



## THE RISING CONCERN ON WEAKENING SECULAR EDUCATION IN TÜRKİYE: THE REMOVAL OF EVOLUTIONARY THEORY

Mohammad Taib Mohd Ismail<sup>1</sup>, Wan Norhasniah Wan Husin<sup>2\*</sup>, Siti Juwairiah Zainurin<sup>3</sup>

- <sup>1</sup> Department of International Relations, Security, and Law, National Defence University of Malaysia, Malaysia  
Email: [toyib@upnm.edu.my](mailto:toyib@upnm.edu.my)
- <sup>2</sup> Department of International Relations, Security, and Law, National Defence University of Malaysia, Malaysia  
Email: [hasniah@upnm.edu.my](mailto:hasniah@upnm.edu.my)
- <sup>3</sup> Faculty of Defence Studies and Management, National Defence University of Malaysia, Malaysia  
Email: [sjuwairiahs@gmail.com](mailto:sjuwairiahs@gmail.com)
- \* Corresponding Author

### Article Info:

#### Article history:

Received date: 30.09.2025

Revised date: 20.10.2025

Accepted date: 30.11.2025

Published date: 09.12.2025

#### To cite this document:

Ismail, M. T. M, Husin, W. N. W., & Zainurin, S. J. (2025). The Rising Concern on Weakening Secular Education in Türkiye: The Removal of Evolutionary Theory. *International Journal of Law, Government and Communication*, 10 (42), 106-130.

DOI: 10.35631/IJLGC.1042009

This work is licensed under [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)



### Abstract:

This study investigates the factors contributing to the weakening of secular education in Türkiye, originally shaped by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. The weakening of secular education became particularly evident when evolutionary theory was removed from the high school curriculum in 2017. Some scholars argue that this decline was caused by politicians, religious groups, and segments of the public who oppose secular education since it encourages the young generation to keep religion separate from everyday life. To fulfil the objective of this study, qualitative methods were employed, with a particular focus on textual analysis of relevant primary and secondary materials. Additionally, this study employs a constructivist approach to gain a better understanding of how educational reforms impact knowledge construction in Türkiye. The findings reveal that political, religious, and social factors have played a significant role in the complex and controversial process of removing evolutionary theory from the curriculum. This decision is part of Türkiye's political strategy to strengthen conservative and Islamic values in society, weaken the secular traditions of modern Türkiye, and integrate more religious perspectives into the national education system.

### Keywords:

Education, Revolutionary Theory, Constructivist Approach, Religious Influence, Political Leaders, Religious Scholars, Masses

## Introduction

The growth of secular ideas is intrinsically linked to the spread of secular education. Secularism was developed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century after the Religious Wars and the Thirty Years' War had weakened the dominance of religious authority in politics. As Blaise Pascal recognised that men commit evil completely and willingly when motivated by strong religious belief (Stueland 2013). According to John Locke, the state exists to protect life, liberty, and property through rational governance, whereas religion must remain a free and voluntary matter to prevent oppression and conflict (Usta 2005). This separation of roles has been reinforced and spread globally through the expansion of modern education since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century which has transformed how knowledge is organized and transmitted, including in the Muslim world (Herrera 2004). During World War I, Türkiye's period of national struggle after the occupation of the Ottoman Empire by foreign powers. These events set the stage for the founding of the modern Republic of Türkiye. Unlike the Ottoman Empire which was strongly tied to Islam, the Republic founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was explicitly secular. Atatürk and his associates believed that Islam's role in Ottoman society and politics had hindered modernization. The new republic introduced reforms to emancipate women and eliminate the influence of Islam in education, law, and public administration, while also banning religious brotherhoods and folk Islam, which they viewed as obstacles to positivist thinking (Akyol 2021). In 1924, Atatürk introduced a series of secularising reforms, including the unification of the education system under state control and the establishment of secular schools, replacing the religious institutions of the Ottoman period (Karapehlivan 2019).

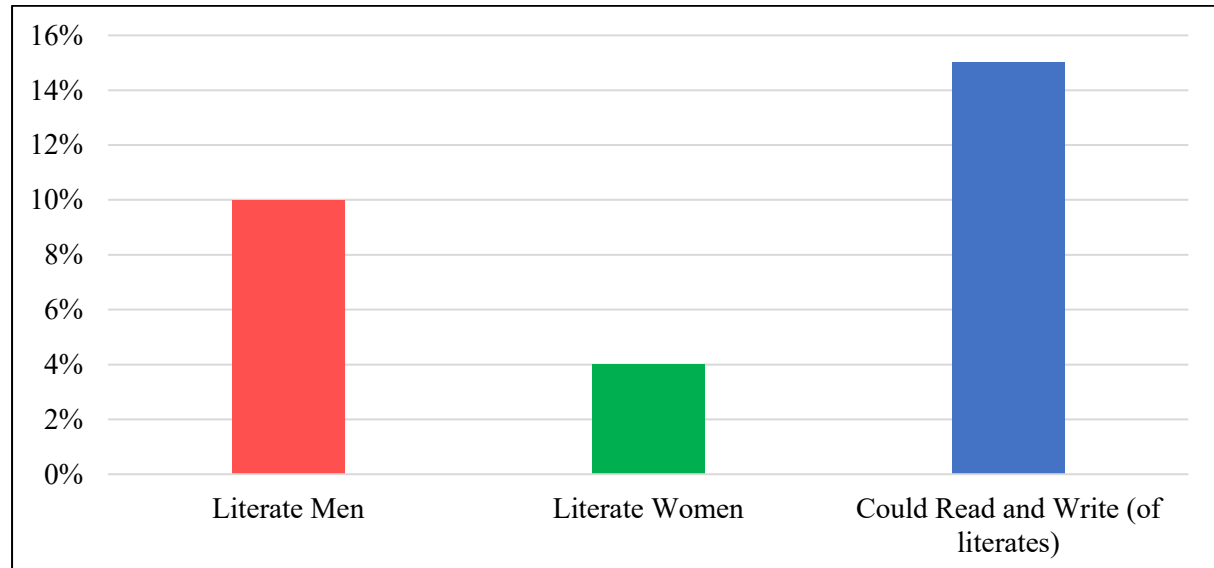
Secular education was crucial for the to the formation of the Republic of Türkiye and the building of new citizen who was modern, accepted the Western ideals, and spoke Turkish instead of Arabic. Atatürk establishes a similar definition of citizenship to the previous Ottoman empire. Under the Ottoman Constitution of 1876, all people living within the empire, regardless of religion or race whether Muslim, Christian, or Jewish were recognized as Ottoman citizens (*tebaa*), indicating an early intention to treat diverse communities equally under the law. Similarly, the Article 88 of 1924 Constitution of Atatürk's Republic defined all individuals within Türkiye's borders as Turkish citizens, again without distinction of religion or ethnicity. However, what changed was the scale and purpose of this citizenship: unlike the vast Ottoman Empire, the modern Republic of Türkiye covered a much smaller territory, limited to Anatolia and part of Thrace. Moreover, while Ottoman subjects maintained strong religious or ethnic identities, Atatürk's vision emphasized a unified, secular national identity, encouraging all citizens to identify primarily as Turkish to strengthen national unity. Unlike the vast Ottoman Empire, the modern Republic of Türkiye covered a much smaller territory, limited to Anatolia and part of Thrace. Moreover, while Ottoman subjects maintained strong religious or ethnic identities subjects to Ottoman *tebaa*, Atatürk's vision emphasized a unified, secular national identity, encouraging all citizens to identify primarily as Turkish to strengthen national unity (Siska 2017). Atatürk and his successors education had three important roles to fulfil including realisation of the modernisation project, formation of the nation-state, and achievement of the economic development (Karapehlivan 2019). Similarly, a study by Husin et al. (2022) found that education supported by inclusive economic policies and religious tolerance contributes to fostering national stability.

The period from 1923 to 1946 in Türkiye is known as the single-party era, during which the Republican People's Party, founded by Atatürk, ruled the country without political opposition. During this time, educational policies aimed to instil new social, political, and cultural values

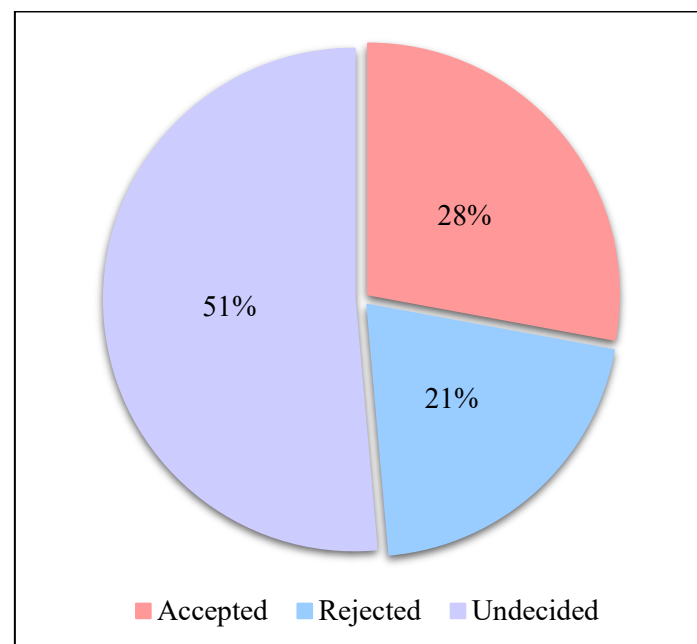
and to build the institutional foundations of the newly established nation-state (Rabo and Gök 2007). Atatürk drew his desired model of modern Türkiye's education system after the French Republican approach to shape citizens who were secularly educated, Western-oriented, valued scientific inquiry, and rejected religious instruction in public schools (Fortna 2018; Akyol 2019). French secularism (*laïcité*) culminating in the 1905 Law on the Separation of Churches and State, and is based on the strict separation of religion from state affairs to ensure a neutral public sphere and protect individual freedom of belief. In contrast, Türkiye's secularism (*laiklik*), does not fully separate religion from the state but rather places it under state control. In 1924, the Turkish Republic introduced decisive measures to curb the political influence of Islam carried over from the Ottoman era. The establishment of the Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*) ensured that religious life would be organized, funded, and supervised directly by the state (Rigoulet-Roze 2025). In the same year, the Law of Unification of Instruction (*Tevhid-i Tedrisat Kanunu*) abolished religious instruction in public schools and placed the entire education system under the Ministry of National Education (Genç 2018). It introduced new requirements, such as requiring approval from the Ministry of National Education before opening a school, as well as for the ministry to prepare curricula (Unal 2015). One of the literal examples of this education push was provided by Atatürk who traveled across Türkiye in 1982 with a blackboard and personally gave lessons on how to write the new Latin alphabet (Fortna 2018). During the Ottoman era, Turkish literature was deeply influenced by Persian and Arabic literary traditions (Arslan 2019). In order to break away from these Islamic cultural ties and foster a distinct national identity, Atatürk Kemal decided that it was essential to make Ottoman language obsolete by removing it from Turkish people's memory (Yılmaz 2011). The adoption of Latin alphabet served a positive step towards bridging Türkiye's cultural divide with the West although it did not fully change how Western states perceived Türkiye (Gulmez, et al. 2023).

