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# FUTURE OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION UNDER THE NEW EXECUTIVE PRESIDENCY IN TURKEY

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By Dr. Abdurrahman Hendek

**THE REPUBLIC OF TURKEY HAS ALWAYS HAD A** complex relationship with Islam. As Martin puts it, Islam has been 'simultaneously blamed as the source of backwardness and defeat, and lauded as the fount of everyday values'.<sup>1</sup> Islam has also been a factor in the electoral calculations of political parties since the multi-party system<sup>2</sup>, which made everything related to Islam, especially education, a battleground between conservative and secular parties and groups. In this environment, religious education has experienced periods of prosperity and decline, depending on the views and policies of political parties in power. As Turkey has entered a new political era, it is important to discuss the future of religious education under the new executive presidential system, which was promoted as a fast and effective administration system.

It is no secret that religious education has enjoyed a period of prosperity, more than ever, under the AK Party (Justice and Development Party) governments. There was of course religious education in state

education system before AK Party's rise to power in 2002. For example, religious education course, titled 'Religious Culture and Ethics Knowledge', has been compulsory from 4<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> grades in state schools since 1982. Even though its compulsory status has been subject to criticisms since then, no government has attempted to change its status. Interestingly, once it was reported that self-described conservative-democrat AK Party was considering removing 'compulsory' status of religious education from the constitution<sup>3</sup>, but it has not been materialised, partly because there has never been found a grand social and political agreement to write a new constitution, and the issue did not come to the fore in the subsequent constitutional changes. Since then, let alone dropping compulsory status of religious education, AK Party governments made the course further compulsory, as it became one of the courses tested in secondary school and university entrance exams in 2013. What is more, new elective religious education courses, dubbed as 'compulsory-elective'

courses by the critics, were added to middle and higher secondary schools.

There have also been Imam–Hatip schools since 1950s, but they were one of the focal issues of the 28<sup>th</sup> February process, which resulted in dramatic changes in their status: their middle sections were closed, they were classified as 'vocational high schools' and their graduates were penalised on the university entrance exam if they wanted to pursue academic degrees in non–religious fields. AK Party has gradually reversed all these changes: the number of Imam–Hatip schools rocketed, their middle section was reopened, and the status of these schools was changed from vocational schools to mainstream schools which means that their graduates can pursue university degrees, without penalty, in religious and non–religious fields.

It is highly likely that religious education will continue to enjoy the period of prosperity under the new executive president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. There will probably more Imam–Hatip schools and the content of education in general will be more religiously–oriented. However, there will be two pertinent issues. The first one is the criticism levelled at the current trend, namely, the rise of religious education and the second one is the future of religious education under a possible laic executive president.

If Erdoğan or a like–minded candidate win the elections, Turkey will be governed by a conservative leader, which means that the relevant prosperity of religious education

will continue. However, this prosperity is not without criticism. There are criticisms from different groups for different reasons. For example, Education Union, a laic and left leaning education union criticises Erdoğan and his governments for 'Islamising' education. It is important to note that even though the Union accuses Erdoğan of Islamising education, they argue that Erdoğan does not really Islamise education for Islam's sake, but he does this to exploit religion to gain popular support. The Union also argues that religious education policies, like education policies in general, have been shaped by Erdoğan and his allies, with little input from other stakeholders.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, some Alevi organisations maintain their fundamental argument that religious education classes in middle and high schools are based on Sunni theology and are used to assimilate Alevis into Sunnism. Even though the religious education courses include information about Alevi faith, some Alevi groups maintain that the courses teach Alevi faith from a Sunni perspective.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, some Alevis and Atheists still beg for a universal right to withdraw from religious education and have made many attempts to seek recourse from national and international law.<sup>6</sup>

Interestingly, current religious education policy is also criticised by some members of conservative community. Some criticises AK Party's education policies for, what policy sociologists call, policy 'hyperactivism'<sup>7</sup> and some criticises the quality of religious education. It is argued

that religious education currently enjoys quantity, but still lacks quality.<sup>8</sup>

Another pertinent issue is what will happen to religious education if a secular president is elected as an executive president. That's why one of the themes of AK Party election campaign in the Presidential Election 2018 was to 'protect' social, political and educational achievements of AK Party governments. The rise of religious education is seen as the achievement of AK Party by the party supporters and they worry that this achievement can be overturned overnight by a possible laic executive president with his/her fast-track legislative powers. This concern probably leads even the critics of the party still vote for Erdoğan and his AK Party to avert, among others, decline of religious education under a laic president.

These issues will probably shape the future of religious education in Turkey. On the one hand, the conservative community will expect more focus on quality rather than on mere quantity of religious education. The laic community, on the other hand, will expect more inclusive religious education and education policies. Rapid educational policy changes without solid consultation periods will not serve the purpose. Turkey, after almost a hundred year of her establishment and a major transformation into the executive presidential system, still seems to need a grand social and political agreement to find the best way forward for its religious education policy.

**Dr. Abdurrahman Hendek**

Theology Faculty/Sakarya University  
abdurrahmanhendek@sakarya.edu.tr  
abdurrahman.hendek@cesran.org

**Notes:**

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