Challenging Multiculturalism

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Chapter Fourteen

Multiculturalism and Minorities in Turkey

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This chapter examines the management of ethnocultural diversity in Turkey, which has undergone enormous change since the turn of the new century. I distinguish between ‘diversity as a phenomenon’ and ‘diversity as a discourse’ in the Turkish context, and will claim that the state and various ethnic groups have generally employed discursive diversity. This has been to remain consonant with the prevailing discourse of unity in diversity within the European context which followed the Helsinki Summit of the European Union in December 1999. I then consider rising Euroscepticism and parochialism in Turkey which became discernible after accession negotiations about membership started with the EU in 2005. It has brought about a retreat in official discourse, I document, regarding recognition of the ethnocultural and political claims of various minority groups, such as Kurds, Alevi, Circassians, Lazis, Armenians, Greeks and others.

Diversity as a phenomenon and as a discourse

There are two alternative ways of comprehending diversity in the Turkish context: diversity as a phenomenon and diversity as a discourse. The former refers to the coexistence of different ethnocultural and religious groups in a historical process. It entails either a primordial phenomenon encompassing migration flows through Asia Minor, or a politically generated phenomenon as in the settlement of various ethnic groups in Central Anatolia by imperial (nineteenth-century) and Republican (twentieth-century) settlement laws (Kirişçi 2000; Dündar 2001; Çağaptay 2006; Şeker 2007; Ülker 2007). In either case diversity as a phenomenon was not necessarily valued by the ruling powers, and was sometimes even denied.

The nation-building process in Turkey that was initiated at the beginning of the twentieth century has developed in parallel with attempts to homogenize the nation by denying the diverse character
of the Anatolian population. This process is characterized by a heterophobia resulting from the fear of losing the remaining parts of the Ottoman Empire. As in other examples of nation building, recent Turkish history is marked by homogenization. The persisting Sèvres Syndrome, derived from the Sèvres Peace Treaty signed by the Allied powers and the Ottoman Empire in 1920 and leading to the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, still drives fear of a break-up of the Turkish state (Önis 2004: 12).

Nevertheless, we can find recent signs of recognition of ethnic, religious and cultural differences by the Turkish state. Diversity as a discourse gained momentum in the last decade in the attempt to join the EU. The shift from homogenization to diversity discourse may seem to be a product of external factors such as EU norms. But it reflects more complex processes than that, subsuming both internal and external factors. The Kemalist rhetoric of homogenizing nationalism had involved a retrospective narrative emphasizing how the Muslim origins of the nation kept it together in the face of imperialist European powers. But Kemalist ideology encountered various challenges in the aftermath of the 1980 military coup originating from previous taboo phenomena – the ethnocultural and religious diversity comprised of Islam, Kurds, Alevi, Circassians, globalization, liberalization and Europeanization.

The historical context of multiculturalism in Turkey

Management of ethnocultural and religious diversity in the Ottoman Empire was mainly carried out on the basis of the ideology of multiculturalism, which was literally called the ‘millet system’. Millet is an Ottoman Turkish term referring to confessional communities in the Ottoman Empire; it comes from the Arabic word millah (‘nation’). Subject populations such as the Christians were classified by their religious affiliations. Their civil concerns were settled by their own ecclesiastical authorities delegated to them by the Sultan. This was the way the government secured access to the non-Muslim populations (Mardin 1981: 192). With the Tanzimat reforms (1839–76) millet started to refer to legally protected religious minority groups other than the ruling Sunni Muslims (Mardin 1981: 196; Zürcher 2003: 66).

Beside the Muslim millet, the main millets in the Ottoman Empire were the Greek, Orthodox, Jewish, Armenian and Syrian Orthodox populations (Barkey 2007). The millet system worked efficiently until
the age of nationalisms when the Ottoman Empire began to crack. Until then interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims had been circumscribed because of the ethnocultural and religious boundaries essentialized by the *millet* system. Moreover, non-Muslims, though they were allowed to maintain their own religious and cultural heritage, were subject to certain rules, including limits on intermarriage and special taxes in lieu of military service (Mardin 1981; Kymlicka 1992). Therefore, the acceptance of *millet* was dependent on their willingness to abide by the regulations of the Empire, which encouraged conformity. The political system did not perceive members of the *millet* as individuals but rather as a part of a collective non-Muslim identity. It nevertheless strictly applied the principle of equality during the *Tanzimat* era (Tunaya 1960).

