

## Political discourse and Islam: The role of rhetoric in Turkey

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**Abstract:** *Adaletve Kalkinma Partisi* (AKP, Justice and Development Party) in Turkey has been blamed for Islamizing the Turkish society through its conservative policies that have similarity with discourses originating from the Islamic principles. However, the AKP government has maintained that it abides by Turkish laicism. This paper identifies and analyses the extent to which rhetoric by AKP's leaders has changed over the years. This is done in order to find out whether the party truly has an intention to Islamize Turkey as part of a strategy to win votes. The paper highlights how the changes observed are related to the current national mood and issues being discussed. As a result, the AKP cannot be said to be a party that had always intended to turn Turkey into a religious country. The rhetoric employed by the leadership in the last 13 years showed that the shifts in discourse were to manage the support it received by conservative Turks, rather than as an upfront to the secular establishment.

**Keywords:** Turkey, Islam, rhetoric, discourse, communication, Adalat Kalkinma Partisi.

### Introduction

Religion in Turkey can, and has been, articulated as either a threat to the state or as a means to ensure the survival of the state when faced with greater ideological threats (Tank, 2005). This has created a legitimacy crisis (Mellon, 2010) as the people do not find the government's control over the type of religious expression allowed in public spaces to be synonymous with a democratic country. On the other hand, Turam (2007) argues against this idea that supporters and detractors of the *Adaletve Kalkinma Partisi* (AKP, Justice and Development Party) are perpetually in ideological battle against each other, and instead suggests that there is greater cooperation between secularists and the AKP because of the ruling party's commitment to democracy.

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The AKP's stance on Islamic issues has caused unease among non-Islamists following the party's growing domination over the discourse. The party's Islamic agenda has increased tremendously after the AKP won its second term in government in 2007, especially after the failed attempt by the military to stop the election of Abdullah Gul as President (Somer, 2014). Case in point is Erdogan's statement to raise a "pious generation" and his call to restrict abortion in 2012, the introduction, also in 2012, of an education reform that would allow religion based courses to be absorbed into the school curricula for younger students, Erdogan's promise to end mixed-sex student residences, and the introduction of laws to restrict the sale and consumption of alcohol in 2013. Granted, these can be read as concerns by a conservative party, which is what the party considers itself to be. However, these developments need to be understood in the context of Turkish society where social conservatism is synonymous to Islamic values. Rising Islamization in society can be observed through the "neo-Ottoman and Islamic aesthetics of numerous shopping malls, gated communities...and the commodification of Islam as a marketing strategy incorporated into 'Brand Turkey' through Turkish Airlines and 'Ramadan in Istanbul'" (Kaya 2015: 51).

The AKP is not just an impressive political party in comparison to other Islamist parties in the world because of its ability to attract votes, but it is also an extraordinary party as it is the only party in Turkish history to have increased its vote share in subsequent elections after coming to power in 2002 with 34.3% of the votes. In 2007, its vote share increased to 46.6% and in 2011 it went up further to 49.8%. As a result of Turkey's 10% threshold, the AKP won close to two-thirds of the seats in the Grand National Assembly (GNA) in all three parliamentary elections: 66% in 2002, 62% in 2007 and 59.3% in 2011 (Ozbudun, 2014). However, in 2015 the party faced a setback when it only won 40.9% of votes and 47% of seats, failing to secure a majority during elections held on 7<sup>th</sup> June. This led to a snap election on 1<sup>st</sup> November 2015, when the party regained its majority by winning 49.5% of votes and 58% of the seats in the GNA (Uras, 2015).

The question on the mind of many political analysts is whether the AKP is an Islamist party. It has been argued that even though Islam does not directly influence the party's policy choices or ideological stance, the AKP is still an Islamic-leaning party since Islam is very much part of the party's core identity and its relation to politics (Atasoy, 2009; Yavuz, 2009). Yavuz (2009:3) takes it further by arguing that "Islam of the AKP is actually "repressed" rather than simply excluded from its identity and ideology", because "the identity of the AKP is shaped both by what it wants to *forget* (Islamism) and what it wants to *become*

publicly (conservative democracy).” Nevertheless, this is not a sentiment shared by authors such as Hale and Ozbudun (2010), who argue that the AKP is not an Islamist party since it does not look to the religion to permeate its ideology, identity or program or to Islamize society through force.

