

# **RADICAL MILIEUS IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

## **Turkey**



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**DARE: Dialogue About Radicalisation and Equality**

## **Country Reports on Historical Case Studies of Radicalising Contexts and Milieus**

**Turkey**

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*This project has received funding from the European Union's H2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement no. 725349*



*This publication reflects only the views of the author(s); the European Commission and Research Executive Agency are not responsible for any information it contains.*

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## Executive Summary

The 28<sup>th</sup> February Process, during which a military memorandum was issued to the coalition government and its Islamist leader Necmettin Erbakan in 1997, is one of the most divisive recent events in Turkish social-political history. This study seeks to understand its potentially radicalising impacts on relations between different groups in Turkish society, specifically between religiously conservative Muslims and those who embrace secular and western values/ways of life. On 28<sup>th</sup> February 1997, the military directly intervened in politics in Turkey by issuing a memorandum initiating specific measures against rising Islamist movements. However, the major coalition partner of the government – the Welfare Party (the predecessor to the current ruling Justice and Development Party) – being of a political Islamist persuasion, was unwilling to implement these measures. This unwillingness provoked and mobilised the secular circles (including military, bureaucracy, judiciary and grand capital owners who were keeping the power of the established order at that time) to destroy the credibility of the Welfare Party. At the end of the process, in June 1997, the Welfare Party was forced to step down from power and was officially dissolved by the constitutional court in January, 1998. This was followed by the introduction of a series of radical state measures that curtailed certain citizenship rights of the religiously conservative Muslim population, these included the prohibition of university study for those wearing the headscarf, the limiting of the opportunity to enter higher education for religious high school students and the restriction of activities of religious sects and media organisations. However in 2002, the electoral triumph of the Justice and Development Party marked the end to this process; and today power relations between political Islamists and secular circles have been completely reversed. The implications of this change can also be seen today in the political demands and discourses of popular and widely acknowledged political Islamist writers, who frequently publish quite radical, stigmatising and extreme statements about seculars and modernists, as well as those who embrace western values and ways of life, by referencing their own experiences during the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process and its aftermath.

The 28<sup>th</sup> February Process represents a landmark event in the collective memory of the political Islamists and it serves as a reference point in the construction of radical and stigmatising discourses, as well as perceptions of secular groups and western values/ways of life. In this way, this report argues, the military intervention and restrictive state measures during and after the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process paved the way for subsequent, further radicalisation and polarisation in Turkish society. This conclusion is reached based on the analysis of the most renowned and popular political Islamist writers' articles and columns in widely circulated newspapers and magazines in Turkey. The study pays particular attention to narratives and discourses of these writers concerning humiliation, grievance, victimhood and stigmatisation. It traces, firstly, the effect of sentiments of humiliation and grievance experienced as a result of the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process on discourses and narratives of the political Islamist writers. Secondly, it considers narratives of victimhood in relation to the gender issue and sheds light on what role victimhood plays in these narratives and discourses. Thirdly, it analyses how this victim identity structures stigmatising discourses and narratives towards seculars and those who have western values/ways of life.

The results of the analysis demonstrate that Islamist writers consistently charge secularism and its supporters with responsibility for social disorder in the recent history of Turkey. They posit the Muslim majority as traumatised subjects struggling to come to terms with the past. Writings of Islamist writers dating from 1999 to 2019 manifest a consistent discourse expressing resentment of the process that, according to them, led to degeneration of Islamic values. Seculars and western values/way of life are frequently associated with immorality, exploitation and treason. Within this framework, the 28<sup>th</sup> February military intervention is referred to as the most severe assault on the religious conservative population since the direct repression of Muslim identity in public life. The collective memory of the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process is presented tinged with sentiments of humiliation and grievance. Adopting an anti-colonialist rhetoric authors state that Muslim identity and principles

have been consistently subjected to cultural exploitation by pro-Western secularists, referred to as 'conspirators' and 'internal enemies' who conspire with powerful international forces to deliberately undermine the integrity of society. Such radical accusations are justified with reference to the injustices that religious conservatives experienced in the years following the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process. Female writers in particular insist on the enduring social exclusion of women wearing the headscarf who appear as victims of secularist policies and patriarchal power relations. The collective identity of the Muslim majority constructed as 'victimised' and 'oppressed' serves as a reference point to convey hate messages towards the 'other' - the alleged perpetrators of the oppression - namely seculars. Authors use increasingly hostile language, labelling the secular stratum of the society, and their political representatives, as partners of 'terrorists', 'enemies of religion' and 'protagonists of dictatorship'.

## 1. Introduction

The history of modern Turkey illustrates an ongoing and unresolved sociological tension. This tension manifests itself in the conflict between secular, modernist and progressive aspirations, which have been administratively promoted and initiated by modern Turkey's founding fathers, and a conservative-Muslim stratum with a long-standing desire for a country whose social, political, and cultural structures align with Islamic values. The Republic of Turkey is a unitary and centralised nation state founded by the Ottoman Empire's former military elite officers who were educated in the West, particularly in France and Germany. Its top-down constitutional formation is illustrative of modern Turkey's Jacobean style of establishment. To put it simply, the founding fathers of the Republic of Turkey held the collapse of the Ottoman Empire to be the result of its traditional and religiously conservative administrative model. In contrast, they identified themselves with the modernist, progressive and secular administrative values of West. This was in fact a response to the religiously conservative and traditional approach to rule of the former Empire and was embodied in a strict secularism adopted by the modern Republic's administrative cadres, which forbade any religious sect, ceremony or even some forms of religious dress. Embracing such a strict understanding of secularism evoked a strong reaction from the grassroots majority of the population for whom Islamic religiosity is one of the strongest unifying codes in Turkey.

In conjunction with some other economic and political developments<sup>1</sup>, this underlying tension led to rising popular support for the political Islamists during the 1970s and 1980s. This process culminated in the electoral triumph of the Islamist political leader Necmettin Erbakan and his *Welfare Party* (WP - *Refah Partisi*) in the 1996 national elections, after which the WP became the major partner in the coalition government. The WP moderated its explicitly anti-secularist and anti-western discourse - which were completely opposed to the founding principles of the Republic of Turkey - after it became the major partner of the government. However, its Islamist leader, Necmettin Erbakan, did not refrain from proposing controversial policies (e.g. to establish the 'Just Order' that referred to a change in political regime in line with aspirations of conservative masses and his statements whether this change was to be soft or hard, sweet or bloody). This was extremely difficult to bear for actors of the established order, particularly the military, which had been accustomed to brokering power in politics since the founding of the Republic of Turkey. Thus, on the 28<sup>th</sup> February 1997, the military intervened, recommending to the government some specific policies to protect against the rise of political Islamism. The unwillingness of the Erbakan government to implement these policies provoked and thus mobilised the military circles, and with the help of the judiciary, bureaucracy, mainstream media

<sup>1</sup> For example, rising poverty as a result of a change in the economic regime and end of the developmental and welfare state, the military coup of 1980 designed to destroy the power of left-wing dissent movements and trade unions, and the economic and political rise of the central-Anatolian capital as a competitor to the established elites of Istanbul can be given examples of such economic and political developments.

as well as the grand capital owners. Erbakan's WP and its government lost all credibility and in June 1997, Erbakan was forced to resign from power and his party was officially dissolved in January 1998.

The 28<sup>th</sup> February Process is today frequently mentioned in discourses and narratives of political Islamists as well as of religiously conservative Muslims. It is referred to, not only as a military intervention in government and the political process, but as having resulted in the imposition of social and economic restrictions for religiously conservative people. The most frequently mentioned of these are the headscarf ban in universities and public institutions, constraints on employment of graduates of religious middle and high school (known as '*Imam Hatip*') in public office and restrictions on the activities of religious sects and religiously conservative media organisations. The discriminatory effects of these measures for religiously conservative Muslims in economic, social and political life has led to the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process becoming part of the collective memory of political Islamists and religiously conservative people and is frequently referenced in their discourses and narratives.

Drawing on the articles and columns of some renowned political Islamist writers who are widely read and followed by the vast majority of religiously conservative people in Turkey, this study analyses how the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process is understood and presented by political Islamist writers, the meaning attached to it and how their understanding of these events is related to radicalisation and societal polarisation/otherisation. The report starts with a discussion of the rise of political Islamism in Turkey including how it has been historically intertwined with nationalist ideas. It then sheds light on how global and local developments of the 1970s and 1980s paved the way for the rise of political Islamists and led them to power in the mid-1990s. Following this, it outlines the key events that provoked and then mobilised the established order of that time, particularly the secular military circles, to intervene in the politics and government of the political Islamists and explains what happened during the process known as 28<sup>th</sup> February in Turkey. It details the measures implemented as a result of the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process and their constraining consequences, not only for political Islamists but also religiously conservative ordinary Muslim people in Turkey. It then briefly discusses how these measures, and their practical consequences, created a longer-term reaction in society that has led to the rise of conservative right-wing political actors at the beginning of the 2000s. This historical scene-setting is followed by a description of the sources and data used in this study of how the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process is today understood by political Islamists, and how this understanding is connected to wider processes of radicalisation. It emphasises the significance of political discourse analysis for the purpose of this report and provides an overview of the data analysed. Finally, the key findings are presented according to three common themes emerging from the analysis of Islamists' writers articles and columns related to the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process: humiliation and grievances; victimhood and victim identity; and stigmatisation of others. Providing some illustrative examples from published articles and columns, the report demonstrates the radical/extreme conceptions and representations of seculars, modernists, western countries and those who embrace western values as 'terrorists', 'centre of evil', 'infidel' and 'immoral' people.

## 2. Setting the Scene

### 2.1 The Rise of Political Islamism in Turkey: Towards the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process

The tension between the secular/modernist founding elites and religious grassroots majority of society has been ongoing since the founding of the Republic of Turkey. Some writers classify this tension as a struggle between the centre (modernist, progressive and secular state apparatus) and periphery (Muslim majority population) (see: Mardin, 1973). Indeed, religious identities have always felt excluded from the political centre in the process of establishment of the Republic of Turkey. This can actually be inferred from the results of the 1950 election when the founding fathers' political party - the *Republican People's Party* (RPP - *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*), lost their majority in the parliament to the conservative right-wing *Democratic Party* (DP - *Adalet Partisi*) directly after Turkey's transition to a multi-party system. This process is, in Turkish everyday politics, frequently referred to as the first



triumphal development for the conservative majority of society in their demand for power. Since then, the right-wing conservative political parties have consciously stimulated a political discourse that is textured with religious values, aimed to create distinction from the westernised, modernist and secular aspirations of the founding fathers of the Turkish Republic. The study of the history of Turkish politics, shows that the conservative politics that embrace Islamic values and ways of life, either softly or rigorously, yet continuously, have always been an important entity in Turkish politics.

