

## CHAPTER 16

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# RELIGIOSITY AND POLITICAL ATTITUDES IN TURKEY DURING THE AKP ERA

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POLITICAL attitudes and values held by ordinary citizens play an important role in the emergence and stability of democratic regimes (Inglehart 2000). Mainwaring (1999, 39), for instance, highlights that the resilience of Latin American democracies in the late twentieth century can be partly attributed to changes in political attitudes of masses “towards greater valorization of democracy.” Interpersonal and institutional trust, appreciation of diversity, and ideological moderation are among the attitudes thought to foster and reinforce democratic governance (Inglehart 2000; Rose, Mishler, and Haerpfer 1998).

One of the explanations to account for Muslim-majority countries being democratic under-performers focuses on such attitudes in these societies, and especially among devout Muslims. In recent cross-national surveys, Muslim-majority countries tend to occupy the lowest ranks with respect to average levels of interpersonal trust, perceived legitimacy of secular officials, and support for freedom of speech and gender equality (Inglehart et al. 2014; Yuchtman-Ya’ar and Alkalay 2010). In turn, a voluminous literature reports a positive relationship between factors associated with modernization (e.g., rising levels of education, income, urbanization) and holding pro-democratic attitudes in these countries (e.g., Çiftçi 2010, 2012; Jamal 2006; Tessler 2002). These findings suggest that lower levels of socioeconomic development might be the primary culprit for the relative dearth of pro-democratic attitudes in Muslim-majority societies.

Beyond the role of socioeconomic development in the shaping of pro-democratic attitudes, we should also note that in many Muslim-majority countries there have been severe restrictions on Islamic organizations and communities (e.g., brotherhoods, orders, etc.), as well as on public expressions of religiosity. Examples include crackdowns on the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Jordan and the severe restrictions around the wearing of headscarves by women in Turkey and Tunisia in the past until recently.

And since in many of these countries there have been regular elections and party competition—that is, at least a semblance of democracy—devout Muslims' political attitudes and views on democracy might have been at least partly shaped by the regimes' distance and even outright hostility toward religiosity. Would there be a change in these attitudes when the political regime adopts a more favorable stance toward religion? For instance, would we observe devout Muslims adopting political attitudes more conducive to liberal democracy, such as ideological moderation or higher levels of interpersonal trust, if they become more satisfied with the political system?

In this chapter I focus on this question of how policies and approaches toward religion in public life affect political attitudes among Muslims by leveraging the change in the Turkish state's policies during the incumbency of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, or AKP) from 2002 to 2018. Turkey is an opportune case for this task, because when the Islamist AKP came to power in 2002, debates around the role of religion in public life and politics had peaked, and there were several restrictions in place regarding the role and visibility of Islam in Turkish society. The AKP gradually lifted these restrictions, especially after its conservative turn starting around 2011 (Özbudun 2014). Islamic religiosity has become a major defining factor, not only in public life, but also in education policies and state bureaucracy, while individuals and organizations with a secular outlook increasingly face discrimination and exclusion. In the face of these developments, can one observe a change in the political attitudes of devout Muslims?

Drawing on original, nationally representative surveys fielded during the period from 2002 to 2018, we are indeed able to diagnose a sense of relief among devout Muslims in Turkey. In particular, they are much less concerned about restrictions on religious freedoms, and increasingly think that they are treated fairly by the political system. In turn, the proportion of devout Muslims favoring the establishment of a shari'a-based religious state in Turkey dropped substantially during this period, and devout Muslims are more satisfied with the way democracy works in Turkey than are less devout individuals.

There is no evidence that these changes have been accompanied by a more pluralistic understanding of democracy, however. We observe no improvement in interpersonal and institutional trust among devout individuals from 2002 to 2018, and they also have not moved toward an ideologically more centrist position. Instead, we observe that devout individuals in Turkey hold more populist attitudes than others; in particular, they are more likely to display a majoritarian view of democracy where the importance of checks on the executive are downplayed. This affinity of devout individuals for populist principles is in line with the political platform of the incumbent AKP.

In the following I first present an overview of modern Turkish politics to highlight the role of religion. This discussion also outlines how religion has become a point of contention, especially in the period immediately preceding the AKP rule, and touches upon the developments during the AKP period with respect to the public role and visibility of Islam. The analyses of religiosity and political attitudes in the AKP era follow this discussion.

## RELIGION IN MODERN TURKISH POLITICS

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In a seminal article, Şerif Mardin (1973) presented a framework to understand the major contours of modern Turkish politics. Mardin argued that a sociocultural cleavage pitting the ruling elites of the “center” against a culturally heterogeneous “periphery” had been inherited by the Turkish Republic from the Ottoman Empire. In the Ottoman polity the center was constituted by the imperial house and its ruling apparatus in the society, and the periphery consisted of various traditionalist ethnic and religious “primordial groups” that were kept out of power (174). This cleavage was first and foremost a cultural one; while the center dominated the religious establishment, justice, and education, its claim to legitimacy was bolstered by its self-ascribed cultural preeminence.