This variation among scholars is due to the variation in AKP’s policy document and AKP leadership’s statements. Rhetoric of a party’s top leadership, defined as “the art of persuading others” (Charteris-Black, 2005: 8), does not necessarily have to conform to the strategy that has been discussed and agreed upon by the greater membership of the party. Although the party’s stated mission and objectives may be contained in a well-thought document that seeks to persuade as many electorates as possible, a leader’s words spoken in front of a crowd of supporters may be altogether different. The main objective of this paper is to find out whether the shifts exist in the AKP’s rhetoric and if so, whether these are attributable to the party leadership. Leaders’ divergence from the party on various issues may indicate satisfaction with the growing support received at the ballot. The statements and speeches made by the leaders of the party between elections can shed light on the AKP, as the party is not constrained by impending elections. This paper is divided into several sections: the role of the leadership, religion in the news, and analysis by year. Any shifts in rhetoric over time are discussed with the intent of discovering the individuals responsible for the change in tone and any events that may have caused the leaders of the AKP to invoke religious rhetoric when addressing the local and international audiences. This is important, as the many accusations on the AKP’s increasing Islamization in Turkey are mostly attributed to the leadership, specifically its current President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

### **Method of data collection**

In this paper, newspaper articles and editorials were collected and quotes by AKP leaders were extracted from them. The data came from a number of daily and weekly newspapers, with a majority being drawn from *The Christian Science Monitor* (Boston), the *Financial Times* (London), *The Australian* (Sydney), *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto), *The Guardian* (London), and *The Sunday Telegraph* (London). These newspapers were selected for analysis based on accessibility and consistency. Since the purpose of this exercise is to collect quotes from AKP leaders, it does not make much difference whether they come from a Turkish newspaper or otherwise as the data would have been the same. Furthermore, these newspapers provide different perspectives on the same matter with newspapers

such as *The Christian Science Monitor* and *The Guardian* being more neutral while *The Australian* is more anti-AKP in its editorials. Table-1 presents distribution of newspaper quotes according to themes.

Table 1: Distribution of newspaper quotes according to themes

Newspaper	Theme					Total
	Religion	Foreign Relations	Party Ideology	Democracy	Authoritarianism	
Financial Times	14	7	5	13	6	45
Investor's Business Daily	1	0	0	0	0	1
Milliyet	1	0	0	0	0	1
Sunday Times	1	0	0	1	0	2
Sydney Morning Herald	0	0	0	1	1	2
The Age	0	3	0	1	1	5
The Australian	0	0	0	2	2	4
The Christian Science Monitor	10	7	1	11	6	35
The Daily Telegraph	2	0	0	2	0	4
The Globe and Mail	0	1	3	2	4	10
The Guardian	4	1	3	0	0	8
The Herald	0	0	0	1	0	1
The New York Times	1	0	0	0	0	1
The Sunday Telegraph	0	9	0	0	0	9
The Times	1	0	0	1	0	2
Washington Post	3	1	0	1	0	5
TOTAL	38	29	12	36	20	135

For this paper, 135 quotes from news and feature articles on Islam and the AKP were collected. Since these newspapers are published outside of Turkey, they are

free from accusations of being biased or as spokesperson for the party. Instead, the reports are judged on the writer's framing of an issue whether it is Islamic-positive or Islamic-negative, meaning that whether issues arising in Turkish politics is deemed acceptable to the western liberals or not. There are potential biases with either international or Turkish newspapers, with both being inclined to select or print quotes or speeches that are not wholly representative but serve the newspapers' ideological purpose. International newspapers may be more critical of the AKP government whereas Turkish newspapers are divided among those that are pro-AKP and anti-AKP. Nonetheless, the quotes compiled from the abovementioned international newspapers do provide different perspectives on the same matter.