In the Ottoman era, teaching programs or curricula appear to have been divided into three faculties or specialties which are religion and law, natural sciences, and instrumental or auxiliary for other sciences. *Tafsir* (interpretation of the Quran), *Hadith* (the Prophet's sayings), *Fiqh* (Islamic law), *Kelam* (Islamic philosophy defending faith *Tevhid* or unity), along with subjects such as Natural Sciences (philosophy, mathematics, astronomy) and, Instrumental Sciences (logic, rhetoric, and aesthetics), were among the main areas covered (Tarman, 2011). However, despite this relatively broad scope in practice, education remained largely limited to religious studies, and access to schools was highly restricted for much of the population (Unal 2015). By the time of the War of Independence 1919–1923, the Ottoman system had left the population with very low literacy with only was a rate of 7 percent of literate among the people (Fig. 1). After the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye, Türkiye's schools became more secular, scientific subjects were given greater emphasis, religious schools declined in prominence, and teaching methods gradually shifted toward encouraging student participation and open discussion (Tarman 2011). Atatürk sought to modernize Turkish education which required adopting a modern Western-inspired model by John Dewey. In 1924, Atatürk's government invited Dewey to Türkiye to evaluate the national education system and provide recommendations. Dewey's observations and proposals significantly shaped the country's new education policies. He advocated for modern curricula and textbooks that promoted scientific knowledge including the teaching of the evolutionary theory of humans (Şahin 2017) which aimed to cultivate students' independent thinking skills (Tarman 2011). However, until today, conservative segments in Türkiye's society continue to reject or question the theory of evolution because they perceive it as conflicting with Islamic beliefs and values (Girit 2017).

This is reflected in a study involving 1,098 undergraduate students from eleven Turkish universities, which showed that the proportion of students who rejected or were undecided about evolution was higher than that of those who accepted it (Fig. 2) (Peker et al. 2009).



**Figure 1. Literacy Rates During the Independence War (1919–1923), (Carkoglu, Ali. 2002)**



**Figure 2. Students' Views on Evolution in Türkiye Education, (Ciftci, Kemal. 2013)**

Türkiye's education always being the medium of clashes among secularist and Islamic conservatives. Since the founding of the Republic of Türkiye, education has been the battlefield for defining the Türkiye's identity whether modern, secular, and Western-oriented or conservative and Islam-rooted (Siska 2017). The Turkish military historically saw itself as the guardian of secularism. Under Atatürk, Türkiye's modern education reforms were inspired by progressive educational philosophies which align with the constructivist theory.

Constructivism emphasizes that students actively construct knowledge through experience and critical thinking, rather than passively absorbing information. This approach supported a secular, scientific, and inquiry-based curriculum, sharply contrasting with the rote memorization of traditional religious education (Karapehlivan 2019). For example, Necmettin Erbakan who led the Islamist Welfare Party was forced out of power in 1997 by a post-modern coup driven by secular elites and the military to stop what they saw as Islamization (Topçu 2008). In recent decades, however, secular education has faced renewed challenges under President Erdoğan's leadership. Many secularists view Erdoğan's educational reforms including the expansion of religious schools and increased religious content in curricula as undermining Türkiye's secular foundations (Weise 2017; Amraoui and Edroos 2018). Beyond political decisions, Turkish society remains deeply divided. Some families uphold Atatürk's vision of a secular, modern nation, while others advocate for an education system that reflects Islamic values and traditions (Afanasieva et al., 2014). This social divide is also reflected among the younger generation, as many young Muslims struggle against religious restrictions imposed by devout parents. Young Muslims increasingly adopt behaviours that challenge traditional norms such as more liberal dress, disregard for fasting rules, and a rising identification as non-believers or atheists, which has grown from nearly zero in 2008 to around 6 percent in 2021 (Fadil et al. 2023). Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP: *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) are undermining modern Türkiye's secular foundations by pushing a conservative agenda that includes removing evolution theory from the curriculum (Gumrukcu 2017). The theory of evolution is often considered blasphemy in the Muslim world, and a sizable portion of the population rejects it (Farouq 2021). In fact, a study found that only about 25 percent of Turkish citizens accept the theory of evolution, one of the lowest acceptance rates in Europe (Miller et al. 2006). The theory's removal in 2017 from the curriculum is interpreted as a rejection of scientific knowledge in favour of religious beliefs (The New Arab 2017).

Thus, based on the above assertions and justifications, gaining control over education policy is essential to influencing the next generation. Referring to one of the International Relations (IR) theory, which is constructivism, it suggests that the active role of learners in constructing knowledge through experience and social discourse is very important as a certain type of education was able to influence their experience and impacted their understanding in the future (Pande and Bharathi 2020). It is possible to argue that education can be shaped to fit a particular interest, whether that interest comes from a community or an individual. To achieve the objective of the study, this paper adopts a qualitative approach, specifically through textual analysis, to examine the factors contributing to the weakening of secular education in Türkiye.

### Methodology

Qualitative research is a type of investigation that focuses on understanding phenomena through in-depth textual analysis and narrative data (Tenny et al., 2022). Textual analysis is a technique used to quantify qualitative variables by analysing textual data from various sources. The selection of these textual sources was guided by the relevance to topic on political knowledge among student in higher education and civic education in Malaysia. Specifically, this study retrieved academic sources across multiple databases, including Web of Science (WoS), Scopus, SpringerLink, Emerald Insight, and Google Scholar to ensure comprehensive coverage of publications. Besides that, online news articles, institutional reports and policy on civic education in Malaysia were analysed based to ensure diverse perspectives. Secondary data from previous studies, surveys, and official reports were also incorporated to validate and enrich the analysis. Integrating textual analysis with secondary data enabled cross-verification



of findings, identification of key trends, and a deeper understanding of the role of political leaders, religious scholar and masses towards secular education as factors of the weakening secular education in Türkiye.

### **The Concept of Secular Education**

The term secular originates from the Latin word “saeculum,” which refers to two meanings: time and space. In the context of time, secular refers to now or the present, while in the context of space, it refers to the world. Etymologically, secularism can be interpreted as an understanding that only emphasizes present worldly life, without considering religious and spiritual elements (Arroisi et al. 2020). In this context, secular education refers to an educational framework that is not based on any religious doctrine or creed and is typically administered by the state. It is based on principle of secularism which emphasises the institutional separation of religion from state affairs, including education (Bertrand 2014). Under this framework, the government that be guided by the constitutions holds the authority to establish and regulate public education. However, once religious components are introduced into a secular institution, it frequently raises concerns about the appropriate role of religion in state-run education (Huntsberry 1974). These concerns are drawn from Huntsberry’s (1974) analysis of how secular education impacts religious perspectives through two main presuppositions which are experiential and the experimental. The experiential presuppositions asserts that human experience solely accepted as valid knowledge and religious beliefs, or miracles are treated as subjective or cultural interpretations. Meanwhile, the experimental presupposition argues that all knowledge is provisional and subject to alteration based on new facts or perspectives, complements this position. From these perspectives, nothing is considered absolutely true including religious beliefs since everything subject to critical inquiry, continual testing and contextual reassessment.

For instance, Huntsberry (1974) illustrates how secular education reinterprets religious narratives through human experience, as seen in the case of the Exodus. While religious believers regard as a historical act of divine intervention and a central narrative in Judaism and the Old Testament, secular educators view it as a story created by a group of people who experienced hardships in specific historical context. This reflects the experiential presuppositions, in which the belief that God was directly involved is treated as a personal and cultural interpretation rather than a proven fact. From the experimental perspective, the story of the Exodus can be reinterpreted, critically examined, or even questioned, depending on new evidence or evolving ideas. This shift reflects growing concern among religious communities that state-enforced secularism under Kemalist leadership suppressed religious expression and restricted individual liberties, particularly for those who shared Islamic beliefs (Rear 2014). Some secularists argue that this kind of system is still acceptable. However, secular education system that tries to accommodate every religious belief creates significant challenges.

