

Challenges of Diversity in Turkish Education

Ayhan Kaya / Istanbul Bilgi University

Turkey is a multi-ethnic and multi-denominational country with a republican tradition based on a constitution underlining the values of equality, freedom, and secularism. However, Turkey faces various problems such as the right to be different, and the lack of equal access to education. In this regard, Turkey has a very intricate history with regard to the culture of *tolerance*. The Ottoman *millet* system praised the act of tolerance during the heydays of the Ottoman Empire, while the nationalist rhetoric promoted a homogeneous nation based on Sunni-Muslim-Turkish elements.

The emphasis made on religion in the Turkish national education has never changed. The integration of secularism and religion was perceived to be the main goal of the curriculum by the nation-builders. However, the objectives of citizenship education show some differences in the history of the Republic. For instance, the primary school curriculum of 1926 stated its objective as 'raising good citizens', the 1929 curriculum as 'raising people, physically and psychologically fit to be Turkish citizens', and the 1936 program as 'raising republican, statist, secular, revolutionary citizens'.

Turkish national education curriculum has always promoted a civic education based on the celebration of the Sunni-Islam-Turkish culture. It has been very difficult for the non-Sunni-Muslim-Turkish students to publicly express their identities in school as well as having their practical claims about their ethno-cultural and religious difference accommodated by the state. Research on the minorities reveals the aggravation experienced by non-Muslim, non-Sunni, and non-Turkish students in everyday life. Although ethno-cultural and religious identities are now being expressed rather freely in the public space, there are still barriers before the expression of one's ethno-cultural and religious identity.

This research illustrates the ways in which cultural and religious diversity has been accommodated in Turkey with a special focus on the response of Alevis to the compulsory courses on religious culture and morality in primary and secondary schools, and on the ban on headscarf in higher education institutions.

Evidence & Analysis (Key Findings)

CASE 1. Alevi's Responses to the curricular changes in compulsory courses on religious culture and morality

While investigating the Justice and Development Party (AKP)'s initiative to accommodate the Alevi claims with respect to the changes in the curriculum of compulsory courses on religious culture and morality, it was revealed that **the Alevi have generated two separate discursive positions**: a) Groups who are content with the willingness of the ruling party (AKP) to include the Alevi belief and practices in the curriculum of compulsory courses; and b) Groups who believe that this initiative is an attempt to Sunnify the Alevi through a discourse of *tolerance*.

The term *tolerance* was specifically mentioned in the **Religious Culture and Morality textbooks** with reference to the Medina Constitution, formulated by Prophet Mohammad to regulate relationships with non-Muslims, and Mohammad's 'tolerant attitude' towards the Christians of Yemen. Furthermore, in September 2010, the Ministry of National Education released a public statement in the first week of the school year 2010-2011 to underline the need for the 'education of values'. Accordingly, the education of values such as citizenship, hospitality, solidarity and *tolerance* aims at empowering individual students against the challenges posed in everyday life by the processes of globalization.

In the mean time, the curriculum change made in 2007 and 2008 brought about some changes with regard to Alevism. The new curriculum focused on different sects and diverse mystic interpretations of Islam. Alevism was mentioned among mystic interpretations as the main constitutive other of the course's syllabus and was integrated into what is called 'Turkish Sunni Islam' in the book. This implies that Alevism was perceived and exposed by the authors of the book as a part of the Sunni Islam with some deviations. This intervention in the textbook was interpreted by several Alevi parents as a form of assimilation, and it was taken to the courts. This mistake has been corrected now together with the publication of the new books in the new academic year of 2011-2012. Accordingly, Alevism is mainly explained through its relationship with Islam.

The governments' initiative for the revision of the curriculum to include the Alevi belief and practices has failed to respond to religious

The attempts made for the revision of the curriculum in the compulsory courses on religious culture and morality do not necessarily bring about respect and recognition for the Alevi culture as a distinct and peculiar identity in school life. However, it means to some Alevi groups that the participation of Alevi children is tolerated, and religious differences of the Alevi are accepted by means of incorporating Alevi belief into the curriculum and textbooks.

and cultural diversity challenges posed by the Alevis with regard to the recognition of the Alevi belief and culture as a distinct and peculiar identity. We argue that although the government's initiative can be regarded as an attempt to tolerate religious differences of the Alevis and the co-existence of Alevi children in school life with the Sunni majority, the inclusion of Alevi belief in the curriculum of the compulsory courses does not necessarily lead to the recognition of Alevi culture as a unique identity.

