

Can the State Make you More Religious? Evidence from Turkish Experience

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This paper first evaluates the impact of a two-decade-long Islamization policy carried out by a pro-Islamist party, which came to power in 2002 in Turkey, on the attitudes of Turkish people toward religious values, religious practices, and clergy. In this regard, how the importance of religion, frequency of going to mosques, and trust in the clergy have changed among Turkish Muslims between 2002 and 2018 were examined by using World Values Survey data and employing logistic regression analysis. Estimation results indicated a reduction in belief in God, attendance to mosques, and trust in clergy, which imply the failure of the Islamization policy. Second, we explored what caused the failure by using the same data set and methodology. Our estimations suggested that the symbiotic relationship between the pro-Islamist government and religious clergy and institutions may explain the failure. As the government is identified with religion in the eye of the public, dissatisfaction with the government turned to dissatisfaction with religious values.

Keywords: Islamization, Government intervention to religion, Politicization of religion, Turkey.

INTRODUCTION

The Turkish Republic was established in 1923, replacing the Ottoman Empire. Founders of the new republic were planning to build this new state on secular principles and restrict religion to the private sphere. This was not an easy task in a country whose inhabitants are mostly Muslims and had lived in a theocratic regime for hundreds of years. Therefore, the principle of secularism was never adopted by the masses, and its maintenance was made possible with the intervention of institutions that consider themselves “guardians of secularism,” such as the military and judiciary.

Despite all counter efforts, a pro-Islamist party, Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP), came to power in 2002, and Turkey has been ruled by this party since then. After coming to power, the AKP initiated policies that increased the visibility of religion in the public sphere by using state power and resources. As the party strengthened its position in politics, the dose of these policies increased gradually. Although these policies are interpreted as “democratization” by some, many researchers considered these policies as “Islamization.” The leader of the party openly stated that their aim is “raising a pious generation” (RPG).

In this paper, we first evaluated the impact of a two-decade-long RPG policy on attitudes of Turkish people toward religious values, religious practices, and clergy. In this regard, we examined how the importance of religion, frequency of going to mosques, and trust in the clergy have changed among Turkish Muslims between 2002 and 2018 by using World Values Survey data and employing ordered logistic regression analysis. Estimation results of our extended model indicate

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a significant decline in belief in God and trust in clergy, irrespective of the age cohorts and gender. For the attendance to mosques measure, decline is significant only for males and those who are above 50 years old regardless of gender, while there is no significant change for women and the other age cohorts. These results imply the failure of the RPG policy of the AKP government. Second, we analyzed what caused the failure by using the same data set and methodology. Our estimations suggested that the symbiotic relationship between the AKP government and religious clergy and institutions may explain the failure. As the government is identified with religion in the eye of the public, dissatisfaction with the government turned to dissatisfaction with religious values.

The negative impact of government intervention in the religious sphere or politicization of religion on religious attitudes has been documented in a number of publications (Chaves, Schraeder, and Sprindys 1994; Fox and Tabory 2008; McCleary and Barro 2006; North and Gwin 2004; Ridge 2020). In the vast majority of these studies, researchers have used cross-country data and standardized intervention measures. Evaluation of country-specific cases is very rare. Similarly, many studies have examined the Islamization policy experienced in Turkey during the AKP rule, yet its implications have been rarely investigated and all these studies are based on descriptive or anecdotal data. First, this study aims to fill this gap. Although failure of government intervention in religion is rather well documented in the literature, the number of studies examining the reasons for the failure is quite limited. Second, this study aims to provide a possible explanation for the failure in the context of the RPG policy, and to contribute to the literature in this regard.

This paper is organized as follows. The following section reviews the studies that analyze the impact of government intervention in religion on religious values. Section 3 provides a brief historical overview of changes in relations between the state and religion since the establishment of the Republic of Turkey. Section 4 introduces the policies adopted by the AKP to reach its “pious generation” target. Section 5 describes the data and methodology used in this study. Sections 6 and 7 discuss empirical results of the models that have been developed to evaluate the effectiveness of the RPG policy and to explain the failure of the policy, respectively. Section 8 discusses the results and concludes the paper.

IMPOSING RELIGION THROUGH THE STATE: A LITERATURE REVIEW

Although each motivated by different concerns, all governments around the world interfere in the religious sphere at various levels. Interference ranges from strict separation where the state has no means or capacity to involve itself in enforcing, mandating, prohibiting, or promoting any particular belief or affiliation, to unification where no boundary exists between religion and state, and legitimacy of the state is derived from a particular religion (including atheism). Depending on the adopted policies, each country is located somewhere between these two extremes.¹

One might expect that in countries where the state supports, favors, or controls one faith, people would adhere more to the favored religion and the values associated with this religion. This is because using state power provides advantages to the favored religion, which are not available to its rivals. However, anecdotal evidence and empirical findings indicate the opposite. For instance, the communist regime established in Albania after the second world war declared itself an “atheist state.” Churches and mosques were demolished, closed down, or converted to sports arenas or workshops, clergymen were humiliated and punished. Albanians had been exposed to atheist indoctrination by the state for about a half-century when the communist regime collapsed in 1990. Despite this massive antireligion propaganda of the communist state, in 1998, the share

¹More detailed discussion of available policies and the place of some countries in “intervention to religion” spectrum see (Fox 2013).

of Albanians who did not believe in God was only 6.1%, which was much less than people in countries who had never lived under a socialist/communist regime.

Similarly, Iran is an Islamic state ruled by the clergy since 1979. All aspects of life in the country are organized according to Islamic rules. The Iranian government has been spending a vast amount of resources to impose Islamic values through educational curriculum and media while suppressing other faiths. However, even after 40 years of Islamic indoctrination, women in Iran still protest compulsory hijab,² Iranian officials are complaining about the threat of mass conversions to Christianity, which is illegal, across the country,³ and, although the reliability of data is questionable, 22% of Iranians do not believe in God, only 37% believe in life after death, and only 30% believe in heaven and hell.⁴

Empirical studies also support the hypothesis that government intervention/favoritism harms the favored religion. Despite countervailing results,⁵ the majority of cross-country studies demonstrate a negative association between state regulation/favoritism of religion and degree of religiosity, measured in terms of attendance to places of worship. For instance, North and Gwin (2004) found that religious regulation has a significant negative impact on the degree of religiosity, measured in terms of attendance, using cross-country data from 59 countries. Another study (Fox and Tabory 2008), using a data set from the World Values Survey and the International Social Survey Program for 81 countries, indicates that state regulation of religion was significantly and negatively associated with religiosity, but not belief. McCleary and Barro (2006) also conclude that high religious regulation is negatively associated with attending religious services.

The number of studies on Muslim majority countries where government interference with religion is high is rather limited. One of these studies (Chaves, Schraeder, and Sprindys 1994) analyzes the impact of state regulation of religion on the religious participation of Muslims, measured by how often Muslim individuals make a pilgrimage to Mecca. Their empirical result based on cross-country data of 18 countries demonstrates that state intervention has a significant negative impact on the religious participation of Muslims. However, Ridge (2020) finds no relationship between government interference in and regulation of religion and religious attitudes of Muslims except belief in *Allah*. Moreover, unlike the other studies examining the impact of government interference on religion, the study indicates that both government interference in and regulation of religion influence Muslims' propensity to believe in *Allah* in a positive way.

Researchers from diverse disciplines offered a variety of interpretations from differing perspectives to explain the fact that a negative association between government inference with religion and religiosity exists. Some researchers, particularly those inspired by economic theory, explain lower participation in religious services in countries where the religious sphere is highly regulated by the state with the inefficiency of state provided services by its very nature. In highly regulated countries, religious services are basically financed through taxes. Therefore, clerics, who are usually government officials paid by the government, care more about convincing politicians or government officials, rather than their parish, to finance their services. On the other hand, in countries where the state has no or minimal control over religion, religious organizations are financed through voluntary contributions. In these countries, religious organizations compete with each other to attract more "customers" that will, in turn, bring more donations. Since these organizations operate under a stricter budget constraint, they provide higher quality services at lower costs than their state-financed counterparts (Iannaccone 1991; Iannaccone, Finke, and Stark 1997).

²<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-44040236>.

³<https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/stories/iranian-official-mass-conversions-are-happening-right-under-our-eyes/>.

⁴<https://theconversation.com/irans-secular-shift-new-survey-reveals-huge-changes-in-religious-beliefs-145253>.

⁵See, for instance (Norris and Inglehart 2004).

