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# AN UNCERTAIN IDENTITY: SOCIOECONOMIC DISPARITIES IN MODERN TURKISH POLITICS

*Kathleen Petryna*



## **Introduction**

After I visited the country of Turkey, one main observation struck me as puzzling and almost ironic. In a land where secularism reigns supreme, the founder and enforcer of secularism himself, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, is revered in a seemingly God-like manner. His presence is pervasive throughout society, not only in the actual laws and establishments of the country, but also through the abundance of portraits and statues dedicated to him. The solemn expression and piercing blue eyes of the Father of the Turks gazed at me from the walls of government buildings, posters adorning the streets, and bronzed statues strategically erected at places of prominence. In recent years Atatürk's presence has only intensified, as the so-called Kemalist form of secularism established by the former leader has been the nexus of a whirlwind of controversy regarding rising tensions between Islamic and secular groups in Turkey.

On the surface Turkey appears to be the very archetype of successful reconciliation between tradition and modernity; Turkey can be described without mutual exclusivity as both a Muslim country and a contemporary, secular republic. Yet stirrings of discontent towards secularism in its current form seem to be rising with the movement that many scholars have deemed the new Islamic revival. When Recep Tayyip Erdoğan became the prime minister of Turkey in 2002, he assumed the responsibility of leading a country with a population of approximately 76 million people, 99.8 percent of whom are Muslim, and a constitution that pronounces the country a democratic, secular state. (The World Factbook) The ascent to power by the ruling political party, the AKP or Justice and Development Party, to which Erdoğan belongs, served as a catalyst for the upsurge of tensions that had been brewing under Turkey's surface in the minds of secularists and traditional Islamists alike. Although recent political developments have increased polarization between these

groups, long-standing socioeconomic disparities within Turkey have exacerbated the issue. Vast inequalities in education, wealth, and employment among different regions of Turkey have caused a schism in the population that is evident in public reactions to political maneuvers by the AKP, a party with Islamic roots and arguably an Islamic-based agenda.

In the first part of this article I seek to examine these inequalities and their roots, emphasizing the role of education and fusing past and present. I then demonstrate that the AKP is in a sense a manifestation of the socioeconomic disparities in the population that play a pivotal role in the current battle between Kemalist secularism and the dominant Muslim religion of Turkey.

## Historical Overview

Turkey has a long-standing history as a Muslim country. The conquest of the Byzantines and the creation of the first Turkish state by the Seljuk Turks at the end of the eleventh century assisted in ushering in a new Islamic era for the Anatolia region, replacing the Byzantine leaders with a new leadership of Muslim Turks. (Glazer, p. 13) The growth of the Ottoman Empire during the period from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries established Islam as the de facto ruler of Turkey, as the Ottoman sultans acted as political, military, judicial, and religious leaders following the Islamic code of law, the *sharia*. By the nineteenth century, some of the intellectual and liberal-minded members of the elite class began to rally for Westernization of the empire, citing the need for a secular state. (p. 26) These individuals, along with young officers and students with European or Western educations, united in the early 1900s to restore a constitutional parliamentary system in Turkey, which had been transiently created and suspended by the reigning sultan. (p. 27)

With the end of World War I in 1918 came the end of the Ottoman Empire. Atatürk, an army commander during the war, led a successful nationalist movement that resisted the partitioning of the empire by Allied forces and resulted in the creation of the Grand National Assembly in 1920. (p. 34) In October of 1923, the Republic of Turkey came into existence with

Atatürk as its leader, and a flood of reforms ensued. (p. 36) These reforms and the robust legacy left by Atatürk's rule built the foundations of Turkey that have in recent years been exposing cracks and faults as the architecture of a nation is being reexamined.

