

Religion and Politics in Comparative Perspective: The Cases of Türkiye and Malaysia

Hakan Köni*

Abstract: This article makes a comparative analysis of the place of religion in political life in the cases of Türkiye and Malaysia. Türkiye has long maintained a tradition of secularism similar to the French model reputed for its opposition towards the extension of religion in the aspects of political, legal and administrative life. Secularism as such has been a major character of Turkish political and legal life, and it has long been backed by an influential class of statesmen, and legal and administrative mechanisms. Secularism in Türkiye has been undergoing a major change, however, for the last two decades of AK Party rule towards a more people-friendly model. Malaysian Constitution, on the other hand, for long identifies Islam as the religion of the state and recognizes it as a major source of reference in various arenas of political life. While the religion has a greater structural influence in some states like Kelantan and Terengganu, it has notable influence in all the Malaysian states within the context of a pluralist legal system. This article examines how two countries differ on the subject particularly, and seeks an answer to the differences partially, and locates them in such factors as British political traditions on Malaysia compared to the French influence on Türkiye; predominance of religious civil society organizations and activists in Malaysia compared to the secularist modernists in Türkiye; and Malaysian religious awakening and mobilization compared to the Turkish disillusionment with the religion at the elite level from the past until the mid-2000s.

Keywords: Turkish Politics, Malaysian Politics, Religion and Politics, Comparative Secularism,

Karşılaştırmalı Perspektifte Din ve Politika: Türkiye ve Malezya Örnekleri

Öz: Bu makalede Türkiye ve Malezya örnekleri üzerinden dinin demokrasilerde siyasal hayattaki yeri incelenmektedir. Türkiye’de uzun bir süre dinin siyasal, hukuki ve idari alanlarda yayılmasına karşı olmasıyla meşhur Fransız modeline yakın bir laiklik anlayışı hüküm sürmüştür. Bu haliyle laiklik, Türk siyasal hayatının önemli bir özelliği olmuş ve varlığını nüfuzlu bir devlet seçkinleri sınıfı ile yasal ve idari mekanizmalarla sürdürmüştür. Fakat bu gelenek iki on yılı aşan AK Parti iktidarı politikalarıyla ciddi bir değişim sürecine girmiş ve mevcut haliyle daha ılımlı bir görünüme bürünmüştür. Malezya’da ise anayasa ülkenin kuruluşundan bu yana İslam’ı devlet dini olarak tanımlar ve İslam’ı siyasal hayatın her sahasında önemli bir referans olarak kabul eder. Bu durum Kelantan ve Terengganu gibi bazı eyaletlerde daha etkili bir varlık gösterirken, çoğulcu bir hukuk sistemi çerçevesinde tüm Malezya eyaletlerinde egemen meşru bir özellik olarak karşımıza çıkar. Bu makale, ilk etapta bu iki ülkenin bu konudaki farklılıklarını tespit etmekte ve kısmen de farklılıkların gerekçelerini sorgulanmaktadır. Farklılıklar özetle Malezya’da İngiliz siyasi geleneğinin etkin olmasına karşın Türkiye’nin uzunca bir dönem Fransız tesiri altında kalmasına, Türkiye’de laik modernistlere karşın Malezya’da dini nitelikli sivil toplum örgütlerinin ve aktivistlerin baskınlık elde etmiş olmasına, Malezya’da dikkat çekici bir dini uyanış ve seferberlik tecrübesi yaşanırken Türkiye’nin özellikle seçkinler düzeyinde 2000’lerin ortalarına kadar dine karşı modernleşme sürecinde ciddi olarak hayal kırıklığı içinde olmasına dayandırılmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Türk Siyasal Hayatı, Malezya Siyasal Hayatı, Din ve Siyaset, Karşılaştırmalı Laiklik

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*Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, Ankara Bilim Üniversitesi, Siyaset Bilimi ve Kamu Yönetimi Bölümü, E-mail: hakan.koni@ankarabilim.edu.tr_ ORCID: 0000-0001-5472-3050

