Exploring the Contribution of Secularism Ideology to the Education System in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: This research analyzes the contribution of the ideology of secularism to the education system in Türkiye, highlighting significant changes since the Kemal Atatürk era until the present.

Methodology: This study employs a literature review method to investigate the impact of secularism on Turkey's education system. This approach involves gathering and analyzing a range of sources, including books, academic articles, and both national and international journals related to secularism.

Main Findings: The findings of this research provide an understanding of the impact of secularism on the paradigm shift that was previously oriented towards religious values towards a modern secular education model that is more open to developments in science and technology. As well as increasing access to education for women and minority groups, the emergence of fierce debate regarding the role of religion in public life, in addition to the hopes for its development prospects in the contemporary era.

Novelty/Originality of this study: This study provides a comprehensive analysis of secularism's impact on Türkiye's education system, offering new insights into the evolution of secular policies and their effects on social and educational inclusivity. It contributes to the understanding of secularism's role in contemporary educational reform and debates on religion's place in public life.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Secularism, a key ideology introduced by Kemal Atatürk, has significantly shaped Turkey's education system. As part of the modernization drive, secularism aimed to reduce religion's influence in public life, including education [1]. Traditional Islamic education, often provided by madrassas, was replaced with a secular curriculum focusing on science and civic values. Atatürk envisioned this approach as a path to a modern, rational society [2].

The reforms in Turkish education introduced a curriculum centered on science, math, and languages, with the goal of creating more ideologically neutral schools. This shift laid a foundation for secularism to reshape Turkish education, transitioning from a faith-based approach to a more secular, science-focused system [3]. Said Nursi, a prominent Turkish Islamic thinker, envisioned Medrese-ul Zehra as an educational institution that blended Islamic religious studies with modern knowledge [4]. Through this madrasa, Nursi aimed to cultivate Muslims who were not only well-versed in religious teachings but also equipped with a strong grasp of general knowledge. By merging the study of the Qur'an and hadith with fields like philosophy, science, and history, Nursi hoped to foster a generation capable of critical, creative thinking to address contemporary

challenges [5]. Medrese-ul Zehra was envisioned as a center for intellectual and spiritual growth, nurturing future leaders with exemplary morals [6].

Secularism's integration into Turkish education involved policies to limit religion's influence in schools. For instance, the Turkish government implemented regulations that restricted religious symbols, including a temporary ban on headscarves in public schools [7]. Additionally, courses once centered on Islamic studies were adapted into broader religious education, covering various faiths and moral lessons in a more neutral format. While these changes sparked diverse public responses, secularism is seen as essential to fostering an unbiased, science-oriented education system, aimed at creating a generation that is both academically adept and open-minded toward diverse religious views [8]. This system seeks to build individuals who understand religious values in a dynamic and comprehensive way, rather than with a narrow, ritual-based focus [9].

Despite these secular policies, challenges persist, especially in a predominantly Muslim country like Turkey. Many people who feel that their religious identity is threatened have voiced opposition to secular policies they see as restricting religious freedom [10]. This ongoing tension is often reflected in debates about religion's place in education. Over time, calls for a return to Islamic values in education have intensified, leading to more inclusive religious policies during conservative-leaning governments [11]. As a result, Turkey's education policy has evolved through a back-and-forth between secular and religious interests, influencing curriculum structure and content [12].

Secularism has also influenced Turkey's focus on science and technology education. With secular principles guiding the system, there is a stronger emphasis on scientific inquiry and knowledge, with the goal of positioning Turkey as a competitive player globally [2]. In this less religiously restricted environment, students are encouraged to engage deeply and critically with scientific disciplines, which equips them with skills relevant to modern economies and industries [13]. In the long term, this educational direction is expected to boost Turkey's technological and innovative capabilities, aligning with secularism's aims of fostering rationality and modernity.

Nonetheless, adapting secularism in Turkish education is challenging in a pluralistic and increasingly complex global context [2]. The system must balance religion-neutral policies with respect for the Muslim community's values [14]. This task becomes even more relevant in today's globalized world, where cultural exchange is more frequent [15]. By striving to continually innovate its education system with an inclusive secular approach, Turkey has the opportunity to develop a progressive, tolerant educational model. Future research could explore secularism's long-term impacts on Turkish education and society and identify effective strategies to address the ideological challenges it faces in the educational landscape.

