

ELIF M. BABUL, *Bureaucratic Intimacies: Translating Human Rights in Turkey* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017), Pp. 230 Paper

MURAT AKAN, *The Politics of Secularism: Religion, Diversity, and Institutional Change in France and Turkey* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), Pp. 357 Cloth

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Two recent books by Elif M. Babül and Murat Akan give us wonderful descriptions of how debates over human rights and secularism spark fierce competition between an ever-widening spectrum of social groups that form shifting and frequently surprising alliances. Young Muslim women in the Directorate of Religious Affairs now use Amnesty International training sessions to combat patriarchy in government workplaces, but about the time that many of these women were born, a supposedly Kemalist junta had charged the same directorate to develop mandatory religious education to inoculate the country against left-wing challenges to authority. Thus, an unlikely army-ulema coalition had paved the way for an equally improbable counter-coalition between European liberals and pious women from the provinces.

Taken together, Babül and Akan remind us that Turkish society is too complex, well-organized, and highly educated to be dominated by a single power center whether public, private or a combination of the two. In deconstructing the imaginary monoliths of secularism and human rights, these scholars also demolish the notion that any culture or institution can monopolize the symbolic and moral power that flows from such ideals. Ongoing struggles to define and embody political principles

take on a force of their own that transcends doctrinaire efforts to freeze them around particular times—modern or post-modern—and places—Western or non-Western.

In Turkey, many factions compete for influence over a divided state and a fragmented society with fluid balances of power negotiating clashing interpretations of human rights and secularism. These re-negotiations and re-interpretations are not Turkish anomalies; instead, they breathe value and meaning into abstractions that need grounding in everyday life. Trying to implement human rights and secularism requires constant arm wrestling and power sharing among multiple groups that make and break shifting coalitions and counter-coalitions. This encourages growing reciprocity between the state and society, often with foreign actors added to the mix—simultaneous efforts at control from above and regulatory capture from below and abroad in which the relative advantage of power can reverse directions many times.

Elif M. Babül explores these struggles at the intimate level of personal relations between Turkish and European participants in human-rights training classes for civil servants and security officials. The sessions are filled with cynicism and opportunism. The European Union has forced Turkish governments to teach civilized behavior as a down payment for an accession deal that no one really expects to happen. Public employees attend to earn certificates and promotions while trying to block out condescending outsiders who have no clue of their professional and moral predicaments. Since everyone is pretending, the organizers decide to make pretending the heart of the program. Role playing and group performance create endless openings for sarcasm, denial, self-deception, and—on rare occasions—true confession.

Bewildered and intrigued, the author picks apart two years of these dramas, to lay out a myriad of cross-pressures between nationalities, genders, ranks, classes, generations, subcultures, and ideologies. It's every field worker's gold mine, but what does it mean and where is it going? Inevitably, we waver. On one hand, the play is a sham. Europe doesn't care about Turkey so it bypasses the local human rights groups and soft-pedals platitudes that hold no one accountable. Rights violators are legitimized; state violence increases, and society is torn to pieces precisely while the phony classes proceed.

Then again, there are many surprise breakthroughs of candor and direct challenges to authority at all levels. The ruptures are too sharp and too numerous to be isolated events: the young women in the religious bureaucracy, the prosecutors and psychologists in the provinces, and the judges who have looked the other way for too long. They are their own stories with pasts and futures worth knowing and following.

Even though the performances use intentionally evasive language and misleading translations, people who take rights seriously can see through the fog—they recognize one another, speak a common language, and strive together for wider goals. Perhaps, human rights networks are so strong and interconnected, both in Europe and in Turkey, that even hypocritical governments and international organizations cannot blunt their advances.

Murat Akan tells an equally ambivalent story about the vicissitudes of secularism in Turkey and France. In both nations, secularism spawns more politics than tolerance—grandstanding in public and horse trading behind the scenes. Instead of building durable institutions upon coherent foundations, politicians shed religious policies as quickly as their coalitions shift beneath their feet. Improvisation in

alliances dictates contradiction in principles. Secularism loses meaning as it gains adherents from opposing sides. Before long, we wonder, Can anyone save secularism from the secularists? Indeed, is there anything worth saving?

Murat Akan shows convincingly that secularists have failed to deliver their professed goal of religious neutrality. Nonetheless, he suggests there may still be hope for a measure of tolerance if the balance of power promotes compromise instead of unilateral action. The drive for power might make neutrality impossible, but the need to share power can make tolerance more likely. Politics destroys the luster of secular idealism, but politics can also help preserve its pragmatic core of basic coexistence. Self-styled secularists misrepresent their intentions in order to favor or disadvantage particular religious groups. They discredit the idea of secularism and prevent true neutrality. But could they also deter one another from full-blown persecution if they all feel vulnerable enough to settle for partial victories?

The evidence from Turkey and France tells us that both countries have powerful groups with maximalist ambitions that periodically threaten tolerance when they think the coast is clear. What keeps them in check—precariously at times—is not a solid commitment to institutions and norms, but a realistic fear that they will lose power if they wield it too recklessly. From this perspective, Murat Akan shares some of the optimism we see in Elif M. Babül's account. Post-modernist social science usually offers more disillusion than direction, but these authors hold out the possibility of progress—if not reenchantment—for anyone who can rekindle the inherent justice and fairness that inspires rights discourse everywhere.