RELATIVITY OF TURKISH POLITICAL ISLAM IN THE PRE-28 FEBRUARY PROCESS: Studying two Studies

Gülsen KAYA OSMANBAŞOĞLU*

Abstract

Looking at the same issue from different lenses brings us quite different repercussions in social sciences. In this paper, an ironic example of the relativity of Turkish Political Islam in the pre-28 February Process is analyzed in the light of two existing studies which were carried by Binnaz Toprak and Ahmet Yıldız. To this end, their methodologies, perceptions of the official ideology as well as their conceptions of Islam are compared and contrasted. It is quite often the case that particular reductionisms and presumptions limit political scientists’ analyses, thus hindering to see the big picture.

Turkish politics have today become an arena of polarization in which prevailing parties and different groups in the society do not seem to be eager to understand and listen to each other. Especially in terms of the debates on political Islam, this polarization gain impetus due to both the rigid character of secularism1 as the omnipotent element of official ideology and politicized perceptions of religion. That is to say as Calhoun and et al. elucidate “[i]n all cases, secularism is defined in tandem with its twin concept, religion, and how

* Assistant Prof., Social Sciences University of Ankara, Department of Political Science
we think about one of these paired concepts affects the way we think about the other\(^2\). This trend could be observed in political scientists’ works as well especially when it comes to the evaluation of political Islam in Turkey. So, how these two scholars evaluate the official ideology and official secularism carried out in Turkey is as much important as their perceptions of religion.

The National Outlook movement and the parties coming from that root, which are usually closed and re-opened under another name, have been on the Turkish politics’ agenda for a considerable amount of time since 1970’s. After the first striking rise of the Welfare Party in the 1994 local elections, followed by success in the 1995 general elections as well as in the 1996 mid-term local elections, the Welfare Party was closed due to the 28 February process. Proceeding from this closure was the foundation of Virtue party, which shared the same destiny as the Welfare Party, and lastly the formation of the Felicity Party almost simultaneously with today’s incumbent the Justice and Development Party. All of these foundations and closures create question marks regarding the nature of political Islam in Turkey in political scientists’ minds. Two such scholars are Binnaz Toprak and Ahmet Yıldız, both of whom deal with political Islam in Turkey. I shall compare and contrast the methodology, approaches, conceptual frameworks and arguments of Toprak and Yıldız in this paper through two their articles. The first paper, “Islam and Democracy in Turkey” by Binnaz Toprak, was published in *Turkish Studies* in 2005\(^3\) and the latter article, “Politico-Religious Discourse of Political Islam in Turkey: The Parties of National Outlook Contents” by Ahmet Yıldız, was published in *Muslim World* in 2003\(^4\). While comparing these studies, I shall

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consider three driving questions that help to identify their differences and similarities.

1- How do they approach the issue methodologically and conceptually?
2- How do the authors explain the position of official ideology within the context of political Islam?
3- How do they consider “Islam” in the political Islamic framework?

Comparison of Methodologies and Conceptualization

The outcome of an observation depends on the observer’s perception of time, place, understanding and approach. In that vein, Tilly and Goodin points that an analysis depends on the context of its place, time, explanation mechanisms, existing culture, history, psychology, population, technology and the philosophy of the researcher which also set the fundamentals for the methodology and conceptualization of the researcher. I chose these two articles because they illuminate how different perspectives and methodologies result in diverse conclusions in political science studies.

The first question above highlights methodological and conceptual differences that the first distinction between the two approaches is the unit of analysis and use of data. Ahmet Yıldız takes the Welfare Party and its successors as the unit of analysis and looks at the issue by putting the party at the center. Political parties that engage with political Islam are the main source and reference for Yıldız as he evaluates the National Outlook manifesto.