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Introduction

This article offers a comparative examination of the interaction of religion and politics in the cases of Türkiye and Malaysia. Democracies display quite a variation in the way they accommodate religion in political life. Conflicts and confrontations never become absent among competing groups on the matter in the parliaments and the media. While some countries give official recognition to one or more religions by giving them a broad space of action in legal, administrative and political arenas, some others prefer to keep the religion out of politics much as possible. Britain and France could be cited as examples to two highly different traditions in democratic world regarding the way they manage this issue for while the religion plays such a significant role in British political life, French political life represents the case of a country where the religion is highly marginalized. In this regard, Türkiye is in the process of moving from a highly rigid secularist political system towards a comparatively moderate one without dropping the secularist principle from the constitution, however. Türkiye was very close to the French model until very recently with the religion being highly unpublic and private matter. The subject earned remarkable publicity from 1980s with unpopular bans and limitations on Imam-Hatip schools, headscarf and Quran courses. But unlike Türkiye, Malaysia exemplifies a country where the religion finds a great space of action in legal, administrative and political life where Islam is also defined as the official religion of the state. While in some states of the country attempts are offered to introduce Islamic criminal law, and not just civil law and administrative matters, in all the other states Islam serves as a significant source in legal and political life. The variation of two countries on the subject is often attributed to some historical circumstances, different experiences with the West, variation in the ideational and organization characteristics of political elites, civil society organizations and individuals.

Religion and Politics in Türkiye

The nature of relationship between religion and politics in the country, unique in some senses but sharing some common features with some other country cases, has taken form under the influence of some historical, ideological, political and global circumstances. The type of relationship between religion and politics displays variation across the Republican history indeed with noteworthy differences in periods like the single-party period from 1920s to 1950s, multiparty period from 1950s mid-1980s, the period from mid-1980s to early 2000s and the period after that characterized with the domination of AK Party in political life. It can be noted that the space of action and freedoms turned more favorable and amenable in every new period generally.

The single party period, lasting from mid-1920s to 1950s, witnessed the implementation of highly constraining state policies towards religion. The excuse was that the development of the country necessitated the minimization of the effect of religion in political and legal life. Failure to do so had led to the demise of the Ottoman state accordingly. Major anti-religious secular policies and practices are adopted in this period towards the religious institution some of which could be cited here as the abolition of the caliphate, renunciation of the Islamic law from all legal spheres in favor of modern western law, removal of the constitutional article indicating Islam as the religion of the state, adoption of the constitutional article of secularism along the French model, prohibition of Islamic cloths for men and women, and prohibition of going for pilgrimage for a period over ten years (Davison, 2002, pp. 220-238; Heper, 1981, pp. 249-251; Zürcher, 2007, pp. 172-173).

Turkish secularism adopted during the single party era, and still finding support in some political and social chambers today, was shaped under the heavy influence of French laicism originating from the French model of modernization, the Enlightenment philosophy, French Revolution, its Jacobinism and all the notions they nurtured against religion as a socially and politically inhibitive, exploitative and

authoritarian institution. For the ruling Republican Peoples Party (RPP), the Turkish people in general were deemed to be uneducated, ignorant and incompetent in political matters; they were prone to be misguided by traditional conservative blocs; and they thus had to be guided by an enlightened class of statesmen (Mağcupyan, 1998, p. 54; Lewis, 2002, pp. 267-271). Antireligious secularist practices continued with all their rigidity until the transition to multiparty politics in 1946 and DP's introduction to the government in 1950. Liberating policies were taken into implementation from 1945s onwards and such changes were introduced as the liberation of going for pilgrimage, introduction of elective religious courses in the schools, opening Imam-Hatip courses, and liberation of the recital of the azan in Arabic. Further changes and practices came during the ten years of DP rule from 1950 like the liberation of religious publication, rallies for new mosque-construction campaigns, recitation of Quran in the radio, opening of Imam-Hatip Schools (IHSs), and the increase in the hours of religious lessons in the schools. DP was in support of a more moderate conception of secularism and it had a more populist and democratic character at the background of these (Ahmad, 1994, pp. 440-442; Landau, 1978, pp. 248-254).

Such reforms continued during the Justice Party, formed after the closure of DP in 1960, which became the winner of the next 3 elections it participated, in form of the building new Imam-Hatip Schools and Quran Courses, promotion of religious education and publications, and employment of religion to combat radical leftist movements (Bozan, 2007, pp. 16- 17; Kırçak, 2001, pp. 60-61). After the DP, with the adoption of a new constitution and new laws, most of the liberating reforms are maintained, but secularism is strengthened with some institutional channels of influence to take the Turkish political life under influence until very recently. Article 2 and 68:4 of the 1961 Constitution defined Türkiye as a secular state and totally prohibited to base "the fundamental, social, economic, political, and legal order of the State on religious dogmas." Acts in violation of this article by the

persons and political parties were made punishable. The principle was further strengthened with the Army Internal Service Code of 1961 assigning the Turkish army the duty to intervene in the political process in such cases.

