



THE PLACE OF RELIGION IN TURKISH SOCIETY: AN ANALYSIS THROUGH THE LENS OF THE CENTER-PERIPHERY THESIS

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Abstract

Turkish society has been analyzed for a long time by Şerif Mardin's center-periphery thesis. This segmentation between the center and periphery is still very essential in understanding Turkish society. This article examines the place of religion in Turkish society from the classical period of the Ottoman Empire to recent times by using Şerif Mardin's center-periphery thesis. While religion was an important element of the Ottoman Empire, it moved toward the periphery because of strict secularization policies which were implemented in Modern Turkey after its foundation. On the other hand, there has been a silent but powerful resistance against the strict secularization process of Turkey throughout its history; therefore, religion has moved toward the center. In this article, the changing place of religion in Turkish society is predominantly examined from the perspective of Şerif Mardin's analysis.

Keywords: Şerif Mardin, Center-Periphery, Religion, Ottoman Empire, Turkey.

1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to examine the changing place of Islam in Turkish society through the lens of Şerif Mardin's center-periphery thesis. Şerif Mardin as a sociologist is a highly significant figure in contemporary Turkey's intellectual life. Mardin mostly focuses on the complex relationship between religion, society and the state in Turkey. Şerif Mardin will be the fundamental figure in this article because of his significant analysis about the place of religion in Turkish. His writings on Turkish society have provided significant inspirations for a large number of new studies.

Depending on the axiom that each society has a center and periphery, in this article, I firstly examine place of Islam in the classical period and its move toward the periphery as a result of the modernization process of the Ottoman Empire. Briefly, in the classical period of Ottoman society, the center was the sultans and his entourages; the periphery was the people who lived in provinces and nomads. There was no linking institution between the center and the periphery in the Ottoman society. Therefore, Islam was used as a linkage between them. Hence, the place of religion was on the intersection between the center and the periphery. Following the modernization process of the Ottoman Empire, the center of the state changed from the sultans and his entourages to the secular bureaucracy. As a result of the secularization and modernization policies, the place of religion moved toward the periphery. Then I examine the place of religion in modern Turkey. After the foundation of the new Republic, a strict secularization process was begun by the Kemalist elites. In the single-party period of the Republic, Islam was identified with the periphery and restricted to private space. However, after Turkey's transition into the multi-party system, Islam has begun to move from the periphery to the center as a result of the revival of Islam.

2. Historical Background

In Ottoman society, Ottoman sultans were in the center while ordinary people were considered subjects and on the periphery (Mardin, 2006a: 299). The Ottoman bureaucrat's duty was to preserve the state's integrity and to promote Islam. It was considered that the state and religion were intertwined. The expression of "Religion and the state are twins" (i.e., equals) shows this close association. This situation was formulated as "Din-u Devlet" or "religion and the state." The Ottoman bureaucracy also thought that it was essential to preserve religion for the viability of the state. Therefore, the state always wanted to have control over religion. Thus, state interests had priority over religion in the Ottoman Empire. One of the most effective characteristics of the Ottoman ruler's control over religion was that the ulama were included in the official class and were paid by the state. On the other hand, the Ottoman rulers harshly handled any

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religious manifestations which got out of their control. Unorthodox behaviors and religious movements were not tolerated (Mardin, 1983: 139-140).

In general, there were no linking institutions between the state and individual in Middle Eastern societies. With the lack of linking institutions, religion was used as a linking institution. This explanation was very valid for the Ottoman Empire. Religion worked as a link between the center and the periphery in the Ottoman Empire (Mardin, 2006b: 199). Therefore, the place of religion was at the intersection between the center and the periphery. Similar to many middle eastern societies (Varol, 2016), the linkage process of religion worked on two levels: First, religion connected popular structures with the Ottoman ruling institution and provided political legitimacy among individuals. Second, religion provided a process of socialization. However, the linkage in the Ottoman Empire was only partially successful because of the two kinds of Islam: official and popular (Mardin, 2006b: 199).

