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## Obscuring the control of the state in Turkey: the articulation of discourse of private Islam

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### ABSTRACT

In 2012, the main opposition party in Turkey, the CHP, accused the ruling AKP of making ideological and unscientific educational reforms. By using discourse analysis, this study examines the debate in the Committee on National Education, Culture, Youth and Sport of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey and scrutinizes how politicians articulate the discourse of private Islam. Furthermore, it explicates how this discourse obscures the state's power over Islam. Although the parties advocated different educational policies in the 2012 debate, their articulation reinforces the hegemonic configuration of power by which the state as a public institution controls private Islam.

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### Introduction

In 2012, then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced that the aim of proposed educational reforms was to raise a pious generation (*dindar nesil yetiştireceğiz*). This provoked the main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, henceforth CHP), to accuse the ruling Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, henceforth AKP) of making ideological and unscientific educational reforms and trying to instill their own principles among future Turkish voters. Part of the reason why the CHP made this accusation was that the proposed reforms increased the role of Islam in the educational system. In addition to the many controversial issues in the educational reforms, Islam was one of the most discussed topics in the seven days of discussion in February and March 2012 by Committee on National Education, Culture, Youth and Sport (*Millî Eğitim, Kültür, Gençlik ve Spor Komisyonu*, henceforth MEKGSK). Regardless of the differences between the educational policies

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advocated by the AKP and the CHP and how they are often seen as being opposite to each other – the former representing the political views of Islamists and the latter secularists – this study scrutinizes their respective articulations by using discursive study of religion. It also shows how the two parties can endorse different political views despite, interestingly, sharing a similar articulation of Islam.

The subject of this article is part of a larger phenomenon whereby parties, which are defined as Islamist or Islamic-oriented, are gaining more power not just in Turkey but also in other predominantly Muslim countries. After gaining power, these parties have increased the role of Islam in the public sphere. Olivier Roy argues that we are dealing with ‘the reformulation of religion’s place in the public sphere.’ According to him, the reformulation is not about secularization but rather about the deconstruction of Islam. He continues that what we are witnessing in the Muslim majority countries is the ‘autonomization’ of politics from religion and of religion from politics. According to Roy, there has been a process of individualization of faith and diversification of religious field.<sup>1</sup> This study agrees with Roy about the reformulation in the sense that there is a negotiation about religion’s place in the public sphere. However, this article does not comment on the ‘autonomization,’ ‘individualization’ or ‘diversification’ claims but instead examines how the increased role of Islam in the public sphere was defended and opposed in the Turkish political discourse. The aim of this study is to scrutinize the kind of discourse articulated with respect to Islam and what that discourse obscures. This kind of approach can reveal more similarities than differences between different parties that are usually seen as representing opposing views.

This study does not only examine how discourse constitutes religion but also how discourse(s) on religion masks, distorts, and serves human interests in disproportional ways.<sup>2</sup> Despite a large amount of research concerning the relationship between the state, Islam and secularism in Turkey, there are few discourse analyses of how the discourse(s) on Islam serves the interests of political parties.<sup>3</sup> The focus of this study is on how the discourse concerning private Islam serves the interests of two political parties, which are considered opposite to each other, and how that discourse obscures the state’s control over Islam.

### **Theoretical and methodological background: discursive study of religion**

Discursive study of religion is not a single, coherent theory or methodology. However, scholars do agree on the starting point that religion is not ‘just out there’ but rather constructed through different processes.<sup>4</sup> This applies to Islam as well, since it is constituted as a religion, for example, in the Turkish political discourse. As Craig Martin has pointed out, much research has focused on

how discourse constitutes religion, but it is equally important to examine what discourses on religion generate because they obscure power relations and interests of different agents.<sup>5</sup> Hence, the aim of this analysis is to scrutinize what kind of discourse(s) on religion, in this case on Islam, is articulated in Turkish political discourse. This is done by examining the MEKGSK's debate from a textual-leaning perspective. This means that the focus is on what kind of discourse(s) is articulated on Islam in a particular text rather than in the analysis of long-term historical processes. Since the analysis concerns discourse on 'religion' rather than 'religious discourse,' the aim is not to scrutinize religious discourse from the debate but to examine what is connected to Islam.<sup>6</sup>

As the discursive study of religion often borrows theoretical and methodological principles from other subjects, this analysis draws its understanding of discourse from the discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Hence, discourse is a formation of a relational net of signs, which are constructed in articulatory practice. The meanings of these signs are constructed in a contingent relationship with each other in a way that will result in a structured totality called discourse. What is significant is that all articulation is contingent: it is possible but not necessary. The discourse establishes a temporary closure to the variations in the meaning of the signs from which it is articulated. However, the closure is never final because although the discourse fixes meaning in a particular way, it does not render that meaning as fixed exactly in that way forever.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, the aim of this study is to examine how certain discourse(s) on religion masks configurations of power and leaves the prevailing hegemony unchallenged. In the Turkish political discourse, the CHP argues in a similar way to liberals in American political discourse described by Martin: they are focused on claiming that religion should be private. In other words, the liberals argue that religious people do not have the right to inflict their values on others. This claim is often framed with the demand that the state should be ideologically neutral as regards religious ideologies.<sup>8</sup> The whole claim together with its framing reflects the modern hegemonic binary where religion, as being subjective and emotional, belongs to the private sphere and secularity, as being neutral and connected with the state, to the public sphere.<sup>9</sup> The CHP argued that because Islam is a religion, and as such a private matter, it does not belong to the public sphere.