A systematic analysis was done to comb through the newspapers for Islam-related rhetoric by leaders of the AKP from 2001 until 2015, tracking the changes that were observed within this period. The news that was selected was based on the content whether it is relevant to the question of discursive shifts by the party in regard to Islam in politics, economy, and society. Based on this selection of data, 76 news articles and editorials were analyzed. Specific themes were looked for while carrying out content analysis of the articles and speeches. Seven main themes are discussed in this paper: religion, headscarf, foreign relations, party ideology, democracy and authoritarianism. Religious issues that were considered for this paper include headscarf, alcohol, abortion, education, equality, science, and most importantly, the place of religion in a leader's personal life. The headscarf, as a hotly debated issue over the years, merits an entire analysis as a subtopic to religion.

## **Findings**

As stated, the findings of this paper are discussed under three headings in the following section.

### *Role of AKP leadership*

The analysis of the news coverage reveals that most of the discussions on Islam-related issues can be traced back to Erdogan. Other members of the party only sparsely mentioned religion, or issues relating to it. The main reason for this finding is that Erdogan is the highest quoted leader overall, due to his position in the party and in the country. It is, therefore, not surprising that newspapers are more eager to quote him than other lay members of the party because they do not have the pull that Erdogan possesses in making headline news.

Therefore, it is more meaningful to look at specific leaders and their share of quotes that are related to Islamic issues. Such an emphasis will reveal the importance of Islamic issues in relation to other issues important to different AKP leaders. Three main leaders are given extra attention — Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Abdullah Gul and Ahmet Davutoglu — because they have held very important positions in the party and government. What they have said has direct bearing on the electorates and international observers, alike.

Data analysis shows that Erdogan, Gul and Davutoglu have different areas of interest. Erdogan's main focus throughout the years examined was religion, which made up 32.5 percent of the quotes attributed to him. A third of his remarks reported in the press were either directly or indirectly related to the issue of religion, which is an interesting finding given that the party he helped co-found has always maintained it is not an Islamist party. Yet, in response to the military coup in Egypt, which ousted Mohamed Morsi, the fifth President (30 June 2012 to 3 July 2013) of Egypt Erdogan had this to say, "(t)hey [the military] want to subdue us by attacking our mosques, women wearing headscarves, religious people and our values... Do not worry. Turkey is no longer the country it once was" (Peterson, 2013). Following a decade in power and three successful elections, Erdogan was more forthright with his comments regarding the need to uphold values that are dear to religious Turks, his core supporters. A definite shift is observed here, from a leader who was wary to admit his party as a religious political party to one who has found no reason to tone down his religious rhetoric in recent years given that he has consolidated his support among conservative Turks compared to the diverse groups that the party attracted during the 2002 general elections.

On the other hand, other leaders have maintained their reluctance to discuss religious issues on a public platform. Gul, for example, has been quoted on issues of foreign relations 56.3 percent of the time. As the president of Turkey for seven years, Gul was more vocal on the nation's interests abroad, especially on Turkey's relations with the United States of America (US), the European Union and the Middle East. In attempts to convince European leaders of the added-value from Turkey's membership in the EU, Gul was reported to have said, "We are between Asia and Europe - we are like a bridge... Some of us are in Asia, some in Europe. We are at the very center of both sides" (Alexander, 2011: 30). As a non-partisan leader above domestic politics, Gul was more concerned with the image that Turkey portrays to the world. Similarly, Davutoglu, who served as Minister of Foreign Affairs for five years from 2009 to 2014, was more interested in Turkey's

overseas interests than dabbling in controversial domestic issues. Nevertheless, following the Arab Uprising, Davutoglu, together with Erdogan and Guland other AKP leaders, believe that the moment has come for Turkey to take its place as an exemplary nation to others in the region. This is a very risky move on the part of the Turkish leaders. This belief in a superior Turkey could possibly hurt its standing in the Muslim world that does not believe Turkey to be representing all Muslim nations. Yet, due to its proximity to the Arab countries, Turkey maintains its position as a democratic model which also has a responsibility to assist countries that are finding their footing in a new world order after the Arab Uprising.

