governments dominated religious education by becoming involved in many publications and symposiums on religious education, initiated by order of the government (Guvén, 2010). The spread of universal education in Turkey and the rapid developments in information communication technologies transformed the message of the orders into mass religious movements. Not only were formal channels such as education or religious courses influenced, but also the media and its opportunities for disseminating Islamic messages to the populous aided the development of the orders to a national level. These developments resisted the forces that attempted to keep religion as a private and personal matter. Social changes such as migration from rural to urban settlement areas, rapid wholesale demographic change, multiparty politics, and economic and industrial development all affected the revival of conservatism in Turkey (Anagnostopoulos, 2017; Guven, 2008).

The Turkish people became polarized into two distinct camps based on attitudes held towards Islam and laicism. This polarization created two opposing groups who are largely intolerant of each other's lifestyles. Although the Prayer Leader and Preacher Schools for Imams (Imam-Hatip schools) had been operating under the supervision of the Ministry of National Education for some time, there were claims made that the values and attitudes inculcated in students at these schools could easily turn them into the proponents of political Islam (Heper & Guney, 2000). Islam and political patronage went hand in hand. Discussions on secularization targeted universities as well. The Islamist movement over the past decade developed in a context in which the state-society relationship was dominated by the state. As a result, the movement developed not only in response to pressures exerted by the masses, but also as a direct consequence of the designs and policies of the Turkish state, which acted to further its own aims in a changed environment, rather than an attempt to appease the Islamists (Irem, 2002).

The increased assertiveness of radical Islam in the last decade reflected deeper changes on both a domestic and international level. In a closely related crisis, the global code words of the new era became "market economy" and "individualism," which negated the old forms of bureaucratic domination and state-society linkage in Turkey. Tensions produced by liberalizing the economy aggravated the growing influence of ethnic and Islamic social and political forces. These forces challenged the modernization formula of the old national capitalist state and insisted on a new social consensus based more on cultural than political differences. Thus, in the emerging state-society relationship, the state had to reestablish its legitimacy on a new basis, rooted less in the insularity of the secular-modernist project and more willing to incorporate the most important marker of local identity, Islam, into the official discourse. The state's new strategy of keeping control over the secular parameters of the republic required a more formalized relationship between the state and Islam, as well as a redefinition of laicism (Onis, 1997).

Although the post-2000 period may at first sight seem to have represented a revolutionary break with the traditional political management of Islam by the state, it actually only represents another mode in the state-Islam relationship, which was not changed in its basic secular orientation or in the primacy of the role of the state. This democratic impulse also gave impetus to the growing self-confidence of Islamic platforms in civil society acting as opposing forces giving voice to issues related to societal disorganization, social despair, and frustration with the conventional mechanisms of representative democracy. However, this new wave of Westernization was detrimental to radical Islam because it was irreconcilable with even the most ingenious blending of Islam and modernity. The most important features of Islamic political platforms, however, were their ambivalence toward the political realm

and their adoption of a cultural stance in its place. Islam played varied roles for different groups of people, independent of country and region (Guvén, 2010). Conservative religious groups and business leaders funded these institutions. Students were educated in line with Islamic rules in these establishments outside of school hours. Moreover, Islamic orders and groups founded schools for successful students providing free education and provided many scholarships for the poor, especially in secondary education. The teachers in those schools were supporters of political Islam. They taught children and the young about Islamic life as well as the secular components of the formal curriculum and encouraged students to study in prestigious universities and departments such as public administration, law, economics and engineering. The aim was to convince students about the Islamic rules and, after university, to go on to use them within state organizations in order to change the regime and to make it conform with their expectations; effectively a progressive replacement of the state institutions from within (Guvén, 2000, p. 379).

