

The Political Instrumentalization of the Topics of Secularism, Religious Freedom and Islamophobia in Turkey

Bernd Hirschberger and Friedrich Püttmann

The topics of secularism and religious freedom are central themes in political debates in Turkey. Over the course of the Turkish Republic's history, the interpretation of the terms has constantly shifted, yielding different levels of inclusiveness at different times. However, power-political interests have strongly politicized the terms at all times.

Kemalism's political instrumentalization of secularism

The Turkish Republic was built by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his supporters upon the supposedly French model of *laïcité* and the idea that religious practice should be private rather than public. The Kemalist interpretation of secularism was part of Kemalist and thus Turkish state ideology. Authoritarian secularists and leftists tended to perceive religion – in particular Islam – as a threat or competition to their positivist worldview and an obstacle to their ideological projects.¹ Therefore, for Turkey's Kemalist founding fathers, the Republic's

1 Bilgin, Pinar: "The Politics of Security and Secularism in Turkey: From the Early Republican Era to EU Accession Negotiations," in: Dietrich Jung/Catharina Raudvere (eds.), *Religion, Politics, and Turkey's EU Accession*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2008, pp. 139–156, p. 141; Orhan, Gözde: "Religious Freedom Governance or Institutionalization of a Heterodox Religion? Turkey's Urban Policies with Respect to Alevi Population," in: *Peace Human Rights Governance* 3 (2/2019), pp. 193–214, p. 211.

main concern was “freedom from religion, and almost never freedom of religion.”²

In this interpretation, secularism was not an approach that promoted religious freedom. On the contrary, the traditional Kemalist reading of secularism implies a considerable curtailment of religious freedom. However, in practice restrictions were applied sometimes more and sometimes less strictly. For instance, since the 1960s, despite the strict Kemalist principles, it has repeatedly been possible for parties with an Islamist orientation to participate in government in Turkey.³ However, secularism has repeatedly been misused as an instrument of political control. For example, in the wake of the 1980 military coup, the (in)famous Turkish headscarf ban was enacted (as the Dress and Appearance Regulation of 1982) as a reaction to the growing influence of Islamist elements in the country.⁴ However, it took until 1997 and an ultimatum by the military for the ban to be fully enforced.⁵

The role of the topic of religious freedom in the context of the transition of power to the AKP in the 2000s

While it was long unheard of in Turkey to show one's religiosity in public, new parties and leaders from the social periphery of Turkey gradually introduced a cultural change by no longer disguising their religious affinities. Especially the current ruling party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who first became prime minister then president of Turkey, have placed the topic of religious freedom at the center of their politics.

In 2007, the wife of former President Abdullah Gül became the first presidential wife to wear a headscarf, inciting a serious fury among Turkey's sec-

2 Akyol, Mustafa: “Turkey's Troubled Experiment with Secularism. Lessons from Turkey's Struggle to Balance Democracy and Laiklik” (25 Apr. 2019), <https://tcf.org/content/report/turkeys-troubled-experiment-secularism/>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

3 Zubaida, Sami: “The survival of kemalism,” in: *Cahiers D'études Sur La Méditerranée Orientale et Le Monde Turco-Iranien* 21 (1996), pp. 291–296.

4 Arik, Hulya: “Speaking of Women? Exploring Violence against Women through Political Discourses: A Case Study of Headscarf Debates in Turkey,” in: *e-cadernos CES* 16 (2012), pp. 10–31, p. 17, <https://doi.org/10.4000/eces.1009>.

5 Wiles, Ellen: “Headscarves, Human Rights, and Harmonious Multicultural Society: Implications of the French Ban for Interpretations of Equality,” in: *Law & Society Review* 41 (3/2007), pp. 699–735, p. 709.

ularist media and citizens. Later, in 2013, the current President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan lifted the headscarf ban as part of a “democratization package,” interestingly by basing himself on the fact that freedom of religion was a central value of the European Union, which Turkey was seeking to join. Indeed, by referring to the “Western” institution of the European Union, Erdoğan was able to rhetorically disarm his political opponents in the Kemalist camp, as they supported the project of European integration.