From the nineteenth century, religiosity came to be increasingly identified with the periphery, as positivism and secularism were the cornerstones of Turkish modernization (Göle 1997). Steps taken to modernize the military and administration have led to the adoption of some form of Western culture, which further alienated peripheral masses from the rulers and agents of the center. In this process, “a clinging to Islam, to its cultural patrimony, was the province’s response to the center’s inability to integrate it into the new cultural framework,” and religiosity became a characteristic marker of the periphery (Mardin 1973, 179). Atatürk’s reforms that spanned two decades following the foundation of the Republic in 1923 constituted the zenith of the Turkish modernization.<sup>1</sup> As Sunar and Toprak (1983) highlight, Islam had served as a connecting function between the Ottoman center and periphery, and this link was severely weakened as a result of these secular reforms, which corresponded to a revolution in cultural values (Mardin 1971). Thus, the center-periphery cleavage primarily took the form of a “cultural bifurcation that crystallized around the secular progressivism of the state and the ascriptive, religious traditionalism of local communities” (Sunar and Toprak 1983, 426).

Kalaycıoğlu (1994, 403) characterizes the center during the Republican period as the “estate of a coherent body of nationalist, centralist, laicist elite which holds the view that it represents and protects the state.” The quasi-autonomous bureaucracy, especially that of the judiciary and military, the large, state-dependent businesses, and the mainstream intellectual community have been integral parts of the center. In terms of societal bases of support, the center has traditionally relied on groups with an urban presence, higher levels of education, lower levels of religiosity, and lower concentration of ethnic minorities (Çarkoğlu 2012), and the political arm of centrist constituencies was the founding party of the Republic, the Republican People’s Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP).

It was not until the introduction of multiparty elections in 1946 that the peripheral masses found an opportunity to participate in the political arena. The Democratic Party (Demokrat Parti, DP) was founded after an elite split within the CHP and emerged as the representative of the periphery. Mardin (1973, 185) highlights that the DP appealed to Islam as the culture of the periphery by promising a liberalization of religious practices

and “relegitimized Islam and traditional rural values.” The DP won the first free and fair elections in 1950, and the CHP remained in the opposition throughout the 1950s.

The parties of the periphery, following the DP tradition, have since dominated centrist parties in elections, despite several interventions by the military, which saw itself as the guardian of the regime (Cizre-Sakallıoğlu 1997). These electoral successes have had little impact on the dominant status and value system of the center, however (Kalaycıoğlu 1994). The Constitution of 1961, drafted in the aftermath of the coup against the DP in 1960, built a regime with strong counter-majoritarian institutions that were able to insulate themselves from the influence of elected governments through their autonomous recruitment and promotion practices. Therefore, the elites of the center retained political power even though the society’s religious and conservative majority threw support behind the parties of the periphery at the ballot box.

A number of developments in the 1980s and 1990s brought about the rise of political Islam in Turkish politics. The military junta (1980–1983), following the 1980 coup, harshly suppressed leftist movements and organizations, and a combination of religiosity (Sunni Islam) and Turkish nationalism was promoted with the hope of undermining left-wing politics against the perceived threat of communism (Akan 2012; Çarkoğlu and Kalaycıoğlu 2009). This period coincided with the significant migration of rural masses to big cities, and the formal mechanisms of the state were simply unable to cope with the accompanying socioeconomic pressures. In the absence of leftist organizations, which had a strong presence among the urban poor in the 1970s, Islamist networks and parties became the dominant actors in shantytowns of big cities like Istanbul and Ankara, inevitably carrying their conservative ideology with them (Eligür 2010). Around the same time, Islamist intellectuals became more assertive in the public domain through a number of Islamist periodicals and newspapers, and public expressions of religiosity (e.g., veiled women becoming visible on university campuses, discouragement of alcohol consumption in public) became more frequent (Göle 1997).

The “centrist” establishment took two additional blows in the 1990s. First, the intensity of the armed conflict between the Turkish state and the Kurdish separatist organization PKK that started in 1984 reached its peak in the first half of 1990s. The clashes had very negative effects on the daily lives of Kurdish citizens living in the southeastern part of the country. In this context, many Kurds, already more conservative than the average Turkish citizen, were attracted to political Islam that emphasized the *umma* instead of nationalism and was critical of the Republican institutions (Çarkoğlu and Kalaycıoğlu 2009). Second, the fragmented center-right and center-left parties of the day proved to be incompetent to cope with the economic challenges, leading to a period of unstable coalition governments and successive economic crises (Öniş 1997).

A consequence of these developments has been a sharp ideological turn toward the right in the Turkish electorate, and the accompanying rise of political Islam. While in 1990 about 23 percent of Turkish voters were on the right of the ideological spectrum, just six years later, in 1996, this proportion increased to 39 percent (Çarkoğlu and Kalaycıoğlu 2009).<sup>2</sup> And in the electoral scene, the Islamist Welfare Party (Refah Partisi,

RP) first won the metropolitan municipalities of Istanbul and Ankara in 1994, and then emerged as the leading party in the general election of 1995, obtaining 21 percent of the votes. In 1996 the leader of the RP, Necmettin Erbakan, became the prime minister in a coalition government.