Although many studies have examined the impact of secularism on the education system in Turkey, most of these studies tend to focus on the impact of secularism policies on the curriculum and educational structure in general [15], [16]. Some studies also discuss the role of Islamic thinkers such as Said Nursi in creating a balance between religious and scientific education [6], [10]. However, few have analyzed in depth how these secularism policies address social and cultural challenges, especially those related to religious identity in education in a Muslim-majority society.

This study provides novelty by integrating the analysis of secularism in education in Turkey, as well as its impact on religious identity in a Muslim-majority society. It also highlights the challenges in balancing religious and scientific values. This study is important because it provides new insights into how secularism can shape an inclusive and rational education system, while also being relevant for countries with a strong religious background in designing modern and tolerant education policies. This study fills this gap by comprehensively examining the contribution of secularism ideology to the education system in Turkey.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a literature review method to investigate the impact of secularism on Turkey's education system. This approach involves gathering and analyzing a range of sources, including books, academic articles, and both national and international journals related to secularism. By reviewing this literature, the researcher gained insights into the historical evolution of secularism in Turkish education, examining policy changes, and understanding how secularist principles have influenced educational curricula, policies, and practices. The analysis centers on primary and secondary sources that detail the influence of secularism across different eras, from Kemal Atatürk's reforms to modern times.

The analytical process in this study identified key themes from the literature, such as the impact of secularism on curriculum reform, the reduction of religious elements in education, and the emphasis on science and technology. Additionally, this research explores public reactions to secular educational policies and the social challenges associated with these changes. The collected data is analyzed descriptively, highlighting similarities and differences in secular policies across periods and their effects on Turkey's educational system. This method aims to provide a thorough understanding of secularism's role in Turkish education and its significance in a modern, pluralistic society.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As a predominantly Muslim nation, Turkey has made significant strides in establishing a modern educational system, yet debates about mandatory religious instruction in public schools persist. An early example of integrating science and religion is Ismail Fenni's advocacy for teaching Darwinism in the late Ottoman era, highlighting the value of balancing scientific and religious perspectives. In today's context of growing religious diversity, the approach to teaching religion in schools is even more complex. While respecting religious freedom is a fundamental human right, religious values often serve as the foundation for morality and ethics in society [9]. Thus, a balanced curriculum must honor religious freedom, teach universal values, and meet academic standards [17].

Since Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's era, secularism has underpinned educational reforms, deeply influencing the curriculum, teaching approaches, and values taught in schools [1]. However, this secular stance has also ignited ongoing debates about the role of religion in both education and public life.

3.1 Historical Background

The role of secularism in Turkey's education system is deeply rooted in the reforms initiated during the Kemal Atatürk era. Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the founding of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, Atatürk aimed to create a modern state by eliminating religious influence from public affairs, including education [1]. One of his first actions was closing traditional madrasas, which had been central to religious education, and replacing them with a secular school system focused on science and practical skills [18]. This move was designed to promote rational thinking, reduce reliance on religious institutions for education, and build a society capable of competing on the global stage [19].

During this period, secularization in education was viewed as essential for modernization and national development. Atatürk's secular ideology led to curriculum reforms that emphasized science, technology, language, and civic values [14]. Arabic, previously the language of religious instruction, was replaced by Turkish as the primary language of education [3]. Religious education was also removed from the mandatory curriculum and made optional, reflecting the belief that education should strengthen national identity and provide skills for the modern world rather than focus on religious doctrine. This policy became a key pillar in shaping a secular and ideologically neutral education system [14].

While these reforms marked significant changes in Turkish education, implementing secularism also faced resistance, especially from those who strongly upheld religious values. Over the following decades, education policy fluctuated with political shifts, and under more conservative governments, religious education was reintroduced as a compulsory subject. This highlights the ongoing tension between secularism and tradition in Turkish education, where policy changes reflect the ideological and political dynamics of the country [20].