In this article, hegemony is approached from a Gramscian point of view, which means that it is a general political logic involving the construction of a new 'common sense.' According to Laclau and Mouffe, hegemony demands the existence of antagonistic forces and the instability of the political frontiers that divide them.<sup>10</sup> There is an ideological struggle between the AKP and the CHP about what kind of educational policies the privacy of Islam requires. In this struggle, the privacy of Islam is the hegemony: it is taken for granted and it forms the 'common sense.'

However, what the modern hegemonic binary obscures is how the division into private/religion and public/state is not clear and how it authorizes configurations of power when used in certain ways.<sup>11</sup> The articulation of the discourse of private Islam in Turkish political discourse obscures the power of the state over Islam, and religion in general. The discourse of private Islam makes people to feel that they are free to choose their own religious matters and that the state is a neutrally and objectively governing force. Both the CHP and the AKP argued that Islam as a religion is a private matter, however, they also claim that the state should not interfere with it by putting obstacles in the way of people's need for religious education. Moreover, there is an ideological struggle over to what this privacy indicates and where it leads to: to more religious instruction in the public national educational system as the AKP argues or to less as the CHP argues. In conclusion, both the CHP and the AKP benefit from the hegemonic configuration of power where an objective and neutral state controls a subjective and private Islam.

## Material

The MEKGSK is one of the 18 standing committees in the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (*Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi*, henceforth TBMM). The Committee was the first political body to debate the AKP's proposal before it was submitted to the Plenary. The Committees are organs where the deputies debate and examine the proposals to be debated in the Plenary.<sup>12</sup> The duty of the MEKGSK is to examine draft bills and proposals of laws concerning, for example, education and religious affairs that are submitted from the Speakership of the TBMM.<sup>13</sup> The MEKGSK is open to MPs, members of the Council of Ministers and the representatives of the Government, the Prime Minister and ministers. However, committees may invite experts in order to consult their views.<sup>14</sup> In the MEKGSK's debate concerning the 2012 educational reforms, the AKP and the CHP tried to demonstrate that each other's political reasoning and arguments were unconvincing. The MPs who participated to the debate were obviously aware that the media were following the debate and reporting about it. This affected how the MPs argued their standpoint because they did not want to displease their voters but rather try to gain more voters.

The debate in the MEKGSK concerning the AKP's proposal (*İlköğretim ve Eğitim Kanunu ile Bazı Kanunlarda Değişiklik Yapılmasına Dair Kanun Teklifi* [2/358]) took place over seven days in February and March 2012.<sup>15</sup> On the eighth day, the proposal was accepted for submission to the Plenary and debating was concluded.<sup>16</sup> The reports about the debates are available from the web page of the TBMM and they contain a total of 909 pages of transcriptions. The AKP's proposal was not only about changing religious education; however, Islam was subject of the discussion in all seven days of the

debate. The CHP gave most of the speeches in the MEKGSK. Of the 130 MPs who spoke in the MEKGSK, 82 were from the CHP, 42 from the AKP, 4 were from the Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*) and 2 were from the Peace and Democracy Party (*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi*).

The debate in the MEKGSK was a political argumentation, where the MPs represented their party but nonetheless formulated arguments also as individuals. Although there was a certain consensus among the MPs of the CHP and among the MPs of AKP, there were also dissenting voices within both parties. Since political identities are defined in the first instance for groups, and individuals may or may not fully support them personally, political practices, such as debates in the committees, may uncover disagreements of identity and ideology in a particular political discourse.<sup>17</sup> MPs can have disagreements inside their own parties, but in the context of a debate in parliamentary committees, they nonetheless represent their party.

The analysis was conducted by doing a close reading.<sup>18</sup> First, all the transcriptions were read twice while taking notes to obtain an overall picture of the debate. Next, the transcriptions were read again several times and special attention was paid to the discussions concerning Islam and religious education; subsequently, a summary of the debate was written. During the analysis, it was essential to return to the original transcriptions. In the analysis, special attention was paid to what the MPs said when they talked about religious education and how they spoke about Islam.