Political scientists also have their own explanations for the negative side effects of government interference with religion. They (Loconte 1997; Tanner 2001) assert that religious organizations and governments have their own goals, which may contradict each other. As religious institutions become increasingly dependent on government money, they put more effort into satisfying the demands of the politicians rather than their members in order to benefit more from state resources, which in turn causes religious people to distance themselves from religious institutions. Similarly, some studies (Campbell 2020; Tezcur, Azadarmaki, and Bahar 2006) also demonstrate that, regardless of the level of economic development, political regime, and religion, in countries where religion is politicized by the ruler(s), the public's reaction to those in power turns into a reaction against the favored religion and values related to this religion.

Campbell (2020) shows that increased intertwining of religion and partisan politics in the United States causes Americans to abandon their religion because they see it as an extension of politics, specifically politics with which they disagree. Second, he asserts that the more religion is politicized, the more it loses its prophetic potential and religious views start to be shaped by politics. Campbell uses public opinion data as evidence to show how religious views can be subordinated to partisanship. He reports that in polls conducted in 2011, 2016, and 2018, a nationally representative sample of Americans were asked whether they agreed with the statement that a public official who “commits an immoral act in their personal life [cannot] behave ethically and fulfill their duties in their public and professional life.” In 2011, when Americans were divided violently over the question of the connection between private and public morality, a question that was often linked to the impeachment of Democrat president Bill Clinton due to adultery and his dishonesty when denying his affair under oath, 60% of white evangelicals (who are overwhelmingly conservative and associated with the Republicans) agreed with this statement. However, in 2016, following the release of the infamous “Access Hollywood” tape on which Donald Trump boasted about forcing himself on women, the number of white evangelicals—Trump's strongest supporters—who agreed with the statement above declined to 20%. In 2018, the percentage was lower still. Based on this and other supporting evidence, Campbell concludes that “many religious believers place party over principle when evaluating the public implications of behavior they find immoral” (p. 95).

Politicization of a religion produced results similar to those in the United States in Iran, a Muslim majority country, which is less developed and less democratic than the United States. Iran is a theocratic state where Islam is the ultimate source of all legislation. Major political positions are occupied by clerics and people are forced to live according to Islamic principles in public. Despite massive Islamic indoctrination and enforcement, attendance to Friday congressional prayer is too low in the country. Tezcur, Azadarmaki, and Bahar (2006) explain this phenomenon with the symbiotic relationship between the mosques and the Islamic regime, because in Iran, mosques are considered as places to disseminate political messages by the rulers. Friday sermons, delivered by state appointed leaders, are used to mobilize the public and to communicate the ruling ideology directly to the people. The authors claim that as Friday prayers were turned into political meetings by the regime, those who are religious do not attend Friday prayer mainly because of their negative feeling toward the political governance of the country.

Although many studies have been carried out on the Islamization policy in Turkey during the AKP era, to our knowledge, the only study evaluating the impact of the policy on the religiosity of Turkish people is by Ertit (2018). In this study, based on descriptive and anecdotal data and previous studies, the author found that praying rates have decreased, extramarital sexual relationships have become prevalent, the number of mosques per person has decreased, the belief in virginity is a point of honor for fewer people, people's clothes have become more flatteringly formfitting and more attractive, including women's head-scarves, secular experts rather than religious officials are being sought out for help concerning problems in daily life, homosexuality has become more socially acceptable and visible, and traditional family structures have been shattered during the AKP era. Therefore, he concludes that efforts of the AKP (or Erdoğan) to Islamize Turkey

have failed yet does not provide any evidence about the reasons for failure. In this regard, it is also worth mentioning another study by Aksoy and Gambetta (2021) even though its focus is not evaluating the impact of the RPG on the religiosity of Turkish people. Results of this study demonstrate that the AKP governance increased the (ab) use of religious symbols, like the turban, but not religiosity, measured by frequency of praying.

A CHALLENGING JOURNEY OF SECULARISM IN TURKEY: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

The Turkish Republic, established in 1923, replaced the Ottoman Empire, which was an Islamic and a multiethnic state. The founders of the republic saw these two characteristics as the major factors behind the collapse of the Ottoman empire.⁶ Therefore, they replaced them with Turkish nationalism and secularism, which would be the two main principles that the new Republic would be built upon (Akyol 2019; Mardin 1981).⁷ In this regard, a series of radical reforms were implemented in the first two decades by the new rulers. Sharia courts and the judicial system were secularized by adopting western laws and institutions. The principle of *laicism* was introduced into the Constitution. Islamic schools (*Madrasas*) were abolished. The education system was unified and brought under the control of the Ministry of Education. The Islamic calendar and Arabic alphabet were abandoned in favor of the Gregorian calendar and the Latin alphabet. The caliphate and the Ministry of Islamic Law were abolished. All *Sufi* lounges were banned. In order to control and monitor the religious sphere, a new government institution, the Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*), attached to the Office of the Prime Minister, was established. With the formation of *Diyanet*, all mosques were put under state control, and all *imams* became state officials. In turn, *Diyanet* turned into an apparatus to control religious discourse and the clergymen in the country. Through *laicism*, the founders were aiming to eliminate the impact of religion on daily life and to control and use it to “modernize” the country. The policies adopted and institutions built usually served to meet the latter of these two contradictive aims.

One of the two main pillars of the new republic, Turkish nationalism, was easily adopted by the public. This was because by 1923, the Ottoman state had already lost its multiethnic character by losing territories in the Balkans, Middle East, and the Caucasus. Most of the Muslims living in the remaining territories accepted the “Turkish” identity even if they were not ethnically Turks. However, acceptance of the second pillar, secularism, remained limited. Many Muslims resisted the interpretation of Islam that the state was trying to impose on them. In such cases, survival of the secularism principle needed the support/intervention of state institutions, such as the army, which is considered the guardian of secularism (Akyol 2019). Due to this controversy, practice of secularism has always been one of the major battlefields in Turkish politics.

During the single-party period lasting until the mid-1940s, religious groups could not find a place in politics due to prohibitions, but continued their activities underground. In the first election after the transition to a multi-party system, the Republican People’s Party (CHP), the party that had been in power since the establishment of the Turkish Republic, lost the election to the newly founded Democratic Party (DP). Although leaders of the DP were former members of its predecessor CHP, the party received overwhelming support from the conservative masses who were not satisfied with the secularist policies adopted by the previous rulers.

With its coming to power in 1950, the DP changed the recitation of call to prayer back to Arabic,⁸ restrictions on hajj (Islamic pilgrimage) were removed, religious (*imam-hatip*) schools were opened, religion courses were added to secondary school curricula, the tombs of holy saints

⁶Roots of this view date back to late periods of Ottoman state.

⁷The other principles were republicanism, populism, statism, and revolutionism.

⁸In 1932, the Arabic call to prayer was banned, and instead, a Turkish translation was recited.

were reopened for visits, the state radio started to broadcast prayers during religious holidays, and so on. These steps were in line with the expectations of the conservative masses and welcomed. However, they were considered a challenge to the secularism project of the Republic by secularist people, who numbered less than conservatives, and the army, which sees itself as the guardian of the Republican principles.

The military coup of 1960 was justified by the deviation of the DP policies from democracy and secularism. Although the military left power and elections were held in the following year, the tension between the Islamists and secular powers has always been at the center of Turkish political life since then. Assertive secularist parties have never won the majority in parliament through a democratic election because conservatives constitute the majority of the population. In order to benefit from the high vote potential of the conservative masses, right-wing parties have adopted a jargon and policies that would meet their expectations. Secularists, on the other hand, took the position of protecting Republican values and exerted their effort to limit activities that they considered as counter the secularity principle of the Republic by using their influence in the army and judicial system.⁹

The place of religion in society and politics in Turkey followed a trend contrary to what the founders of the republic had aimed for. Conversely, the role and power of Islam have immensely increased over the years (Keyman 2007). In 1995, the pro-Islamist Welfare Party (WP) won the greatest number of seats in Parliament in the elections for the first time in the history of the Republic. The Party formed a coalition government with the True Path Party and its leader, Necmettin Erbakan, became Turkey's Prime Minister in 1996. After 11 months in power, the military-dominated National Security Council forced Erbakan from power because a set of events that occurred during the coalition government¹⁰ were perceived as threatening the secular system of Turkey. In May 1997, a case to ban the WP was opened with the allegation of violation of the secular principles of the constitution, and the party was banned in January 1998. Before its closure, National Security Council forced the coalition government to take some measures, which addressed the military's concerns with secularism, which resulted in the closure of the *imam-hatip* secondary schools, a headscarf ban for students, civil servants, and elected politicians, hindering the employment of Islamists in government jobs and the military, and inspection of the economic activities of Islamic groups.

