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Social changes under the Justice and Development Party (AKP)

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By Ahmed Hassan Ali*

Before we embark on the subject of the social changes that have taken place in Turkey during the era of the Justice and Development Party [Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi or AKP], first we need to take a look at the country's modern history in order to learn about the changes that took place in the aftermath of the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923. It was then that Turkey transformed itself from a country of a socially Islamic nature based on the Ottoman Caliphate, to one in which republican secularism was forced on it, and in which the Republic engaged in a fierce conflict with the large majority of Turkish society and which also failed in its attempt to force this majority to abandon their Islamic traditions and conservative customs.

Ataturk's Social Revolution

The revolution by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk to modernise Turkey brought with it many consequences for the Turkish people socially, religiously and politically. In relation to the social and religious aspects, the renunciation of Islamic traditions and culture may be seen as one of the major factors that wrought religious and social changes in modern Turkey.

Ataturk's reforms created a new system of life based on the Western norms, following which Turkey became a completely secular country. In fact, Kamal Ataturk's policies to end the political role of Islam or to eradicate Islam from political life, were apparently also an attempt to

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erase Islam in most aspects of social life.

By the end of the last century, religious institutions only played a marginal role or assumed responsibility for minor religious institutions only, in contrast to the role they played during the Ottoman era. In this context, it has now become evident that during the first decades of the Republic, urban society were more influenced by these reforms than rural areas. In Istanbul and Ankara, for example, large numbers of people began to ignore the fast during Ramadan, and children were not taught to perform their daily prayers.

With, what appeared to be, the gradual disappearance of Shari'a from the lives of ordinary people, religious interdictions, which normally prohibited people from doing all that is right or wrong in the religious sense, turned into a reactionary or regressive phenomenon. There were, however, different attitudes in rural areas where although many religious and conservative people refused to accept Kemal Ataturk's reforms, they nevertheless opposed them quietly, avoided confrontation with state's secular institutions, and continued to practise Islamic traditions and secretly set up their own religious institutions.

With the abolition of all the Sufi Religious Order centres at the end of 1925, the principles of Sufism ceased to be taught at meetings and retreats, which over the centuries had widespread influence on social life in Anatolia.¹

In fact, the teachings of Sufism tended to focus more on spiritual philosophy, purification of the soul, and the building of a righteous and reformist human being, and contributed a great deal to Islamic missionary work in Turkey. Lessons were conducted in secret in the homes of Sufis, but the Kemalist regime continued to harass them.²

The Sufis took advantage of the situation which resulted from the enforcement of the Civil Code of 1926, which was lifted from Swiss law. The law created a new social problem for modern Turkey when there was an increase in the number of illegitimate births among adolescents. Subsequent generations showed no respect for religion and consumed alcohol openly simply because the law allowed them to do so.

The religious and conservative classes considered Kemal Ataturk's reforms on women the antithesis of inherited Islamic traditions because it gave her equal status with men in the decision to divorce, inheritance, employment, marriage to non-Muslims and the abolition of polygamy. This rural religiously conservative class – which until the 1950s constituted about two-thirds of the population – secretly worked to create generations opposed to secularism. At the beginning of the 1950s – almost twelve years after Ataturk's death – there was mass migration by the rural population to cities, which were turned into commercial and industrial centres, in search of better opportunities in work and in the standard of living; and from there that Islamic opposition later sprang.

From his perspective, Kemal Ataturk blamed the Turkish people's backwardness not only on the Ottoman caliphate but also on Islam itself. He saw Islam as having become a political trojan horse for religious dictatorship and as legitimizing corrupt sultans who sacrificed the sovereignty of the Turkish nation in order to remain in power. He also saw the dervishes and sheikhs as wielding too much power and thus impeding the progress of the state and as persisting in their adherence to the outmoded principles of Islamic tradition. Kamal Ataturk expressed the belief that by eliminating the political and social powerbase of the Islamic religious authorities, Turkey would become completely modernized.³

Although the government created by the Kemalist regime appeared democratic, however, the reality at the time and for the subsequent twenty years, pointed to the emergence of a one-party government controlled by Kemal Ataturk and his friends. There are historians who argue that the secular republic did not run into any major obstacles because Ataturk insisted on a one-party dictatorship without any real opposition in the House of Representatives to the policies or actions that reshaped Turkey. It was for this reason that he was opposed by many Muslim clerics who saw it as completely contrary to Islam, which resulted in the revolution led by Sheikh Saeed in 1925.⁴

However, this theory contradicts certain historical facts. The revolution by Sheikh Saeed was galvanised by Kurdish nationalist goals, even if it appeared to be religious. The revolution failed because Turks did not participate in it, and here we note the absence of any form of religious revolution in rural areas or in cities against the abolition of the Ottoman caliphate, which had lasted for six centuries. The Turks were simply tired of wars, sieges, hunger and hyperinflation which they had endured for twenty consecutive years, starting with wars with tsarist Russia, followed by the civil war with the Armenians, the Balkan War, the First World War and finally the War of Independence (1918-1922).