Islam has always been an important part of national identity in Turkey. But, national identity was also a bearer of Islamism in Turkish society. Therefore, a feature of Turkish nationalism is that it involves both nationalist and religious values in a way that they are intertwined with each other. The most obvious example of this is the political organisation of *Ülkü Ocakları* ('Grey Wolves') and their members, *Ülkücüler* ('Idealists'), who have become popularised through their engagement with Islam. This connection of Islam and Turkish nationalism have helped nationalist and Islamist political actors to collaborate against the 'common threat' of Soviet Russia and their 'local collaborators', such as left-wing political dissidents, during 1970s and 1980s.

In Turkey's violent socio-political atmosphere of 1970s and 1980s, Islamist and nationalist actors both presented themselves as forces that could provide a barrier against those who were seen as threatening the very establishment of Turkey, such as left-wing political dissidents, the Kurdish movement and religious minorities, such as Greeks, Armenians, Jewish people and even the non-orthodox sects of Islam, such as *Alevi*s. This characteristic of the political Islamism in Turkey that was a form of intertwinement of Islamist and nationalist political values was evident in various youth organisations of 1970s, such as *Milli Türk Talebe Birliği* (National Turkish Students Union – NTSU), *Komünizmle Mücadele Dernekleri* (Association for Fight against Communism – AFC), *İlim Yayma Cemiyeti* (Dissemination Society – DS) which managed to mobilise quite a large number of young people through grassroots organisation. Moreover, the current president of the Republic of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan<sup>2</sup> who is today seen as one of the most influential global actors of political Islamism, joined politics in 1970s by becoming a member of the NTSU. He later became the head of the Beyoğlu district of the youth branch of the Islamist *National Salvation Party* (NSP - *Milli Selamet Partisi*) whose legacy and political cadres were transferred to the WP after the military coup in 1980. The WP was the major coalition partner in power in 1997 when the extreme/radical state measures of the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process were taken. Building on the tension briefly discussed above, the rise of political Islamism in Turkey has a long history that dates back to the 1950s, after which certain political actors steadily organised significant portions of society, including young people, around values of Islam and nationalist ideals.

In addition to the tension between secular/modernist elites and the religiously conservative grassroots of society, the increasing popularity of the Islamist movement during the 1970s was enhanced by the rapid social changes being wrought by a neoliberal political economy, at both local and global levels. With the end of the developmental state and inward-oriented industrialisation that had characterised the political economy of modern Turkey, a clash of interests became evident in the economy of Turkey, namely between small-scale Anatolian entrepreneurs with traditional values and lifestyles and the established modern bourgeoisie of heavy industry (Çağlar, 2012: 23). The leader of the *Milli Görüş Hareketi* (National View Movement – NVM) of political Islamists, namely Necmettin Erbakan, saw the potential of the newly rising Islamic middle classes within an export-oriented economy and set his primary political aim to be a representative of their interests (Gülalp, 1999: 32). Owing to the support of provincial business owners, he managed to enter parliament with the NSP in 1973, as a junior coalition partner. The party was, however, closed down along with other established and existing

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<sup>2</sup> In fact, intertwinement of the nationalism and political Islamism in Turkey can also be observed through the current motto of the ruling Justice and Development Party (JDP) of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan who frequently expresses a nationalist ideal of 'one nation, one flag, one motherland, one state' as a catchword in rallies and meetings. Although the motto directly and explicitly reflects a nationalist perspective, it is in fact inspired from the *Rabia* (translates as 'four' in Arabic), the name of the square in Cairo, which symbolises the struggle of the Muslim Brotherhood movement in Egypt.

political parties as a result of the 1980 military coup (Jenkins, 2003: 49). NVM, however, continued to expand its constituency by appealing to a shared conviction among Islamic groups that values of western modernity, the primacy of state over individual and society, capitalism, materialism and secularism are the main sources of social degeneration (Duran and Çınar, 2008: 29-31).

A key thrust of the movement appeared to be criticism of Westernisation processes ushered in as part of republican reforms. These were also considered to be a failed imitation by Islamists, for whom globalisation and postmodernist critiques on Western civilisation fed the trend of the growth of identity politics and recognition of cultural difference (Hale and Özbudun, 2010: 5-17; Güllalp, 1999: 23). Protagonists of Islamism followed the trend by defining themselves as members of an oppressed culture (Hale and Özbudun, 2010: 5-17). Therefore, the rise of the Islamist political movements in Turkey can also be associated with the perceived effects of globalisation as bringing to the fore ethnic and religious identities in place of conventional, class-based political alliances.

Islamism in the 1980s can thus be characterised by collectivism and essentialism (Çayır, 2008: 68) and found a resonance that stretched from some conservative business owners in Anatolia, and emerging business owners from provincial towns aggrieved by the domination of big capital and state restrictions, through to young urban middle-class professionals and university students, to the working class and urban immigrants in the metropolitan centres (Güllalp, 1999: 33). With this heterogeneous support base, the WP, which was founded by Erbakan in 1983, rapidly grew in electoral strength during the 1990s. However, this growth cannot be explained solely by the use of the unifying Islamist identity, as Tuğal (2009) and Güllalp (1999) suggest Erbakan's emphasis on the need for greater social justice helped to attract voters of centrist parties, in a socio-economical context of high rates of inflation and unemployment (Tuğal, 2009: 41-42; Güllalp, 1999: 27). Through a programme of robust social policies, WP developed an inclusive social justice concept for those who saw themselves pushed to the margins of society by neoliberal economic policies. The party's local religious organisations and volunteer workers, especially women, worked to provide social welfare help to poor neighbourhoods, thereby augmenting the popularity of the Islamist political movement (Rabasa and Larrabe, 2008: 43). Along with this welfare work, routine home visits to educate potential women voters about Party principles expanded their community networks (Hale and Özbudun, 2010: 17). This advanced party organisation brought two major victories in both the local elections of March 1994, with a gain of 28 municipalities including Istanbul and Ankara, and in the national elections of December 1995, where the party led, with more than 20 per cent of votes and formed a coalition with the centre-right True Path Party (TPP).

The rather rapid rise in popularity of the WP triggered the thorny issue of reconciling a politicised movement and discourse based on Islam, with the official secularist nature of the state. As the party moved to the centre of political discourse in Turkey, its explicit anti-secularist and anti-western discourse threatened some of this new-found support base (Hale and Özbudun, 2010: 8). Nevertheless, the movement's leaders continued to espouse an Islamist agenda, evident, for example, in the well-known statement *inter alia* of Erbakan's 'Just Order'. Erbakan famously stated in a group meeting of his party, after the 1994 elections, that the 'Just Order' system will be established and people will decide whether the transformation to what he calls a 'Just Order' will be 'soft or hard, sweet or bloody', interpreted as an intention to replace Turkish constitutional political order by *sharia-law* (Birand and Yıldız, 2012: 89).

The tension between the WP movement and Turkey's official stance of secularism was not limited to such discourses, however. The Islamisation of public life, and perceived threat this presented to secular public life, prompted the secular establishment to act. During the WP's brief tenure in government (28 June, 1996 - 28 February, 1997), certain incidents took place as a precursor to the 28<sup>th</sup> February intervention, including: Erbakan's visits to Libya and Iran, with the intention of founding an Islamic economic union (D-8) as an alternative to the European Union; plans for the construction of a mosque in the prominent Taksim square in Istanbul; and a public dinner in the Prime Minister's residence with prominent leaders of Islamic groups. Finally, the participation of the Iranian ambassador at an event, named 'Jerusalem Night', which was organised by the WP's Sincan district mayor, who made a speech



in favour of *sharia-law*. This was followed by a parade of military tanks on the streets of Sincan by the secularist military elites of Turkey, in January 1997, which were designed to send a message of intimidation to the government of the WP. The latter two activities by the government of the WP were considered to be indicative of their explicit defiance of the establishing principles of the Republic of Turkey by the military elites.

## 2.2 28<sup>th</sup> February Process: A Process of Extreme/Radical Measurements and Its Practical Implementations

Following these developments, a military memorandum was issued by the National Security Council (NSC) on 28<sup>th</sup> February 1997 by reminding the coalition government's Islamist Prime Minister Erbakan to respect the fundamental secular principles of the Republic. The military memorandum also made the recommendation to implement a list of specific measures against the rising threat of reactionary Islamist movements. Erbakan and his WP were averse to these recommendations; a position that led to military intervention into politics, damaging the credibility of the ruling government. The process resulted in the eventual resignation of the government in June, 1997 and the official dissolution of the WP in January, 1998.

The importance of this event can be demonstrated through the following three points. Firstly, although challenges to political parties and military interference in the course of social, economic, and political life are not necessarily new phenomena in the history of modern Turkey, this was the first time that the military, in collaboration with the judiciary and bureaucracy, were successful in directly ousting a ruling political party (Gülalp, 2003: 83, Birand and Yıldız, 2012: 232). It was also the first time that a prime minister with Islamist tendencies had ascended to power since the foundation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 (Jenkins, 2003, Rabasa and Larrabe, 2008: 42). Secondly, the role played by civilian groups as active participants of the process was noteworthy. The military held a series of briefings for the media, judiciary and business communities to mobilise civil society against the WP's policies. This helped to legitimise its intervention through also invoking support for secularism. The new strategy of the military to produce consent and support in society with appeal to the supra-political and supra-party founding principle of the state, *i.e.* liberation of political and civil life from the control of religious and theocratic allegiance, transformed the public space into an arena of struggle between Islamists and secularists (Cizre and Çayiroğlu, 2003: 321).

It could also be argued that the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process led to exacerbate the division between political Islamism and secularist Kemalism<sup>3</sup> through encouraging people to adopt a 'for or against' position on hitherto divisive issues such as the headscarf-ban, the limitation on the educational rights of religious middle schools' graduates and the adoption of further measures which pushed national security concerns into public policy. However, the aftermath of the process also brought with it a pulling back of the resultant socio-political polarisation, *albeit* temporarily, evident in the softening of radical discourse of the political Islamist movement. This led to the third and perhaps most significant characteristics of the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process - that it gave rise to a split between traditionalists and reformists within the Islamist political movement. Reformist Islamist intellectuals and politicians became cognisant of risks to challenging the secular state, evident in their revised position toward democracy, human rights and freedom, which now leaned toward the secular principles of the state. In light of these three scenarios, the 28<sup>th</sup> February military intervention came to be referred to as a 'watershed event' that marked the transformation of prevailing conservative tendencies in Turkey and paved the way for the establishment of the *Justice and Development Party* (JDP), the current ruling party of Turkey, which has reshaped the political landscape of the country (see Hale and Özbudun 2010: 27; Rabasa and Larrabe, 2008: 44; Cizre and Çayiroğlu, 2003: 310; Jenkins 2003: 45; Çayır, 2008:

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<sup>3</sup> Kemalism can be considered as a guiding republican ideology of the state that reflects Mustafa Kemal's understanding of Turkish modernisation and which conceptualises social, cultural, religious and legal reforms implemented during the foundation period of the Turkish nation state. Kemalism comprises as essential tenets Western modern values as secularism, statism, cultural and national unity, political participation and revolutionism.

75; Aslan 2016: 363). Therefore, it is important to consider key aspects of the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process and its implications in the political landscape in a way that focuses on its practical impact in a wider socio-political context.

