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Traces of the Religious Education Politics in Post-Kemalist Türkiye:

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Traces of the Religious Education Politics in Post-Kemalist Türkiye: A Study on the Theology Students

Abstract

Under successive Justice and Development Party (AKP) governments, Türkiye has experienced a significant post-Kemalist transformation in which religious education has moved from the margins to the center of state policy. Through curriculum reforms, the expansion of İmam Hatip schools, and the rapid growth of theology (ilahiyat) faculties, these reforms were frequently justified in terms of cultivating a "pious generation" aligned with a broader religious-conservative vision. While existing scholarship has extensively examined these institutional reforms, less attention has been paid to their effects on the students they target. This article examines whether the state's project of religious socialization has been realized among theology students, a constituency in which its success should be most evident. Drawing on survey data and in-depth interviews, the study examines how students interpret and respond to the norms and values promoted through religious education. The findings reveal a substantial gap between policy ambitions and lived outcomes. Despite sustained institutional efforts to shape students' values and identities, theology students do not constitute a homogeneous ideological constituency. Their orientations range from endorsement and accommodation to ambivalence, skepticism, and critical distance. Rather than producing ideological convergence, religious education often fosters reflexive and individualized engagements with religion and politics, while support for the government's religious-conservative agenda remains far from uniform. By demonstrating the limits of state-led ideological socialization in a highly favorable institutional setting, the study challenges linear models of ideological reproduction and highlights the contingent relationship between institutional power, religious education, and identity formation.

Keywords: AKP, post-Kemalism, theology students, cultural policies, Islamization

Introduction

Education, as one of the ideological state apparatuses (ISAs), (Althusser, 2014, 82–93), constitutes the primary domain in which the foundations of governmental social and cultural policies are established. For the ideological transformation within the state apparatus to permeate society, those in power must secure social consent. (Kaplan, 2006, 8–36). Drawing on Gramsci's theory of hegemony (Gramsci, 1971), this consent is not merely coerced but actively manufactured through cultural and educational policy: it is through the creation of a shared sense of belonging and collective identity that ruling groups consolidate their dominance. Education, therefore, is not a neutral institution but an ideological battleground where the terms of consent are negotiated and reproduced across generations (İnal and Akkaymak 2012).

Religion and religious values emerge as a functional social mechanisms in the construction of a sense of belonging and collective identity. (Mardin, 1991, 113–129; 2006, 5–20). In Althusserian terms, religious institutions operate as such apparatuses, sites where dominant ideology is inculcated not through force but through interpellation, the process by which individuals are called into subject positions that reproduce existing social relations. (Althusser 2014, 140–170). Beyond this structural function, religious values and symbols are instrumentalized by political actors to draw social boundaries, reinforce the *us-versus-the-other* distinction, and mobilize the masses (Brubaker 2012, 2–20; Lamont and Molnár 2002, 167–195). In this sense, religion constitutes a symbolic field in which political legitimacy is produced, and collective identity is continuously reproduced (Bourdieu, 1991). Gramsci's concept of hegemony further enriches this picture: a ruling bloc achieves dominance not solely through the repressive state apparatus but also by winning the war of position in civil society — in schools, religious associations, media, and community organizations (Gramsci, 1971, 245–246). It is precisely this war of position that the AKP has waged through its religious education policies (Çayır and Gürkaynak, 2008, 50–58; Kandiyoti and Emanet, 2017, 869–870; Lüküslü, 2016, 637–649).

The influence of religion has been evident in Turkish politics over the last 24 years. The AKP, which has advocated for liberalization and the superiority of religious ethical norms, captured power. This process has witnessed a socio-cultural upheaval accompanying the centralization of powers in the hands of the executive. While the government put a massive amounts of privatization, deregulation and disciplinary implementation of labor into practice, (Agartan 2017, 136–152; Angın and Bedirhanoğlu, 2012, 139–167; Bozkurt-Güngen, 2018, 219–238; Erol, 2019, 663–677; Özdemir, 2020, 245–267), it also strived to revitalize the religious social norms permanent in all areas of the public and private spheres (Adak, 2021, 200–221; Onur, 2024; Kaya, 2015, 47–69; Kirdiş, 2023, 146–161; Şen, 2011). This Islamization found places from education through family and gender policies to the media and other means of communication.