5. Islamization of Curriculum and Disappearance of Secular Education

5.1. Islamization of Educational Policy

Since the 2000's, modern Turkey has witnessed a strong revival of Islamic units and tendency in education, economics and political life, with the same movement appearing as neo-conservatism in different parts of world (Melville, 2017). The debate between the secularists and Turkey's ruling Islamic AK Party's (Justice and Development Party, hereafter referred to as the "AKP") educational policies and implementations aimed at strengthening religion in a conservative manner within the national school system is heightening. New educational policies and implementations of the ruling conservative party tend to use education to shape the next generation according to their outlook rather than the views of a secular nation.

Turkish society has not been fully secularized since the Republic Period of 1923. However, from the time the Democrat Party took government office in 1950, new emerging conservative classes have targeted secularism within the educational system (Ayata, 1996; Guven, 2005). Tensions between the secular class and conservatives have continued since 1950 and significantly increased with the emergence of the Islamist-leaning AKP in 2002. After ascending to power at the national level, the AKP started to enforce Islamic values into every part of society and schooling, and these changes have considerably transformed the previously secular educational system. Proponents of the AKP state that religious symbols and practices of the secular rulers were alien to their faith and as a result started a counterhegemonic strategy called

“Islamization versus Secularization.” They regarded education as the primary vehicle for the dissemination of their ideology to the masses, and prioritized public debate of controversial issues such as jihad, the rejection of Darwin’s evolution, as well as abortion and gender segregation. They have attempted to make visible and dominant the values and symbols based on Islamic outlook to generate an Islamic worldview aimed at replacing secular values and implementations. Rejecting secularism and its founding principles, Islamic groups have attempted to create a policy rooted in Islam. In reaction to the secular classes, the Islamic-leaning government proposed a new form of secularism, one that is supposed to be more respectful to Islam and anti-secularism. Schooling therefore is regarded as an important medium for the Islamists to ensure that their views are dispensed to the masses and to transform them to their Islamic ways (Göle, 2015; Guidère, 2017; Akdemir, 2017).

The Islamic-leaning AK party have ruled Turkey since 2002, having won subsequent general elections in 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2018. They prioritized the privatization of education and have tended to trivialize the values of democratic society. In spite of the diverse strands such as nationalism, individualism, pragmatism, national security and autocratic essence of the Islamic tendency of the ruling party, it has not fundamentally changed, if anything they have become even more conservative. The Islamic-leaning ruling party took over power and manipulated national economic life along the lines of liberal economic theory. They dominated religious conservatism across all aspects of life and adopted a conservative interpretation of cultural heritage, particularly around education. They have commissioned cultural heritage as a means of reconnecting the past to the present, portraying the heroic Ottoman-Islam past in history through Turkish and social studies curricula. Curriculum planners placed the old values and heroic past, which was dominated by the Ottoman Empire, into the curriculum in favor of dropping some controversial issues such as evolution theory (Millî Eğitim Bakanlığı [Ministry of National Education], 2017a, 2017e, 2017f) in Turkey. For conservatives, Biological evolution is incompatible with the Biblical-Qur’anic concept that God created all species in the form in which they now exist. For example, a junior high school science teacher faced interrogation by the school principal and school inspectors because for giving information about evolution theory to his students (“Evrimsel Teorisi’ni anlatan,” 2004). These indicators demonstrate how the new educational policies strengthen conservatism and make it clear that it aims to break the dissemination of scientific ideas and theories that appear to contradict or challenge Islam. Not only have the social and cultural issues in the curricula been redefined from the perspective of Islam, but this non-technical approach to science, economy and technological skills acquisition in reality is dumbing-down science to a

practical rather than academic level. Students are expected to be educated as low-skilled labor power through a curricula based on the technical rational model approaches (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı [Ministry of National Education], 2017a, 2017e, 2017f, 2017h).

