

rising authoritarianism and changing education policies of 21st century Turkey

Ece Cihan Ertem

This paper conceptualises rising authoritarianism in Turkey under the conservative ruling party, AKP, and its Sunni-Islamist educational policies. It scrutinises the Islamisation of early childhood and primary-secondary school education during the recent authoritarian turn. The discourse of ‘raising a religious generation’ entails reframing the Turkish secular education system into a Sunni Islam model. The article first situates early childhood, primary, and secondary school policies and discusses five major policy alterations during the contemporary authoritarianism of the AKP: restructured Preacher’s Schools (Imam-Hatip Schools), the 4+4+4 system, cooperation with Islamic sects, implementation of values education, and public Islamic kindergartens.

Keywords: contemporary authoritarianism, early childhood education, education policy, policy changes, primary school education, Turkey

Following a significant electoral victory in 2010 that allowed for amendments to the constitution, the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) veered from its earlier seemingly pro-Western and liberal positions, which were at least evident in its discourse in the early 2000s. After gaining the support of fifty percent of the population to change the constitution in 2010, along with support from a segment of liberals, as Tuğal (2012) noted, “the liberals’ strategy of ignoring the Erdoğan government’s authoritarian tendencies backfired when the constitutional amendments were followed by the heaviest wave of repression” (p. 23). Thus, at this pivotal point in Turkish Republican history, the AKP adopted more authoritarian governance in contrast to its relatively liberal promises of leading Turkey into the European Union (Bermeo, 2016; Castaldo, 2018).

Based on these assumptions, this article examines the impact and changes in the authoritarian tendencies of the AKP and their implications for early childhood, primary, and secondary school education policies in the second decade of 21st-century Turkey. It focuses on these sections of the national education system since the AKP primarily targeted these areas while transforming the overall education system (Kandiyoti & Emanet, 2017). The article explores changes in education policies and the ideal of creating a Muslim child identity, as Recep Tayyip Erdoğan openly declared while addressing the public in 2012¹. Hence the paper claims that even though AKP governments appeared to be against the “tutelary democracy” inherited from military interventions, they aimed to reproduce non-inclusive conservative educational policies in favour of Sunni Turkish indoctrination, aided by the recent authoritarian regime that they established in the second decade of the 2000s.

Turkish Education System: A Brief Outlook

The Turkish Constitution declares that the education system is secular and was established during

the early years of the Turkish Republic under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, based on secular and modernist principles aimed at eliminating religious influence from public education. This system was formalised through the Law on the Unification of Education in 1924, which abolished religious schools and centralised education under state control (Akyüz, 2021; Mango, 2002). The goal was to create a unified national curriculum that would foster a modern, progressive citizenry aligned with the secular values of the republic. Since the foundation of the Republic, there have been discussions about secularism and its impacts on the education system (Zürcher, 2017).

Since the establishment of the Republic, Turkey has witnessed intense scholarly debates on the role of secularism in education (Lüküslü, 2018; Öcal, 2007). Following the founding of the Republic in 1923, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's secular reforms aimed to transform education into a tool for creating a modern, secular nation-state. A unified national education system was introduced and a secular curriculum was implemented at all levels of education. The Directorate of Religious Affairs (DIB) was founded in 1924 as a state-controlled institution tasked with overseeing all Islamic activities and institutions in Turkey, including mosques, organising Friday prayers, and other mosque-related functions. Furthermore, in the same year, Imam Hatip Schools (IHSs) were established to train Imams for mosques. However, in 1930, these schools were closed, citing the sufficient number of Imams as the reason (Akşit & Coşkun, 2004).