This success of political Islam raised alarm bells among the centrist establishment, especially the military. After some controversial moves by Erbakan and RP executives that exacerbated the tension, the military declared political Islam as the primary threat to the Republic in a National Security Council meeting on February 28, 1997, and demanded action by the government through a directive that they themselves prepared. The eighteen-point demands, reluctantly approved by Erbakan, included the extension of compulsory primary education from five to eight years, which would effectively close the religious Imam Hatip middle schools, transfer of private dorms and schools affiliated with Islamic brotherhoods to the Ministry of Education, strict implementation of laws related to clothing in universities and public offices, and precautions about Islamist “infiltration” of state institutions. While only one of the directive’s demands was actually implemented (extension of primary education, see Eligür 2010), this intervention of the military was followed by the mobilization of the secular sectors of society, leading to the toppling of the RP-led coalition government and closure of the RP by the Constitutional Court in 1998. The broader result of this process was a narrower space for public expressions of religiosity and a retrenchment of Islamist organizations.

Thus, the second half of the 1990s has been a period of showdown between conservative, peripheral actors and the secular establishment. In the political scene, the RP was replaced by the Virtue Party (Fazilet Partisi, FP), which was subsequently closed down by the Constitutional Court in 2001. A split within the Islamist movement had been visible within the FP, and upon its closure the younger generation of Islamists, headed by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, formed the AKP (Hale and Özbudun 2010). The coalition governments formed after the toppling of the RP proved to be short-lived, and in the aftermath of two consecutive economic crises, in 1999 and 2001, and a devastating earthquake in 1999, early elections were held in 2002. The AKP won the election with 34 percent of the votes and an unprecedented almost two-thirds of parliamentary seats (due to several parties getting votes just below the national threshold of 10 percent), allowing it to form a single-party government.

## THE POST-2002 AKP ERA

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The AKP pursued a different strategy than its predecessors by downplaying elements of Islamist demands and mobilization in its rhetoric and policies until the end of its second term in government in 2011 (Altınordu 2016). Instead, the party leadership defined themselves as “conservative democrats” and emphasized a politics of economic competence and democratizing reforms, with the prospect of membership in the European Union (Öniş 2015).

Starting around 2010–2011, the AKP moved ahead with a discourse and policies aimed at expanding the public role and visibility of Islam in Turkish society. By this time the AKP had successfully subdued the elites of the center, especially the military and judiciary, through a series of controversial trials involving hundreds of senior active and retired military officers, along with constitutional amendments that curbed the power of secularist groups within the high judiciary. As a result, the era of “military tutelage” in Turkish politics was effectively over, and the AKP ruled in a setting marked by severely weakened horizontal accountability (Akkoyunlu and Öktem 2016).

The growing conservative trend in AKP’s policies manifested itself mostly in the area of education. The middle sections of the religious Imam Hatip schools that were closed in 1997 reopened in 2012, and many secular high schools were converted to religious ones. By 2018 the total number of students in these religious schools had risen fivefold since 2012, and although Imam Hatip schools made up about 11 percent of the total middle and high school population, they received close to a quarter of the budget (Butler 2018). At the same time, restrictions on the placement of Imam Hatip graduates to universities were also lifted. The conservative turn of the AKP has taken its toll in nominally secular public schools as well. Compulsory religious teaching in these schools was doubled to two hours per week, and extra optional religious courses were introduced. While these new courses were optional on paper, in many schools they were effectively the only available optional courses. References to Islam have steadily increased in the curriculum, and religious groups outside the education system are now allowed to conduct special seminars in schools (Gall 2018; Kingsley 2017).

The AKP also engaged in several policy changes with an eye toward pleasing devout Muslims beyond the realm of education. The restrictions around the religious headscarf were lifted in this period, which was one of the primary sources of resentment among the conservative majority of Turkish population (Çarkoğlu 2010). New restrictions on the sale of alcoholic beverages were introduced, and their advertisement or promotion of any kind were prohibited, together with substantial increases in taxation. These policies have effectively removed alcohol from public spaces and confined its consumption to mostly private settings. Changes were made to the Turkish civil code in 2017 allowing muftis, religious civil servants, to perform marriages in the same capacity as municipal officials.

While these developments raised concerns among the more secular-oriented segments of society, anecdotal accounts suggest that they brought a sense of relief to conservatives. The changes in the education system expanded the opportunities for parents who want their children to get religious education in a conservative setting without any limitations upon graduation (Lüküslü 2016). A majority of Turkish adult women are estimated to wear some kind of a headscarf (Çarkoğlu 2009); the lifting of restrictions in this area paved the way for them to attend universities and join the bureaucracy without making a change in their appearance. An interviewee for a Reuters report on Imam Hatip schools said, “Muslims have now reached a point where they can breathe more easily in their own country . . . in the last 15 years this government has

shown respect to Muslims” (Butler 2018). In the following section we look at this sentiment and its consequences on political attitudes more systematically.