Decision making was concentrated in the hands of a small political elite, at the centre of which stood the Sultan. His power was theoretically absolute, but in practice it was limited by the existence of three major power structures, the *Ulema* (religious intellectuals), the military and the bureaucracy (Szyliowicz 1966). The separation of the *khalifa*, as an ideal religious figure, and the Sultan, as the actual ruler, resulted in several unique social formations: this included the establishment of a group of military-religious rulers who emerged from sectarian elements, and the autonomous *ulema* who developed networks that brought together – under one religious and often also social-civilizational umbrella – varied ethnic and geopolitical groups, tribes, settled peasants and urban groups (Eisenstadt 2006: 447–9). Through their control of education, of the judiciary and of the administrative network, the *ulema* acted as agents of the state, and secured the state’s control of societal life (Mardin 1981: 194). As a result, the *ulema* were the umbrella under which the *ummah* was able to convene, and together the two entities constituted an autonomous public sphere. This decoupling of an autonomous and vibrant public sphere from the political arena – more precisely, the realm of rulership – distinguished Turkey from Europe and constituted one of the distinctive characteristics of Muslim civilization (Eisenstadt 2006: 452).

**Tolerating difference**

Ottoman multiculturalism was usually coupled with the term ‘tolerance’, which has a long history in the Turkish context tracing back to the early days of the Ottoman Empire. It is also found in everyday
popular usage in modern Turkey. Turks are generally proud of the *millet* system of the Ottoman Empire, which is often celebrated as the guarantor of tolerance and as respecting the boundaries between religious communities.

Official discourse celebrating tolerance is still discernible in contemporary Turkey, although it is little more than a myth. For instance, research conducted by Ali Çarkoğlu and Binnaz Toprak (2007) found that more than half of the Turkish population was intolerant of having gays and atheists as their neighbours. It also uncovered that 42 per cent of respondents were intolerant of having Greeks and Armenians as their neighbours and 28 per cent intolerant of Kurdish-origin neighbours (Çarkoğlu and Toprak 2006). The myth of tolerance has been functional in concealing mistreatment of ethnocultural and religious minorities other than the majority of Sunni-Muslim Turks.

Tolerance has been confined to the acceptance of Sunni Muslims and their secular counterparts under the banner of a Sunni-Muslim-Turkish nation; it does not embrace all different kinds of ethnocultural and religious minorities. As Karen Barkey (2008: 110) stated, tolerance in the Ottoman context as well as in other imperial contexts refers to the ‘absence of persecution of people but not their acceptance into society as full and welcomed members of community’. Tolerance is actually nothing but a form of governmentality (Foucault 1979), designed to maintain peace and order in multi-ethnic and multidenominational contexts. The Ottoman imperial experience and the Turkish national experience have confirmed how tolerance of non-Muslims, non-Sunni Muslims and non-Turks was dependent on their not challenging the Sunni-Islam-Turkish order. If ethnocultural and religious minorities did transgress, their recognition could easily turn into suppression and persecution. I claim, therefore, that ‘tolerance’ is nothing but a myth in Turkey, as it is in other countries such as the Netherlands or the Balkans (Walzer 1997; Hayden 2002; Brown 2006).

The defining distinctiveness of the early Republic was Turkification policies that sought the dominance of Turkishness and Sunni Islam in every walk of life, from the language spoken in the public space to citizenship, national education, commerce, public-sector employment, industrial life and even settlement laws (Aktar 2000; Yıldız 2001). Inheriting an imperial legacy, many new laws set out to homogenize the entire nation without tolerance of difference. Moreover, it is highly probable that the ethnocultural diversity among the Muslim
population of the Republic had been underestimated because of the use of the Ottoman *millet* system borrowed by the Republican state elite. The *millet* system did not consider ethnic differences among Muslims. All Muslims, regardless of their other differences, belonged to one and the same ‘Muslim nation’. Paradoxically, the success of the Turkish rupture from the past lay in the continuity of the Ottoman notion of *millet*. Hence, the modern Turkish Republic became indifferent to ethnocultural differences.