There was a separation between official and popular Islam in the Ottoman Empire. The religious institutions established politico-ideological basis for the upper class. On the other hand, the dervish religion aimed to strengthen the identity process. Thus, Islam established two segmentations although it seemed to provide integration between the center and the periphery in Ottoman society. Although these had many shared characteristics, there were many differences between them. While Islam was a moral value, a source of consolation, and a patterning of life for the periphery, Islam was a source of the legitimacy of the state for the center. The neglecting forms of these two kinds of Islam were different for these groups. For the periphery, it was a break of religious taboos; for the center, it consisted of moving religion into the background when it was necessary for political aims (Mardin, 2006b: 199).

The modernization process of the Ottoman Empire in the eighteenth century led to the decline of the traditional structure of the Empire. In the beginning of the modernization process, the dominant idea is that the modernization process should only be technological and that Islam should remain as the core value of Ottoman society. However, the fall of the Empire continued despite the technological modernization. Therefore, state elites came to the idea that the solution should be more comprehensive. Then, the secularization process, in most areas of public and political life, was started (Turan, 1994: 33). There was a competition between these two ideas: modernization with religion and modernization without religion. During late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Ottoman secular bureaucracy extended its power against the Ottoman sultan and began to control political power. The priority of the secular bureaucracy was to preserve the state above all other concerns. Therefore, they became sponsors of the westernization in the Ottoman Empire (Mardin, 1983: 140-141).

After the decline of religion, there was not any central value system in Ottoman society. Therefore, the Ottoman reformers tried to increase the conscience of being an Ottoman to collect all segments under an umbrella. Thus, their first approach was "Ottomanism" in order to preserve the integrity and unity of the Empire (Varol, 2015: 71-72). Hence, all other religious groups were considered as Ottomans. However, it was totally eliminated after the first Balkan war. The second approach of the Ottoman reformers was "Islamism." Sultan Abdulhamit II focused on Islam as the cement of Ottoman society. The sultan used Pan-Islamism and propagated that the Ottoman Empire was a defender of the Islamic world (Mardin, 2006d: 232). However, the sultan did not carry out Islamism in the education system by supporting classical institutions of religious training but established new modern professional schools.

After the Young Turk revolution, the state's center changed from the Ottoman sultan and its entourages to secular bureaucrats who had graduated from the professional schools. The trend of secularization was taken over by the Young Turks (Mardin, 2006c: 273). Their world view was shaped by French positivism and materialism. They had already seen religion as a manipulative-instrument because of their elite origin. Also, their training in modern and professional schools increased this attitude toward religion. They saw religion as "greasy preachers mouthing incoherent arguments" (Mardin, 2006b: 201)

These new elites' aim was also to preserve the state. Some of them questioned the close association of religion and the state because of segmentation in the Ottoman society. However, they realized the importance of religion in daily life for the periphery (the peasant, the craftsman ...). In the beginning of 20th century, the Young Turks encountered religion as a basis of community, as a philosophy and worldview, as a state institution and ideology. According to Şerif Mardin, these times were the root of the new republic. For example, secularism was begun as a conscious but underground ideology at the time of the Young Turks (Mardin, 2006b: 201). Even if religion was still an important element of Ottoman society, we can draw that the place of religion in the late Ottoman Empire began to move toward the periphery as a result of the modernization process.



3. Religion in Modern Turkey

Some of the Young Turks gathered around Mustafa Kemal's movement of resistance between 1919 and 1922 against the Greek occupation of Anatolia. Mustafa Kemal and those around him wanted to gather support from the rural Muslim masses in the war against the Greeks. Local provinces with Islamic foundations supported this resistance against invaders. Mustafa Kemal did not express his ideas about religion and the state until the victory of the War of Independence. After the War of Independence and the victory of the Kemalists, it became easier to carry out their policies. Mustafa Kemal and the supporters of the new regime established a political party, the Republican People's Party, which became the center of the new state and the only legitimate organ of political expression in the Republic.

We see the center-periphery dualities once again after the Turkish War of Independence (1920-1922). The Kemalists struggled with a diffuse group known as the Second Group in the Grand National Assembly. This group had some interesting ideas regarding representation, the military, religious instruction and practice. For example, they wanted to control the military and attach the gendarmerie to the Ministry of the Interior. They strongly supported religious education. Also, they wanted to prohibit the consumption of alcohol (Mardin, 2006a: 310).