### Public Islamic religious education in the Republic of Turkey

In general, the Turkish educational system is strongly centralized. The Ministry of National Education (*T.C. Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı*, henceforth MEB) determines, for example, curricular matters, financing of the schools, staff employment and examinations. This way the state has control of all educational affairs, including religious education. Briefly, the CHP has traditionally favored educational policies which diminish Islamic religious education (henceforth IRE) and the AKP has – particularly since 2012 – fostered educational policies, which increase IRE.

Previously, there have been several models of religious education in Turkey.<sup>19</sup> Alev Çınar argues that following colonialism and globalization most of the institutions and practices established in the name of modernity in places outside of Europe have been modeled according to European equivalents. Çınar contends that this is also the case in Turkey, although it was never directly colonized.<sup>20</sup> Çınar's argument applies to how the educational system and IRE in Turkey have developed. First, the new republic nationalized and centralized education in 1924 and later in the 1930s they removed IRE from the national curricula in schools. After this, the state did not allow any nongovernmental organizations, religious groups or communities to

offer public religious education. This meant that the IRE was demarcated from the public sphere to private and marginal spheres. After the 1980 coup, compulsory Religious Culture and Moral lessons – which mainly focused on Sunni-Islam – were added to the national curricula. Following the 1997 coup, public, vocational and intermediate-level İmam Hatip schools (henceforth İH schools) were closed. In addition, the graduates from İH schools were precluded from further studies in other faculties except in the faculties of divinity and the banning of headscarf at the universities became more strict than before.

The most recent major change to IRE was made by the AKP in 2012. The AKP's proposal, which was debated in the MEKGSK, recommended increasing compulsory education from 8 years to 12 years and dividing it into three four-year periods; this also gave the new system its name 4 + 4+4. The division enabled the re-opening of the intermediate-level İH schools. The proposal also included adding three elective religious courses to the ordinary school's curricula: Basic Religious Information, the Quran and Prophet Mohammed's Life. After the debate ended in the MEKGSK, the proposal was taken to the Plenary for a vote and it was accepted on 30 March 2012.

### **Similar articulation on Islam by the AKP and CHP: the unchallenged state's control over religion**

In the political debate in the MEKGSK, both the AKP and the CHP articulated the discourse of private Islam from such signs as freedom of choice, preference, conscience and belief, family and personal relationships with Allah. The politicians articulated the meanings of these signs in a contingent relationship with each other in a way that resulted in a structured totality called the discourse of private Islam.<sup>21</sup> However, the articulation was not similar throughout. In general, the CHP's articulation was republican and the AKP's was populist: the CHP defended freedom and self-determination detached from gender, religion or ethnicity, and the AKP announced it was representing the will of the people.<sup>22</sup> The following describes how the discourse was articulated and how the prevailing hegemony was left unchallenged.

Initially, there was considerable debating about the actual model of the new educational system. The CHP, for instance, claimed that the AKP wants to divide the educational system into three four years' periods only because it wants to open the intermediate level to İH schools. The CHP did not oppose İH schools completely but was afraid that the 'real' aim of the AKP was to convert all schools into İH schools. According to the CHP, this was wrong because the AKP was using the educational system in order to fulfill its own aspiration to initiate more IRE.<sup>23</sup> On several occasions, the MPs of the CHP accused the AKP of generating this reform as means of revenge

for the educational changes made after the 1997 coup, which closed the intermediate-level İH schools. The CHP argued that the AKP wanted a rerun of the 1997 educational reform.<sup>24</sup> The MPs of the CHP referred particularly to the statement of the former Prime Minister Erdoğan who, according to the MPs of the CHP, wants to raise a 'pious and vindictive generation.'<sup>25</sup>

The AKP's main argument to defend the elective courses and the opening of the İH schools was that they were in response to the wishes of the people and that they would only bring more flexibility and freedom to the educational system.<sup>26</sup> AKP's Selçuk Özdağ, for example, answered the CHP by saying that despite their accusations, the opening of the İH schools would bring freedom of choice and conscience and this was a matter of family affairs:

So, we wanted the generation which has freedom of mind, wisdom, conscience? ... let's also open the intermediate level İH schools. Those families, who want, can send their children to the intermediate level İH schools, to vocational schools, be they regarded as vocational schools. The families who want can educate their children like that. According to the sect they want, the religion they want, to which ever belief they belong to.<sup>27</sup>

According to Özdağ, the decision about a student's religious education should be left to their family. Although Özdağ talked about the freedom to choose an education according to the religion the family prefers, in the end this freedom was only given to the Sunni-Muslims. By the spring of 2018, there have been no signs that, for example, Alevis would be granted the right to provide their own religious education.