Following the closure of the WP, its deputies in the parliament joined the Virtue Party (VP), which was established at the end of 1997. However, the VP was also closed down by Constitutional Court in 2001 on the grounds of acting against secularist principles of the constitution. After the closure of the VP, Islamist political cadres were split into two groups. Followers of Erbakan, who was a pioneering figure of political Islam in Turkey, formed the Felicity Party, and the more liberal group—the Innovators—formed the AKP, led by Tayyip Recep Erdogan, who served as mayor of Istanbul between 1994 and 1998 and became a prominent political figure at that time.

One year after its foundation, in 2002, the AKP came to power with the support of not only traditional conservatives but also the liberals, social democrats, and leftist political actors (Tomuş and Aygenç 2017). Initially, the AKP took a different path from previous pro-Islamist parties. First, they refused to be defined as an Islamist party but preferred to be identified as central right. Rather than demonizing the West and Israel, which is a traditional discourse of the Islamists,

⁹For instance, pro-Islamist National Order Party (MNP) was closed down after the military intervention of 1971. Its successors National Salvation Party, Welfare Party, Virtue Party, and Felicity Party shared the same faith in following years.

¹⁰Like the official visits of Erbakan to two radical Islamist countries, Libya and Iran, his appointment of Islamist allies to posts in the bureaucracy, the increase in the number of religious schools and religion-referenced companies, and a particular antisecular meeting held by Sincan municipality (Aknur 2013).

AKP cadres supported European Union membership and good relationships with Israel and the United States. In the realm of economics, they declared they would continue with the IMF program, which had been adopted by the previous government after the financial crisis in 2001. They preferred to approach the issues concerning their traditional conservative supporters—such as the headscarf ban or the closure of *imam-hatip* schools (IHS)—from a “human rights” perspective without giving too much emphasis to Islam.

The policies implemented by the AKP in its early years received significant support not only from its traditional voters but also from Western countries.¹¹ Quick economic recovery from the downturn in 2001 and subsequent economic growth in the following years also contributed to the increasing support. Increasing support brought success to the AKP in the following two elections in 2007 and 2011, and its vote increased to around 49%, up from 34% in 2001.

Support from both home and abroad has made it easier for the AKP to take some steps to limit the military’s influence in politics. For instance, civilian representation in the National Security Council was increased and its domain of control was limited. While application of the Military Penal Code to civilians was severely limited, prosecution of military personnel in civilian courts was made legally possible. Also, the military’s right to appoint board members to the Council of Higher Education and the Radio and Television High Council was taken away. Hundreds of retired or on-duty officers were charged with and jailed on controversial charges (Çalışkan 2017).

The steps taken in the first term of the AKP were interpreted as democratization and Turkey began to be labeled as a “rising Muslim Democracy” by some researchers (Nasr 2005). The party has gone on to win all subsequent elections and is guaranteed to remain in power until 2023. Each new era in power has created new opportunities for the AKP to recruit its cadres to public positions like military, judiciary system, regulatory authorities, and so on (Lord 2018; Somer 2017). As the AKP strengthened its position in Turkish politics, rather than further democratizing the system, they took steps that lead Turkey to an electoral authoritarian regime (White and Herzog 2016). In 2018, Freedom House downgraded Turkey from the “partly free” to “not free” category.¹²

RAISING A PIOUS GENERATION DURING THE AKP ERA

Two issues played a critical role in the AKP’s coming to power: the economic crisis of 2001 and the conflict between secularists and conservatives that was symbolized by the headscarf ban and the closure of IHS. As mentioned above, they successfully overcame the economic crisis by adopting IMF imposed programs. The second task was not that easy. Although several attempts were made to solve these problems, they faced with fierce resistance from secular forces, the judiciary and the army. Having strengthened its position in both politics and bureaucracy after the electoral victory in 2007, which gave it more than 60% of the seats in parliament, restrictions about the headscarf ban and IHS were also lifted. The judiciary and the military, the traditional advocates of secularism, could not react to these developments as in previous years, because their power was significantly eroded by the political power of the AKP.

Despite its Islamic roots, as mentioned above, the AKP stayed clear of Islamic rhetoric in its early years in power. Issues related to Islam were usually handled in the context of human rights. In the same vein, by granting a wide range of protection to the Islamic faith, they were allowed to carry out their activities in a more supportive environment. However, as increasing public support and control over state institutions strengthened its position, the party started to pursue a more active policy in terms of Islamization (Bipartisan Policy Center 2015; Kaya 2015;

¹¹For a support from a left-wing scholar, see (İnsel 2003). The U.S. President Barack Obama showed Turkey as a model for other Muslim countries. See <https://edition.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/04/06/obama.turkey/>.

¹²See <https://freedomhouse.org/country/turkey>.

Lüküslü 2016). Ironically, those who had criticized the secularism policy imposed by the state for ages in the name of democracy were now trying to impose Islam by the state when they seized state power.

The AKP leader and the other influential members expressed their intention of Islamization of the society, particularly the youth, on various occasions. For instance, in 2017, a member of the Turkish parliament's national education commission, who is also a member of the AKP, said that there is no use teaching math to students who do not know Jihad.¹³ In one of his speeches, AKP leader Erdoğan described the ideal young man in his mind as a person carrying a computer and a Quran in his hand. He also expressed that he wanted to raise a "pious generation" on various occasions.¹⁴ Researchers have taken the phrase RPG as the motto of the AKP's—Erdoğan's—Islamization project, which has been carried out basically through public sources and institutions (Lüküslü 2016).

The national education system, particularly government-funded religious schools (IHS), was the major pillar for accomplishing the "creating a pious generation" goal. IHS, equipped with the values of the new Republic, were established in the first era of the Turkish Republic for the training of religious functionaries. Although their mission in the beginning was raising Imams and preachers, over time they have turned into regular high schools that give special emphasis to religious education,¹⁵ attracting students from families with conservative backgrounds. Therefore, they have always been a battleground for the actors within Turkish politics. Those who see IHS as threats to the secularist order have taken measures to weaken them, while the others, usually conservatives, have viewed them as a tool for controlling religious discourse and a source of voter base and manpower for Turkey's Islamist movement, and have thus taken measures to develop them (Cornell 2018; Özgür 2012).

The 1997 intervention compelled the government to take some measures that would stall the expansion of IHS. One of these measures was the introduction of the 8-year mandatory schooling system, which requires all students to remain in primary education (secular schools) through eighth grade. The middle school years of all high schools, including those of IHS, were shut down with this measure. The second measure was the introduction of a new university entrance exam that significantly disadvantaged IHS students if they pursued higher education in fields outside their vocational training (divinity schools). Following the introduction of these measures, enrollment in IHS declined dramatically, from 11% to 2% of all students, as was intended (Cornell 2018, p. 48).

The AKP's ascension to the government in 2002 reawakened interest in IHS. A pious generation would be raised in these schools.¹⁶ However, a major revival of IHS occurred with the removal of the regulations, which were imposed by 1997 military intervention in order to restrict the development of IHS, after 2010.¹⁷ The number of IHS has expanded from 450 in 2002, the year in which the AKP led by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan came to power, to 1650 in the 2019–2020 academic year. Some of these IHS were newly built, while some others were converted from secular schools. The increase in the number of IHS was accompanied by an increase

¹³<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/turkish-mp-maths-teaching-jihad-child-muslim-islam-jihad-madrasa-secular-education-a7858451.html>.

¹⁴<https://www.ft.com/content/ba284cda-e5b1-11e9-9743-db5a370481bc>, <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/390428/erdogan-dindar-nesil-hayalini-yineledi-toplumsal-sorunlarin-cozumunu-dine-bagladi>.

¹⁵IHL were opened to girls, who could not become imams, in 1970s.

¹⁶<https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/dindar-nesil-imam-hatiplerden-yetisecek-29168972>.

¹⁷In 2011, the AKP removed the disadvantages posed to IHS students in university entrance exams. In 2012, Imam Hatip education was extended to middle schools for pupils aged 10–14.

in government spending on these schools. In 2018, the government was planning to spend two times more per pupil at IHS than regular schools.¹⁸

The government justified the expansion of IHS with “meeting the demand from parents,” yet recent reports reveal that enrollment to these schools is well below their contingents¹⁹ and in some cases, conversion to IHS is realized despite the opposition of parents.²⁰ It is claimed that many students were forced to enroll in IHS either because the transformation left no other public schooling option in some neighborhoods or transformation made secular public schools overcrowded.²¹

Increasing Islamic content of education in Turkey during the AKP era is not limited to IHS. The government increased compulsory religious education teaching at regular state schools and introduced new elective courses, such as “The Life of the Prophet” and “Qur’an” into the curriculum. In 2014, girls were allowed to wear the Muslim headscarf in high schools. In 2017, Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution was excluded from the curriculum on grounds of being too complex for high schoolers. A regulation released in the same year by the Ministry of Education made having gender-separated Muslim prayer rooms in every newly opening school mandatory (Taşçılar 2020).

