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Impacts of Religious Communities on Turkish Political Culture: The *İskenderpaşa* Community

This article employs a cultural analysis to explore the role of religious communities in Türkiye's political culture, focusing specifically on the *İskenderpaşa* community. The study investigates both the political and cultural networks the community has developed, arguing that, as a traditional religious collective, the *İskenderpaşa* community's influence extends beyond its theological commitments to embrace significant political and economic relationships that shape political power. Through this lens, the article poses the following questions: What roles have been attributed to religious communities- specifically the *İskenderpaşa* community-within the political sphere, and what core political visions do they articulate and promote.

Keywords: Religious Communities, Political Culture, Islamism.

Dini Cemaatlerin Türk Siyasal Kültürüne Etkileri: *İskenderpaşa* Cemaati

Bu makale, Türkiye'nin kültürel siyasetinde dini cemaatlerin rolünü kültürel analiz yöntemiyle ele almakta ve özel olarak *İskenderpaşa* Cemaati'ne odaklanmaktadır. Cemaatin geliştirdiği politik ve kültürel ağları inceleyen makale, *İskenderpaşa* Cemaati'nin geleneksel bir dini kolektif olarak etkisinin yalnızca teolojik bağlılıklarla sınırlı kalmayıp, siyasal gücü şekillendiren önemli siyasi ve ekonomik ilişkileri de kapsadığını ileri sürmektedir. Bu çerçevede makale şu soruları sormaktadır: Dini cemaatlere — özelde *İskenderpaşa* Cemaati'ne — siyasal alanda nasıl roller atfedilmektedir ve bu cemaatler ne tür temel siyasal görüşleri dile getirmekte ve yaymaktadır?

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dini Cemaatler, Siyasal Kültür, İslamcılık.

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1. Introduction

This study aims to examine how religious groups and communities both shape and are shaped by the cultural and political structures of contemporary Türkiye. By approaching these groups as integral components of Türkiye's political culture, the central research questions emerge: What roles are attributed to these religious communities within the political sphere, and what are the core political visions they promote? In this context, the study seeks to analyze the politico-religious discourses adopted by these groups, while also exploring the socio-cultural conditions that influence their religious, social and political activities.

After the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye, secularism, as a part of successive reforms, has become the main doctrine leading the relationship between the state and religion. Even though religious communities have played a significant role in social fabric these were not welcomed by the new understanding of Islam built by the Republic. With the claim that these communities are operating as a threat to the existence of the secular state, their organizations were banned. It was the secular effort in eliminating Islam from the political arena with the resistance to its social power (Torun, 2020: 84). In spite of this resistance, these social entities still maintained their existence and significance on behalf of increasing social networks.

Considered the secular restrictions including ban and imprisonments of members their permanent social strength required to be analyzed. It is considerable to understand organic and traditional commitments of these religious communities throughout the absence of powerful civil society. As Mardin puts in his reputable thesis of center-periphery, in the face of center and its cultural symbols the provinces have been the place of religious heterodoxy sustained by sects and cults (Mardin, 1973:171).

Traditional relations undergirded these communities inherited from the Ottoman Empire didn't dissolve in the establishment of Republic. Against the rationalization of Islam in the religious discourse of the Republic personal affiliations based on neighborhood and hometown have been preserved as the main roots of social fabric. In addition to social bindings depending to hometown and affinity, Islam has always played an important role in organic relationships and conservation of traditions. Indeed, while for Republican sense of religion religious communities posed a risk, the new regime was considered as threat against people's existing values and beliefs. Considering this sense of anxiety, traditional familial and social relations have gradually become the symbols of the concern about conservation. On the other hand, against this conservative position the new regime cannot be engaged with the starting over in the modern way. The establishment of Turkish Republic did not basically reject the traditional values of the society but sought to reshape, reengineer and reinvent them by several political mechanisms. In the field of religion, Islam was never completely abandoned but it was reformulated in a new discourse attached to modern references. As a part of Kemalism, modernist Islamic theology depended upon the intellectual idea of individualization of Islam against the traditional intellectual authority assigned by the conservative Islamic understanding. The establishment of the Presidency of Religious Affairs and the first Turkish divinity faculty at Ankara University are considered with the goal of this intellectual promotion (Dorroll, 2014: 1037). With these developments and the writings of intellectuals associated with these institutions it was aimed to construct a Republican way of religious discourse. Nevertheless, this new discourse ultimately fails to transform pre-existing patterns of social belonging. In the context of a weakly institutionalized civil society and a delayed experience of modernity, traditional social relations may have lost their legitimacy in the eyes of the new regime; however, a coherent and widely accepted alternative framework of social relations has not emerged to replace them. In this context, religious groups—including those organized

around *tariqas* and broader religious communities—maintained their social legitimacy both as a form of conservative reaction to the new regime and as a means of adapting to it. However, this legitimacy persisted despite the loss of formal legal recognition.

With the emergence of multi-party regime and its partial liberating impact over religious activities, Islamic groups gained opportunity to express their political and social demands in civil society organizations and political parties. In Türkiye, the 1980s were marked by intense debates over secularism and Islamism, as Islamist political movements began to gain increasing influence. In the 1990s, Islamist politics gained significant prominence in Türkiye, with their discourses attracting attention from individuals across a wide range of political orientations. During this period, *tariqas* and religious communities also expanded their influence through political alliances with parties and economic engagement via their own initiatives. Religious communities such as *İskenderpaşa* have come to occupy a crucial position within Türkiye's social fabric, making them essential subjects of study for understanding the country's evolving social and political dynamics. The *İskenderpaşa* Community emerged as one of key actors in shaping social relations through its journals, business activities, foundations, and associations, reaching a broad segment of society. This paper, therefore, aims to examine the social relations, religious vision, and political affiliations of the *İskenderpaşa* community in light of Türkiye's transforming societal structure.

