How the Presence of the Presidency of Religious Affairs Undermines Secularism in Turkey
Feryal Cubukcu Can

Founded in 1923, the Republic of Turkey was the successor of the Ottoman Empire, which was the last Islamic caliphate. With its strong Islamic roots from the past, the new republic declared that `the religion of the state is Islam` in the second article of the fundamental provisions of the Constitution of 1924. However, this provision was removed with the 1928 amendment to the Constitution of 1924. Another important development was the official abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate by Turkish National Assembly on 3rd of March 1924. Following it, the Presidency of the Religious Affairs (PRA) was founded in the same year to fill in religious vacuum. The PRA was designed for the interpretation and execution of an enlightened version of Islam. It was accountable to the office of the prime ministry.

In 1937, the Constitution of 1924 was further amended, incorporating the six main principles of the Republican Peoples` Party Program; republicanism, nationalism, populism, statism, reformism and secularism.

The controversial presence of the PRA in a secular state is a source of tension since the main principle of secularism is the separation of religion and the state. However, the PRA, referred to as the Diyanet in Turkish, is a state-funded and a state-run institution.
This paper aims to research on the factors that make the presence of the PRA undermine secularism in Turkey. It is an important topic since in 2015 the current president of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, criticized the main opposition party, which is the Republican Peoples’ Party, for writing in their election platform ´The Presidency of Religious Affairs will be at equal distance to all faiths´. In fact, this statement reflects how a secular state ought to run legitimately. However, the PRA has reflected the mainstream Sunni-Islamic beliefs, excluding folk Islam (Alevism and Sufism) since its establishment.

As a state institution, The PRA is getting a substantial share from the budget, which also takes the public attention and puts it under the spotlight. Its 2015 budget is 1.4 times bigger than that of the Ministry of Interior, 2.7 times bigger than that of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and 5.1 times bigger than that of the National Intelligence Organization. It has also become the center of attention because of its lavish spending, which is regarded against the Islamic value of ´modesty´. The recent fatwas that the PRA issued have condemned religiously illicit the celebration of the Gregorian New Year, playing the lottery, tattoos and abortions. These fatwas have created much controversy among the people of Turkey.

Moreover, public sectors’ recruitment policies also draw much opposition since education is a sensitive area and 800 civil servants were transferred from the PRA to the Ministry of Education in the past years under the rulership of the governing party.
The PRA is now viewed as a tool of the governing party, Justice and Development Party (JDP), with its Friday sermons that support the corruption of JDP and it is regarded as an obstacle before a modern form of secularism by the opposition.