Additionally, AKP's İsrail Kışla argued that giving the freedom to choose religious education is a matter of trust in students and parents:

If you do not trust the student, the mother, the father the family today, this is not a right approach. ... So, if you are saying that we are not against the idea that people get religious education, so for now the adding of the modules of the elective courses to the second level [of education], so what, so what is wrong with that, friends? So, what if we give this system of preferences to our people and open this area of freedom?<sup>28</sup>

Kışla articulated the elective religious education as a matter of freedom; if it is the family or the student wish, they should be free to choose more of it. According to Kışla, there cannot be any pressure because people are free to choose. In general, the AKP emphasizes on its party program the role of the family as the foundation of society and the solidarity in it. The family is described to be 'the way to social happiness, solidarity, peace, affection and respect' and the party is engaged in a plan 'to preserve family peace and spiritual health of children.'<sup>29</sup> Kışla continued later that this freedom should be respected because it has been chosen freely by the nation:

... the interlocutor of this is the people, the nation. So, it is to open the field of freedom for them. Today it is not possible for us to estimate or guess who will



choose what, you know, who will prefer what, what percentage will use these preferences, it will not be possible for anyone to manage it, nor is it possible to predict it today. From that point of view, being it here as a matter of freedom, I would like to see respect for the choice of a people.<sup>30</sup>

Bilge Yabancı and Dane Taleski have analyzed how the AKP ‘uses religion’ as an instrument for their populist politics. They argue that the ‘ruling populists co-opt and monopolise the majority religion in the name of “the people’s will” as they increasingly undermine democratic legitimacy.’<sup>31</sup> The above quotations illustrate how the increased IRE is ‘the will of the people’ in the AKP’s articulation. The AKP approaches IRE from individual’s, family’s and nation’s perspective and the state is only answering to people’s demand. In the quotations, the discourse of private Islam is articulated by making it a personal matter, which depends primarily on freedom of choice. This freedom of choice, according to the AKP, should be given to the student and to the family because they have demanded it and it is their democratic right to demand it. Because the families have – according to the AKP – demanded more IRE, it does not present a problem to increase it in the public educational system: in a free and democratic society, the state should not impede people’s private religious aspirations. According to the AKP, the demand did not come from the party, but from the nation, thus, the AKP is only implementing the will of the people.

During the whole debate, the CHP aimed at showing themselves as scientific, neutral, objective and modern in contrast to the AKP which was portrayed as subjective, dangerous, regressive and vindictive. The CHP accused the AKP several times of creating dangerous and ideological educational policies because according to the CHP, the AKP was mixing religious affairs and state affairs.<sup>32</sup> This kind of articulation includes the assumption, what Martin calls ‘religion is apolitical’ assumption. This assumption can be utilized in order to criticize those religious traditions that are involved in politics. Martin continues that the assumption presupposes ‘a dichotomy between religion and politics as two naturally different domains.’ However, this use also relies on ‘an implicit, normative dichotomy between good religion and bad religion: good religion is apolitical, and bad religion is politicized religion.’<sup>33</sup> Thus, the CHP’s articulation includes the assumptions that Islam is a private matter, which should not be ‘used’ in politics and that because the AKP has politicized Islam, there is something wrong in their politics.

Aytun Çıray of the CHP, for example, argued that by aiming at raising a pious generation, the former Prime Minister Erdoğan is interfering in family affairs:

Even before this government [of AKP] my family raised me and my siblings to be pious. At the same time, I completely believe in the secular system, I hold on to it. Because that secular system ensures the freedom of belief and freedom of

not to believe. If one of the goals of the Prime Minister is to raise a pious generation I consider that as intrusion. This is not his duty and he oversteps his limits; these are family affairs.<sup>34</sup>

Çıray articulated that the secular system does not interfere with people's private religious affairs, but the AKP's system is trying to do that. Hence, the AKP's system is not secular and it is not working according to a neutral and impartial state. The CHP's Engin Altay also emphasized that neither other people nor the state should intrude into people's belief.

Yes, you can be both religious and modern; you can be secular and Muslim, but no one can measure the religiosity of another person. ... Belief should be everyone's own business. Besides, Allah will sure give to everyone according to their hearts. Do not say 'Allah gave us the power', that is a different thing. Allah has no interest in your hearts. Leave the belief, the belief of the people, to them.<sup>35</sup>

The CHP argued that the people should be left with the choice of not to believe and that they should not be pressured to be pious Muslims. However, the CHP omitted to mention that it has, for example, supported on its own party program compulsory IRE. Altogether, the CHP has supported several policies in which the state controls religious affairs. These policies include, for example, the establishment of a Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*, henceforth Diyanet) in 1924 and the ban after the 1980 coup on using the Islamic headscarf in public offices, such as in universities and in the TBMM. According to Martin, the demand for public neutrality is paired with 'to each of its own' attitude toward the private sphere. Thus, those who operate this articulation prevent themselves from criticizing private or religious ideologies. As a result, the hegemonic ideologies stay uncontested and therefore free to operate invisibly.<sup>36</sup> In order to convincingly challenge the AKP, the CHP should openly acknowledge the publicity and political nature of Islam instead of articulating the same discourse of private Islam as the AKP.