According to Copson (2018), implementing a religiously adapted education system involves several significant challenges. First, patterns of belief and religious affiliation evolve over time. An education system that initially favours certain dominant religions may continue to prioritise them even as societal beliefs shift, thereby marginalising emerging or minority faiths. Second, it is practically unfeasible for the state to design an education model that accommodates the full spectrum of religious diversity. Even within the same religious tradition, young generation and families often interpret and practise their faith differently. Interfaith households and personal deviations from doctrinal teachings further complicate any attempt to provide

religiously specific education without discrimination. Third, an overemphasis on parental belief overlooks the rights of young generation, who are entitled to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion as they develop. A secular education system goal is to provide a neutral, inclusive, and balanced learning environment that does not promote or favour any particular religion or belief system. But instead, it respects diversity, protects individual freedom of belief, and equips students with critical thinking skills to make their own informed choices about religion, morality, and worldview.

### **The Evolution Theory in Education**

The evolution theory is a foundational concept in biology that offering a scientifically validated explanation for the diversity of life on earth (National Geographic 2023). It is grounded in the core principle that heritable traits in populations evolve over time due to mechanisms of natural selection (Harms and Reiss 2019). A phenomenon in natural selection known as genetic drift refers to random changes in population's traits happen by randomly, not they are stronger or more suited to the environment. For example, certain individuals have more offspring just by chance, even if they lack features that typically support survival (National Geographic 2023). The theory of evolution, first introduced by Charles Darwin, explains gradual adaptation through natural selection (Dixon and Shapiro 2022), and is now expanded in contemporary biology to include mechanisms like genetic drift, in which traits may be passed on by chance rather than fitness. Theory of evolution serves as an integrated framework in the biological sciences, encompassing a wide range of disciplines such as genetics, ecology, and physiology (Ashraf and Sarfaraz, 2016).

The controversy surrounding the teaching of evolution in the United States (US) highlights the enduring tension between secular science and religious belief. Despite being a well-established scientific theory, supported by overwhelming evidence and endorsed by the global scientific community, evolution continues to face opposition from many theologically conservative groups (Pew Research Center 2024). These groups often advocate for the inclusion of creationism or intelligent design in school curricula, viewing Darwinian evolution as a direct challenge to religious teachings about the origin of life. In Türkiye, the evolution theory status in the curriculum reflects the ongoing tension between secular and religious worldviews. After the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Atatürk's reforms in the 1920s and 30s aimed to modernize Türkiye and reduce the influence of religion in public life. As part of this vision, evolutionary theory was integrated into the national curriculum, symbolizing a commitment to science, rational thought, and Western education models. Atatürk even contributed to writing textbooks defending evolution and materialist science (William 2008).

However, this secular vision has faced repeated challenges. Since the 1980s, and especially under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's AKP, there has been a marked increase in Islamic influence on educational policies. In 2017, evolution was officially removed from the national high school curriculum, representing a dramatic shift toward religious conservatism in education (Pew Research Center 2024). Groups like the Science Research Foundation (BAV: Bilim Arastirma Vakfi), have promoted creationist views, distributing materials such as the Atlas of Creation across schools and universities. Their actions, backed by substantial funding, reflect a broader to replace evolution with religious explanations of life, mirroring similar efforts by creationists in the US. This trend has raised serious concerns among scientists and educators. According to Turkish evolutionary biologist Aykut Kence, the push against evolution threatens the scientific integrity of the education system and undermines students' ability to engage critically with

biological science. Despite these pressures, many academics and students, particularly at institutions like Middle East Technical University (METU) in Ankara, continue to defend evolutionary science. They have hosted international experts and filled lecture halls with hundreds of students eager to learn about evolution signaling a strong base of support for scientific education (Pew Research Center 2024). The case of Türkiye demonstrates how curricular decisions about evolution are not just scientific or educational, but deeply political and ideological. The inclusion or removal of evolution reflects the broader struggle between secularism and religious fundamentalism, and has significant implications for how future generations are taught to understand life, science, and truth.

### **Factors of Weakening Secular Education in Türkiye**

The strong, state-enforced secularist vision in Türkiye has been significantly weakened over the past decade due to political shifts and educational reforms (Genc 2018). Several factors have contributed to this decline, including the expansion of religious education, the exclusion of certain scientific themes such as evolution, and the promotion of the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis (TIS) ideology (Akyol 2019; Burak 2021). TIS, which combines elements of Turkish nationalism and Islamism, gained prominence in the 1970s and 1980s as a dominant political ideology aim to reconcile Islam with the secular state (Balci, 2009). Although Kemalism, introduced by Atatürk, initially sought to diminish the role of religion in public life, a shift occurred by the 1950s when some Kemalist elites began to see Islam as a useful tool for fostering national unity. This laid the ideological groundwork for the later emergence of the TIS in the 1970s and 1980s

Under the leadership of the AKP and President Erdoğan, the state further aligned with this view, demonstrating that nationalism and Islam are compatible with Türkiye's modern identity (Tobing and Nurwijoyo 2020). However, secularists argue that this shift, TIS erode the separation of religion and state, allowing Islamic values to shape public institutions, particularly education and potentially undermining secular principles (Amraoui and Edroos 2018; Akyol 2019). The government through TIS advocacy has invested heavily in religious schools and revised curricula to reflect a more conservative Islamic orientation (Butler 2018). Notably, figures such as Ali Carkoğlu (former education minister and political science), Aykut Kence (evolutionary biologist in METU), and Ali Bardakoğlu (former head of the presidency of religious affairs, Diyanet) have played key roles in advancing religious education reforms (Yavuz and Ozturk 2019).

Another factor contributing to the transformation of Türkiye's secular education is the government's shifting stance on minority rights, particularly the Kurdish issue. In the early 2000s, as part of European Union (EU)-aligned reforms, the AKP government-initiated policies that challenged the traditional Kemalist model of homogenized national identity. These included the recognition of Kurdish cultural rights and steps toward softening policies against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK: *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*). However, these reforms were met with resistance from both secular nationalists and religious conservatives, who viewed them as a threat to national unity. In response, the government increasingly emphasized religious unity using Islam as a tool to consolidate national identity across ethnic lines. This shift coincided with the Islamisation of education and the marginalisation of secular content such as evolution, suggesting that both ethnic and ideological diversity are being suppressed in favour of a religiously conservative, unified national narrative.



This suppression of ethnic plurality aligned with the marginalisation of secular and scientific content in education, reinforcing a unified national-religious identity through textbooks and school policies. Due to significant changes in the country's education system, younger generations and segments of the Turkish public are confronting their views on national education. These reforms, supported by many AKP-aligned citizens, are seen as part of a broader effort to cultivate a more religiously conservative society through schooling (Karapehlivan 2019). This ideological reorientation is also shaped by Türkiye's strained relationship with the EU, where unfulfilled accession promises and cultural tensions have fueled public resentment and increased support for domestic religious-nationalist policies. As a result, secular education has been steadily reshaped, culminating in the removal of evolutionary theory from the national curriculum, a symbolic move that reflects the deeper ideological transformation of Türkiye's education system.

### ***The Role of Political Leaders Towards Secular Education***

Political leaders have a significant impact in determining the educational direction of a country and in shaping the values of younger generations. Leaders which emphasizes Islamic work ethics and moral values able to cultivate responsible youths who are equipped to contribute to social harmony (Noh et al. 2015). As the founder and first president of modern Türkiye, Atatürk had the important contributions in shaping the education system. Unlike some contemporary political figures, Atatürk's leadership implemented sweeping reforms to secularize and nationalize the education system, replacing the Ottoman Empire's religiously influenced model with a Western-style, scientific curriculum (Karkazis 2021). During Turkey's transition to a republican regime, republican elites adopted an assertive form of secularism (Erturk 2022). His vision was based on the concept that education should equip young generation with scientific and technological knowledge both in primary and secondary school for national progress (Unal 2015). During this period, literacy rates rose from around 10 percent in the 1920s to over 70 percent by the 1970s, and secular schools expanded significantly, even in rural areas (UNESCO 2008). The curriculum reflected Enlightenment values and rationalist thinking that weakened the Islamic influence in public education and aligning Türkiye with European models (Erturk 2022).

In contrast, later political figures began to challenge this secular foundation. Necmettin Erbakan, serving as Prime Minister from 1996 to 1997, proposed a national identity based on Islamic values and reduced reliance on Western influence. He encouraged for the expansion of Imam Hatip schools, which are religious vocational high schools that teach prayer leaders while also promoting Islamic academics such as the Qur'an, Hadith, and Fiqh (Yinanç, 2018). Erbakan's government came under scrutiny and pressure from the military, which forced the enactment of regulations aimed at curbing the rapid rise of Islamic activism, or *da'wah*, including reforms to the curriculum and education system (Karacan 1995). Subsequently, his government extending compulsory education from five to eight years (Cornell, 2018) and his support for religious schooling laid groundwork for future reforms. However, by the time Erbakan was forced from office by the military in 1997, Imam Hatip schools had developed into a parallel state-funded education system, educating approximately 11 percent of Turkey's student population (Miller, 2014). By the late 1990s, over 500,000 students were enrolled in Imam Hatip schools, compared to just 72,000 in the 1970s (Genç, 2018), signalling the emergence of a dual-track education system. Despite his efforts to promote Islamic values, Erbakan was removed from power due to concerns from the military and secularist factions who felt threatened by his government. The military's actions were driven by fears that

Erbakan's administration was undermining secularism and the Kemalist reforms that had established Turkey as a secular and Western-oriented state (Amraoui and Edroos, 2018).