**Republican indifference towards diversity**

Assimilationist and/or exclusionary policies of the Republic’s elite sought both to erase social and cultural diversity and to assign a national identity based on Sunni Islam and Turkishness being the dominant role in social and political spheres. Diverse religious, ethnic and cultural values were frequently suppressed by homogenizing policies such as a nationalist Turkish history model initiated in 1932; a ban on the use of mother tongue and ethnic minority names; discriminatory settlement policies and discriminatory citizenship laws granting citizenship exclusively to migrants of Muslim origin; the imposition of a wealth tax in 1942 targeting non-Muslims; and the forced migration of Kurds in the east and south-east of Turkey (Ülker 2007; Kaya 2007).

Ethnocultural minorities adopted different means to cope with the state’s homogenizing policies. Within the framework of majority nationalism, they chose to be involved in the construction of a homogeneous Turkish nation, disguising their ethnic identities in public and identifying themselves as a constitutive element of the Turkish nation. Thus, assimilationist and/or exclusionist state policies have shaped the ways in which ethnic groups have developed their identities and political participation strategies. One example is particularly vivid: Moiz Kohen Tekinalp, a Turkish nationalist of Jewish origin, in his 1928 work *Turkification (Türkleştirme)* listed the main incorporation strategies for non-Turkish ethnic minorities into the political system. He proposed ten commandments for Turkish-Jews:

1. Turkify your names
2. Speak Turkish
3. Pray in Turkish in synagogues
4. Turkify your schools
5. Send your children to Turkish schools
6. Get engaged in national issues  
7. Stick together with Turks  
8. Affili ate yourself with the community spirit  
9. Fulfi l your duties in the national economy  
10. Be aware of your rights 
    (cited in Landau 1996)

There is strong evidence that these commandments also applied to some Muslim communities such as Kurds and Circassians (Yıldız 2001).

Since the 1919 Turkish war of independence Kurds, Alevi s and Circassians have insisted that they are constitutive elements of the nation. They opposed the idea of being a minority and underlined the fact that they also belong to the Muslim nation. They were not part of the offi cial minorities programme of the Lausanne Treaty (1923), which identifi ed Armenians, Jews and Greeks as offi cial minority groups. The myth of being a ‘constitutive element of the nation’ persis ts to this day. It is remarkable that Kurds and Alevi s denounced the term ‘minority’ applied to them by the European Commission in its 2005 Progress Report on Turkey. They accused the EU of trying to divide Turkey at a time of growing Euroscepticism.

Ethnocultural and religious diversity challenges

In the aftermath of the 1980 military coup Kemalist ideology was challenged by multiculturalist claims raised by ethnocultural and religious groups. As José Casanova (2006) put it, the project of constructing a nation state from above was bound to fail because it was too laicist for the Islamists, too Sunni for the Alevi s and too Turkish for the Kurds, Circassians and Lazis. A Turkish state in which the collective identities and interests of groups constituting the majority of the population are unable to obtain public representation cannot be a representative democracy, even if it is established on modern secular Republican principles. Let us examine the different multicultural claims one by one.

Islamist multiculturalism as a challenge to the Kemalist regime

The emergence of the Welfare Party (WP, Refah Partisi) with an Islamic social base and political agenda posed a profound challenge
to the state-centric Republican and secular regime in both political and cultural terms. This party together with the broader Islamist movement sought to address the inequalities of the global system by transcending the state and mobilizing the marginalized and underprivileged social groups within an expanding Islamic civil society (umma) and the framing structure of identity politics. The WP tried to generate electoral support from a broad Islamist social network both by supporting socio-economic opportunity structures for the social integration of the Islamist forces into the growing liberal economy and competitive urban life, and by channelling their interests and demands into national politics through political parties.

Like Islamist movements in other Middle Eastern countries, Islamist communities, Sufi orders (tarikats) and Islamic welfare associations provide a network for the marginalized classes that offers different social services: employment, religious and secular education, health services, food, clothing and energy supplies. The state failed to provide these in its unmanaged transition to the liberal economy (Hale and Özbudun 2009: 16–18).