In addition, limitations on some subjects in the curricula have introduced certain rituals consistent with Islamic customs and habits. The curricula expects students to learn religion or faith that is deemed the Islamic way of life, with respect for authority and discipline. Teachers are expected help students keep their nonproductive instincts in check, such as aggression or mindlessness in a repressive rather than democratic manner. Education should focus on facts of objective reality as well as “the basics,” in training students to read, write, converse, and compute clearly and logically. Schools should not try to set or influence educational policies (Houtman, 2001). The new curricula assigned to schools aims at controlling students rather than fulfilling an educative role. The Islamic-leaning AK party and its leadership vigorously rejects the “Islamism” label, although they have started to integrate Islamic code into education. It refers to religious feelings either directly or indirectly as common to all references. The historical period that the AKP frequently refers back to is complex, and incoherent at best. Admiration for the Seljuks, the nonscientific interpretations of the Ottoman period and the Sultans, as well as the old “sovereignty” approach are once again brought to the fore by the agenda of the conservative AK party.

AK party supporters and followers in state institutions and parliament paid special attention to the lifting of the ban on headscarves being worn at universities and at religious schools, particularly at Prayer Leader and Preacher Schools for Imams (Imam-Hatip schools). They changed the Constitutional article 10 and 42 which previously outlawed the wearing of headscarves in public institutions (Republic of Turkey Constitution 1982 Amendment of 2017, Article 10, 42). The AK party placed its followers as staff within the educational ministry, and in 2007 appointed a known supporter as president of the Higher Education Council. The Ministry of National Education relaxed the requirements for the appointment of school principals. Whilst it was later annulled, in the brief period it was in effect, approximately 4,500 people in 40 cities across Turkey were appointed as principals and deputy principals, two thirds of whom were affiliated to the AK party, according to analysis by Eğitim-Sen (Eğitim Ve Bilim Emekçileri Sendikası, 2017), an opposition education labor union. According to a Parliamentary report by the Minister of Education, more than 3,000 people from the government’s Religious Affairs Directorate have been transferred to the Ministry of Education during Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s tenure of power. This move has led to a lifestyle change within the bureaucracy. The President of the Higher Education Council is also planning amendments to the central university

examination system in favor of the Prayer Leader and Preacher Schools for Imams (Imam-Hatip schools) (Guvén, 2017).

The regularity and type of religious instruction within primary education has increased and its curriculum revised based on Sunni Islamic rituals. Today, religious education begins at the 4th grade of primary school and continues throughout secondary and high school education as mandatory. From the 4th to the 8th grade, religious education classes are given for two hours each week, reducing to one hour per week in high school (9th to 12th grades). Thus, a student graduating from high school will have received eight consecutive years of religious education. The secular classes reject such developments, but the ruling party continues to impose religious education lessons organized according to traditional Islam. The curriculum and textbooks for religion lessons have caused conflict in Turkish society as they provide only a singular viewpoint of orthodox Islam. Nearly half of the content of these courses concerns religion and Islam, with the remaining topics ranging from laicism to humanism and from ethical values to social etiquette. Other major world religions such as Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism are included in the content of the course, but only briefly with a few paragraphs besides humiliating statements related to the heterodox Islamic view. There have been, and still are, various criticisms directed at the course entitled “The Culture of Religion and the Knowledge of Ethics.” Some of these criticisms are aimed at the course itself, whilst others concern the way in which it is taught (Çelik, 2006). Primarily, the course is criticized as being against the principles of laicism; in other words, the separation of religion and state, but the situation is becoming much more complex. Some groups, particularly the Alevis (heterodox Islamic sect), claim that religious lessons reflect mainstream Sunni-Islamic beliefs to the exclusion of all others. One Alevi student’s family applied to the European Court of Human Rights for the removal of mandatory religious lessons (The elective mandatory religion lesson: a great Turkish invention!). The court noted that whilst the constitution specified that every citizen was free to practice their own religious beliefs and that religious education was conducted under state supervision; it also specified that religious lessons were mandatory. The court also mentioned that the European Convention on Human Rights ensured that the state had to respect the parents’ belief in the provision of religious education (Guvén, 2017). However, the National Ministry of National Education made no changes; on the contrary, they ignored the decision of the European Court of Human Rights and repressed the opposing views by using Marshall Laws which are now in force.