This incident became iconic in recent Turkish history and domestic political debates on religious freedom. This is the case because for Erdoğan’s supporters the issue of religious freedom has since then been closely connected to the issue of democracy and democratization overall. Within the framework of European integration, President Erdoğan liberalized many of Turkey’s institutions – whether political or economic – and reduced the influence of the Turkish military over Turkish politics, which was an explicit requirement by the EU’s *acquis communautaire* and took place against this background of several military coups that Turkey had previously experienced. This is tied to religious freedom because the Kemalist founding fathers of the Republic institutionalized the military as the guardian of the Republic’s Kemalist secular order and gave it the authority and mission to intervene in democratic politics when they saw this order (including secularism) as being at risk. Given the military’s long record of interventions against religious expression in Turkish politics (for example, Erdoğan himself was imprisoned for four months in 1999 for reciting a religious poem in public to mobilize his supporters), the curtailment of the military’s influence thus also expanded the exercise of religious freedom. These changes under Erdoğan in terms of religious freedom still matter today because they have created a profound loyalty to him among his supporters. In Turkey, it is common for people to closely associate changes in the country (from the building of roads to the spread of television) with not only certain periods but also the president of that time, and thankfully credit them for it, even if later times under the same person may be tougher. As a result, Erdoğan’s achievements regarding religious freedom have brought him strong political credit, which he partly still lives off today.

The populist reinterpretation of religious freedom under the AKP rule

While many liberal intellectuals in Turkey and large parts of the West hoped for a reconciliation of democracy and Islam through the AKP,⁶ the prospect of liberalization and democratization in Turkey was eventually disappointed. Instead, the Erdoğan-led AKP gradually adopted an illiberal interpretation of democracy.

Although references to EU integration in the context of religious freedom in Turkey have become rare these days, the AKP continues to use the semantics of human rights for its own power interests. Religious freedom is still being framed as a centerpiece of democracy. However, the notion of democracy that is referred to when doing so is no longer a democracy in terms of a liberal democracy with an emphasis on rights but in terms of the rule of the majority and the realization of their will. This change in how the ruling Islamist Turkish elite uses the term democracy also shapes the AKP's reinterpretation of religious freedom. The idea of religious freedom as a universal right to freedom benefiting all religious communities and individuals in Turkey has been replaced by a populist understanding that restricts religious freedom in a clientelistic and power-oriented way following a majoritarian and autocratic logic.

When the AKP and its leadership make demands and efforts with reference to religious freedom, it is noticeable that a single, specific population is the focus of attention: the majority group of pious, conservatively oriented Sunni Muslims. This majority – that has long felt suppressed in Turkey by the secular elites – is now encouraged to take up more space in society and the public sphere. In addition, religiously conservative politicians demand more attention to their 'religious sensitivities,' as it is often called in Turkish domestic political debates.⁷ The symbolically most prominent examples of this are certainly the lifting of the headscarf ban in 2013 as well as the rededication of the Hagia Sophia as a mosque in 2020, which was presented as a revision of a violation of

6 See e.g., Karakaya-Stump, Ayfer: "The AKP, sectarianism, and the Alevis' struggle for equal rights in Turkey," in: Celia Jenkins/Suavi Aydin/Umit Cetin (eds.), *Alevism as an Ethno-Religious Identity. Contested Boundaries*, London: Routledge 2018, pp. 53–67.

7 Bilgin: *Politics*, p. 140f., pp. 147–151; see also Alic, Anes: "Turkey's secular-democratic tightrope," <https://css.ethz.ch/en/services/digital-library/articles/article.html/88690>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

religious freedom.⁸ However, in their rhetoric, the AKP and its leadership also claim to promote the religious freedom of minorities. For example, in 2020, the AKP's human rights department published a report entitled "Our silent revolutions in the field of religious freedom."⁹ Nonetheless, in practice there is a visible gap between speech and actions. Even though some severe restrictions from the Kemalist era were lifted in the course of Turkey's application for EU membership,¹⁰ including restrictions discriminating against non-Muslim minorities,¹¹ experts continue to assess the state of religious freedom in Turkey as problematic. For instance, the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) international research network has even observed a deterioration in its Democracy Indices in the area of religious freedom since the AKP took over government responsibilities in 2003 (the corresponding indicator fell from -0.2 in 2003 to -0.72 in