Attempts made for the revision of the curriculum in the compulsory courses on religious culture and morality do not necessarily bring about respect and recognition for the Alevi culture as a distinct and peculiar identity in school life. However, it means to some Alevi groups that the participation of Alevi children is tolerated, and religious differences of the Alevis are accepted by means of incorporating Alevi belief into the curriculum and textbooks. This initiative cannot be regarded as a public policy, which effectively responds to the Alevi claims along with the respect and recognition of the Alevi identity in the framework of more rigorous problems/issues arising from the religious differences of Alevis in terms of their places of worship (*cemevi*) and their alleged legal status within the Directorate of Religious Affairs. **The issue of education on Alevi belief should be discussed in the public space, in relation to the freedom of faith in general.**

CASE 2- Lifting the Ban on Headscarf in Higher Education

The public policies and political initiatives undertaken for the lift of the ban on headscarf in universities have so far been unsuccessful in making a substantial change in the national discourse of laicism in Turkey. These attempts have also been short of introducing a new discourse based on respecting and recognizing religious diversity in higher education. Referring to the interviews undertaken with several policy and civil society actors, our study shows that there is a common belief that the attempts made by the political parties have just been politicizing the headscarf issue without making any substantial improvement for the resolution of the ongoing problem.

Most of the interlocutors regard the public policies and political initiatives proposed for the resolution of the headscarf issue in universities (by making new legal changes or by reinstating and enforcing the laws to re-assure the right to education) as palliative solutions. However, it was mostly claimed that in order to resolve this issue with an address to *tolerance*, respect and recognition, a more structural solution should be found on the basis of **the right to freedom of religion**. Accordingly, those interviewed have expressed their willingness to see a constitutional reform to clearly make sure that headscarf ban will no longer be an obstacle before the right to education of individuals, to precisely highlight the right to religious difference, and to prevent the politicization of the headscarf issue.

It was mostly claimed that in order to resolve this issue with an address to *tolerance*, respect and recognition, a more structural solution should be found on the basis of right to freedom of religion.

Evidence & Analysis (Key Findings)

Laicism: Infidelity, or Piety?

The most crucial impact of strict laicism in Turkey is that it polarizes and diffuses the society between *laicists* who comply with the state's principles and interests, and *Islamists* who challenge the state and the regime with their social and individual preferences. As in the headscarf debate, the top-down modernization process run by the state has so far created believers of Laicism on the one hand, and believers of Islam on the other.

Following the French model of *laïcité*, the choice of the early Republicans on the integration of the principle of Laicism into the Turkish Constitution in 1937 indicates that the Kemalist elite was not preoccupied at all with the elimination of religion from public space. On the contrary, they affirmed the fact that Turkish society was religious in essence. The main rationale behind the principle of Laicism was not to wage war against Islam, but to provide the people with the power to challenge the rising authority of the Islamic clergy since the late 18th century. Laicism derives from the French word *lai* (or *laïque*, in contemporary usage, lay people in English, or *inanamlar* in Turkish), meaning “of the people” as distinguished from “the clergy”. Hence, laicism underscores the distinction between lay members of a church and its clergy. In other words, Laicism in a way rescued Islam as a matter of ‘belief’ and ‘conscience’ by institutionally supporting, financing, and promulgating a different version of Islam and its view of relation to power and social life.

Laicist ideology has also made it possible that the Kemalist elite politically and culturally instrumentalised Islam to unify the nation through the institutions of the Ministry of Education and the Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*).

Secularism and Laicism

The terms *laicism* and *secularism* are often interchangeably used in Turkey. Both terms rather have different etymologies, institutional histories, and normative theoretical implications. Secularism derives from the Latin *saeculum*, meaning generation or age, and originally meant “of the world” (*dünyevi* in Turkish) as opposed to “of the church” (*ruhani* in Turkish). Hence, the term “secular” differentiates between matters of religiosity and matters of the world. In this sense, secularization of a society simply refers to the “diminution of the social significance of religion” and “the growing tendency to do without religion”. A secular state then refers to a “religion-free” state - a kind of state that does not apparently comply with the modern Turkish state. In this sense, **Laicism is actually a kind of obstacle to secularization as it has so far made the state to instrumentalise religion as a tool to control the masses.**

In this sense, rather than antagonizing Islam, laicism simply means to empower the individual believers vis-a-vis the clergy. Furthermore, laicist ideology has also made it possible that the Kemalist elite politically and culturally instrumentalised Islam to unify the nation through the institutions of the Ministry of Education and the Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*). The perception that Laicism was “antireligious secularism” ignores the regime’s religious policy, and fails to consider the existence of different versions of political Islam in Turkey, one of them enshrined in power until very recently and others outside it.

Eventually, laicist/religious divide has so far been ideologically manipulated by both pro-laicist and pro-Islamist political elites. The political obsession with religion, as displayed by both Laicism and Islamism, tends to distract the masses from social and economic problems by turning them into a rhetorical debate about existential and societal fears. One could clearly see that the theological and political debates around Laicism and Islamism cannot be isolated from the socioeconomic realities in which they are situated. The rise of an Islamic bourgeoisie with roots in Anatolian culture, the re-Islamization of society and politics in everyday life through the debates on headscarf issue and Alevism, the emergence of consumerist lifestyles not only among the secular segments of the Turkish society, but also among the Islamists, and finally the weakening of the legitimacy of the Turkish military as the guardian of national unity and the laicist order are all very important aspects of the ways in which the Turkish society and politics have radically transformed in the last two decades. Thus, one should certainly try to assess the social and political change in Turkey without falling into the trap essentializing the Laicist-Islamist divide. This research has partly revealed that both laicist and Islamist discourses have so far been used by Turkish political elite as two different forms of governmentality in order to conceal social, economic and political issues prevalent in the society by means of institutions, procedures, analyses, debates, and reflections.