5.2. Conservative Curriculum vs Secular Curriculum

The Ministry of National Education announced new education curricula for secondary and high schools in Turkey at the beginning of

2017. It could be said that the implicit curriculum of public schooling in Turkey is fundamentally religious, and particularly Islamic. This has caused tremendously debate in Turkey as the curricula contains many attainments that conflict with secular ideals and the ideas of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of secular modern Turkey and still a current symbol of the country's secularism. A pro-government education union with an Islamic tendency, Eğitim Bir-Sen, recently suggested the removal of "Kemalism," the official ideology of modern secular Turkey, from the social sciences curriculum, and also that religious education should start from the 1st grade of primary education. The same union also proposed the ending of co-education policy ("Eğitim Bir-Sen temsilcisi: Karma," 2015). The conservative government seems intent on removing Atatürk's principles even from lessons on the History of the Republic and Atatürk Principles for 8th grade students (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı [Ministry of National Education], 2017g). Whilst it has not been removed completely, content with regards to Atatürk's principles have been reduced to a minimal level in the current curricula. This has always been controversial, given that all government and political bodies want to restructure the educational system according to their Islamic faith. The process of curricula revision ended with the gradual reduction in hours devoted to philosophy lessons, and the adding of a topic about the latest attempted military coup d'état of 2016 into the curriculum. The new curricula focuses on the concepts of nation, culture, identity, and social cohesion in line with Islam; drawing on conservative Islamic discourse, the curricula examines the issues of social integration, national will, and nationalism in a faded way as they are very ambitious. Some of the attainments of the new curricula impose gender segregation and some imply significantly sensitive and difficult issues such as respect for administrators, reciprocity, interdependence, responsible and participatory citizenship, empowerment, obedience to authority, and loyalty to the system. Cultural unity, integrity and economic individualism are mentioned many times over, and these are aspects of present-day neo-conservative discourse realized within the new school curricula (Sayin, 2017). In addition, other courses related to religion have been added to the schedules of K-12 schools. From the 5th to the 12th grade (middle school and high school), under the heading of "religion, morality and values," an elective course entitled "The Qur'an, Hz. Muhammad's Life and Basic Religious Studies" has been introduced (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı [Ministry of National Education], 2017c). The issues on the agenda of the 19th National Education Convention in 2014 offered an even deeper view of the tendency towards religiousness in education. Religious education become obligatory in primary education, and activities such as the free distribution of anti-evolution religious books, associations of foundations and municipalities and the Directorates of National Education, and the organization of

religious theaters, films, excursions and competitions have become actuality for many schools (Guvén, 2017).

The conservative-oriented curricula pays special attention to the past and the heroic epics of the past through the introduction of changed curricula for history and language arts. There has been a tendency to amend history and language arts lessons especially in the construction of national identity according to the conservative view. The conservative Islamic-leaning ruling AK party introduced a new version of history curricula, created according to their own ideologies. For them, their antecedents' (the Ottomans) glorious past, which ruled the world for six centuries by justice and courtesy epitomizes Turkish heritage. They appointed teachers with religious tendencies and chose them in order to create a curriculum along neo-conservative lines, and this has since become a reality. Curriculum planners removed some of the controversial issues about the Ottoman rule and also scrapped the modernist ideas of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, modern Turkey's founder, and the principle of encouraging visibility of religious holidays increased. Thus they have tended to create a distinct new Turkish identity and culture formed from a significant past that identified itself with Islam (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı [Ministry of National Education], 2017e). The new curriculum focuses on teaching "values" such as the notions of "national unity and solidarity" as well as "national, moral and universal values" and "values education" concept. These values were integrated within all subjects of the new curriculum in terms of cultural impact, transforming new values into the daily routine of society (Çepni, 2017; Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı [Ministry of National Education], 2017e, 2017f, 2017h).