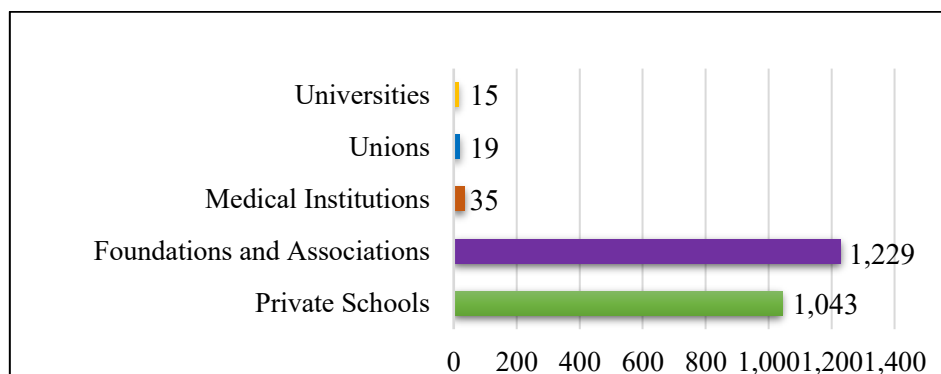
This development intensified under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who rose to power in 2002. Erdoğan's education policy marked a significantly differed from Atatürk's secularism. Erdoğan's administration massively expanded religious education, particularly Imam Hatip schools, while cutting resources to secular public schools (Butler 2018). By 2020, over 1.3 million students were enrolled in Imam Hatip institutions, a twentyfold increase from 2002 (Butler 2018). In 2018, the government allocated 6.57 billion Turkish Lira (approximately \$1.68 billion USD) to these schools, nearly a quarter of the national upper-secondary education budget (Butler 2018). This expansion of religious education has drawn criticism for diverting resources and attention away from secular schools. Furthermore, a Erdoğan's controversial decision came in 2017, when Erdoğan's administration removed the theory of evolution from the high school biology curriculum. This move, justified by the claim that evolution was "too complex and controversial" for younger generations (Shaheen and Hatunoğlu 2017), was met with strong opposition from academics and secularists. Those academics and secularists' critics viewed it as a direct assault on scientific literacy and an attempt to align science education with religious ideology. In fact, Türkiye already had the lowest public acceptance of evolution among European countries (Annac and Bahçekapılı, 2012). Public protests like the Gezi Park movement in 2013 reflected broader resistance to this ideological shift. Demonstrators held forums on topics like evolutionary theory, and banners reading "We have been standing for four million years" symbolized resistance to anti-scientific educational reforms. In 2014, biologists launched the Ecology and Evolutionary Biology Symposium to promote academic dialogue in the face of increasing pressure (Altınışik 2022). As education is weakened and topics like evolution are removed, students lose the chance to ask questions and think critically. This goes against the main idea of constructivist learning, which encourages students to explore and build their own understanding. The importance of education in a multi-ethnic country is reflected in a recent study by Husin et al. (2023) which indicates that education supported with fair political practices and respect for religious and cultural diversity significantly fosters unity particularly among young generation.

### ***The Role of Religious Scholar Towards Secular Education***

Religious scholars and intellectual movements have profoundly influenced Türkiye's education system, frequently challenging the secular foundations established by the Republic's founding principles. One of the essential institutions in this process is the Diyanet which has played an emerging influence in embedding Islamic values into public education through curriculum content and teacher training (Butler and Altaylı 2023). Among the most influential figures is Fethullah Gülen whose Hizmet (or Gülen) movement built an expansive network of over 1,000 schools both in Türkiye and internationally (Pew Research Center 2024). These schools formally obey to Türkiye's secular curriculum but integrate Islamic ethics and discipline into everyday school culture that seeks to harmonize religious and academic development. The Gülen schools are widely respected for their emphasis on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) subjects and academic performance, with early foreign language instruction enhancing their appeal (Demir et al. 2000). Proponents argue that this synthesis of secular academic rigor and Islamic values cultivates globally competitive graduates with a strong ethical compass, positioning the schools as an appealing alternative to purely secular or state-run models. However, the Gülen movement's approach has also attracted significant criticism. Detractors argue that the schools serve as vehicles for covert

religious proselytization, thereby undermining the secular ethos that underpins Türkiye's national education policy (Tittensor 2014). The movement's deep integration into the state bureaucracy, judiciary, and security apparatus further intensified concerns about its political ambitions and parallel influence within the Republic's secular institutions (Aydıntaşbaş 2016).

These tensions exacerbated following the 2016 coup attempt which the Erdoğan administration attributed to Gülen and his followers. In the aftermath, the government issued sweeping measures to demolish the movement's institutional presence, culminating in the closure of 1,043 private schools, 1,229 foundations and associations, 35 medical facilities, 19 unions, and 15 universities. The state treasury took all assets (Fig. 3) (Letsch 2016). This widespread elimination indicated how deeply the movement was embedded in Turkey's educational and sociopolitical fabric, as well as the state's willingness to protect secularism in the face of perceived threats to its ideological underneath. While these scholars have contributed to raising academic standards and promoting global competitiveness through innovative schooling models, their efforts to infuse education with Islamic values continue to challenge the Republic's secular identity. The state's aggressive response to the Gülen movement following the coup attempt highlights the enduring fragility of Türkiye's secular education framework when confronted by organized religious networks that wield significant social and institutional power.



**Figure 3. Institutions Closed by Turkish Government Decree Following 2016 Coup Attempt**

### ***The Role of Masses Towards Secular Education***

The Turkish public has long been a significant force in shaping the trajectory of secular education, serving both as a guardian of the Republic's founding secularist ideals and as an active participant in contesting or endorsing government-led educational reforms (Karapehlivan 2019). Historically, the establishment of a secular and modern education system was central to Atatürk's nation-building project, aimed at cultivating a citizenry aligned with Western scientific and democratic principles. However, the past two decades have witnessed profound shifts, marked by an increasing incorporation of religious content within the curriculum such as elective courses on the Quran, the Life of Prophet Muhammad, and Basic Religious Knowledge (Kadıoğlu 2021). While officially voluntary, limited secular alternatives mean that many students are indirectly compelled to enroll in these religious classes, raising alarms among secularist segments of society (Kadıoğlu 2021).

Secular-minded parents and civil society organizations have emerged as vocal defenders of Türkiye's secular educational framework. They frequently criticize the ruling AKP government's education policies for fostering what they perceive as an ideological drift towards religious conservatism. Many parents express fear that an intensified focus on religion in state schools could stifle critical thinking and academic freedom, potentially producing a generation less equipped to question authority or engage in scientific inquiry (Afanasieva et al., 2014). This public vigilance has manifested in various forms of resistance and advocacy. A concrete example is the widespread protests during the 2013 Gezi Park demonstrations, where citizens did not only rally against urban development plans but also criticized perceived authoritarianism and the erosion of secular values including concerns about the government's growing influence over education policy. About 640,000 people had participated in the demonstrations as of 5 June. Protests took place in 78 of Turkey's 81 provinces. The biggest protests have been in Istanbul, with reports of more than 100,000 protesters, according to the Human Rights Foundation of Turkey (Yinanç 2018). This event demonstrated that the masses could act as a powerful check on policies seen as undermining secularism.

In addition to street protests, organized networks such as parents' associations, teachers' unions such as Eğitim-Sen, and secular advocacy groups have taken legal action against curriculum changes and have mobilized public opinion to demand policy reversals. These unions, often composed of prominent academics and educators, play a critical role in pressuring the government by leveraging media campaigns, petitions, and court challenges. For example, Eğitim-Sen has repeatedly sued the Ministry of National Education over mandatory religious courses and curriculum revisions, arguing that they violate the constitutional principle of secularism (Jones 2017). Conversely, significant segments of the population notably conservative, religious communities and supporters of the AKP actively endorse the integration of Islamic values into the education system. This faction believes that strengthening religious education fortifies national identity and moral values eroded by Westernization (Kirdiş 2021). They too organize, vote, and exert pressure through unions, religious community networks, and local governance structures to expand religious schooling options such as Imam Hatip schools.

In Türkiye's vibrant democratic setting, electoral outcomes directly shape education policy. Citizens' choices at the ballot box determine the ideological orientation of the government, which in turn dictates the balance between secular and religious priorities in schooling (Kirdiş, 2021). This underscores the masses' role not only as protestors or supporters but as ultimate arbiters through democratic means. The general public in Türkiye plays an indispensable dual role: as both a safeguard against the dilution of secularism and as a driving force behind reforms that reflect the evolving religious sentiments of society. The persistent tension between secularists and conservatives highlights the deeply contested nature of education as a battleground for Türkiye's identity.

### **The Process of Removing the Evolutionary Theory in Education**

In 2017, Alpaslan Durmuş, then-chair of Türkiye's Board of Education, announced the removal of the chapter on evolution theory from ninth-grade biology textbooks. He justified the changes by describing the theory as controversial and too complex for high school students (Shaheen and Hatunoğlu 2017). This decision marked a turning point in the AKP broader agenda to reshape Türkiye's national curriculum in line with a more religiously conservative worldview. The AKP government, under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, had already begun revising textbooks to reduce references to Atatürk and increase Islamic themes (Kingsley 2017). The

removal of the evolution sparked significant criticism from scientists, educators, and secular organizations, who viewed it as a regressive step for science education and a broader threat to secularism. Education Minister İsmet Yılmaz defended the reform, stating that evolution was a complex and debated topic better suited for higher education. In support of the curriculum change, the pro-AKP teachers' union, *Eğitim Bir-Sen*, proposed in early 2017 the elimination of courses on Kemalism that further intensifying debates over ideological shifts in education. In contrast, the secular Education and Science Workers' Union (*Eğitim-Sen*) publicly opposed the move, advocating for the continued inclusion of evolution in the high school curriculum. This stance is part of *Eğitim-Sen*'s long-standing commitment to defending secular and science-based education in Türkiye. On February 2015, the union organized a nation-wide boycott under the banner of "Secular and Scientific Education," supported by dissident civil groups, Alevi associations, and the United June Movement (BHH). *Eğitim-Sen* affiliated teachers went on a one-day strike and marched to demand an education system free from religious influence and grounded in scientific principles including the right to teach evolution in schools (Şen 2018).