Another pillar of RPG during the AKP era was the Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*), a state institution constituted in order to control the religious sphere of Islam. *Diyanet* controls all mosques, employs imams, writes sermons, and issues fatwas. It also offers Qur’an courses, especially summer courses for children.

In 2012, the conditions of “completing primary education” in Quran courses and “completing 5th grade in primary education” in summer Quran courses were abolished. The supervision and surveillance authority of the Ministry of National Education in summer and winter Quran courses and their dormitories and pensions were also terminated, and *Diyanet* was made the sole authority in these fields. Regulations on the nature of facilities for such courses were lifted, and requirements for eligible teachers were relaxed. This change made nongovernmental institutions (like religious groups) able to establish their own Qur’an schools with their own teachers. Moreover, the Quran courses are allowed to have dormitories. Following the abolishment of the minimum age requirement for Quran courses, a special project was launched in 2013 for the provision of “Qur’an courses for preschoolers.” The number of Quran courses in Turkey, which was 3699 in 2002, reached 18,675 in 2020. The number of children in the age group of four to six who received “Religion and Values” education by the Directorate of Religious Affairs approached half a million.²²

Diyanet also initiated a project to build a mosque in every state university, again with the justification of catering to the needs of hundreds of thousands of students. The head of *Diyanet* explained the motivation behind this project as follows: “We attach great importance to mosques in city universities. They are the only way to bring mosques back into the lives, the cities, and the hearts of our people.”

During the AKP era, both the size and social role of *Diyanet* expanded. Its share in the overall government budget increased from 0.6% in 2002 to 1.24% in 2017, surpassing the budget of

¹⁸<https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/turkey-erdogan-education/>

¹⁹In 2017, IHS filled only 31% of their contingent, while the ratio was 98.3% for regular high schools (Cornell 2018, p. 54).

²⁰It is reported that 40,000 students were automatically enrolled in IHS against their will (Cornell 2018, p. 49).

²¹<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/03/turkey-akp-supported-religious-education-drive-stumbling.html>, <https://merip.org/2018/12/the-akps-problem-with-youth/>, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/turkey-erdogan-education/>.

²²<https://www.birgun.net/haber/akp-doneminde-kuran-kursu-sayisi-yuzde-400-artti-18-yilda-15-bin-kuran-kursu-aicildi-302884>. This is for legal courses only. Number of illegal Quran courses is unknown.

Table 1: Number of mosques and personnel, 2009–2019

Years	Number of personnel	Number of mosques
2009	81,851	80,636
2010	84,157	81,984
2011	98,555	82,693
2012	105,472	84,684
2013	121,845	85,412
2014	119,743	86,101
2015	117,378	86,762
2016	112,725	87,381
2017	109,332	88,021
2018	107,206	88,681
2019	104,814	89,259

Retrieved from Diyanet's official website. <https://stratejigelistirme.diyamet.gov.tr/sayfa/57/istatistikler>.

several ministries (Adak 2021, 204). Between 2009 and 2019, the number of its employees grew much faster than the number of mosques in Turkey (Table 1).²³ The change was not only in the number but also the composition of the *Diyanet* personnel. Previously, a solid proportion of its employees were secular career civil servants. In recent years, however, increasingly more openly pious Muslim recruits have been brought into its ranks (Cornell 2015; Öztürk 2016).

As the *Diyanet* grew, it began to play a more active role in social life and gained more visibility in public discourse. In 2011, it began issuing halal certificates for food products; the next year, it opened a television station, which only broadcasts thematically Sunni Islam-based programs. In 2016, it opened the first religious kindergarten in cooperation with the *Diyanet* Foundation. It has also issued an increasing number of fatwas on a variety of subjects, including feeding dogs at home, celebrating the Western New Year, buying lottery tickets, and getting a tattoo. The institution also has a free telephone hotline service that provides guidance on everyday matters from an Islamic perspective. Although these fatwas are not legally binding, they were unprecedented and considered incongruent with the principle of secularism (Cornell 2015; Öztürk 2016).

Another transformation that occurred in *Diyanet* during the AKP era was its increasing politicization. Starting from Mehmet Görmez's presidency in 2010, the agency became more active in politics close to the AKP front. In sermons in mosques, Imams defended the AK Party's restrictions on social media, warned their congregation not to send antigovernment tweets, and urged them to vote for "Muslims," implying the AK Party. The instrumentalization of *Diyanet* for domestic political purposes is not limited to these examples. The agency also played an active role in some foreign policy issues alongside the AKP government (Cornell 2015; Öztürk 2016).

The third pillar of the "rising pious generations" project is cooperation with religious organizations, such as religious orders and foundations. Even though they were declared illegal after the establishment of the Turkish Republic, religious orders and communities continued to survive and eventually became influential actors of Turkish political and social life. The activities of these organizations basically concentrated on three points: religious indoctrination through education institutions, like Quran courses or regular schools, and so on, gaining power in politics and bureaucracy, and involvement in business activities in order to improve financial resources of the sect and the individual welfare of the involved members. Cooperation with particularly

²³Decrease in the number of staff after 2013 is probably due to fired Gülenist imams after the breakdown of the coalition between AKP and the Gülen movement.

right-wing conservative politicians, based on mutual interest, has helped them to carry out these activities and expand their influence in society.

The AKP was no exception to the rule. Like its predecessors, the AKP supported the activities of the religious orders by making state resources available to them in exchange for their support. The support to religious orders is provided through basically transferring state land and financial resources to their schools, Quran courses, dormitories, and so on, providing privileges to members of the religious organizations through recruitment to state cadres, and condoning their illegal activities and providing legal protection when necessary. In return, these religious organizations were expected to support the policies of the AKP (Çevik 2019).

Backed with government sources, religious organizations provide usually free education or accommodation to students from low-income families. Religious indoctrination is generally a byproduct of their services. The students in these organizations are encouraged to attend religious activities organized in these institutions. The limits of religious indoctrination in these institutions are much wider than those of government institutions because they are less tightly regulated and less frequently inspected than government institutions that provide the same services, and it is not easy to monitor their activities.

At the beginning of the AKP rule, the Gülenist movement was a religious group that benefited most from the support from the AKP.²⁴ Like many other religious organizations, the education sector has been a key focus of the activity of the Gülen community. At that time, the community was dominating the nongovernmental educational realm with its for-profit private schools, tutorial colleges, dormitories, and publication houses, alongside other communities like Süleymançı that was active in the field of Quran courses. The confrontation between the Gülen movement and the AKP leader in 2013 showed that the policy of outsourcing PRG project to religious organizations is a two-sided sword because, while these groups support the aims set by Erdoğan, they also pursue their own agenda.

After the Gülen case, loyalty became the determining criterion in the selection of religious organizations to cooperate with, and two organizations came to the fore in this context: TÜGVA (The Service for Youth and Education Foundation of Turkey) and TÜRGEV (Turkish Foundation to Serve the Youth and Education). The most important feature of these associations was the active involvement of the Erdogan family and their associates in their management. Using the advantage of connection with the government, these associations could easily both collect donations and access public resources. Together with similar other organizations, these institutions operate student dormitories, kindergartens, and primary and higher-level schools. In certain activities, they started to cooperate with the *Diyanet*. Furthermore, on the basis of agreements with the ministry of education, these foundations set up “education centers” across the country to support religious education in government schools. These “centers” in turn became tools of religious indoctrination and ideological propaganda toward the country’s youth (Çevik 2019; Cornell 2018).

Supporting the religious organizations policy of the AKP is accompanied by discouraging secular organizations operating in the educational sphere. While the illegal activities of religious communities were ignored, the legal activities of secular education organizations like Çağdaş Yaşamı Destekleme Derneği were tried to be deterred by investigations or cases filed against them (Taşçılar 2020).

In addition to the three pillars mentioned above, the project of RPG/Islamization has been supported by other means like high taxes on alcoholic beverages, promotion and increasing use of Islamic concepts like Jihad and martyrdom in public by politicians and government officials, and adjustment of working hours in public institutions according to Friday prayers. Some scholars prefer to label these policies as “democratization” or “pluralization” rather than Islamization

²⁴As pronounced by AKP leader Erdoğan, whatever they wanted was given to them.