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by using discourse analysis. Here, Yıldız considers discourse as not only language but also emblems of the parties, symbols and appellations in Foucauldian manner. According to Foucault, everything is shaped by discourse and discourse includes every system of meanings that constructs power and knowledge⁶. In that sense, Yıldız’s analysis of discourse in a broad manner and studying every single detail are a de-construction of the Islamic and non-Islamic references of the National Outlook movement parties. While doing this, Yıldız observes both official party programs and unofficial discourse with special reference to the meanings that are ascribed to the symbols by reading between the lines. For instance, he connects the appellation of “Welfare” to the developmentalist repertoire and interprets the symbols of Welfare Party, which are “crescent” and “ear,” as spiritual and material aspects of growth and development⁷. He describes and de-constructs the National Outlook ideology and its descendants chronologically in a historical framework. He does not address either sociological response to the movement or opposition discourses against the National Outlook parties. Instead, he only focuses on the party itself, its ideology and discourse as presented by its leader, columnists, newspapers, party meetings and so on who are commonly seen in the public sphere.

Binnaz Toprak, on the other hand, looks at the trio of government, state and society which to her all have an impact upon the formation of the Welfare Party and its successors. Toprak considers Islamist parties as government, the military and the bureaucracy as state elites and interest groups and the masses as society. Unlike Yıldız, for Toprak ‘party’ is only one dimension of political Islam in Turkey and thus she adds some other dynamics

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⁷ See Ahmet Yıldız. p.189.
into the picture to provide a broader framework, though with less details. As a result, she takes into account the reactions for and against political Islam with which Ahmet Yıldız engages very little. Another distinguishing factor between the two scholars is that Toprak generally deals with actions rather than intentions and dialogues, which she perceives to have little reference to the discourse of political Islamist parties. She generally uses the discourse of the Welfare Party in order to show the discrepancy between the promises and actions rather than taking discourse as the main source. She utilizes a historical descriptive approach, providing reasons and results and various examples. Like Yıldız, she proceeds chronologically while narrating the process but, different from Yıldız, Toprak uses survey results and quantitative data in addition to qualitative data. For instance, Toprak interprets survey results and figures to assert that Turkish people are generally neither pro-Islamist nor desire Islamic rule despite casting their vote for an Islamist party. Nevertheless, she does not pay attention to how these quantitative data are produced and whether a sort of selectiveness or overemphasis has a role to play while producing the questions.

A second significant distinction between the two scholars is that of methodology. Ahmet Yıldız pursues a deconstructivist approach that is based on the exploration of what was established and why. Deconstruction is a critical scrutiny introduced by Jacques Derrida, which serves to “interrogate the assumptions of thought by reversing or displacing the hierarchical binary oppositions that provide its foundation”\(^8\). For instance, while Yıldız is discussing the double discourse of the Welfare Party, he suggests that the construction of the unofficial discourse aims at providing legitimacy and legality within the secular system as a survival reflex. Here, Yıldız not only

http://www.scholars.nus.edu.sg/post/poldiscourse/spivak/deconstruction.html
identifies the existence of double discourse, but also explains why he believes a second discourse was constructed. One may argue that he is using post-structuralist theory by de-constructing how the National Outlook parties establish the “self” identity through otherizing certain features like the concepts of the Westerner and infidelity. Furthermore, in the post-structuralist direction, instead of taking the established structures, he delves how these structures are constructed. For instance, while he is analyzing the ‘Just Order’ principle, he demonstrates how that principle is subliminally linked with Islamic ethical norms without leaving the legal circle. So, instead of taking a constructed Just Order structure as reference for study, he prefers to analyze the formation of that structure from the very beginning.

Binnaz Toprak, in contrast, uses somehow an Orientalist view that assumes that Islam is incompatible with democracy and accepts the representation of West as a supreme model for democratization and secularism. Edward Said explains that “what I called Orientalism was a new way of conceiving the separations and conflicts that had stimulated generations of hostility, war and imperial control” In other words, Orientalism is merely based on the separation of the East from the West and the representation of these paradigms as antagonistic cultures by appreciating the superiority of West over East. In comparison to Ahmet Yıldız, who de-constructs the West-East dichotomies, Toprak utilizes that dichotomy with special reference to Western supremacy. According to this essentialist approach, secularism as a crucial element of liberal democracy belongs to West and the rest of the states, including Muslim World, are incapable of being secular; it is claimed that

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9 See Toprak, p.168.
“non-Western cultures are peculiarly hostile to democracy”\textsuperscript{12}. In that sense, Toprak accepts the essentialism that liberal democracy is incompatible with a Muslim state. However, it should be noted that she does distinguish between a Muslim society and the Muslim state.