These reforms also sparked resistance and ongoing tension between secular and religious factions, as later governments, particularly those influenced by political Islam, sought to reintroduce religious education and challenge the secularist narrative. The introduction of the multi-party system in Turkey in 1946 marked the beginning of significant transformations in both the political sphere and social life (Zürcher, 2017). One notable outcome of this transition was the resurgence of religious education as a contentious issue—previously absent from the agendas of both the ruling party and the opposition. IHSs were reopened in 1951 and became very influential in religious education (Akşit & Coşkun, 2004). A key concern at the time was the threat posed by communism, a by-product of the bipolar world order. Fears that the moral vacuum left by religion could be filled by various ideologies, especially communism, were openly expressed. The anti-communist propaganda propagated by the United States played a significant role in bringing religion to the forefront of Turkish politics (Buyruk, 2021).

Turkey experienced three consecutive coup d'états in 1960, 1971, and 1980. The first two military governments were short-lived, lasting only about a year, and willingly transferred power back to civilian governments (Ahmad, 2010). However, the third coup in September 1980 had a significant impact on Turkish society, as the military government remained in power for three years, created a new constitution, manipulated subsequent elections, and the coup leader, Kenan Evren, became president for an additional five years following the military rule. During this time, all political parties, the parliament, associations, and unions were closed and banned. The leaders of workers' unions were prosecuted, and the military government took control of universities (Ahmad, 2010). The ideological stance of the military regime, known as the Turkish-Islamic synthesis, served as the ideological basis for the regime framed by Kenan Evren both for military rule and his presidency (Kurt, 2010; Oprea, 2014). The Turkish-Islamic synthesis also provided a framework for educational policies leaning towards both religion and nationalism, marking the first steps in undermining the secular education system (Çağlar & Uluçakar, 2017; Copeaux, 2006; Ertem, 2012).

AKP's Authoritarian Turn and Educational Policies

The change in AKP policies during the second decade of its rule, from a seemingly liberal standpoint to a populist authoritarian one, has been extensively discussed in both literature and the international and national press (Adaman et al., 2019; Akçay, 2021; Gürcan & Peker, 2014; Karaveli, 2016). There has been a growing scholarly consensus that Turkey's political system has become undemocratic. This perspective gained further support when Freedom House reclassified Turkey from "Partly Free" to "Not Free" in 2018, indicating what many experts describe as "democratic backsliding"—a targeted governmental effort to weaken the institutional pillars of democracy (Freedom House, 2018). Many scholars label this form of governance "competitive authoritarianism," where democratic structures are nominally maintained and serve as the principal means to power; yet incumbents manipulate state resources to substantially disadvantage their competitors (Bermeo, 2016; Levitsky & Way, 2010). Esen and Gumuscu (2016) further analyse this framework, applying it to developments in Turkey after 2015, detailing the features of the country's new political regime. In summary, when the AKP obtained the majority of votes necessary to amend the country's constitution in 2010, it shifted away from "Western moves" and liberal tendencies, with its governance taking on a more authoritarian character (Çalışkan, 2018; Castaldo, 2018; Levitsky & Way, 2010; Somer, 2018).

Another step that led to a clear transition to AKP authoritarianism is "The July 15th coup attempt," which was a failed military coup in Turkey on the night of July 15, 2016 (Altınordu, 2017; Fırat, 2016; Jenkins, 2016). The Turkish government declared a state of emergency after the coup, which was in place until July 2018, and conducted an extensive purge of individuals from public service institutions that they suspected of having links to the Gülen group, which was once a supporter and partner in the shadows for the AKP governments and was accused of orchestrating the coup (Bozkurt, 2016). Within this purge, thousands of officials, police, teachers, academics, and soldiers who were either allegedly linked to Gülenists or simply opponents of the government were dismissed, suspended, and/or replaced. Hundreds of media outlets were closed, and numerous journalists were arrested on charges of spreading "terrorist propaganda." In 2017, a constitutional referendum in Turkey resulted in significant constitutional changes, leading to the transition from a parliamentary to a presidential system and significantly increasing presidential authority (Altınordu, 2017; Azeri, 2016; Turan, 2019).