The Constitution established the National Security Council (NSC) too for the participation of the Turkish Armed Forces in the political processes through their recommendations and communications with the politicians by direct monthly meetings (Özbudun, 1999, pp. 108-110; Hale, 1994, pp. 272-273). The functions, capabilities and the composition of the NSC has been reformed substantially during the recent AK Party Governments for a democratically more acceptable status, but till then, the NSC exploited its opportunities generously to deliver the desired messages of secular Turkish army to the politicians via regular meetings and the press, and it was the major actor of the 28th February Process from the beginning with the National Security Document issued against political and social practices with religious character.

The Constitution allocated an institutional place to the Turkish judiciary too in the promotion of the classical anti-religious secularism via the Constitutional Court, Supreme Court, and the public prosecutors. Supporting heavily the classical RPP view on the state-religion relationship until the recent AK Party reforms, the elements of the judiciary have been highly engaged with their acts of party closures of the earlier National Order Party, National Salvation Party, Welfare Party, Virtue Party and plenty of other sentences given to their members. Until recently, Turkish Judiciary tended to judge the cases pertaining to alleged violations of secularism with a remarkably rigid and intolerant perspective with a distaste for even the smallest degree of religious representation in public life.

Despite all those secularist practices and political mechanisms, attempts continued during and after the prime of Justice Party in

Turkish political life for greater rights and liberties for the religion also thanks to the elements of globalization and increasing wealth in the country from then. Necmettin Erbakan's National Salvation Party, established in 1972 to survive until the 1980 coup, was partly active in the process particularly when it was a part of the coalition governments in, for instance, increasing of hours for religious lessons in the schools, building new mosques and religious schools, and redesigning the school curricula in greater conformity with religious teachings. With that time, the imprinted notion of evolution and disingenuity of the religion in schoolbooks started to meet with some alternatives and lose its dogmatic validity in the school curricula.

Facing heavy criticisms by various rightist movements and intellectuals, the interest-based banking system did not experience such a change in Türkiye, but a parallel Islamic banking system made its introduction to the market during Turgut Özal's leadership in Turkish political life from mid-1980s. The interest-free banking system has grown substantially since then with such a reception from the society. And, in addition to that, the current AK Party government is waging an ambitious struggle to reduce the rate of interest by the Central Bank of Türkiye. In the ongoing state of global economic recession where almost all the world countries are raising the interest rates, the Turkish government has successfully decreased it to below 10% from around 25% in 2018. Important in this struggle has been the belief of the Turkish government that high interest is morally and politically unwelcome in addition to its inflationist and other negative economic influences. The party in the government has met with such an opposition by various cliques in this process with claims that it is ignoring the major principles of liberal economic management yet to its victory on a major economic goal that has been traditionally supporting.

Issues of religion and politics occupied a significant place in the party program and policies of Welfare Party (WP) too in the issues of IHSs,

headscarf issue, Quran courses and the other popular matters, but WP's ambitions on these matters went far over its capabilities in legal and political terms. The Party once came with a parliamentary proposal to introduce Islamic law in the country in the context of a plural legal system in 1997, but the proposal was rejected by heavy opposition from the rival parties of the left and the right (Refah Partisi, p. 4). As an important matter on the subject, the WP is closed on account of violating secularism during the course of the 28th February Process, its properties are confiscated and its leadership cadre are banned from politics. Most of the WP politicians collected around a new party named as AK Party and re-embraced earlier WP goals withing legal borders. AK Party won all the parliamentary and governmental elections it joined since then and problems never became absent with the secularist state elites despite all the efforts waged. Giving up the campaign for the introduction of Islamic law and statehood in the country, the party kept pressing on the major issues of religious politics as cited above and became successful in getting desired results with most of them.

The headscarf, as one of those major issues of concern, was prohibited in Turkish schools and universities by an official order in 1984, while until then it was banned just customarily by individual public actors. The ban on headscarf turned to a serious problem with its rising use among the female students from the late 1980s. The rising popularity of the headscarf is often attributed to what is called as the process of Islamic re-awakening in the country. Various aborted attempts were made for the removal of the ban in the parliament and through administrative initiatives since 2001 and eventually the ban is removed in 2007 during the presidency of Abdullah Gül (Kuru, 2009, pp. 187-193; Rabasa & Larrabee, 2008, pp. 62-63). The use of headscarf is now free in the Turkish schools as well as in the rest of the public sector and even in the police organization and the army.

Problems with IHSs have similarly been recovered in the same period by similar processes. The IHSs had suffered heavily from the 28th February regime, during which their secondary school division was forced to close, the graduates of their high school division had to suffer lower point calculations in the university entrance exam, they were forced to unite the classes for male and female students who were previously separated, and the use of headscarf was prohibited in all its divisions (Köni, 2018, pp. 84-85). All of these problems are recovered as of December 2011 and IHSs remain a kind of popular public educational institutions in Türkiye where the students learn classical Islamic sciences in addition to traditional modern sciences. In these schools, the curriculum includes courses like Arabic, Quran, the life of the messenger, Quranic exegesis, hadith and so on and so forth in addition to classical modern school courses.