What truly infuriated both urban and rural Turks was the alliance forged by Sultan Mehmed Wahiduddin with the Allied forces that occupied the capital Istanbul and most of Anatolia after the First World War. Whilst Greek troops burned Turkish villages in western Anatolia in response to the decades long Ottoman occupation of Greece, the Sultan dispatched an army, with British and French support, to fight the Turkish army led by Kamal Ataturk. Observers will have noted that Turkish farmers and peasants, who formed the backbone of Turkish society at that time, had always complained about the high taxes levied

on them (the tenth tax), which Ataturk had abolished and replaced with more lenient taxes.⁵

Whatever the reasons may have been, Ataturk was very popular amongst the people for his successful military leadership, his achievement of decisive victories, his ability to eject the occupiers, for retaking Istanbul and for establishing peace and imposing security.

According to the views held by Kemal Ataturk, the Caliphate under Ottoman rule had lost its legitimacy and all the Muslim regions that had been ruled by the Ottomans had risen up and demanded independence, which meant the Turks had to fight everywhere and on every front against these uprisings that cost Turkey dear both economically and in human terms. Moreover, the incumbent Caliphate which had succumbed to the influence of Sufi doctrines and the power of the religious seminaries had become an obstacle to the modernisation of Turkey and had resulted in great defeats to the Ottoman Empire because of its strong opposition to modernisation.

In addition to his popularity for his role in leading battles, winning victories, ejecting the Allied forces, reuniting Anatolia, and retaking Istanbul, Ataturk was able to increase his popularity by constantly speaking about the Turkish national dignity that had been violated for seventy long years after the Ottoman sultans had signed trade treaties with Europe that were solely for the benefit of the Europeans without in anyway advancing the ambitions of the Turkish people.

Ataturk succeeded in improving the living standards of his citizens when he abolished the Ottoman “tenth” tax levied against the peasants and instigated agrarian reforms. This tax had been a considerable burden on the Turkish peasant and by abolishing it many people cared little about the abolition of the Caliphate.⁶

In 1920, nearly 80% of the Turkish population lived in villages and worked in agriculture, nearly 5% in crafts and 5% in trade, at a time when human resources and domestic capital were scarce and agricultural production could barely meet the basic needs of the population. There were virtually no industrial enterprises, especially following the migration of the Greeks, Armenians and Jews. All that remained were foreign-owned companies producing flour and sugar.⁷

With the passage of time, Ataturk's public development programmes succeeded in creating Turkish industrial enterprises despite certain shortcomings in the development programmes themselves. Perhaps one of the most important economic achievements was the creation of a new class of individual from amongst the Turkish people in the commercial and industrial sectors which had previously been under European control. In due course, this class came to be known as the nationalist bourgeoisie.

Centre-right parties

After eighty years of mandatory secularism and militaristic nationalist politics and political instability, with the exception of a few years under Turgut Ozal, the AKP's star rose to prominence to become a major political party in Turkey at a time when the values of Kemal Ataturk and his vision of the social political system were sacred and untouchable. It encompassed the belief that religious traditions, through their use in social emotions within the public sphere, posed an obstacle to the building of a strong state, and that secularism and the renunciation of religion were the cornerstones of Turkey's modernisation.

It was also believed that a nationalistic Turkish army would safeguard the country's pro-Western secular orientation as well as the Turkish identity which evolved with Ataturk. This formula proved effective in

establishing the Turkish state and in aiding its evolution in the initial stages up until the 1980s. Islamist social movements were confronted alongside the curbing of the Kurdish and Alawite identity. Consequently, true popular representation did not emerge through successive elections that always excluded the religious and Kurdish movements.

Religious movements found their way into power through centre-right parties, established in the early 1950s by the Democratic Party led by Jalal Bayar (Ataturk's colleague) and Adnan Menderes, previously members of the Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi or CHP) founded by Kemal Ataturk. But Menderes, during his presidency of successive governments during the 1950s, provided the opportunity for the populist Islamic movements to freely practice religious traditions, reinstated the call to prayer in Arabic and reintroduced the teaching of Islamic religion in educational curricula, initially banned and subsequently made optional at the end of the 1940s.