-
- 8 Dogan, Taner: "Erdogan's 'New Turkey' narrative is no longer selling" (29 Sep. 2020), <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/turkey-erdogan-narrative-not-selling>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023; Oztig, Lacin Idil/Adisönmez, Umut Can: "Sovereignty, power, and authority: understanding the conversion of Hagia Sophia from a performative perspective," in: *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* (2023), pp. 1–21; TRT World: "Prayer restrictions lifted in Hagia Sophia," <https://www.trtworld.com/video/social-videos/prayer-restrictions-lifted-in-hagia-sophia/5fo88d7c3e5d6bo0171206de>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023; Attaman, Muhittin: "Reversion of Hagia Sophia: Normalization of Turkish politics" (29 Jul. 2020), <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/columns/reversion-of-hagia-sophia-normalization-of-turkish-politics>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.
 - 9 Şahan, Fazlı: "En güzel cevap sessiz devrimler: Ayasofya'nın açılışını eleştirenler bunları görmüyor" (13 Jul. 2020), <https://www.yenisafak.com/hayat/en-guzel-cevap-sessiz-devrimler-ayasofyanin-acilisini-elestirenler-bunlari-gormuyor-3549129>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023; Agenzia fides: "Ayasofya, Erdogan's Party responds to criticism: religious freedom has increased with our governments" (15 Jul. 2020), http://www.fides.org/en/news/68359-ASIA_TURKEY_Ayasofya_Erdogan_s_Party_responds_to_criticism_religious_freedom_has_increased_with_our_governments, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.
 - 10 Küçükcan, Talip: "Are Muslim Democrats a Threat to Secularism and Freedom of Religion? The Turkish Case," in: Allen D. Hertzke (ed.), *The Future of Religious Freedom: Global Challenges*, New York: Oxford Academic 2013, pp. 270–289; see also The Institute on Religion & Public Policy: *Institute on Religion and Public Policy Report: Religious Freedom in Turkey* (7 Oct. 2008), <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/f/8/34238.pdf>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.
 - 11 Oztig, Lacin Idil/Aydın, Kenan: "The AKP's Approach toward Non-Muslim Minorities," in: *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 42 (2/2017), pp. 59–73.

2022).¹² Minorities remain structurally discriminated against; for example, in the field of theological formation.¹³

Moreover, the Turkish government does not shy away from drawing on (widespread) prejudices¹⁴ against religious minorities and even fuels them through political agitation¹⁵ to gain the sympathy of Turkey's Sunni majority or divert attention from political problems for which the government is responsible. For example, the U.S. State Department remarked in its 2022 International Religious Freedom Report that the Turkish government "continued to treat Alevi Islam as a heterodox Muslim 'sect' and categorized Alevi worship as cultural rather than religious,"¹⁶ and did not recognize Alevi houses of worship. Moreover, individuals affiliated with the AKP have repeatedly made use of anti-Semitic or anti-Zionist codes and narratives. Even though anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism were already widespread long before the AKP came to power, it is noticeable that the media environment close to the AKP now feels emboldened to openly express respective prejudices.¹⁷ For example, in publications such as the popular documentary *Üst Akıl* ("Mastermind") by the pro-government TV station *A Haber*, parallels to the anti-Semitic conspir-