According to classical modernist view, religion is expected to decline as modernity continues. Toprak revises this theory since in the Turkish context religiously oriented parties have come to power as modernity increases. Moreover, she contends that although it seems to be a rise of Islamism, in fact it is a result of modernity and democratization. She states that the success of the Welfare Party and its successors depends on economic factors rather than religious ones\textsuperscript{13}. She does not ignore the place of religion in society but implies that with the influence of modernization, the understanding of religion in Turkish society was modified and people began to think, act and vote more pragmatically. For instance, she suggests that the former failure of the National Outlook Parties in 1970’s was due to the irresponsiveness of their program to the economic problems\textsuperscript{14}. Furthermore, unlike Yıldız, she evaluates ‘Just Order’ which brings electoral victory to the Welfare Party as only a socio-economic program without considering its Islamic roots\textsuperscript{15}. So, according to her analysis, Islamists have carved out a place in the Turkish politics due to materialistic rationales rather than spiritual reasons. Despite appreciating Toprak’s argument about the importance of socio-economic factors and liberalization of political atmosphere, it is possible to say that she underestimates the role of religion in terms of shaping voting behavior.


\textsuperscript{13} Toprak, B. 177 and 180.

\textsuperscript{14} Toprak, B. p.171.

\textsuperscript{15} Toprak, B. p.181
Although she does not utilize feminist perspective in the whole article, gender is a concern for Toprak while it is not one for Yıldız. She suggests that gender is the main impediment and source of conflict between modernity and the Islamic project because she perceives the covering of women and their segregation in the society as the core of Islamism, which opposes gender equality and freedom of choice in liberal democracies. Ironically, a certain kind of inferior position is attributed to women here while considering the gender issue. For instance, covering of women is perceived as a male-choice and the women obeying that choice are described as passive actors, which to a large extent does not reflect the real case. She also represents women rights as a crucial element of the republican modernization of Turkey in that she considers gender while describing these issues. Neglecting to consider the sufficiency and the limits of the empowerment of women rights’ in the modernization period, the scholar leans upon the mentality of the official ideology.

A third noteworthy distinction between Yıldız and Toprak is their divergent conceptual understandings of Islam and Islamism, which shall be analyzed in the third question as well. According to Ahmet Yıldız’s conceptual framework, the Welfare Party and its successors are neither Islamist nor radical since they are always within the borders of the established secular system. In fact, Yıldız conceptualizes radicalism and Islamism as demanding a state based on Islam and that kind of ideology can never coexist with these parties’ system-oriented attitudes. He takes Islam as a dynamic paradigm in terms of its repercussions and determines that National Outlook

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16 Toprak, B. p.169.
inherits an Ottoman type of Islam rather than fundamental Islam\textsuperscript{18}. So, he distinguishes Ottoman Islam from the other types of Islam and thereby the religious discourse of the National Outlook parties from that of the radical Islamists.

Ahmet Yıldız also uses “binary oppositions,” as Derrida suggests, the bipolar theoretical opposites that are constructed on behalf of one’s hegemony\textsuperscript{19}. Yıldız illustrates how dichotomies like truth-wrong, West-East, pious-infidel are constructed under the framework of National Outlook by otherizing wrong, West, infidel in an agnostic manner and keeping the monopoly of truth, East, piety and so on under their umbrella.

Binaz Toprak likewise states that Welfare Party government created an Islamist-Secularist dichotomy through its populist policies while it was incumbent\textsuperscript{20}, in accordance with the binary oppositions of Derrida, the conceptualization of Binnaz Toprak is in many respects distinct from that of Ahmet Yıldız. For instance, Toprak understands the National Outlook movement and its successors to be Islamists who engage with Islamic manifestations and are trying to change some secular dynamics. Unlike Yıldız, Toprak considers Welfare Party as anti-system party who has had some difficulties in adapting to the secular system. Furthermore, Toprak conceptualizes Islam as a religion, which leaves no room for democracy without considering different interpretations of Islam, which might be considered as a way of reductionism.