At the end of a National Security Council meeting on 28<sup>th</sup> of February in 1997, the military presented the coalition government (led by the WP) with a list of 18 measures whose implementation would demonstrate that it had curbed its anti-secular tendencies. The measures included: extending the compulsory education to include five to eight years; shutting middle school sections of Imam Hatip schools, which the military believed were being used to spread Islamist and anti-secularist values; closure of private religious schools; restricting activities of religious cults; a stricter implementation of the 1934 dress code (which included the ban on wearing headscarf in public institutions); and placing restrictions on Islamist middle classes and media (Birand and Yıldız, 2012: 211). However, the WP government and its leader Erbakan refused to implement these 18 measures, because they were apparently in conflict with the political commitments they had made.

The most crucial measure *inter alia* was that relating to the headscarf. It became the cause of considerable controversy between Islamist and secularist segments of society until the ban was officially lifted in 2007 for university students and in 2013 for officials in public institutions as a part of the 'Democratisation Programme' (BBC News Turkey, 2013). As Güllalp (2003) and Jenkins (2003) suggest, the 'enshrined' status of Kemalist secularism rendered the conflict a struggle between two creeds over the possession of public space without leaving space for a critical reasoning on the demarcation line between 'individual freedom' and 'mutual responsibilities' (Güllalp, 2003: 88; Jenkins, 2003: 47).

Those who were the direct target of the measure were forced to make a choice between their religious beliefs and participation in public life. In effect, being barred from attending university and disqualified from working in public services, served to restrict the social mobilisation of women, for whom the struggle with patriarchy was also a concern. An unintended consequence of the ban was that it mobilised the political agency of women who took to demonstrations and sit-ins to defend their educational rights (Deutsche Welle Turkish, 2019).

In the months following 28 February 1997, the military set out to mobilise certain sectors of civil society against what it described as the most dangerous 'internal enemy'. Military commanders held briefings with representatives of media, business unions, and universities (Güllalp, 1999: 39). In May 1997, an alliance between the five largest trade unions and association of businessmen presented a declaration demanding the resignation of the government. Under this pressure, the government finally resigned in June, 1997. Subsequently, the WP was officially dissolved and its leader Erbakan was banned from political activity for five years. The military continued to demand that the new government ruled by Mesut Yılmaz, should rapidly pass laws to address the 18 points mentioned above. Some commentators saw this as an attempt to strengthen the centrist parties in Turkey's political system so that emerging Islamist political movements and parties or any other radical political force could effectively be displaced (Cizre and Çayiroğlu, 2003: 320). The 28<sup>th</sup> February Process demonstrated the degree of sophistication that a military intervention could achieve in its overthrowing of the government through manufactured consent from across civil society.

One of the major consequences of the event from the perspective of conservative religious groups was the violation of their right to political representation. The overthrow of the elected government by a coalition of military and civil actors suggested that their identity was officially viewed as a threat to society and required containment. In the Constitutional Court's decision (No: 1998/1) on WP's cessation, it is stated that Turkey's official secular nature amounts to more than the mere separation of religious affairs and state; it also requires the organisation of education, law, economy, family and certain dimensions of social life in accordance with modern values of the time. Thus, the aim of the 28<sup>th</sup> February intervention, to introduce a comprehensive set of limits on the visibility of religion in many aspects of public life. Özbudun and Hale (2010: 22) define this Republican conception of

secularism, as ‘assertive secularism’ whose ultimate aim is to individualise the religion and its exclusion from public space.

As mentioned, one of the most visible victims of this exclusion were women who chose to wear headscarves. Although the exact numbers of students and officials banned from attending universities and workplaces are not known<sup>4</sup> (Eğitim-Bir-Sen, 2014: 26), research conducted with those who experienced the headscarf ban reveals the extent of the pressure they faced. For these women, wearing a headscarf was more than a religious obligation, it was also an enabler of self-expression, protection and social affiliation (Işiker, 2011: 131). Interviews with those who postponed their educational plans until the annulment of the ban demonstrated deep feelings of regret, belatedness and disappointment. (Ibid. 131-137). Furthermore, the state’s attitude and media coverage of the issue induced feelings of insult, criminality and shame among many women interviewed (Ibid. 145).

Another controversial feature of the 28<sup>th</sup> February debacle regarded state-run vocational schools - *Imam Hatip* schools - where training was delivered for religious preachers. These religious schools followed the same curriculum as regular state high schools but with the addition of religious subjects. Since their foundation in 1949, graduates were free to attend any university department by fulfilling the same criteria as the graduates of regular high schools (Hale and Özbudun, 2010: 68-69). The decision taken on 28<sup>th</sup> February ruled out this opportunity and changed the regulation of university entrance examinations so that the graduates of *Imam Hatip* schools could only attend theology departments, which was imagined to be their desired profession. While the regulation encompassed all vocational schools, the exceptional reputation of *Imam Hatip* schools (in the opinion of conservatives) and the concerns of secular segments about the expansion of religious education made the issue an object of social conflict. For many conservatives, *Imam Hatip* schools were the only vehicle to raise their children with a pious Muslim identity and without being deprived of the promises of a prestigious professional life and social mobility. These schools were strongly supported by successive centre-right governments until the abrupt restrictions brought about by the of 28<sup>th</sup> February intervention. They were considered to educate doctors, politicians, lawyers and engineers with religious wisdom and moral principles (Hale and Özbudun, 2010: 69). For this reason, conservatives objected *Imam Hatip* schools’ being deemed as ordinary vocational high schools (Rabasa and Larrabe, 2008: 63-64), established only for the education of preachers, in order to legitimise the imposed restrictions. The decision of the state therefore discriminated against religious citizens by diminishing their opportunity to obtain prestigious jobs (Çağlar, 2012: 34).

### 2.3 Aftermath of 28<sup>th</sup> February Process: ‘Conservative Democracy’ on the Scene

The rise and fall of the WP demonstrated that a frontal attack to the founding principles of the state would signify the end of a party’s political life. This brings us to the moderation thesis according to which Islamist parties gradually abandoned their ties with the radical religious discourse that is centred on the ideal of establishing a society ruled by Islamic principles through capturing state power (Köseoğlu, 2019: 325; Güllalp, 2003: 291).

After WP was dissolved, some parliamentarians close to Erbakan founded the *Fazilet Partisi* (Virtue Party – VP). The new party adopted a more moderate Islamist stance stressing its commitment and willingness embrace to secular and Western political values. This later paved the way for the foundation of a ‘conservative democratic’ political party, namely the *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (Justice and Development Party – JDP), by the younger, reformist wing of the VP in 2001, and the ensuing gradual transformation of Turkish Islamism. The transformation of the political stance of the reformists was also reflected in their manifesto which declared the rejection of taking ‘advantage of sacred

<sup>4</sup> The only available report, conducted by a union named Eğitim-Bir-Sen, indicates that with the accusation of dress code violation, between 1997 and 2000, 139 of civil servants and 3527 school teachers were discharged, 11.890 of civil servants received disciplinary punishment and the number of those who were forced to resign is unknown.

Eğitim-Bir-Sen (2014). ‘Rakamlarla 28 Şubat Raporu’. The report is available at [https://www.ebs.org.tr/ebs\\_files/files/yayinlarimiz/28\\_subat\\_rapor\\_web.pdf](https://www.ebs.org.tr/ebs_files/files/yayinlarimiz/28_subat_rapor_web.pdf)

religious values and ethnicity and to use them for political purposes' (JDP, 'Development and Democratisation Program', 2001, cited in Jenkins, 2003: 53) The same manifesto also defines the 'attitudes and practices that disturb pious people as anti-democratic and in contradiction to human rights and freedoms' (ibid.). JDP's initial pro-Western agenda, commitment to free-market capitalism, promises to boost production, attract foreign investment and introduce a more equitable tax system were regarded as signs of this transformation. To decisively separate themselves from the vestiges of the Erbakan's NVM, the JDP defined themselves from the outset as not Islamist or Muslim democrat but conservative democrats, through emphasising their liberal tendencies (Hale and Özbudun, 2010: 20).

Çınar and Duran (2008) refer to this transformation by highlighting the difference in the political strategies of the WP and the JDP's during their initial years. According to the authors, the WP 'disregarded the plurality of the society' by enforcing an 'Islamic essence' (ibid. 30). Without establishing a political order and institutional framework of democratic politics, they could not face the challenge of the 'military led secularist establishment' (ibid.). However, as the new party, JDP rejected the Islamist orientation of its predecessor by freeing itself from 'politicisation of religion' (ibid.) Questioning the feasibility of a collective form of Islamism, the younger generation reformists attempted to present a more durable and sustainable political agenda that would also appeal to the broader secular public (Çayır, 2008: 74).

## 2.4 Rise of Erdoğan and JDP's 'Authoritarian Turn'

Although he had been active in politics since a young age, Erdoğan's first appearance as a leading figure in mainstream politics was during his term as the mayor of Istanbul between 1994 and 1998, during which he is described as representing the 'modern' face of the Islamist movement. However, the term 'modern' here does not necessarily designate 'ideologically more moderate, secular or liberal' (Hale and Özbudun, 2010: 8), because Erdoğan's did not refrain from expressing his commitment to an Islamist political agenda of transforming society by introducing a religiously inspired way of life at that time<sup>5</sup>. His modernist style was reflected in the unconventional methods he employed in electoral campaigns, and in the ways he connected with potential voters in spaces of everyday life (ibid. 8-9; Kaya, 2015:54). Frequently visiting his old neighbourhood and establishing bonds with the masses by using non-elitist and common language that created sympathy in the eye of public, Erdoğan successfully forged a portrayal of a leader who was organic and legitimate. Furthermore, his life trajectory - having been raised in an impoverished neighbourhood of Istanbul, being a graduate from a religious high school - suggested he was a man of the people, particularly in the eyes of subaltern, conservative and religious classes, distinguished from the Kemalist state bourgeoisie (Kaya, 2015: 50). His popularity was bolstered following his imprisonment for reciting a religious poem in 1998 and he was accused for inciting people to hostility and hatred on the basis of differences in race and religion. The verdict was a harbinger of the radical secularist atmosphere of the post 28<sup>th</sup> February political context and its unfairness was admitted even by his opponents (Birand and Yıldız, 2012: 265) In any case, four months spent in jail, transformed Erdoğan into a hero from the perspective of the conservative population (Kaya, 2015: 50) and would serve as a reference point for his 'self-ascribed' victim identity.