The civics' issues in different curricula such as social studies, Turkish, and even Math have also been arranged based on the principles of the Turkish-Islamic outlook. Positivism and secularism have been placed under the "Problems of Faith" topic of some social sciences lessons and talk of "encouraging individualism and the allegation of state and religion." Controversial issues such as deism, agnosticism, atheism, nihilism, Satanism, reincarnation and false prophets were elicited under the problems of faith heading to the favor of Islamic outlook. Excluding the secular principles from the curricula, they took as reference the faded principles of Islam such as jihad, era of bliss, stability, and national will. "Darwin and Evolution Theory" was also purged from school textbooks, but the worst was the prohibition of publications about evolution by the Turkish Science Association (Tuysuz, 2017). The chairman of the Education and Instruction Board of the Turkish National Ministry, which is responsible for curricula at the national level, responded to critics as follows: "the scientific background of students is too weak to comprehend evolution and other controversial issues." However, they included other Islamic or conservative issues such as fatalism, determinism, constant loyalty to the community and membership of a nation state, obedience to

superiors, and even the prophetic biography into early childhood curriculum (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı [Ministry of National Education], 2017d). Lessons such as philosophy and fine arts also are used to expose students to the cultural heritage. The government has also tended to include Ottoman Turkish, which is written in Arabic script, to high schools as an elective course (Shaheen & Hatunoğlu, 2017, Cin, 2017).

The new curricula aimed at teaching about a general culture based on a conservative Islamic outlook to students at every level, and provides content in all curricula through textbooks, hidden curricula, and instructional implementations. Some subject areas such as religious education, history, and values education have been revised and adjusted to this new conservative trend. The K-12 curricula have been packed with themes like loyalty to and membership of Turkish society, strict nationalism and the nation state, a national will and other significant Ottoman cultural ideals. The planners of the new curricula have burdened history lessons with delivering a special mission of transmitting the perspective of progress towards a national culture and Ottoman heritage. This may be termed the emergence of Neo-Ottomanism. The conservative government appointed teachers with the same ideological tendency to rewrite history books from a conservative political perspective. This started with a very extensive eulogy of the Ottoman past, even with fine arts and music, curricula have been designed to provide students a knowledge of the cultural heritage of the Ottomans. The new curricula prompts and defines some core cultural and spiritual values that imply conforming to the traditional and national norms, and are used to form the attitudes or habits and characters of Turkish students ("Cumhuriyet yerine 'Yeni,'" 2017; Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı [Ministry of National Education], 2017f). Content from the history curriculum particularly has been scrapped. The ruling period of the secular People's Party of the Republic of Turkey and the political and educational contributions of this periods' government have been erased from the history curriculum as it referred to the secular development of Turkey. Special emphasis has been given instead to the multiparty period which has been dominated by conservative Islamic governments, to which the current ruling party regard themselves as being a continuation. The history curriculum has started to place the heroic and honorific Turkish characters and worldwide success of the country's people in an ethnocentric manner. The conservative values inspired from a rigid Islamic outlook aim at shaping a personality within the religious perspective, even within the history curriculum. They represent an extreme radical shift from secularization to conservatism in education. The conservative educators also utilize social media to legitimize their actions and ensure the inclusion of the new conservative outlook into every aspect and stage of schooling, either explicitly or implicitly. The conservative discourse of the ruling AK party is devoted to erasing secularism and positivism through emphasizing a

more results-oriented approach in education (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı [Ministry of National Education], 2017 History Lesson Textbooks).

New curricula has deliberately incorporated Islamic principles and aimed at increased visibility with its explanations, critiques and solutions. Concepts such as a sovereign national power, groundless allegations, individual will against welfarism, traditional way of life, and nation-centered institutions have all been interwoven into the new curricula, and all of these themes have provided conservative principles as the vital point of reference. Religious issues and religious schools have converged in national conservative policies. Almost all of the sources of the Ministry of National Education have been channeled into religious schooling, while academic high schools and secular curricular issues have been undermined or neglected. Instead of intervening productively, educational politics and curricula dictums have been used to legitimize the lacking of a coherent worldview (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı [Ministry of National Education], 2017e; and other Curriculum).