### *Religion in the news*

The dominant religion-related issues brought up by AKP leaders was found to be the headscarf issue which made up almost one fifth of the quotes collected from the period between 2002 and 2015. Interestingly, this was closely followed by the leader's rhetoric on Islam and religion as a personal choice by politicians that should not be confused with the concept of theocracy. Other important issues touched upon by AKP leaders were abortion, religion and democracy, religion in politics, religion and science and secularism.

In the case of newspaper articles, these quotes are related to the most pressing issue faced by Turks at specific points in time. That explains the appearance of adultery, abortion and alcohol as these three issues had been somewhat of a priority over the years (Kiper, 2013). In 2004, conservative members of the AKP proposed legislation that would criminalize adultery, but this bill was later dropped by Erdogan to help the country's bid to join the EU as a secular country. In 2012, Erdogan dipped his toes in the contentious issue of abortion when he promised to revise the current law that allows the termination of a pregnancy that is less than ten weeks after equating abortion with murder. Alcohol consumption is another issue that has mobilized secular Turks against the AKP government. While the government did not ban alcohol altogether, it did restrict the sale and consumption of alcohol to designated areas. In 2013, laws were passed limiting shops from selling alcohol from 10 pm to 6 am, similar to other European countries.

During the party's first term in forming a government, multiple leaders were reluctant to touch on the headscarf issue, much less embrace it. Instead, the government sought to prioritize the economy and membership in the EU. In 2002, "Mr. Erdogan announced that the [headscarf] issue was not even on the

government's agenda" (Boulton, 2002b: p. 6). This was followed by a comment from a former minister for religious affairs, Mehmet Aydin, who stated that "[t]he Koran only talks about modesty. Whether you need to wear a headscarf is a question of interpretation" (Boulton, 2003: p. 6). The party's framing of the issue as the basic right of religious Turks to practice their faith while obtaining higher education was the reason behind the constant frequent reporting of this issue, especially during the party's second term. Given the party's earlier EU ambition, the AKP's call for the right of its citizens to adorn the headscarf is in line with European standard of religious freedom that does not impede the citizen's ability to lead a fulfilling life.

From denying the importance of the headscarf issue when he first took office as prime minister, Erdogan went on to suggest a need to remedy this problem, because doing so would only benefit the secular nature of the country, not because it is a requirement in the Islamic faith. Rather than portraying the AKP government as an Islamist government that wants to intrude into the private sphere of Turks by forcing Muslim women to cover their heads, AKP leaders are only providing the option for Muslims to wear or not to wear the headscarf as part of a liberal agenda. After all, Erdogan did state that "[o]ur goal is to end the injustice against women students. We have no other aim" (Boland, 2008: 8). While it is hard to believe that his motives were not related to religion, his rhetoric shows that Erdogan is a smart political strategist that understands his country better than previous leaders. He cannot afford to challenge the country's secular constitution, but he can fulfill the demand of his core supporters by proposing a lift to the headscarf ban as an opportunity for more female students to enroll at universities.

These are just a few examples of countless occasions where the headscarf issue was framed as part of the government's effort to uphold individual freedom in a secular and democratic country. Seldom was the issue paired with any mention of other religious rhetoric or symbolism in trying to gain the support of the people. The fear among secularists of the perceived Islamization of the party was allayed by promises of the government that it has no plans to mandate the wearing of headscarves as Iran had. Instead, the AKP government portrayed itself as a party aware of the many opinions on the issue, given that Turkey is a pluralistic country. This shows Erdogan's political sophistication in his attempt to win the support from both the liberals and conservatives.

Another interesting finding of the analysis is that AKP leaders repeatedly call for the press to respect the religiosity of the leaders as a personal choice that does

not intrude into their role in the government. There have always been questions raised about the AKP's intention to Islamize Turkish society, in part because the party did come from previous Islamist parties that embraced such an ideology and aim. For that reason, AKP leaders have always maintained that the AKP stands apart because of the party's belief in separation between religion and politics. This distinction is especially evident in Gul's statement, "[w]e established a new political party. Definitely we are trying to be good Muslims, because we believe in that, but that is on an individual level" (Prusher, 2002: 6). Turning Turkey into an Islamic state or country is virtually impossible due to the entrenched idea of secularism that is accepted by most Turks, including pious Muslims.

