

CONSERVATISM IN TURKEY

Based on data collected in research, the author analyzes the trends of conservatism in Turkey observing that conservatism is higher among rural and provincial residents, among people with lower education and income, and of more right-wing orientation. The author remarks that as a segment of society rises in socio-economic status while being politicized through religious parties, there may be a trend of reinterpreting Islam to be more congruent with the modern city realities. Another possibility is that religion will be taken as an unchanging realm and instead a stark division will come about in cities, between those of different lifestyle and worldviews.

Hakan Yılmaz *



* Hakan Yılmaz is Professor at the Department of Political Science and International Relations, Boğaziçi University, İstanbul, and the executive coordinator of Boğaziçi University's Master of Arts Program in European Studies.

Between July 2005 and July 2006, we conducted a research under the title of “Major Variants of Conservatism in Turkey.”¹ Using in-depth interviews and a nation-wide opinion survey, we have explored conservative political beliefs and attitudes in today’s Turkey, and attempted to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent and in which areas of their lives did the Turkish people perceive themselves to be conservative? How did people perceive and make use of “traditions” in their public and private decision-making processes and what strategies did they develop to make sense of and cope with change?
2. What was the strength of conservative values in the regulation of sexuality and women’s rights in the sphere of family and private life?
3. What was the strength of conservative values in the area of the regulation of gender relations and women’s rights in the public sphere?
4. To what extent did people take into account religious beliefs and considerations in making decisions on the political, social and personal issues that are of importance to them?

At the beginning of the research, we expected to find two major streams of conservatism in Turkey. One of them was political conservatism, which would come in the form of new nationalism (known by terms such as *ulusalcılık* or *ulusal sol*), be marked by anti-Western (Euroskeptic and anti-American) overtones, and be purporting to “conserve” the nation-state and national values in the face of Europeanization and globalization. The second area of conservatism we expected to find was social conservatism of an Islamic variety, which would be geared at conserving the religious regulatory mechanisms in the area of sexuality, gender relations, and family values. We thought political conservatism, aiming to defend the nation-state, would be the more important brand of conservatism, and social conservatism, focused on the regulation of sexuality and gender relations, would come in second place. We were clearly mistaken in the order of importance of these two conservative streams. The results proved just the opposite.

Hence, social conservatism emerged to be the more influential realm of Turkish conservatism, centered upon an idealized “holy family”, which itself was revolving around an idealized “woman” who was supposed to be equal with

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men, but at the same time honorable (namuslu) and hard-working (hamarat). Religion appeared to be an ideology which legitimized and upheld that “holy family”, particularly as regards the “equal, honorable and hardworking” position of women in that family structure.

Political conservatism, on the other hand, came almost exclusively in the form of skepticism towards the West (the EU and the U.S.). However, although they expressed strong West-skeptic tendencies, the majority of the respondents also expressed their support for Turkey’s EU membership. In a like manner, the great majority of the respondents expressed their support for the Republican project of Westernization and modernization, and they defined the “ideal Turk” as one who blends his/her (Turkish) culture with Western values. In Turkey, we did not observe a British or American style political conservatism in the sense of defending the existing political order, values and institutions. However, we did not observe significant currents of reformism in the area of politics either. Except for defensive reflexes in reaction to the real or perceived threats from the West, the political arena seemed quite neutral with respect to the claims for protection and the demands for change. In other words, the Turkish public expressed neither a strong conservatism, nor a strong reformism in the area of politics. That means that what the public mainly expected from politics was that it stay stable and not create turmoil or crises, particularly to avoid triggering economic crises, such as that of 2001.

The Turkish public appears to want to protect its “moderately patriarchal” family structures. People are for the general Western orientation of Turkey and want their country to join the EU, despite big reservations about Europe and about the West in general; they want change in the area of the economy in the form of more equal distribution of income; and, finally, they do not have strong ideas of change or conservation in the area of politics. The golden formula for Turkish conservatism thus appears to be: “protect the family; change the economy; ensure political stability; and, make us a member of the EU, without sacrificing our national customs and traditions.”

Conservative Themes

The following table outlines the main conservative themes and the general level of support for each of them. It is to be noted that, from a statistical point of view, each of the four themes is a cluster that reflects the composite impact of many single variables.

	Those with high conservative attitudes	Those with low or no conservative attitudes
Religious conservatism; one's relying on religious norms and values in making his/her personal, social, and political decisions	67%	33%
Conservatism in the area of sexuality: women's rights and male-female equality in the sphere of family and private life	59%	41%
Traditionalism; resistance to change	48%	52%
Conservatism in the area of gender relations: women's rights and male-female equality in the sphere of political and economic life	27%	73%

It is apparent that religious conservatism –a person's relying on religious norms and values in making his/her personal, social, and political decisions– was by far the most widespread dimension of conservatism in Turkey. Religious conservatism was followed by what can be called “sexual conservatism”, which designated an attempt to regulate sexuality and in particular women's values and behavior in the intimacy of family and personal life. Conversely, when it came to women's rights in the political and economic realms, on the other hand, the early Republican emphasis on male-female equality seems to have dominated the thinking of the general public as the great majority of our respondents expressed a favorable attitude towards gender equality in the public sphere. Finally, regarding the theme of traditionalism and resistance to change, the public looked divided into two roughly equal chunks, one chunk favoring traditions and opposing change, and the other one welcoming change and non-traditional ways of doing things.