The ideological push against evolution was also influenced by broader cultural and religious narratives. Prominent among these was Adnan Oktar, also known as Harun Yahya, a religious author and advocate of Islamic creationism. Through the distribution of his lavishly produced book, *Atlas of Creation*, Oktar challenged evolutionary theory by using pseudoscientific arguments that gained significant attention both nationally and internationally (Solberg 2013). Although not directly linked to the removal of evolution, another influential figure was Fethullah Gülen. Once a political ally of President Erdoğan, Gülen fostered a network of schools and scholars who often favoured religious explanations over scientific theories like evolution. Following the failed 2016 coup attempt which the government attributed to Gülen's movement, the AKP accelerated its efforts to centralize control over education and align it with a conservative, Islamic identity (Daftari 2024). These developments reflect not only a change in curriculum content but also a broader ideological transformation in Türkiye's education system. Education policies have shifted away from secular, scientific traditions by minimizing evolution and emphasizing religious content. This process aligns with the government's broader agenda of reinforcing a national-religious identity at the expense of critical, inquiry-based learning.

### ***From the Perspectives of Political Leaders***

The AKP came to power in 2002 through political strategy, strategic alliances, and a strong support base grounded in religious conservatism. Although the AKP positioned itself as a centrist conservative party with democratic identities, but its Islamist origins remained strong (Kutay 2021). In the 2002 general election, it secured 34.2 percent of the popular vote and 363 out of 550 parliamentary seats, enabling it to form the government (Çarkoğlu 2002). Once in power, the AKP gradually dismantled the influence of the secular bureaucracy and military, institutions that had long upheld the Kemalist legacy. The AKP's governance can be examined through three phases: hegemony (2002–2007), predominance (2007–2014), and suspension (2014 onward).

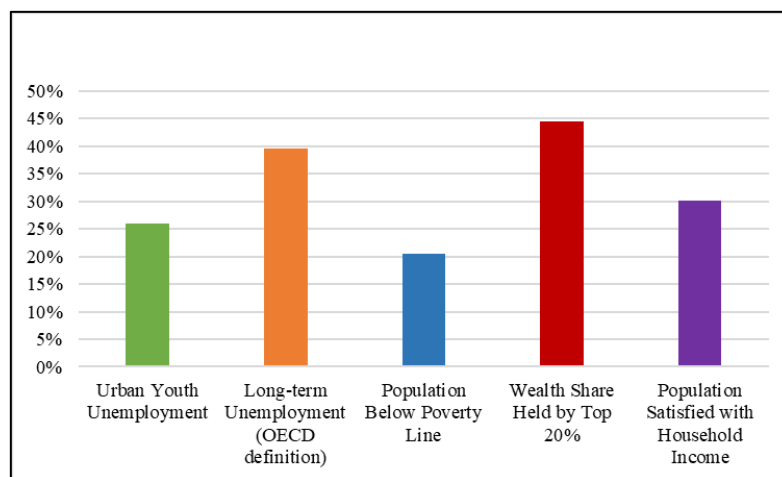
### **The Hegemon Period**

The hegemonic period of the AKP refers to its early rule following by its decisive victory in the 2002 general election. It secured 34.3 percent of the vote and 363 out of 550 parliamentary seats. This is enough to form a single-party government (Çarkoğlu 2002). This election victory



represented a significant shift from the Kemalist establishment that had long dominated Turkish politics through the military, judiciary, and bureaucratic institutions. The AKP demonstrated itself as a moderate, centrist-conservative party that distanced itself from overt political Islam and catered to a broad base, including liberal and leftist intellectuals. From 2002 to 2007, under the leadership of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and with the key involvement of Abdullah Gül, the AKP prioritized stabilizing the economy and strengthening ties with the EU. During this period, the party also worked to build broad social consensus across religious, conservative, and liberal segments of society.

This was achieved in part by capitalizing on widespread public dissatisfaction with decades of Kemalist governance which had alienated many conservative and religious citizens. By 2007, surveys showed increasing support for the AKP among the youth and urban poor, especially those previously marginalized by strict secular policies (Çiftci 2013). This shift was partly driven by persistent unemployment over 26 percent among urban youth, poverty 20.5 percent of the population, and low satisfaction with household income only 30.1 percent (Eligür 2007) (Fig. 4). Prior to 2002, Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit's coalition government (DSP, CHP, MHP) had attempted economic reforms and advanced EU negotiations. However, the 2001 financial crisis one of the worst in Turkish history, which saw the Turkish lira lose nearly 50 percent of its value and unemployment spike to over 10 percent undermined public trust and led to the AKP's rise. Although Abdullah Gül's focus remained largely on foreign policy, democratization, and economic development rather than immediate educational reforms, the AKP's early dominance enabled it to lay the groundwork for later ideological shifts. These included increased support for religious education and a gradual weakening of secular norms in state institutions, particularly the education system.



**Figure 4. Socioeconomic Indicators in Türkiye 2007. (Karkazis, John. 2021)**

### The Predominance Period

The predominance period of the AKP began with Abdullah Gül's election as President of Türkiye in 2007, succeeding Ahmet Necdet Sezer. This transition marked a consolidation of the party's power across both executive and legislative branches. In the same year, the AKP won the general election with nearly 47 percent of the national vote, securing 341 out of 550 seats in parliament (Turkey Analyst 2008). During this period, political tensions over secularism deepened, while Türkiye's bid for EU accession and its emerging role as the world's largest host for Syrian refugees shaped the government's domestic and international agenda

(Pope 2012). Between 2007 and 2014, under Gül's presidency, the AKP introduced key education reforms that signalled a gradual departure from the secular Kemalist model. Among them was the expansion of Imam Hatip schools and the easing of university admissions for graduates from these religious institutions (Göğüş 2016). While their official vocational status remained unchanged, these reforms reflected the AKP's broader strategy of promoting religious education. One of the cornerstone initiatives was the introduction of the Values Education (Değerler Eğitimi) program, which emphasized moral and religious teachings based on Islamic Akhlak (Çelik and Gür 2013). In 2012, a significant education reform bill extended compulsory schooling from eight to twelve years and enabled students as young as eleven to enroll in optional Quran classes (Sabral 2012). These changes stirred public debate, especially among secularist circles and opposition parties such as the CHP, who viewed them as efforts to erode Türkiye's secular foundations. Nevertheless, these reforms effectively cemented the AKP's ideological dominance and built institutional pathways for further religious influence, especially in the education sector.

### **The Suspension Period**

The suspension phase marked by Erdoğan's presidency beginning in 2014 which represented a more assertive departure from secular norms. Erdoğan adopted a populist and authoritarian style that emphasizing religious identity and increasing executive powers under the 2017 constitutional referendum (Bâli 2018; Korkmaz 2021). One of the most evident signs of excessive executive power concentration is the original legislative authority granted to the president under Türkiye's new constitutional system, coupled with the lack of parliamentary checks on this power (Bâli 2018). This centralization allowed sweeping control over institutions, including education. One of the most controversial educational reforms was the 2017 removal of the theory of evolution from the national high school curriculum. While the government claimed that evolution was too complex for high school students, critics viewed this as a politically motivated shift to undermine scientific reasoning (Shaheen and Hatunoğlu 2017; Cornell 2015). Concerns also intensified over the declining quality of science and technology education, as the AKP expanded Imam Hatip secondary schools and increased the number of religious education hours in public schools (Tol and Alemdaroglu 2020). Originally established to train prayer leaders, Imam Hatip schools have grown into mainstream institutions under Erdoğan's rule. By 2020, over 1.3 million students were enrolled in these schools, up from just 60,000 in 2002 (Butler 2018).

These educational reforms raise serious concerns about the quality of science instruction in Türkiye. The removal of evolution, a central theory in biology, limits students' opportunities to engage with evidence, explore natural phenomena, and think critically that are essential in modern, student-centered approaches such as constructivism. Instead, the curriculum increasingly reflects ideological aims, narrowing the space for open inquiry and individual understanding. Under the AKP's leadership, particularly during Erdoğan's tenure, these shifts reflect a broader effort to reshape national identity through religious and ideological frameworks at the expense of secular and scientific educational foundations. This relationship between the inclusive education and inter-ethnic understanding is significant was reflected among Malaysian youth as education guided by them towards fair governance and mutual respect among different religious and cultural groups to enhance ethnic unity (Husin et al., 2022).

***From the Perspective of Religious Scholars***

Several Muslim religious scholars who support creationism and oppose evolution have influenced the discussion on the removal of evolutionary theory from Türkiye's education system. Among the most prominent figures is Harun Yahya who have published over 200 books in Turkish and translated many of them into 51 other languages (Heneghan 2007). Yahya is the founder of the BAV, an organization dedicated to promoting Islamic creationism (Carrier 2011). Through the widespread distribution of his materials, particularly the "Atlas of Creation," Yahya has challenged the teaching of evolution, framing it as incompatible with religious belief. whose creationist agenda has significantly influenced both public opinion and educational policy. He has been effective in convincing educators to teach creationism as an alternative to the theory of evolution and in obtaining creationist materials into schools.