1. Religious Communities as Social Movements

Islamist movements have been paid striking attention in the world since the 9/11 attack in the USA. The literature developed throughout this era generally explain motivation of Islamist groups as the religious desire to create an Islamic order with the name of fundamentalism. This point of view reduces Islamism to the radical groups characterized with violence and Western hostility. Apart from that kind of opposition to the Western expansionism attached to globalization, there are also several Islamist groups which embrace liberal economic market and allegedly Western democratic political regulations. In Muslim countries underwent modernization process, like Türkiye, the way that religious communities operate religious and social authorities politically may bring insight of political culture. It seems necessary to examine the extent to which these communities adopt these values and how they reconcile them with religious reservations.

Since the 1960s, the growing scholarly interest in religious movements has contributed to the emergence of a robust body of literature, particularly within the fields of social movement theory and the sociology of religion (Kniss & Burns, 2004: 695). This literature basically analyzes how these groups are mobilized through collective purpose and how internal relations are shaped within their organizational constructions. By this way, as well as their discourses Islamic impetus attached to religious motivation and the desire to gather might be figured out throughout the sociology of religion. For some, this perspective adopts an essentialist stance by reifying concepts and social groups as fixed and homogeneous categories that makes it incapable of inquiring the social changes that these groups undergone in relation with economic and political transformations (Tuğal, 2014: 34).

Another influential approach to religious movements, rooted in Weberian sociology, conceptualizes sectarian movements as potential agents of social change and religious innovation (Kniss & Burns, 2004: 695). Indeed, it is also need for belonging and safe social shelters of people against the changes created in the modern world amid the global chaos of social relations (Bozkurt, 2018: 443). Contrary to the conventional dichotomy that aligns modernity with progress and religion with tradition and conservatism, this perspective suggests that religious movements can, under certain conditions, function as progressive forces opposing the dominant social order. In line with this reinterpretation, some scholars argue that pan-Islamism should be understood not as a purely traditionalist reaction but as a political project that incorporates elements of modernist thought and practice.

According to this perspective, pan-Islamism is understood as a form of resistance articulated by those marginalized or excluded from the political system. In this context, their Islamist discourse and political stance may be interpreted not as a rejection of modernity, but rather as an alternative mode of advancing modernization (Tuğal, 2014: 35). In contrast to the orientalist perspective aligning religious groups with anti-modernism, for this aspect it is figured as a religious opposition against modernity but also through modernity. Therefore, Islamists' concern does not target the modern regime itself but draw towards its cultural field eliminated from Islamic elements. It becomes a hegemonic struggle which political culture becomes the main arena that different cultural groups struggle for controlling the cultural symbols. Gramsci defines hegemony as something exercised by the dominant group through society. In his theory, the term of civil society appears as the place by which hegemony is exercised. According to this classification, political society or the State exercises the direct domination or command (Gramsci, 1999: 506). In this framework, it is not considered that the State has power and oppression over civil society. But, rather, civil society is a field of political struggles including domination and subordination, which points to hegemony. Therefore, in the cultural level, religious is also used as tool of domination for hegemony. To do so, religion has influenced social groups "by constructing and maintaining identities, providing definitions of social problems, and supplying symbolic repertoires that justify collective action and make it meaningful" (Kniss&Burns, 2004: 696). Similarly, Bourdieu claims that daily practices internalized by people and relations among people and institutions reflect in symbols, habits, beliefs and thought associated with the people's gestures, bodies and appearances (Bourdieu, 1995: 123). Thus, symbols, discourses, traditions are not only shaped by the political power but also reshaped by the relations of agents with each other and the political authority. Moreover, these cultural notions are not homogeneous and monolithic constructions, rather they are in social, economic, political circulation with the impact of these overlapped fields.

On the other hand, from the perspective of the sociology of religion, religious groups have importance due to their social functions, their type of organizations and membership. According to Durkheim, society needs to be evaluated as an organic entity in which every part of society functions with its own purpose (Vergin, 2004: 228). In this sense, social harmony can be achieved when social groups carry out their roles and responsibilities in an organized and consistent way. However, such an order does not necessarily imply the absence of conflict; on the contrary, it may inherently involve tensions and struggles. Nevertheless, social conflicts are integral to social harmony and must be managed in accordance with the specific rules and functions of each group (Vergin, 2004: 228). In examining how moral behavior and religious rules influence economic decision-making, Weber engages organizational relations with political allegiance and structures of domination. In his well-known study *'The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism'* he puts forward a social and economic system-capitalist mode of production- whose ideals and discourse aligned with the tenets of Protestantism (Aron, 1971: 217). The pursuit of profit and the rationalization of work overlapped with Protestant values of moral purity, including the avoidance of excessive consumption and an emphasis on saving. In this sense, Weber explains Western capitalism by referring to individual behaviors shaped by the Protestant ethic.

2. Religious Communities and Political Islam in Türkiye

Under the secular establishment of Turkish Republic, while a contemporary religion was anticipated to remove the traditional religious discourse economic and political networks of religious communities were overlooked. While the existence of religious communities such as tariqas, cults, and sheikhdoms rooted in the Ottoman period is analyzed within the context of center-periphery relations, their presence in modern times also deserves investigation. As a social phenomenon, these communities are regarded in sociological research as protective forms of social belonging against urbanization factors such as increasing chaos, cultural differentiation, and moral uncertainty in the modern era (Ayдын, 2005: 309).