## RELIGIOSITY AND POLITICAL ATTITUDES IN THE AKP ERA

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In this section I track the relationship between religiosity and several political attitudes during the AKP era in Turkey. My data come from the Turkish Election Study surveys conducted around the general elections of 2002, 2007, 2011, June 2015, and 2018. These face-to-face surveys are all nationally representative, employing a similar probability sampling procedure, with sample sizes ranging from 1,642 to 2,156.<sup>3</sup> Not every political attitude question we analyze was asked in every survey, but whenever they were asked, the question and answer formats were identical. This comparability of the measures allows me to document the aggregate changes in attitudes over time, and the representativeness of the samples makes it possible to generalize the results to the adult population of Turkey.

To analyze whether and how political attitudes vary across individuals with different levels of religiosity, I separate respondents in the samples into three levels of religiosity that I label as *non-devout*, *devout*, and *very devout*. A standard question in all surveys asked respondents how religious they saw themselves on a 0–10 scale, where zero corresponds to “not religious at all” and ten to “very religious,” irrespective of their frequency of prayer. The distributions of answers are heavily skewed toward higher values, with mean levels ranging from 6.9 in 2002 to 7.4 in 2018. I categorize respondents into the three religiosity levels such that those who gave answers between zero and six are labeled as non-devout, those with answers of seven or eight are labeled as devout, and those with answers of nine or ten are considered as very devout individuals. These values are selected such that each category roughly contains about a third of respondents over the entire period of analysis.

While this measure corresponds to the belief dimension of religiosity (Wald and Smidt 1993), it also closely reflects its behavioral dimension. In the surveys, respondents were asked how frequently they prayed (*namaz*) in the past year, with the answer option “more than once a week” being the highest indicator of religious practice. Averaging across all the surveys, only about 26 percent of subjectively defined non-devout individuals reported praying more than once a week. This figure increased to 55 percent for devout individuals and to 76 percent for very devout individuals. Thus, there is a close match between the subjective religiosity measure and reported religious practice. In the analyses I prefer to use the subjective measure, because it lends itself to a more equal distribution of individuals into three categories. The substantive results of the analyses are identical if we use the practice measure.

Figure 16.1 presents the distribution of non-devout, devout, and very devout individuals across the surveys. We observe a decrease over time in the proportion of non-devout respondents, from 44 percent in 2002 to 28 percent in 2018, while the proportions of devout and very devout respondents increase from 32 percent to 42 percent and from 24 percent to 30 percent, respectively, during the same period. These results point to an increase in subjective religiosity during the AKP era. On average, more devout individuals are more likely to be female, older, reside in rural areas, and have lower levels of education and income.

We begin our analyses of political attitudes by focusing on respondents' views on restrictions that devout Muslims face in Turkey with respect to their religiosity. Two related questions in this regard probe respondents about whether Muslims in Turkey are able to worship freely, and whether devout (Muslim) people face oppression. The percentages of respondents answering these questions affirmatively are presented in panels (a) and (b) of Figure 16.2, respectively. We see that across all the subgroups considered there were significant improvements from 2002 to 2018 with respect to perceptions of devout Muslim's conditions in Turkey. The change in perceptions among very devout individuals is especially stark: in 2002 about half of very devout individuals (56 percent) thought that Muslims in Turkey were able to worship freely, but this figure reached 96 percent in 2018. Similarly, in 2002 close to half of very devout individuals (47 percent) held the view that devout people in Turkey faced oppression, whereas in 2018 only 5 percent of them thought this way. It is remarkable that at the beginning of AKP's tenure a considerable segment of even non-devout individuals acknowledged the hardships devout Muslims faced, and over time we observe a convergence of views toward a more positive environment in this regard across individuals with different levels of religiosity.

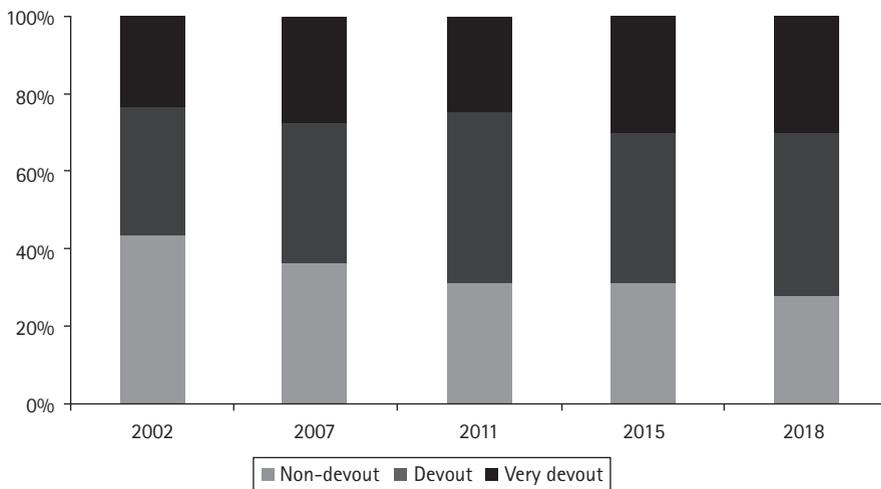


FIGURE 16.1: Distribution of non-devout, devout, and very devout respondents in the surveys.