Even before the removal of evolutionary theory from secondary public schools' curriculum by AKP government in 2017, several books have been published and conferences have been hosted by Harun Yahya and BAV to promote creationism as an alternative to the theory of evolution (Hameed 2010). Numerous surveys indicate that the majority Muslims populated nations believe in creationism, and Türkiye has lately become the centre of the world's resistance to evolution under AKP (Paulson 2009). Only 25 percent of Türkiye's citizens, according to science article in 2006, agreed with the theory of natural selection, which is one of the subtopics taught in Darwin's theory of evolution, making Türkiye the centre of the world's opposition to evolution (Altınışık 2022). This movement led by Oktar is concerned with using the internet to further an ideological cause especially by disseminating ideas that contradict the theory of evolution and propagate anti-evolutionary beliefs (Riexinger 2008). Hence, it is undeniable that the creationist movement, which is led by Oktar, has significantly undermined the teaching of evolution in Turkey by advocating for the eliminations of evolutionary theory from the curriculum. Meanwhile, Gülen opposes the evolutionary theory since it proposes but also evolution from one species to entirely another (Riexinger 2008). He obtained guidance from Sufi sheikhs, grew up in a *Naqshbandi* setting, which is a Sufi order in Islam founded by the 14<sup>th</sup>-century Central Asian Sufi named Bahauddin Naqshband. He was also exposed to the tenets of the mystical path and was raised in a Sufi tradition that placed a strong emphasis on obeying religious law and loving God. Fethullah Gülen and Said Nursi both oppose Darwin's theory of evolution. Fethullah Gülen was influenced by Said Nursi (Pandya and Gallagher 2012).

The views expressed in Gülen's book "The Truth of Creation and Evolution" are anti-evolutionary, and he has written extensively on the subject, opposing the teaching of evolution in education institutions especially in Türkiye (Riexinger 2008). Gülen challenges the idea of evolution and criticises the way evolutionary theory is taught, especially the notion that humans descended from earlier species. He places a strong emphasis on the notion that Adam was the first human, and that Eve was created from Adam's rib as miraculous creations that are not to be discussed in terms of cause and effect. The Gülen Movement led by Gülen have had a significant impact on Türkiye's education reforms; in fact, there is evidence that Gülen has reinforced the AKP's hold on power in order to realise his vision of reforming education. In accordance with the contribution of Gülen that influenced the removal of evolutionary theory is via its coalition with political leader, which is Erdoğan. Concerning an uprising that some characterised as passive or quiet, this signalled the triumph of a coalition between two forces: the visible and political referring to AKP, and the unseen and spiritual nebula or sect led by its founding imam referring to Gülen (Balci 2022).

Gülen focuses his efforts on educating the next generation and assisting in the rise of new elites who are devout but unaffected by economic success, nationalist but engaged in globalisation, believers but never leaves behind the modernisation. It has been the goal of Gülen and his supporters to oppose the teaching of evolutionary theory in Türkiye. The inclusion of evolutionary theory in school's curriculum has been opposed by Gülen himself, and the Gülen Movement has been able to promote creationism as a substitute theory for the origins of life because of an anti-evolutionary agenda (Shaheen and Hatunoğlu 2017). However, regarding the removal of evolutionary theory in 2017 from secondary school's curriculum, there is no direct evidence that Gülen or his followers were involved. The cause of no involvement of Gülen by himself or Gülen's followers comes when relationship between Gülen and Erdoğan began to deteriorate due to political conflict between them. To illustrate more, Gülenists or people loyal to Gülen particularly in the police and judiciary were accused by Erdoğan of creating a parallel state within the state, which meant they were operating independently of the civilian political leadership and were not accountable to the elected government (Shaheen and Hatunoğlu 2017). In fact, the Gülen Movement's educational programmes and political influence in Türkiye have helped AKP came into power which enables government to remove evolution theory from the country's curricula (Arslan 2019).

### *From the Perspective of Masses*

In the context of Turkish population and its secular education system, the masses represent the ordinary citizens, including parents, other students, and various community members who may not hold prominent positions in politics, academia, or religious institutions. Their perspectives, beliefs, and actions collectively contribute to the broader societal fabric.

**Parents** Parents tend to have their own perspectives regarding the removal of evolutionary theory from the curriculum. Their opinions are often influenced by various sources such as, political views or religious beliefs. Some parents worry about excluding evolution because they believe it is essential for students to understand this foundational theory in biology and science (Kingsley 2017). Conversely, other parents may support the removal due to their faith-based convictions, particularly those aligned with Islamic views on creationism. These parents argue that teaching evolution in schools' conflicts with their religious beliefs and is therefore inappropriate (Shaheen and Hatunoğlu 2017). Pressure on teaching the theory of evolution in Turkish classrooms existed long before its official removal in 2017. Mehmet Balik, former head of Eğitim-Sen reported ongoing pressure from parents and educators to stop teaching evolution (Jones 2017). Many parents feared that teaching both creationism and Darwin's theory would confuse students because the ideas conflict (Jones 2017). Despite this, the government never held a referendum specifically on parents' views about evolution. After the 2016 coup attempt, public support for President Erdoğan rose, reshaping Turkish society and leading to more conservative policies, including education reforms aimed at raising "pious generations" (Weise 2017). Parental backing for Erdoğan strengthened during this time and was reflected in the April 16, 2017 referendum, where the "Yes" vote won narrowly with 51.4 percent against 48.6 percent for "No" (Weise 2017). While the referendum did not directly address evolution, it demonstrated broad support for Erdoğan's policies, encouraging the government to remove Darwin's theory from the high school curriculum as part of its conservative education agenda.

**Academic community** The academic community in Türkiye including scientists, educators, and researchers has consistently opposed the removal of evolutionary theory from the high school curriculum. While no specific academic lobby group has been directly linked to this resistance, strong opposition has come from two major education trade unions: Eğitim-İş and Eğitim-Sen, both of which represent teachers, academics, and education workers across the country, albeit with differing political affiliations. Eğitim-İş, aligned with the Confederation of Turkish Trade Unions (Türk-İş), is known for its conservative and pro-government orientation (Gürcan et al. 2022). In contrast, Eğitim-Sen is affiliated with the Confederation of Public Workers' Unions (KESK) and has a secular and progressive stance (Altınışık 2022). While Eğitim-İş has made controversial proposals, such as the removal of Kemalism from the curriculum and the introduction of compulsory religion classes for first-grade students (Girit 2017), Eğitim-Sen has taken a firm stand in defense of secular and scientific education. While, in the Malaysian context, studies have shown that university students are influenced by their peers through group discussions, peer pressure, and identity development which plays a significant role in shaping youth political behaviour (Zainurin et al., 2024).

On February 13, 2015, Eğitim-Sen organized a nationwide boycott campaign titled “Secular and Scientific Education”, in collaboration with Alevi associations, dissident civil organizations, and the Barikatlarla Halkla Hukukla Dayanışma (BHH). Teachers affiliated with the union participated in a one-day strike to demand the protection of secularism and scientific content in schools. The union’s opposition to AKP’s education policies came at a significant cost. On June 25, 2009, Sakine Esen Yılmaz, Executive Board Member and Gender Secretary of Eğitim-Sen, and Mehmet Bozgeyik, General Secretary and ETUCE Committee member, were arrested as part of government crackdowns (Şen 2018). In the following years, many Eğitim-Sen members, including teachers and academics, were dismissed or suspended, particularly after the failed coup attempt in July 2016. In the aftermath of the coup, the Turkish government declared a state of emergency and undertook mass eliminations targeting those suspected of having links to terrorist organizations or opposition groups. Among those affected were members of Eğitim-Sen. More than 1,500 educators and academics affiliated with the union were dismissed, signaling a broader effort to suppress dissent and neutralize critics of the AKP’s education agenda (Karkazis, 2021).

After the 2016 coup attempt, this study returns focus to the central issue including the 2017 removal of evolutionary theory from Türkiye’s national curriculum. Although Eğitim-Sen was in a vulnerable position due to mass arrests and dismissals of its members, it continued to resist government policies that were viewed as harmful to secularism and scientific education in Türkiye (Dennis et al. 2019). In response to the AKP government’s decision to eliminate Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution from the high school curriculum, Eğitim-Sen publicly voiced its opposition, warning that the move could undermine secular and evidence-based education. The union argued that banning evolution contradicted the foundations of a modern secular curriculum. Despite increasing political pressure, many Eğitim-Sen members faced intimidation from school officials, fellow educators, and parents, who urged them not to discuss evolution in classrooms (Jones 2017). In contrast, Eğitim Bir-Sen a splinter group from Eğitim-İş supported the government's move. Following the Ministry of Education's announcement to exclude evolution, Eğitim Bir-Sen called for the removal of Kemalism-related content from school curricula (Sol 2017).



## Conclusion

Overall, political, religious, and social factors have intricately shaped the controversial and multifaceted process of removing evolutionary theory from Türkiye's high school curriculum. Central to this development was the AKP government under the leadership of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who advanced a broader political vision: to embed conservative and Islamist values more deeply within Turkish society, challenge the secular foundations established by the Kemalist republic, and reshape the education system in alignment with religious traditions. Religious figures such as Fethullah Gülen and Adnan Oktar (Harun Yahya) were instrumental in spreading anti-evolutionary sentiment. Gülen's network of schools and media outlets, despite his later political rift with Erdoğan, helped cultivate a generation whose worldview was shaped by faith-based interpretations. Similarly, Oktar's prolific publications especially *Atlas of Creation* that gained domestic and global attention by presenting counter-narratives to scientific theories, often employing a persuasive but misleading veneer of scientific reasoning. Rooted in religious traditions, both figures promoted a vision of education where spiritual conviction was interwoven with academic instruction, thus redefining the boundaries of science education in Türkiye.

Politically, Türkiye's shifting governance landscape facilitated these changes. The AKP's progression through the hegemonic, predominance, and suspension periods illustrates how political consolidation coincided with fundamental reconfigurations of national curricula. During the hegemonic phase (2002–2007), the AKP gained legitimacy by promoting economic development and EU harmonisation. In the predominance phase (2007–2014), with Abdullah Gül as president, the government expanded Imam Hatip schools and introduced Values Education, gradually increasing religious influence in classrooms. The suspension period, catalysed by the failed 2016 coup, gave Erdoğan the latitude to centralise power and curtail dissent, particularly among secular and academic voices. Public attitudes toward these reforms were deeply divided. Many conservative parents viewed religious content as essential to moral upbringing, while more secular-minded families worried that reducing exposure to empirical scientific theories would limit students' capacity to explore, question, and critically interpret the world around them. Following the coup attempt, heightened nationalism and a desire for stability helped Erdoğan secure support for his "pious generation" (*dindar nesil*) initiative. The narrow 51.4 percent victory in the 2017 constitutional referendum symbolised a society torn between preserving its republican-secular identity and embracing conservative restructuring, including education reforms like the removal of evolution.