In Türkiye, modernization process developed within secularism and Westernization

which led to dramatic changes in social lives of people. In this sense, although Islamism didn't appear as opposed to the Turkish modernization, emerged with resistance against secular reforms. In the Ottoman Empire, since Islam was the main notion that people defined their beings and lifestyles, Republican reforms was considered as threat to traditional and religious values. Indeed, Mardin claims that Islam was a central political link in the society which functions as proto-nationalism in the Ottoman Empire (Mardin, 1991: 56). Nevertheless, it means that modernization reforms made up in the late times of the Ottoman considered Islam as a cement which gather community. And this community was Islamic not the nation-based unity (Bora, 2012: 115). In this direction, Bora claims that before pan-Islamism modernized, although had included nationalist references these are Islam-based nationalism which points to the concept of *ummah* (Bora, 2012: 115). With the modern Republic, religious-political references and values were not totally thrown away from political arena, rather these were interfused through modern rationality and Western values.

The dissolution of traditional lifestyles in the Ottoman Empire began in the 19th century and triggered dramatic social transformations. However, the modern era was not built entirely without traditions and illusions in the political arena. Rather, it marked a period of their transformation, reflecting the distinction between the new and the old regimes. In social life, this distinction created a deep social divide, as traditional ways of living became increasingly obsolete while modern social factors emerged slowly, forcing people to take sides within this social split (Öğün, 2004: 35). The political nexus created by the Republic was one-sided and based on the idea of Western progression. Since religion was considered as the reason of social backwardness, the hegemonic discourse was transformed through secularization and modernization with historical references to the old-Turkish communities, legal regulations about family. It was the establishment of the new regime which based on national bindings of Turkish identity. But at the same time, we couldn't claim that the new Republic couldn't completely exclude religion from the identity politics. At the same time, however, the founding elite sought to reinvent Islamic discourse, believing that if Islam were purified from superstitions, it could serve as a social guide for moral order (Bora, 2012: 118). In this complicated relation of the new regime with Islam, Islamism became modernized and created new organizational forms. But, since Islam was placed as a part of Republican quest for investment of traditions, Islamism emerged through the relationship with conservatism (Bora, 2012: 105). Indeed, it was the way of re-invention of the traditions. The ideal of the nation-state was embraced by both Islamists and the Turkish Republic. For Islamists, Muslim identity was the primary basis of national belonging, whereas for the Turkish Republic, Islam contributed to the reinvention of tradition within the framework of a new national identity. Therefore, Islamism responded to the Republican reinvention of traditional values by drawing on Islamic practices which explains its close alignment with conservatism.

In the literature about Turkish modernization process, there is an advance discussion about the absence of civil society inherited as a part of Ottoman social legacy. In doing so, Öğün addresses the structural elements which singles out Turkish modernization from the Western model. In Western modernization, the mode of production was transformed through the actions of local rural authorities, who eventually became a bourgeois class with significant economic power. In contrast, in the Ottoman Empire, the relationship between the *ayan* (local notables) and the Sultan was redefined during the centralization process. Although this process aimed to reinforce central authority, the *ayan* actually strengthened their local power and pursued their own economic interests (Öğün, 2004: 15). Such changes driven by rural dynamics in the West played a constitutive role in the modernization process because changes in the mode of production and the increasing economic power of local authorities were mutually constitutive processes, which together led to their transformation into civil authorities. The new political forms and economic interests enable them to push the central authorities which addresses civilization against the central power. Yet, the Ottoman Empire witnessed more oppressive and more centralized version of the modernization. Already dominant political sphere intensified by the all-pervading central power with the modernization process instead

of contribution to the civilization and the transformation of economic power. In addition to this centralization, the social engineering that shapes the character of development was set on a single nexus: progression. In this context, social engineering was used as a tool to identify social facts and how organizations relate to the ideal of progress (Öğün, 2004:17). From this perspective, the coexistence of multiple civil spheres within the political domain appears untenable. Within the formal framework that seeks to absorb diverse identity groups, Islamists contend that their vision of Islam—predicated on a just social order—finds no legitimate space, given the perceived incompatibility between the principles of Kemalist modernization and Islamic values (Kasaba, 1998: 23). It is thus noteworthy that Islamic ideals themselves undergo politicization, shaped by Islamists' experiences of political marginalization and disapproval.

1950s marks the turning point for Islamist politics not only in Türkiye but also in the world. In Türkiye, the process of industrialization during this period significantly accelerated rural-to-urban migration by generating expanded employment opportunities in urban centers. One of the direct results of such migration on social texture derived from the families dwelling in periphery of urban areas who pursued given traditional networks in these neighborhood (Bulaç, 2005: 66). These groups constitute a significant social base whose social needs related to metropolitan area are aligned with and addressed by the ideological framework and political goals of Islamism.

In 1970, Milli Nizam Partisi (The National Order Party) was founded as the first Islamist political party which was mainly consisted of small business owners, merchants, businessmen, peasants and rural artisans (Tuğal, 2014: 57). Islamists' political parties were closed several times and refounded within different names: *Milli Selamet Partisi* (The National Salvation Party), *Refah Partisi* (The Welfare Party), *Fazilet Partisi* (The Virtue Party) and *Saadet Partisi* (The Felicity Party). The National Salvation Party advocated the economic development based on heavy industries with the private initiatives under the state supervision (Tuğal, 2014: 57). Therefore, their economic vision was to integrate into the liberal economy and industrialization. A similar commitment to economic developmentalism can be observed in the political program of the Welfare Party. In this regard, the economic visions and policies of Islamic parties were largely aligned with the dominant global economic trends of the period.