Education has always played a crucial role for the AKP governments, which are willing to form a 'golden generation'. This process, according to AKP, determines the way in which future generations would be raised. The AKP took several steps to fundamentally reform the national education system, particularly in primary and secondary schools. Under the guise of the AKP, the Turkish education system has undergone numerous reorganization processes. Religious training was extended (and popularized) both in public and private education institutions, the number of *imam hatip* schools (the locomotive of religious public education) was increased, publicly promotion encouraged families to send their children to the Qur'an courses, and religious affairs staff members were trained to guide the children along these lines. Consequently, this fundamentally intervened and fractured the integrity of the public education system (Coşkun and Şentürk, 2012, 165–177; Lüküslü, 2016; Yaşar, 2020, 106–120; İnal, 2012, 17–30; Gur, 2016, 1–19).

Against this backdrop, we examine the group that the literature has consistently overlooked: the theology students — the AKP's most direct institutional investment in producing a religiously oriented generation. Three interlocking gaps motivate this inquiry. First, while the Islamization of Turkish education has attracted considerable scholarly attention, existing studies analyze policy and institutions, not the ideological subjects that those institutions are meant to produce. Second, the post-Kemalist paradigm has been examined primarily as a political and intellectual phenomenon; its effects at the level of individual consciousness and social identity — specifically among those it claims to empower — have not been empirically tested. Third, the Gramscian concept

of hegemony and the Althusserian notion of the ISA have been invoked in analyses of Turkish conservatism (Buyruk, 2021, 657–674; Kirdiş, 2023) but rarely deployed to examine the reception of hegemony from the perspective of its target audience. This study addresses all three gaps by inquiring into the extent of success of pK policies in religious higher education in cultivating the ideological subjects they set out to create. Drawing on in-depth interviews and surveys conducted with 17 theology faculty students across four metropolitan areas — a methodologically demanding task given the political fragility of population — the research argues that the AKP's hegemonic project has encountered significant limits at the grassroots level. Theology students, despite their conservative formation, approach the government's socio-cultural policies with scepticism, express dissatisfaction with the quality of religious education, and retain a nuanced attachment to republican legal norms. We structured our research as follows: in the first section, we map the key religious education reforms of the AKP era, whereas we analyze the post-Kemalist paradigm as an ideological project in the second section. We present the empirical findings. The third section presents the empirical findings. We conclude our research with a theoretical assessment of the limits of hegemony-building through education in post-Kemalist Türkiye.

The Rise of Conservative Reforms and Policies

Türkiye has witnessed one of the most radical shifts in the 21st century. Conservative politics were reached with the election victory of the AKP. However, the social and cultural transformation had begun earlier, owing to the local networks that played a significant role in the party's emergence. This transformation is as important as the rise of authoritarianism in Türkiye. Nonetheless, one should consider how religious-based socio-cultural implementations have contributed to this process over the years. This trend in the field of culture expands the horizon and highlights the transformative influence of the AKP government on daily life. In addition to other institutions, the education system has undergone major religious-oriented reforms.

Much earlier than the AKP captured power, conservative social norms left their mark on daily life. It was a continuation of an anti-secularist stance within the society, tracing back to the early Republican era (Lord, 2018). The party smartly built its cultural norms upon this basis. From a discursive perspective, it has enhanced religious rhetoric that emphasizes faith in God, unity among Muslims, patience toward the poor, and the promotion of conservative family values (Kaya, 2015, 52–56). Conservative non-governmental organizations and charities were essential for the party to manage the public sphere (Atalay, 2018, 183–184). Additionally, the education system underwent repeated reorganization under the new regime; consequently, the *imam hatip* schools were promoted, their numbers increased, and private Qur'an courses, which were highly influential in neighborhoods, were established (Lord, 2018). This rearticulation of 'conservative democracy' is based on the reinterpretation of Islam and superseded secular tradition (Azak, 2023, 82–83). Through this process, the AKP persuades its Islamist policies with an ostensively un-Islamist agenda (Sambur, 2009, 121). The rise of Islamism has contributed to and coincided with the spread of privatization and deregulation of public goods and services (Balkan, Balkan, and Öncü, 2015; Demiralp, 2009, 315–335; Kabacıoğlu, 2016; Özel, 2009), which marked a milestone in the history of the Republic.