After the victory of the resistance movement, a strict secular political process began to be carried out. Similar to many modernist movement in the Middle East (Varol, 2016: 135-136), the Kemalist elites believed that religion was a powerful barrier in their way. Their attitude toward Islam was disgust and distrust (Mardin, 2006b: 202). Thus, Mustafa Kemal chose to deal with the foundation of official religion instead of struggling for enforcing the new ways in the daily lives of ordinary people. Firstly, the Empire was abolished (November 1, 1922) and the Republic declared (October 29, 1923). Then, the caliphate was abolished (March 3, 1924). After the abolition of the caliphate, religion's penetration on daily life was cut off. Despite the strict secularization processes, some elements of daily life (birth, marriage, death...) still required the services of the ulama. Then, the secularization process continued by the abolition of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Religious Endowments (March 3, 1924), the abolition of religious courts (April, 1924), the adoption of the hat as headgear (November 25, 1925), the reform of the calendar (January 1, 1926), the adoption of the new criminal code (July 1, 1926), the adoption of the Swiss Civil Code (October 4, 1926), the disestablishment of Islam as a state religion (April 10, 1928), the reform of the alphabet (November 1, 1928), and the "Turkification" of the call to prayer (February 3, 1932). The reason for all these processes was "the requirements of contemporary civilization."

According to the Kemalist elites, sufi orders should have been abolished for "the requirements of contemporary civilization" and were the source of opposition. The role of the Sufi orders in opposition movements was obviously seen in the Seyh Sait rebellion of 1925. The Kemalist elites utilized this rebellion in order to establish a control over Islamic movements by passing the Law on the Decision on Establish Order (Takrir-i Sükun) (Mardin, 2006c: 274). After this rebellion, sufi orders were eliminated in 1925. After eliminating the class of the ulama and sufi orders, the Republican People's Party destroyed the two elements of religion in Turkey.

The Kemalist elites did not want the separation and autonomy of religion from state power. On the contrary, institutional religion was put completely under state control in order to bring the religious idiom and education in line with the modernization process (Göle, 1997a). Therefore, the state controlled religion through the Directorate of Religious Affairs. After the foundation of The Directorate of Religious Affairs, all matters related to religion were given to the Directorate of Religious Affairs. The Directorate was attached to the prime minister's office; the Director was designated by the prime minister and appointed by the president of the Republic. Thus, all religious matters could be controlled by the state like the Ottoman Empire.

The Kemalist elites used religion to create obedient citizens by the Directorate of the Religious Affairs. For example, the Directorate sent out the Friday sermons to mosques which encouraged paying of taxes and obedience the armed forces (Turan, 1994: 42). On the other hand, the Kemalist elite utilized religion as a main issue against the opposition groups and provinces (Mardin, 1992: 59). The Progressive Republican Party founded as an opposition party in 1925. Then, it coincided with a Kurdish and religious rebellion (the Seyh Sait rebellion). Then, a Law for the Maintenance of Order was passed. Even though, there was no link between the party and rebellion, the party was suppressed because of its links with "religious reaction." In 1930, a new opposition party, the Liberal Republican Party was founded. At this time, a new rebellion which was connected to the periphery (the political parties, the provinces, and religious reaction)



occurred in Menemen. After the Menemen revolt, the provinces, political parties and religion was considered as treasonous against the secularist goals of the republic by the Kemalist elites.

Until 1928, Islam was still officially the religion of the state. This status was eliminated from the Turkish constitution in 1928. It was mentioned for the first time that "the most advanced form of the state is a secular and democratic Republic" (Mardin, 2005: 98). In 1931, "The Party has accepted the principle that all laws, regulations and procedures used in the administration of the state should be prepared and implemented in order to meet the needs of this world and in accordance with the foundations of and the forms provided by science and technology in modern times" (Mardin, 1997: 210). In 1937, this process was included in the Turkish Constitution. It has been the most important principle of Kemalism since 1937.

According to Şerif Mardin, the most important role of "official" religion was that it provided legitimacy for the religion of the masses. After the principle of laicism, this legitimacy was erased. Thus, the "little man's" religion was put in an uncertain position: tolerated but not safe and sound. However, Mustafa Kemal was optimistic and believed that this process worked in favor of secularization in the long term (Mardin, 2006b: 202). In this context, we can argue that Islam was identified with the periphery in the single-party period of the Republic of Turkey and the state tried to "domesticate" and use Islam to gain legitimacy for its modernization project.