However, the most significant impact on the working and rural classes came from the tangible improvement in the living conditions of farmers and artisans which came about after Turkey received the first instalment of American financial aid in 1949 under the Marshall Plan, which was designed to support Europe in stemming the Communist tide.

In addition to the two previous factors, the Government of Menderes took steps that had positive benefits for the rural poor, namely replacing the leadership of the police and security forces, who had previously dealt with these groups with excessive brutality. These classes of people now experienced a new form of treatment based on respect from police officers.⁸

Since then, religious and conservative movements have become an integral part of every centre-right party who adopted the freedom to worship and to practice religious rites as fundamental personal freedoms, and, most significantly, allowed members of these religious groups to participate in government, albeit only in the middle and lower ranks.

The policies of Adnan Menderes had a tumultuous impact on rural and working-class suburban areas, leading to confrontations and violent protests against the government of Menderes, due in large part to the worsening economic situation of the late 1950s, between pro-government working class people and pro-secularism groups, which culminated with the first army coup of 1960. A year later Menderes was executed because he was seen as a symbol of the religious and conservative establishment, despite the fact that he was not religious himself.⁹

Despite the dissolution of the Democratic Party and the banning of its senior leaders from participating in political life, the party's supporters transferred their loyalty to the Justice Party, which they deemed as the heir to the Democrats. The Justice Party, led by Suleiman Demirel, won the 1965 elections, the second centre-right party to do so. Demirel followed the line of Adnan Menderes, but with prudence, such that he refused to allow Necmettin Erbakan to come on board with him, who from the outset was known publicly for his political Islamist credentials.

Demirel's party won again in the 1969 elections and introduced a package of economic reforms to counter inflation, but supporters of the Republican People's Party (CHP) and the leftists entered into public confrontations with the conservative and Islamist movements. Demirel resigned as prime minister as a result of his differences with the military over the Cyprus conflict, tensions with Greece and domestic

political violence. He had also been accused of deviating from Atatürk's principles. Popular clashes between the right and the left ended with yet another military intervention in 1971 and a military coup.

When parliamentary life returned to the country in 1973, supporters of the religious and conservative movements were split between an Islamist party led by Necmettin Erbakan; the centre-right led by Suleiman Demirel, and the extreme nationalist right-wing party. The emergence of National Salvation Party, led by Erbakan; the first Islamist-leaning party since the fall of the Ottoman caliphate; had a direct bearing on Islamist movements, for it achieved great success in the 1973 elections and formed a coalition government with the Republican People's Party, which had turned secular.¹⁰

In the 1975 elections, Demirel headed a coalition government of four parties that failed to end the economic crises and resigned in 1977. Demirel then headed a new coalition government with Erbakan and the far right that collapsed a year later for similar reasons. In 1978, Turkey was plunged into a political crisis during which time political parties deployed their religious and social grass-root supporters for the confrontations, and the extreme right founded militias and led several attacks on the headquarters of other parties, in particular the Alawites.

The 1970s were characterized by armed social conflicts between the left and the right. The security situation deteriorated to such an extent that the spread of political violence spread went unchecked, and some 4,000 people were killed as violence intensified between the nationalists and religionists. The conflicts took on a sectarian character when Sunnis and Shiites fought in the south-eastern region of Turkey. The far right, in the form of the MHP, played a major role in fomenting political violence in the city, which finally ended with the military intervention

and coup of 1980.¹¹

Parliamentary life returned once again to Turkey in 1983, and a new centre-right party, the Motherland Party, appeared on the scene that was truly heir to the Democratic and Justice parties. Whilst the army banned Erbakan from political activity and his party was dissolved, the Islamists and Conservatives went out in support of the Motherland Party, led by Turgut Ozal, who won a comfortable victory in the 1983 elections. Successive Ozal governments made capital of the Iraq-Iran war by developing the Turkish economy and improving people's living standards.¹²

By the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, new parties had formed to compete with the Motherland Party, which had singlehandedly harvested the votes of both the Islamist and Conservative blocs. In the meantime, Suleiman Demirel established the True Path Party and Erbakan founded the Islamic Welfare Party. Thus, the voices of these movements were split between the three. And the cessation of hostilities between Iraq and Iran constituted a major blow to the Turkish economy, causing major crises that continued until 2002 and the AKP's victory.