-
- 12 Varieties of Democracy: The V-Dem Project, https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/VariableGraph/, accessed on: 26. Oct. 2023. Indicator: "Freedom of Religion," negative trend also for the indicator "Religious Organization Repression."
 - 13 Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz/Kirchenamt der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland (eds.): 3. Ökumenischer Bericht zur Religionsfreiheit weltweit 2023. Eine christliche Perspektive auf ein universelles Menschenrecht (= Gemeinsame Texte Nr. 28), Bonn/Hannover 2023, pp. 163–168.
 - 14 Freedom House: Freedom in the World 2023. Turkey, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/turkey/freedom-world/2023>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.
 - 15 Hintz, Lisel: "Challenges to Religious Freedom among Religious Minorities in Turkey," <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Lisel%20Hintz-%20SAIS.pdf>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.
 - 16 U.S. Department of State: 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Turkey, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/turkey/>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.
 - 17 Bali, Rifat N.: "Antisemitism in Turkey: A New Phenomenon or More of the Same?," in: Armin Lange/Kerstin Mayerhofer/Dina Porat/Lawrence H. Schiffmann (eds.), *Confronting Antisemitism in Modern Media, the Legal and Political Words*, Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2021, pp. 223–238, p. 232f; Waldmann, Simon A.: "Erdogan, the AKP and Antisemitism" (1 Jun. 2016), <https://isgap.org/flashpoint/erdogan-the-akp-and-antisemitism/>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

acy theory about the “Wise Men of Zion” are noticeable.¹⁸ Moreover, Erdoğan himself occasionally toys with such sentiments. However, in contrast to his political mentor, Necmettin Erbakan, this seems to be motivated by political calculations rather than ideological convictions.¹⁹

In addition, the AKP-led government’s control-oriented religious policy towards both the Sunni majority and religious minorities stands in conflict with a human rights-based interpretation of freedom of religion or belief: regarding the Sunni majority, the Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*) – which had already been used by Kemalist governments to exert influence – remains an important instrument of control for the AKP.²⁰ Nonetheless, control is also a central goal for its religious policy towards minorities. As a part of this, the government is increasingly attempting to influence the leadership of the religious communities, including the elections of patriarchs and chief rabbis.²¹

Altogether, it becomes evident that both its (alleged) commitment to religious freedom and its positioning towards secularism as well as the Turkish government’s religious policy as a whole are not primarily oriented towards human rights but rather power-political interests. Both the focus on the majority group of conservative Sunni Muslims and the prioritization of their in-

18 Balke, Ralf: “Antisemitismus spielt eine ganz zentrale Rolle.’ Simon Waldman über den Besuch von Recep Tayyip Erdogan, das Verhältnis zu Israel und Judenhass” (27 Sep. 2018), <https://www.juedische-allgemeine.de/juedische-welt/antisemitismus-spielt-eine-ganz-zentrale-rolle/>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023; Baer, Marc David: “Erdoğan accuses Germany of echoing the Nazis – but his own record on anti-Semitism is shameful” (13 Apr. 2017), <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2017/04/13/erdogan-accuses-germany-of-echoing-the-nazis-but-his-own-record-on-anti-semitism-is-shameful/>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023; Baer, Marc David: “Erdoğan und die Zinslobby” (10 Jun. 2017), <https://taz.de/Debatte-Antisemitismus-in-der-AKP/!5410004/>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

19 Bali: Antisemitism, p. 228.

20 Yildirim, Mine: “TURKEY: The Diyanet – the elephant in Turkey’s religious freedom room?,” in: Forum 18 News (4 May 2011), <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4dc24d952.pdf>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023; Yilmaz, Isan/Albayrak, Ismail: Populist and Pro-Violence State Religion. The Diyanet’s Construction of Erdoğanist Islam in Turkey, Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore 2022; Seufert, Günter: The changing nature of the Turkish State Authority for Religious Affairs (ARA) and Turkish Islam in Europe, Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik 2020.

21 Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz/Kirchenamt der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland (eds.): Ökumenischer Bericht, p. 166.

terests as well as the instrumentalization of prejudices against minorities ultimately emerge from an attempt to please a large electoral group and gather their votes for the AKP.

Polarization of the political debates about religious freedom and secularism and the opposition's likewise populist reaction

The AKP strongly relies on the use of identity politics and a harsh tone against the political opposition. For instance, despite claiming to be religiously tolerant, the pejorative term *gavur* (infidel) – a term used to refer to Orthodox Christians in the Ottoman Empire's tax registers and which has become an insult to non-Muslims and non-believers – is a common element in the AKP's repertoire of rhetorical attacks on political opponents.²² Furthermore, the AKP often uses a logic of “we vs. others”²³ when dealing with political opponents and claims to speak for “the people” whereas opponents are portrayed as “the enemy” of the people.²⁴ It is also not uncommon for the AKP to accuse political opponents of being Islamophobic.²⁵

On the other hand, the secular Kemalist-oriented forces in the opposition criticized the fact that Erdoğan's references to the EU and democratization merely served as a fig leaf for him to advance his secret agenda of gradually Islamising Turkish society and introducing conservative cultural change.