Atatürk sought the complete modernization of Turkey based on Western models and undertook dizzying reforms in an attempt to achieve this. He believed that the key to creating a modern nation-state was secularization, and he instituted a system resembling French laicism, in which religion is brought under the control of the state in order to protect the separation of the two. In 1924 Atatürk abolished the caliphate and established the Directorate of Religious Affairs to preside over matters of religion. The next few years saw the implementation of a new Latin alphabet; European criminal, civil, and commercial codes; and secularism in the constitution of the Republic. (Alam, p. 356)

In recent years, this form of Kemalist secularism begun by Atatürk has been put under the magnifying glass, largely as a result of the AKP's rise to power. Those particularly critical of the interface between religion and government are largely members of a new Islamic revival of sorts; it is a movement that advocates an increasing presence of Islam in Turkey's laws, or at least a decreasing presence of certain secularist restrictions. This revival has taken on several different forms, as is heavily discussed in the current literature on the subject. While some argue that the Islamic revival is a reactionary movement with a political undercurrent, others proclaim that it is a resurgence based on the desire of some parts of the population to assert their religious identity.

Regardless of the motives of the movement's proponents, there exists a sharp polarization between those who support and those who feel threatened by the Islamic efforts. I focus next on how this polarization is closely linked to demographic and socioeconomic disparities in Turkey's many regions. I first analyze the current socioeconomic disparities within the country, and then examine how the ruling party and religious-political tensions are largely a manifestation of these disparities.

## Current Socioeconomic Disparities

The Turkish Statistical Institute projects that Turkey's population (76 million in 2010) will grow to approximately 84 million by the year 2020. A study of demographic data and socioeconomic factors including wealth, employment, and education in this growing population reveals major regional differences and an even greater divide between East and West. For the purposes of this article, these regions are identified as Marmara, Aegean, Central Anatolia, Black Sea, Mediterranean, Southeast Anatolia, and Eastern Anatolia. (TurkStat) According to the CIA World Factbook, about 69 percent of the population was considered urban in the year 2006, with urban areas defined as those areas with 10,000 or more inhabitants. The most urbanized areas in Turkey are concentrated in the Western portion of the country, while the least urbanized area is Southeastern Anatolia. ("Turkey, Joint Poverty . . .," p. 31)

The concentration of wealth is tightly linked to urbanization, with the Marmara region being the wealthiest and Southeastern Anatolia being the poorest region, according to the World Bank Joint Poverty Assessment Report. (p. 31) The poverty rate for urban residents in 2007 was a little over 10 percent, while the rate for rural residents was about 33 percent. (Turkey's Statistical Yearbook 2008, p. 352) Turkey's 2008 Statistical Yearbook reports that the average income of workers in urban areas in 2005 was approximately \$6,344 versus \$2,864 for workers in rural areas.<sup>1</sup> (p. 345) Unemployment is also a major concern in Turkey with an overall unemployment rate of 10.8 percent in early 2008 (12.7 percent in urban areas versus 7.6 percent in rural areas). (Library of Congress) However, while unemployment rates remain higher in urban areas, the European Training Foundation (ETF) explains that rural unemployment is not accurately reported and that there are extremely high unemployment levels in the Southeast Anatolia region. Furthermore, the ETF reports the at-risk-of-poverty rate among the working population to be 22.7 percent, compared to a 7 percent rate for European Union countries. ("ETF Country Plan 2009: Turkey," p. 2)

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<sup>1</sup>I used an exchange rate of 1.341 Turkish lira to 1 U.S. dollar for 2005 data. (OECD StatExtracts)

## Inequalities in Education

While Turkey's educational system offers schooling from the preschool level through higher education, only eight years of primary schooling are compulsory for individuals between the ages of six and fourteen. Secondary education is available through general high schools or more specialized vocational schools, like those focusing on technical, agricultural, or religious education. When students complete secondary education, they may take the university entrance exam and, if successful, can continue onto the university level.

When Atatürk came to power, he solidified a compulsory education program at the primary level for all of Turkey; however, issues of accessibility, family responsibilities toward children, and lack of resources prevented his educational aims from reaching many Turks. While great strides have been made and the majority of Turks now attend at least primary school, divisions still exist, especially at regional levels, and a primary schooling rate of 100 percent remains to be achieved.