The development of an Islamic civil society in Türkiye coincided with the rise of conservative politics in the 1980s. The NGOs in which the military junta's harsh policies had chained significantly contributed to democratization and social consciousness. However, they were exceedingly weak in the 1990s, as the state remained a predominant actor in the public sphere, and their political attitudes were considered undesirable

(Şimşek, 2004, 69). This balance initially changed in favor of Islamist movements with the penetration of their network system into society. They both became more active and visible following the acquisition of the central media by conservative businessmen (Kirdiş, 2023). The groups shaping the Islamic civil society in Anatolia include religious associations, women's organizations, merchant associations, and various other faith-based groups. Many of these foundations and organizations have developed networks of relationships spanning from the local to the national level since the AKP came to power (Çevik, 2019; Kaya, 2015, 47–69; Türkmen, 2023, 25–40; Zihnioğlu, 2018).

The Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı* - DRA) has been the institutional backbone for directing religious norms into daily life practices and diffusing discourses for the AKP. The institution's personnel and budget were expended and increased annually, matching the visible rise in its influence. Throughout those years, the DRA abandoned its passive role in the previously assigned role, and assumed a propagandist role to enhance its influence. years and undertook a propaganda role for the Muslim believers. It has now turned into an ideological instrument (Gumuscu, 2024, 381). The institution came up after its highly ideological Friday sermons, most of which were about the promotion of the current government and Islamist politics. The DRA started to actively participate in public discussions, such as women's lifestyles, their clothes, 'children' education, and alcohol issues, in the early 2010s (Öztürk, 2016, 9–10). Its educational programs for elementary and high school students were promoted in these schools, and they were frequently taken to the special events prepared by the DRA (Çıtak, 2020, 172–174).

The *imam-hatip* schools have played a central role in this process. First established in the early years of the Republic to train religious functionaries, they were closed only a few years later. Although religious education began to be reintroduced under the Republican People's Party (CHP) in 1949, it was the Democrat Party (DP) — which defeated the CHP in 1950 — that reopened the *imam-hatip* schools in 1951. From the DP era onward, these schools were used to mobilize conservative constituencies, an effort that intensified after Islamist parties entered the government as coalition partners in the 1970s (Coşkun and Şentürk, 2012, 167–168). Their number rose from approximately 20 in 1960 to approximately 70 in 1970 (Çakmak, 2009, 832). The 1980 military coup was a turning point, as the weakening of leftist opposition and the restructuring of the political sphere were accompanied by increased social visibility among Islamist organizations. These organizations frequently drew on graduates of *imam-hatip* schools, who contributed to the expansion of their social networks and organizational capacity at the grassroots level. The schools were subsequently strengthened in physical, logistical, and financial terms. During the AKP's first term in office, the number of imam-*hatip* schools remained largely stable. However, the 2012 *4+4+4 educational reform*, which reintroduced *imam-hatip* middle schools, was followed by a substantial increase in the number of these institutions. By the mid-2020s, there were approximately 1,700 Anatolian *imam-hatip* high schools and approximately 3,400 *imam-hatip* middle schools (MoNE, 2023/2024; Nazlıer, 2025). These institutions have played an important role in the socialization and educational trajectories of individuals associated with various Islamist and conservative political movements, including the AKP (Buyruk, 2021, 162). They have also become a central component of the state's religious education system. (Çakmak, 2009).

The other reform in education was the implementation of the 4+4+4 system. Rather than 12 years of continuous education from elementary to university (8 years for elementary school and 4 years for high school), this system created separate divisions consisting of elementary (first four years), secondary (second four years),

and high (last four years) schools, which paved the way for intermittent education (Eğitim-Bir-Sen, 2012). It was the first major political design to shape the future of many generations in Türkiye, starting in the early 2010s. In the following years, the school enrollment rate decreased, and the number of students attending secondary and high schools decreased (VeriKaynağı, n.d.).