Academic unions exemplified this divide. *Eğitim-Sen*, which advocates for evidence-based, secular instruction, consistently resisted policies undermining scientific integrity in schools. Its members, many of whom were dismissed or arrested post-coup, represented the voice of an academic community concerned about the erosion of students' ability to engage in independent, inquiry-driven learning. In contrast, unions like *Eğitim-İş* and *Eğitim Bir-Sen* aligned more closely with the AKP's conservative agenda, framing the curriculum changes as a restoration of national and moral values. The removal of evolutionary theory is therefore more than a policy shift; it represents a profound reorientation of Türkiye's national identity and educational philosophy. As foundational scientific theories are sidelined, students may lose opportunities to develop reasoning skills and construct understanding through investigation and evidence a departure from educational models that nurture critical, autonomous thinkers. This trajectory may diminish Türkiye's scientific competitiveness and deepen the ideological rift within its society.

Ultimately, this reform is not just a curricular change but a reflection of Türkiye's ongoing struggle between its secular republican legacy and a resurging religious conservatism. Understanding this dynamic is key to grasping the broader sociopolitical transformation currently shaping the nation's future.

### Acknowledgements

The authors express their gratitude to the National Defence University of Malaysia for providing resources throughout the publication process of this paper.

### References

- Afanasieva, Dasha, and Sezer, Can. 2014. *Rise of Turkish Islamic schooling upsets secular parents*. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/rise-of-turkish-islamic-schooling-upsets-secular-parents-iduskcn0jg0ck/>
- Akyol, Mustafa. 2019. *Turkey's Troubled Experiment with Secularism*. The Century Foundation. [https://production-tcf.imgix.net/app/uploads/2019/02/23094811/Akyol\\_FinalPDF.pdf](https://production-tcf.imgix.net/app/uploads/2019/02/23094811/Akyol_FinalPDF.pdf)
- Akyol, Mustafa. 2021. *Turkey's Troubled Experiment with Secularism*. The Century Foundation. <https://tcf.org/content/report/turkeys-troubled-experiment-secularism/>
- Altınışık, N. Ezgi. 2022. Science and Politics: The fight for evolution. *eLife*. <https://elifesciences.org/articles/84343>
- Amraoui, Ahmed El, and Edroos, Faisal. 2018. Is Turkish secularism under threat? *Al Jazeera*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2018/6/3/is-turkish-secularism-under-threat>
- Arroisi, Jarman, and Sa'adah, Hidayatus. 2020. Secularization of education and ITS implication on learners. *At-Ta'dib* 15(2): 43. <https://doi.org/10.21111/at-tadib.v15i2.5051>
- Arslan, C. Ceyhun. 2019. Entanglements between the Tanzimat and al-Nahḍah: Jurjī Zaydān between Tārīkh ādāb al-lughah al-turkiyyah and Tārīkh ādāb al-lughah al-'arabiyyah. *Arabic Literature* 50(3-4): 298-324. <https://doi.org/10.1163/1570064x-12341389>
- Ashraf, Muhammad Ashraf, and Sarfraz, Maliha. 2015. Biology and evolution of life science. *Saudi Journal of Biological Sciences* 23(1): S1-S5. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sjbs.2015.11.012>
- Balci, Tamer. 2009. From Nationalization of Islam to Privatization of Nationalism: Islam and Turkish National Identity. *History Studies* 1(1): 83-103. [https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1095&context=hist\\_fac](https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1095&context=hist_fac)
- Bâli, Aslı. 2018. Turkey's Constitutional Coup. *MERIP*. <https://merip.org/2018/12/turkeys-constitutional-coup/>
- Bertrand, Robert L. 2015. The Limits of Secularization through Education. *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 17.
- Burak, Begüm. 2021. Turkey's Secularism Experiment as an impediment to Democratic Consolidation. *Journal of Political Administrative and Local Studies* 4(1): 54-71. <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/1612934>
- Butler, Daren, and Altayli, Birsan. 2022. *Role of Islam in Turkish education fuels secularist fears*. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/role-islam-turkish-education-fuels-secularist-fears-2023-12-14/>
- Butler, Daren. 2018. With more Islamic schooling, Erdogan aims to reshape Turkey. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/turkey-erdogan-education/>
- Carkoglu, Ali. 2002. Turkey's November 2002 elections: a new beginning? *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 6(4): 30-41. [https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/meria/caa02\\_01.pdf](https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/meria/caa02_01.pdf)

- Carrier, Marc. 2011. Muslim creationism and the curious case of Harun Yahya: a look at a high-profile Muslim creationist and his Christian friends in the U.S. *Skeptic [Altadena, CA]* 16(3): 32.  
<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A257216611/AONE?u=anon~49f7749b&sid=googleScholar&xid=8d6614de>
- Çelik, Zafer, and Gür, Bekir. S. 2013. Turkey's Education Policy During the AK Party Era (2002-2013). *Insight Turkey* 15(47): 151-176.  
<https://www.insightturkey.com/file/410/turkeys-education-policy-during-the-ak-party-era-2002-2013-fall-2013-vol15-no4>
- Ciftci, Kemal. 2013. The kemalist hegemony in Turkey and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) as an 'Other'. *L'Europe En Formation* 367(1): 143-169.  
<https://doi.org/10.3917/eufor.367.0143>
- Copson, Andrew. 2018. *The ethics of education in the secular state*. Philosophy Now.
- Cornell, Savante E. 2018. Headed East: Turkey's Education System. *Transatlantic Policy Quarterly*. <http://turkishpolicy.com/article/895/headed-east-turkeys-education-system>
- Daftari, Amir. 2024. Turkish Spiritual leader Fethullah Gülen dies in U.S. *Newsweek*.  
<https://www.newsweek.com/turkish-spiritual-leader-fethullah-gulen-has-died-pennsylvania-1972127>
- Demir, Cennet Engin, Balci, Ayse, and Akkok, Fusun. 2000. The role of Turkish schools in the educational system and social transformation of Central Asian countries: The case of Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan. *Central Asian Survey* 19(1): 141-155.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/713656175>
- Dixon, Thomas, and Shapiro, Adam. R. 2022. 4. Darwin and evolution. In *Oxford University Press eBooks*: 59-94. <https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780198831020.003.0004>
- Eligür, Banu. 2007. The changing face of Turkish politics: Turkey's July 2007 parliamentary elections. *Crown Centre for Middle East Studies* 22.  
<https://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/middle-east-briefs/pdfs/1-100/meb22.pdf>
- Erturk, Omer F. 2022. Anatomy of political Islam in republican turkey: The milli Görüş movement as a legacy of Naqshbandism. *Contemporary Islam*, 16, 295-320.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-022-00500-x>
- Farouq, Mohamad. 2021. *Understanding Muslims' Responses to the Theory of Evolution*. RIMA. <https://rima.sg/understanding-muslims-responses-to-the-theory-of-evolution/>
- Fortna, Benjamin C. 2018. Education and change in the late Ottoman Empire and Turkey. *Journal of Educational Media Memory and Society*, 10(1), 44-62.  
<https://doi.org/10.3167/jemms.2018.100104>
- Genç, Muhammad Fatih. 2018. Values education or religious education? An alternative view of religious education in the secular age, the case of Turkey. *Education Sciences* 8(4): 220. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci8040220>
- Girit, Selin. 2017. Passions flare as Turkey excludes evolution from textbooks. *BBC*.  
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-40384471>
- Göğüş, Sezer İdil, and Mannitz, Sabine. (2016). The World Culture Entered Turkey. *Peace Research Institute Frankfurt*. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep14549.5.pdf>
- Göle, Nilüfer. 2020. *Turkey is undergoing a radical shift, from pluralism to Islamic populism* - NOEMA. NOEMA. <https://www.noemamag.com/turkey-is-undergoing-a-radical-shift-from-pluralism-to-islamic-populism/>