(Albayrak 2019). Whatever the intention is, all agree that during the AKP rule, which has been ongoing since 2002, Islam has been more visible in social life in Turkey and Turkish people have been exposed to more Islamic influence. Obviously, it is expected that these policies had an impact on the attitudes of Turkish people toward Islam, and those who aim to raise a pious generation expect this impact in a positive manner.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

To investigate the impact of a two-decade-long RPG policy on religious attitudes of Turkish people, we compared Turkish Muslims' attitudes toward religious values and institutions before the AKP era to their attitudes after about two-decades of AKP rule. Significant changes in attitudes in a positive manner (increase in religiosity) between the 2 survey years were attributed to the effectiveness (success) of the policy. In the method used to evaluate the policy, we implicitly assumed that (1) all Muslims in Turkey were exposed to RPG policy (no control group is available), (2) the attitudes of Turkish Muslims before the AKP had come to power continued to be the same after AKP rule, had they not been exposed to the RPG policy, and (3) there was no change in other external factors that influence the religious attitudes, in the two compared years.²⁵

The data used for the comparisons are obtained from two waves of the World Values Survey (WVS). Of these two waves, the first was conducted in 2001, the year before AKP came to power, and the second in 2018, which is the last available data for Turkey.²⁶ WVS is a cross-national research project based on surveys that have been conducted since 1981. In each survey, face-to-face interviews are held with newly selected, cross-sectional samples in over 90 countries across the world, using a common questionnaire with variables on beliefs, values, economic development, democratization, religion, gender equality, social capital, and subjective well-being. In this study, the data we used to measure the change in religious attitudes (attendance to religious services, importance of religion in one's life, and confidence in mosques) of the Muslims in Turkey, and a set of control variables used for estimations (age, gender, marital status, education, and income) are drawn from WVS.

"Attendance to religious services" and "importance of religion" in one's life are two indicators routinely used in empirical studies to measure the strength of people's religious conviction.²⁷ Being used by researchers, however, does not make them exempt from criticism. Major criticism of the first indicator is that attendance has different meanings in different religious denominations (El-Menouar 2014; McAndrew and Voas 2011). For instance, attending religious services is more important in Abrahamic religions than East Asian religions. Frequency of religious services also varies across and within the faiths. Moreover, praying within the household rather than in public places of worship is more common among Jewish and Muslim women. The second indicator of the religiosity is based on the self-evaluation of the survey respondent and, therefore, suffers from the problem of subjectivity. One may consider herself religious even though her life is not

²⁵Recommended methodology for evaluating a policy is comparing the changes in outcomes in two groups of subjects: one group that has been exposed to the policy (treatment group) and unexposed group (control group). In our case, there was no control group because everybody who had been living in Turkey during the study period was exposed to the policy to some extent. In cases where there is no control group, the way to evaluate a policy is to compare the same group of subjects before and after the policy is imposed. Unfortunately, we did not come across such data. Therefore, we had to compare a group who had been unexposed to the policy to another group who had been exposed. This is considered as weak methodology since unmeasured changes in the composition of the samples over time or other unmeasured contextual confounders influencing the outcomes over time may introduce bias (Venetoklis 2002; Leatherdale 2019).

²⁶I used the last available data because I assumed that the longer the period, the more likely the policy will achieve its objectives.

²⁷Cotton, McGrady, and Rosenthal (2010) find that "Attendance to religious services" and "importance of religion" are the two of the most frequently used measures/items examining religiosity/spirituality in their field of research.

Table 2: Changes in religious attitudes among Turkish Muslims (2001–2018)

Important in life: Religion (%)			How often do you attend religious services (%)			Confidence: Mosques (%)		
Answers	2001	2018	Answers	2001	2018	Answers	2001	2018
Very important	79.04	60.57	More than once a week	15.6	9.0	A great deal	31.0	22.4
Rather important	14.46	28.46	Once a week	20.0	27.8	Quite a lot	41.6	49.8
Not very important	4.33	10.25	Once month	2.53	5.3	Not very much	11.4	22.0
Not at all important	2.17	0.72	Only on special holy days	16.5	32.3	None at all	16.0	5.8
			Once a year	6.8	5.9			
			Less often	3.8	6.0			
			Never practically never	34.8	13.7			

Note: Excluding “don’t know” and “no answer.”

compatible with the teachings of her faith. Despite efforts to develop better indicators to measure the religiosity of a person, these efforts are far from being used in comprehensive surveys, and positive correlations between these two indicators provide justification for using them. Therefore, these two indicators are used as a measure of strength of religiosity.²⁸ The third measure, “confidence in mosques,” shows particularly confidence in *Imams*, who are the visible face of Islam in the daily life of Muslims. As discussed above, RPG policy was carried out via *Diyanet* and its staff in the field, *Imams*. Therefore, one may expect that confidence in *Imams* increases as religiosity of Muslims in Turkey increases, or vice versa. Our data also indicate a positive correlation between “confidence in mosques” and the two religiosity indicators, “attendance to religious services” and “importance of religion.” This positive correlation makes the “confidence in mosques” measure a good proxy for religiosity of Muslims in Turkey as well.

Table 2 tabulates answers given to the questions that are our principal concerns by the Muslim respondents in the years 2001 and 2018. In the first question, respondents were asked how important religion is in their life with the responses reverse coded for this study such that 1 = very important, and 4 = not at all important. In the second question, respondents were asked how often they go to mosque with answers ranging from “More than once a week” (coded as 1) to “Never” (coded as 7). The third question is about the level of confidence in religious leaders. In this question, answers are again reverse coded and ranging from “a great deal” to “none at all.” The order of the answers for these three questions is reversed for the purpose of clearer presentation of estimation results. The most apparent trend in answers to these three questions is the drastic drop in extreme answers in both ends of the scale, which may indicate a religious moderation among the Muslims in Turkey.

The above analysis simply compares before and after data without considering other variables—like age, income, education, gender—that influence people’s attitudes toward religious beliefs and related values. To better investigate the impact of RPG policy on “importance

²⁸Our data also indicate a positive and significant correlation between these two variables.

of religion” in Muslim-Turks’ life, their “attendance to religious services” and “confidence in religious leaders” we estimated the following ordered logit model:

$$\text{Religiosity Indicator}_i = \beta_0 + \chi_i' \delta + \varepsilon_i,$$

where *Religiosity Indicator* represents a vector of the abovementioned three variables used to measure religious attitudes of Turkish Muslims that are ordinal in nature. ε_i is the error term, which is assumed to follow the standard logistic distribution.

β is a $(k \times 1)$ vector of unknown parameters and X_i is a $(1 \times k)$ vector of observed nonrandom explanatory variables hypothesized to affect religious attitudes, such as *Age*, *Gender*, *Marital status*, *Education*, and *Income*. *Age* is the age of the respondent. *Gender*, *Marital status*, *Education* are dummy variables that take the value of 1 if the respondent is male, married, and with a university or above degree, respectively, or 0 otherwise. *Income* is the monthly income of the respondent measured as a 10-point scale ranging from “lowest” (coded 1) to “highest” (coded 10).

These individual characteristics are frequently used in the studies examining correlates of religiosity, yet they provide no consistent findings regarding the effects of these characteristics on the religiosity of an individual, except age and gender (Aleksynska and Chiswick 2013; Gershon, Pantoja, and Taylor 2016; Iannaccone 1998; Taylor, Mattis, and Chatters 1999). Age and being female are usually found positively correlated to religiosity. However, in this study, we do not expect a positive relationship between mosque attendance and being female, because of the special characteristics of Islamic faith with regard to praying in public places of worship. Studies investigating correlates of “confidence in religious institutions” also found varying results about the impact of these characteristics, except age. Age and “confidence to religious institutions” are also usually found positively correlated (Charles 2010; Hoffmann 1998; Kim, Kim, and Kang 2010; Kleiman, Ramsey, and Palazzo 1996).

The variable *Time* refers to the year the survey was conducted and takes the value of 1 if the year is 2018, which is the 17th year of the AKP rule, and 0 if the year is 2001, a year before the AKP came to power. The estimate of β_1 is the estimate of the average effect of a 17-year-long RPG policy, adjusted for the effects of the control variables.