In the modern era, the challenges to secularism in education have become more complex, with movements calling for greater inclusion of religious education in public schools. At the same time, proponents of secularism argue that a religion-neutral education is crucial for maintaining individual freedoms and promoting diversity in Turkey's increasingly pluralistic society. Additionally, globalization has reinforced the need for a science and technology-driven education system to ensure Turkey's competitiveness on the international stage [19].

These developments demonstrate that secularism in Turkish education is not merely a policy choice but also a reflection of Turkey's ongoing quest for a modern and independent national identity. Secularism remains a defining element of Turkey's education system, though it continues to be tested by the dynamic challenges of contemporary society.

3.2 The Effect of Secularism on Education in Turkey

The influence of secularism on education in Turkey has a wide and diverse impact, especially in shaping the curriculum, educational policies, and structure of educational institutions in the country [16]. Since the era of Kemal Atatürk, secularism has been the basic principle guiding Turkey's policy direction as a modern state. With secularism as the official ideology, the Turkish education system is oriented to prioritize national values, rationality, and science as the main foundation for educating the younger generation. Secularism separated religion from public educational institutions, which were once heavily influenced by Islamic madrassas, and replaced them with a public school system that emphasized scientific and practical education. This transformation aimed to create a modern, independent, and highly competitive society in the global arena [3].

The education curriculum in Turkey underwent a major overhaul as a result of secularism. Religious subjects that used to be the core of the curriculum were replaced with more science, technology and social science-based subjects. This reflected an attempt to distance students from religious doctrine in public schools and prioritize education that was deemed more relevant to the demands of the times. The Arabic language used

in religious schools was also replaced with Turkish, which became the national language. This move not only separated religion from education but also strengthened national identity, making Turkish a symbol of national pride and unity [21].

On the other hand, the policy of secularism in education in Turkey is not free from challenges, especially from groups of people who still consider the importance of religious values in education. Although religious education in public schools was made optional, there is pressure from conservatives for religious subjects to return to being a compulsory part of the curriculum. This debate shows the tug-of-war between modernization and tradition, with some people wanting ideologically neutral education and others wanting education that integrates religious values. This shift in the direction of education policy reflects the complex socio-political dynamics in Turkey, where secularism continues to be questioned and debated [16].

In addition to changes in the curriculum, secularism also affected the structure of educational institutions in Turkey. Traditional Islamic educational institutions, such as madrassas, began to lose their relevance and were replaced by secular public schools. Even so, some specialized religious schools, such as Imam Hatip school, were introduced to accommodate the public demand for more formal religious education, especially among conservative Muslim communities [2]. These schools offer a standard national curriculum supplemented by religious education, providing an alternative for those who want a faith- based education without having to sacrifice the academic standards required by the state.

The influence of secularism can also be seen in higher education policy-making. Turkish universities, previously dominated by traditional views, were encouraged to focus more on modern science, research and innovation. The establishment of public universities with secular higher education standards expanded people's access to quality education, without requiring them to adhere to certain religious doctrines. This policy strengthened Turkey's position in its efforts to build a science- and technology-oriented society, while emphasizing that higher education should be neutral and uninfluenced by religious affiliation [22].

Based on the above explanation, it can be concluded that secularism has contributed significantly to education in Turkey, both in terms of curriculum, policy, and institutional structure. Although this secular policy has been challenged, especially by conservative groups, the influence of secularism remains the main foundation in shaping an inclusive and rational education system. In the midst of changing socio-political dynamics, secularism in Turkish education plays an important role in maintaining a balance between the needs of modernization and the religious identity of society. Thus, education in Turkey is a reflection of the complexity and diversity of ideological views in society, which continues to adapt to global developments in the modern era.

3.3 The Impact of Secularism on Education in Turkey

Turkey's secular education system has successfully expanded access to modern and scientific learning. Public schools prioritize subjects like mathematics, science, and technology, preparing students for the workforce and global challenges. This approach cultivates analytical skills and equips students with the necessary abilities for the modern world [20].

Moreover, by embracing secularism, Turkey strengthens its position as a nation committed to aligning itself with developed countries in education, science, and technology. The structured secular education system, with its emphasis on critical thinking and scientific inquiry, equips Turkish youth with the knowledge and skills necessary to compete on the global stage.