After the 1980 military coup, Islamists took a new turn with the Welfare Party under the leading of Necmettin Erbakan. The concept of social fair played a central role in this new age of Islamism in which the political discourse was built upon the political anxiety about social degeneration (Mert, 2005: 417). Against the closing of Islamists parties for several times, the emphasis on democratic politics began to legitimize their political activities with reference to human rights. The pronounced emphasis on democratic principles also functions to justify and normalize the involvement of tariqas and religious communities in the political sphere (Çiğdem, 2005: 30). As the ongoing suppression of Islamist political parties—including legal bans and dissolutions—was increasingly criticized as anti-democratic, this critique was further legitimized by the growing support of religious communities, their leaders, and affiliated intellectuals.

The transformation of the political and economic landscape—driven by integration into the global economy, the diversification of political movements, and the promotion of civil society in the 1990s—marked a significant political turning point. In this era, religious communities and tariqas gained significant power as the key actors in providing organic solidarity in society with powerful network (Mardin, 1991: 109). Tariqas, religious publications such as journals and newspapers, along with religious leaders and intellectuals from self-contained communities, emerged as central figures and influential agents of Islamism due to their strong social authority (Çiğdem, 2005: 31).

The Welfare Party's moderate political position couldn't entirely meet the expectations of tariqas and ulama. However, the party insistence on religious demands about headscarf, *Imam Hatip* high schools and its close relationship with religious communities still remarked a

threat to the state on the eye of secular establishment (Tuğal, 2014: 59-60). This concern reached its peak with the military intervention on February 28, 1997, which resulted in the closure of the party and a political ban on Erbakan. In 1998, the Virtue Party was founded with a less confrontational discourse toward the secular system (Tuğal, 2014: 61). Following its closure on the grounds that some of its MPs wore headscarves, Islamist politics fell into silence at the level of parliamentary representation.

With the establishment of the Justice and Development Party (JDP) in 2002, Islamist actors re-emerged through a synthesis of liberalism and conservatism, drawing upon religious values. During this period, the party maintained close ties with various religious communities and tariqas. Several of these tariqas institutionalized themselves as civil society organizations and began participating in the business sector as corporations.

The JDP's close relationship with these groups sparked debates over whether Islamism had become part of a broader state project. In this regard, Çakır (2012) argues that the JDP governments utilized the social power of Islamist communities to strengthen international alliances and to mobilize electoral support.

Thus, tariqas and religious communities, once central to oppositional Islamist discourse in the 1990s, became integrated into the political establishment through their organizational strength and social networks. This marked a significant transformation in political Islam, shifting it away from its earlier oppositional stance against the secular regime.

3. The Turkish Religious Community: *İskenderpaşa Cemaati*

The religious roots of the *İskenderpaşa* community are based on the Naqshbandi Tariqa, which traces its origins back to Central Asia under the spiritual leadership of its founder, Yusuf Hamedani. The tenants of Naqshbandi were flourished by Bahattin Nakşibendi and has gained a significant place in the Sufism (Yaşar, 2005: 324). As one of the most significant and influential branches of the Naqshbandi Tariqa, the *Gümüşhanevi Dergah* was closed in 1925, along with other religious orders, following the enactment of the Law on the Closure of Dervish Lodges and Shrines (Tekke ve Zaviyelerin İlgası Hakkındaki Kanun). Despite the legal ban, informal relations sustained under the leadership of Mustafa Feyzi Efendi, Hasip Efendi and Abdülaziz Bekine Efendi. In 1952, after the death of Abdülaziz Bekine Efendi, Mehmed Zahid Kotku became the sheikh of the convent. The social network of the convent—comprising academicians, intellectuals, and university students and inherited from Bekine Efendi—further developed on the societal level under Kotku's leadership (Yaşar, 2005: 327). By 1970s, *Gümüşhanevi Dergahı* began to be called as *İskenderpaşa*, a name derived from the mosque where Kotku was once serving as imam (Yaşar, 2005: 327). The period under Kotku's leadership marks a milestone for the community, as traditional relations were transformed through expanding social networks and the diversifying status of its followers. Indeed, by the 1950s and 60s, Kotku's leadership was widely spread through university students (Balancar, 2019: 20). From this aspect, such a change in the community's target audience has indirectly reflected its hegemonic challenge to the secular formal education of the Turkish Republic (Acar, 2019: 32). In addition to such social changes, its religious and political discourse also addressed a remarking evolution. Developing skills in reconciling modern and traditional references also diversified the discursive resources of the community.

After the death of Kotku, the leadership of community was taken over by his son-in-law Prof. Mahmud Esad Coşan, a scholar at Ankara University Faculty of Theology (Çakır, 2014: 26). His social status and profession marked a departure from the earlier leaders of *İskenderpaşa*. Since the social position of the leader has always influenced the discourse and organization of the community; his leadership marked a new phase in terms of religious vision. Under Coşan's leadership, the community began publishing a religious journal titled '*İslam*', which included social and political commentary written by prominent followers. Moreover, since the 1990s, *İskenderpaşa* has also become active in the business sector through Server Holding operating

in areas such as education, communication and health.

After Mahmud Esan Coşan passed away in 2001 his son Muharrem Nureddin Coşan who graduated from Ankara İmam Hatip High school and studied Management in the USA has undertaken the leadership of the community. Regarding his modern appearance and training, many expected the community to transform into a contemporary, firm-like organization in connection with an intensive political and economic networks.