Islamist political mobilization appealed to both the winners and the losers of the global and liberal economy. The newly emerging Islamic bourgeoisie, which was becoming integrated into the liberal system from the 1980s on, distributed to the poor the wealth it had accumulated from the publishing houses, private media channels, university preparatory courses, Islamic banks and financial institutions and holding companies it ran (Hale and Özbudun 2009: 13). Through its connections with these Islamist communities, the WP attracted the votes of the Islamic bourgeoisie, the upper middle class and the marginalized lower class and also stimulated political mobilization of the conservative and Islamist social forces, which dramatically challenged the Republican and secular segments.

The hostility of the dominant regime towards the Islamist forces led to a political crisis in 1997. The WP’s challenge to the secular regime stemmed from its articulation of Islamic values in political life; specifically, it involved demands for the exercise of Islamic law, the segregation of the sexes in social life, religious education and the headscarf issue. WP demands for the incorporation of Islam into formal politics were designed to enable WP acquisition of state power and the formation of an Islamic social order; recognition of religious (Islamic) freedom and conscience and the protection of religious rights such as the wearing of the headscarf and religious
clothing in public places were the tools to achieve these goals (Hale and Özbudun 2009: 7–9).

The military/bureaucratic state elite made it clear that the WP’s Islamist demands could not be tolerated. In January 1998 a Constitutional Court decision ordered the WP to be closed down (Hale and Özbudun 2009: 4). The WP and the Islamist forces had constituted a religious and cultural challenge to the Republican and secular regime and sections of society. The WP had suggested adopting a legal framework allowing each legally recognized community to be governed in accordance with its own religious rules. In doing so, it had proposed a return to the Medina Covenant of Prophet Muhammad’s time, the age of happiness (asr-ı saadet) in which a kind of multiculturalism based on religious differences was experienced (Hale and Özbudun 2009: 7–8).

The WP had also attempted to undermine the secular Western order and to incorporate movements stressing a religious and Islamic way of life in politics. Therefore, the party and Islamist forces had posed religious and cultural challenges both in encouraging the political participation of Islamist segments in the secular Republican order, and in striving to Islamize society and culture. The state elite and dominant secular interests reacted by purging them from the formal political sphere.

ALEVI REVIVALISM SINCE THE 1990S

Another challenge to the Republican state and the myth of a homogeneous nation arose from the Alevi community. Since the sixteenth century, when Sunni Islamic traditions were imposed on other religious groups in Anatolia (Erman and Erdemir 2008), Alevi were compelled to adopt a defensive attitude towards their own community and identity by living in small social enclosures in rural areas. The millet system of the Ottoman Empire had recognized Islam as the main constitutive element and did not distinguish between Muslim subjects on the basis of ethnocultural differences (Yıldız 2001). Alevi were therefore imagined as integral subjects of the ‘Sunni Muslim nation’.

In order to promote Kemalist modernization in the first decades of the twentieth century, Turkey’s Republican elite implemented policies for the secularization of political and social life (Göle 1997). One of these policies was the elimination of religious communion and practice outside the mosques; it therefore ruled out the Cemevis,
dervish lodges and special places for Alevi communion (Erman and Erdemir 2008). Through these means, Alevi communities were deprived of the places where they could be organized as a religious community separate from Sunni ones.

At the start of the new century state discourse called for accommodation by Sunni secularists of Alevi cultural and religious practices. But we can just as easily find cases of intolerance and conflict. As an ethno-class group, the Alevi community living in the shanty town of Gazi on the outskirts of Istanbul has emerged as a resistance group. It regards Alevi identity as superior to the Turkish national identity – in contrast to the groups of moderate Alevis that form a democratic, pluralistic and peaceful movement. The Alevi community of Gazi has displayed distrust of the bureaucracy, state authorities, politicians and municipal governments that ignored its grievances. ‘Othering’ of ‘poor and different’ Alevis has also deprived them of basic social services.

In March 1995 violent clashes broke out following attacks by a gunman on coffee houses in Gazi. The Alevi community became involved in an armed conflict with police forces which were late to intervene. Fifteen people were killed by the police. This outbreak of violence between security forces and marginalized Alevis revealed an embedded mutual intolerance and hatred between the Sunni-Muslim-Turkish majority and ethno-religious minorities such as the Alevis which surfaced when a catalyst appeared. The widening gap between rich and poor also played a part.