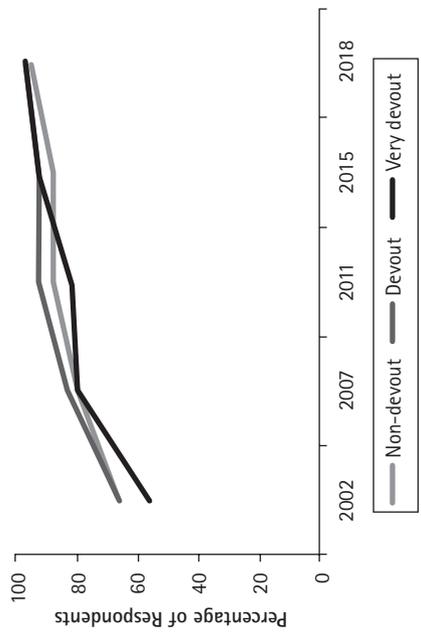
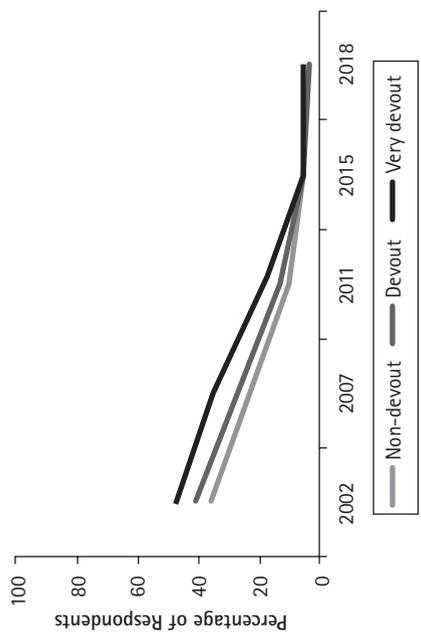


FIGURE 16.2: Views on restrictions faced by devout Muslims in Turkey.

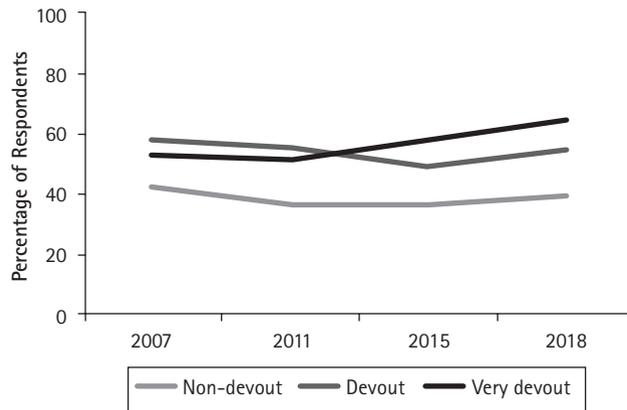
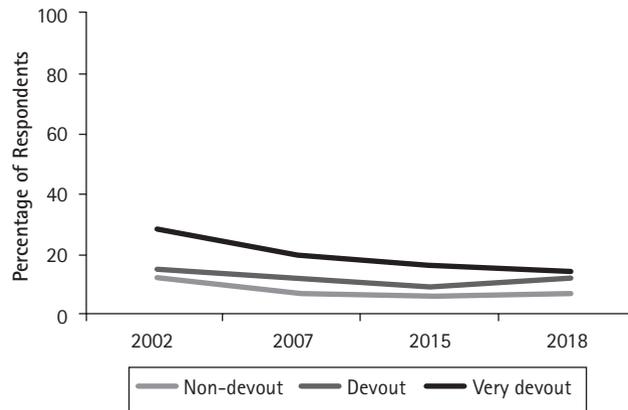


FIGURE 16.3: Are citizens like you treated fairly in our current political system? “Yes” respondents.

These results suggest that devout Muslims in Turkey consider the tenure of AKP government as a period of “decompression of Islam,” similar to the characterization of the 1950s by Sunar and Toprak (1983). This is also reflected in how they view the political system. Since 2007 our surveys asked respondents whether citizens like them are treated fairly in the current political system. In 2007 about 52 percent of very devout individuals responded positively to this question, and this figure steadily increased over time to 63 percent in 2018 (Figure 16.3). While non-devout individuals consistently had a more negative view of the fairness of the political system, the percentage of individuals in this group who think they are treated fairly decreased slightly over this period. Thus, the gap in positive responses between non-devout and devout respondents has widened. As of 2018 there is a clear, positive relationship between perceptions of the fairness of the political system and higher levels of religiosity.

As devout Muslims increasingly consider the political system in Turkey to be fair toward them, have their views about a shari‘a-based state changed? Figure 16.4 presents the percentage of respondents from 2002 to 2018 that favor the establishment of a shari‘a-based religious state in Turkey. We see a precipitous decline in the proportion of very devout respondents that support a shari‘a-based state in Turkey, from about 27 percent in 2002 to 14 percent in 2018. A similar decline, though less dramatic, can be observed among other groups as well: from 15 percent in 2002 to 12 percent in 2018 among devout respondents, and from 12 percent to 7 percent among non-devout ones. It would be wiser to focus on the trend of these figures than on their absolute values, since the word *shari‘a* has a rather ambiguous meaning for the Turkish electorate. Çarkoğlu (2004) presents evidence that when people are asked to choose between the present secular civil code regulations (about marriage, divorce, inheritance) and arrangements in accordance with Islamic law, support for Islamic law arrangements is much lower than the support for shari‘a. He concludes that a certain proportion of the electorate seems unable to voice objection to a shari‘a-based rule when asked in a generic manner or establish its implications to daily life.