The official state department of religion, Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı (Presidency of Religious Affairs), shortly named as Diyanet publicly, has witnessed major changes in Türkiye in the last 20 years. Currently, Diyanet has about 130.000 employees as mosque imams and auxiliary staff and it manages a budget of about 1 billion USDs every year on average provided from the national budget. It does not practice any political, administrative and legal duties unlike some of its counterparts in various western democracies; and it does not have any involvement in religious education in the schools, in the provision of teachers and course material in the process. It broadcasts via its official TV channel called Diyanet TV on subjects relating to non-political aspects of Islam and in the last few years it has undertaken a duty of providing kindergarten service to the children at the age group of 4 to 6 years. It has stepped into the Halal sector though with its involvement in the issuance of Halal certificate to the blends of food and related consumption items in cooperation with some other government offices and civil society organizations. Since 2018, Diyanet is allowed to register civil marriages in the country without being able

to judge over the cases of divorce and inheritance as an engagement in public civil matters at a preliminary level.

The Turkish government provides various private and public entities real estate donations through the General Directorate of Foundations without making a transfer of ownership of the property, however. The Directorate donates such real estate property for prolonged periods of time often from those properties donated by the people for specific purposes or from those properties transferred from unattended ownerless foundations. In this context, Türkiye Diyanet Foundation is allocated amounts of real estate properties in the value of about 115 million USDs in 2019 to be a major beneficiary of such allocations. Such allocations are not allowed to be used for commercial purposes and they don't cover any direct monetary support, construction or repair of religious places.

Religion and Politics in Malaysia

In Malaysia, Islam has been an important component of socio-political life for centuries and, before the establishment of modern Malaysian state, it was one of the major legitimacy sources of Malay kings to observe the Islamic law among the people and to distribute justice accordingly. This tradition was maintained even during the British colonial regime and it is preserved after the declaration of independence with the Constitution of Malaysia identifying Islam as the religion of the state. During its years of foundation, Malaysia did not have a powerful class of secularist political elites, nor does it have now, who considered secularism as an important necessity of the national modernization goal and therefore, unlike Türkiye and such other countries as Syria, Tunisia etc. with a majority Muslim population, Malaysia did not meet with such a campaign against the political and legal representations of Islam in public life. In independent Malaysia, Islam has occupied a gradually strengthening influence under the supportive effect of increasing literacy rate and

knowledge of Islamic resources, an active and growing Islamic civil society net, and also because of such international factors as the growth of a Middle East-educated class of Islamic Intelligentsia, and successful Islamic experiments in Iran and Afghanistan as sources of inspiration. What is often called as Islamic resurgence in Malaysia by some scholars gained speed in 1980s and made a peak with the election of Mahathir Mohamad as the Prime Minister of Malaysia and his service in the office for more than 20 years (Batumalai, 1996, pp. 57-71; El-Affendi, 2010).

As the head of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), Mahathir has supported the idea, in his two decades of term as prime minister, that Islam is an important part of Malaysian socio-political life and a fully secular political system could be terribly alien to the Malaysian people. UMNO, and much as that Party Islam se-Malaysia (PAS), since then support the view that Islam is a highly sophisticated and systematic religion with a highly developed legal and political system, which it has proved through centuries of exercise and refinement, and with a little bit of revision and synthesis, it could be successfully reconciled with contemporary political norms and institutions (Batumalai, 1996, pp. 60-63). Further to that, its implementation in Malaysia relies on the democratic consent of the people and it is not enforceable to the non-Muslims. Accordingly, if the Islamic norms make sense to the Malaysian Muslims, in part or whole, and if they want to be subject to it with their own free choice, they have to be respected from a legal and democratic point of view.

Islam has thus been in an institutional state of engagement with Malaysian public political life in its laws, bureaucracy, public administration, political institutions, parties and public social bodies. The establishment of Pusat Islam in 1980 was an important point in this process which was replaced by JAKIM in 1996, which is still in service today. Pusat Islam (and afterwards JAKIM) was given the duty to advice on, supervise, scrutinize and even enact the Islamic law in

Malaysia in cooperation with federal and state bodies. JAKIM is now active in many processes of the socio-political life of the Malaysian Muslims and it even has got a police force and powers of prosecution. It thus enjoys the capabilities to police and prosecute the Muslim Malays when there appears from their part violations of the laws laid on Islamic prerogatives and JAKIM can lead them into the trial room when necessitated accordingly (Liow, 2009, pp. 48-52).