22 Ertan, Nazlan: “Turkey's rulers need to stop using the word ‘infidel’” (19 Apr. 2021), <https://www.duvarenglish.com/turkeys-rulers-need-to-stop-using-the-word-infidel-article-57131>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023; Liphshiz, Cnaan: “Turkey school textbooks call Jews and Christians ‘infidels’” (5 Mar. 2021), <https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/antisemitism/turkey-school-textbooks-call-jews-and-christians-infidels-661051>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023; Erdemir, Aykan/Maenza, Nadine: “Turkey Needs to Change its Policy and Rhetoric Toward Religious Minorities | Opinion” (29 Apr. 2021), <https://www.newswweek.com/turkey-needs-change-its-policy-rhetoric-toward-religious-minorities-opinion-1586803>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

23 Hintz: Challenges.

24 Yilmaz, Ihsan: “Erdoğan's Political Journey: From Victimised Muslim Democrat to Authoritarian, Islamist Populist,” in: ECPS Leader Profiles. European Center for Populism Studies (14 Feb. 2021), <https://www.populismstudies.org/erdogans-political-journey-from-victimised-muslim-democrat-to-authoritarian-islamist-populist/>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

25 Aydındag, Didem/İsalsal, Huseyin: “Securitization of Identity in Turkey During the AKP Era,” in: *Revista Gênero e Interdisciplinaridade* 2 (1/2021), pp. 498–523, p. 515.

This rhetoric can be seen as a reaction to the shock of their loss of power with their own, different form of populism. While the AKP's populism focuses on the interests of the Sunni majority, this "secular populism"²⁶ focuses on a glorification, idealization and romanticization of Kemalist secularism while largely ignoring its deficits and curtailments of democracy and human rights. As a result, the aggressive populist style of the government as well as the at times populist reactionary strategies of the opposition contribute to a strong polarization of the debates on religious freedom and secularism in Turkey and Turkish society as a whole. While fierce mutual attacks continue to characterize the culture of political debate in Turkey, a repositioning of the oppositional Republican People's Party's (CHP) approach to secularism has become apparent in recent years.

After the strategy of secular populism had proven unsuccessful, the party began to loosen its ideological principles regarding Kemalist secularism and in turn also tried to appeal to conservative Muslim voters.²⁷ For example, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu – presidential candidate of the main opposition parties in 2023 – advocated a doctrine of *helalleşme* (reconciliation) in the run-up to the general elections, particularly targeting the religiously conservative Muslim part of the population.²⁸ Already in 2017, the CHP leader had presented his party as a "defender of the freedom of religion and conscience," protecting various lifestyles, including conservative ones.²⁹ In October 2022, breaking with a rigid application of Kemalist principles, Kılıçdaroğlu proposed a law to protect the right to

26 Tambar, Kabir: "Secular Populism and the Semiotics of the Crowd in Turkey," in: *Public Culture* 21 (3/2009), pp. 517–537.

27 See e.g., Bajec, Alessandra: "Turkey's opposition opens up to the hijab" (12 May 2023), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/12/turkeys-opposition-opens-up-to-the-hijab>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023; Aydın, Selçuk: "Turkey elections: Why the CHP has changed its stance on headscarves" (12 Oct. 2022), <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/turkey-elections-why-chp-has-changed-its-stance-headscarves>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

28 Kendrick, Leo: "Opposition leader's call for reconciliation spark discussion on Turkey's historical wrongdoings and current polarization" (19 Nov. 2023), <https://mediascope.tv/2021/11/19/opposition-leaders-call-for-reconciliation-spark-discussion-on-turkeys-historical-wrongdoings-and-current-polarization/>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