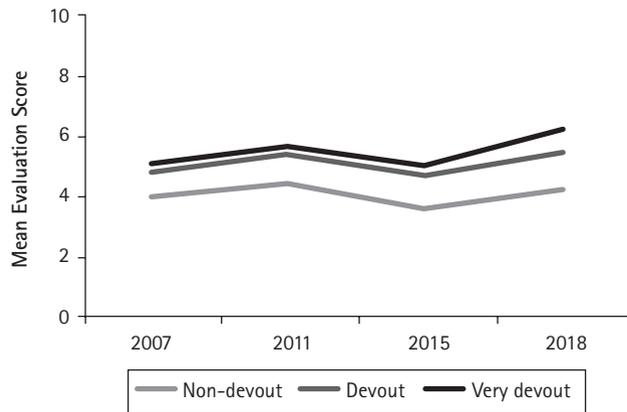


**FIGURE 16.4:** *Would you favor establishment of a shari'a-based religious state in Turkey? "Yes" respondents.*

The decrease in preference for the establishment of a shari'a-based religious state among devout individuals has been accompanied by greater levels of satisfaction with the way democracy works in Turkey. A question in our surveys first included in 2007 asked respondents to indicate how satisfied they were with the way democracy works in Turkey on a 0–10 scale, with higher values indicating more satisfaction. In Figure 16.5 we see that the average level of satisfaction among non-devout respondents has not changed over the eleven-year period, and consistently remained lower than among more devout individuals. In contrast, we do observe an increase in satisfaction among very devout respondents that is driven by increased levels of satisfaction from 2015 to 2018. The mean level of satisfaction with democracy among very devout respondents is 5.0 in 2007, 4.9 in 2015, and 6.1 in 2018. The period from 2015 to 2018 corresponds to an increasing centralization of power by Erdoğan, embodied by the transition to a presidential system of government and a sharp conservative turn of the AKP.

The changes in political attitudes among devout Muslims in Turkey from 2002 to 2018 can be summarized as follows. Compared to 2002, devout individuals as of 2018 are much less concerned about restrictions on religious freedoms, and only a small minority of them think that they face oppression. During this period, devout individuals' perceptions of being treated fairly by the political system have gradually improved, and there is a positive association between these perceptions and levels of religiosity. A similar positive relationship exists between satisfaction with democracy in Turkey and religiosity: very devout individuals declare more satisfaction than devout or non-devout individuals. In turn, only about one in seven very devout individuals favor the establishment of a shari'a-based religious state in Turkey as of 2018, compared to about one in four in 2002.

Have these changes in political attitudes been accompanied by a more pluralistic understanding of democracy? There are a couple of ways of approaching this important



**FIGURE 16.5:** *How satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Turkey?* 0 corresponds to “not satisfied at all” and 10 to “very satisfied.” Mean evaluation scores.

question. First, we can look at patterns of interpersonal and institutional trust (Figure 16.6). We see that there has been a slight improvement from 2002 to 2018 in levels of interpersonal trust across all categories of religiosity. During this period, the percentage of individuals who agree that most people can be trusted increased from 8 percent to 10 percent among non-devout individuals and from 9 percent to 11 percent among very devout individuals (panel a). These changes are quite small, and devout individuals do not differentiate themselves from others, however—they just follow the general trend. In panel (b) we consider trust in parliament, and again there is little change from 2002 to 2018. Together, these results suggest that there has not been a substantial improvement in levels of interpersonal and institutional trust in Turkey from 2002 to 2018.

Another way to explore whether there are signs that the increased satisfaction of devout individuals led them to adopt a more pluralistic view of democracy is to see whether they hold more ideologically moderate positions now compared to the past. Figure 16.7 presents the mean score of respondents over time on the left-right ideological scale (0 indicating extreme left, and 10 extreme right). Devout and very devout individuals consistently positioned themselves more to the right than non-devout individuals, and there has been little change in the mean positions over time. Therefore, we do not have an indication that devout individuals have shown ideological moderation during the AKP government.

In fact, there is evidence that, as of 2017, religiosity is positively associated with having more populist attitudes, and thus a majoritarian understanding of democracy. A nationally representative survey ( $N = 1,954$ ) fielded in 2017 presented respondents with a list of populist statements to measure the prevalence and correlates of populist attitudes among Turkish voters.<sup>4</sup> The statements tapped into different dimensions of populism: a Manichean view of politics as moral struggle, anti-elitism, people-centrism, and popular sovereignty (Box 16.1). Respondents were asked to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with the statements on a five-point scale, with options ranging from “I do