The discourse of private Islam was not articulated only in connection with the debate about IRE but also in discussions about the piety of MPs and other topics of debates in parliament. There were disputes about the piety of MPs whenever MPs from the CHP considered that the MPs from the AKP were judging their piety and quality of being Muslims. According to the CHP, the AKP was claiming that only they were pious Muslims, although the AKP was not in a position to judge other people's piety, only Allah could do that.<sup>37</sup> The quotations below show how CHP's Ali Haydar Öner and İhsan Özkes were indignant since according to them the AKP had questioned their piety. The quotations illustrate how Islam was connected to a personal relationship with Allah in which no other person can interfere.

No one can question my belief, can judge me based on my belief, no one from here can send me to hell or heaven. Finally, I say this: May Allah save us all from religious abusers who gossip and do not believe.<sup>38</sup>

They [the AKP] need to look in the mirror instead of questioning the piety of the members of the CHP. A pious person is never interested in another person's piety. I am not interested in anybody's piety. ... Faith is affirmed in heart, professed with language. A person with faith is the one affirming Allah's existence in his heart but not professing with language. Who knows the faith that is in the heart? Nobody but Allah knows the faith in one's heart.<sup>39</sup>

According to the MPs of the CHP, the piety of a person should be left between Allah and the individual. In other words, the individual's relationship with Allah should be left free from other people's criticism. While it might be true what Roy argues about the individualization of faith and diversification of religious field – that individuals experience their relationship to religion accordingly – the discourse of private Islam nonetheless masks the control of state when articulated in political discourse.<sup>40</sup> The discourse presents Islam from individual's point of view and omits state's role in religious affairs.

The MPs of AKP responded to these allegations by saying that it was not their intention to judge the MPs of the CHP or to say that they were not 'real' Muslims. For example, AKP's Osman Çakır argued that they only wanted to adduce past policies that they considered to have been discriminatory toward pious Muslims.<sup>41</sup> In addition, AKP's İsmet Uçma explained his earlier statements concerning the comments on the religiosity of the MP's of the CHP by saying he was misunderstood and that he only meant that politicians should not deny people their religious needs:

For example, looking at the role of politics is a good example: if a person wants to worship a stone, the politician's task is to remove the obstacle in front of the stone, not to question why the man worships the stone.<sup>42</sup>

Uçma voiced opinions similar to the MPs of the CHP: politicians should not meddle in people's religious affairs. However, Uçma emphasized that the politicians should not prevent people from practicing religion.

These debates also led two MPs from the CHP to argue that parliament is not the right place for a discussion about the piety or the Muslimness of MPs. The MPs argued that since religion is a private matter it should not be discussed in parliament as it is a secular place. In following quotations, CHP's Ahmet Toptaş and Aykut Erdoğan express their indignation at the discussion concerning the piety of MPs because they considered that parliament was not the place for this discussion.

Why are we talking about religion in here? Why are we making contest about piety? This is the place, where the secular republic and the sovereignty of Turkish people are represented.<sup>43</sup>

... I say this as a person, as a human being, not politically, I feel very uncomfortable. Especially, the discussion about religion and faith, when again that topic emerges, I do not like it because religion is everyone's own business, faith is everyone's own business but this is a state institution, we are here to talk about other aspects of this issue.<sup>44</sup>

The quotations illustrate the opinion that parliament as an instrument of the state represents an institution, which should be separate from religious affairs. It was emphasized that religion is 'everyone's own business,' in other words private, and it should not be discussed in parliament, which represents the secular and public state.

Not only the CHP but also the AKP agreed that the state should oversee education. Both parties admitted that they have their own ideology, but that the state and educational system should remain neutral and not include any ideology. In this matter, the state should remain a neutral, objective force guarding religious education and fulfilling the religious needs of families and individuals.<sup>45</sup> However, the CHP feared that the control of religious education would eventually transfer into the hands of religious orders and they were afraid that the state would no longer control education because, according to the CHP, the AKP listens too much to the religious orders and Association of Imam Hatips (ÖNDER).<sup>46</sup> For example, CHP's Osman Kaptan argued that if the proposal of the AKP for a new educational system was to be accepted the MEB would no longer be national but religious.

Ministry of National Education, MEB. If you take this system [of 4 + 4+4] in this way, the name will lose its attribute of 'national' and it will be 'CEB'. What does 'CEB' mean? CEB is 'Ministry of Religious Community Education'. Okay? ... Ha, it could be 'T', 'TEB' could be the acronym. When I say 'TEB' ... I mean 'Ministry of Religious Orders and Education' and I also propose this.<sup>47</sup>

In this quotation, Kaptan expresses the opinion that religion is a threat to the educational system, which should be national and not governed by any agent. The CHP considered the agent in this case to be religious leaders or those who have close contacts with religious communities or orders. The national nature of the educational system was not a problem for Kaptan, on the contrary, he felt it should be protected. The problem for Kaptan was the alleged religiosity that the new system would create because it would be a threat to the neutrality and impartiality of the state, and not support the present national nature of education.