The social and political context forged by the 28<sup>th</sup> February events demonstrated the importance of democracy for the protection of political and civil rights. Learning from the experience of defeat and struck by a sense of insecurity, JDP's members who were formerly attached to WP began to emphasise universal values as democracy, human rights, the rule of law, pluralism, respect for diversity and minority rights (Hale and Özbudun, 2010: 20). They became aware that, given Turkey's secular public

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<sup>5</sup> Among many of his provocative statements from interviews between 1993 and 1996, mostly cited by newspapers, are: 'my reference is Islam', 'Democracy is a vehicle which you ride as far as you want to go and then get off', 'there is no room for Kemalism or any other official ideology in Turkey's future', 'the system we want to introduce cannot be contrary to God's commands, human beings cannot be secular', 'praise to God, we support sharia-law' (cited in Jenkins, 2003: 52).

structure and the majority of the population's strong attachment to democracy, a new understanding of politics exempt from politicisation of religion was needed (Çayır, 2008: 74; Duran, 2008: 82). In this vein, Erdoğan adopted a liberal rhetoric; and his party JDP, in the announcement of its establishment in 2002, underlined the need for a pluralist political system and secularism as necessary conditions for guaranteeing the freedom of religion (Hurriyet Newspaper, 2001). He made frequent references to the importance of strengthening civil society organisations in order to end the tutelage of military and bureaucracy elites and to protect their social and economic networks damaged from the 28<sup>th</sup> February intervention (Hale and Özbudun, 2010: 20, 28). One of the major impacts of the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process was the adoption of an Islamic conception of European values, long considered as sources of social degeneration by the NVM, now seen as a repository of democracy and human rights, and profitable tool in the struggle against authoritarian Kemalism.

While the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process accelerated moderation and democratisation in the Islamic political movement, other factors bolstered the landslide victory of JDP in national elections of 2002, by which the new party came to the power commanding 66 per cent of seats in the parliament. Appeals to democracy and secularism served not merely to legitimise the party as a political actor and shield it from the threat of closure but also extended the scope of its social base. In addition to Erdoğan's loyal supporters - low-income working class urban dwellers, religious conservatives who felt marginalised by the state imposed secularist measures, as well as upper and middle-class liberal voters from within business circles were attracted by JDP's reform projects for EU membership (Patton, 2007: 343; Rabasa and Larrabe, 2008: 51). Furthermore, the new party's ability to offer a large, heterogeneous, cross-class population the promise of liberal reforms, coupled with existing dissatisfaction towards centrist parties, helped Erdoğan's to achieve his first electoral victory.

JDP came to power at a time of economic and political instability following a major financial crisis in 2001 (Tansel, 2018: 201). The attempt of the previous tripartite coalition government to stabilise the economy had cost them political support from large segments of society who had suffered from the fallout along with economic measures of the IMF's structural adjustment programme (Buğra and Savaşkan, 2015: 102). During the coalition government's term, however, Turkey had officially obtained candidate status for EU membership, and the economic recession was coming to the end (ibid, 102-103; Jenkins, 2007: 348). Thus, in a way Erdoğan and JDP reaped the benefits of a recently rebounding economy and a series of already initiated democratising reforms for EU negotiations. Moreover, profiting from the political vacuum caused by the loss of public trust in centrist parties, they were fortunate in bringing into the fold the victims of the 28<sup>th</sup> February measures and that of the economic crisis.

The JDP government's first term was marked by a process of successive constitutional amendments aimed at fulfilling the Copenhagen Political Criteria<sup>6</sup>. The democratisation reforms implemented between 2001 and 2004 ranged from freedom of expression, freedom of association, freedom of assembly, freedom of religion, prevention of torture and mistreatment, minority rights, international protection of human rights and civil-military relations (Hale and Özbudun, 2010: 57-61). After having consolidated its power with victory in the 2007 general election, JDP embarked on rectifying the costs of 28<sup>th</sup> February for the conservative population by focussing on reversing the headscarf ban in universities and public institutions as well as restrictions on *Imam Hatip* Schools. However, the first attempts of the government to cancel the regulation on religious schools was prevented by the President's veto; and controversies over lifting the headscarf ban drove the party to the edge of a closure case in 2008, with the involvement of the Constitutional Court. Setting forth accusations for violating constitutional prohibitions with anti-secular activities on 30 July 2008, the Constitutional Court announced a case for the banning of the JDP party. During the trial, the necessary majority of

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<sup>6</sup> The Copenhagen Criteria refer to the essential requirements for candidate countries to satisfy in the accession process into European Union, defined after the European Council in Copenhagen in 1993. The criteria fundamentally demand the stability of democratic institutions for guaranteeing human rights and a capacity to cope with competitive market economy (European Commission, 2016).



judges votes required by the Constitution was not obtained. Therefore, JDP avoided being banned from politics, although it was subjected to a partial deprivation of state funding (Ibid. 69, 71-75). Despite this attempt of judiciary power being unsuccessful, it still served as an awakening for the party leader to initiate the ending of the long lasting battle between the secular state institutions and Islamist political movement. Consequently, the JDP's political priority shifted from democratisation of society to weakening control over the government enjoyed by autonomous institutions of the secular state. The JDP leadership legitimised their attempts to eliminate veto players and dominate all state institutions by reference to the superiority of the 'elected' politicians over 'appointed' bureaucrats (Köseoğlu, 2019: 336; Esen and Gümüşçü, 2016: 1584). This was achieved through a constitutional referendum in 2010, that curtailed the unelected tutelary power of the judiciary in particular, when the government reformed the Constitutional Court and discharged the secularist judges.

With the successive electoral victories of national elections in 2002, 2007 and 2011 increasing its vote share nearly to 50 per cent<sup>7</sup>. The JDP took advantage of this popularity to further the erode the independence of state institutions. This considerable change in JDP's politics from 2002 onwards, seen either as cumulative (Özbudun, 2014; Esen and Gümüşçü, 2016) or gradual (Tansel, 2018), is referred to as an 'authoritarian turn'. Scholars have employed a variety of terms to refer to the increasingly repressive governance, such as 'new authoritarianism', 'competitive authoritarianism' and 'neoliberal authoritarianism', and have singled out distinct decisive events that have contributed to the transformation, such as the 2007 elections, 2010 constitutional referendum or 2013 Gezi protests. A key critique of the JDP has been that it fails to exemplify an electoral or majoritarian democracy; when elections are the only indicator of accountability and fairness of these is questionable (Esen and Gümüşçü, 2016: 1583). Critics cite the government's exploitation of state resources and private funds during electoral campaigns, uneven access to media and inefficient security measures in big electoral rallies of opposition parties as leading to unfair competition in the democratic arena. Violation of civil liberties is another frequently referred to aspect of the JDP's current politics. It is often argued that it has oppressed the mainstream media through ownership, censorship, intimidation, mass dismissals and imprisonment of journalists, since 2002 (Ibid. 1590). Furthermore, the pressure of government's surveillance has produced a culture of self-censorship that affects ordinary people's behaviour on social media. Some scholars (Esen and Gümüşçü, 2016: 1593) draw attention to the remarkable increase of number of people facing trial for insulting the president after the presidential election of 2014. Defamation lawsuits filed by Erdoğan targeted 26.115 individuals in 2018, including 168 children (T24 Online Media, 2019).

Over the last decade, the JDP government has consistently increased its power and adopted a particular form of religious conservative discourse. Erdoğan, in 2012, claimed that his main political objective is to raise a 'pious generation'; and this promise was followed by a set of regulations covering the educational system. An increase in Islamic themes contained in school curricula, a sudden transformation of a significant number of regular high schools into *Imam Hatip* schools are examples of how religious education has increased (Sarfati, 2017: 403). Erdoğan has also been criticised for displaying disregard toward different aspects of secular lifestyles. His statements against abortion, consumption of alcohol and gender relations are some instances of his intrusion into the domain of private life. The recent Gezi Protests can be considered a culmination of the increasing discontent felt towards the coercive politics of JDP and, for many, marked the decisive separation between liberal democrats who supported the party's earlier politics and religious conservatives (Özbudun, 2014: 158).

JDP's early ambition to compensate for the discriminatory effects of the previous undemocratic interventions against conservative Muslims which resulted in a leaning towards an authoritarian single-party rule with discriminatory and exclusionist propensities, exemplifies how the secularist oppression lead to a reactionary and gradually radicalised political response. This mutual aggravation

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<sup>7</sup> In the national elections of 2002, the party obtained 34 percent of votes, in 2007 it achieved victory with 46 percent of votes and in 2011 the vote share increased to 49.8 percent (Anadolu Ajansı, 2015).



between the oppression of the assertive secularism and political Islamism has heavily influenced contemporary Turkey's socio-cultural and political cleavages, and can be traced through the discourse of Islamist authors.

### 3. Sources, data collection and analysis

A key objective of this report has been to elaborate on the nature of Islamist political discourse following the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process, through widely circulated newspaper articles and columns of influential Islamist writers. This report assesses how a particular event served as and continues to be a main reference point for political Islamists in their self-identification as the oppressed and in their unfinished struggle with Turkey's secular past and its association with the West and modernity. In analysing the narratives of Islamist writers, the aim is to demonstrate how stories of humiliation, grievance and feelings of victimhood are persistently invoked toward rationalising a radical discourse among political Islamists and to consolidate the support of religiously conservative circles.

#### 3.1 Methodology of the Research

The research was conducted in two phases. Firstly, in order to situate the history of political Islamism in Turkey, along with the specific social and political context that led to the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process and its subsequent impacts, a comprehensive review of the literature was undertaken (see section 2). Secondly, the radical/extremist nature of renowned Islamist writers' works dating from 1997 to 2019 was explored. The methodological tool employed for analysing the textual data in this second phase was political discourse analysis. Differing from other versions of discourse analysis which exclusively focus on linguistic features of a text at micro level, political discourse analysis addresses the questions of how the social world is presented to the public through particular modes of expressions, in which ways these are articulated to identify social groups, institutions and events and what are the causal mechanisms that enable them to become internalised and sustained cognitive frameworks (Glynos *et.al*, 2009: 5 and 9; Wilson, 2015: 776-777). Political discourse offers a convenient methodological approach since the main concern of this study is to reflect on the mobilising and influencing effects of the elements of Islamist discourse, in a specific social and political context - the aftermath of 28<sup>th</sup> February Process.

As a broader methodological concern, critical discourse analysis was also relevant for this exercise as it allowed an emphasis on the dialectical nature of the discourse entwined with existing power relations. In this regard, discourse is accepted as a social practice, both constructing and constructed by social context, institutions, identities and relations between groups (Glynos *et. al*, 2009: 17; Wodak, 2002: 8). Scholars of this methodological approach usually aim to decipher the way in which social inequalities are disguised by the rhetoric of those who have access to specific power resources, namely in the spheres of politics, science, education and media (van Dijk, 2015: 469). As Wodak emphasises, 'language is not powerful on its own but gains power by the use powerful people make of it' to indirectly control social actors by persuasion and manipulation (Wodak, 2002: 10). In this regard, critical discourse analysis relies upon a 'triangulated theoretical framework' that conceptualises intricate relations between discourse, public's cognition and resulting social actions and events (van Dijk, 2015: 468). To recapitulate, from this regard, a discourse displays a dialectical nature as being the product of a peculiar social and historical context and shaping the cognitive map of social agents who in turn contribute to the formation of the very same context with their practices.

