

Islam and capitalism: Current Islamist modernities in Turkey

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Abstract:

The main purpose of this article is to open a discussion about the contemporary interaction of capitalism and Islam in Turkey and to come up with a brand-new typology—in political/ideological, production and consumption contexts—as an outcome of this interesting interaction. The paper utilizes literature review to reach different varieties of modernity that lie at the intersection of religion and 3 mentioned contexts. Starting from the global roots of capitalistic influence on religion-related behavior, the author mainly aims to focus on the dynamics in Turkey. The article could be deemed original as it pursues to introduce a fresh classification to business, sociology and political science literatures. The findings are expected to provide readers with research ideas about production styles, cultural consumption, and political antagonism related to religion and ideology.

Keywords: Capitalism, Globalization, Islam, Modernity, Muslims, Religion, Turkey

1. Introduction

Islamic life has been diversified and gaining strength in a wide geographical area from North Africa to China from the beginning of 1970s. Different forms of Islamic life emerge today as new entities such as conservative parties that can draw millions of people, businesses run by religious businessmen, and postmodern identities that perceive religion as different from the past. Despite the fact that the Islamic movements take its roots from a distant past, their political, economic and cultural transformation is a new and interesting phenomenon. [1] states that the new religious movements that started appearing in the 20th century are both a result of reaction against social change and a catalyst for it.

After the emergence of Islam in the first half of the 7th century, merchant Arabic tribes started becoming small states by merging with one another over time. And their religion became the dominant administrative instrument of the ruling classes and thus of their bureaucratic ideology. Throughout history, for the creation and management of this ideology, statesmen in governments, merchants with financial power, and clerics who are called charismatic leaders, entered into a triple symbiotic relationship and achieved conquests. During the Early modern period, Europe, seizing hegemony in the hands of Islamic states, became the rule makers

of the new world, leading geographical discoveries, thus producing and retaining resources. Later, the United States, founded by the European immigrants, has taken on the role of being the master of the ever-globalizing world in the last century.

Carrying the flag of imperialist ideology, the United States has sought to design ‘precious’ regions by establishing friendships in the Middle East, North Africa and the rest of the world, which have rich natural resources and strategic importance, and by giving bloody battles against their enemies. Saudi Arabia’s close partnership with the United States, invasion of Iraq, the Muslim Brotherhood’s rise in Egypt as a former ally of the United States, Gaddafi’s overthrow in Libya, and the placement of ISIS in the lands of Iraq and Syria are just a few visible examples of this very design effort. Islamist movements, which have been supported behind the scenes in the framework of anti-communist ideology since the Cold War, have started getting extra help—especially in the political arena—under the Green Belt project [2].

Conservative Islamic parties, strengthened by the backing of imperialist support, have pioneered the emergence of a new and unique *lifeworld* by cooperating with religious businessmen and by leading religious communities in their countries. Especially Muslim entrepreneurs who started to

enter the capitalist system after the 1970s have heightened business activities in their countries and in others with a high Muslim population. For instance, religious entrepreneurs who followed the policies of Enver Sadat in Egypt spread their investments to the Gulf states. And in Indonesia, Suharto's exports-based economic model led to the formation of a Muslim merchant class [3].

Islamic movements today are not only pro-imperialist and pro-capitalist, but also antagonists of these phenomena. Throughout history, it has been observed that religion-based opposition to Western capitalism/imperialism could sometimes exist through religious movements such as liberation theology or religious fundamentalism [4]. And it has been documented that this opposition is likely to be carried out by individuals or small groups. As the Karmatis opposed the Abbasid state in the 900s by establishing a system of common ownership, some other prominent figures of opposition appeared in the past, including Sheikh Bedreddin in the Ottoman Empire, Ali Shariati in Iran, Sayyid Qutb and Hassan Hanafi in Egypt, Mustafa al-Siba'i in Syria, Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr in Iraq, Mawdudi in Pakistan, and Ihsan Eliacik in Turkey. These prolific intellectuals produced a huge amount of work at the intersection of Islam and social justice. In the next section, contemporary Islamic movements in Turkey are examined in the context of politics, production, and finally consumption, and an attempt is made to present a unique classification.