The AKP also argued that there is a need for state management with regard to religious education because it should be 'proper.' In the quotation below, AKP's Mahir Ünal voices the attitude that religious education is a matter of family affairs, however, it should be controlled by the state.

... the priority is the demand of the families. If you meet with the demands of the families your educational system can be successful. But if your educational

system is oppressive, it will determine and pressure. However, the state must be in the position of supervising, regulating and managing.<sup>48</sup>

Ünal argued that it is not the state's role to pressure its citizens but to control the fact that education is being handled in 'a right way.' Of course, whoever has the power in the state has the chance to define what is 'the right way.' When Roy's argument on individualization of faith and diversification of religious field is articulated in the political discourse in Turkey, it obscures the fact that at the same time the state controls more and more what is the official interpretation of Islam and it only strengthens the status of Sunni-Islam. According to Martin, it is not surprising that for the most part, the dominant parties promote 'separation of church and state' and 'freedom of religion.' This is because the claim of 'freedom of religion' gives them free reign to socialize citizens in ways that produce public effects that indirectly contradict the 'separation of church and state,' while the latter obscures the effects.<sup>49</sup> Although there is no 'separation of church and state' in Turkey, there is the claim of state's neutrality and impartiality, which works in a similar way as the claim of 'separation of church and state.'

The articulation of discourse of private Islam obscures the state's control of Islam, and religion in general: it moves the attention away from all the institutions and regulations, by which the state controls religion. These institutions and regulations include, for example, the Diyanet, which is directly under the Prime Minister's office, imams as civil servants and compulsory and elective IRE in the strongly centralized educational system. The AKP argued that because Islam is a private matter, the IRE does not constitute a threat to an objective, neutral, and impartial state. As a private matter, the state cannot pressure anyone into Islam: individuals have the freedom of religion. According to the AKP, the state cannot pressurize people, but it also cannot prevent people from fulfilling their own private religious needs. The argumentation of AKP reflects the neoliberal features of its politics, where the articulation of freedom of choice plays a central role. Quite similarly, the CHP's Kemalist argumentation that the educational system, as a public state institution, should not include the IRE, because Islam is a private matter, blurs the actual power that the state wields. The CHP argued that it is precisely because of the private nature of Islam that the IRE is a threat to the secular state because it is ideological, emotional and subjective. According to the CHP, the state cannot impose religious belief on people because it is a private matter and the state should be neutral in these matters.

By increasing the role of Islam in the educational system the AKP has gained more power to define what 'proper' Islam is. The AKP benefits from the institutional, political and structural power created by the republican regime to maintain control over the IRE. One configuration of this power is state secularism. In Turkey, there is no separation between state and religion

in the same sense as, for example, in France, but rather the state controls religion. This kind of secularism is one of the basic principles of the CHP and the AKP also benefits from it.<sup>50</sup> For both parties, on their party programs secularism is not only a principle of freedom in general but a particular freedom as regards religion. However, the CHP emphasizes that secularism means the separation of state and religion while the AKP does not – at least not directly – mention this.<sup>51</sup> One example of the control of Islam by the state was seen in the fall of 2016. As the *Hürriyet* newspaper wrote on 19 September, many school books were to be revised if they contained references to the *Hizmet*-movement and its leader Fethullah Gülen. Gülen is alleged to have planned the coup attempt in July 2016 and after the coup, the form of Islam that Gülen preached was no longer considered ‘proper.’

## Conclusion

This article illustrates how the two largest political parties, the AKP and the CHP, debated the educational reforms in spring 2012 in the MEKGSK. The article shows how both parties articulated the discourse of private Islam by constructing the signs of family, personal relationship with Allah, freedom of choice, preference, conscience and belief in a contingent relationship with each other. Although the AKP defended its proposal to increase the role of Islam in the educational system and the CHP opposed this, their articulation on the question of Islam was very similar: they both argued that it should be a matter for families or students, the state should not pressurize its citizens and people should have the freedom of religion. However, the expression of this freedom of religion and the privacy of Islam only strengthens the hegemonic status of Sunni-Islam while other groups, such as Alevis, lack the same privileged position.

The discourse of private Islam enabled the parties to argue differently because it allowed the CHP to argue that the state should not interfere in private religious affairs and the AKP to argue that the state should not put obstacles in the way of people’s private religious needs. According to the AKP, Islam is a private matter; it does not constitute any threat to the neutral and impartial state. The CHP, in turn, argued that the privacy of Islam makes it a matter, which should not be part of state affairs or the public educational system. Considering the broader context – such as the phenomenon where parties, which are defined as Islamists gain more power in Muslim majority countries – this article examines how these parties are not necessarily very different from those parties labeled as secularist, as regards the articulation of their ideas about Islam. The discourse of private Islam permits two different kinds of politics to be pursued. Furthermore, the parties, which are considered Islamists, can benefit from those institutional structures created by regimes considered secularists, as the case of the AKP shows.