\textbf{Official Ideology and Political Islam}

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\textsuperscript{18} Yıldız, A. p.191
\textsuperscript{20} Toprak, B. p.172.}

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Turkish official ideology, namely Kemalism, is based on six principles: republicanism, secularism, nationalism, etatism, populism and reformism. Secularism and nationalism in particular stand out as two basic elements of the official ideology that are always protected and highlighted. Thus, in response to the second question regarding official ideology and political Islam, I will especially address how these two authors position National Outlook parties and, especially the Welfare Party, in relation to secularism and nationalism.

Ahmet Yıldız states that the official discourse of the Welfare Party, which is quite different from the unofficial discourse, is closely dependent on the Constitution and the notion of secularism. According to his analysis, the Welfare Party and its successors usually refrain from making Islamic statements and clashing with the Kemalist elites. Yıldız argues that Welfare Party keeps radical Islamists from trouble and focus on socio-economic and cultural realms instead of debating secularism. Since they are system-oriented parties, Yıldız states that they avoid opposing the system and engaging in bloody struggles. Yıldız develops an optimistic understanding for the Welfare Party and its successors, asserting that they neither challenge nor contradict secularism. Despite not giving direct reference to different version of secularisms, he intrinsically espouses the multiple prevailing understandings of secularism(s).

On the other hand, Binnaz Toprak identifies the polarization of Welfare Party from the Kemalist axis by evaluating its actions and tendencies beyond the discourse. For instance she recalls Erbakan’s dinner with sect sheiks and calling for the Sheria by local administrators of Welfare Party, actions that are

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21 Yıldız, A. p.196.
22 Yıldız, A. p.201.
ignored by Ahmet Yıldız. Unlike Yıldız, Toprak argues that, due to the National Outlook ideology, the left-right split turns into a secularist-Islamist fragmentation, creating something like civil war. Thus, Toprak sees the Welfare Party and its successors as overtly challenging the official secular ideology by their actions. Binnaz Toprak’s argument and evidence, which makes special reference to exaggeration of the media while transmitting the events, exemplifies the scholars’ tendency to stay within the boundaries of the official ideology whereas Yıldız states that Welfare Party always stayed within the borders of the official ideology in terms of secularism which might be true for the party’s actions but the exceptional stance of the party is not adequately evaluated. Furthermore, it is interesting to observe here that Toprak and Yıldız are identical in their perspectives in that both evaluate staying within the borders of the regime as a positive phenomenon without questioning the possible weaknesses and deficiencies of the existing system. The difference emerges from their examination of whether the Welfare Party remained as a system party or not; it should be noted at this point that being a system party is illustrated as *ipso facto* a positive qualification.

On the other hand, both authors suggest that the post-1980 state ideology provides political Islam with more room to maneuver. Toprak argues that liberalization and democratization of the official ideology in addition to the promotion of Islam in order to stop leftist movements paved the path to the rise of political Islam. However, she distinguishes between the post-1980 policies which are based on Turkish-Islam synthesis and the Welfare Party ideology since she assumes Welfare Party to have never been engaged in that kind of nationalism.

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23 Toprak, B. p. 175.
24 Toprak, B. p.176.
Ahmet Yıldız also counts the post-1980 state policies among the promoters of the rise of Welfare Party, yet differs from Toprak, when he argues that in terms of nationalism National Outlook Parties try to construct a ‘nation’ through identity politics which could be understood as ethnic and religious interchangeably. First of all, Yıldız argues that National Outlook ideology stood clear from the ultranationalist ideology and then adopted a kind of religious nationalism based on Islam-West dichotomy, thus connecting themselves to the Muslim world. For instance, Yıldız associates the “leader, organization, doctrine” trio of ultra-nationalist Nationalist Action Party with the “community, organization, obedience” trio of the Welfare Party in order to show the similarities between the two. Furthermore, he goes on to underline the nationalist repercussions of the slogan of the Welfare Party, which is “Great Turkey once again” that reminds of the history and creates a hopeful national honor. As Benedict Anderson suggests, instrumentalization of history is one of the most efficient ways of nation-building process, which, in this case, makes Yıldız’s analysis quite considerable. Yıldız is of the opinion that opposition to Zionism, Semitism and European Union, seeking Muslim interests through Islamic organizations and providing a platform for the expression of religious identity make all National Outlook parties, and the Welfare Party in particular, overtly nationalist. According to my reading, Yıldız de-constructs how the Welfare and the other parties of the same sort utilize ‘reverse Orientalism’ and try to reproduce the Ottoman/Islamic version