2. Methodology and Findings

The literature review has been utilized to come up with a brand-new classification of current Islamist forms in Turkey. Books, articles, scientific reports and internet resources have been used to learn more about the actual Islamic framework in the country, thus allowing the author to reach the full typology.

When we look into the religious distribution of the Turkish society, a very homogenous structure comes across. According to a research study conducted across Turkey by Konda Research Company; 52.8% of participants define themselves as 'religious people who try to fulfill all religious requirements', 34.3% define themselves as 'believers who want yet cannot fulfill all the requirements of religion', 9.3% define themselves as 'devoted believers who exactly fulfill all the requirements of the religion', and 2.3% define themselves as 'atheists who have no religious

beliefs at all [5]. These statistics show that the majority of the Turkish society possesses Islamic beliefs to some extent at least. As Peter Berger indicates, Islamic practices are more visible in everyday life, symbolic and religious practices intertwined with life, causing secularization to be present at a minimum level in Islamic societies [6]. In the following sub-sections, Islamic life in Turkey is presented in 3 contexts, politics/ideology, production and consumption.

2.1 Islam in political/ideological context

The systematic encounter of religion and politics in the history of the Turkish Republic dates back to the 1950s. Democratic Party with Adnan Menderes' leadership and winning power stayed away from the Soviet Union in the political and economic territories, and had close relations with the US, taking off the strike and trade union rights from government's program [7] and inserting religious elements to political discourse. Later Justice Party became the first party alone on the government for a while and took control of governing the country by coalitions until 1980, standing with center right and liberal economic stance behind the big industrialists and carrying out policies against craftsmen, artisans and farmers. With the establishment of National Order Party in 1970, the political Islam, which flourished in the provinces, rode into the city with the Welfare Party in the 1990s, especially to reach for poor and devout voters. Erbakan, who was the prominent leader of Welfare Party, came to the fore with his Fair Order discourse, opposing to the Western-based monopolies and their 'unislamic' practices, yet assisting free market competition and property rights. His *fair order discourse* also included the willing to go back to Prophet Muhammad's times, known as *Age of Happiness*, economically and socially.

As [8] pointed out, political Islam today has been divided into two main streams: the first is Islamic state socialism, which supports national capital with anti-imperialist/anti-American rhetoric. The second and relatively popular way is liberal neo-conservatism or moderate Islam, which works in tandem with imperialist capitalism and yet does not discredit the Islamic discourse in the political arena. Judging from the example of the currently ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey, it is understood that the second way has maintained its popularity. On the other hand, according to some, left Islamism gets its roots from the Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwan), but hosts more than one

fraction emerging as an alternative and a relatively weak way.

Since the transition to a multiparty system in Turkey, the issue of religion has been exploited by politicians, such as nagging about past anti-democratic practices against religious freedom, including the prohibition of headscarves in universities. Especially, for the last 15 years of AKP's governance, calling out to conservative people for their votes, polarizing the society to gather followers together, or escaping from administrative responsibility for terror killings or natural disasters by using religious titles such as martyrdom were common political practices. On the contrary, the left Islamism, which has emerged in recent years seems to be against the current style of governance, collecting different groups and institutions under its umbrella. Labor and Justice Platform, Social Solidarity Culture Education and Social Research Association (TOKAD), Anti-capitalist Muslims and Revolutionary Muslims are some of them. Under AKP's ruling, there was a transformation towards being powerful. Yet this change was met with dissatisfaction by some individuals and groups who, like Anti-capitalist Muslims, are deeply attached to 'original' Islam. These groups organize demonstrations on May 1, take part in workers' strikes, participate in social protests such as Gezi protests and organize social gatherings like Yeryuzu Sofralari (Earth dinners), which is basically sharing food in the month of Ramadan. These groups' criticism of political activity emerges in three main areas: (1) Discourses and practices of past and present governments that produced injustice and discrimination, (2) Negative effects of the capitalist system on workers and rest of the society, (3) Religious and social deviations that emerged later on the path of Prophet Muhammad.