There are, of course, other discourses on Islam as well, such as nationalistic and public discourses, but the discourse of private Islam is the discourse which obscures the hegemonic configuration of power where the state as a public and neutral institution controls private and subjective Islam. Both parties articulated the discourse of private Islam, however, it was not necessary but contingent. Islam – or religion in general – is not essentially private or public but certain discourses can be articulated on Islam in order to obscure the power relations. This study draws attention to how the discourse of private Islam obscures the control of the state over Islam and how it can serve for the interests of two different political parties.

## Notes

1. Roy, “The Transformation of the Arab World,” 17–18 and Roy, “Islamic Revival,” 47.
2. Martin, *Masking Hegemony*, 10.
3. On the state, Islam and secularism in Turkey, see, for example, Azak, *Islam and Secularism in Turkey*; Çınar, *Modernity, Islam and Secularism in Turkey*; Kuru, “Passive and Assertive Secularism”; Navaro-Yashin, *Faces of the State*; and Özyürek, *Nostalgia for the Modern*. Emre Ünlüçayaklı’s dissertation, “The Official Discourse,” is one of the most recent studies of discourse on religion in Turkey.
4. von Stuckrad and Wijsen, “Introduction,” 3. In addition, the description of a discourse is also a constructive process where one can see the interests of a researcher. The researcher also constructs the discourse by giving meaning to things. von Stuckrad, “Religion and Science in Transformation,” 217.
5. Martin, *Masking Hegemony*, 10.
6. See, for example, Taira, “Discourse on ‘Religion,’” 129–33.
7. Jørgensen and Phillips, *Discourse Analysis*, 25–9 and Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 91–9.
8. Martin, *Masking Hegemony*, 128. This study considers neither American liberals and the CHP nor American conservatives and the AKP as completely similar. However, the study recognizes similarities between these agents.
9. On religion/private and secular/public division, see, for example, Fitzgerald, *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity*; Fitzgerald, *Religion and the Secular*; Martin, “On the Origin of the Private Sphere”; Martin, *Masking Hegemony*; and Nongbri, *Before Religion*.
10. Jørgensen and Phillips, *Discourse Analysis*, 47–8 and Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 122.
11. See, for example, Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*; Martin, *Capitalizing Religion*; and Martin, *Masking Hegemony*.
12. TBMM1, “The Committees.”
13. TBMM2, “The Standing Committees.”
14. TBMM3, “Rules of Procedure,” 135.
15. The proposal was called “The Proposal for Changing the Law of Primary School and Education with Some Other Law Amendments 2/358.”
16. TD8.
17. van Dijk, “Political Identities,” 41.