Finally, theology faculties have been one of the essential pillars of the conservative regime-building. Like the situation of *imam hatip* schools, theology faculties have multiplied since the 2000s. Following the establishment of new universities in the peripheral cities of Anatolia, theology faculties were integrated into these new campuses as an unchanged part. They have developed a curriculum comprising essential religious principles, fundamentals of Islamic theology, the history of Islam, philosophy of religion, and religious teachings. Despite some exceptions in recent years, the academic staff mostly received their Ph.D. degrees from theology programs in Türkiye (Koç, 2025, 1–17). In this sense, theology faculties have created their own ecosystem. In the literature concerning the theology faculty students, the main focal points are the perceptions of these students' views on the quality of teaching programs, (Turan, 2017, 59–77) their online education experience during the pandemic, (Selçuk et al., 2021, 74–90) pedagogical education in those faculties (Koç, 2025), or their perspectives on interdisciplinary education in theology (İder and Okumuşlar, 2024, 1003–1025). To date no study has examined theology faculty students through the lens of hegemony theory, or investigated whether the post-Kemalist ideological project has actually succeeded in producing the consenting, religiously committed subjects it intended. This is the gap the present article addresses. Only a few studies address the relations between secularism and theology faculties (Kara, 2009, 1–19; Yılmaz and Akçay, 2021, 152–186), and these studies remain and involve institutional arrangements rather than the ideological subjectivities of the students themselves. The broader literature on the AKP's Islamization project (Gumuscu, 2024, 371–397; Kaya, 2015, 47–69; Kirdiş, 2023, 146–161; Lüküslü, 2018, 169–182) has overwhelmingly focused on policy design and institutional change — the supply side of hegemony — while largely neglecting the demand side: how those targeted by these policies actually receive, interpret, and relate to them. Studies of religious youth in Türkiye either treat them as a relatively homogeneous conservative bloc (Yaşar, 2020, 106–120) or focus on imam hatip school graduates rather than university-level theology students, who occupy a distinct and ambiguous position as simultaneously the AKP's intended beneficiaries and its most educated religious critics. The intersection of post-Kemalism as ideology, the Althusserian ISA theory, and the lived reception of hegemony among theology students thus constitutes a genuine and consequential lacuna in the literature — one with direct implications for understanding the limits of authoritarian-populist hegemony-building through education.

Conceptualizing Post-Kemalism

Post-Kemalism is best understood not as a single object but as a concept that operates across three distinct registers, and much of the confusion in the literature stems from collapsing them into one. In its first and original sense, post-Kemalism is an *analytical paradigm*: a scholarly lens that emerged in the social sciences from the 1980s onward to reinterpret the relationships among state, society, and democracy in modern Türkiye (Aytürk, 2022, 1–19). In its second sense, it denotes an intellectual-political alliance — a loose coalition of writers and public intellectuals from otherwise incompatible traditions who converged on a shared critique of the republican order. In its third sense, and most contentiously, the term describes a *governing ideology* that the AKP was said to have

operationalized after 2002. This article treats these registers as analytically separate, and traces how an interpretive paradigm was gradually converted into a political programme and, eventually, into an instrument of state power. Keeping the three apart is not a pedantic distinction: the central argument of this study — that the project failed to reproduce its intended subjects — depends on recognizing that the explanatory paradigm and the hegemonic project are not the same thing.

The periodization of this conversion can be specified more precisely than is commonly assumed in the literature. As an *intellectual* current, Pk took shape in the post-1980 conjuncture, when the political defeat of the left and the liberalizing economic agenda of Turgut Özal and the ANAP governments opened space for a critique of the Kemalist establishment from multiple directions; the decisive shift from theory to practice came after the AKP's single-party victory in 2002, when the critique of the 'tutelary state' was translated into concrete institutional reform — the restructuring of the high judiciary, the curbing of military oversight, and the reorganisation of education — converting a temporal process of de-Kemalisation within the bureaucracy into a positive project of hegemonic reconstruction (Gümüş, 2020, 143–173). The claim that Pk was subsequently 'institutionalized as official state ideology' should therefore be read with care: it was not promulgated as doctrine but sedimented through appointments, curricula, and constitutional amendments — a mechanism this article examines empirically rather than asserts.

The alliance that carried this project comprised the liberal left, liberals, conservatives, Islamists, and segments of the Kurdish political movement; what bound these otherwise incompatible groups was less a positive vision of the good society than a negative consensus against the republican-bureaucratic order (Aytürk, 2022; Sandıkçı, 2023). In Gramscian terms, this coalition constituted a *historic bloc* — an assemblage of heterogeneous social forces united by a common ideological framework capable of winning consent across diverse constituencies (Gramsci, 1971). Conservative and Islamist intellectuals such as Ali Bulaç and Yasin Aktay (Aktay, 1997; Aktay and Kızılkaya, 2014; Bulaç, 2006, 2007, 2020) supplied a substantive cultural content — plural modernities, indigenous modernity, and an Islamically inflected critique of Western-imposed secularism — while liberal intellectuals supplied the language of rights, pluralism, and EU-oriented democratization. This heterogeneity was the bloc's source of strength and, ultimately, of its fragility, since its members understood democratization in mutually incompatible ways.