In accordance with the operational principles of JAKIM above, the Muslims are, for instance, required to follow certain dress codes in much of the public places they may attend. Wearing headscarf and hijab is not an obligation for the ladies, but they cannot wear revealing clothes like short skirts, sleeveless shirts, shorts, t-shirts, clothes that leave the legs, arms and the back of the body open. That is indeed not only the case for Muslim ladies, but also for the non-Muslims who cannot wear in very revealing ways in much of the public offices. And, in addition, the men and the women cannot wear such clothes worn by the counter-sex for any purposes. In 2014, seventeen people were arrested in the state of Negeri Sembilan for cross-dressing at a wedding who were invited as wedding-planners and beauticians. The reason for their type of wearing was that they were transgender persons, but as such practices were not acceptable in Islam, they were arrested and their application to the high court for release was rejected for the reason that they acted in violation of religious enactment of their state (Dahlan & Faudzi).

Not less noteworthy than that, Malaysian justice system incorporates Sharia courts to judge the matters among the Muslims functioning at state level. Its jurisdiction covers over a wide range of areas including but not limited to inheritance, marriage, divorce, adoption, foundations and associations, religious taxes and charities, Malay customs, issues related with the mosques and apostasy (Dahlan and Faudzi). Various states of Malaysia, like Kelantan and Terengganu, have met with the challenge of the introduction of Islamic criminal

law. The Islamist party PAS is very popular in these states and it has won the local parliamentary elections against the other parties in many occasions. It holds the parliamentary majority in these states and it has passed the Islamic criminal law in the local parliaments as the most serious step of its implementation. It now maintains its diplomacy with the federal assembly for the ratification of the law, for such changes require the approval of the Malaysian Federal Assembly too to come into effect. But the PAS campaign for the matter is not so comfortable for there is an influential anti-sharia lobby in the country who defend that Malaysia is a secular country and argue that various criminal punishments in Islam are in conflict with contemporary human rights. They maintain, together with some moderate Islamists, that original Islamic sources date back from 7th century AC and that there has been tremendous changes in human life since then. And, in addition, Islam is open to re-interpretation and revisions based on the necessities of the time and change of the circumstances (Liow, 2009, pp. 58-63). The power and influence of this anti-sharia lobby is very remarkable indeed blocking the approval of the Islamic criminal code at federal level for long.

In states like Kedah, Perlis, Pahang, Kelantan and Terengganu where the electoral majority is secured by UMNO or PAS, measures are taken towards the banning of alcohol sale, gambling and night clubs for the Muslims. In these states, such practices and activities are allowed to the non-Muslims only as the Islamic law binds the Muslims. But interestingly, it is noted by some surveys that in these states quite some of the non-Muslims are not disturbed with such highly conservative policies and some of them even support UMNO and PAS for they are impressed by the generous social services provided. They also express their pleasance with the notably low level of corruption by UMNO and PAS politics as a by-product. Islamic political practices, as they are followed in these states, and the Islamist politicians are found very fair, hardworking and honest. And the implementation of

Islamic criminal law does not generate any fears on them for it applies to the Muslims only (Hays, 2015).

Conclusion

To summarize, in this article, Türkiye and Malaysia are compared regarding the place of religion in political life. While both countries share a common feature of having a long history of relations with religion in political life, Türkiye breaks with the tradition and, starting with the early years of single-party period in mid-1920s, adopts a militant secularist political life by removing the religion from the political, legal and administrative life almost all together. The reactionism towards religion mitigates from the 1950s onwards by transition to democracy, but the regime remains highly stable as such until the introduction of AK Party in Turkish political life. Solving the epitomized problems of religion in the country like the headscarf ban, the marginalization of the IHSs and religious life and practices in the country in general, Türkiye has embraced a remarkably moderate mode of secularism. Malaysia, on the other hand, has adopted a characteristically religious trajectory of modernization since its independence in late 1950s by recognizing Islam as the official religion of the state, and acknowledging it as a major source of legal, political and administrative action. Islam is a major reference for civil law in all Malaysian states and attempts are made by various states to adopt Islamic criminal law enforceable for the Muslims. JAKIM acts as an important administrative actor in the country to monitor the observance of religious administrative and legal norms. Differences in the experience of two countries are located in this article with reference the following developments: Different roads of modernization adopted in two countries, Türkiye being impressed with the French model on the matter and Malaysia with the British model; predominance of secularist elites in Türkiye compared to the Islamists in Malaysia during the years of foundation; and the growing

impact of religious education and activists in Malaysia compared to the secularist nationalists in Türkiye.

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