- Gulmez, Seckin Baris, Topal, Alp Eren, and Rumelili, Bahar. 2023. Europe and Turkey: identities in evolution. An analytical literature review. *Open Research Europe* 26(3): 120. <https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.16176.1>
- Gumrukcu, Tuvan. 2017. Turkey to stop teaching evolution theory in high schools - education board. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN19E1SQ/>
- Gürçan, Efe Can, and Mete, Bark. 2020. Emerging Forms of Social-Union organizing under the new conditions of Turkish Capitalism: A Class-Capacity Analysis. *Review of Radical Political Economics* 52(3): 523–541. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0486613419899515>
- Hameed, Salman. 2010. Evolution and creationism in the Islamic world. In T. Dixon, G. Cantor, & S. Pumfrey (Eds.), *Science and Religion New Historical Perspective*:133-152. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511676345.008>
- Heneghan, Tom. 2007. Creation vs. Darwin takes Muslim twist in Turkey. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSL09265541/>
- Herrera, Linda. 2004. Review: Education, Islam, and Modernity: Beyond Westernization and Centralization. *Comparative Education Review* 48(3): 318-326. <https://doi.org/10.1086/421179>
- Huntsberry, Randy. 1974. Secular education and its religion. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 42(2): 733–738. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1461140>
- Husin, W. N. W., Samsudin, N. K. I., Zainol, N. A., Nordin, N. N. H., & Mujani, W. K. (2022). The influence of education, economy and religion domains in enhancing ethnic unity among Malaysian youths. *Ethnicities*, 22(6), 922–942. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687968221101401>
- Husin, W. W., Samsudin, N., Mujani, W., & Zainurin, S. (2023). Consociational politics as a mediating effect in strengthening ethnic unity among youth in Malaysian public universities. *Ethnicities*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687968231204667>
- Jones, Dorian. 2017. Dispute about teaching evolution in Turkish schools escalates. *Voice of America*. <https://www.voanews.com/a/dispute-about-teaching-evolution-in-turkish-schools-escalates/3926085.html>
- Kadioğlu, Uluç. 2021. *The State of Education in Trmurkey and Bogazici Protests*. Harvard International Review. <https://hir.harvard.edu/the-state-of-education-in-turkey-and-bogazici-protests/>
- Karacan, Serpil. 1997, May. Turkish Education: Past, Present... and Future? *Insight Turkey*, 5, 147-153. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26726629>
- Karapehlivan, Funda. 2019. *Constructing a "New Turkey" through Education*. Heinrich Böll Stiftung Derneği. <https://tr.boell.org/en/2019/10/01/constructing-new-turkey-through-education>
- Karkazis, John. 2021. *Educational reforms during the Ataturk era*. Geo-economy and geopolitics series.
- Karlidag-Dennis, Ecem, McGrath, Simon, and Stevenson, Howard. 2019. Educational policy-making and hegemony: monolithic voices from civil society. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 40(8): 1138–1153. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2019.1647091>
- Kingsley, Patrick. 2017. Turkey Drops Evolution from Curriculum, Angering Secularists. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/23/world/europe/turkey-evolution-high-school-curriculum.html>
- Kirdiş, Esen. 2021. Islamic populism in Turkey. *Religions* 12(9): 752. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12090752>



- Korkmaz, Serem Selvin. 2021. The perils of personalizing power: Erdoğan's one-man rule has made him increasingly vulnerable. *Middle East Institute*. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/perils-personalizing-power-erdogans-one-man-rule-has-made-him-increasingly-vulnerable>
- Kutay, Acar. 2021. A Historical Analysis of the AKP in Power. *Journal of Political Science* 123(1). <https://journals.lub.lu.se/st/article/view/22771>
- Letsch, Constanze. 2016. Turkey's president orders closure of 1,000 private schools linked to Gülen. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/23/turkey-erdogan-closure-of-1000-private-schools-gulen>
- Miller, Alexander Christie. 2014. Erdogan Launches Sunni Islamist Revival in Turkish Schools. *Newsweek*. <https://www.newsweek.com/2014/12/26/erdogan-launches-sunni-islamist-revival-turkish-schools-292237.html>
- Miller, Jon D, Scott, Eugenie C, and Okamoto, Shinji 2006. Public acceptance of evolution. *Science* 313(5788): 765–766. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1126746>
- National Geographic. (2023). *Theory of evolution*. <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/theory-of-evolution/>
- Noh, M. M. M., Basir, S. A., Taib, L., Ahmadun, M., & Husin, W. N. W. (2015). A case study of Islamic work ethics implementation at Johor Corporation (JCORP): Focus on the implementation and benefits. *Jurnal Pengurusan*, 45, 105–118. [https://www.ukm.my/jurnalpengurusan/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/jp\\_45-10.pdf](https://www.ukm.my/jurnalpengurusan/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/jp_45-10.pdf)
- Pande, Mandaar, and Bharathi, S. Vijayakumar. 2020. Theoretical foundations of design thinking – A constructivism learning approach to design thinking. *Thinking Skills and Creativity* 36: 2-17). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tsc.2020.100637>
- Pandya, Sophia, and Gallagher, Nanacy. (Eds.). 2012. *The Gulen Hizmet Movement and its Transnational Activities*. Brown Walker Press. <https://objective-hopper.74-208-172-112.plesk.page/bwp/pdf-b/2335470b.pdf>
- Paulson, Steve. 2009. *Meet Harun Yahya, the leading creationist in the Muslim world*. Slate Magazine. <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2009/10/meet-harun-yahya-the-leading-creationist-in-the-muslim-world.html>
- Peker, Deniz, Comert, Gulsum Gul, and Kence, Aykut. 2009. Three Decades of Anti-evolution Campaign and its Results: Turkish Undergraduates' Acceptance and Understanding of the Biological Evolution Theory. *Science & Education* 19(6–8): 739–755. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11191-009-9199-1>
- Pew Research Center. 2024. *Gülen Movement*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2010/09/15/muslim-networks-and-movements-in-western-europe-gulen-movement/>
- Pew Research Center. 2024. *Overview: The conflict between religion and evolution*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2009/02/04/overview-the-conflict-between-religion-and-evolution/>
- Pope, Hugh. 2012. Erdoğan's Decade. *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*. <https://www.thecaireview.com/essays/erdogans-decade/>
- Rabo, Annika, and Gök, Fatma. 2007. Appendix 1 - The History and development of Turkish education. In *Education in 'Multicultural Societies.: Turkish and Swedish Perspective* 18: 247–255.
- Rear, Patrick G. 2014. Atatürk's Balancing Act: The role of Secularism in Turkey. *Global Tides* 8(1): 9. <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1110&context=globaltides>



- Riexinger, Martin. 2009. Propagating Islamic Creationism on The Internet. *Core UK*. <https://core.ac.uk/reader/230601454>
- Rigoulet-Roze, David. 2025. *The Geopolitics of laïcité: Making sense of the Franco-Turkish dispute - IRIS*. IRIS.
- Sabral, Jody. 2012. New Education Bill Revives Koran Studies In Turkish Schools. *Al-Monitor*. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2012/al-monitor/turkish-education-reform-passed.html>
- Şahin, Mustafa. 2017. John Dewey's Influence on Turkish Education System in the Early Republic Era. *European Journal of Education Studies* 3(6): 622-632. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.80260>
- Şen, A. Fulya. 2018. Discussions on education policies in media: Media representations of education activists in Turkey. *Research in Education* 105(1): 89–106. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0034523718791923>
- Shaheen, Kareem, and Hatunoğlu, Gözde. 2017. Turkish schools to stop teaching evolution, official says. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/23/turkish-schools-to-stop-teaching-evolution-official-says>
- Siska, Katalin. 2016. *Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's effect on the new concept of the Turkish identity and citizenship in particular the constitutional regulation of the Young Turkish Republic*. Szakcikk Adatbázis. <https://szakcikkadatbazis.hu/doc/4693535>
- Solberg, Anne Ross. 2013. *The Mahdi wears Armani an analysis of the Harun Yahya enterprise*. <https://sh.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:626688/fulltext01.pdf>
- Stueland, Eirik. 2013. *Religion is a motivator, not a motive for conflict*. Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama. <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/AD1023006.pdf>
- Tarman, Bülent. 2011. Development of Social Studies Curriculum in Turkey and John Dewey's Effect on the Modernization of Turkish Education. *International Journal of Progressive Education* 7(1): 45-61. <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/237175>
- The New Arab and Agencies. 2017. *Turkey scraps theory of evolution from school curriculum*. The New Arab. <https://www.newarab.com/features/turkey-scraps-theory-evolution-school-curriculum>
- The Turkey Analyst. (2008). Turkey in 2007: Key Developments. *Turkey Analyst*. <https://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/113-turkey-in-2007-key-developments.html>
- Tittensor, David. 2014. *The House of Service*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199336418.001.0001>
- Tobing, Fredy B. L, and Nurwijoyo, Agung. 2020. Turkish Islam-Nationalism under AKP: a new model for the Muslim world? *Global Jurnal Politik Internasional* 22(2): 268. <https://doi.org/10.7454/global.v22i2.532>
- Tol, Gonul, and Alemdaroglu, Ayca. 2020. *Turkey's Generation Z Turns Against Erdogan*. Foreign Policy. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/15/turkey-youth-education-erdogan/>
- Topçu, Canan. (2008). *Self-appointed guardians of secularism*. Dandc.eu. <https://www.dandc.eu/en/article/turkeys-military-self-appointed-guardians-secularism>
- Unal, Birsan. 2015. Education Policies during Ataturk Period. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 174: 1717–1722. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.01.827>
- UNESCO Institute for Statistics. 2008. *International Literacy Statistics: A Review of Concepts, and Current Data*. United Nations. [https://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/international-literacy-statistics-a-review-of-concepts--and-current-data-en\\_0.pdf](https://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/international-literacy-statistics-a-review-of-concepts--and-current-data-en_0.pdf)

- Usta, Metin. 2005. *Separation of religion and politics*. Citeseerx. <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=6223b33d17cd45a8e8900909aaba0536d2b41d8>
- Weise, Zia. 2016. Erdoğan, the new Atatürk. *Politico.eu*. <https://www.politico.eu/article/recep-tayyip-erdogan-new-ataturk-turkey-coup-eu/>
- Williams, Nigel. 2008. Secular Turkey's evolution battle. *Current Biology* 18(10): R398–R399. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2008.04.066>
- Yavuz, M. Hakan, and Öztürk, Ahmed. Erdi. 2019. Turkish secularism and Islam under the reign of Erdoğan. *Southeast European and Black Sea studies* 19(1): 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2019.1580828>
- Yılmaz, Kaya. 2011. Critical examination of the alphabet and language reforms implemented in the early years of the Turkish Republic. *Journal of Social Studies Education Research*, 2(1), 59–82.
- Yinanç, Barçın. 2018. Atatürk's vision was based on education, information and science: Professor. *Hürriyet Daily News*. <https://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/ataturks-vision-was-based-on-education-information-and-science-professor-138348>
- Zainurin, S. J., Husin, W. N. W., & Zainol, N. A. (2024). Assessing peers as a predictor on youth political behaviour in enhancing Malaysian political stability. *Pakistan Journal of Life and Social Sciences (PJLSS)*, 22(2). <https://doi.org/10.57239/pjlss-2024-22.2.00385>