At the analytical core of the paradigm lies a fundamental critique of Kemalism, which post-Kemalist scholarship characterizes as a rootless and coercive modernization imposed from above (Akat, 1991, 121–132; Belge, 1991, 108–124; Tunçay, 2010; Göle, 1997, 61–81; Mahçupyan, 2008). This order is sustained by a *tutelage regime* — the Army, the National Security Council, and the high judiciary — that constrained electoral majorities and rendered civilian governments dependent on military oversight (Cizre, 2004, 135–161; İnsel, 2009; Parla, 1998, 29–52; Özbudun, 2013, 161–176). The theoretical scaffolding for this reading is Şerif Mardin's centre–periphery framework, in which a bureaucratic centre dominates a marginalized periphery (Mardin, 1973, 169–190). Two precautions are in order, and the existing accounts tend to omit both. First, Kemalism is not the monolith this critique assumes; the 'Second Republic' debates themselves revealed competing strands of republican thought, and treating Kemalism as a single repressive bloc reproduces the very flattening for which post-Kemalism is criticized elsewhere. Second, the post-Kemalist appropriation of Mardin is contested: his framework was a descriptive sociological model that ascribed no democratic virtue to the periphery, and reading it as a script for

emancipation — projecting tolerance onto the "periphery" according to one's own political inclinations — strips it of its analytical neutrality and ignores the discontinuities and internal fractures the binary cannot capture (Bakiner, 2018, 503–522; Levin, 2023, 617–639).

From this diagnosis, post-Kemalism derives two prescriptive models that are frequently — and misleadingly — placed on the same plane. *Passive secularism*, developed by Ahmet Kuru, is an analytical typology distinguishing state postures toward religion across the United States, France, and Türkiye; it is a comparative social-science category, not a partisan program (Kuru, 2009). *Conservative democracy*, by contrast, articulated by Yalçın Akdoğan, is an explicitly political doctrine authored from within the AKP itself (Akdoğan, 2003); conflating the two lends academic authority to a party-ideological construct. A third element, *Neo-Ottomanism* — an imaginary of cultural and geopolitical continuity with the Ottoman-Islamic past, mobilised to legitimize a post-secular national identity — supplied the affective content around which popular consent could be organized through the educational apparatus (Yavuz, 2020).

It is at this point that the paradigm can be read through the article's own theoretical apparatus — something the descriptive literature rarely attempts. In Althusserian terms, PK functiones as *ideology* in the strong sense: it does not merely describe Turkish politics but *interpells with* subjects, hailing the religious and conservative majority as the authentic "people" long silenced by an elitist center, and thereby constituting the very constituency it claims only to represent (Althusser, 2014). In Gramscian terms, this was a *war of position* fought to redefine common sense, repositioning religion, tradition, and conservative values as the natural foundation of social life against an "artificial" Kemalist modernism. The expansion of religious education, from imam hatip schools to theology faculties, is intelligible only within this frame: not as a discrete policy preference but as the institutional deployment of a counter-hegemonic ideology through the full range of Ideological State Apparatuses — which is precisely why theology students constitute a decisive test case for the subjects the apparatus was designed to produce.