Five Steps of Islamisation of Education With the Authoritarian Turn in Turkey

Following the authoritarian turn, several steps were taken in the attempt to Islamise early childhood, primary, and secondary school education. After the AKP came to power in 2002, one of the major educational policies of the party was to expand and increase the number of Preacher's Schools (Imam-Hatip schools), which are vocational divinity schools. Most members of the AKP elite share the identity of being graduates of Imam Hatip schools, which are based on Islamic education and also admit girls as students, even though they cannot be recruited as Imams in mosques according to state regulations (Ozgur, 2012). After publicly announcing the wish to raise a religious generation, in 2012, the AKP amended the law on education widely known as the 4+4+4 Law, which paved the way for the spread of Imam-Hatip schools by allowing the reopening of the secondary section and abolishing the coefficient factor, which had previously confined the graduates of Imam-Hatip schools to pursue their careers only in divinity faculties.

Another major step was the introduction of the 4+4+4 education system, which revised compulsory education into three stages: four years of primary education, four years of secondary school, and four years of high school in 2012. This restructuring has been met with criticism from academics,

policymakers, and opposition parties (Gün & Baskan, 2014; Sahin & Is Guzel, 2018). Since the reform allows students to enrol in vocational schools or partake in apprenticeships after the first eight years, this option has led to an early exit from the formal education system, particularly among girls in rural areas. Consequently, the system has exacerbated gender disparities in education (Bayhan & Çimen-Aratemur, 2019; Lindquist, 2017). By making the transition to middle school coincide with the age at which many girls reach puberty, cultural pressures and economic factors have encouraged families to pull their daughters out of school rather than sending them to a different school for the next educational stage (Lindquist, 2017). Implementing the new system required significant changes in school infrastructure and resources, such as more classrooms and teachers, especially to accommodate the middle school segment. Scholars point out that these resources were not adequately provided, leading to overcrowded classrooms and strained educational facilities (Gün & Baskan, 2014; Lindquist, 2017; Sahin & Is Guzel, 2018).

For primary and secondary school education, another major change was the government's decision to cooperate with religious sects and associations for values education. In Turkey, during the AKP term, values education covering general human rights and values began to be expanded across all courses, as the themes are general, such as environment and climate, friendship, moral values, daily life, and sports. Starting from 2014, the interpretation of and applied teaching of these general themes has been delegated to various Islamic sects and associations. Semerkand Foundation, Ensar Foundation, Hayrat Foundation, Ilim Yayma Cemiyeti, and Hizmet Foundation are some examples of foundations established by Islamic sects. Tügva is another significant Islamic foundation that participates in educational activities, with President Erdogan's son, Bilal Erdogan, being one of the founders and a member of the board of directors. These foundations also signed collaboration agreements with the Ministry of National Education (*Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı*, MEB) and entered public schools to organise courses and leisure activities. These foundations have dormitories, schools, and kindergartens throughout the country. The activities of these sects in public schools were ceased by the decree of the Council of State; however, MEB ignored most of these decrees and continued the collaboration with Islamic sects by signing protocols with them (MEB, 2014).

The expansion of values education in Turkish schools has led to criticisms and concerns from scholars and various segments of society (Kandiyoti & Emanet 2017; Toker, 2021). Values education mainly includes Sunni Islamic values and aims to teach moral and ethical conduct from an Islamic perspective. It has been criticised for not being sufficiently inclusive of diverse religious and cultural backgrounds, and many scholars have demonstrated that by primarily reflecting Sunni Islamic values, these courses will alienate or exclude Alevi and non-Muslim students, as well as those from various secular families (İnal, 2012). Scholars have also pointed out that the integration of religious sects in the teaching of values education is being used as a tool for ideological indoctrination rather than fostering critical thinking and cultural and moral education, which would discourage open discussion of diverse perspectives (Caner & Bayhan, 2020; Yilmaz, 2018). In addition to values education, there has been an increase in elective religious education courses, marking another significant step towards Islamisation in primary and secondary schools in Turkey. The Ministry of National Education has introduced numerous Islamic electives for public primary (and secondary) schools with Sunni Islamic content, and in many schools, there are only elective courses, even though on paper some science and sports courses appear in the curricula. This development has also attracted criticism, with concerns that this policy would detract students from academic subjects and compromise the quality of education by prioritising religious and moral instruction over critical thinking, academic skills, and knowledge (Caner & Bayhan, 2020).