From the 1990s Alevis raised their cultural and religious claims, which revolved around four issues: (1) eliminating compulsory courses on religious culture and morality in primary and secondary school education, which were seen as promoting Sunni Islam; (2) seeking state recognition of Alevi communion houses (Cemevi) being equal to mosques as places of worship; (3) asking for equal treatment of Alevis in the allocation of resources by the Directorate of Religious Affairs attached to the Prime Minister’s office (which employs all the Imams, hatips and muezzins in Turkey and abroad); and (4) combating negative stereotypes of Alevis mostly framed by extremist Sunnis. Some progress in meeting these demands has been recorded under the Justice and Development Party government.

Kurdish revivalism

At the end of the 1980s political parties representing Kurdish identity and defending Kurdish cultural and political rights began to enter
the formal political arena. The abolition of articles in the Turkish Penal Code that restricted freedom of expression laid the ground for the formation of legal ethnic and religious parties (Sahin 2008: 134). In addition, abandoning their alliances with the leftist parties of the 1970s, the Kurdish political and intellectual elite replaced old communist slogans and socialist economic programmes for an eventual independent Kurdistan with demands for the cultural rights of Kurds and a democratic consolidation of the Republic. During the 1990s the attempts of the Kurdish political elite to represent Kurdish cultural and political interests by participating in national politics through political parties were undermined by rulings of the Constitutional Court questioning the legitimacy of a party founded on a particular ethnic identity.

Since the establishment of the Turkish Republic, the state has never displayed tolerance towards the expression in the public sphere of Kurdish identity. The Kemalist elite regarded the Kurdish population as the most formidable threat to the nation state conceived as Republican, secular, modern and bureaucratic and anchored in a homogeneous Turkish national identity (Kaya and Tarhanlı 2008). First, as demonstrated in a series of Kurdish rebellions between 1925 and 1938, Kurdish tribal and religious leaders were rivals of central political authorities. Second, the Kurdish people were perceived as an obstacle to the Kemalist modernization project and Westernization. This was due to their purported ‘backward, pre-modern and unprogressive’ communal and primordial lifestyle based on Sufi orders (tarikats), tribes, sheikhs, landlords, warlords and rebels. An increasing affiliation of the Kurds with the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK, Partia Kerkeran Kurdistan) made them even more intolerable for the majority Turkish nation and the state (Kirişçi and Winrow 1997).

Since 1984 the PKK has led an armed struggle against the Turkish Armed Forces in south-eastern Turkey. In order to defend Turkish territorial integrity and national security, martial law had been introduced in 1987 in the eastern and south-eastern regions and was renewed fifty-seven times until it was finally abolished in 2002. Moreover, in 1985 the military adopted a strategy of arming village guards, who were recruited from some Kurdish tribes (Olson 2009).

The rise of Kurdish ethnic nationalism and the attempts to secure Kurdish representation in national politics was paired with an armed struggle and low-intensity warfare between the Kurdish minority and the Turkish state. The armed conflict has divided Kurds themselves and has cost them jobs (Kaya et al. 2009). Racism and institutional
discrimination towards the Kurds in Turkey’s large cities and in western Anatolia has grown. Since the mid-1980s the Kurds have been associated by the majority Turkish population with secessionism, division, disintegration, terror, violence, drug trafficking, the informal economy and the arms trade.

Since the early 1990s it has become a recurring pattern that Turkish political leaders address the importance of the Kurdish question before embarking on democratization (Watts 2009). Süleyman Demirel was the first Prime Minister to publicly declare that the government recognized the ‘Kurdish reality’ (1992). Similarly, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Prime Minister from 2003, also stated that his government was aware of the ‘Kurdish question’ (2005). In August 2005 he gave a historic speech in Diyarbakır explaining that the cultural, religious and historical bonds between Turks and Kurds would provide solutions to the Kurdish question: ‘The sun warms everybody and the rain is God’s grace for everybody. Thus I address those asking, “What will happen to the Kurdish question?” The Kurdish problem is my problem . . . We will solve all the problems through democracy’ (cited in Yavuz 2009: 189; see also Yavuz 2001).

Tezcür (2009: 10) examined the Islamic elements raised by Erdoğan in defining the bond between the Turks and the Kurds when he noted that ‘there is a single nation (millet) in Turkey’. What the Prime Minister meant by a single nation appeared to be the nation of Islam, which has its roots in the Ottoman millet system. The Islamist polity shaped by Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP, Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) has also had a remarkable resonance among Kurds with Islamist orientations, including such groups as the Med-Zehra, Mazlum-Der and Mustazaf-Der (Tezcür 2009).