The Justice and Development Party

In the 2002 elections, the AKP won 33 percent of the total vote, but because of the electoral laws introduced by the army after the 1980 coup, a party was required to get at least 10 percent of the total vote to get into parliament. When the other parties failed to cross the electoral threshold, the AKP secured nearly 66% of the seats in parliament to form a government comfortably. The vast majority of those who voted for the Justice Party were in fact Erbakan grassroots supporters, with some conservative elements.¹³

Seen from another point of view, the AKP's electoral rise in 2002 was a turning point for the "suppressed" movements who were now increasingly standing up against the decades of secularism, militarism and nationalism.

After taking power, the Justice and Development Party launched a variety of reformist, liberal and anti-poverty policies that were designed to meet the needs of different social groups. Erdogan, the newly elected prime minister, labelled the Kurdish question as Turkey's long-standing internal problem that needed to be resolved in ways other than through forced assimilation.

Erdogan then embarked on structural reforms, such as greater democratisation; enhancing civilian control over the security forces; a review of Turkey's security model and improving human rights. During its first term (2002–2007), the AKP achieved considerable success with reviving the Turkish economy through a series of reforms that took the country down the road of liberal democracy, exemplified by AKP's peace overtures to the Kurds of Turkey and negotiations on EU membership in 2005. These developments prompted the United States to announce that the AKP's vision was a beacon of democracy in the Muslim world.

Following these successes, the 2007 elections saw the AKP win 46% of the vote. This resounding victory encouraged the party to exercise "ideological hegemony" over the Turkish political scene with its ally, Mr. Fathullah Gulen. To achieve its goals, the party appointed Gulen supporters to state judicial, security and educational institutions. However, by 2015, the party stood at a crossroads with Gulen because of a deep rift between the erstwhile allies, especially after Erdogan had accused the Gulen movement of trying to monopolize power and of

trying to oust the AKP. Events unfolded until the failed coup attempt of 2016 and the purges that followed of Gulen's supporters.¹⁴

In socio-political terms, the AKP's understanding of democracy has largely been inspired by Muslim Brotherhood ideology, which tends more towards practicing democracy through party politics in order to win; instead of a system of government that upholds the rule of law, human rights and the free press. In the sense that Islam, as a religion (according to the concepts held by the Justice and Development Party), has clear political interests and ambitions in terms of how to rule a society; this goes contrary to some of the results that can be produced by democracy.

The Justice and Development Party (AKP), which was established as a conservative democratic party, has progressively promoted Islamic practices in daily social life, especially after the party cemented its position following the 2007 elections, by spreading Islamic ideas through the politicisation of Islam. As regards foreign policy issues, there was greater focus on the Middle East, coupled with heightened social animosity towards the European Union and Israel, despite the fact that economic relations with Israel have never been disrupted.

Women and the hijab in the eras of Ataturk and Erdoğan

In 1925, Kemal Ataturk travelled throughout the country to show himself in "civilized dress" to the people. The headdress was a sign of the social status of the individual during the Ottoman period and was also a sign of Islamic affiliation. Ataturk wanted to eliminate this social discrimination in the newly born republic both by encouraging and by imposing what was then a new common civilized way for his citizens.

On one of his tours, Ataturk stopped in a small town on the Black

Sea and in that town, he saw a women wearing the niqab. He turned to his entourage and said: “This habit causes discomfort to women in the heat of the summer, which is a result of man’s selfishness and desire to protect his honour. Women also have minds; allow them to show their faces and to see the world with their own eyes.” Although Ataturk completely banned the fez and turban for men and encouraged them to wear hats; the laws on changing the dress code and headwear precluded women.¹⁵

During that period, authorities ignored the ban on hijab [headscarves, niqab, etc] in schools and certain government institutions because they were convinced that they would be unable to enforce the ban on hijab, since the majority of people affected lived in rural areas. Educational reforms included the construction of many schools in rural areas and mandatory education for girls. If he decided to ban the hijab, Kamal Ataturk risked getting embroiled in a battle with the rural tradition of the hijab, which is seen as a symbol of honour and chastity. Thus, he let time solve the problem of the hijab; in the course of time, the hijab became a class habit for the rural population and gradually disappeared in urban areas.

During the last Ottoman period, the niqab and the isolationism of women belonged to the middle classes, who were sufficiently well off and had enough to stop their women from working or appearing in public events. In good time, following the rise of the republic, middle-class women in cities began taking off their hijab, while rural women began to wear comfortable wide trousers or simple skirts and body-length hijab, especially since most villagers were close relatives or knew each other well.