İskenderpaşa plays a significant role in Turkish social life, as its religious roots trace back to the teachings of esteemed scholars of Sufism, granting it well-deserved religious authority. Although Kotku rejected politics due to its perceived immoral nature, under his leadership the community developed close ties with the Welfare Party (Yaşar, 2005: 330), which makes their political position ambiguous. Moreover, since this connection sustained even after the community's political network has persisted in various forms. Given these significant characteristics, *İskenderpaşa* must be analyzed as both a political and religious actor in the context of Turkish political culture. To this end, in the following sections, *İskenderpaşa's* place in political culture will be examined as a social and religious community through two following factors: Sufism and religious discourse, and political relations.

3.1. Sufism and Religious Discourse

İskenderpaşa community depends upon the tradition of mysticism which has a significant impact upon Turkish theology. According to the community mysticism is defined as follows:

“On the one hand mysticism is considered as a way of recognizing and comprehending the God as our creator. And on the other hand, it involves with self-discipline of ones to reach moral and inner goodness” (İnan, 1981).

Given this dual definition, the community dedicates itself to guiding both its followers and society at large toward God's moral principles, while also encouraging individual self-awareness. From this perspective, religious communities assume the responsibility of contributing to the moral development of society. Although the Turkish Republic banned religious lodges and zawiyahs, Sufism has retained its significance as a respected religious tradition within the collective memory (Sevinç, 2012: 128). Given this social influence, it is essential to consider religious activities and discourse in relation to collective symbols.

After the ban on religious communities, the *İskenderpaşa* community diverged into two underwent a structural transformation. While the traditional foundations of religious knowledge declined, the community began to attract new adherents including students, scholars and technocrats (Yaşar, 2005: 328). Following the 1950s, the transition to multi-party politics coupled with the growing migration from rural to urban areas, significantly reshaped religious influence and visibility of these communities. Indeed, these later adherents were migrants to the suburbs of the metropolitan cities, for whom religious belonging became a key aspect of their identity, serving as a safeguard against the perceived moral decline in their new environment. As a response to this social anxiety, Kotku could achieve to adapt religious knowledge to modern requirements and life conditions as well as strengthening the revelation with Sufism against the negative impact of liberalism and Marxism (Çakır, 2014: 20-21). According to its doctrine, adherents are never recommended to avoid from modern world and its daily order, contrary faithful believers are capable of living in modern world coupled with material pleasures (Kotku, 2010: 45). Indeed, Kotku sought to reconcile tenets of Naqshbandi with the socio-cultural changes (İnce, 2017: 155). His perspective standing against radicalism in Islamic interpretation tries to balance divine and material world. Therefore, he does not recommend people ignoring the earthly values, but also questioning the material fields as economy, politics and civil society. From this aspect, it is not suggested to form everyday life according to Islam but to involve with these fields by means of civil society (Özyağlı, 2024: 17).

Within this framework, true believers who are committed to revelation and communitarian principles are able to safeguard their beliefs against moral corruption. Similarly, Ersin Gündoğan, an adherent of *İskenderpaşa* clarify such values in the biography of Kotku:

“In and through crowds, people have increasingly lost their emotions as if they were herds. While the richness of inner values bestowed by the God is inestimable compared to earthly wealth, which is pursued to satisfy unending desires, humankind often fails to recognize these inner riches and values unless they join in communities seeking for inner peace” (Çakır, 2014: 22). As his statements shows, communities and moral values developed through them are ones which guide people through their inner peace. Therefore, being an adherent of a religious community is made compulsory for being a true believer against the earthly desires.

Kotku’s teachings emphasized individual morality and the improvement of personal conduct. Accordingly, religious discussions and sermons were organized in the courtyard of the *İskenderpaşa* Mosque (Sevinç, 2012: 130). Given these sermons, Kotku’s manner of speaking remarkable characteristics which differs his discourse in synthesizing a wide variety of issues. In addition to his poetic style, his discourse was able to address to both modern and traditional followers (Öztekin, 2022: 62, Özyağlı, 2024: 17).

These conversations were sustained under the leadership of Mahmud Esas Coşan. As mentioned above, Coşan’s distinct academic background, which set him apart from the community’s traditional leadership, led to noticeable changes in the community’s discourse. His high emphasis on education is evident in his writings published in the journal *İslam*:

“Thank God, we are Muslim; our purpose is derived from our faith. In our opinion, education of Muslims is a major concern. We have observed that several of our activities in this field including courses, sermons, conversations, conferences, and seminars have not fully met the needs and demands. We have not able to reach everyone and everywhere as we intended. That is why we have decided to publish this journal” (Çakır, 2014: 27).

With this statement, Coşan puts education as the main objective of the community in order to improve their journey. Indeed, for many, education has always had a great importance for the community (Şentürk, 2015; Silverstein, 2011; Özyağlı, 2024). From this aspect, it is such an apparently intellectually advanced community with a large number of university graduate followers. But still, Coşan’s era points to an apparent transformation in the community’s discourse and religious approach because of rapid changes in cultural life of Türkiye following 1980s as well as Coşan’s academic career in the modern educational life. In fact, whereas it was a Sufist book called *el-İbriz* that Kotku suggested Coşan supported to publish an academic journal called *İlim ve Sanat* which shows the difference in their epistemological approach (Sözer, 2018: 87).