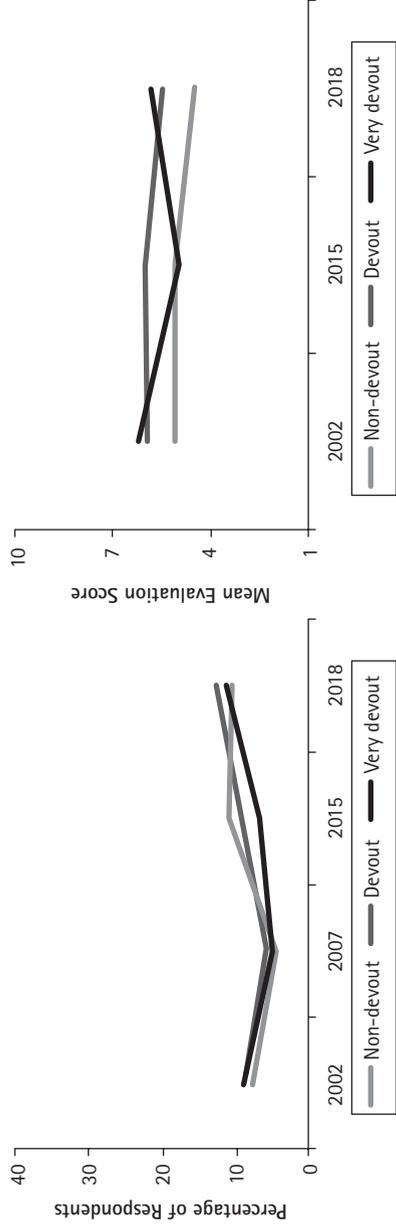


FIGURE 16.6: Interpersonal and institutional trust in Turkey.

### Box 16.1: Statements to Measure Populist Attitudes in Turkey

#### Manichean outlook

Politics is ultimately a struggle between good and evil.

What people call “compromise” in politics is really just selling out one’s principles.

I would stop talking to a friend who had unacceptable political opinions.

#### Anti-elitism

Most politicians do not care about the people.

The power of a few special interests prevents our country from making progress.

The differences between the elite and the people are larger than the differences among the people.

#### People-centrism

The people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions.

Referendums are the ultimate measure of the will of the people.

Politicians in the parliament need to follow the will of the people.

#### Popular sovereignty

Political leaders do not need to be checked by institutions since people make their decision in elections.

Having a strong leader in government is good for Turkey even if the leader bends the rules to get things done.

Most of the time parliaments do nothing but preventing the governments to do their jobs.

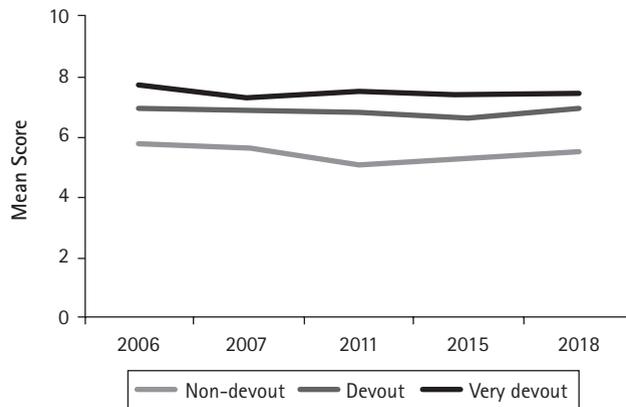


FIGURE 16.7: Self-positioning on the left-right ideological position. Mean scores on a 0–10 scale where higher values indicate more right positions.

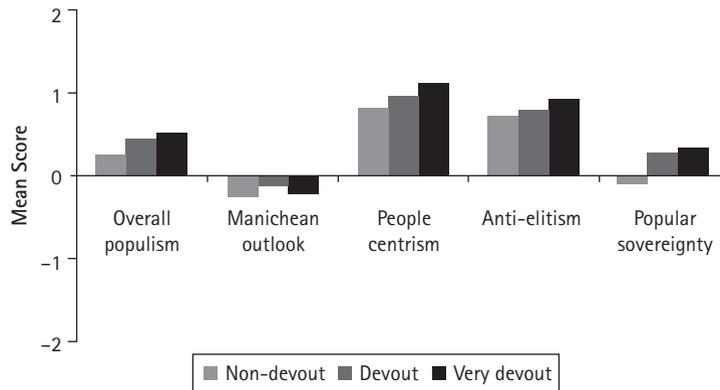


FIGURE 16.8: Support for populism and for its different dimensions across levels of religiosity.

not agree at all” (coded  $-2$ ) to “I agree completely” (coded  $2$ ), the middle position being “neither agree nor disagree” (coded  $0$ ). As agreement with the statements indicates support for populist attitudes, I created an index that takes the mean value of the answers given to these statements by a respondent; therefore, the resulting index has a range from  $-2$  (the most anti-populist position) to  $2$  (the most populist position). The mean score in the sample is  $0.36$ .

Figure 16.8 presents the mean scores of the index of populist attitudes (overall populism) and of the four different dimensions of populism for non-devout, devout, and very devout respondents in the sample. We observe a positive correlation between religiosity and populist attitudes—both the overall populism and different dimension scores are higher for more devout individuals. While support for people-centrism and anti-elitism statements are especially high across all levels of religiosity, the difference between devout and non-devout individuals is especially stark with respect to the popular sovereignty dimension of populism. The mean scores for this dimension of populism stand at  $-0.1$ ,  $0.27$ , and  $0.34$  for non-devout, devout, and very devout individuals, respectively. The second-largest difference in support for populist principles between devout and non-devout individuals is on the people-centrism dimension.