Education is perhaps the single most important factor in the determination of poverty. Studies show that poverty rates consistently decrease as years of education increase. In fact, the education level of the head of the household has been proven to be more crucial than gender or unemployment in determining household poverty in Turkey, and households whose heads are illiterate or who did not graduate from primary school have a poverty rate double that of the national rate. ("Turkey, Joint Poverty . . .," p. 30)

As reported by the Ministry of Education, for the 2004/2005 academic year gross schooling ratios of primary education were lowest for the regions of Eastern, Southeastern, and Central Anatolia respectively, and were highest for the Marmara and Aegean regions. Gross schooling ratios indicate the proportion of the population between the ages of 6–13 attending school at the primary level. ("Reviews of National Policies . . .," p. 27) Similarly, in 2008 the highest gross schooling ratios were seen in the Marmara and Aegean regions and the lowest in Central and Northeast Anatolia and East Black Sea.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, it is noteworthy that slight regional disparities at the primary

level become progressively more pronounced with each schooling level thereafter, as reflected by high school graduation rates. (TurkStat)

Even with a compulsory primary education system in place, vast inequalities exist in terms of quality of education. Students of higher socioeconomic status and from more educated backgrounds are more likely to attend the most selective high schools, which provide the highest quality of education. Graduates of more selective schools had higher average PISA test scores, which measure mathematics, reading, and science performance. Of particular importance are data that show a positive correlation between PISA scores and community size, with village communities having the lowest scores. (“OECD Economic Surveys: Turkey,” p. 158)

### **Factors Contributing to the Divide**

As the Turkey ETF Country Plan explains, “Western Turkey has good economic conditions, with industries competing at global levels, higher employment rates and better and more balanced access to education and higher educational attainment levels. The Eastern provinces of Turkey are more rural, with low employment rates and poorer educational attainment.” (p. 2) It is also noteworthy that the inherent difficulties experienced in transportation and access within the harsher geographical terrain and climatic conditions of the East and Southeast have exacerbated the diminished economic and educational opportunities in these areas. Historically, these difficulties have been an important factor in the effective distribution of limited government resources between East and West due to higher delivery costs and lower quality of personnel and infrastructure in the eastern regions.

Several important periods in Turkey’s history have likely contributed to the tremendous disparities that permeate society. Some believe that Atatürk’s reforms exacerbated disparities because of their “top-down” nature, in which Kemalism was supported and enforced by the elite class and failed to cover society’s lower

strata. Thus, the majority of the traditional, poor, or rural masses remained faithful to their religious way of life, while the secularist ideals created by Atatürk radiated throughout the bureaucratic sectors of society. (Karasipahi, p. 93) In addition, Professor Rossella Bottoni, a Research Fellow at Catholic University, explains that the rapid pace of Atatürk’s reforms did not allow the masses to undergo a gradual adjustment or “soft transition,” which most likely hindered the infusion of reforms into some sectors of society. For instance, the new Turkish alphabet was approved in November 1928 and was fully implemented into book publication by January 1929, enabling the entire population for the first time to be able to read the language they spoke. (Bottoni, p. 185) An important note apropos the correlation between education and religion is raised by Sena Karasipahi, who explains that the “moral vacuum” that emerged in the newly-mobilized rural masses when Atatürk’s educational reforms failed to affect them “became filled with Islamic ideology after the 1950s.” (p. 93) I explore the link between socioeconomic levels, education, and the Islamic revival in the following sections.