By the 1990s, the community have made connections with the foreign organizations and activities. In the late 1990s, following the February 28th process and increasing political oppression, Coşan moved to Australia as the community had gained significant popularity through its powerful social networks. After Coşan passed away in a traffic accident in 2001, Muharrem Nureddin Coşan took over the leadership of *İskenderpaşa*. Compared to previous periods, M. Nureddin Coşan has made fewer vocal and written declarations regarding their religious values and tenants. Indeed, it is said that Nureddin Coşan frequently responds that his grandfather’s and father’s sermons and books are adequate enough (Sözer, 2018: 119). Such modesty is generally highlighted as the evidence of his humbleness in addition to his remarking desire to use social media effectively. In this regard, his methods and approaches separated from the ones embraced by his antecedents. Yet, Nureddin Coşan does not sustain traditional routine preaches instead he prefers to give his messages through the website of the radio station called Akra Fm which the community owns (Yılmaz Hava, 2017: 144). It is worth noting that his statements have mostly focused on the community’s political relations, while he continues to maintain the community’s civil society organization- based structure inherited

from his father. Moreover, under his leadership the political party called 'Sağduyu' (Common Sense) was founded in 2002, which was defeated as the need for legality by most of the followers (Sözer, 2018: 120). Even though the party has never attended any elections, still exists. On the website, the party defines their goal to establish common sense, justice, goodness, virtuous character and inner peace (Sağduyu, 2025). Apart from emphasizing virtuous character in terms of morality, party's website does not refer to any kind of religious or Sufist principles but instead proposes a stance that is equally open to all political values, ideological stances and religious tendencies. Given these main issues, rather than functioning a political party having a political project or a religious community spreading a tenet, it appears to be a civil society organization having partial political visions.

3.2. Political Relations

In Türkiye, the political views and attitudes of many religious communities toward political relations and politics itself remain quite ambiguous. As a protective response to state-imposed bans and pressures, most religious groups have maintained their activities secretly and kept themselves closed off to outsiders. However, with the increasing participation of Islamism in parliamentary politics, supporting these political actors became almost inevitable for these 'enclosed' religious groups. Considering social changes, religious communities have burdened several functions in public, political and economic fields in addition to the religious training (Torun, 2020: 84). Beyond mere political participation, they also began to support these parties' parliamentary success through their economic and social resources. These inevitable relationships have played a notable role in the empowerment of *İskenderpaşa Cemaati*.

With the age of multi-party regime in the ruling of *Demokrat Parti* (Democratic Party), most of religious people tend to support *Demokrat Parti* as it was considered as the representative of traditional values against the secular oppressive state authority (Yaşar, 2005: 330). In the age of *Demokrat Parti*, the secular oppression against religious groups partially declined with a relatively liberated public sphere. Although the ban on these religious groups was valid, political parties and leaders generally ignored their existence due to their potential support in elections (Aybudak, 2014: 90). There was an obscure connection between *İskenderpaşa Cemaati* and center-right parties.

There is a widespread belief that Naqshbandi Tariqas' religious roots have traditionally been incompatible with political engagement and state power. This stems from the perception that the state and political authority are prone to moral decline, which stands in opposition to the spiritual ideals of Sufism (Sevinç, 2012: 132). Similar perspective is evident in Kotku's discourse, where he identified sexuality, money and power as primary sources of evil (Yaşar, 2005: 329). Consequently, some scholars suggest that Kotku may have disapproved of the establishment of political parties by Islamists.

Following the foundation of the Islamist National Salvation Party (Milli Selamet Partisi) in 1970, there is scholarly debate regarding Kotku's stance: while Yaşar claims that Kotku was reluctant to support the party (Yaşar, 2005: 331), Şentürk asserts that *İskenderpaşa* provided significant backing, effectively making the party the community's political extension (Şentürk, 2011: 343).

With reference to Tevfik Paksu, who is one the founder of Islamist Salvation Party, it is said that Mehmed Zahid Kotku hardly gave permission to the foundation of the party. While convincing him, the fact that the national need for a savior party instead of masons or communists is submitted (Aybudak, 2014: 88).

Notably, Necmettin Erbakan, the party's leader, was a follower of *İskenderpaşa*, and many political actors within the party had close ties to the community. During this period, the National Salvation Party joined a coalition government and was tasked with managing the State

Planning Organisation. Kotku encouraged his followers to seek positions within the bureaucracy and indeed many community members were appointed to the State Planning Organisation, reflecting the close relationship between the party and the community (Çakır, 2014: 24).

In his study researching social ties between Naqshbandis and Milli Görüş Movement, İnce puts that the growing alliance between them mainly resulted from their social base who are mostly university graduate coming from upper class but felt excluded from the politics because of their values (2017: 153). From this aspect, discursive foundation of Milli Görüş is responded by the educated pious youth living in urban.

After Kotku's death, leadership passed to Esad Coşan who shifted the community's focus away from direct political involvement towards social and civil society activities. This shift was prompted by the closure of the National Salvation Party political bans imposed on its leaders (Yaşar, 2005: 332). Coşan concentrated on expanding civil society organizations affiliated with the community and promoting its journal, *İslam*. Today, nearly one hundred *İskenderpaşa*-affiliated civil society organizations operate nationwide (Aybudak, 2014: 101). Moreover, increasing activities in media and press for children, women and youth demonstrate the community's adaptability to technological development and tools (Aybudak, 2022: 197).