At this point, it is useful to explain how exactly these three main reference points of the political and critical discourse analysis, *e.g.* emphasis on a contextual framework, dialectical nature of the discourse and focus on reproduction of power relations, are utilised in this research. As discussed in section 2, the social and political context emerged following the anti-democratic intervention. The actual extent of the prohibitions implemented were examined to demonstrate the causal relationship between the reformation of social structure and the shift in Islamist rhetoric. Epistemologically speaking, from a

realist point of view the emphasis is put on the causal mechanisms that constituted a particular discourse as a social phenomenon. On the other hand, in the key findings section, through the narratives of Islamist writers, the constructivist aspect of the discourse and the role of power relations are explored. The writers and journalists presented in this section, who are well-known and considered influential representatives of Islamist thought in Turkey, and who have also been closely related to the political Islamist parties from 1980 onwards, have enjoyed influence in shaping and/or re-forming the Islamist mood in the country. As the authors of books, newspaper columns, keynote speakers at public conferences, they have enjoyed considerable influence within conservative circles. Their privilege in accessing the public discourse for years enabled them to disseminate their interpretations on political events in a provocative tone, which addressed the religious sensitivities of Muslim readers. Their advantageous status in power relations, negative depictions of non-conservative sections of society, using powerful metaphors in order to belittle them, amplifying differences by frequent use of the pronouns 'us' and 'them' are all willingly absorbed by the conservative layers of society. In a dialectical pattern, the coherent discourse they have established throughout the years reconstructs shared prejudices and radically discriminative thoughts among social actors taking sides in the old battle between religious conservatism and secularism.

### 3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

In order to examine the radicalisation inherent to the Islamists' discourse relating to the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process, the main data collection tools used in this research were literature review and digital archival research. The academic works of prominent scholars of the Turkey's recent political history were drawn on for an overview of the phases of the Islamist movement since the 1970s, which are mostly used in the scene setting part of this report (see section 2). The data for analysis, which is composed of Islamist writers' works, was collected through archival research of influential Islamist newspapers and magazines.

In the first step, 16 writers<sup>8</sup> were selected, based on their influence in shaping public opinion and associated popularity through affiliation with the NVM. In other words, these writers are renowned for being active participants of the Islamist movement since 1970 and their work has featured in Islamist newspapers and periodicals<sup>9</sup>. Another criterion was the frequency with which they referred to current political cleavages through the prism of the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process. For the purpose of this study, we aimed to access articles dating from 1997 to 2019, in order to analyse the reaction of writers to the event and to track any effects on discourse in the political arena as discussed in previous the section. However, since online archives of some newspapers and periodicals are not fully accessible<sup>10</sup>, some of the writer's articles, especially those dating from 1997-2001 were not available. Two websites<sup>11</sup> which also acted as a database for significant number of Islamist journalists' published columns were examined as resources. In addition, the archives of popular conservative newspapers,

<sup>8</sup> Abdurrahman Dilipak, Ahmet Taşgetiren, Ali Bulaç, Ayşe Böhürler, Davut Dursun, Dücan Cündioğlu, Fatma Barbarosoğlu, Fatma Bostan Ünsal, Fehmi Kuru, Hidayet Şefkatli Tuksal, İhsan Eliaçık, Mehmet Metiner, Rasim Özdenören, Sibel Erarslan, Yıldız Ramazanoğlu, Yusuf Kaplan. These writers vary in terms of their cultural background and the degree of their alliance to the JDP. More specifically, Dilipak, Kaplan and Taşgetiren are columnists in popular extreme rightist, pro-government dailies, namely *Yeni Şafak* and *Yeni Akit*. Metiner, Böhürler and Ünsal were founder party members of the JDP. Cündioğlu is furthest apart from the others with an outstanding Muslim intellectual identity. Dilipak, Kaplan and Metiner are the most partisan and extremist voices among the group.

<sup>9</sup> At this point, considering the distinction drawn between Islamist writers and Islamist intellectuals would be useful. As Cizre (1998: 75) points out in her article 'Kurdish Nationalism from an Islamist Perspective', whereas *intellectuals* restrict their work with the interpretation of the essentials of Islam, *writers* address contemporary political issues and 'pressing needs of the time' from a religious perspective and the level of their political engagement is higher.

<sup>10</sup> The websites of the newspapers known for their alliance to the Gülen Movement, namely *Bugün* and *Zaman*, have been blocked and their archives have become inaccessible after the 2016 attempted coup in Turkey.

<sup>11</sup> To reach articles published between 1997 and 2001, a website project for the Islamist periodicals, (<https://idp.org.tr/>) was examined and for the archive of newspaper columns, the following website was referred to; <https://www.haksozhaber.net/islam-dusuncesi-haberleri-116hk.htm>. Special issues of some periodicals, dedicated to the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process, for the event's anniversaries served also as significant resources.

namely *Yeni Akit*, *Yeni Şafak* and *Star* were scanned employing key words such as ‘28 February’, ‘Headscarf’, ‘Imam Hatip’, ‘West’, ‘New/Moderate Islamism’, ‘Islamophobia’, ‘secularism’, ‘religion’. 124 texts from 16 writers were selected<sup>12</sup> based on their relevance to the research problem and their salient representation of radical and exclusionary Islamist discourse.

The second step, was to download the articles and analysis in order to identify common themes and stereotypical expressions. The purpose was to classify the empirical material and find evidence of a coherent discourse. Narratives were brought together around often repeated expressions, signifying for instance, constant vigilance towards external and internal threats to religion, feelings of resentment and stories about oppression. After this phase of coding through a descriptive analysis, the data was examined for a second time to reveal recurrent themes emphasised by the authors. As a result, articles from 11 writers<sup>13</sup> were classified around the themes of (1) victimhood identity, (2) stigmatising the other, (particularly secular dissents, Western values and Western ways of life) and (3) humiliation and grievance. Through systematic analysis, these three themes were distinguished and seen as related to each other as being parts of a common/populist discourse of the identified Islamist writers. The narratives of the writers also display a similar discursive strategy by highlighting the social disorder, stigmatising those conceived as responsible and describing the victimisation of their community. They also express grievances which place the 28<sup>th</sup> February experience at the centre. The following section presents a discussion of the research findings under these three topics of victimhood, stigmatisation and grievance/humiliation.

## 4. Key findings

In Turkey it can be frequently observed, that political movements/parties attempt to consolidate their support through creating their own versions of history or by ascribing a subjective meaning to events in the past. This is evident in how certain watershed events in the nation’s political history are significant for particular segments of society, especially those who were directly affected by these events and the consequences from them. As governments have been faced with crises of legitimacy economic depression or social dissolution, they have attempted to garner consent by referring to these specific histories, exhuming past injustices and voicing past grievances. In this regard, the experience of the military intervention of the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process has been a salient reference point for those espousing political Islamism. The JDP government has sought to mobilise supporters by feeding the polarising and antagonistic discourse infused into the conservative fractions of society for the last two decades. It is claimed that by frequently referring to the ‘period of authoritarian secular oppression’ that followed the military intervention of the 28<sup>th</sup> February, the current ruling party strengthened its constituencies’ allegiance and helped to give succour to the belief that if they lose power, all the liberties and privileges that have accrued will be lost, since their struggle against the authoritarian secularist elites will also be lost. This belief is popular among their conservative voters and subsequently explains their role in keeping the Islamist movement in power as active political agents (Somer, 2016: 483). Perceived as the only safeguard of conservative Muslim majority’s rights, the political Islamist movements have successfully politicised the collective trauma of the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process and adopted it as part of a radical discourse against their political opponents, secular segments of society, western values and international powers, specifically NATO, the United States, Israel and the EU. These are also presented as the key sources of existential threat to the Muslim world. The discourse is popularised by conservative media and Islamist writers and touches upon the recurrent themes of victimhood, stigmatising the western way of life and modern secularity, humiliation and grievance.

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<sup>12</sup> For instance from 1320 articles written by Dilipak 19, from 600 articles written by Bulaç 15 were selected.

<sup>13</sup> Abdurrahman Dilipak, Ali Bulaç, Mehmet Metiner, Yusuf Kaplan, Ahmet Taşgetiren, Dücan Cündioğlu, Fatma Barbarosoğlu, Yıldız Ramazanoğlu, Sibel Erarslan, Ayşe Böhürler, Fatma Bostan Ünsal.

In the collective memory of the considerable proportion of the population, the event of 28<sup>th</sup> February, and its impacts signify a traumatic process, particularly for those who identify themselves as the conservative Muslim majority in society. This collective memory is also fed by various personal stories narrated with references to the official outcomes of the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process through which religiously conservative members of the society were subjected to measures which they claim resulted in their dispossession from certain citizenship rights, such as participating in education, employment and visibility in public life. These scenarios are today also frequently referred to and recalled by Islamist writers who appear on television programmes and have columns in widely circulated newspapers as well as periodical magazines. Thus, through their widely consumed writings in popular media, Islamist writers have played an important and influential role in terms of the formation of conservative groups' collective memory of the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process.

One feature of the writing analysed for this report is that writers tend to converge on the point of condemning 'secular national ideology' for violating Islamic precepts and obstructing the majority of the Muslim population from expressing their religious identity in public. However, in this work, special attention is given to the ways in which Islamist writers relate the injury of the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process to issues which have been prominent in the cognitive map of Islamic circles for years, such as oppression of religious identity, forced modernisation, lack of representation, marginalisation and degeneration of values. Looking at the discourses and narratives of Islamist writers with this special attention in mind, three common themes which appear in relation to the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process are critically evaluated. These themes are humiliation and grievance, victimhood, and stigmatising others through adoption of a victimised identity.

#### 4.1 Radical/Extreme Expressions of Islamist Writers through Sentiments of Humiliation and Grievance

This section explores the dimensions of humiliation and grievance that are referred to by those who perceive themselves as the victims of 28<sup>th</sup> February Process, and how such discourses on humiliation and grievance are reflected in Islamist writers' accounts. It is possible to discern four main dimensions. Firstly, the modernisation project and secularism are associated with Western 'immorality' and 'exploitation'. Secondly, the secular hegemonic actors are believed to create degeneration of Islamic youth by their 'exploitative modernisation'. Thirdly, for this degeneration to have effect, the ruling secular elite is accused of collaborating with the Western Powers who are external and historical enemies of Islam and an Islamic way of life. Finally, the feminist movement that promotes gender equality is considered to be an imported product of Western immorality. In the narratives of the Islamist writers which have been critically assessed, the 28<sup>th</sup> of February Process is seen as the culmination of these themes. This perspective of the Islamic writers and intellectuals is reproduced and underpinned with radical and extreme rhetoric that is expressed by blaming and depicting the West as 'bloody murderers', 'exploitation', 'immorality', 'terror' and 'war'. In a similar vein, it is also argued that sympathisers of a modern secular Turkey, are an 'internal enemy', through invocation of tropes such as 'terror', 'infidelity', 'immorality' and 'treason'. In addition, feminist activism is associated with 'immorality' and 'prostitution'. Therefore, from the discursive analysis of the Islamist writers' columns, it can be claimed that there is a form of rhetorical radicalisation with regards to the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process, in pointing out the 'enemy' with an abundance of claims at hand ready to deploy.