While this discussion of religion as a personal choice dominated discourse on the identity of the AKP in the early days of its founding, the discussion stopped appearing in the press post-2007. Either one of two possibilities could explain this absence: (1) the people saw that the AKP had been hard at work fixing the economy and mending the country's image on the world stage, or (2) the people felt they could no longer trust the leaders' rhetoric, as their actions, such as the lifting of the headscarf ban and restricting alcohol and abortion, spoke louder to the electorates of the party's true intention. In the first explanation, it is possible that the electorates were no longer obsessing over the AKP's ideology as they were satisfied with the government's performance. As a consequence, the party may have felt that it was no longer necessary to recycle old rhetoric on Islam and religion in the press to defend itself against those who fear Islamization by the government. On the other hand, based on the second explanation, it is also possible that the discussion on the leaders' ideology and belief was deemed useless when it became apparent from the government's actions that the leaders leaned more towards religious conservatism concerning public policy.

#### *Interests by the year*

Another interesting finding was the distribution of quotes when sorted according to years. For every term the party formed the government, different topics dominated the news and, consequently, the comments made by leaders of the AKP. For instance, between the years 2002 and 2006, the theme with the highest frequency within comments by party leaders at 40.5 percent, was religion, specifically, the fact that the party is not a religious or Islamist party, but is simply made-up of pious Muslims. In order to reinforce this message, Erdogan reportedly said, "Just as no race is better than any other race, so no one religion is superior to any other" (Boulton, 2002a: 19). Erdogan may have been trying to convince the

wider Turkish electorates, who did not subscribe to the AKP's ideology that the party had no intention to bring Islam to the forefront of Turkish society. More interestingly, AKP leaders approached the issue of religion by framing it as the expression of a fundamental right that does not go against European culture. For example, Mehmet Aydin, as minister of religious affairs, once said, "We will benefit from our relationship with EU member countries. The economy will be in a better position and so will education levels. You cannot have a healthy religious life if there's an enormous amount of poverty and unemployment" (Boulton, 2003: 6). Therefore, the rise of the AKP was viewed as a win-win situation for both religious Turks and secularists, who wanted Turkey to become a member state of the EU.

During the AKP's second term, discussion of Islam fell to 31.8 percent whereas quotes on foreign relations rose from 10.8 percent to 31.8 percent. Religious issues again filled the news in 2007 and 2008 due to efforts by the secularist establishment through the country's chief prosecutor to close the party on the grounds that it over-stepped its boundaries by acting unconstitutionally to lift the headscarf ban on school campuses. In response to this accusation, Erdogan stated that the difference between the AKP and fundamentalist Muslims is "like the difference between day and night" ("Turkey wrestles", 2008). However, YasarYakis, a former foreign minister, did admit that the AKP faced an existential problem and that the party "should have done something to dissipate the worries of those who believe we will bring in sharia law" (Tait, 2008: 13). This shows that the AKP's rhetoric on Islam is in response to the political climate of the day. As a political party, it is expected for the AKP to use any means to maintain not only its survival, but also its legitimate rule in the country. Rather than Islamizing society, the government was defending itself against accusations by the secular establishment.