The ruling AKP’s tolerant approach towards the Kurds has brought about several reforms regarding the recognition of Kurdish identity in a multiculturalist style. The AKP has taken steps to expand the cultural rights of the Kurds. Turkey’s state-run radio and television network TRT’s new TV channel, TRT 6, launched a 24-hour broadcast in the Kurdish language in January 2009. In addition, a department of Kurdish language and letters was established at Mardin Artuklu University, located in south-eastern Turkey, in 2011. Kurdish language courses have also been provided by several universities in larger Turkish cities since 2009. These policy innovations reflect a changed mindset in the ruling political elite, indicating that they are willing to come to terms with the past and repair the damage caused by military force in the recent past.
Kurdish political claims reached new levels in the past few years with greater political mobilization in local and national politics. Kurdish nationalism took the form of civil disobedience initiated by a combination of Kurdish political actors and the PKK (Aslan 2009). Kurds have engaged in a process of reconciliation with the Turkish state that involves issues such as education in the mother tongue, civil rights, coming to terms with the past and unsolved killings and disappearances of people. Thus, since 2008 Kurds have taken legal action with respect to murders committed by paramilitary forces in order to identify and prosecute those responsible. The judiciary branch has become an important institution in the reconciliation process (Olson 2009: Chs 2 and 7; Ünver 2009).

Kurds have also become more assertive in such identity areas as renaming their children, their streets, villages, parks and urban quarters in accordance with Kurdish national mythology. Renaming has not taken place without controversy, highlighting how the formal nationalism of the state and minority nationalism mutually condition each other. Past interventions of the Turkish state to regulate and control the private lives of Kurds have politicized many forms of cultural expressions, such as Kurdish naming. Official discourse on Turkishness has influenced the ways in which Kurdish activists have imagined Kurdish identity and have pushed them to define it in more exclusivist political terms (Aslan 2009: 13). For example, the name of a Turkish military barracks was changed in 2011 because it bore the name of a Turkish general who had massacred thirty-three unarmed Kurdish villagers in 1943 (Barkey and Fuller 1998: 28; Özgen 2003). Similarly, a AKP deputy proposed changing the name of Sabiha Gökçen Airport in Istanbul because it was hurtful to Kurds; Sabiha Gökçen was the adopted daughter of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and was the first female pilot believed to have dropped bombs on Kurds in Dersim in 1938. These claims have been amplified by the public apology issued by Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan in November 2011 for what had happened in Dersim.

The European integration process: quest for a multiculturalist state?

The EU perspective offered at the European Union Summit in December 1999 radically transformed the political establishment in Turkey, opening up new prospects for ethnic, religious, social and political rights. Kurds, Alevi, Islamists, Circassians, Armenians and
a number of religious and ethnic groups in Turkey have subsequently become ardent supporters of the EU, interpreting the project of political union as an opportunity for peace and transnational integration. It is no longer the retrospective past, replete with ideological and political recriminations among various groups, that dominates social consciousness but rather the prospective future in which ethnic, religious and cultural differences are recognized and embraced in a democratic way. In short, the EU was the major catalyst in accelerating the process of democratization in Turkey in the early years of the new century.

The 1999 Helsinki Summit stimulated a series of reforms in Turkey. In fact, the country recorded more reforms in just over two years than during the whole of the previous decade. Several laws were passed in Turkey’s National Parliament to fulfil the Copenhagen political criteria for EU candidature. These included the right to broadcast in one’s mother tongue; freedom of association; the limitation of military influence on the judiciary; more civilian control over the military; transferring extra-budgetary funds to which the military had access to the general budget of the Defence Ministry; removing military members from the High Audio Visual Board (Radyo ve Televizyon Üst Kurulu, or RTÜK) and the Board of Higher Education (Yükseköğretim Kurulu, or YÖK); removing military judges from the State Security Courts (Devlet Güvenlik Mahkemeleri, or DGM) and, subsequently, the abolition of those Courts; the extension of civil rights to officially recognized minorities (Armenians, Jews and Greeks); reformation of the Penal Code; the abolition of the death penalty; the release of political prisoners; the abolition of torture by the security forces; and greater protection for the press. Furthermore, strict anti-inflationary economic policies were carried out in line with International Monetary Fund directives; institutional transparency and liberalism were accepted; both formal nationalism and minority nationalism were even-handedly discouraged; and socio-economic disparities between regions were targeted.