[9] has examined the various influences of modernity on the nations of the world, and one of these influences is 'religious fundamentalism' that is another visible aspect of ideological Islam. It came into being by living Islam in the traditional way, so anti-secularism, anti-Semitism and anti-imperialist discourses are arisen among fundamentalists. According to many radical ideologists, the main reason for the deviation from Islamic order Sharia is external forces. Most Islamist sects and cults in Turkey can be classified as religious fundamentalists and they are currently gaining momentum by

showing up in political, commercial and social spheres [10]. According to the research by [11], since the multi-party system in Turkey came into effect in 1950, sects and cults have been voting for right-wing parties and have used their votes predominantly for AKP and Saadet Partisi (Felicity Party) in the last 10 years.

2.2. Islam in production context

US-sponsored Green Belt project became the chief actor in Turkish politics along with the September 12 Military Coup, the adoption of 1980 Constitution, and the January 24 Liberal Economic Programme. With the influence of political conjuncture and urbanization, devout Muslim entrepreneurs have started to open their own schools, media channels and entertainment centers. The marriage of political Islam and green capital has become more visible with the economic alliance formed by the MUSIAD, established by conservative businessmen with the support of right-wing politicians. The neo-capitalist mode of production has been fully established in Turkey along with AKP, which emerged from Refah Partisi (Welfare Party) tradition yet kept its relations with imperialist capitalists warm. Hence, this new tradition of AKP is called as post-Islamist. According to Karl Marx, instead of dealing with constructive solutions such as appreciation of labor and elimination of poverty, workers' attention is drawn on the afterworld, and problems are submerged [12]. As Durkheim points out, religion alleviates the frustrations of individuals and makes life more bearable by promising a good 'life' after death [13]. [14] states that the bourgeoisie give religious sermons to their workers while living for pleasure. And in Turkey, the current relations between Muslim capitalists and their employees do not seem very different from these sociologists' standpoint. A few research studies conducted in Turkey show that even though a relationship of brotherhood between the religious boss and the religious worker is present, delay in payments, uninsured employment and flexible working patterns are pretty common [15]. MUSIAD's efforts to merge market rationalism with Islamist identity have been observed by some social scientists. According to [3], Islamification of Coca-Cola into Mecca-Cola, after all, is a non-jihadist and profit-centered activity.

2.3. Islam in consumption context

1929 Economic Crisis and then the Second World War led Turkey to become acquainted with American capitalism between 1950 and 1980. The import substitution industrialization applied before

left its place to the free market economy with the January 24 Liberal Economic Programme put into effect by Turgut Ozal, the 8th President of Turkey known to be close to Iskenderpasa sect. The economic transformation seems to have taken place simultaneously with media transformation. National public broadcaster TRT's transition to television broadcasting in 1967 and the start of advertising in 1972 paved the way for Turkey to become a capitalist and consumption-oriented market. In 1990, the establishment of Star-1, the first Turkish private television network, is considered as one of the important developments. The introduction of credit cards and consumer loans into the Turkish market and the rise of shopping centers have helped Turkish consumers establish an organic connection with many global brands. After 1980s the Turkish society has shifted from producing to consuming. In this context, many scholars have defined the Turks as 'townspeople but not urbanized' and 'a society that can fully consume like Westerners yet that can't produce'.

[16] states that as capitalism has become more global, multiple modernities have started emerging. West-originated capitalism has now made new consumption forms possible in other parts of the world. New industries such as Islamic fashion are used as a means of creative production and of feminist resistance to patriarchy. While the hybrid forms existing between Islam (or piety) and consumption are perceived positively by some scholars, some others have a critical view of Muslims who happen to be indulgent with 'ethically-debated consumption styles' such as inconspicuous and luxury consumption. These critics tend to think that such consumption behaviors are by no means competent with 'real' Islam. According to [17], "capitalism encourages individuals to be rich for being more valuable in the presence of God; it transforms God, God's rules and the way of life he envisions into a 'commodity' that can be valued." By citing several verses in the Quran, the Anti-capitalist Muslim Eliacik states that the property belongs to only God (Allah), condemning Muslims with such discourse as "Muslims should be strong, they will wear the best of everything; I love rich Muslims". Inconspicuous lifestyles among capitalist Muslims have led to the existence of terms in the literature; 'ablutioned capitalist', 'the turbaned with jeeps' and 'part-time Muslim' to name a few.