ESTIMATION RESULTS

For each religiosity indicator, we first estimated the model for the full sample to see the changes in attitudes on average. Then, in order to see the impact of RPG policy on different generations, the model was estimated separately for three age groups, young (<30 years); middle (30 through 49 years); and old (≥ 50 years). In 2018, the eldest surveyee of the first age group had been in her early teens when the AKP came to power and had lived all of her post-childhood life under AKP rule. On the other hand, all members of the third age group had experience with governments that had been in power before the AKP. I expect younger generations to be influenced more by the RPG policy since they have been exposed more to indoctrination. Alternately, it would be more difficult to change one’s mind after a certain age and accordingly, we expect older generations to be influenced less by the RPG policy.²⁹

Estimations were also repeated by gender subsamples to examine whether the attitudes vary by sex. In the context of this study, estimating the model separately by gender is important for several reasons. First, studies show that women are generally more religious than men (Pew Research Center 2016). However, when measured by the “attendance to religious services” indicator,

²⁹Studies show that early indoctrination has a major impact on many belief systems. According to a study by the Pew Research Center, in the United States, only 22.4% of adults raised as a Christian changed to a different belief and only 4.2% adopt the belief later in life (Pew Research Center 2015).

the difference in religiosity level between Muslim men and Muslim women disappears because of the Islamic norms. Traditionally, Muslim men attend services at a mosque much more often than Muslim women do. For instance, the Friday prayer in congregation, which is one of the most performed prayers among Muslims, is an obligatory duty for Muslim men only. The same is also true for religious holy day (*Bayram*) prayers. In our sample as well, the portion of men attending services at least once a week is about 10 times higher than the portion of women. In more frequent attendance, the difference is fourfold, again in favor of men. Second, lower attendance to religious services means lower contact with Imams for Muslim women. Due to the lower contact, Muslim women may develop an attitude different from that of Muslim men toward religious leaders. The third point is related to the success of the AKP in gaining the support of women. Public opinion researchers claim that women have always voted for the AKP more than men.³⁰ This support is explained, at least partly, by the social policies of the AKP, which directly or indirectly benefit women, such as financial support for disabled children, kids in school, and widows, as well as the well-organized women's associations established through Islamist networks (Tremblay 2014). For these reasons, one may expect, again, different estimation results for women and men regarding the changes in attitudes toward religious values.

Table 3 provides ordered logit estimates for "importance of religion" for Muslims in Turkey. The results indicate that religion is more likely to be important for those who are married, and less for those who have a university degree and are wealthier. The impact of age and gender is found insignificant. More importantly, religion was less important in 2018 than it was in 2001 for Turkish Muslims, regardless of age group or sex, and reduction in "importance of religion" is higher among those who are more than 50 years of age and female.

Second, we estimated the model for "confidence in religious leaders" for the whole sample, age groups, and both genders, respectively. Findings imply that those who are married and older are more likely to trust in religious leaders, while men and those who are more educated are less inclined. Results imply no significant change in the confidence in religious leaders for the whole

Table 3: How important is religion in your life?

	ALL	AGE \geq 50	50>AGE \geq 30	30<AGE	MALE	FEMALE
MARRIED	0.589*** -0.0706	0.593*** -0.185	0.710*** -0.117	0.912*** -0.142	0.656*** -0.106	0.529*** -0.0977
UNIVERSITY	-0.504*** -0.0906	-1.120*** -0.253	-0.592*** -0.125	-0.0366 -0.165	-0.288** -0.122	-0.785*** -0.136
AGE	0.00159 -0.0026	0.0258** -0.0131	-0.0136 -0.00841	-0.0156 -0.0189	-0.00072 -0.00386	0.00311 -0.00362
INCOME	-0.108*** -0.0188	-0.104** -0.043	-0.0942*** -0.0282	-0.103*** -0.0319	-0.119*** -0.0259	-0.0921*** -0.0273
GENDER	-0.051 -0.0616	-0.0767 -0.147	-0.0427 -0.0909	0.0165 -0.107		
YEAR	-0.596*** -0.0729	-0.618*** -0.181	-0.608*** -0.109	-0.560*** -0.123	-0.424*** -0.0999	-0.784*** -0.107
<i>N</i>	5324	1121	2426	1777	2657	2667
Pseudo <i>R</i> ²	0.0478	0.0561	0.0486	0.0518	0.0392	0.0594
Chi ²	418.55***	91.33***	199.28***	155.99***	175.93***	253.59***

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. ***, **, and * denote significance at 1%, 5%, and 10% levels, respectively.

³⁰In the 2014 presidential elections, 55% of women and 48% of men voted for Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Table 4: How much confidence do you have in religious leaders?

	ALL	AGE≥50	50>AGE≥30	30<AGE	MALE	FEMALE
MARRIED	0.242*** -0.06	0.498*** -0.15	0.355*** -0.105	0.356*** -0.114	0.122 -0.0894	0.331*** -0.0832
UNIVERSITY	-0.313*** -0.0814	-0.505** -0.227	-0.352*** -0.113	-0.204 -0.146	-0.149 -0.107	-0.525*** -0.125
AGE	0.00831*** -0.00213	0.0148 -0.00936	-0.00243 -0.00705	0.00372 -0.0162	0.0110*** -0.00317	0.00687** -0.00294
INCOME	-0.0831*** -0.0163	-0.105*** -0.035	-0.0751*** -0.0247	-0.0647** -0.0283	-0.0935*** -0.0228	-0.0730*** -0.0233
GENDER	-0.198*** -0.0514	-0.205* -0.115	-0.221*** -0.076	-0.187** -0.0922		
YEAR	0.0896 -0.0618	-0.343** -0.141	0.123 -0.0931	0.345*** -0.109	0.116 -0.0862	0.0663 -0.0887
N	5244	1105	2392	1747	2635	2609
Pseudo R ²	0.0111	0.0238	0.0091	0.0079	0.0084	0.0121
Chi ²	145.51***	64.28***	55.22***	34.60***	56.39***	77.41***

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. ***, **, and * denote significance at 1%, 5%, and 10% levels, respectively.

Table 5: How frequent do you attend religious services?

	ALL	AGE≥50	50>AGE≥30	30<AGE	MALE	FEMALE
MARRIED	0.338*** -0.0596	0.528*** -0.15	0.615*** -0.108	0.235** -0.113	0.468*** -0.09	0.184** -0.0841
UNIVERSITY	-0.267*** -0.0827	-0.611*** -0.23	-0.328*** -0.116	0.0776 -0.146	-0.0919 -0.108	-0.592*** -0.132
AGE	0.0124*** -0.00212	0.0145 -0.00919	0.00325 -0.00692	-0.00047 -0.0161	0.0141*** -0.00327	0.00986*** -0.00297
INCOME	-0.0810*** -0.016	-0.0851** -0.0339	-0.113*** -0.0244	-0.0319 -0.0281	-0.126*** -0.0225	-0.0371 -0.0236
GENDER	2.084*** -0.0572	2.050*** -0.128	2.030*** -0.0848	2.131*** -0.101		
YEAR	0.624*** -0.062	0.295** -0.137	0.858*** -0.094	0.535*** -0.11	0.0693 -0.0862	1.286*** -0.093
N	5168	1091	2351	1726	2599	2569
Pseudo R ²	0.0912	0.0929	0.0901	0.0901	0.0192	0.0388
Chi ²	1635.41***	348.92***	732.07***	533.35***	160.10***	299.29***

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. ***, **, and * denote significance at 1%, 5%, and 10% levels, respectively.

sample and for two genders during the AKP era. However, for age groups, we found a significant increase in confidence among youngsters but a decrease among those who are above 50 years old.

Finally, we estimated our model for “attendance to religious services” for Muslims in Turkey. Estimations show that people who are married and older attend religious services more often, while those who have a university degree and are wealthier attend less. Like other Muslim dominated countries, in Turkey, men attend religious services more frequently than women. These results are consistent with our findings about the “importance of religion”—the other measure of religiosity—because, as expected, those who consider that religion is more (less) important for themselves also go to mosques more (less) frequently. Our estimates also indicate that the frequency of attendance to religious services significantly increased in 2018 compared to 2001

in all age groups. However, increase in “attendance to religious services” is significant only for women, the group who are traditionally less involved in mosque life.

To sum up, our study shows that despite the whole effort spent during the 17 years of AKP rule, religion is less important for Muslims in Turkey in 2018 than in 2001. Again, the policies implemented have failed to succeed in increasing people’s trust in clergy and convincing men, who constitute the overwhelming majority of the mosque community, to attend religious services more often. However, our results imply that PRG policy succeeded in involving women in mosque prays.

CAN THE POLITICIZATION OF RELIGION EXPLAIN THE FAILURE?

As mentioned in the previous section, the policies promoting Islamic indoctrination, which were ongoing in the 17 years of AKP rule, failed to change Turkish Muslims’ attitudes toward religion and religious values in a positive manner. After 17 years, religion is less important for Turkish Muslims, and there is no change in their confidence in clergy or in the frequency of men’s attendance to religious services. These findings are consistent with Ertit’s study (2018), which claims that, despite having all the governmental means and opportunities to do so, the AKP (or Erdoğan) had failed in their efforts to Islamize Turkey in 15 years of rule. Similarly, a workshop organized by the Ministry of National Education in 2018 found that students in IHS are questioning Islam and shifting toward deism in growing numbers.³¹ More importantly, support to our findings comes from president Erdoğan, the leader of the AKP, who admitted the failure of his RPG project in one of his speeches in 2017. In this speech, Erdoğan said: “*Politically ruling is one thing. Socially and culturally ruling is another thing entirely. We have been in power for 14 years, but we still have problems with ruling in the social and cultural field.*”³²

Despite all efforts, why did the Islamization policy of the AKP not work? Researchers may offer many answers to this question, but we will concentrate on only one of them: the politicization of religion. As discussed in the literature review section, increasing use of religious institutions and clergy by politicians transforms religious services in a way that meet the expectations of the politicians rather than the community, which, in turn, causes increasing dissatisfaction with the services provided. Moreover, as religion becomes synonymous with politics, opposition to a politician turns to opposition to the religion associated with this politician.