During the republican period, girls were encouraged to attend

universities, obtain academic and vocational degrees, and to contribute to the development of the country. Whereas previously women only worked as teachers in girls' schools; they were soon to be seen everywhere: in mixed schools, in medicine, law, engineering and in the social and natural sciences. Not surprisingly, Istanbul was at the forefront of these changes.

In 1929, 75 per cent of girls aged 7–11 years attended primary schools in Istanbul, alongside nearly the same percentage of boys, compared to 26 per cent of girls and 51 per cent of boys nationally. Between 1920 and 1938, 10% of all college graduates were women, a major achievement in the short time since the University of Istanbul was founded and opened its doors to women.¹⁶

Ottoman Islamic law was replaced by secular civil law in 1926 which granted women equal civil rights. The Civil Code no longer recognized religious marriages; abolished polygamy and granted women the right to divorce. Under Ottoman Islamic law, a woman's inheritance was half that of a man; later, under secular laws, men and women inherited equally. Nevertheless, the new laws were not entirely on the side of women. While Ottoman law provided for women to obtain “ a marriage dowry and a divorce settlement” as a sum of money, the new laws made no such financial provisions.

Under secular civil law, men were officially the head of the household and women needed their permission to travel abroad or to work outside the home, as was the case in many European countries at that time, however, these laws were repealed in the 1990s.

In 1930, women were granted the right to vote in municipal elections and for the first time, a woman was appointed to the judiciary. In 1934, women were granted full voting rights. In 1935, eighteen women were

elected to the Turkish parliament. Ataturk's adopted daughter, Sabiha Gökçen, became Turkey's first military pilot, with the encouragement of Ataturk himself, and whose picture was all over the Turkish media, where she was seen wearing her military uniform and standing with a group of male pilots as proof of equality and secularism. In 1932 – less than a decade after the founding of the Republic – a Turkish girl [Keriman Halis Ece] was crowned Miss Universe in Spa, Belgium.¹⁷

Rapid social changes – particularly in large cities – led to the rise of the Muslim middle class and their domination of businesses, as well as the upward social mobility of Muslim families. After the Second World War, the number of non-Muslim minorities decreased, who had traditionally dominated both trade and business, while Muslim Turks served in the civil service, state institutions and the military. Following the departure of the ethnic minority classes that had previously dominated commercial life, the republic nurtured a new bourgeois class of Turks, whilst women got the opportunity to join this elite and the middle class after receiving education and vocational training.

Despite women's activism in the Republican era and their semi-autonomous independence in urban areas, they were nevertheless still bound by two things: conservative ethics and the fulfilment of the Republic's modernisation goals. The "silent" Islamic movements and conservative camps denounced all these changes as calls for immorality. Despite the dramatic changes enacted by the Republic with respect to women, Turkish society remained socially conservative, even in cities. For instance, in the workplace, women wanted to dress modestly and to avoid inappropriate behaviour.

There were fears in Turkish society that following the founding of the Republic that the rise in the number of educated women, their entry into the workplace and public life, and having equal access to their own

private income as men do; would eventually lead to a crisis within the family and society. Moreover, it was feared that women's individual autonomy would lead to social corruption, delayed marriages, and possibly even women's refusal to marry; which could pose a threat to the social order.

Such were the concerns in urban areas. Meanwhile, in rural areas, life for the majority of women in small towns and villages was quite different, before and after the Kemalist reforms. Birth rates remained much higher in rural areas than in urban areas. Official figures for that period (during the first decades of the Republic) indicate that the average age of marriage in villages was 19 for women and 22 for men, but real ages were lower.

The Republic, which had worked hard to support the suburban family by providing employment opportunities, found that rural families depended on children, especially boys, for agricultural work, and then relied on them later in old age. The consequences of state propaganda on childbirth to compensate for the major losses of World War I remained apparent for decades.¹⁸

Returning to the subject of the hijab, although the Republic did not specifically pass laws outlawing the hijab, nevertheless, state institutions, from the outset of the Republican era, refused to employ hijab-wearing women. Following the military coup of 1980, a law was passed by the Military Council to stop hijab-wearing women from entering universities, polytechnics, schools and certain state institutions. The ban on the wearing of hijab in Turkey became a political issue after 1980.