5.3. Transformation of Learning Domains

The new curricula uses the term “learning domains” as broad areas of learning instead of curriculum categories based on specific subject areas or titles. However, there is no “thematic and/or epistemological coherence and integrity”; on the contrary, the themes are defined only very broadly. For instance, the domain of “citizenship and ethical skills” is very indistinct and the concepts less than impressive. The roles of nongovernmental bodies have been exaggerated and the definition of concepts remains largely unclear. The curriculum writers have attempted to insert the “Islamic faith” as one of the domains into the subject of social sciences, but they propose teaching students from the perspective of a single religious sect (Sunnah) and exclude the other heterodox views within Islam as well as other major and minor world religions. Assignments in faith and ethics aim at inculcating the Islamic faith in young children in a noncritical manner (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı [Ministry of National Education], 2017c).

The new curricula attempts to intensify religious principles within the different domains of curricula on the grounds that religion has an important place in societal life and therefore in the daily lives of many of Turkey’s citizens. Religious content is imposed explicitly and implicitly in the curricula at every occasion, with the education system taking primary responsibility for the teaching of religious beliefs instead of the family. There is constraining and inculcating religious teaching in the essence of all areas of the school curricula. For instance, the science curriculum overemphasizes the contribution of Turkish-Islamic scientists, highlighting the compatibility of Islam and Science through the quoting of Qur’anic verse. Likewise, the social studies and language arts curricula are full of Islamic concepts such as jihad, hell, heaven, and sin. There is also

undue emphasis on obedience, deference and religious segregation (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı [Ministry of National Education], 2017h, History Lesson Textbooks, Social Studies 6th grade Textbook, Turkish Lesson Textbook). It is therefore possible to maintain that the role of education and curriculum in present-day Turkey has changed into instilling religious devotion rather than education.

6. Discussion

Modern Turkey established itself from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire, inheriting an imperial legacy that had launched modernizing reforms during the 18th century in political, legal, administrative, educational and cultural areas. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Republic of Turkey, adopted these reforms and accelerated the country's modernization process. Overall, Islam in Turkey has not been able to redefine its own self-image and face up to the theological issues involved in becoming a religion that is primarily "enthroned in people's consciences." Nor has it been able to provide a deeper religious dimension of both legitimatizing and judgment of the six principles that are the basis of the new social life. It remains, as a whole, in a conservative frame of mind in which its ideological claims are considerable, thus still posing a threat, possibly a significant one, to society's return to a less differentiated level of social organization. It seems worthwhile to stress that the process of secularization, which is in part what the transition from prescriptive to principal society is, does not mean that religion disappears. The function of religion in a principle society is different from that in a prescriptive society, but it is necessarily less important. Moreover, in the very process of transition, religion may reappear in many new guises. Perhaps what makes the situation so unclear is its very fluidity. Even in highly differentiated societies, such as in Turkey, traditional religion, so deeply associated with the prescriptive past, is still in the process of finding its place in modern principal society.

Yet, a point made by the vast majority of Turkish politicians and officials – all claiming to abide by the precepts of laicism – is that Turkey's population is, after all, 90% Muslim, and that Islam remains an essential and integral part of Turkish culture and identity. Moreover, they argue that Islam is of intrinsic value to Turkish society and to the Turkish state. Turkey tolerates Islam as a respectable form of religious activity. Nor would it satisfy them if government controls were entirely removed and Islam granted unlimited internal autonomy in the administration of Islamic institutions in Turkey. They would argue that the whole purpose of the State in Islam is to organize the community of the faithful in such a way as to enable them to follow the precepts of Islam under the most favorable conditions. The state should be an Islamic institution rather than Islam a State institution. Global revival of religion as a response to

deteriorating social, political, and economic conditions began in the 1980's. As a result, the Islamic movement has grown from strength to strength.