### **Socioeconomic Status and Religion**

While the distribution of “religiousness” across society is not as easily quantified as wealth or education, several polls and studies have attempted to do so. I use these measurements to analyze the correlation between socioeconomic disparities and religious preferences. While public opinion surveys must be evaluated with a critical eye, they still paint a broad picture of attitudes that may be prevalent. Ali Çarkoğlu and Binnaz Toprak conducted a study of religion, society, and politics in 1999 and again in 2006. According to their findings, the percentage of people who defined themselves as “very religious” increased from 6 percent to 13 percent, and those who defined themselves as “primarily Muslim” increased from 36 percent to 46 percent over this seven-year period. The authors found a clear divergence of self-proclaimed identities when individuals were asked to rate themselves on a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 meaning “secular” and 10 meaning “Islamist.” Of the 48.5 percent who veered towards the Islamist end of the spectrum,

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<sup>2</sup>I calculated gross schooling ratios for 2008 by using 2008 data for the number of students at the primary level divided by the population between 5–14 years of age. (TurkStat)

there was a high correlation with rural settlement areas, low income, and inadequate education. Furthermore, for illiterate individuals (6.9 percent of the total people polled) the average was 7 on the 10 point scale, while for university graduates (9.2 percent of the people polled) the average was 3.9. When asked to select an identity, those with higher educational levels were more likely to define themselves as a “citizen of the Turkish Republic” and were more likely to select “secular” and “not very religious” as characteristics. Çarkoğlu and Toprak also found that the majority of individuals who selected a Muslim identity were from the lowest income bracket, lived in more rural areas, were predominantly women, and were more likely to be illiterate.

Extrapolation from the data presented here shows first that socioeconomic disparities remain prevalent and problematic in Turkey. Second, it shows that education is the most important predictor of other socioeconomic factors and that critical regional inequalities in education still exist in Turkey. Finally, these existing divisions are analogous to divisions in religiousness. I explore the correlation between these data and voter preference and opinion next.

## Overview of Political Parties

Turkey has a short but multifaceted history as a constitutional parliamentary system, with transitions from single party to multiparty elections, changes of power between left- and right-oriented political parties, and oscillations among coalition-party, single-party, and military-ruled governments. Over the past few years, the CHP, MHP, and AKP have been the most prominent political parties in existence and have captured the majority of the public’s vote.

The Republican People’s Party, the CHP, is the oldest political party in the country and is identified as a center-left party with staunch adherence to Atatürk’s principles. (Hooglund, p. 262) The Nationalist Movement Party, the MHP, entered the political arena as a far-right, nationalist party and still retains this identity. (Sayarı, p. 14) The Justice and Development Party, the AKP, identifies itself as a conservative party and is linked to Islamist roots. Although Islamist parties have never had a stronghold

in Turkey’s political history, another party, the Welfare Party, gained the first significant political victory for an Islamist party in 1995 when it achieved 21.4 percent of the popular vote, although the party was later forced by the military to dissolve for violating the principle of constitutional secularism. (p. 16)

The AKP took office following the general election in November 2002, which gave the party 34.3 percent of the general vote. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan assumed the role of prime minister in 2003. President Ahmet Necdet Sezer was replaced by AKP member Abdullah Gül in April 2007 after Erdoğan called for an early general election due to a storm of controversy in which the military and prominent individuals from opposing parties publicly declared their disagreement with Erdoğan’s nomination of Gül. The 2007 general election validated the AKP’s dominance in Turkey when the party gained 46.6 percent of the popular vote. (Jenkins, pp. 6–7)

In the past eight years, the AKP has captured unprecedented support at the polls, due in part to its mobilization of grassroots support throughout Anatolia and Eastern Turkey. While all three of the dominant political parties — AKP, MHP, and CHP — are represented in urban regions and among the top echelons of society, the same does not hold true throughout the remaining segments of Turkey. In fact, the leading opposition is severely lagging behind throughout the widespread areas where the AKP derives some of its highest numbers of votes. An examination of the AKP constituency unique to the party in the following section reveals a correlation between geographic regions of support and socioeconomic status.

## Demographics of the Justice and Development Party

The role of the AKP as a manifestation of the disparities within Turkey’s population is evident by the parallels between the party’s voting constituency and their socioeconomic status. This manifestation is increasingly palpable when one examines the public reactions to recent political maneuvers of the party that have been especially incendiary, as I will discuss later.