The negative depictions in the words of Islamist writers often take the form of infidelity, immorality, violence and exploitation. The two passages cited below reflect how Islamist writers perceive the West through such depictions. Abdurrahman Dilipak, an important figure of the Islamist intelligentsia in Turkey, in his article entitled *The Two Faces of the West*, argues that behind the happiness and richness of the West, there are 'our tears, sweat and blood. Do they expect us to applaud the English who settled Israel that threatens us?' He continues blaming US 'who were once our (good) boys during the

Cold War’ and who established their power ‘over our tears and blood by turning the children of the same country against each other’.

He continues, blaming the West for destroying Islamic civilisation, creating terror and addiction, for using ethnic, sectarian cultural, religious, ideological, political cleavages and turning people against each other, ‘You (the Western powers) leave your bloodstained knives as the evidence of your murders. You humiliate our beliefs, history, culture and identity’ (Dilipak, 2009)

By employing a radical rhetoric, Dilipak constructs an image of the West as immoral, abusive and violent; he blames the West for all the misfortunes of the non-Western World. Dilipak can be considered as one of the more extreme Islamist writers, who frequently express radical and generalising views about the West and the Western culture through pejorative and vulgar vocabulary. However, it is fair to assert that his generalisations reflect the common sentiments and understandings of other Islamist writers. Anti-Westernism is one of the core aspects of Islamic identity construction, as Islamist intellectuals adopt rhetoric that depicts the West and secularism as forms of immorality and exploitation. Therefore, analysis of anti-Western rhetoric as a catalyst of radicalisation is significant in understanding radical expressions of anti-Western sentiments on immorality. A recent column dated 21<sup>st</sup> February 2018 and titled ‘Did You Say Harassment?’ can be referred to:

I don’t know if you know that, those who die committing suicide in Western Societies are higher in number than those who die in the East because of war and terror. In a family of five (in Europe) at least one person is alcoholic or drug addict, at least one person needs psychological support. (...) They beat up women, harass and rape women. These cases are regarded as normal in Europe. (...) Today in Europe a woman cannot walk around at night after 12:00 pm, cannot travel easily. (...) Women are regarded as sexual objects. (...) (Dilipak, 2018)

Beyond the issue of reliability of the statistics which Dilipak draws on in the quotation above, claiming that cases of rape, harassment as well as violence to women are considered as ‘norm(al)’ in Europe is apparently an unjustifiable, account through which depiction of the West as immoral is built up. In the same article, he continues by claiming that Westerners and secularists (*laikçi*<sup>14</sup> in Turkish), through being recipients of support from the ‘immoral West’, are trying to ‘rescue the Anatolian women’ from traditions and Islam by ‘trying to modernise Turkish women’. For the Islamists, the celebration of national holidays in the stadiums in which young women and men dance and perform gymnastics with modern outfits are all examples of immorality that should be banned, as should beauty pageants, dance balls for celebrating the foundation of the Republic, and so forth. For Dilipak, such ceremonies and events are all organised with the support of the West for one main purpose; namely the degeneration of Islamic youth. A key theme running through his writing is the depiction of the Western world/tradition and secularism as being associated with immorality.

Dücan Cündioğlu (2010), another Islamist intellectual and writer, claims that Muslims have compromised their principles in exchange for freedom to wear the headscarf in public spaces, and says that, ‘They (Muslims) showed tolerance to nudity, prostitution sexual freedom. This shouldn’t have been done’. According to the author such tolerance implies straying from the principles of ‘Muslim’ identity and a weakening of ‘Muslim’ identity, dignity, beliefs and principles. The author regards certain forms of freedom - other than the freedom to wear headscarves in public institutions - as something contrary to the core principles of Islamic identity. This is regarded as degeneration and the cause of this degeneration are the pro-Western secular sympathisers. Here we see an account that is built on a contrast between more secularist ways of life such a ‘sexual freedom’ and ‘nudity’ *vis-à-vis* a freedom (recovered from tradition) to wear the headscarf. Rather than constructing an argument for freedom for all different ways of life, the author builds up a narrative of conflicting sides between freedom for secular values (e.g. sexual freedom) and freedom for Islamic values (e.g. having headscarf). In doing

<sup>14</sup> Here the author uses the term ‘laikçi’ in Turkish, which is usually pejoratively used by Islamists to imply that secularism in Turkey involves authoritarian and oppressive characteristic.



so, it demonstrates intolerance toward different ways of beings - observed through his demand that freedoms which are more popular, are associated with secular life, which 'should not have been done'.

The grievance about degeneration of religious identity is also reflected in the columns of Yusuf Kaplan, who is one of the most popular figures among Islamist writers and thinkers of contemporary Turkey. Kaplan's writings can be characterised by a dichotomy between an 'evil west' and 'victim east (Islam)'. Kaplan (2006) develops his works on an account of the West that is in collaboration with 'evil Zionism' or the West as the 'Evil Zionism' itself. In one of his columns, he blames the Turkish media for voicing the interests of the Zionist West who commits murder in the Middle East. According to Kaplan, the Turkish media, as the 'secularist missionaries'<sup>15</sup>, follow such Western interests, by occupying the minds of the youth, and thus undermining Turkey:

Secularism is threatening, dissolving, causing de-identification of Muslim society. Wanting a society to be secular means the end of that society. This is a disguised new form of western exploitation. Believing that a secular man in a Muslim society wants that society's freedom is foolish.<sup>16</sup>

The degeneration of Muslim youth due to secular influences is a common theme in Kaplan's writings. On 28<sup>th</sup> February 2016 (the anniversary of the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process) and 1<sup>st</sup> March 2019, he argued that the strongest blow of 28<sup>th</sup> of February to Turkish society was the 'de-Islamisation of education, media, culture and the youth'. He continued that that the 'Islamic notions, institutions, symbols have all become secularised and Islam has lost its soul and meaning'. In addition to this, on 1<sup>st</sup> March 2019, he defined secularism and its reflection in the form of the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process as 'epistemological and cognitive slavery of a society who could not be enslaved from outside'. According to Kaplan, the 28<sup>th</sup> of February should be considered as a post-modern form of military intervention to oust a democratically elected government, and to distance Muslims from Islam, which has been centuries-long project of the West.

As seen in the above-mentioned columns, the Islamist authors place blame on the West, and label secularists as being insiders and collaborators in sharing 'the long-lasting project of the West' which is for the degeneration of Muslim youth and Turkish society in general. This account is built on radical/extreme narratives and expressed in a similar manner; of humiliation and grievance based on the 'treason' of pro-Western secularists in Turkey, the ultimate enemy is demonised and held responsible for the evils befallen to the Muslim society. Anti-colonialist narratives and the history of exploitation of the non-West by the West appear as common narratives for a number of different Islamist authors in Turkey. The important point is that the deep dichotomy of the West and the Muslim World embedded in their rhetoric is mostly narrated in an account of 'good' versus 'evil'. Furthermore, the dichotomy is frequently stressed in relation to the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process and its implications for Muslim group. This demonstrates that there is an understanding of the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process as a process that sustains and maintains unjust western exploitation over Muslims, coupled with insider secular collaborators of the West.

A further dimension, according to Kaplan (2008), is the insider collaboration of the West which terrorises the Muslim majority over the headscarf issue. In this regard he defines the seculars as, 'dogmatic, non-questioning, brain frozen, can only breath with slogans but also hold the control of real power mechanisms, monstrous small minority'.<sup>17</sup> This vulgar and vivid depiction of the 'other' through radical rhetoric is also an expression of their extremism, for example, when he labels the secularists as 'White Turks' and 'non-Turks' who hate Islam and seek to sever society's connection with Islam. In his words, 'secular White Turks are an organised crime ring with its accomplice West. Seculars are non-

<sup>15</sup> Note that 'missionary' has significantly pejorative meaning in common accounts of public in Turkey.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.



Muslims who are mentally manipulated'.<sup>18</sup> The radical hate discourse directed by the author to the secularists goes as far as to criminalise them as can be seen in the above quote.

Furthermore, in the narratives of humiliation, the secularists are blamed for 'terrorising', 'man-handling' and 'hustling', 'humiliating' and 'demonising' people with headscarves; and the narratives of humiliation usually lay the foundations of justification for the radicalisation of their rhetoric. Kaplan, for instance, asks in his column that 'these people with headscarf, what did they do to you for deserving all the humiliation, hustle, abuse, for God's sake?'<sup>19</sup>. The dramatic depiction of humiliation is followed by equally strong, radical discourses towards the 'other' (secularists). The narratives of humiliation and grievance based on the suffering of Muslims at the hands of the secular elites are all followed by the radical hatred towards secularists and the West as their collaborators in crime.

The fourth dimension of the narratives on humiliation and grievance relates to gender, which is a recurring theme, in, for example, the negative perception of male Islamist writers towards gender equality and feminism. For instance, Dilipak demonstrates a radical view toward feminism when he claims that feminism is:

Dissolving families, promoting homosexuality, making fun of sexual purity, supporting prostitution. They regard this as freedom. This is a total war on family, promotion of relationships outside of wedlock, childless societies. (Dilipak, 2019)

Similar discourses on humiliation and grievance can also be read in relation to feminism and gender equality which are associated with immorality and undermining of core social values of majority society. It is not uncommon for Islamist writers to label gender rights activist as 'prostitutes' which reflects the dimension of radical hate speech towards the gender rights and feminist movement.

From the above cases, it can be gleaned that radicalisation of Islamist discourse targets three main and related groups: the West, the pro-Western secularists and women's rights and gender-equality activists. The radical discourses aimed at these groups tend to focus on the following main arguments: (1) an immoral and infidel West that exploits the vulnerable non-Western World, (2) secular elites are seen as collaborators of the evil West through mental manipulation of Muslims, hence causing degeneration of the Muslim youth and culture, (3) The feminist movement is seen as an aspect of this degeneration, and it is believed that, under the assumption of gender equality, the core values and dynamics of Muslim society are undermined. All these argumentations are presented through radical expressions and inflammatory language. Between the lines, such radical sentiments are legitimised based on the discourse of suffering and humiliation felt by Muslims under the rule of secularists, in which the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process is a landmark moment and is seen as the latest form of Western exploitation and humiliation of Muslim society.

## 4.2 'The Invisible Outcasts': Identity of Victimhood and Gender

As stated above, the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process had far reaching consequences for women through significant restrictions on their participation in public life, education and the workplace. In this section we explore narratives of Islamist writers' who perceive themselves as victims of the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process through analysis of their attention on the issue of the headscarf and gender equality.

While a rhetoric of victimhood can be observed as part of the political life of various political actors in Turkey, it is usually right-wing parties that are believed to draw benefit from this. Commentators usually attribute this to the modern/conservative and secular/religious divides that intersect with inequalities of class and ethnicity, leading to the consolidation of communal identities around a common 'we'. A discourse of 'we' can be observed among disaffected pious Muslims who have experienced marginalisation and calls for assimilation for a number of decades by secular state elites. This particular victimhood discourse which is configured around a homogenous religious identity does

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

not only exclude secular as well as liberal citizens and other ethnic minority groups, but also misses a significant inequality axis: Gender.