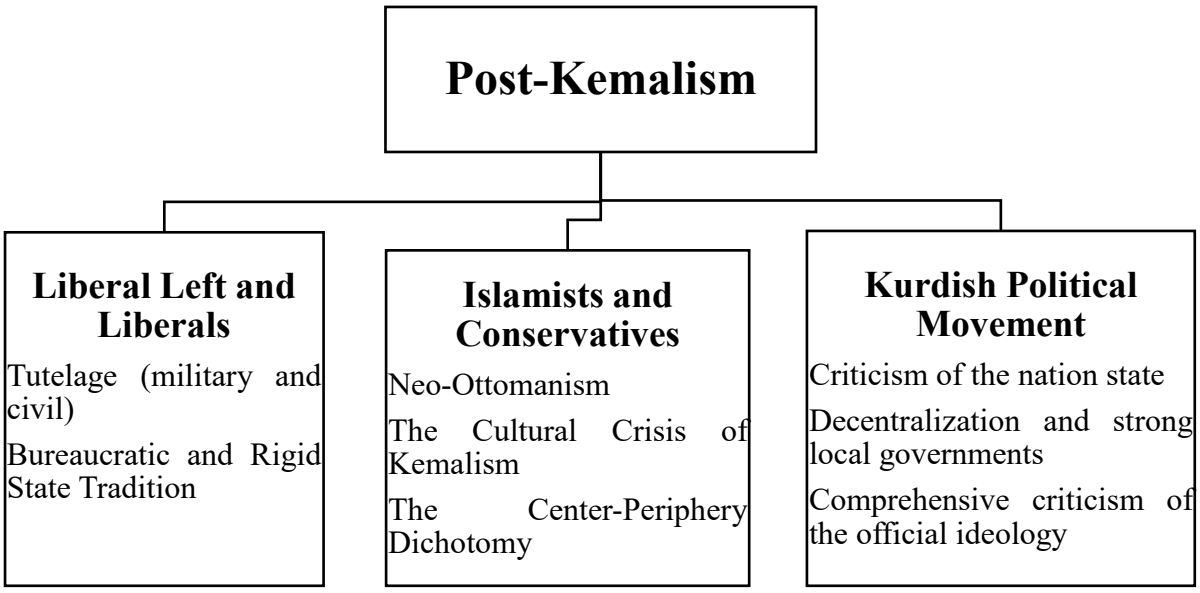
The hegemonic function of the bloc became most visible at moments of crisis. When the AKP faced closure before the Constitutional Court in 2008, post-Kemalist intellectuals rallied to its defense, framing the case as a tutelary assault on the popular will; the 2010 constitutional referendum, championed by the *Yetmez Ama Evet* (*Not Enough, But Yes*) platform, marked the apex of the alliance, as liberals and Islamists jointly persuaded diverse publics that supporting the amendments was equivalent to supporting democratization itself. The argument that the periphery would finally displace the center and dissolve the tutelary regime (Mahçupyan, 2008; İnsel, 1990, 1996) animated this moment — but the same referendum also marked the beginning of the bloc's dissolution. Once the tutelary institutions were neutralized, the negative consensus that held the alliance together lost its object: the liberal and Kurdish components broke away as the AKP's trajectory became majoritarian, and the Gezi protests of 2013 and the rupture with the Gülen movement in 2013–2016 completed the fragmentation. The historic bloc did not survive its own victory.

This dissolution is also why the paradigm has come under sustained critique as an *analytical* framework. Aytürk argues that post-Kemalism as a scholarly paradigm has exhausted itself, having become an orthodoxy that obscures as much as it reveals — hence the call for *post-post-Kemalism* (Aytürk, 2022, 1–19). Its most consequential blind spot is at once methodological and normative: in celebrating every advance of the "periphery" against the "center" as a democratic gain, post-Kemalist scholarship discounted the importance of checks and

balances and the rule of law, and thus could not anticipate that the dismantling of tutelary institutions — when accompanied by patronage, nepotism, and the erosion of horizontal accountability — would produce not pluralization but rather social polarization, democratic backsliding, and a new authoritarian centralization (Mantoğlu, 2024, 1–18). On this question, the post-Kemalist literature has remained largely silent — a silence this study reads not as oversight but as a constitutive limit of the paradigm itself.

Figure 1 maps these relationships. It situates the three constituent currents — the liberal-left, the liberal, and the conservative-Islamist — around the shared critique of the tutelage regime and Mardin's center–periphery cleavage, showing how distinct agendas converged on a common diagnosis even as their prescriptions diverged. The figure thus visualizes both the cohesion that enabled the bloc and the fault lines along which it later broke apart.

Figure 1: The ideological background and the context of post-Kemalism



It is this contested, internally unstable ideological formation — rather than a coherent doctrine — whose material traces the following section pursues through the perceptions of theology students.