During Coşan's tenure, the community's political alliance with the National Salvation Party dissolved. Following the party's closure by the military in the coup of 12 September 1980, *İskenderpaşa Cemaati* redirected its political support to the Motherland Party (Anavatan Partisi) (Çakır, 2014: 40), with many political figures in this party maintaining ties to the community. However, when the Welfare Party (Refah Partisi) was founded in 1983 *İskenderpaşa* renewed its support for these Islamist cadres. The Motherland Party's efforts to join the European Communities (EC) contributed to the withdrawal of *İskenderpaşa*'s support, as the community strongly opposed Türkiye's integration into European countries. Coşan explicitly expressed concerns about the potential threats to religion, culture and beliefs posed by EC membership (Çakır, 2014: 37). Consequently, the EC was perceived as a principal political threat, motivating the community to support the Welfare Party in the 1987 elections, although the party failed to surpass the 10% national threshold. Until Kotku's death, the community gave unconditional support to parties led by Erbakan (Balancar, 2019: 21).

A significant rupture occurred in 1990 when Coşan publicly urged his followers to distance themselves from the Welfare Party, condemning its members as an "unreliable cadre dependent on exploitation and deception" (Çakır, 2014: 39). This political break was also fueled by a personal rivalry between Coşan and Erbakan. Coşan had expected greater recognition of his influence in political decisions, and this tension culminated in an open conflict and subsequent political separation in 1990 (Yaşar, 2005: 338). According to Balancar, this conflict between two leaders is also revealed from their competition. While Erbakan was always loyal to his sheikh Kotku, he did not show same recognition and support to the authority of Coşan, who was of a similar age (2019: 229). Indeed, this conflict peaked with the Erbakan's urge to obey his authority. By reminding the sufistic tradition of the community, Coşan reminds followers to owe allegiance only to ulama (Sözer, 2018: 94). Therefore, this conflict reflects the tense debate between ulama and political leaders in terms of justification of their authority. The political orientations of the *İskenderpaşa* community provide a valuable lens through which to assess its broader impact on Turkish political culture. Fundamentally, the community's social cohesion has been structured around a strong spiritual and emotional attachment to its leader—the sheikh—whose authority is both religious and charismatic in nature. This leader-centric structure fosters a kind of traditional hierarchy, deeply rooted in Sufi conceptions of loyalty and submission, which has implications for the community's political engagements. The personal rivalry and eventual rupture between Necmettin Erbakan and Esad Coşan can be interpreted as a manifestation of the tensions that arise when spiritual authority intersects with political ambition. In this case, political rivalry overpowered religious frugality and the values of humility and detachment that Naqshbandi teachings typically

advocate.

During the 1990s, the *İskenderpaşa* community began to consolidate its influence within the economic sphere through the establishment of companies and the expansion of business-related activities. While the community had never explicitly discouraged individual economic initiatives among its followers, this period marked the first time that economic ventures were undertaken explicitly in the name of the community itself, signaling a more institutionalized approach to economic engagement (Yaşar, 2005: 338). A key component of the community's economic philosophy was its opposition to Western capital and forms of economic imperialism. In the fight against the enemy, Kotku highlights the significance of establish companies and factories in cooperation in order to become economically self-sufficient (İnce, 2017: 156). This resistance to foreign economic domination appears in Kotku's strong support for the National Salvation Party's efforts to initiate heavy industrialization based on domestic resources and national capital (Çakır, 2014: 25). In this regard, one could argue that a form of economic statism was central to the community's vision of self-reliant development. However, the *İskenderpaşa* community did not adopt an isolationist stance; rather, it pragmatically engaged in trade relations and operated within the broader structures of the liberal market economy. Indeed, several initiatives reportedly associated with the community such as the Hakyol Foundation, Asfa Educational Institutions and Server Holding has been carrying out their activities with increasing strength since 2002 (Balancar, 2019: 23).

Under the leadership of Coşan, the support for entrepreneurship sustained in similar lines but nationalist references were strictly underlined. Coşan frequently recommends not to exploit foreign capital and to consume Muslims' productions (Sözer, 2018: 112). Therefore, in community's point of view although business and economic investments have been encouraged, these are always determined through the distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Indeed, although the Naqshbandi Sufi tradition generally advise withdrawal from overt political ambition and discourages the pursuit of state power, the *İskenderpaşa* community has at times deviated from these prescriptions. This is especially visible in its evolving relationship with the Justice and Development Party (AKP). Indeed, after the first election that the JDP came to power in 2002, Erdoğan went to the Mehmet Zahit Kotku Mosque in Ankara which shows his commitment to the community (Balancar, 2019: 23). Despite the tradition's emphasis on spiritual modesty and restraint, the community has issued strong declarations of support for the AKP, particularly through public statements made by Muharrem Nureddin Coşan, Esad Coşan's successor. Such declarations reflect a continuation of the community's pragmatic engagement with political actors perceived as sympathetic to their religious and moral worldview.

Even though in 2002 the Common Sense Party was established, the party does not have any official member and has always avoid participating in elections (Özyağlı, 2024: 78). For some the establishment of the party was reasoned by the purpose of being legality, it is also seen as Nureddin Kotku's achievement of his father's incomplete attempt (Sözer, 2018: 94). Manifesting their political initiative as a political party, Muharrem Nureddin Coşan justifies their attempt within the purpose of "revealing and defeating the justice for the sake of all people" (Sözer, 2018: 119). Yet, it is noteworthy that the community firstly resisted to the JDP's government in 2003 about the Iraq resolution. Their memorandum expressing their opposition to the use of US Turkish military base in the war against Saddam in Iraq is only significant political attempt of the party (Özyağlı, 2024: 78). As the party did not participate in elections, in 2004 local elections their support was given to the JDP. Even though the community's apparent support sustained since 2011 with the leader's declarations, in 2011 they turned their direction. Unexpectedly, in 2011 Nurettin Coşan released their support to the National Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi). While appealing for support to help the Nationalist Movement Party surpass the electoral threshold, Coşan addresses the disappointment caused by the government's failure to act for the benefit of humanity (Pala,

2016: 46). Nevertheless, the community sustained their supportive declarations to the JDP in 2011, 2014, 2015, 2018, 2019 elections and 2017 referendum. In these supportive releases, Coşan frequently appraised freedom, peacefulness among various ethnic identities, justice and state of law achieved in Türkiye (Işık, 2023: 65-68).