Texts of Islamist female writers who are the actual subjects of the debate over the headscarf, help to shed light on the different dimensions of their perceived victimisation<sup>20</sup>. The prominent feature of these writings is their situation at the intersection of two axes of discrimination: that religiously conservative women have had to struggle against both patriarchal conventions and secular impositions in order to gain visibility and a voice in public life. Hence, Islamist female writers complain about the lack of support in their struggle for equal rights, representation and freedom from both secular feminist circles and conservative Muslim men. A key theme in their critique is that they propose a mode of emancipation to be found in a refusal of essential features of their religion, as well as by male figures who exercise their authority through expecting women to cover their bodies. The latter also enforce a secondary status on women in Muslim society by insisting that a woman's role be tied to family, morality and privacy.

A common tendency among these writers is to invoke the trauma experienced by conservative social groups during the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process, who unjustly confronted the measures of the state to fight against Islamist reactionary milieus. Since the headscarf is the most overt sign of a religious identity, veiled women were targeted to reduce the representation of the religion in public space. University administrators endorsed the measures by banning female students wearing headscarves. As mentioned earlier, these women were also prohibited from working in state institutions. Thus, exclusion from education and work space victimised women wearing headscarves and caused them loss of social affiliation.

Relying on Cündioğlu's research (2010) among young, graduate women who wore headscarves, Ramazanoğlu (2010) draws attention to the various forms of discrimination that these women face while trying to access employment. She claims that the headscarf ban was exploited by employers to bar entry to women in professional sectors such as engineering, advocacy and medicine. This was enabled by a paternalistic attitude that labelled them as only 'sisters', average 'neighbourhood girls' or 'housewives', thus expecting women to be compliant and thankful for being employed in the first place. Furthermore, women were expected to endure low wages and precarious employment even in Islamist institutions and companies. This point, raised by Ramazanoğlu as well as ordinary Muslim women, demonstrates that even after the annulment of the ban and after years of Islamist political movement being in power, the headscarf issue still creates obstacles for women.

For other Islamist writers too, the headscarf becomes a sign of a derogatory identity that upends a woman's social, economic, cultural status. The entrenched condescending language and attitudes of secular elites label the headscarf as the sign of a failed modernisation, refusal of national values or of a voluntary submission to patriarchal customs. Fatma Barbarosoğlu, another well-known Islamist writer, argues against all kinds of generalisations and pejorative attributions directed to veiled women by secularists. In her two articles dating from 1999 (Barbarosoğlu, 1999) and 2006 (Barbarosoğlu, 2006), she criticises the general tendency of secularists to denounce all women wearing the headscarf as partisans of an Islamist party, covertly seeking political gains and undeserved advantages while wrongly using religion as a cover.

In another article, Ramazanoğlu (2008), with an explicitly radical tone, compares this systematic humiliation to an institutionalised racist apartheid system, when she asserts that the experience of

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<sup>20</sup> At this point, a distinction should be drawn between the concepts of victimisation and victimhood. As, Jacoby (2015) clarifies, victimisation is the actual act of committing abuse against an individual or a social group, whereas victimhood is a collective identity constructed based on the awareness and recognition of this abuse and an ideological instrument convertible into political gain. For the experience of victimisation to become a pillar of a collective identity, the abuses must be systematic and also threaten the normative framework of society (Jacoby, 2015: 520-522). In this regard, it can be said that those who were at the target in 28<sup>th</sup> February Process are accepted as legitimate victims and their grievance-based discourse appeal to wide segments of society.

discrimination towards religious women is comparable in terms of trauma and psychological violence brought about by the injustice of discrimination. She states;

(...) they were believed to be servile people who lack the capacity of reason and judgment. This approach brought with it a psychological violence and spread sneaky racism into the layers of the society like liquid, for years.

According to Ramazanoğlu, secularists do not even tolerate the presence of veiled women in the streets because of a belief that a veiled woman's very existence damages the modern image of society. Thus, a common narrative among Islamist writers is that women wearing headscarves are victims of stigmatising attitudes whose aim is 'to make them invisible' (e.g. Tasgetiren, 2010). What is remarkable for these Islamist writers, is that these attitudes and official prohibitions occurred in a society where religiously Muslim women who prefer to wear headscarves, comprise 70 percent of the female population. A reason behind this is discussed as 'secularist discomfort' by some Islamist authors. For example, Dilipak (2001) claims that the unease secularists feel toward the visibility of conservative Muslim women in all spaces of public life, is not related to a danger of reactionary threats against the regime, but rather it pertains to the fact that elite segments cannot accept the upward social mobility of conservative people. He suggests that women carrying out subordinate jobs, as cleaners, servants and porters, have always worn headscarves without this posing any problem. However, once they have become socially and economically integrated, through attending universities, applying for jobs in the same workplace as their fellow citizens, they come to be interpreted as a risk to the status quo. Thus, discrimination against conservative groups does not stem from the idea of a political threat but from the anxiety felt by elite secularists at the loss of their privilege. Similar arguments are offered by different Islamist authors (e.g. Bulaç, 2009) in relation to the restrictions on the *Imam Hatip Schools*. It is argued that, those who attended these schools were disadvantaged in terms of economic and cultural capital, and the restrictions were a measure intended to prevent the rise of a generation of pious and education Muslim youth from taken on prestigious jobs. In the same vein, one outspoken female Islamist author, Sibel Erarslan, suggests that the roots of such victimisation should be seen as resulting from centre-periphery cleavage (e.g. Erarslan, 2008), which was discussed above with reference to Mardin's (1973) famous article. This cleavage resonates with the tension between an official secularist culture of the state and a religious conservative population who demand social justice evident in their opposition to structures of discrimination that limit them to the margins of the city and as victims of uneven development.

As suggested, then, gender is a significant dimension of the victimhood discourse of Islamist authors. However, while most of these critics appear sensitive to the victimisation that women have experienced in higher education and public service, the male writers tend to display an ambivalent position when it comes to the issue of identifying women's role in society. This can be observed through references to the domestic role of women and identification of the 'home' as 'natural' place for Muslim women in society. The approach of Dilipak and Bulaç to the issue of gender equality as an example of reforms imposed by the West that can lead to social crisis in long run. In one article, Bulaç (2010) asks;

Isn't it rational to think that it is a blessing for a woman who lives according to the nature, to rest at home and freed from the anxiety to earn money, to distance herself from the deadly competition of marketplace?

This statement is ambivalent in its legitimization of restrictive measures through which veiled Muslim women were excluded from education and the workplace and denied the ability to realise themselves as independent agents. As Fatma Bostan Ünsal (2018) remarks, the headscarf issue was an instrument for conservative men to practice an antagonistic political discourse over the real victimisation of women. On the other hand, they also fortify their patriarchal power by turning women's disadvantages into an instrument of religion and defining religiosity in terms of the bodily privacy of women and veiling. It is important to note that Ayşe Böhürler (2008), a female Islamist author who is known for

her critical approach, describes women as victims of the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process similar to ‘soldiers who fight on multiple fronts’.

The discourse of victimhood, then, is one of the emerging themes in Islamist authors’ works. It is in itself important to reflect a common theme among Islamist commentators. Beyond this, however, it is also important in terms of how it is drawn on by the same authors. One common way it is employed is in the discourse of victimhood identity in relation to attributing certain imaginary characteristics to secularists, opposition groups, and the West, such as evil, terrorist, immoral and infidel. Thus, developing an account of secularism, dissent/opposition groups, and the West as enemies of Islam and Muslims; and developing extreme discourses that stigmatise them becomes a legitimate move. Below, such accounts and discourses are discussed in further detail.

### 4.3 Extreme Discourses of Stigmatising the ‘Other’: West and Secularist Circles as ‘Centres of Evil’

The identity of victimhood is frequently highlighted by Islamist authors in their discussions of the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process and its discriminatory effects on the public life of the conservative Muslim population. One common characteristic in these writings on the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process and its aftermath is the stigmatisation - constructed in a radical tone - that considers ‘others’ as hazardous elements with a potential to corrupt society. We see that the main opposition party, namely the RPP, Western societies and international political organisations as NATO and EU are referred to and depicted as conspirators responsible for all past military interventions, terrorist attacks, unidentified murders, as well as corruption. The representatives of the West in Turkey, secularists, the RPP supporters, and any other dissent groups other than Islamists are stigmatised through radical expressions such as ‘terrorists’, ‘infidels’, ‘coup plotters’ and ‘immoral’. In this way, the dichotomy between Muslims as the only moral agents and the ‘others’ representing ills and evils, contributes to the construction of an identity for the Islamists who present themselves as the innocent victims of the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process, while also serving to keep societal polarisation and hostility between different groups alive.

An article entitled ‘The Guardians of Covering’ by Sibel Eraslan (2010), offers a good insight into how the West is conceptualised through the lens of Islamist writers. The writer complains about how women from the East - immigrants, Muslims, the poor, the dark-skinned - are regarded as invisible and erased from social life. According to her, due to unfounded fears in Belgium, France, and Germany, women who wear the veil or hijab are forced to strip in order to assuage Westerners’ fears:

‘I am scared’ says the EP Vice President Silvana Koch-Mehri... ‘I am afraid from the women with burqa, veil, covered women in the streets.’ She is filled with the sense of insecurity. What is insecurity? While you hold the great map of development filled with nuclear weapons, invasions, burned down cities, thousands of children that you have murdered, all the continents that you have enslaved and exploited... Which security? Why trust you? (...) Who deserves more to be afraid? (...) Koch wants to examine the covered women just like a biology student examines exotic objects. She needs to rip off, uncover, cut down the covered women. All for Mrs. Koch not to feel insecure. (...) You honourable guardian, add a new page to your diary of gas chambers and crematoriums: the ban on Burqa.

The author criticises the West for stigmatising Muslim women by subjecting them to ‘extreme and long-lasting hate’. However, in directing this criticism, the writer makes her own generalisations by stigmatising European societies under the name of one ‘evil Islamophobic West’. The radical position of the writer reaches its apogee in the closing lines of the above quotation by equating the ban on the burqa with the mass destruction witnessed during Nazi Germany.

In parallel with the dichotomy of the Muslim East and the hostile West, the articles of the Islamist writers which are analysed here, create similar divisions within the society between pious Muslims and

secularists who are represented by the RPP in Turkey. In the texts of the Islamist writers, the RPP and its supporters represent the face of a hostile West, which pursues the interests of the 'enemy' by promoting dictatorships, coup d'états and eventually terror. An example of this can be gleaned, from an article by Mehmet Metiner (2013) published on 24<sup>th</sup> of September, 2013:

As our Prime Minister Erdogan says, the RPP is a pro-coup party. The RPP is behind all the coup-d'états in Turkey. Now that the RPP understood that they cannot come into power through elections, now they are supporting the terror. They are behind the terror on the streets. (...) The RPP was both the leader and supporter of the Gezi incidents which were terrorist actions that put our security and democracy into danger. The RPP claims that the events are against dictatorship and fascism. But in Turkey when we say fascism and dictatorship, the RPP comes to mind. The reality is that the RPP applied terror under single party regime in the past. Now in order to obtain power, it recruits terror from the streets.

