

Critical Approaches to the PRA

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The Presidency of Religious Affairs (PRA) is one of the most specific institutions of Turkish modernity. Its existence and function have been challenged on many grounds, with concerns ranging from its control of religion to actual interference with it. In fact, the PRA has been a reflection of the Turkish Republic's modern understanding of religion and its establishment goes back to the birth of the modern Turkish Republic. Thus, the modern vision of Turkey cannot be understood without dealing first with the intellectual basis on which the historical commonality is based.

The Legitimacy of the PRA

The modern Turkish Republic's policy on religion required an institutional organization peculiar to itself. This requirement has been shaped and continuously updated with persistence throughout the 84 years of the Republican era. Therefore, the institutional legitimacy of the PRA must be considered side by side with the legitimacy dynamics of the Republic itself.¹ If we consider the PRA along with the Republic, the matter of religion has always been controversial. The Republic and the PRA should be considered as institutional partners that complement each other's legitimacy with respect to Turkish democracy. This mutuality obligates the PRA to the eternity of the Turkish Republic.²

The PRA holds the balance of the formal approaches to religious issues such as, how should Turkey position religion *vis a vis* new conditions, which significantly changed with the establishment of the Republic, and how should Turkey shape the structure of religion with respect to society. Today, the PRA is distinguished as an indispensable institution forming the sole official religious character of Turkey and representing the country's religious and spiritual diversity. Including the traditional community in the modernization

process has caused much tension in Turkey. In light of challenging social changes, religion has had to reexamine its position.³ In this respect, the PRA complements the Republic's social dynamism.⁴

Laicism and secularism are among the fundamentals of religion's position in the new period. Therefore, religion and the reality of its connection to laicism or secularism in Turkish modernity is central to the dispute. Because of the transition from tradition to modernity, variations and expectations related to the daily application of religion have been ignored.⁵ The revolutionary reform the country experienced sought to change traditional forms of religion. Despite this, the existence of religion's important role had never been questioned.⁶

Religion, as an important fact, has complex and often chaotic aspects in Turkey, yet it has always been taken into consideration. For this reason, it was inevitable that it be dealt with institutionally. This has resulted in conflict on matters such as the exploitation and misuse of religion.⁷

New Definitions

In reality, recent disputes related to the institutional legitimacy of the PRA indicate the dynamism of religious life in society.⁸ These disputes have had a role in almost every political and religious constitution in the country. On the other hand, their force has also been weakening and impairing the strength and influence of the PRA. Within this framework, the definitions and explanations *vis-à-vis* religion, the PRA and the state are out of date. Turkish society is composed primarily of Muslims and religion, as a subject, has never lost its value in the country's modernization. On the contrary, the loss of meaning that ensued with modernization increased the population's need for a modern explanation of religion. Some new individual, social and intellectual problems resulted from variations in this period. On the other hand, narrow definitions brought about consideration of the humane necessities of religion and led to new searches for meaning. One alteration observed by many countries of the world, and which has been described as "the return of religion," has caused different inclinations to come to the fore in distinct ways. It has also led to increased dispute in the religious arena.⁹

Discussion of the PRA

Discussions of the PRA center on three main areas. The first is the question of the existence of the PRA within a secular system. The questions imply that many principles related to modernism and laicism have been corroded and distorted. It also implies that personal life preferences are being compromised by religious demands. In this argument, the "definition of laicism as anti-religion" or "the objectivity of laicism against any religion" are debated.

However, these discussions generally have the same common point: according to the chief principle of laicism, the relationship between the state and religion is clear, and the very existence of the PRA is contrary to laicism. Therefore the only way to legitimacy for the PRA is through modifying common definitions of laicism.

In fact, this criticism is proffered mostly by anti-religious groups. On one side, there are some dilemmas that make clarifications of the PRA's position difficult; on the other side, the institution's inadequacies present the theme of what is expected of it in terms of religion. These facts sometimes result in insoluble chaos. It has been increasingly more difficult to find a common point between the official system and the demands of society. In another words, it is becoming hard to answer the question of how the PRA can have a permanent and indisputable legitimacy. In fact, this question has begun to attract attention as an ongoing problem, with the Alawi population in the lead. The contradictions arise from state policy and the independent demands of society, and require more attention.

The Alawis and Baktashis have been pressing different demands. Both grew from the historical and cultural processes of Anatolia. The religious practices of these groups are different from those of majority Sunni Muslim society, as their forms are more mystical. In this respect, Mevlevis, Kadiris, Nakhshis and Rufais also reflect the diversity of various Islamic interpretations in Turkey.