[8] claims that it is not the other religions that threaten Islam, but the secular and superficial nature of consumption is the main destructive force. [3] termed Market Islam as a brand-new form of hedonistic consumption, defining it as a bourgeois cosmopolitanism, adding that ostentatious displays of wealth are used to build self-confidence in Muslim societies which lived with scarce resources in the past. As a result, the capitalist system is strong enough to alter Islamic institutions, religion-based morality and theological aesthetics by means of consumption. The research conducted by [18] with religious Turkish university students shows that their Islamic perception is also different from one another in terms of consumption. Among the participants, there are some individuals who choose to minimize their needs and desires even though they are financially in a good shape. These avoid using luxury brands and promoting their bodies in public with extravagant clothing. On the other hand, by referring to some verses in the Quran some other students claim Muslims have the exclusive right to consume everything as much as they want except for non-halal items. According to [3], these arguments reveal an interesting culture war (*kulturkampf*) between traditionalist and liberal values. Concepts such as asceticism, minimalism and fatalism that existed among conservative Muslims in the past has started leaving their place to new concepts such as vanity, extravagancy and success stories. In a country like Turkey, where the majority of the population is Muslim, this cultural war seems to continue intensely. All in all, Islamic life is perceived and experienced in different forms by different Islamic groups. The detailed typology of these groups is available on Table 1 at the end of the paper.

3. Discussion and directions for future research

The end of the Cold War era with the fall of the Berlin Wall has led to the softening of religious opposition against capitalism and the emergence of hybrid forms such as neo-Islamism. [19] states that globalization plays a more prominent role in the construction of religious identities today. [20] found that globalization is rejected by some rigid religious groups while it is gladly accepted by some others. In such an environment where individuals, groups and nations are influenced and transformed by one another, daily life is now radically changing [21]. Zygmunt Bauman predicts that the changing Islamic culture around the world could intimidate some Islamist groups and a shift to religious

fundamentalism may occur [6]. [22] agrees with this prediction, relating fundamentalism to imperialism-oriented globalization and the collapse of the nation state concept.

According to Marx, religion is a functional phenomenon which provides protection and dominance to ruling classes. For this very reason, it is expected that the phenomenon of religion will sustain its influence especially on the Eastern societies for a long time, and even in the same religious groups different interpretations will continue to exist. According to [23], who advocate that religious beliefs will not disappear today, democracy and globalization will foster competition in the religious arena and religious diversity. Potential research topics that can add meaningful discourse to the literature can be seen as follows:

- Consumption dynamics of neo-capitalist Muslims and socio-psychological reasons underlying these dynamics,
- Political and consumption-related stance of left-wing Muslims known to exist in different countries,
- Religious Muslim businessmen's conflicting/dialectical relationship with their employees, and finally
- Socio-psychological reasons underlying the entrepreneurial spirit of conservative Muslim businessmen.

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Author Profile

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Table 1: Current Islamist modernities in Turkey in terms of 3 contexts

Group name	Estimated population percentage	Affiliated cultural era	Political/Ideological context	Production context	Consumption context
<i>Neo-capitalist Muslims</i>	Between 40% and 60%	Post-modern	Mostly following <i>AKP</i> and <i>MHP</i> <i>Post-modern Islamic lifestyle</i>	Neo-capitalist	Consumerist
<i>Muslims following National Vision Movement</i>	5%<	Pre-modern	Following <i>Saadet Partisi</i> <i>Traditional Islamic lifestyle</i>	Islamic-capitalist	Mixed
<i>Islamic sects and cults</i>	5%<	Pre-modern	Following <i>AKP</i> and other conservative parties <i>Traditional Islamic lifestyle</i>	Islamic-capitalist	Mixed
<i>Anti-capitalist Muslims</i>	1%<	Theoretically pre-modern Practically modern	Mostly nonpolitical or <i>anti-AKP</i> <i>Individualistic religious-belief system and relatively secular lifestyle</i>	Anti-capitalist (Collective production and profit sharing)	Anti-consumerist
<i>Unaffiliated Muslims</i>	Between %30 and %40	Modern	Following <i>CHP</i> , <i>MHP</i> and <i>HDP</i> <i>Relatively secular lifestyle</i>	Mixed	Mixed

AKP: Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party) / MHP: Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (Nationalist Movement Party)
Saadet Partisi (Felicity Party) / CHP: Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (Republican People's Party) / HDP: Halkların Demokratik Partisi (People's Democratic Party)