26 Yıldız, A. P.188.
27 Yıldız, A. p.188 and 206.
28 Yıldız, A. 192.
of nationhood under the concept of banal nationalism\textsuperscript{30}. In terms of nationalism, both Toprak and Yıldız approach the issue onesidedly to the end of supporting their own arguments with particular examples\textsuperscript{31}.

Briefly, Toprak thinks the National Outlook ideology to be incapable of neither adopting Kemalist ideals nor confronting the Kemalists. Although she acknowledges that the post-1980 state policies took part in the rise of political Islam, Toprak does not think that the Welfare Party employed nationalistic motives. It is rather possible to conclude that she assumes nationalism to be a “good” tenet which could not be attributed to the “bad” Welfare Party. On the other hand, according to Yıldız, National Outlook parties never contradict with the official ideology openly and are modern intra-system parties. His way of approaching the nationalism which is based on defining the ‘self’ as against the ‘other’ enables him to argue that the National Outlook movement brings a religious nationalist separation and identification which espouses a broader understanding of nationalism.

“Islam” in the Political Islamic Framework

Binnaz Toprak takes Islam as the static set of rules that determine the way things should be in all the layers of individual and social lives and argues that Islam is incompatible with liberal democracy. In my opinion, she underestimates its different versions and deals only with the fundamentalist Orthodox Islam so much so that to what extent it reflects real practices is very

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\item \textsuperscript{30} Here, although Yıldız do not use the term explicitly, his way of analysis reminds me Michael Billig’s concept of ‘banal nationalism’. For details, see: Michael Billig. 1995. \textit{Banal Nationalism}. London: Sage. \\
\item \textsuperscript{31} The rough character of the Welfare Party’s nationalism should be considered. For example, see Ruşen Çakır. 1994. \textit{Ne Şeriat Ne Demokrasi: Refah Partisi’ni Anlamak}. İstanbul:Metis. Chapter 3.
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questionable. For example, even in the Ottoman state, “[f]or the population at large,” as Mardin notes, “religion was a moral prop, something to lean on, a source of consolation, a patterning of life; for the ruling elite it was in addition, and probably much more, a matter related to the legitimacy of the state. Both groups could at times neglect religion or by-pass it, but the form of this by-passing was different: for the masses it consisted of breaking religious taboos and then atoning for it later; for the ruling it consisted in pushing religion into the background when required by secular political purposes.”

This, in turn, suggests that the Islamic state was not fully fledged Islamic at all. According to Toprak’s analysis, political Islam, with which especially the Welfare Party engages, tarikats (dervish lodges) and radical Islamist movements have the same “Islamic” credential or, as she suggests, all of them are in the same Islamic camp. Since she does not distinguish these paradigms from each other and analyzes them all under the umbrella of political Islam, her analysis runs the risk of reduction. On the other hand, she does not use the term ‘Muslim’ but ‘Islam’ while referring to the sociological level inasmuch as she thinks that religion of the masses, which is modified in time, neither threat secularism and established system nor demand a state based on Islamic principles.