Making associations between the opposition party - RPP - and terror and while also aligning these with the PKK is a common theme among Islamist writers. For instance, Metiner (2012), in another article accuses the RPP for using terrorist attacks to criticise the government by stating that 'they are feeding on the bloodshed by the PKK for political ends'. Such radical expression plays on nationalist sentiments in society in order to conjure patriotic feelings among the masses so as to enlist them in the Islamist agenda. Furthermore, the RPP and secular segments of society are frequently identified as the internal agents/spies of the 'hostile' West. In accordance with such identifications, the West and its agents are regarded as actors responsible for the evils that have befallen Turkish society with its predominantly Muslim population. Thus, such discourses serve to reinforce a sense of Muslim identity through stigmatising others. Furthermore, such discourses frequently encountered in pro-government daily media outlets, help to create a mass audience for such opinions.

In a similar vein, Dilipak (2011) who frequently draws on the discourse of victimhood dismisses *Kemalism*, which is considered by Islamists to be the official ideology of secularism in Turkey, as the source of all evil. Below is an example of such rhetoric from his column in the *Yeni Akit* daily newspaper:

We are all disabled with Stockholm syndrome... Still our children take oath of loyalty to *Kemalism* every morning. But there is no one individual left who did not suffer the single party (regime of) *Kemalism*.

He continues by arguing that the educational policies of Turkey during the government of the RPP served to homogenise society and created a mass of people 'educated and mentally retarded'. Accordingly, Dilipak mentions that religious and ethnic minorities have all suffered under the rule of *Kemalism*, and the RPP was the main supporter of persecutions in its name.

In addition to stigmatising the 'other' as terrorists, persecutors and coup plotters, the themes of immorality and infidelity are also apparent, *albeit* usually in a covert way. This can also be observed, again, with reference to Dilipak.

Did the RPP leave any mosques for prayers? If there were any mosques left, would people go to mosques and get into trouble? Are there any clerics left in the mosques to conduct funeral prayers? (...) The politicians who never uttered the word Allah in their lives are trying to shape our religion which they call it as secularism. (Dilipak, 2008).

In another article, the same writer depicts supporters of the main opposition party by accusing them of immorality, referring to their organising of festivals where alcohol is consumed and 'the nights of Sodom and Gomorrah', under the name of activities for tourists (Dilipak, 2016). Subsequently, the RPP and its supporters are depicted as being devoid from the core values of Islam such as piety, morality and purity. Through stigmatising the secular stratum of society in general and the RPP in particular



using an extreme rhetoric such as ‘internal enemies’ while also othering them through reference to certain religious values, risks increasing hostility within Turkish society as a whole.

A final point arising from these narratives is that the criminalising and terrorising language voiced by the Islamist authors is reminiscent of the similarly accusative language adopted by military officials and secular circles in the 28<sup>th</sup> February process. Labelling political Islamism as national threat that demands a never-ending state of vigilance and struggle, enabled the initiators of the intervention large public support in favour of the undemocratic measures and political prohibitions that followed. However, the ways in which Islamism responded to this intervention, examined with reference to the transformation of JDP’s politics and to the discourse of Islamist authors, show how an authoritative secularist political action evokes an equally authoritative and radical response from the opposing wing.

## 5. Conclusion

This case study elaborates on the socio-political context and impact of the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process, a military intervention in the recent history of Turkey that sought to diminish the influence of an Islamically inspired movement from the political scene, under the pretext of rescuing the state and the society from reactionary Islamist currents. The main objective of this report was to assess the extent of which the memory of this intervention has been revived through a radicalised political discourse since 28<sup>th</sup> February 1997. The case study shows the dialectical nature of political discourse constituted as the product of a particular historical context while also constitutive in forming public opinion.

The first section of this report, presented the context and background to the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process, pointing to how the secular-conservative cleavage had been formed in Turkey, along with the rise of political Islamism and its transformation in the aftermath of the event. In the second section, the report described how the social polarisation between secularists and conservatives is discursively reproduced through various publications of influential Islamist writers. These employ an exclusionary rhetoric centred around themes such as identity of victimhood, grievance, humiliation and stigmatisation.

A key finding is that right-wing conservative parties such as the Welfare Party and its successor the Justice and Development Party, rose to power and solidified their support by addressing the need for social justice. They further valorised the oppressed identity of Muslims who held a long-standing desire to live in a society configured in line with Islamic principles. A political strategy that focused on the political and economic deprivation of the conservative Muslim population, enabled the Islamist movement’s appeal to widen among certain segments of society, ranging from urban immigrants, workers, university students to young members of the middle-class and an emerging Islamic middle class. However, after their national electoral victory in 1996, the Islamists paid a heavy price for their anti-secularist and anti-western discourse and practices. This discourse focused on challenging the republican reforms as an aspect of a failed imitation of the West while offering in its place the need for a ‘Just Order’ system. It was interpreted as an attack on the founding principles of the secular state by the military and secularists. Thus, it can be inferred that the Islamists provoked an equally extremist response from their secular opponents. The peculiarity of the 28<sup>th</sup> February intervention arises from how the military addressed the deeply rooted tension between secular/modernist and religious/conservative sectors of society. It empowered a variety of actors from the secular state apparatus and civil society, including media and judiciary, to collaborate in overthrowing the first ruling Islamist party in the history of modern Turkey, through constructing it as the ‘most dangerous internal enemy’/‘national threat’. The 28<sup>th</sup> February intervention demonstrated how even a leading coalition partner of government could be ousted if it set out to challenge the founding principles of the Republic.

The report also offers an account of the formation and rise of the JDP, in response to developments which occurred in the aftermath of the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process. It briefly discussed how the reformist camp, under the leadership of Erdoğan, profited from a pro-Western agenda such as universal



principles of democracy, human rights and pluralism with the purpose of enlarging their constituency of support, attracting foreign investment and standing up to institutions associated with the secular state apparatus. The JDP was able to capitalise on the fall out of the headscarf affair and restrictions on Imam Hatip Schools; two important issues for the conservative population. However, after successive electoral victories in the national elections of 2007 and 2011, Erdoğan's party politics shifted from a struggle against the unelected tutelary power of military and bureaucracy elites toward striving to abolish most of the autonomous institutional control mechanisms over government. Scholars have referred to this shift as an 'authoritarian turn' that marked the weakening of the government's democratic accountability and adaptation of an exclusionary religious discourse.

An evaluation of the discursive process of radicalisation inherent to the approach of political Islamists has been a key focus of this study. It reveals the 'intolerance' toward proponents of Turkey's secular political framework through a dismissal of secularists as perpetrators of injustices towards supporters of a Muslim way of life which was affected by the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process. This is most evident in the restrictions put in place following the military intervention. Key features of the ensuing constraints were in the areas of access to education and the prestigious professions, the wearing of headscarves in certain public spaces and restrictions on religious schools. These had the effect of impairing social mobility and a polarisation of social and political life in Turkey. As discussed above, regulations implemented as part of state policy against reactionary Islamism, signified for conservatives a question of existential security, since for them, religious education and wearing of the headscarf were important expressions of their identity. Both the visibility of women in headscarves in universities and public institutions and the expansion of religious education as an alternative to regular modern education, raised concerns among secularists, resulting in these issues becoming causes of social conflict.

As discussed by scholars cited in this case study, one of the ways the 28 February Process served to aggravate social divisions between conservatives and secularists was the 'enshrined' status of authoritarian secularism, which turned the conflict into a perpetual struggle between two creeds over the possession of public space (see Güllalp, 2003: 88; Jenkins, 2003: 47). Although the scale of the struggle has varied, depending on socio-political context and the antagonism built up at ideological level, it has not straight forwardly translated into conflicts in everyday life. Political and intellectual figures on both sides of the conflict, however, have continued to invoke ongoing tensions in their discourse to help consolidate popular support for their views.

The second part of this report presented a long-lasting political discourse, appropriated by Islamists through an analysis of prominent writers' articles published over the last two decades, which focused on the constitutive role of the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process' in shaping the conception of a 'we' as the 'oppressed' Muslim majority in society.

As columnists in influential popular and pro-government conservative newspapers, Islamist writers have exploited an opportunity to voice narratives about past experiences of the coercive politics of authoritarian secularism and to foster prejudice and stereotypes toward proponents of secularism among the conservative population. Analysis of a number of writer's discourses revealed certain commonalities that feature across the columns and articles. A key aspect of the discourses identified in this case study are the hostile and radical language used to identify and position secularists as outside of the nation, which is instead defined through religiously conservative imaginations. Even in the post-2007 period of the JDP governance, which marked a progressive consolidation of Islamist power and a process of de-institutionalisation to stultify secularist influences, writers have referred to secularists as 'white Turks' who are a minority which unjustly holds power and seeks to limit the visibility of religion in many areas of public life. They are frequently referred to as conspirators working in alliance with the West to corrupt pious Muslim youth from an Islamic way of life and to impose their 'immoral' lifestyles upon Muslims. The metaphor of 'internal enemy' is a trope adopted in their discursive armoury to produce consent among sympathisers of an Islamist ideal. Ironically, those who were addressed by the military as the 'internal enemy' and source of never-ending danger for the

security of the state - the Islamists - now stigmatise secularism as a threat to the survival of the Muslim way of life that religiously conservative people of Turkey embrace.

Findings from the data analysis also demonstrate how the experience of the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process is recalled by these writers through narratives which have evolved around humiliation, grievance, victimhood and stigmatisation. A radical articulation of humiliation, along with discourses of hate work to target modernists, secularists and feminist activists who, according to Islamist writers, ignore the prevailing norms of Turkish society and the 'evil' nature of the West. The 28<sup>th</sup> February Process and its implications are described as one of the various and deliberately planned attacks through the collaboration of international power groups and national secularists. Another common theme, the identity of victimhood, can also be discerned as a persistent feature in Islamist writers' articles and columns. The findings under these themes are of special importance since they reveal how the same experience of oppression differs in relation to gender inequalities. The accounts of female writers demonstrate that conservative men who identify as victims of the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process utilise the headscarf issue as a political tool, but then deny the freedom of devout Muslim women to actualise an economically independent self. This also exposes the twofold victimhood narrative of Muslim women writers who claim that they fight both against oppressive secularist regulations and patriarchal power. The formation of a victimhood identity relies on attributing certain imaginary stigmatising characteristics to the opposition groups, such as radical/extreme expressions of 'terrorist', 'infidel', 'immoral'. This point is observed in the stigmatising rhetoric of Islamist writers who conjure a discourse that condemns secularists and their political representatives as being partners of terrorists, enemies of the religion and proponents of dictatorship. Finally, the case study suggests that there is a consensus among these writers of accusing the secularist national ideology of oppressing the religious identity of the Muslim majority since the founding of the Republic; and serving as a historical reference point, the 28<sup>th</sup> February Process is a salient moment in this oppression.

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