The EU perspective has also provided the Turkish public with an opportunity to come to terms with its own past (Vergangenheitsbewältigung). Widely discussed conferences entitled ‘The Ottoman Armenians during the Demise of the Empire’, ‘The Assyrian Diaspora’ and ‘The Kurdish Question’ were organized at Istanbul Bilgi University in 2005 and 2006. These conferences paved the way for public discussion of subjects that had hitherto been taboo in contemporary Turkish history. Legal and political changes
underscored the transformation of Turkey in terms of recognizing diversity. This transformation corresponds to a discursive shift which officially recognizes Turkey as a multicultural country. That is to say, multiculturalism is no longer just a phenomenon in Turkey; it is also an officially recognized legal and political fact.

Furthermore, these far-reaching reforms reinforced human rights, and individual rights and liberties, by liberalizing the law on the freedom of association and demonstration; abolishing the death penalty and all means and practices of tortures by the security forces; revising the Penal Code; eliminating the term ‘forbidden language’ from the press law; permitting limited broadcasts in Kurdish on private radio and TV channels; introducing limited broadcasts in Arabic, Circassian and various dialects of Kurdish (such as Kurmançî and Zaza) on the national radio and TV channels; and allowing ethnic languages and dialects to be taught in private courses. As a result, the reform packages, which were adopted to raise social awareness, tolerance and acceptance of ethnocultural minorities, encouraged ethnocultural groups in turn to articulate their claims through legitimate political channels.

Since 2001 successive Turkish governments have taken initiatives to raise the status of the civil and cultural rights of non-Muslim minorities through a variety of legal amendments. In accordance with the Copenhagen political criteria, constitutional amendments extended individual rights and liberties to every citizen and overhauled structures to promote democratic consolidation and the enhancement of the rule of law and human rights (Oran 2004). The EU reform packages gradually restored the civil and cultural rights given to the non-Muslim minorities by the Lausanne Agreement (Oran 2004).

The ban on establishing associations for the preservation and diffusion of languages and cultures other than Turkish and traditional to minorities was lifted. Use of the ‘forbidden language’ was re-legalized in the law on associations. Restrictions on learning and publishing in different languages and dialects other than Turkish were eliminated. The right to acquire property that had belonged to foundations set up by the non-Muslim minorities was restored. Limitations on the use of names other than Turkish were abolished through a change in the law on population. Furthermore, the EU General Secretariat in Ankara decided to drop the use of the term ‘non-Muslims’ in identifying officially recognized minorities in Turkey (Kaya 2009). Seeking to update the government’s terminology in order to reflect
the new reality, Turkey’s chief negotiator for European Union affairs announced a decision to use the term ‘different belief groups’ instead of gayrimüslim (non-Muslim) in official EU correspondence. This decision was taken after the chief negotiator had received a letter from the vice-patriarch of the Ancient Syriac Orthodox Church, who pointed out that ‘Muslim’ means ‘believer’ in Aramaic – a north-west Semitic language used in ancient times as the everyday speech of Syria. The letter drew attention to the use of gayrimüslim – the preferred term for non-Muslims in Turkey – implying ‘nonbelievers’.

Furthermore, the discursive shift from ‘majority nationalism’ to ‘diversity as a discourse’ fostered by the governing party created an incentive for adopting greater tolerance of the ethno-religious rights of non-Muslim minorities. The political elite, Turkish and Armenian intellectuals and civil society organizations were induced to open public discussion on the taboo subject of the Armenian ‘genocide’. But not just that: there was now open debate in Turkey on Armenian ethnic minority rights, Armenian-Turkish diplomatic relations and the impact of the Armenian diaspora on issues related to Armenians living in Turkey.