In the area of early childhood education, the AKP introduced public Islamic kindergartens in 2013, for the first time in Republican history, thereby changing the trajectory of the secular tradition in public early childhood education. Turning the Quran Courses for 4- to 6-Year-Old Children into fully functioning Islamic kindergartens initiated a non-secular educational environment designed to imbue children aged 4 to 6 with a “Muslim way of life” (Dedeoğlu & Adar, 2022; Ertem, 2022). The Directorate of Religious Affairs (DİB) officially designates Quran kindergartens as “Quran courses for four to six-year-olds.” However, these new establishments differ markedly from traditional Quran courses typically held in mosques. The latter primarily focused on Quranic recitation and offered Arabic instruction for just a few hours daily, targeting primary school-aged children rather than the early childhood demographic. In contrast, Quran kindergartens function as early childhood education (ECE) facilities, extending beyond the scope of the previous part-time Arabic and Quran recitation classes (DİB, 2022). Quran kindergartens are overseen by the DİB rather than the Ministry of National Education (MEB), which sets them apart from other public kindergartens. This represents a significant shift in Turkey’s educational landscape, as previously, Islamic kindergartens were only managed by private organisations and religious sects without formal legal recognition. They are the first public Islamic kindergartens initiated and supported by the Turkish state under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) regime. They form part of the AKP’s strategy to foster a “new pious generation” through its neoliberal populist educational policies. To facilitate the establishment of these kindergartens, the AKP removed the age restrictions on religious education. The pivotal change came with a government decree in 2011 that eliminated the age requirements for religious education. Before this change, Turkish public kindergartens did not offer religious education, and children were required to be at least 12 years old—or in the fifth grade of primary school—to participate in religious instruction at schools or Quran courses at mosques. The removal of this age limit by the AKP has made it possible for even very young children, including toddlers, to receive religious education.

In a nutshell, this paper explored the increasing authoritarian tendencies in Turkey under the conservative rule of the AKP, focusing on its Sunni-Islamist educational strategies. It examined the Islamisation of education across early childhood, primary, and secondary levels during Turkey’s recent shift towards authoritarianism. The policy of fostering a “religious generation” signals a significant departure from Turkey’s traditional secular educational framework, steering it towards a Sunni Islam model. While contextualising the educational policies affecting early childhood, primary, and secondary education, it identifies five key policy changes under the AKP’s contemporary authoritarian regime. These five major policy shifts during the AKP’s rule are the introduction of the 4+4+4 education system, the restructuring of IHSs (preacher training schools), the expansion of values education, collaborations with Islamic sects, and the creation of public Islamic kindergartens. By reorganising the education system in this way, the AKP governments stepped away from the secular education system and effectively bypassed the Law of Unification in Education, especially for early childhood education. In public schools, Sunni Muslim practices are promoted as a way of life. Students are encouraged to embrace the role of a “newly invented Muslim child,”; aligning with the AKP’s vision of nurturing a religious generation that embodies the ideals of a new Turkey and a redefined “Muslim citizen.” Despite claims from the MEB and DİB that only humanistic moral values are taught, students are exposed to Sunni Islam practices. This situation not only places secular families and minority groups, such as Alevi citizens, at a disadvantage but also prioritises religious concepts over scientific facts.

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1. Prime Minister-now President Erdoğan's note on raising a religious generation: "We want to raise a religious generation. Do you expect the conservative democrat AK Party to raise atheist generations?" (Dindar Bir Gençlik Yetiştirmek İstiyoruz, 2012)