In Turkey, religion had always been used by (particularly right-wing) politicians for political gain before the AKP rule. Political parties had frequently used religious references and competed with each other for the support of religious orders in elections. However, they did this with caution, and hesitated to go forward in a way that would disturb “the guardians of secularism.” In the beginning, the AKP’s approach was not different from its predecessors’. However, as the power of the army in politics was restricted and the judiciary system was taken under control, the dose of religion in politics increased. The AKP leader Erdoğan was compared to the Islamic prophet Mohammed,³³ and AKP politicians presented voting for the AKP as part of practicing faith. For example, in an election speech, an AKP deputy said: “If you vote for us, God will not ask you for an account at Armageddon.” Another AKP politician, who was running for local elections, told a large audience: “If we lose here,” (referring to his municipality) “then we will lose Jerusalem, we will lose Mecca.”³⁴

During the AKP era, the most drastic change which occurred, in terms of politicization of religion (or religionization of politics), was in the political conduct of the official clergy. In the past,

³¹<https://t24.com.tr/haber/milli-egitim-mudurlugu-calistayindan-imam-hatipliler-deizme-kayiyor,596337>.

³²<https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/we-still-have-problems-in-social-and-cultural-rule-president-erdogan-113644>.

³³<https://onedio.com/haber/erdogan-sevgisinin-costugu-9-fantastik-aciklama-412975>.

³⁴<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2018/04/turkey-why-so-many-turks-are-losing-faith-in-islam.html#ixzz6sH9WyYNF>.

official religious clergy (imams, *Diyanet* representatives, etc.) avoided taking a public stand in favor of any politician or political party. They paid attention to stand by the state but not individual politicians or governments while performing their duties. As the AKP strengthened its position, the official clergy cared less about keeping distance from politics. Propaganda speeches were delivered in mosques by AKP members before elections,³⁵ AKP flags were hung on *minarets*,³⁶ in Cuma prayers, *Imams* asked the congregation to vote for the AKP candidate and criticized the opposition,³⁷ and Turkey's Religious Affairs Directorate issued fatwas regularly in support of regime policies.³⁸ Official clergy and government had never intertwined openly like this before.

Several studies investigating the impact of increasing religionization of politics (politicization of religion) during the AKP reign show that increasing association between religion and politics has changed both political and religious attitudes in Turkey. One of these studies (Aytaç 2020), which investigates the changes in political attitudes among devout Muslims in Turkey during the AKP era, finds a positive correlation between religiosity of people and their perception of the fairness of the political system. The results of the study indicate that while the percentage of nondevout individuals who think that they are treated fairly decreased, devout individuals' perceptions of being treated fairly by the political system have gradually improved between 2007 and 2018. In another study, examining the motivations behind the changing patterns of wearing a headscarf, Aksoy and Gambetta (2021) find that although veiling increased substantially, the praying of women did not change significantly during the AKP governance. They assert that basic motivation behind the increasing veiling is benefitting from the resources distributed by the AKP cadres to their supporters and potential voters. In addition to academic studies, anecdotal evidence also shows that many Muslims in Turkey react to politicization of religion, and their reactions appear as a reaction against religious institutions and values. One can find many news articles³⁹ on the Internet informing that some of the congregation left the mosque when the preacher used a rhetoric praising AKP policies or criticizing AKP opponents during the sermons. In some TV interviews,⁴⁰ people from different backgrounds state that their reaction to the wrong behaviors of the AKP leaders (such as increasing corruption), whom they identified with Islam, turned into a reaction against religion. In their words, "the AKP made them atheist."

Can politicization of religion (or religionization of politics) explain the failure of RPG policy of the AKP? To answer this question, we added a new variable (*Confgov*), which shows people's confidence in the government in Turkey, to our ordered logit model. We expect a positive association between the two variables if attitudes toward religion and religious values are linked with attitudes toward politicians. The data for this variable are again taken from WVS data. In the survey, participants were asked how much confidence they have in the ruling government, and answers are reverse coded, ranging from "a great deal" to "none at all." We reversed the order of the answers and re-estimated the above model for each *Religiosity Indicator* by adding *Confgov* and its interaction with *Year* dummy, a new variable that demonstrates the connection between politics and religious attitudes in Turkey during the AKP era.

In Tables 6–8, we report results for the estimations with our new variables. These results are broadly similar to the results obtained in Tables 3–5,—in terms of signs and significance of the

³⁵https://www.istanbulgercegi.com/akpli-baskan-yardimcisindan-camide-secim-propagandasi_198037.html.

³⁶<https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2019/gundem/siyaset-caminin-icinde-disinda-3965856/>.

³⁷<https://www.yenicaggazetesi.com.tr/mobi/-239005h.htm>.

³⁸<https://www.dw.com/tr/diyanet-akpnin-iktidar%C4%B1n%C4%B1-peki%C5%9Ftirme-noktas%C4%B1nda-kritik/a-54456517>.

³⁹See <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2021/gundem/imamin-lut-kavmi-vaazi-tepki-cekti-camide-sinirler-gerildi-6247831/>, <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/imama-tepki-gosteren-cemaat-cuma-namazini-terk-etti-476181>, <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/imam-bakanlari-savununca-cemaat-camiyi-terk-etti-25410669>.

⁴⁰<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h56KrNPKIB8>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=atEjQjxxzNo>.

Table 6: How important is religion in your life?

	ALL	AGE \geq 50	50>AGE \geq 30	30>AGE	MALE	FEMALE
MARRIED	0.569***	0.685***	0.699***	0.830***	0.670***	0.465***
	-0.0723	-0.19	-0.119	-0.143	-0.108	-0.101
UNIVERSITY	-0.452***	-1.050***	-0.526***	-0.0241	-0.242*	-0.726***
	-0.0917	-0.257	-0.127	-0.165	-0.124	-0.137
AGE	0.00138	0.0273**	-0.0177**	-0.0102	-0.00124	0.00291
	-0.00267	-0.0133	-0.00859	-0.0191	-0.00395	-0.00372
INCOME	-0.113***	-0.116***	-0.100***	-0.107***	-0.131***	-0.0886***
	-0.0192	-0.0449	-0.0288	-0.0324	-0.0264	-0.0281
GENDER	-0.022	-0.0583	0.0104	-0.00353		
	-0.0629	-0.151	-0.0928	-0.109		
CONFGOV	0.321***	0.333***	0.366***	0.253***	0.281***	0.355***
	-0.0443	-0.113	-0.0659	-0.0717	-0.0608	-0.065
CONFGOV*YEAR	0.230***	0.276*	0.195**	0.261**	0.234**	0.237**
	-0.0671	-0.156	-0.0991	-0.117	-0.0938	-0.0965
YEAR	-1.446***	-1.562***	-1.400***	-1.470***	-1.273***	-1.662***
	-0.182	-0.411	-0.271	-0.319	-0.252	-0.266
N	5251	1105	2391	1755	2633	2618
Pseudo R ²	0.0680	0.0861	0.0700	0.0659	0.0556	0.0838
Chi ²	587.15***	137.19***	282.88***	196.40***	246.76***	351.44***

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. ***, **, and * denote significance at 1%, 5%, and 10% levels, respectively.

Table 7: How much confidence do you have in religious leaders?

	ALL	AGE≥50	50>AGE≥30	30<AGE	MALE	FEMALE
MARRIED	0.174***	0.504***	0.310***	0.215*	0.111	0.206**
	-0.0612	-0.154	-0.107	-0.116	-0.091	-0.085
UNIVERSITY	-0.216***	-0.399*	-0.211*	-0.178	-0.0706	-0.413***
	-0.0822	-0.227	-0.114	-0.147	-0.109	-0.126
AGE	0.00870***	0.0216**	-0.0031	0.0112	0.0108***	0.00692**
	-0.00217	-0.00959	-0.00717	-0.0164	-0.00322	-0.00301
INCOME	-0.0872***	-0.101***	-0.0866***	-0.0687**	-0.108***	-0.0657***
	-0.0166	-0.0358	-0.0251	-0.0288	-0.0231	-0.0239
GENDER	-0.142***	-0.132	-0.162**	-0.172*		
	-0.0523	-0.118	-0.0774	-0.0934		
CONFGOV	0.604***	0.494***	0.630***	0.610***	0.633***	0.580***
	-0.0346	-0.0791	-0.0514	-0.059	-0.0488	-0.0497
CONFGOV*YEAR	0.304***	0.538***	0.257***	0.263**	0.186**	0.430***
	-0.057	-0.122	-0.0839	-0.104	-0.08	-0.0816
YEAR	-1.097***	-2.129***	-0.951***	-0.728**	-0.795***	-1.434***
	-0.164	-0.355	-0.243	-0.293	-0.226	-0.239
N	5199	1094	2370	1735	2619	2580
Pseudo R ²	0.0624	0.0832	0.0611	0.0545	0.0563	0.0681
Chi ²	814.17***	221.23***	366.43***	235.42***	377.48***	429.65***

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. ***, **, and * denote significance at 1%, 5%, and 10% levels, respectively.