Strikingly, the debates on the Armenian ‘genocide’ both at state and society levels furnished important examples of an increase in the level of tolerance and acceptance of Armenian ethnic and cultural rights. One case of such greater tolerance was the conference entitled ‘Ottoman Armenians during the Demise of the Empire’ held at Istanbul Bilgi University in 2005 (Kaya 2009). Although some Turkish ultranationalists brought a lawsuit against the organizers of the conference and the court ruled that their claims were in part justified and lawful, this conference became a barometer of eradicating biased views on the Armenian issue (Kaya 2009).

**Conclusion: retreat from multiculturalist state discourse**

Turkey experienced a profound social, political, economic and legal transformation in the first decade of the new century. It paved the way to official recognition of ethnocultural and religious diversity, which has always been the reality of this region of the world. However, this positive mood fundamentally changed after December 2004 when EU-level and national government leaders started negotiations with Turkey on its membership application. The start of negotiations together with various internal and external developments caused tensions to rise between nationalist, patriotic, statist, pro
status-quo groups in Turkey on the one hand, and pro-EU groups on the other. This was the time that the virtuous cycle of the period between 1999 and 2005 was replaced with the vicious cycle starting from late 2005. A new nationalist wave swept the country, especially across middle- and upper middle-class groups. The electoral cycle of presidential and general elections was punctuated with militaristic, nationalist and Eurosceptic attitudes coupled with rising violence and terror in the country.

The fight between the Justice and Development Party and the other statist political parties, backed by the army, crystallized during the 2007 presidential election. The AKP had nominated then Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdullah Gül as presidential candidate but he did not meet the expectations of Turkey’s traditional political and military establishment; he failed to reach the required two-thirds majority in the assembly vote. This failure resulted from the fact that the presidential post has symbolic importance in Turkey since it was first occupied by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founder of modern Turkey. However, the establishment argued that, as someone with pro-Islamist values and a wife who wears a headscarf, Gül was inappropriate for the office. The conflict even led to military intervention in politics in April 2007, an intervention notoriously labelled ‘e-intervention’ because of the way it was announced on the web page of the Chief of Staff. However, the nationalist and military alliance against the AKP was unsuccessful and in the general election held in July 2007 the party won a landslide victory, receiving 47 per cent of the votes cast. Following the elections, Abdullah Gül was elected to the presidential office.

Prior to the constitutional referendum in late 2010 minorities had become outspoken once again. They had become more receptive to the idea of creating a completely new democratic constitution that would be prepared in the new Parliament due to convene after the general elections of July 2011. The results consolidated the power of the AKP: this time it registered a landslide victory, gaining more than 50 per cent of the vote (Yılmaz 2011). Decisive in the consolidation of the AKP’s power in Turkey were economic prosperity; growing Turkish ‘Lira nationalism’ (based on the currency); a strong commitment to weakening the traditional legacy of the Turkish army; the emergence of Turkey as an imposing ‘soft power’ in the region; the establishment of friendly relations with Middle Eastern countries, Russia, those in the Caucasus and North Africa; and the emergence of a political climate conducive to mediating the interests
of different ethnocultural groups in the run-up to drafting a new constitution.

Minorities have today become more assertive about finalizing a more democratic and inclusive constitution. It would be prepared with the inclusion of all segments of society. Minorities have expressed their preference for a political system that grants rights to all communities in Turkey, with violence and racism excluded from the process. In meetings held by various ethnocultural and religious groups in different cities across Turkey between 2010 and 2012, there was general agreement that the constitution should be redrawn so as to more effectively guarantee individual rights and to remove any reference to ethnicity. Specifically, there was a desire to see a change in Article 66 of the Constitution which defines Turkish citizenship this way: ‘Everyone bound to the Turkish state through the bond of citizenship is a Turk’. The other major demand by minorities has been to ensure that rights are granted on the basis of citizenship, not on ethnicity which favours the Sunni-Muslim Turks.

An optimistic conclusion can be that, instead of heeding nationalist and militaristic electoral messages which are based on parochial, anti-global and anti-European discourse aiming at ‘nationalist closure’, the Turks are opting for Europeanization, globalization, stability and progress. However, the EU no longer serves as a beacon for Turkey. In the absence of its influence, the political divide present at the top of the Turkish state is being turned into a social divide between moderate Islamists and secular fundamentalists, which bring into play broad constellations of political and non-political actors such as the political parties, Parliament, the judiciary, the army, academics, non-governmental organizations, the media and business circles.

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