Conservative Groups

Let us now look at which of the social groups, shown in the table below, occupied the top ranks for each of the four dimensions of conservatism mentioned above.

Ideology: Opinion Leaders Followed (Right-wing/Religious/ Nationalist vs. Left-wing/Secular/Liberal)
Ideology: Political Party Preference
Ideology: Self-Placement along the 1-10 Left-Right Scale
Ideology: Self-Placement along the 1-10 Nationalism Scale
Ideology: Self-Placement along the 1-10 Religiosity Scale
Place of Residence: Geographic Region of Residence
Place of Residence: Metropolitan Areas (Istanbul, Ankara, İzmir)
Place of Residence: Urban or Rural
Socioeconomic Status: Age
Socioeconomic Status: Employment (Full-time, Part-time, Seasonal, Housewife, Unemployed)
Socioeconomic Status: Gender
Socioeconomic Status: Knowledge of Foreign Languages
Socioeconomic Status: Level of Education
Socioeconomic Status: Level of Income
Socioeconomic Status: Marriage
Socioeconomic Status: Mother Tongue

The groups of high religious conservatism were (in decreasing order) the ones who did not have a formal education; those who followed right-wing/religious/nationalist opinion leaders; those who placed themselves to the right of the left-right scale; and those who would have voted for AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – Justice and Development Party) if there had been an election at the time of the survey.

The groups that ranked high along the line of low religious conservatism, on the other hand, were those who lived in one of the three metropolitan cities (Ankara, İstanbul, and İzmir); students of universities and post-graduate institutions; those who placed themselves to the left of the left-right scale; CHP (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi - Republican People's Party) voters; speakers of a western European language (English, French, or German); those who were in the middle-to-upper ranges of monthly household income; those who followed left-wing/secular/liberal opinion leaders; and those who placed themselves on the low points of the nationalism scale.

Those who were at the top of the list as regards high conservatism in the area of sexuality and male-female equality in the sphere of private life were: MHP

(Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi - Nationalist Action Party) voters; followers of right-wing/religious/nationalist opinion leaders; people living in the rural areas; right-wing people; people with 5-year elementary school diplomas; and AKP voters. Conversely, those leading in low conservatism in the area of sexuality and male-female equality in the sphere of family life were those who placed themselves at the low ends of the religiosity and nationalism scales; students; middle-to-high income earners; leftists; people living in Istanbul or Ankara; CHP voters; and people with a university or post-graduate degree.

An evaluation of the groups who were at the top of the remaining two high conservatism dimensions, namely, “traditionalism/resistance to change” and “attitudes towards male-female equality in political and economic life”, in which non-conservatives outweighed conservatives shows that, like in the previous two conservatism dimensions, we see people who followed right-wing/religious/nationalist opinion leaders; people with right-wing and nationalist leanings; AKP and MHP voters; those who lived in the rural areas; and those who had no formal education or had an elementary school diploma only.

Conversely, the groups that had the lowest levels conservatism along the dimensions of “traditionalism/resistance to change” and “attitudes towards male-female equality in political and economic life” were those who placed themselves at the lower points of the religiosity and nationalism scales and who chose the left side of the left-right scale; residents in one of the three big cities; people in the middle-to-upper income brackets; students; speakers of a western European language; followers of left-wing/secular/liberal opinion leaders; CHP voters; and people with a university or post-graduate degree.

From these data, we can come to the conclusion that whether a person would have a high or low level of conservatism depended to a great extent on his/her ideological orientation (his/her self-placement along the nationalism, left-right, and religiosity scales); the opinion leaders he/she follows (right-wing/religious/nationalist versus left-wing/secular/liberal); his/her party preferences (AKP/MHP versus CHP); his/her place of residence (rural versus urban; metropolitan versus provincial cities); and his/her levels of education and income. It is to be noted that age, gender, and ethnic identity (as measured by one’s mother tongue) did not directly appear among the basic determinants of conservative attitudes. These findings allow us to predict that, in line with the basic tenets of the modernization theory, conservatism, in all its four dimensions, can be expected to lessen as people move from the rural to the urban and from the provincial to the metropolitan areas. Similarly, and again in accordance with the basic assumptions of the modernization theory, an increase in general levels of education and income would also reduce conservative attitudes. On the other hand, a person’s politicization by means of right-wing, religious and nationalist political parties and opinion leaders would tend to boost his/her conservative orientation.

Concluding Remarks

At this point, an interesting question would be the direction and intensity of change in a person's degree of conservatism if that person underwent both a rise in his/her socioeconomic status and, at the same time a path of politicization through religious and nationalist parties and opinion leaders. Such a phenomenon has been taking place in Turkey under the AKP rule for the last 5-6 years. A simultaneous operation of seemingly conflicting forces might bring about quite unexpected outcomes. One likely outcome could be a reinterpretation of the teachings of religion and the principles of nationalism to make them more congruent with the realities and requirements of a higher social, economic and cultural status. This situation would roughly correspond to what some authors have formulated as the emergence of "non-Western forms of modernity" which we could observe in countries like Malaysia, Iran, Morocco, some Turkish cities, and some western European cities with sizeable Muslim immigrants. Another likely outcome could be a remodeling of the newly acquired higher socioeconomic status and cultural capital to make it conform to the basically unchanged principles of religion and nationalism. At this point, we could have what we might call a version of "modernity alla Dubai", with divided lives and minds, emphasizing the consumption aspect and technical sides of modernity.