Democracy (For Me): Religious and Secular Beliefs and Social and Political Pluralism in Turkey

ABSTRACT

This essay draws on a systematic and comparative content analysis of four religious and two secular newspapers, covering their issues between 1996 and 2004. The main goal is to examine through testable hypotheses to what extent, why, and on which issues religious and secular actors’ views changed in contemporary Turkey with respect to questions of pluralism and democracy. It is argued that Turkey made significant advances in democratization in recent years, and de facto became a more pluralistic society, to some extent because of the new visibility and vitality of religious social, economic, and political actors. This created an important potential for pluralistic democracy. But de facto pluralism did not translate into normative pluralism in the sense of acknowledging and recognizing difference. It did not produce a more inclusive pluralism whereby the major social and political actors recognize the legitimacy, and even desirability, of social and political freedoms not only for themselves, but also for others they see as different, competing, or threatening. On the contrary, the new pluralism came at the price of a divided society between self-anointed “pro-secular” and “conservative-democratic” actors.

This outcome is consistent with the findings of the content analysis. Secular and religious views converged on political pluralism but diverged on social pluralism and secularism. After 1998 the views expressed in the religious-conservative press shifted from one emphasizing electoral-majoritarian democracy to one emphasizing liberal-pluralistic democracy. However, this embrace of political pluralism did not translate to support for social pluralism, and support for recognition and rights for specific groups such as Alevis, women, and people with “non-mainstream identities and life styles.” The Turkish practice of secularism is criticized in ambiguous terms alongside demands for a greater role for religion in social affairs. Secular actors’ embrace of pluralism decreases with respect to “unsecular” actors, and support for authoritarian interventions increases “to protect secularism.” Variations within secular and religious newspapers are also analyzed.

The essay theorizes that in addition to being major pressure groups in Turkish politics, the media constitute important sites of discussion, contestation, and deliberation for the secular and religious intelligentsia. Thus, changes in media content can be seen as possible indicators, and partial causes, of changing elite beliefs, rhetoric, and values. Critically discussing theories of democratic consolidation, the essay argues that the sustainability of Turkey’s “new pluralism” depends on democratic consolidation. Democratic consolidation requires the major social-political actors to adopt a more inclusive pluralism, which cannot be produced by economic interests alone.

The findings from the content analysis also contradict some of the stereotypical views religious and secular actors hold vis-à-vis each other. Secularist interventions and EU decisions preceded major changes in religious actors’ views. Many secular actors were critical of the illiberal-authoritarian interventions against religious actors. Religious actors increasingly consider faith a matter of choice. There is weak evidence that religious actors view democracy as a means rather than an end. Both religious and secular actors heavily rely on indigenous (Turkish) and western practical and intellectual sources to justify their positions.