Transformation from the Theology Students' Lenses

The interviews and surveys were conducted with the voluntary students from Istanbul, Ankara, Bursa, and Izmir from June and to July 2025. Before the actual interviews in these months, a sample questionnaire was distributed to some students of the theology faculty. Since the feedback obtained from this questionnaire was weak and insufficient, it was decided to conduct online interviews with those students. Through snowball sampling, 17 students were reached and met online. Owing to the social environment and general political conditions in Türkiye, only the ages of these students were collected as demographic information. During the conversations, some

students preferred to hide their faces and mostly did not answer all of the questions. Before the interviews, a short survey was conducted. Owing to the small sample size, this survey does not provide substantial statistical data. Instead, it served to 'warm up' for more comprehensive answers. As mentioned earlier, theology students constitute a fragile sample, and this method had to be used. The interviews (open-ended questions) lasted almost 30 minutes in total. Because of the relatively short duration of the interviews, three students could even be interviewed online in a day. All participants were informed regarding the survey and interview.

The interview questions provide a relatively deep understanding of the theology faculty students' concerns regarding daily life problems and values. These questions were asked discontinuously to the participants. They focus on fundamental values of family, gender equality in social life, dominant socio-cultural paradigms in the country, the elite of the early-Republican period, and the main problems in their faculties. Thus, it might reveal the perceptions of theology faculty students on ongoing social and political processes.

With respect to the fundamental values of family, almost all the participants stressed love and respect as their core values. Regardless of their belief and training, this is one of the classical responses among Turkish youth. Some expressed faithfulness. These three elements reflect universal values and a balance between elders and younger generations in a family. This confirms that loyalty to family matters in Turkish families, particularly in those of theology students. Although they were not asked about their family background (to make them feel comfortable about the interviews), it is predicted that those students have more or less conservative families. They naturally inherited those ethical codes from their family, their close environment, and other networks. Another answer type stated that ethics and Islamic ethics were the core concepts. These are the more obvious expressions of the conservative ethical paradigm related to the previous ones. In a conservative culture, a child should be loyal to their family, wherever they are. The responses reflect this loyalty at first glance. Moreover, ethical codes are valuable to these people. The family consists of individuals who have specific 'missions.' The father is at the heart of this semi-hierarchical organization and is viewed as paterfamilias. On the other hand, mothers are responsible for (unseen) domestic labor. Ascribing a secondary role, she is kept away from 'external' jobs. Finally, children are expected to respect and be loyal to their parents, especially fathers. This respect sometimes includes fear of the one on the upper level in the hierarchy. In this traditional frame, a family is, one way or another, a man-based micro-institution.

The responses to the question about gender equality vary from student to student. The general trend is to ignore this concept or to perceive it as a negative signifier (Participant 3, interview, June 2025; Participant 4, interview, June 2025; Participant 5, interview, June 2025; Participant 7, interview, June 2025). The ones who responded to this question from this view put forward different justifications. Some stated that gender justice is more significant than gender equality (Participant 7, interview, June 2025; Participant 9, interview, June 2025). Some others did not believe in equality (Participant 3, interview, June 2025; Participant 5, interview, June 2025). Moving from this point, it seems that the theology faculty students generally prefer to stand away from the concept of gender equality. Although it has been frequently discussed among in terms of public opinion, political platforms, and social media in recent years, theology students appear to keep their conservative views against equality. Some highlighted gender justice as a replacement expression. They accepted an unbalanced situation between genders but did not give up traditional Islamic values, preaching no gender equality. In other words, the students more or less keep Islamic gender roles by saying that the natures of men and women is different.

The section on the problems of theology faculties explores the ongoing issues in religious higher education and much more. The most remarkable factor mentioned was the educational problems, which stemmed from an insufficient curriculum, excessive number of lessons, and inadequate faculty (Participant 4, interview, June 2025; Participant 9, interview, June 2025; Participant 10, interview, June 2025). The lack of a more qualified education plan does not meet the expectations of the students. They frequently believe that they cannot improve themselves under these curricula and low-level programs. Additionally, some expressed that the problems stemmed from the absence of administrative skills for faculty management (Participant 7, interview, June 2025). Some participants claimed that the faculty members did not have the necessary proficiency; they thought these faculty sometimes presented sciolistic knowledge in the lessons (Participant 6, interview, June 2025; Participant 10, interview, June 2025). It was also stated that the professors might not have encountered critical thinking before, which made them unfamiliar with a new perspective (Participant 10, interview, June 2025).