In the government's fight against FETÖ, İskenderpaşa community took side of the JDP. Balancer asserts that by siding of the government the community might have expect financial and social benefit (2019: 23).

While *İskenderpaşa* has never adopted an overtly ethnic form of Turkish nationalism in its rhetoric, its emphasis on the unity of the Muslim ummah has consistently pointed toward a form of religious nationalism. The community's publications, most notably its periodical *İslam*, frequently frame global affairs through a binary lens that distinguishes between the faithful (mümin) and the unbelievers (kâfir) (Çakır, 2014: 32). This theological worldview is often coupled with an anti-imperialist discourse that identifies entities such as the Vatican, Zionist organizations, and Masonic networks as existential threats to Muslim unity. When this ideological framing is considered alongside the community's perception of itself as a religious family bound by shared moral and spiritual values, it becomes evident that *İskenderpaşa's* conception of the nation is based less on territorial or ethnic definitions than on religious solidarity.

In this framework, Islam serves not merely as a belief system, but as the central organizing principle that binds individuals into a cohesive moral and social order. This is why Şerif Mardin (1991: 56) characterizes this orientation of Islamism as a form of "primary nationalism" or "proto-nationalism." It is rooted in the notion that only through the maintenance of traditional communal ties, reinforced by religious values and spiritual leadership, can society resist the moral disintegration associated with modernity and secularism. Accordingly, the community encourages its followers to participate in modern life but simultaneously warns them against the deceptive allure of modern values. This dual stance reflects a broader ideological position that prioritizes cultural continuity and religious morality over uncritical adaptation to secular norms.

Thus, *İskenderpaşa's* vision of Islamism cannot be understood in isolation from its conservative and nationalist dimensions. Rather than advocating a purely theological or scriptural form of political Islam, the community integrates religious principles with a broader conservative worldview that emphasizes moral order, traditional authority, and social cohesion. In fact, this hybrid ideological posture is characteristic of many religious communities in Türkiye. The political trajectory of these groups has been significantly shaped by the historical legacy of the secular Republic, particularly the legal prohibitions placed on *tariqas* and *zawiyahs* during the early Republican era. These prohibitions forced religious communities to operate covertly and spurred them to develop alternative strategies for maintaining and legitimizing their presence in the public sphere.

One of the most significant strategies adopted by these groups was the prioritization of religious education through Quran courses and informal religious gatherings. These activities served both as a form of resistance and as a means of community preservation. Consequently, when Islamist political actors began to participate in electoral politics in the latter half of the 20th century, religious groups such as *İskenderpaşa* viewed political support for these actors as a form of retributive justice and an opportunity to reverse decades of marginalization and state-led oppression. Although their doctrinal commitments urged detachment from political power, they interpreted participation in political opposition to secularism as both necessary and legitimate.

Moreover, beyond resistance to secular repression, the enduring mystique of the state has remained a central feature of Turkish Islamism. While in some cases this mystique takes the form of a vision for an Islamic state, more often it corresponds to a broader aspiration for

sacralized political authority. This symbolic valorization of the state, and the concomitant desire for leadership and control, has impeded Islamists from developing robust critiques of domination, hierarchy, and authoritarianism. Instead, the internalization of statist and hierarchical ideals has led to the reproduction of power structures within religious communities themselves. As such, despite their oppositional rhetoric, many Islamist movements, including those influenced by İskenderpaşa, have struggled to maintain a genuine distance from state power and economic interests. This fusion of moral authority with political ambition has, in turn, limited their capacity to function as transformative or genuinely oppositional forces within the broader political order.

4. Conclusion

İskenderpaşa Cemaati has been one of the significant Islamic communities in Türkiye which could achieve to create a broad social network not only among Turkish religious people but also in several foreign countries. This network has been empowered by means of economic and political power which have gradually increased in terms of Islamists' political power. As Durkheim puts by asserting that the organic solidarity could be maintained by collective bindings and traditional values, these factors have also made changes on the community's structure. As long as religious communities have attained political power, political relations and economic interests have predominated over the religious adherences which give meaning to traditional communities.

On the other hand, since Coşan's leadership *İskenderpaşa* community has concentrated on civil society organizations including charitable organizations, scholarship for children's education, foundation of dormitories for students. At the same time, associations and foundations related with the community have worked as business actors in the market. Therefore, their civil society activities have played a major role in enhancing their networks and economic performances. In this regard, the religious stance of the community has increasingly become shaped by expanding networks and the pursuit of material profit. With the development of civil society and the consolidation of political power by Islamist actors, the foundational values and interpersonal bonds that once unified the followers have undergone significant transformation. The community gradually lost its critical distance from political authority, especially concerning issues such as the headscarf controversy and Türkiye's integration into the European Communities. Rather than maintaining a position of moral autonomy, the community began aligning its discourse and positions with the interests of the ruling government. In this process, their oppositional potential did not erode entirely but was transformed through engagement with modernized political and institutional mechanisms.

Consequently, like the *İskenderpaşa* community, most religious communities in Türkiye have failed to channel their religious discourses and civil society opportunities through into emancipatory or oppositional frameworks. Instead, they became confined within structures that merely mimicked traditional community forms while, in reality, pursuing modernized relations and competitive/interest-driven engagements.

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