Prior to Turkey's 1980 coup d'état, there were larger crowds seen in mosques, a greater number of people wearing religious dress, and a more observant atmosphere. The religious orders were involved in a range of activities, with the military always guarding against the influence and role of Islam in Turkey. However, the military did not show a coherent approach to Islam. As the Turkish military commanders considered themselves the guardians of democracy, they were confronted by anti-secular views and intervened in the nation's politics on several occasions. Civilian and military confrontation over political and educational life in Turkey showed that civil supremacy over the military had not been fully established. Therefore, the military was always ready to intervene in every phase of social and political life, especially based on religion. The military ran the major secular educational institutions at every educational level, sometimes preferring a moderating role in Turkey. With the aim of recreating a new form of education, the military determined the path of education and identified its destiny after 1980 with the support of Islam. The governments created after the military interventions aimed at securing the support of voters by using Islam as a tool, organizing textbooks, curricula and educational activities according to their own expectations. These developments were responsible for the rise of Islam, threatening the very existence of secular Turkey, and in turn, provoked further military interventions. Nevertheless, some governments, including those led by the military, inaugurated a religious training track for secondary school students as personnel for the religious services. These schools grew steadily in popularity, even during the military governmental periods. However, the military regarded the graduates of religious schools as a danger to secular education and secularization with the resurgence of Islam in the post-1990's. Each of the governments used schools to indoctrinate children with "true" religious beliefs and practices. They wanted Islamic principles to form part of every level of schooling, facilitating children with a conservative outlook in all areas of life. Governments wanted Islamic principles to be taught in every level of schooling, and attempted to convince the secular classes not to violate secularism, and rejected the theory of evolution. The conflict between the secular classes and conservatives in Turkish political and cultural life affects educational life as well. Reinforced by conservative groups and government, the new curricula emphasizes the building of Turkey through religious discourse and values contextualized in traditionalism.

The new curricula, which was first introduced in 2005 and subsequently revised in 2017, embedded the conservative cultural and Islamic religious ideals, practices and moral code of the rural populous, thus aiming to connect with the identity and conservative definition of

morality as defined extensively by religious doctrine. The conservatism influence in Turkish public education is significant, as are the Islamic and religious practices confined within it. These developments have been the cause of significant debate between secular and conservative groups, yet the curricula and educational policies of Turkey's conservative government continue to shape education in Turkish schools. The curricula reinforces conservative behaviors and habits and influences a change in attitudes and approach to secularism, local nationalism, scientific education and a modern way of life. Conservatism and Islamic morality have been infused within public education; therefore, causing conflict between religious-based curricula and secular-based curricula. Gender segregation, dismissal of denominational differences and undermining universal scientific understanding has become the focal point of hidden curricula in Turkey. Today's curricula in Turkey aims to make students true believers of Islam according to the conservative view, clearly defining gender roles that emphasize male dominance and obedience to the husband/father in the family. The family is also reflected in the curricula in terms of Islamic-based ideals and strict conservative moral values. The curricula also emphasize individual freedom based on the principles of traditional life, while the voice of other groups have been minimized or effectively silenced. Islam still has a prevailing role in every unit of Turkish life, be that political, educational or cultural life. Islamic tendency has increasingly dominated the educational processes in recent years. Secularism in formal education has been violated and is still under scrutiny and threat.

Today's conservative rulers in Turkey actively resist secularism and have created a new national education system based on the Islamic worldview, but loyal to scholastic minds and rationality. They desire to connect Islam and the West similar to that seen during the Tanzimat Period of the Ottoman Empire. The number of private schools increased due to liberal policies enforcing religious education policies and a hidden religious agenda of the state education establishment, with religious tendencies having become dominant in state schools. Thus, secular families avoid sending their children to state schools. However, even though private schools are required to follow the strict curricula of the Ministry of National Education, some schools differ from the religious schools in terms of their training of students as families demand a more secular education. Conservative policies have caused the emergence of a dual education system in Turkey, with one Islamic-oriented and the other secular.

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