Election data available from the Turkish Statistical Institute details the number of total

deputies elected to parliament for each party from Turkey's regions according to TurkStat regional definitions. Within these regions, patterns emerge when 2002 and 2007 general election data are compared. Of the 363 seats won by the AKP in 2002, the greatest numbers come from the Istanbul, Mediterranean, and Aegean regions. These were also regions of strong support for the CHP in 2002; yet the two parties differ greatly in Southeast Anatolia, which contributed 37 deputies from the AKP and 13 from the CHP. This difference became more exaggerated in 2007, when the CHP gained only 3 deputies from the region. In both years, the AKP received the least support from West Marmara. While very densely populated regions, such as Istanbul, Aegean, and Eastern Marmara, are not significantly different in political preferences for the two leading parties, it appears that Anatolia remained loyal to the AKP and West Marmara to the CHP. This division deepens the cracks that have been chiseled into Turkey's landscape by socioeconomic disparities, especially on a broad scale of East versus West.

Several studies have supported the connection between party preference, geographic location, and socioeconomic level. According to a public poll performed before the 2002 election, 60 percent of the AKP's supporters in 2002 had education below the secondary level, 30 percent had a high school level of education, and only 10 percent had education above the high school level. The corresponding values for the CHP were 37.3 percent, 40.1 percent, and 22.6 percent respectively. (Aydın and Dalmış, p. 213) When the research agency Pollmark conducted a similar poll in 2006, the percentage breakdown of predominant attributes for the AKP remained approximately the same. (p. 218)

The previously discussed study by Çarkoğlu and Toprak reaffirms these findings. The authors explain that "the more conservative group of rural voters who see themselves closer to the religious and Islamist sector and who have a relatively lower socio-economic status have a more positive approach [to the AKP], whereas urban voters, who ideologically see themselves closer to the leftist and secular sector and who have a relatively higher socio-economic status, generally assess AKP negatively." (p. 35) Of those who defined them-

selves predominantly as citizens of the Turkish republic, 46.1 percent support the CHP and 23.1 percent support the AKP. Incredibly, of those who defined themselves foremost as Muslim, 60 percent support the AKP and only 20.9 percent support the CHP. The Pollmark study from March 2006 echoes these findings, revealing that the self-chosen identities of religious, rightist, and conservative were significantly higher among supporters of the AKP than other political parties, with the selection of religious and conservative actually increasing from 2002 to 2006. (Aydın and Dalmış, p. 219) Thus, there are parallels between differences in geographical regions distinctly loyal to the AKP and differences in socioeconomic indicators of Turkey's regions.

The heavy concentration of grassroots support for the AKP is a phenomenon seemingly stemming from seeds that previous Islamist-based parties had planted. The center-periphery model is frequently utilized throughout the literature as an explanation of Turkey's political and social structure. This model pits Turkey's elite, secularist center against the masses that make up the surrounding periphery. The CHP is then the party of the center; and as Frank Tachau, a professor of political science, explains, its power was lost in the 1950 election due to its inability to translate republican reforms into substantial advancements in average living conditions. (p. 39) These alleged "top-down" reforms of Atatürk, as earlier discussed, were challenged in the 1960s by "bottom-up" reforms of Islamist movements that attempted to provide direction to lower segments of society through education. (Karasipahi, p. 101) Islamic parties gained momentum by appealing to conservative or economically deprived masses and championing a more equal distribution of wealth, which was much needed following a period of migration to urban areas in the country that resulted in an abundance of shantytowns and cultural isolation. (p. 96)

Any government that attempts to operate "by the people, for the people" must then be representative of the people. The AKP has in large part given a voice to those who otherwise may not be heard. Many feel that the top-down style of secularism ingrained in Turkish society halted the progress and mobility of many groups, particularly those affiliated with reli-

gion. (Yilmaz, p. 119) These groups have since gained influence, in addition to receiving valuable socioeconomic services overseen by the AKP, such as improvements in health care, housing, infrastructure, and student grants.