After the multi-party system of the Republic, we see that there has been a religious revival in Turkey and the place of Islam has started to move from the periphery to the center. According to Serif Mardin, this reversal was initiated by the Republican People's Party (Mardin, 1983: 143). This reversal took place at the party's seventh congress in 1947. There are two reasons for this reversal. First, after the multi-party system, they wanted to gain the conservative vote. Second, some important RPP members felt that they had gone too far in the secularization process because there were no well-trained men of religion. Then, RPP put religious courses into the programs of primary schools, established a faculty of theology and religious schools for training prayer leaders and preachers and religious tombs were opened for visitors (Mardin, 2006d: 235). However, the Democrat party gained a victory in 1950. Although the Democrat party kept secularism in operation, they appealed to Islam as part of the culture of the periphery. Against the Democrat Party, the Republican People's party dedicated itself to the Kemalist ideals. Then, Kemalist elites, the bureaucrats, military, bourgeoisie got together around this party (center) against the democrat party (periphery) (Mardin, 2006a: 314). Then, the Democrat Party used religion against the RPP. Religious groups and the DP created an alliance. However, the military coup in 1960 ended this alliance. One of the reasons for this military coup was that the generals thought that some religious groups wanted to undermine the secularist principles of the Turkish Republic.

According to Mardin, Kemalism, the founding ideology of the modern Turkey, failed to change traditional society in the rural area. Therefore, there was a cleavage between the center and periphery in the Republican Turkey. The lack of a linkage between these two groups created conflict and debate between them. The center was composed of educated urban, western-looking and secular-minded upper and middle classes. The periphery was composed of faith-basic lower-middle classes originating from Anatolian towns. After the multi-party system, we have witnessed not only the revival of traditional Islamic movements such as Naksibendi sufi orders, but also the foundation of new Islamic movements and parties. Anatolian people have accessed higher education since 1960s with immigration to urban cities and increased their economic power. For example, conservative women began to participate in the labor force in urban areas (Varol, 2017a). These kinds of developments led to the increase in the political power of Islamic groups since the 1970s.

Following the 1980 coup, religion was used as an effective means against extreme leftist movements (Varol, 2010: 47). Therefore, the state tolerated Islamic movements. Islamic groups have expanded their network via economic and political liberalization, the expansion of education, and urbanization. For instance, an influential Islamic media has been founded and it has played an important role in constructing Islamic awareness. On the one hand, today's Turkey has an increasing economic growth and political liberalization (Varol, 2017b; Onis, 2004), on the other hand it has an increasing impact of Islamic movements.

There are two kinds of Islamic movements in Turkey: society-oriented Islamic movements and state-oriented Islamic movements. Society-oriented Islamic movements expect to transform the society. Therefore, they focus on gaining "public space". On the other hand, State-oriented Islamic movements believe that society should change by means of the state. They want to take over control of the state and shape it. Therefore, their aim is to gain the "center" of the state. Society-oriented Islamic movements are interested in daily life and want to take over control of cultural, educational and economic spheres. Therefore, they utilize



the new opportunity spaces (magazines, TV channels, radio stations, the internet, cultural foundations, and a private education system) in order to expand their effect and action area. In this way, they reconstitute daily life by changing personal identity and consciousness. Hence, these opportunity spaces have become a source for social change in Turkish society. Their aim is not to build an Islamic state but to reshape everyday life by means of converting personal identity and consciousness by means of media, printed text, households, and neighborhoods. The public space has been identified with Kemalism and by institutional religion of the Republic until the last times. Although the Kemalist elites wanted to limit the Islamic identity in the “private space”, we have witnessed for 60 years, religious identity have been moved from the “private space” to the “public space” (Göle, 1996, 1997b). Today, Islamic identity has performed and is claimed in public space such as schools, universities, workplaces, public gardens and beaches. Therefore, the presence of Islam in public has challenged the Kemalist ideals.