29 BirCün Daily: "CHP the 'guarantor of lifestyles' in Turkey" (23 Oct. 2017), <https://www.birgun.net/haber/chp-the-guarantor-of-lifestyles-in-turkey-186045>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

wear headscarves even in public institutions.³⁰ The AKP's reaction to such advances from the ranks of the opposition is typically to outdo them. For example, the AKP suggested that the right to wear a headscarf should even be included in the constitution via an amendment³¹ and even more strongly drew on an anti-LGBT rhetoric in an alleged defense of the traditional family.³² In the struggle for votes from the conservative population, they portrayed the opposition as "pro-LGBT," while according to them only the government alliance protected the "sanctity of the family."³³

The instrumentalization of the fight against Islamophobia as a diaspora and foreign policy tool

The topic of religious freedom also plays a central role in the AKP-led government's rhetoric in the realm of international politics. In particular, the AKP has established the fight against Islamophobia as a central theme of Turkish foreign and diaspora policy.

In doing so, the AKP is certainly taking up an important issue, as xenophobic and also Islamophobic prejudices are widespread in many Western countries. There is often a lack of commitment to counteracting the corresponding group-focused enmity. On the contrary, many media sources in Western countries offer considerable space to corresponding narratives, and sometimes even politicians and parties from the democratic center take up rhetorics and proposals from the far right in the hope of gaining voters' ap-

30 Euro|topics: "Turkey: CHP calls for law protecting headscarves" (7 Oct. 2022), <https://www.eurotopics.net/en/289620/turkey-chp-calls-for-law-protecting-headscarves>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

31 Daily Sabah: "Turkish constitutional committee approves amendment on headscarf" (25 Jan. 2023), <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/legislation/turkish-constitutional-committee-approves-amendment-on-headscarf>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

32 Wilks, Andrew: "Headscarf debate returns to Turkish politics at initiative of secularist opposition" (6 Oct. 2022), <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/10/headscarf-debate-returns-turkish-politics-initiative-secularist-opposition>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

33 Stockholm Center for Freedom: "Erdoğan reiterates plan for anti-LGBT constitutional amendment" (7 Jun. 2023), <https://stockholmcf.org/erdogan-reiterates-plan-for-anti-lgbt-constitutional-amendment/>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

proval in this way. This lays the ground for the AKP and its leadership to take up this issue in a populist way.

Especially ahead of elections in Turkey, leading AKP politicians are conspicuous for using a very harsh tone to attack Western allies. For example, in 2017, in the run-up to the constitutional referendum on the expansion of the presidential powers, Erdoğan criticized a controversial ruling by the European Court of Justice on the wearing of religious symbols by employees as a “crusade struggle against the (Muslim) crescent.”³⁴ Moreover, after having been denied entry to the Netherlands to campaign for the referendum, Foreign Minister Cavoşoğlu warned of “religious wars”³⁵ in Europe and claimed that there was “no difference between Dutch social democrats and the fascist Wilders.”³⁶ Before the 2018 Turkish general elections, Erdoğan in turn sharply attacked the Austrian chancellor for his actions against “political Islam” and the closure of mosques, focusing less on factual criticism and more on questioning Kurz’s ability to govern due to his young age.³⁷ During campaign rallies ahead of the 2019 local elections, President Erdoğan played a video of the Islamophobic attack on a Christchurch mosque, even though minors were also present,³⁸ sharply attacked New Zealand and Australia,³⁹ accusing “the West of ‘preparing’ the manifesto of the Christchurch attacker” and claiming “that the West

34 Arab News: “Erdogan accuses EU of launching anti-Islam ‘crusade’” (16 Mar. 2017), <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1069161/amp>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

35 VOA News: “Turkey’s Top Diplomat Warns of Religious Wars in Europe” (16 Mar. 2017), <https://www.voanews.com/a/turkey-warns-of-religious-wars-in-europe/3768816.html>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

36 Khalidi, Ari: “Turkey FM expects religious wars in Europe” (16 Mar. 2017), <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/11036-Turkey-FM-expects-religious-wars-in-Europe>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

37 Bernath, Markus: “Neue Attacken von Tayyip Erdoğan gegen Sebastian Kurz” (11 Jun. 2018), <https://www.derstandard.de/story/2000081350287/neue-attacken-erdogans-gegen-kurz>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023; Innerhofer, Hannes: “‘Unmoralischer Kanzler’: Erdogan greift Sebastian Kurz heftig an” (2 Jun. 2018), <https://www.unsertirol24.com/2018/06/02/unmoralischer-kanzler-erdogan-greift-sebastian-kurz-heftig-an/>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

38 Tremblay, Pinar: “Erdogan took Christchurch shooting to campaign trail” (19 Mar. 2019), <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2019/03/turkey-erdogan-took-christchurch-shooting-to-campaign-trail.html>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2019.