The popular sovereignty and people-centrism dimensions of populism emphasize the centrality of people’s will in politics (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). In this view, politicians should simply respond to people’s demands rather than leading them, which can be best elucidated through elections and referenda. Institutions of horizontal accountability, such as the judiciary or a strong legislature, are frowned upon by populists,

since they can serve as impediments to the exercise of people's will by the executive. Our data reveals that devout Turkish individuals are closer to such a view of democracy than non-devout ones. For example, about 39 percent of non-devout respondents in our sample agree with the statement that "Having a strong leader in government is good for Turkey even if the leader bends the rules to get things done;" and this figure increases to about 50 percent among devout and very devout respondents. Similarly, while about 31 percent of non-devout respondents agree that "Most of the time parliaments do nothing but preventing the governments to do their jobs," about 43 percent of devout and very devout respondents agree with it.

These results suggest that support for populist attitudes are more prevalent among devout Turkish voters. Rather than adopting a more pluralistic view of democracy as a result of perceptions of increased religious freedoms and satisfaction with the political regime, devout individuals are more likely to display a majoritarian understanding of democratic governance. Of course, this result cannot be separated from the fact that devout individuals are more likely to support the Islamist AKP, which has been in power since 2002. This is a party that caters to the interests of devout individuals with a heavily populist platform (Aytaç and Öniş 2014), and it seems that devout individuals have opted to give the executive a blank check to rule, only to be constrained by electoral performance, in line with the "delegative democracy" characterization of O'Donnell (1994).

## CONCLUSIONS

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In this chapter I examined the relationship between religiosity and political attitudes in a Muslim-majority country during a period when the state's approach and policies toward religion in public life have fundamentally changed. The AKP in Turkey came to power in 2002 when there were several restrictions on the public role of Islam, and it not only gradually lifted these restrictions over time, but also put Islamic religiosity at the center of state bureaucracy and policies. I asked if one can observe any accompanying changes in the political attitudes of devout Muslims in response to this more favorable outlook of the state toward religion, and if yes, in which direction.

The analysis of a series of nationally representative surveys fielded over a period of sixteen years (2002 to 2018) during which the AKP has been in power reveals two sets of findings. First, the AKP governments' positive approach toward Islamic religiosity in public life seems to have led to a rapprochement of devout Muslims with the political regime. Devout Muslims no longer think that they face oppression or limitations on worship. They also display higher levels of perception of fair treatment by the regime and satisfaction with the way democracy works compared to less devout individuals. The second set of findings, however, points to a lack of ideological moderation or meaningful change in the levels of interpersonal and institutional trust among devout

Muslims. Rather than a more pluralistic understanding of democracy that might be expected to develop due to the rapprochement with the political regime, we observe that devout Muslims display higher levels of populist attitudes than their less devout compatriots. These populist attitudes emphasize a majoritarian understanding of democracy by prioritizing vertical accountability through elections and referenda at the expense of institutions of horizontal accountability.

This picture is compatible with the theories of elite-driven public opinion (e.g., Zaller 1992). As the ruling AKP elites employ a political discourse with frequent populist messages, those individuals with affinity to the party and who are satisfied with its policies, like devout Muslims, are more likely to embrace these messages. The favorable policies and approaches of the government toward religion in public life seem to have little effect on political attitudes of devout Muslims, other than making them more comfortable with the political regime. This is a rather disappointing finding, as it suggests that a sizable portion of the Turkish electorate do not feel disturbed by the populist rule that deliberately weakens institutions of horizontal accountability. This dynamic has likely played a role in the recent democratic backsliding of the country and its descent into a competitive authoritarian regime.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank Melani Cammett and Pauline Jones for their guidance and feedback, and participants in the Understanding Political and Social Change in Muslim States and Societies Conference at the University of Michigan in May 2019 for comments and suggestions. I am grateful to Ali Çarkoğlu for making available the 2002, 2007, and 2011 Turkish Election Study survey data. Dilale Dönmez and Hevi Gökdemir provided valuable research assistance.

## NOTES

1. See Eligür (2010) and Sunar and Toprak (1983) for an overview of these reforms.
2. Turkish voters' self-placement on the ideological left-right scale has little economic basis and is strongly influenced by religiosity and attitudes like preference for the maintenance of the status quo (Çarkoğlu 2007).
3. The sampling procedure for the surveys starts with the use of Turkish Statistical Institute's (TUIK) NUTS-2 regions. The target samples were distributed according to each region's share of urban and rural population in accordance with records of the Address Based Population Registration System (ADNKS). Next, TUIK randomly selected blocks of four hundred addresses from each of the NUTS-2 regions according to probability-proportionate-to-size (PPS) principle, and twenty addresses were again randomly selected in each block. Selection of individuals in households is done on the basis of reported target population of eighteen years or older in each household according to a lottery method. If for any reason that individual could not respond to our questions in our first visit, then the same household is visited up to three times until a successful interview is conducted and no substitution was applied.
4. See Aytaç and Elçi (2019) for details of the survey and associated research.

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