Though this article examines the overwhelming grassroots support of the AKP, it would be erroneous to suggest that the party receives no backing from the upper echelons of Turkey's socioeconomic ladder. In recent years, noteworthy support for the AKP has been seen among urban dwellers, businessmen and entrepreneurs, and individuals of middle or high socioeconomic status. However, this segment of the party's constituency appears to act more out of economic motives rather than ideological motives, particularly in the open economies of the western provinces as opposed to agricultural economies of central rural provinces. (Çarkoğlu, p. 17) Financial crises during 2000 and 2001 and dismal economic conditions, along with the AKP's pro-market stance and allegiance to privatization and stabilization, set the stage for the AKP to provide the Turkish public with an economic rescue of sorts from the failures of existing parties. Although this sector of support is an important fragment of the Turkish political landscape, a detailed analysis is beyond the scope of this article, which aims to primarily explore the vast grassroots population that is unique to the AKP.

## The Headscarf Debate

Since the AKP's rise to power, the party has been a hotbed of controversy. Polarization among segments of society has become increasingly pronounced following the threat of party dissolution in 2008, when the AKP was accused of violating the constitutional principle of secularism and narrowly avoided dissolution by the Constitutional Court. Another ongoing debate has been that regarding the relationship between religion and education: specifically, the curriculum of *imam hatip* high schools, or Muslim clerical schools, and the opportunities for graduates of these schools. Yet these issues are only the tip of the iceberg that is progressively cracking under the weight of increasing polarization in Turkey's society. The most prominent area of controversy is that of the headscarf and its ban at universities and state offices.

When Abdullah Gül assumed the position of President, it was not he, but rather his wife, who became the subject of much discussion in the country, as she openly wears a headscarf. In recent years, the headscarf issue has become one of great magnitude in the country and a source of wide polarization. While in Turkey, with a simple glance of the surrounding crowds I saw some women wearing the traditional headscarf, some wearing a scarf covering the whole forehead and neck, and others sporting no scarf at all, wearing instead the most modern and fashionable of hairstyles. A divisive debate is underway regarding a governmental ban on the allowance of the headscarf in the public sector, including universities and government departments.

When Atatürk came to power, he believed that headscarves were a threat to secularism. The headscarf became a widespread legal issue beginning in the early 1980s, when the Higher Education Board began to restrict the wearing of the headscarf in universities. (Şentop, p. 2) In the case of *Leyla Sahin v. Turkey* (2006), a Turkish university student took her case to the European Court of Human Rights and argued that being forced to uncover her head violated her right to freedom of religion as established in Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights. Sixteen of the seventeen judges upheld the ban, using Turkey's history and identity as a secular republic as justification. (Bottoni, pp. 176–77) However, Prime Minister Erdoğan sees the ban in all public institutions as an issue of freedom; and the AKP has attempted, though unsuccessfully, to lift the ban on university campuses. A proposed amendment to remove the ban became one of the factors that provoked a closure case against the party.

One of the most debated questions regarding the headscarf is what it actually signifies. A significant portion of the Turkish population view the headscarf as a political symbol; it is a statement against the secular status quo and the reigning Kemalist ideology. Many scholars have echoed this consensus, although some segments of the population are of the opinion that the headscarf remains a practice of faith. Proponents of the ban reiterate Atatürk's logic that the headscarf threatens Turkish secularism, while those who oppose it argue that it directly contradicts the right to freedom of religious



practice and the right to education. Yet polls reveal that the majority of Turks support freedom to wear the headscarf in university or state office. (Çarkoğlu and Toprak)

A breakdown by socioeconomic segments reveals that the number of women wearing the headscarf has recently increased in rural areas and decreased in cities. Furthermore, the number of covered women is negatively correlated to income level. (Çarkoğlu and Toprak) A 2007 poll performed by KONDA Research and Consultancy and published in *Milliyet* found that a positive correlation exists between the percentage of participants that do not cover themselves and their income bracket, from lowest income to highest income. In keeping with previously discussed data regarding education by region and wealth, one would predict that lower levels of education attainment in urban and poor areas would result in a link between low education and headscarf wearers, which is in fact the case. The KONDA study explains that the majority of women who cover their heads have less than a high school education. Furthermore, as schooling increases, women are less likely to cover themselves.