Secularism also creates a more inclusive and diverse educational environment. Students from various religious and cultural backgrounds can attend public schools without facing pressure from specific religious doctrines. By promoting inclusivity, secularism cultivates a neutral and open learning atmosphere where students are encouraged to develop critical thinking without being constrained by rigid ideological boundaries [22]. In higher education, secularism fosters academic freedom, allowing both faculty and students to pursue innovative research focused on development, free from religious constraints. This enriches Turkey's educational discourse and facilitates the growth of diverse academic fields [21].

However, secularism has also led to certain negative consequences, particularly concerning the relationship between education and religious identity. Since the introduction of secular policies, religious education has been removed from the core curriculum of public schools, causing concerns among conservative communities. These groups argue that religious values, which they consider an integral part of national identity, should be included in school curricula. As a result, many feel that the education system no longer reflects the spiritual values important in their daily lives [8].

This dissatisfaction has been particularly evident in the debates surrounding religious attire in schools. Under secular education policies, the wearing of religious symbols, such as the hijab, in public schools was either banned or restricted, sparking tensions between secular and religiously-minded groups. Some perceived these policies as infringements on religious freedom, leading to prolonged public debates in Turkey [23]. Although the government later relaxed this rule, the tensions highlight how secularism can be a contentious issue in a society that continues to uphold strong religious values. Some view secular education policies as imposing a particular ideology, which they argue reduces ideological diversity [16].

Additionally, secularism in education has deepened the divide between secular public schools and religious institutions like Imam Hatip schools, which continue to offer faith-based education. Many families seeking religious education for their children opt for these schools, which provide a religious curriculum alongside the national one. This creates a segmentation within the education system, with secular and religious schools evolving separately, sometimes imparting differing values. This divide has the potential to foster societal polarization between those who favor secular education and those who prioritize religious education [24].

In conclusion, Turkey's secular education system has undoubtedly enhanced the quality of scientific education and fostered inclusive institutions. However, it has also led to a decline in the role of religion in formal education. The ongoing challenge for Turkey lies in harmonizing modernization with the spiritual needs of society. Balancing progress with social harmony in a diverse nation like Turkey is a complex task that requires careful consideration of various factors.

This study provides important insights into the impact of secular ideology on the education system in Turkey, particularly in promoting inclusivity and wider access to education for women and minority groups. By shifting from a paradigm based on religious values to a secular education model that supports the development of science and technology, Turkey has created a more modern and competitive foundation in facing global challenges. However, the impact of secularism has also given rise to complex social dynamics, including debates about the role of religion in public life [25], 26]. Therefore, the results of this study have implications for policymakers to continue to evaluate education policies by considering the balance between modernization and the diversity of spiritual values held by society.

This study has limitations because it uses a literature review method that relies on secondary sources, so it cannot directly capture the perspectives of actors involved in the education system in Turkey, such as educators, students, and policy makers. In addition, this study focuses more on the general impact of secularism without delving deeper into the variations in policy implementation at the local level. For further research, it is recommended to use a mixed-method approach that includes interviews and surveys to understand public perceptions of secular education policies. In addition, comparative studies with other countries that implement secularism policies in education can provide a broader picture of the effectiveness of this approach in various social and cultural contexts.

4. CONCLUSION

Kemal Atatürk's secularism in the Turkish education system has played a pivotal role in fostering a more scientific, modern education and enhancing Turkey's international competitiveness. This initiative aligned the country with global advancements in education, science, and technology, while also promoting the development of critical thinking, analytical skills, and innovation essential qualities in the modern world. While secularism has positively impacted Turkey's education system, it has also generated significant challenges. The separation of religion and education has led to discontent among those who believe religious instruction is essential in public schools. This division can exacerbate societal polarization, with secular policies sometimes perceived as limiting religious freedom and diversity. To address these issues, Turkey must carefully balance modernization with the preservation of spiritual values in its education system. To address these challenges, Turkey should consider integrating optional religious education programs that respect individual beliefs while upholding the principles of secularism. In addition, encouraging open dialogue and inclusive policies in the education system can help bridge societal divides and foster mutual understanding among different communities.

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