Alawis have struggled with their identity. Apart from discussion on whether Alawism is a religion, *madhab* or social group, they are vulnerable and open to external provocation. The Alawis are a crucial part of social harmony in Turkey, and face various internal and external enemies intent on demolishing this harmony. We should not ignore the reality that hesitation by the state regarding its secular religious policies has played a big role in increasing Alawi frustration. They are in danger of losing their 'folk' identity and instead have been showing signs of becoming an ideological group. This requires the PRA to take a more embracing attitude toward them. Some collaborators are inclined to distort the reality of Alawis rather than seeking a real understanding of them. The unnatural forcing of Alawis into a Sunni unity, accordingly, has made the situation even worse. On the other hand, Alawi societies outside of Turkey have turned into platforms of continuous rebellion. Hence, the PRA sees Alawis as a growing problem and has sought to enhance its understanding. New Alawi demands about their representation within the PRA and approval of their cultural places of worship are being evaluated by both legal and scientific experts. Certainly, these demands are part of a strategy to establish a new identity. Yet, their decision to discuss their demands through the PRA clearly creates problems for everybody. Regrettably, many of their recent demands have been ideological in nature.

A second challenge concerns the PRA's control of the effects of religion, religious life and all related concepts. Religion should be free from all kinds of political approaches. The PRA is among the fundamental branches of the official Turkish state system. This attitude would bring religion within the laic worldview and attempt to control it. Thus, the PRA becomes state control of religion.

As a final point, the relationship between the state and religion must be defined. This argument claims that laicism should be seen as a means of compromise as opposed to being an extreme mechanism. Thus, the state will not control society and religion through the PRA; rather, it will try to overcome possible tensions within the religious world through the knowledge, morality and peace provided by the PRA.

The PRA, in fact, should not defend only one truth. It should give importance to social conscience as well, be open to new ideas and not fear criticism. The PRA should make way for a pluralist approach. This requires a review of the underlying philosophy and intellectual background of the institution.

A Field Beyond Politics

To limit religious sayings and see religious symbols in daily life as anti-laic is risky. This will weaken religiosity and lead to ideological thinking. On the other hand, neglecting religion supports those fundamentalist approaches that deal with their deficiencies by using religion. As long as the aspect of unity of religion is neglected, there will be deprivation and oppression. Anti-religious and radical religious attacks on culture and identity causes similar harm to society.

It is significant that all the disputes about the PRA are political even though it is an inseparable part of the Republic. On the other hand, to place the institution within daily politics limits its effectiveness.

The PRA has always taken into consideration that it functions within a theocratic system but it has had to face its difficulties alone. To make this institution serve society better, it needs projects that take the realities of the country into consideration without the interference of the political. One of the questions is, is the PRA a means for state politics or is it a free, independent institution? All these kinds of questions need to be thoroughly considered. The PRA does not function as a church. Its general mission is to enlighten society within the frame of religion but the variety of *medabib* is a crucial element of the country's diversity and richness. The coexistence of Hanafis, Shafies, and Alawis shows the possibility of living together. For this reason, the PRA should make an effort to preserve and develop commonalities in religious life.¹⁰

It should not be forgotten that the state is aware of the close relationship between religion and society. It is a fact that sometimes the state and religion come into conflict. The main reason for the discord is that state institutions and religion have had to reconstruct themselves in a laic system and it has taken a long while for them to define themselves.¹¹

Clearly, the religious symbols and practices of the Ottoman Empire and previous societies have lost their value in our age. At the same time, religious discourse cannot lose its real meaning.

Consequently, the PRA tries to reflect the social reality of laicism without causing any paradoxes or dilemmas in society. Obviously, religious life in Turkey differs from that in other Muslim countries. As a matter of fact, the PRA makes religion secure in its own identity instead as it is needed by the state and supplies Muslims in Turkey with a point of view to understand their relationship with the modern world.

Today Turkish people face trouble in every area. The ensuing dissatisfaction is closely related to the rejection of religion. Delay in the definition of 'religious' has led to the inclusion of a political aspect. The state is capable of strengthening the PRA and preventing uncontrolled public religiousness but there are problems that require urgent attention. These are a function of lack of religious knowledge, and a decline and degeneration of religious life and spirituality. Many of the problems are related to political and ideological separation and economical changes in the country. New identity demands refuse existing discourse that defines them as traditional. In this respect, religion is in a difficult position and struggles to renew itself.¹²

The image of a modern Turkish Muslim is a positive thing in Turkey. Yet, sometimes this image becomes sullied when there are political issues. The commonalities of modernity, Islam and Turkish nationality are all meaningful components but the state and the government has obscured these. The state has no solutions to satisfy all, so it has chosen to hold an abstaining position. As a result, it is impossible for religion to be satisfactory.