The political obsession with religion, as displayed by both Laicism and Islamism, tends to distract the masses from social and economic problems by turning them into a rhetorical debate about existential and societal fears.

Key Messages for Policy Makers

1. Tolerance vis-a-vis religious diversity is not being discussed with reference to the freedom of religion. The ideology of laicism has so far dominated all the relevant discussions about the public and private divide, the practice of religion in everyday life and the freedom of faith.

→ Policy makers should open up discussions on religious matters along with the freedom of religion instead of insisting on a laicist rhetoric.

→ **Generating a debate on the freedom of religion could also contribute to the resolution of several other problems such as the historically loaded hostilities between Muslims and non-Muslim groups.** Such a debate could also contribute to the generation of a public understanding, which perceives religious convictions as a matter of private domain.

→ It could also contribute to the de-securitization of the religion vs. secularism debate.

2. Education on religious culture and morality in primary and secondary schools promotes Sunni Islam at the expense of disrupting social cohesion.

→ Curriculum of the compulsory courses on religion and ethics should be changed, and concentrate on the history and sociology of religions. Such a change could help creating a cohesive society in which no group would be feeling threatened by the hegemonic discourse of Sunni-Islam.

3. The Headscarf issue has become a symbolic fault line in Turkey separating the so-called religious and secular (laicist) groups.

→ Policy makers should not portray the term laicism as if it is against religion. Political and societal tension between the so-called Kemalists and the Islamists could be addressed by explaining that laicism aims at empowering the faithful citizens against the clergy rather than erasing religion altogether from public life.

→ Policy makers should refer not only to tolerance (*hosgörü*) in settling the cultural and religious conflicts but also give credit to the notions of respect, recognition, pluralism, equality and justice in order to create a cohesive society.

Methodology

Data Collection: This study is based on literature review as well as field work. We have collected relevant data and information about the two cases through a study on NGO reports, policy documents, public statements, internet news and a wide range of books and articles enlisted in the academic literature. Fieldwork was conducted between the end of February and mid-April 2011, the work was written in May and June 2011. We have conducted nineteen semi-structured qualitative interviews, nine of which were conducted on the first case (compulsory courses on religious culture and morality), and ten of which were conducted on the second case (the lift of the ban on headscarf in universities).

Indepth Interviews: Among these interviews, thirteen were conducted with experts including civil society leaders, policy makers, politicians, bureaucrats, and academics and six with practitioners and other stakeholders such as teachers, students, and parents. Most of the interviews were conducted in Istanbul, while four of them were held in Ankara with policy makers, politicians and bureaucrats. The final part of the field work was accomplished with a focus group discussion held in July 2011. A group of journalists, civil society leaders, practitioners and headscarfed lawyers had a heated debate on both cases.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA): The data collected through the interviews were evaluated on the basis of the interlocutors' reflections on some common denominators such as tolerance, Europeanization, religion, secularism and laicism. These interviews were analyzed through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) method. CDA is a method of discourse analysis focusing on the investigation of the relations between discourse and social/cultural developments in everyday life. It views discursive practices as an important form of social practice contributing to the constitution of the social and cultural world including social identities and relations.

Project Identity

Acronym:	ACCEPT PLURALISM
Title:	Tolerance, Pluralism and Social Cohesion: Responding to the Challenges of the 21st Century in Europe
Short Description:	<p>ACCEPT PLURALISM questions how much cultural diversity can be accommodated within liberal and secular democracies in Europe. The notions of tolerance, acceptance, respect and recognition are central to the project. ACCEPT PLURALISM looks at both native and immigrant minority groups.</p> <p>Through comparative, theoretical and empirical analysis the project studies individuals, groups or practices for whom tolerance is sought but which we should not tolerate; of which we disapprove but which should be tolerated; and for which we ask to go beyond toleration and achieve respect and recognition.</p> <p>In particular, we investigate when, what and who is being not tolerated / tolerated / respected in 15 European countries; why this is happening in each case; the reasons that different social actors put forward for not tolerating / tolerating / respecting specific minority groups/individuals and specific practices.</p> <p>The project analyses practices, policies and institutions, and produces key messages for policy makers with a view to making European societies more respectful towards diversity.</p>
Website:	www.accept-pluralism.eu
Duration:	March 2010-May 2013 (39 months)
Funding Scheme:	Small and medium-scale collaborative project
EU contribution:	2,600,230 Euro, Grant agreement no. 243837
Consortium:	19 partners (15 countries)
Coordinator:	European University Institute (Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies)
Person Responsible:	Prof. Anna Triandafyllidou
EC officer:	Ms Louisa Anastopoulou, Project Officer