Yıldız takes Islam as a dynamic system of meanings that can be interpreted in various ways. For instance, he argues that Islam which motivates the Welfare Party is the Ottoman Islam rather than a fundamental version of it and goes on to suggest that it is a modern interpretation of the religion which supports economic and technological development. He also distinguishes between the Islam that is employed by National Outlook

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33 Toprak, B. p.175 and 171.
ideology and the radical Islamism and its sectarian (tarikat) versions. So, unlike Toprak, Yıldız’s conception of Islam is not monolithic. On the other hand, place of the religion in political Islam is much more complex according to Yıldız’s study which figures out the double discourse of the National Outlook. According to the unofficial discourse, political Islam is merely motivated, not determined by Islamic impulse. Yıldız formulates that it was Islamic nationalism rather than Islamism that is observed in Turkish politics which suggests other perspectives than cliches.

Conclusion

Binnaz Toprak’s main concern is to evaluate the relationship between Islam, politics and democracy and while doing so, she takes the religiously oriented Welfare Party as her reference point to show how dangerous the Islamization of politics could be. Her main assumption is that Islam is incompatible with democracy and that liberal democracy requires tolerance for all preferences, which, Toprak thinks, Islamists cannot provide. Given the survey data in this direction, she highlights that Muslim Turkish society is against the politicization of Islam. Having focused on how the Islamization of politics caused trouble and polarization under the Welfare Party rule, she briefly notes the alteration of the ideology from Virtue Party to the Justice and Development Party by drawing an optimistic perspective for the future at the same time. Since she focuses on actions rather than discourses, her analysis is based on a selective historical description.

On the other hand, Ahmet Yıldız looks at the picture from the “party” and evaluates the ideology by analyzing its discourse. His different

34 Yıldız, A. p.194.
methodology brings forth a different understanding of political Islam in Turkey; according to him, National Outlook ideology promoted a kind of religious nationalism in a secular and modernist rhetoric rather than Islamism. He focuses on the National Outlook ideology with particular example of the Welfare Party and then he points to the radical change in ideology beginning with the Virtue Party and its successors. Without considering the possibility of dissimulation which has been outspoken by the opposition for a while since the same cadre of the Welfare Party formed the Virtue Party, he sincerely believes in the shift of ideology after the Virtue Party. Furthermore, he does not pay attention to some actions of the Welfare Party before the 28 February process, such as Erbakan’s visit to Khaddafì and such which were outused by the opposition largely to label the party as an anti-system party. What he implicitly criticizes is the Welfare Party’s monopolist attitudes towards the religion, yet he avoids touching upon neither the common criticisms to the party nor clarification of these criticisms. Although it is impossible to analyze everything in a particular issue as Faulconer suggests “for one thing, no one can say everything about anything”\textsuperscript{35}, I believe Yıldız should clarify some certain accusation raised by the opposition in the 28 February process especially as he claims that the National Outlook movement always refrains from violence, promotes modernization and secularism and so on.

In conclusion, needless to say, the relativity of every single issue pervades in the social sciences because different methodologies, conceptualizations and perceptions of the authors bring us different conclusions. Although the two scholars study the same issue with special reference to the Welfare Party before the 28 February process, their different perspectives and approaches result in divergent statements and findings.

\textsuperscript{35} http://jamesfaulconer.byu.edu/deconstr.htm
Toprak introduces the exceptionality of the Turkish experience of political Islam and consolidation of democracy in a Muslim country whereas Ahmet Yıldız originally explores that although it is perceived as Islamist, the National Outlook movement and the Welfare Party in particular indeed utilizes religious nationalism by carrying out identity politics. In my opinion, both of the articles provide significant perspectives for the students of Turkish Politics though Toprak’s presumptions and oversimplifications of the paradigm of Islam and politics and Yıldız’s tendency to skip some important statements and details should be noted as considerable flaws. While Toprak uses classical descriptive methods with a sauce of quantitative data, Yıldız focuses on discourse analysis per se. All in all, in order to mitigate the gap between the findings of the researches, what I suggest is to utilize a combination of wide range of methods and enrich conceptual frameworks rather than employing the concepts in a static manner. This will most likely enable us to seek a broader understanding of the conflictual issues by decreasing the tension and polarization prevailing in the Turkish politics at the same time. The fuzzy and complex issues of political science require multilevel analyses which refrain from reducing the causations to a single or a couple of factors as wella.

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