The PRA must undertake a critical self examination against the new concepts and conditions of modernity. The meaning of the PRA in the Turkish Republic should be thoroughly reviewed. Politics of religious expectations and sensitivities during the establishment of the Turkish Republic seem to be insufficient today against changing social needs. Furthermore, new projects are needed to keep the state and the society together on the issue of laicism. The historical conditions of the Turkish Republic have changed; the public is now on the same plane with the concept of laicism. As a result, new conditions require serious religious expansion and new projects.¹³

In sum, the PRA has played a functional role as the real source of religion, balance and sensitivity during Turkish modernization. World developments

have led to global discussions of the place of religion. If these issues are examined carefully, the public will see that the PRA and the state, working together, best benefits society.

Endnotes

1. Günter Seufert, "Stat und Islam in der Türkei," *SWP-Studie*, (Agust 2004), i: 29.
2. İsmail Kara, "Din ile Devlet Arasında Sıkışmış Bir Kurum: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı," *Marmara Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi*, (İstanbul 2000), Sayı: 18, 29–55; Ruşen Çakır, İrfan Bozan, *Sivil, Şeffaf ve Demokratik Bir Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı Mümkün mü?*, (Tesev, İstanbul 2005).
3. Ali Bardakoğlu, "Din, Yenileşme ve Modern Hayat," *Türkiye ve Avrupa'da İslâm, Devlet ve Toplum*, (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Ankara 2005). Both single and multiple parties' experiences have affected Turkey's religious life. Religion and its related institutions which were created in the process of democracy need to be paid attention. Islamic schools, Religious High Schools and Theology Faculties had an important effect shaping the religious life in the country.
4. Religion has always been a serious subject for Turkish Muslims. The PRA constituted a religious argument without being hindrance to the state. The main purpose was to explain religious changes within the tradition. New projects for current problems would be defined within the concept the PRA determined. Thus the institution would realistically shape religious concepts. Compare: Ali Bardakoğlu, "Din, Yenileşme ve Modern Hayat," *Türkiye ve Avrupa'da İslâm, Devlet ve Toplum*, (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Ankara 2005).
5. For instance, since the 1980s, new religious developments throughout the world caused religiousness to re-gain strength in Turkey. Nevertheless, the state delayed determining its position towards religion and have been neglectful on that issue.
6. Effects of modernization often caused alteration within limitations of the theology, too. The position and function of religion had been reviewed. The main factor of Turkish modernization is to institutionalize laicism. Every rebellion against laicism had to "use" religious arguments. Thus, "radicalism" began to be used at that time although its meaning was obscure. To call religious people with this name hurts them individually and damages social peace. See: Necdet Subaşı, *Ara Dönem Din Politikaları*, (Küre, İstanbul 2005).
7. Yasin Aktay, "Cumhuriyet Döneminde Din Politikaları ve Din İstismarı," *İslâmiyat*, Vol: III, No: 3 (Temmuz-Eylül 2000).
8. Ruşen Çakır, İrfan Bozan, *Sivil, Şeffaf ve Demokratik Bir Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı Mümkün mü?*, (Tesev, İstanbul 2005); Binnaz Toprak, Ali Çarkoğlu, *Türkiye'de Din, Toplum ve Siyaset*, (Tesev, İstanbul 2000).
9. Günter Seufert, "Stat und Islam in der Türkei", *SWP-Studie*, (No: 29, Ağustos 2004).
10. Compare: Ali Bardakoğlu, "Din, Yenileşme ve Modern Hayat," *Türkiye ve Avrupa'da İslâm, Devlet ve Toplum*, (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Ankara 2005).
11. The history of laicism and secularism is complete in Turkey. The process has been continuing. The tensions and chaos related to religion and the limits of state begin again. On the other hand, religion has been forced to recede from the public area. Its holiness has been exposed to limitations with dominant laic discourses and politics. Thus, some religious, political and social problems appeared. Moreover the modernization of the religion emerged in this process. Maybe in the beginning, Kemalism needed a radical secularism in order to process its own institution. But today the need for the same thing is disputable.

12. Alteration of religion is inevitable because lifestyles change and differ. However, every time needs are realized, the idea of new arrangements come more from the anti-religious side than the PRA or professional theologians. They can easily interfere with the area of religion. These non-professional approaches create discomfort in society.

13. Necdet Subaşı, *Ara Dönem Din Politikaları*, (Küre, İstanbul 2005). The effects of modernism on religion and related issues not only multiply informational problems but also increase sensitivities in social life. Laic and secular people wanted to see religion in the limits of themselves. Thus, religion is redefined and brought to the broad space of redefined worship place and morals.