Table 8: How frequent do you attend religious services?

	ALL	AGE \geq 50	50>AGE \geq 30	30>AGE	MALE	FEMALE
MARRIED	0.309***	0.551***	0.579***	0.190*	0.447***	0.142*
	-0.0601	-0.152	-0.109	-0.114	-0.0905	-0.085
UNIVERSITY	-0.219***	-0.509***	-0.268**	0.0681	-0.0208	-0.551***
	-0.083	-0.233	-0.117	-0.146	-0.109	-0.132
AGE	0.0128***	0.0179*	0.00275	0.00416	0.0147***	0.00976***
	-0.00214	-0.00937	-0.00697	-0.0162	-0.00329	-0.003
INCOME	-0.0903***	-0.0979***	-0.124***	-0.0368	-0.139***	-0.0450*
	-0.0162	-0.0343	-0.0246	-0.0283	-0.0227	-0.0238
GENDER	2.092***	2.097***	2.036***	2.118***		
	-0.0578	-0.13	-0.0857	-0.102		
CONFGOV	0.0302	0.0154	0.0308	0.0327	0.0765*	0.0584
	-0.0321	-0.0728	-0.0474	-0.0551	-0.0455	-0.0475
CONFGOV*YEAR	0.379***	0.551***	0.358***	0.258**	0.411***	0.335***
	-0.0552	-0.116	-0.0812	-0.101	-0.0779	-0.0801
YEAR	-0.474***	-1.287***	-0.175	-0.213	-1.146***	0.327
	-0.162	-0.341	-0.239	-0.293	-0.223	-0.236
N	5102	1077	2320	1705	2578	2524
Pseudo R ²	0.0956	0.1029	0.0943	0.0918	0.0266	0.0445
Chi ²	1692.89***	382.04***	757.29***	536.43***	219.65***	337.54***

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. ***, **, and * denote significance at 1%, 5%, and 10% levels, respectively.

coefficients—which indicates the robustness of the estimates of the coefficients for all control variables. Higher pseudo R^2 values in the new estimations indicate better model fit.

Coefficients of the *Confgov* variable are positive in all models, which implies a positive correlation between confidence in the ruling government and religious attitudes, but it is only significant for two indicators, “importance of religion” and “confidence in religious leaders.” More importantly, the coefficient of our new interaction variable *Confgov*Year* is positive and significant for all models, which indicates the strengthening correlation between politics and religious attitudes in Turkey during the AKP era. Moreover, coefficients of the *Year* variable are negative and significant—except “attendance to religious services” for women—in all models that provide stronger evidence for the failure of RPG policy. These extended models, again, show that those who are above 50 years of age reacted the most to RPG policy. Particularly, overall reduction in mosque attendance is sourced from this group and Muslim men. Unlike the restricted forms where the sign of *Year* variable for women in “confidence in religious leaders” model was insignificant and “attendance to religious services” model positive and significant (Tables 4 and 5), in these extended models, these signs are negative and significant, and insignificant (Tables 7 and 8), respectively. These results confirm the results of the previous section and suggest that politicization of religion (or religionization of politics) may explain the failure of RPG policy.

CONCLUSION

Secularism is one of the founding principles of the Turkish Republic, the successor of the Ottoman Empire. The founders of the new republic had two contradictory aims: to eliminate the impact of religion on daily life, and to control and use it to “modernize” the country. Considering that Islam is a religion that organizes every aspect of daily life, eliminating the impact of religion (Islam) on daily life was not an easy task in a Muslim majority country. In practice, over the years, governments in power (ab)used religion (Islam) for their political interests, and the task of dereligionization of the state was usually fulfilled by the army and judicial system in a nondemocratic way.

In 2002, a pro-Islamist party, the AKP came to power in Turkey. Despite its Islamic roots, the AKP stayed clear of Islamic rhetoric in its early years in power. The issues related to Islam were usually handled in the context of human rights. However, as increasing public support and control over state institutions strengthened its position, the party started to pursue a more active policy in terms of Islamization by using the education system, religious organizations, and *Diyanet*.

The present study aimed to examine the impact of the Islamization policy of the AKP on religious attitudes of Turkish Muslims by comparing the data obtained from two waves of WVS, one conducted in 2001, the year before AKP came to power, and the second in 2018, the AKP’s 17th year in power. Our ordered logit estimates demonstrated that, in 2018, religion was less important for Turkish Muslims and their confidence in the clergy was weaker compared to 2001. Again, in 2018, frequency of Muslim men’s attendance to religious services was less than 2001. These findings are consistent with the previous studies in the literature demonstrating that government intervention in religion harms the favored religion itself. They are also in line with the findings of the studies on Turkey and other parts of the world.

Why did the Islamization policy of the AKP fail? Universal decrease in demand for religion might be an answer. Proponents of the secularization theory claim that as societies develop, particularly through modernization, rationalization, and advances in science and technology, demand for religion will decline (Pérez-Agote 2014). Secularization trends might have been more influential on Turkish Muslims than the Islamization policy of the AKP. Advocates of Religious Market Theory may contribute to the discussion by providing an answer from the supply side and associate the failure with the inefficiency of government intervention in religion. Others may suggest alternative answers as well.

Inspired by Campbell (2020) and Tezcur, Azadarmaki, and Bahar (2006), in this study, we also suggested an explanation for the failure that is related to increasing politicization of religion in Turkey during the AKP reign. Our estimations revealed that there is an association between confidence in government and attitudes toward religion and religious values in Turkey, which implies politicization of religion. Moreover, this association was strengthened significantly during the AKP era, which can be attributed to the adopted policies. We proposed that increasing politicization of religion (or religionization of politics) might have caused a reaction to the party to turn into a reaction to religion and religious values. In other words, those who were dissatisfied with the AKP policies, in any field, may have directed their reactions to the values (Islam), institutions (mosques), and people (Imams) they associated with the party.

These findings, taken together with the findings of the previous studies on different parts of the world, are not very encouraging for the rulers/governments that are keen on religious indoctrination. Failure of the RPG policy in Turkey and other countries' experiences show that regardless of all the efforts put forth, all the resources spent, and even repression, it may not be possible to change people's behavior toward religion and religious values through government policy. Furthermore, such policies may produce results contrary to the intended ones.

The study also generated two more findings that are worth discussing here: strong reaction to religion and religious values, seen in the oldest age cohort, and divergent tendency, occurring among women in terms of attendance to mosques. Possible explanation for the reaction of the oldest age cohort might be their experience with the ruling parties/leaders who were in power/office before the AKP/Erdoğan. Unlike the other age cohorts who had little or no experience with other parties/leaders, this group had an opportunity to compare AKP/Erdoğan governance with their predecessors. Dissatisfaction with the ruling party/leader might have turned into negative attitudes toward religion and religious values for this age cohort. The opposing trend in women's attendance in religious service may be attributed, at least partly, to the AKP's social policies touching women and the success of the religious networks in organizing women during the AKP era. Alternatively, it can be considered as part of a universal trend. Studies and anecdotal evidence show that in other parts of the world women are protesting separate prayer places for women in mosques (Abdi and Nomani 2010), the number of female-friendly mosques is increasing (Taylor 2018), and women are becoming more involved in U.S. mosques (Mohamed 2021). The increase in the frequency of women's attendance in mosques in Turkey may be part of the trend observed in other parts of the world.

However, these results should be considered within the limitations of the study. We have already emphasized data limitations. Hence, repeating the same analysis with data collected from the same sample at different times would improve our understanding in evaluating RPG or similar policies. Second in the study, changes in attitudes toward religious values in the examined period attributed to the failure of the policy. An alternative explanation would be the trend of the "decline of religion" in the whole world and that the Islamization policies of the AKP were insufficient to reverse this trend. We suggest the examination of this alternative explanation as a future research opportunity. We also believe that the divergent trend in women's attendance in religious service vis-à-vis the men's and the strong reaction to religion and religious values present in the oldest age cohort deserve further research.

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