18. See Pöysä, “Kaksin tekstin kanssa,” 338–44.
19. On Islam, citizenship, curricula and school books, see, for example, Kaya, “Ethno-Religious Narratives”; Çayır, “Citizenship”; and Üstel, *Makbul Vatandaş'ın Peşinde*. These studies include analysis of Turkish school books and curricula from the perspective of citizenship construction. All of them argue that Turkish citizenship is strongly Muslim.
20. Çınar, *Modernity, Islam and Secularism in Turkey*, 1.
21. See, for example, Jørgensen and Phillips, *Discourse Analysis*, 29 and Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 91.
22. See, for example, Kaul, “Republicanism under Scrutiny,” 342 and Yabancı and Taleski, “Co-opting Religion,” 1.
23. TD1, 58 (Metin Lütfi Baydar, CHP); TD1, 72 (Engin Altay, CHP); TD2, 127–8 (Engin Özkoç, CHP); TD3, 115; TD4, 146 and TD6, 16 (Fatma Nur Serter, CHP); TD4, 144–5 (Recep Gürkan, CHP); TD7, 70 (Ali Şerindağ, CHP); and TD7, 89 (Tufan Köse, CHP).
24. TD3, 105; TD4, 123 and TD6, 16 (Fatma Nur Serter, CHP); TD3, 136 (Musa Çam, CHP); TD4, 118 (Mehmet Hilal Kaplan, CHP); TD5, 41 (Tufan Köse, CHP); TD5, 48–9 (Hursit Güneş, CHP); TD5, 68 and TD6, 73–4 (Aytun Çıray, CHP); TD6, 67 (Oğuz Oyan, CHP); and TD7, 66 (Faik Öztrak, CHP).
25. TD1, 58 and TD5, 8 (Metin Lüfi Baydar, CHP); TD1, 44 (Osman Oktay Ekşi, CHP); TD2, 40 and 102 (Engin Özkoç, CHP); TD3, 5 (Dilek Akagün Yılmaz, CHP); TD3, 84 (Sedef Küçük, CHP); TD3, 104 and TD5, 9 (Fatma Nur Serter, CHP); TD3, 127 (Musa Çam, CHP); TD4, 3 (Engin Altay, CHP); TD4, 117–18 (Mehmet Hilal Kaplan, CHP); TD5, 69 (Aytun Çıray, CHP); TD5, 110 (Kemal Değirmendereli, CHP); TD5, 109 (Mahmut Tanal, CHP); TD5, 126 (Veli Ağbaba, CHP); TD6, 42 and 45 (Celal Dinçer, CHP); TD6, 47 (Müslim Sarı, CHP); and TD7, 72 (Gürkut Acar, CHP).
26. TD3, 86 (Selçuk Özdağ, AKP); TD2, 2 and TD3, 120 (Fikri İşik, AKP); TD5, 91–2 (İsmet Uçma, AKP); TD6, 34 and TD7, 36 (İsrafil Kışla, AKP); TD6, 62 (Fatih Şahin, AKP); TD6, 13–14; and TD7, 31 and 45 (Orhan Atalay, AKP).
27. TD3, 86. All displayed quotations are translated from Turkish to English by the author and words in square brackets are author’s additions.
28. TD6, 33–4.
29. AK Parti, “Party Programme.”
30. TD7, 36.
31. Yabancı and Taleski, “Co-opting Religion,” 1.
32. TD1, 46–7 (Osman Oktay Ekşi, CHP); TD1, 74 and TD4, 2 and TD5, 42 (Engin Altay, CHP); TD2, 102 (Engin Özkoç, CHP); TD3, 6 (Dilek Akagün Yılmaz, CHP); TD3, 77 (Sedef Küçük, CHP); TD3, 131 (Musa Çam, CHP); TD4, 15–16 (Bülent Tezcan, CHP); TD4, 123 and TD5, 9–10 (Fatma Nur Serter, CHP); TD1, 19–20 and TD5, 30 (Rıza Türkmen, CHP); TD5, 73 (Müslim Sarı, CHP); TD5, 116–17 (İlhan Cihaner, CHP); TD6, 66–7 and TD7, 49–50 (Oğuz Oyan, CHP); TD6, 73–4 (Aytun Çıray, CHP); TD6, 76–7 (Levent Gök, CHP); and TD7, 61 (Ahmet Toptaş, CHP).
33. Martin, *Masking Hegemony*, 6.
34. TD1, 68.
35. TD1, 75.
36. Martin, *Masking Hegemony*, 157.
37. TD4, 59–60 (Osman Çakır, AKP; Mustafa Sezgin Tanrıku, CHP; Osman Oktay Ekşi, CHP; Hursit Güneş, CHP; Haydar Akar, CHP) and 69–70 (Sena



- Kaleli, CHP; Osman Çakır, AKP) and 79–83 (İsmet Uçma, AKP; İhsan Özkes, CHP; Metin Lütfi Baydar, CHP; Hursit Güneş, CHP; Ramazan Kerim Özkan, CHP; Ali Haydar Öner, CHP; Haydar Akar, CHP) and 86 (Metin Lütfi Baydar, CHP); TD5, 69 (Aytun Çıray, CHP; Yahya Akman, AKP) and 87–92 (İhsan Özkes, CHP; Temel Coşkun, AKP; Levent Gök, CHP; Selçuk Özdağ, AKP; Ayşenur İslam, AKP; Nebi Bozkurt, AKP; Osman Çakır, AKP; İsmet Uçma, AKP) and 105 (Ramazan Kerim Özkan, CHP; Nebi Bozkurt, AKP).
38. TD4, 89.
  39. TD5, 90–1.
  40. See Roy, “Islamic Revival and Democracy,” 47.
  41. TD4, 61.
  42. TD5, 92.
  43. TD4, 89–90.
  44. TD5, 112.
  45. TD2, 121–2 (Engin Özkoç, CHP); TD3, 73 (Bülent Kuşoğlu, CHP); TD4, 128 (Metin Lütfi Baydar, CHP); TD5, 25 (Mahir Ünal, AKP); TD5, 30 (Rıza Türmen, CHP); TD5, 42 (Engin Altay, CHP); TD5, 48–9 (Hursit Güneş, CHP); and TD6, 60–2 (Fatih Şahin, AKP).
  46. TD3, 135 (Musa Çam, CHP); TD4, 62–3 (Nurettin Demir, CHP); TD6, 49 (Osman Kaptan, CHP); TD6, 76–7 (Levent Gök, CHP); and TD7, 60–1 (Ahmet Toptaş, CHP).
  47. TD6, 49.
  48. TD5, 25.
  49. Martin, *Masking Hegemony*, 31.
  50. Keto-Tokoi, “Islam Unfettered, Control Retained,” 3–4 and 5–6.
  51. AK Parti, “Party Programme” and Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, “Parti Programı.”

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## Notes on contributor

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