The third term of the AKP government, from 2011 to 2014, illustrated an interesting trend as all issues, except party identity, were relatively equally discussed. Although foreign relations issues took up the biggest share at 29.1 percent, this theme was closely followed by democracy at 25.5 percent and religion at 23.6 percent. Foreign relations issues conquered the news in 2011 when the Arab Uprising that began in Tunisia during the winter of 2010 took off in the most populous Arab country, Egypt, the following February. Turkey, specifically Erdogan, took these events as an opportunity to promote the Turkish brand of politics that combined religion and democracy in a secular manner. He did so by linking the AKP's victory at the ballot box in June 2011 with a victory for all

Muslims. Erdogan stated that the AKP's electoral win was a "victory for the wronged and oppressed on a global scale" (Strauss, 2011: 12) and mentioned specific Muslim countries that should rejoice in this win, arguing that it was also a victory for "Bosnia as much as Istanbul, Beirut as much as Izmir, Damanscus as much as Ankara" (Gardner, 2011: p. 9). Erdogan wanted to portray Turkey as an inspiration for Middle Eastern countries going through democratic transition. Although the AKP government has slowly increased its rhetoric in the role it wishes to play in the Middle East, this marked a great shift from using Turkish democratic practices to win points with European countries to one of a closer relation with its Middle Eastern neighbors. In fact, during Erdogan's tour of the Middle East in September 2011, he was greeted with cheers in Libya, especially when he proclaimed, "Turkey will fight with you until you take all your victory...you proved to all the world that nothing can stand in the way of what the people want" (Christie-Miller, 2011). During the same tour at an Arab League meeting in Cairo, he called for the Palestinian flag to be "the symbol of peace and justice in the Middle East" (Christie-Miller, 2011) much to the chagrin of the United States, its long-time ally and Israel, a country it had cut ties with following Israel's refusal to apologize for the *MVMavi Marmara* incident. It should be pointed out here that *MV Mavi Marmara* was a Turkish ship carrying relief materials for the people of Gaza. On 31<sup>st</sup> May, 2010, thirteen Israeli commandos boarded the ship. During the ensuing struggle with the volunteers on board the ship nine activists were killed.

Post-2011 was a period of rising rhetoric on Islam and religion by the ruling party. In 2013, in defiance against those who do not want to see further imposition of the sale and consumption of alcohol, Erdogan famously said:

We do not want a generation that drinks night and day, that walks around merry....They have to be awake, they have to be sharp, they have to be equipped with knowledge. We want such a generation and we are taking steps in this regard (Vela, 2013: 26).

As usual, Erdogan does not frame this blatantly Islamic-specific issue in terms of the religious ruling on alcohol consumption but on his desire to create a generation that fits his description of good citizens. Nonetheless, there are clear examples of party leaders using religious symbolism to attract the support of grassroots supporters. For example, Aysenur Islam, who had previously been the minister of family and social policy, told a "group of party orderlies that they were as important as the bowmen who fought with the Prophet Mohammed in the Battle of Uhud" (Shafak, 2014: 9). This was a smart move by a government

minister to invoke the name of the prophet to call for party members to continue to support the AKP, as such a comparison implied that the party was the defender of Islam, akin to the army of Prophet Muhammad. While the country is constitutionally secular, the party is aware of sentiments on the ground, which is that more Turks want a more conservative and Islamic government. The AKP is not at fault then for this rise in Islamic rhetoric as it is a political party that depends on the support of the majority. The party's strategy worked because the AKP managed to win a plurality of seats in the general election of June 2015 and later on won at outright majority in the general elections held on November 2015. While various factors may have determined the party's success at the ballot box, there is no denying that a rise in Islamic rhetoric did not put a huge dent on the party's dominance in Turkey.

### **Conclusion**

This paper attempted to explain the extent to which AKP leaders have a different strategy behind the party's daring move to further discuss Islamic themes in the public sphere. Based on the content analysis on the frequency of certain themes appearing in AKP leaders' quotes printed by newspapers, the study found that while statements by AKP leaders have always contained religious undertones, whether it be in 2002 or 2015, the framing of these religious issues has changed over the years.

While AKP leaders initially defended the role of religion in politics as part of a leader's personal identity, in later years, leaders, such as Erdogan, became bolder in discussing the crucial role Islam plays in the nation's narrative as the party's political dominance stays relatively the same. However, the analysis also reveals that not all leaders hold the same view on whether Islam should or should not play a role in politics, with some AKP members eventually resorting to quitting the party over disagreements with Erdogan, who has become more hard-lined both in his religious rhetoric and authoritarian manner.

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