The mainstream of state-oriented Islamic movements is the national outlook movement. A series of Islamist Parties including National Order Party (Milli Nizam Partisi), The National Salvation Party (Milli Selâmet Partisi), The Welfare Party (Refah Partisi), The Virtue Party (Fazilet Partisi) and The Felicity Party (Saadet Partisi), inspired by the National Outlook founded. One has succeeded the other because they were suppressed for violating Turkey’s secularism. When we look at their percentage of vote, we see that their votes have gradually increased since the foundation of Islamist party. The vote percentage of the Welfare Party (Refah Partisi) in 1983 was approximately 5%. Their vote rose over the years until they became the largest party under Necmettin Erbakan in 1996. After a soft military coup in 1997, they had to leave the coalition government. Refah Partisi was suppressed by the Supreme Court and Erbakan was banned from active politics. After the Welfare Party, the Virtue Party (Fazilet Partisi) was founded but this party also was banned in 2001. Following the suppress of the Virtue Party (Fazilet Partisi), two parties took its place: the Felicity Party (Saadet Partisi) representing Erbakan’s entourage, and the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) led by younger and more pragmatic politicians led by Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who declare to have abandoned Islamist ideas (Cinar, 2006; Dagi, 2004; Findley, 2010; J. White, 2012). The vote percentage of the Justice and Development Party was 34% and it won the election in 2002. It has increased its votes and has ruled Turkey since the election of 2002.

Although Turkey has experienced three and a half coups of military, religious movements have not declined, and they have enhanced their networks for 60 years. On the other hand, secularism is still the most important constitutional principle in Turkey (Mardin, 1997: 210). In this context, we wonder why Turkey is still secular. According to Serif Mardin, the military coups should not be seen as the only reason for the persistence of secularism in Turkey (Mardin, 1983: 149). The more important reason is the social status created by the secular system. The occupants of this status have interest in the preservation of secularism. These elites –judges, public prosecutors, lawyers, and professors- administrators- created a powerful group in Turkish society which can access and control the mass media. The future of these elites depends on secularism. It is very difficult to impose an Islamic order on such establishment groups and it involves more than parliamentary legitimation. When we look at the military coups in Turkey, there was no much opposition against the military because these elites have power. Another reason is that Turkey does not have independent religious authorities. All mosques in Turkey and religious personnel in the mosques attached to the Directorate of Religious Affairs. They have to follow state instructions. Also, religion is not the only source of legitimacy for the political opposition in today’s Turkey (Mardin, 1997: 149).

Turkish Islamic movements generally play within a legal frame, and tend to use democratic and pluralistic parameters (Fuller, 2008; Göle, 1997b; Kuru, 2009; Onis, 2009; J. B. White, 2011). Although there are Islamic movements which use violence against established regimes, as in Algeria, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, Turkey has experienced a silent Islamic reformation. The experience of Islamic movement in Turkey is different from other Islamic countries. According to the Turkish Islamists, Islam belongs to a person’s own spiritual pursuit. Turkish Islamic movements generally have been tended to be open, liberal and ready to negotiate differences within a democratic context. Also, they do not want an illiberal state because they have improved their spaces and networks by means of liberal and pluralistic state. For example, they reject to use any slogan for an Islamic state or law. Because of these radical slogans, an anti-Islamic and anti-democratic environment could be created in Turkey. Also, Islamic groups want Turkey to be admitted into the European Union as a way of integrating into the globalized world.

4. Conclusion

The place of Islam in the classical period of the Ottoman Empire was at the intersection between the center and the periphery because Islam was used as a linking institution between the center and the periphery. In the late Ottoman Empire, the place of Islam remained at the intersection between the center



and periphery despite the secularization process. After the foundation of the new republic, a strict modernization and secularization process was begun by the Kemalist elites. According to them, being modern means getting away from Islamic identity; one can be either modern or Muslim. Therefore, all organized Islamic movements were forbidden. Religious signs and practices were also expunged from the public space by the new secular elites during the single-party period on behalf of “the requirements of contemporary civilization.” As a result of the strict secularization process, the place of Islam was identified with the periphery in the single party period of the new Republic. However, there has been a comprehensive Islamic revival in Turkey after the multi-party system. Islamic movements have carried out religion from “private space” to “public space.”

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