Turkey

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Despite the centrality of the rising tensions between secular and pro-Islamist groups with respect to the future of Turkish politics, little empirical analysis exists on the cleavages between the two groups. The Political Islam in Turkey (PIT) project provides extensive opportunities for such an analysis as well as analyses of policy questions. The PIT concerning the Civic Code could be used to examine the role of religion in Turkish social life. Several memorable incidents occurred during the establishment of the secular Republican regime and its immediate aftermath in which the reactionary perennial forces gathered around a loud reactionary demand for juris and the protection of the sultana and caliphate. Tension between the secularists and pro-Islamist forces resurfaced with the success of the pro-Islamist Welfare Party (Rafah Partisi), first in the local elections of 1994 and then in the general elections of 1995. Ever since, questions concerning the popular bases of juris rule have been used in public opinion surveys. The wording of the questions usually refers to an unspecified group of people that supposedly think that Turkey should be governed according to juris rules. The respondents are asked whether they would agree with this idea. These simplistic evaluations cannot be taken as a sign of a demand for juris rule. Perhaps more seriously, the respondents are not even given a description of what is meant by juris, nor are they asked about specific implications of juris rules. Table 1 shows the findings in three consecutive opinion polls conducted in 1995, 1996, and 1998. What is striking in those figures is that over the years concerned at least one out of five voters expressed their approval of juris rule in Turkey. A year before the peak of tensions between the military and the pro-Islamists during the so-called 28th of February process, the approval rate peaked with slight- ly more than a third of the voters supporting the idea. Nearly a year after the start of the process the approval rate dropped to its 1995 level.

The straightforward wording of the question used in the PIT stressed the necessity of the ex- isting legal system. Would you or would you not favour the establishment of a juris-based religious state in Turkey? Answers to this question in February 1999 indicate that approximately 21% of the voters approve.

Several additional questions (Table 2) in the PIT concerning the Civic Code could be used to provide some context to the above findings. When posing these questions on the present-day Civic Code regulations on marriage, divorce, and inheritance, the wording specifically allowed for a clear comparison with arrangements in the Islamic law. The overwhelming support for the secular Republic Civic Code is evidence of the problematic nature of the word juris for the Turkish electorate. A significant number of the electorate seems unable to refute juris rule. However, as Table 2 shows, once a given clear choice between the secular and Islamic legal arrangements, preferences clearly shift to- ward the secular arrangements. An integral part of the Republican civic law was the abolishment of religious ceremonies or clerical marriages (imam nikah). Under the Republican arrangement the only lawful marriage is civil marriage. However, it is well known that a sizeable proportion of the couples that marry in a civil ceremony also under- go a religious ceremony in which an imam concludes the marriage contract. When asked whether the religious wedding with an imam and the civil marriage ceremony should both be counted as official, nearly 43% of the re- spondents answered favourably to having both become legally binding. Table 3 presents answers in support of some assertions concerning the role of reli- gion in Turkish society and general evaluations of the social and political life of the country. It seems that in the last three-quarters of the respondents support assertions about women having the right to cover their heads if they want to in the universities as well as in government jobs. Other statements about reli- gious expression in social life were strongly supported. However, despite overwhelming agreement with statements backing a religious point of view, nearly 67% agree with the statement that having religion as a guide in state affairs is detrimental. Could these agreements be taken as a disguised support for secular principles? The fact that those who agree with this statement (only very unlikely to support juris rule seems to support this view. Similarly, nearly 77% of the respondents agree with the statement that Republican re- forms have helped Turkey to progress. Recently the role of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyarçılık-i Bâlâcî) in regu- lating the role of religion in Turkish society has come under attack. Despite its large bud- get, the Directorate’s services concentrate primarily on Sunni rather than Alexi communi- ties. Nonetheless, the harsh reactions to the Directorate do not seem to find much sup- port among the population at large; only about 4% seem to support the idea of abol- ishment of the Directorate. But when it comes to the functions it fulfills the reformists dominate the answers: nearly 70% of the respondents agree with the statement that the Directorate should provide services to the Alexi as well as the Sunni communities.

Another facet of state-society relations in Turkey concerning religiosity, religious ser- vices and worship practices is an implicit concern, or explicit claim, that religious people are being oppressed. Although some state policies are not fully supported by the people, it is not clear whether the above policies are perceived to be oppressive. The PIT includes a question as to whether people in Turkey are free to fulfill the wor-