Based on these facts and the information presented earlier in this article that connect income, education, and political preference, it follows suit that approximately 65 percent of adult female women in the general population cover their heads; but among women who voted for the AKP in 2002 the number is 85–90 percent. (“Religion, Secularism, and the Veil . . .”) Regardless of motives or whether the ban on headscarves should be abolished or maintained, the link between socioeconomic status and party preference is present once again when the headscarf debate is dissected from a demographic perspective.

## Political Trends in Recent Elections

As Turkey moves forward into the new decade, an impending question will be how the electoral landscape of the country will change. Strong support in favor of the AKP could serve as a mandate for some of the controversial actions of the party, whereas declining numbers and regional shifts in support will force the AKP to reexamine its political agenda and perhaps its association with Islamic

ideology. In fact, some worry that increased AKP support will serve as a catalyst for pursuit of conservative constitutional amendments on which the party has previously yielded. (Kaya and Karaveli)

Regional voting trends observed from 2002 until the end of 2009 may provide some clue as to the future of the party, particularly the most recent local elections of 2009. However, as Ali Çarkoğlu explains, local elections, particularly provincial general council election, may provide some insight on electoral trends but are not a clear predictor of general elections. (p. 2) While the AKP has retained its spot as the dominant political force in Turkey, some, including Erdoğan, considered the 2009 local elections to be a disappointment for the party since it did not capture the desired 45–50 percent of the overall vote. Instead, for the provincial general council election, the AKP received about 38.8 percent of the total vote, the CHP received 23.1 percent, and the MHP received 16.1 percent, whereas the respective percentages from the 2004 provincial general council election had been 41.7, 18.2, and 10.5. (p. 3)

Yet a regional examination of electoral data reveals a more consistent picture for the leading party, with the AKP remaining the sole party with a notable level of widespread support throughout the country. Even so, the regional divide between socioeconomic strata has become more evident than ever, with the CHP and MHP strengthening their support in the western coastal regions. Meanwhile, AKP support in West Marmara was seven percentage points less than their overall national figure, in part due to the Western-leaning secular attitude of the middle class along the coast and their retreat from the AKP. (Kaya and Karaveli) In particularly urban areas including Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, and Bursa, the AKP has lost notable support, whereas the CHP has done the contrary. Furthermore, the AKP has seen a decline in its share of the overall vote in small, underdeveloped eastern provinces.

Çarkoğlu explains that these movements away from the AKP in the highest and lowest socioeconomic levels of society may not be of concern as the party continues to be dominant in the large, conservative segments throughout Anatolia, where the opposition is virtually nonexistent. (p. 13) The party has

essentially utilized its grassroots popularity, possibly at the expense of the Western metropolitan areas. It is probable that the general election of 2011 will see a continuation of the AKP reigning supreme throughout Anatolia and remaining popular among the voter type profiled throughout this article. However, among the upper echelons of Turkish society, the AKP is suffering; and it is unlikely that the party will be able to increase its overall share of the vote from the 47 percent it won in 2007.

## Educational Reform

Regardless of the AKP's performance in the general election of 2012 or the emergence of new parties and failures of existing ones, Turkey faces a larger issue that it must remedy before deeper regional marginalization occurs. If education is the predominant determinant of socioeconomic status, as I have previously suggested, it is then education that must be addressed in order to decrease inequalities in Turkey.