After the ousting of Erbakan as a result of a military coup in 1997, the Turkish National Security Council issued a declaration in which it

classified “the hijab as a threat to Turkey,” and as a consequence, a large number of hijab-wearing women were fired from public institutions, after they had been allowed to wear it by Erbakan during his tenure as prime minister, and hijab-wearing students were prevented from entering universities .

After the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in late 2002, it did not address the issue of the hijab in its first session until the end of 2007. It then took a strong stance in 2008 by passing a bill in parliament allowing the headscarf/hijab to be worn in universities. Although the Supreme Constitutional Court annulled the law passed by parliament, nevertheless, the country’s Higher Education Council, the executive body responsible for education, allowed the wearing of the hijab in the classroom. The role of Gulen’s supporters was prominent in supporting the decision, at a time when both Erdogan and Gulen were waging a war against the deep state within an army that supported secularism.¹⁹

After Erdogan’s success in neutralising the real threats from the army, in 2010 he was able to pass a constitutional amendment through parliament, backed by the AKP, regarding the “Rights Clause.” The “Different Forms of Discrimination against Women” law was passed, and the constitutional change was put to the people in a referendum for a vote. The prohibition on hijab was deemed a form of discrimination against women.²⁰

In 2013, Mr. Erdogan passed decrees on public and personal rights and freedoms, with particular reference to state institutions. It included an amendment to the law on the Regulations for Civil Servant’s Uniform under the freedom of dress. The law approved the lifting of the ban on hijab. For the first time, Turkish women wearing the

hijab were allowed to engage in parliamentary work and to work in government institutions, as well as allowing men to wear a beard and to wear any form of religious attire.²¹

The law also gave women lawyers the right to wear hijab during work. In 2014, a law was passed allowing middle-school students to wear the hijab, and at the same time repealing the law prohibiting it. In 2015, the government approved the right of women working in the state police force to wear the hijab .

Summary

In Turkish society, there are three identities: Ottoman-Islamic, Nationalist and Western-Secular. Since the founding of the Republic, the Islamist-tendency identity has remained that of the majority, however, it only came to prominence under the AKP, which draws its strength from this popular broad base.

If Mustafa Kemal Atatürk followed a “top-down” strategy with an elite base of secularists to create institutions capable of nurturing new generations according to a secular identity; Recep Tayyip Erdoğan followed a “bottom-up” strategy; drawing on populist grass-root support, influenced by Sufism or those who identified themselves with the various Islamist and conservative movements, to serve in state institutions and in the fight against secularism. In other words, since their second term in power after 2007, the AKP has unleashed a series of fundamental social changes by promoting Ottoman Islam in a “bottom-up” way and through religious and civic institutions. The AKP has sought to give priority to the Ottoman identity after taking full control of religious and educational institutions. Political hegemony over religious affairs has become a priority for the government and more particularly as part of the duties carried out by the Ministry of

Religious Affairs, which ironically Atatürk had established to exercise control over all forms of religious activity and to ensure that Islam had no sway over political and social life.

Notwithstanding, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) made significant changes in the Directorate of Religious Affairs, the most significant being an increase in the number of its employees who adhere to the Ottoman identity. Since 2007, the religious institution's budget has jumped to over \$1 billion, with more than 100,000 employees, to become the largest government institution alongside the Ministry of the Interior.²²

At the same time, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) gave wing to the body of preachers and imams and allowed them unprecedented influence, not enjoyed since the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Whereas the Directorate of Religious Affairs was in essence meant to be apolitical, it has in fact become a great platform and a huge institution for the spread of Ottoman Islam in social and political life. President Erdogan effectively used it to spread his social message with the eventual aim of achieving political changes.

Following the failed coup attempt of 2016, Mr. Erdogan benefited from the Directorate of Religious Affairs in his encirclement of the Hizmet (Service) Movement (supporters of Fethullah Gülen), who also had their own religious platforms and social activities in the name of religion. Thus, and within ten years, the impact of the transformation in religious education and the activities in mosques and schools has led to the emergence of a new popular base that is Ottoman-Sunni, anti-secular and anti-West, on the one hand, and against the Alawites and Shiites at home, on the other. It is reported that many religious schools have been re-opened to graduate imams and preachers, and that many

middle-school and secondary school pupils attend these schools.

In addition to the foregoing, the Justice and Development government has taken several important steps in the social sphere, such as increasing the number of mosques under construction and re-naming bridges and public places with Ottoman names. As a result, the AKP has sought – and continues- to change Turkey’s social face from that of a secular republic to one of an Ottoman republic.

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