39 Ozerkan, Fulya: “Erdogan calls for fight on Islamophobia like ‘anti-Semitism after Holocaust’” (22 Mar. 2019), <https://www.timesofisrael.com/erdogan-calls-for-fight-on-islamophobia-like-anti-semitism-after-holocaust/>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

and Western media have remained silent about the massacre,” promising to bring the attacker to justice if New Zealand would not, and calling on New Zealand to reinstate the death penalty.⁴⁰ Furthermore, in 2020 he engaged in heated arguments with French President Emmanuel Macron, claiming that the latter needed “mental treatment”⁴¹ and calling for a boycott of French products.⁴² Fahrettin Altun – then-President of the Directorate of Communications of Turkey – also accused Macron of anti-Muslim rhetoric and following “the old Fascist playbook that targeted Jews in Europe in this manner.”⁴³ The AKP’s language in its fight against Islamophobia is thus characterized by personal attacks and strong polemics. Inappropriate comparisons of allegedly Islamophobic politics with the “crusades,”⁴⁴ the Holocaust⁴⁵ or the Covid-19 pandemic⁴⁶

40 Weise, Zia: “Turkey’s Erdoğan invokes Christchurch attacks on campaign trail” (20 Mar. 2019), <https://www.politico.eu/article/erdogan-invokes-christchurch-attacks-on-campaign-trail/>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2019.

41 Deutsche Welle: “Erdoğan blasts Macron and ‘Islamophobia’ in Europe” (24 Oct. 2020), <https://www.dw.com/en/erdogan-says-macron-needs-mental-treatment-blasts-europes-islamophobia/a-55385180>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

42 Devamı, Haberin: “President Erdoğan calls for boycott of French goods” (26 Oct. 2020), <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/president-erdogan-calls-for-boycott-of-french-goods-159484>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

43 Zontur, Erdoğan Çağatay: “Turkey’s Communications director slams French president” (27 Oct. 2020), <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/turkeys-communications-director-slams-french-president/2020206>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

44 See e.g., Deutsche Welle: “Erdoğan accuses EU of ‘crusade’ against Islam” (17 Mar. 2017), <https://www.dw.com/en/erdogan-accuses-eu-of-crusade-against-islam/a-37979126>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

45 See e.g., Aharon, Eldad Ben: “Erdoğan’s comparison of Islamophobia, antisemitism doesn’t work – opinion” (17 Dec. 2020), <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/erdogans-comparison-of-islamophobia-antisemitism-doesnt-work-opinion-652489>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023; Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye: “The rising Islamophobia in the West has turned into an all-out attack on our Book, our Prophet and all our sacred values” (26 Oct. 2020), <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/122501/-the-rising-islamophobia-in-the-west-has-turned-into-an-all-out-attack-on-our-book-our-prophet-and-all-our-sacred-values->, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

46 See e.g., Höhler, Gerd: “Türkischer Staatschef vergleicht Islamphobie mit dem Holocaust” (14 May 2021), <https://www.rnd.de/politik/tuerkischer-staatschef-vergleicht-islamophobie-mit-dem-holocaust-BYFWYZTHZNCJDNQY6WMLALGIVE.html>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

as well as accusations of supporting terrorists are recurring elements of this jargon.⁴⁷

This suggests that the motivation behind this rhetoric is more rooted in the Turkish government's own power-political interests than in actually protecting Muslim minorities in Europe:

The topic of the fight against Islamophobia offers President Erdoğan and his party the opportunity to stage Erdoğan himself in the heroic role of the “defender” of Islam and Islamic values and traditions as well as the “champion” against Islamophobia.⁴⁸ Adopting the language of colonial liberation and the fight against oppression, the Turkish government presents itself as the “voice of the voiceless.”⁴⁹ In this way, it hopes to gain approval and sympathy among Turkish voters, especially among the large diaspora in Western countries and to expand its public diplomacy vis-à-vis Muslim societies abroad. This rhetoric goes hand in hand with Turkey's domestic discourse about conservative Muslims' victimhood.⁵⁰

In some cases, the references to the problem of Islamophobia are also used to place pressure on partners to obtain political concessions that can be presented as domestic successes. A prominent example of this is the Turkish government's blockade of Sweden's NATO accession in 2022/23 after rallies with Quran burnings took place there. While the Turkish government publicly called for “sincere steps from Sweden in the fight against Islamophobia,”⁵¹ other in-

47 See e.g., Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye: Islamophobia; *Hürriyet Daily News*: “Turkey's Erdoğan says his only concern is Islam, takes jab at atheists” (2 Aug. 2015), <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkeys-erdogan-says-his-only-concern-is-islam-takes-jab-at-atheists-86228>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

48 See e.g., Hussein, Rikar: “How Turkey's Erdogan Portrayed Syria Offensive as a Pan-Islam Struggle” (13 Nov. 2019), https://www.voanews.com/a/extremism-watch_how-turkeys-erdogan-portrayed-syria-offensive-pan-islam-struggle/6179309.html, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

49 See e.g., Mengü, Nevşin: “How China's influence flipped Turkey's position on Uighurs” (27 Jan. 2021), <https://www.duvarenglish.com/how-chinas-influence-flipped-turkeys-position-on-uighurs-article-56020>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

50 Yesil, Bilge: “Mediating Muslim Victimhood: An Analysis of Religion and Populism in International Communication,” in: *International Journal of Communication* 17 (2023), pp. 2904–2924.

51 Zorlu, Faruk: “Türkiye concerned by ‘increasing anti-Islamic rhetoric, actions in Europe’: President Erdogan” (1 Feb. 2023), <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkiye/turkiye-concerned-by-increasing-anti-islamic-rhetoric-actions-in-europe-president-erdogan/2803868>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

terests were also at stake, including the extradition of Kurdish activists and increased access to US military equipment.⁵²

The political power perspective thus seems to prevail over the normative one and the Turkish government's primary concern appears to be to harvest political capital out of its criticism of others. This is shown not only by the fact that this rhetoric is used especially during election campaigns but also that the criticism of Islamophobia in other, non-Western countries is very selective. For example, the Turkish government is conspicuously reticent about criticizing the Chinese regime's treatment of the majority Muslim minority of the Uyghurs.⁵³ It is also striking that countries that are portrayed as the worst perpetrators in the Turkish government's rhetoric at one point in time are often presented later again as the closest partners and friends, and vice versa, insofar as this is politically opportune.⁵⁴

Conclusion

To conclude, the role of religious freedom in Turkish domestic political debates can hardly be understated as it represents a pivotal arena for Turkey's general struggle over democracy and its meaning, and because – given the major role of identity politics in Turkey – it remains an issue that can determine elections.

52 Al Jazeera: "Turkey's been busy at NATO: Sweden's bid, F-16s and war mediation" (13 Jul. 2023), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/13/turkeys-busy-nato-swedens-bid-f-16-jets-war-mediation>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

53 Mengü: China's Influence; Dorian, Jones: "Turkish Opposition Challenge Erdogan Over Uighur Silence" (28 Jan. 2021), https://www.voanews.com/a/europe_turkish-opposition-challenge-erdogan-over-uighur-silence/6201354.html, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

54 See e.g., Turkey's relations with the governments of Israel: Frantzmänn, Seth J.: "Turkey's shift from hating Israel to mending relations – analysis" (22 Sep. 2022), <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-717859>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023; Sariaslan, Kübra Zeynep/Avetisyan, Armine: "What the Turkish election means for Armenia-Turkey relations" (18 May 2023), <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2023/05/18/what-the-turkish-election-means-for-armenia-turkey-relations/>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.