Since the late 1990s, Turkey has made commendable progress in educational reforms, alleviating issues of finance, access, and quality in rural and poor areas; still concerns remain. Financially, programs such as the Conditional Cash Transfer Program have provided poor families with non-repayable assistance. ("The Development of Education . . .," p. 23) An 85 percent increase in the number of student scholarships occurred between 2002 and 2009, with a total of 175,000 students receiving scholarships in 2009, a number that should be raised even higher. Accessibility of education has been significantly improved in rural areas, and there have been increases in programs that encourage students to attend school. Students who live far from available schools have benefited from the implementation of busing programs and the construction of hundreds of boarding schools. (p. 19)

Even with increased access and enrollment in rural areas, the quality of education throughout Turkey remains uneven. By increasing compulsory education efforts, more students are attending school, but this may compromise the quality of education due to problems with overcapacity and lack of resources. Programs such as the Mobile Teachers Project have been implemented to place skilled teachers in rural schools and disadvantaged schools, and recent years

have seen more teachers in understaffed areas of Istanbul and Southeastern Anatolia. Still, an unequal distribution of teachers remains a problem. ("The Development of Education . . .," p. 18) Furthermore, class sizes remain well above the desired limit of thirty students, and numerous regions suffer from a lack of adequate educational tools. ("Education Monitoring Report . . .," pp. 13–14)

Two issues within the realm of educational reform that need to be further examined and remedied in upcoming years are fiscal policy and performance evaluation. Turkey devotes four percent of its GDP to education, while the OECD average is six percent. Some believe that public spending per primary level student is insufficient to achieve the most effective educational experience. (Aydagül, p. 404) The Education Reform Initiative, an organization of the Istanbul Policy Center at Sabancı University, reported that 2004–2008 witnessed an increase in public spending, with a slower rate of increase in the amount of spending on public education. Meanwhile, the report claims that more public education spending is not on the political agenda for upcoming years. (p. 7) Instead, the private sector is being encouraged to invest in education through incentives such as a 100 percent tax reduction for these investments. ("The Development of Education . . .," p. 19) These efforts have been successful in recent years; yet it is my opinion that the country must avoid an over-reliance on the private sector, and should increase the portion of the general budget designated for education.

The second suggestion that I have in the realm of education is an improved strategy for monitoring and assessing policies and reforms. Batuhan Aydagül, Deputy Coordinator of the Education Reform Initiative, explains that there is a "lack of benchmark information and systematic empirical assessment," which likely hinders the ability to restructure policies and programs in the areas that may be weak. (p. 405) Along with new laws, decentralization of the Ministry of National Education has been on the national agenda and is even mentioned in the AKP program as a way to increase local administration better suited to regional needs. However, since discussions began in 2004, advancements have been few. ("Education Monitoring Report . . .," p. 5)

## Conclusion

It is simply not possible to diagnose what political party may be most suited to lead the country, or which stance on secular and religious issues that party should uphold. Nor is it practical to assume that there truly exists a concrete solution to remedy the sociopolitical tensions that plague Turkey. Yet one issue must be resolved in upcoming years; the socioeconomic disparities that exist on a regional basis throughout the country will only strengthen the threat of clashing political and religious ideologies. There is an evident association, as I emphasized throughout this article, between socioeconomic status and political preference in regard to religious ideology. While such significant disparities in wealth and education exist between social classes in Turkey, voters will continue to fail to agree on which issues plaguing the country are the most important to address. Furthermore, an open dialogue on the tension

between secularist and religious groups is necessary to begin moving toward a resolution that will prevent the country from falling victim to conflict and chaos, as has occurred in many of Turkey's neighbors. Yet commencing a national dialogue is only possible when all participants are on even ground in terms of standards of living and opportunities. The remediation of educational problems is just one step toward a resolution, albeit an important one.

The issues discussed in this article are tremendous, complex, and dynamic. Vast amounts of literature and opinions exist on the subject of Turkey's sociopolitical environment, and tensions between segments improve and worsen weekly as political parties change direction. While the path of Turkey's evolution may be unclear, I am confident that the country will find a way to reconcile its Muslim and secular identities.

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