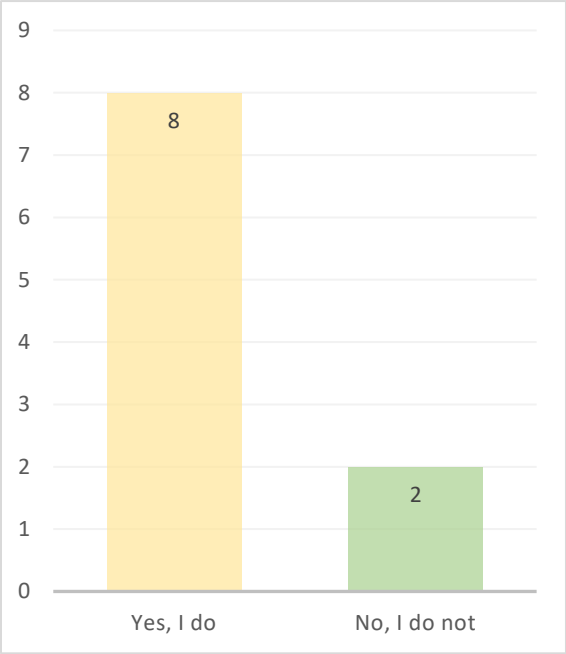
Moreover, the number of faculty members was under the limit given the high number of students per faculty member (Participant 6, interview, June 2025; Participant 17, interview, July 2025). In some cases, the students said there was a lack of practice. This concept, created by the authors to collect different types of claims, narrates an education only subject to theoretical training, a lack of teaching on the output of several issues, the final purpose of faculties (Participant 1, interview, June 2025; Participant 16, interview, July 2025) (growing people to become religion teachers or religious officials).

The participants gave similar responses to the question on dominant socio-cultural paradigms in Türkiye. They can be categorized into three elements: kemalism, nationalism, and Islamism. Those who identified Islamism provided examples of religious orders (*tarikatlar*) or local religious communities (*cemaatler*) that had been influential in both peripheral and metropolitan areas (Participant 1, interview, June 2025; Participant 12, interview, July 2025; Participant 17, interview, July 2025). Both support their followers logistically and psychologically in handling the problems of urbanization; therefore, in some cities, their origins are built on a strong basis. Throughout the years, Islamist thoughts has developed via the means of communication. Despite these difficulties, claiming that Islamic social values have influenced daily life in the country is not incorrect. On the other hand, some participants emphasized the Kemalist paradigm (Participant 1, interview, June 2025; Participant 14, interview, July 2025).

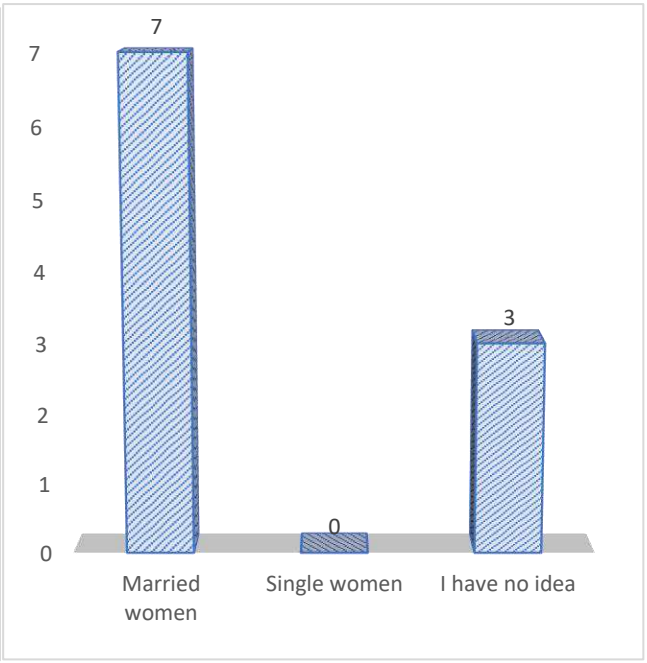
With respect to whether there was an elite class in the early-Republican period, despite a few differences, the responses resembled each other. Two participants told the military and bureaucratic elite of the Kemalist cadres (Participant 2, interview, June 2025; Participant 16, interview, July 2025). These cadres were presented and told as the elite class of that time; naturally, it was not surprising for the students to give these answers. While one student expressed that the people who were away from religion, the other stated the people were close to religion (Participant 3, interview, June 2025; Participant 10, interview, June 2025).

The survey questions were designed to know their opinions, which they were supposed to express in open-ended questions. These questions are mostly short and focus on 'to-the-point.' Graphs 1 and 2 reflect the participants' responses regarding the obstacles women face in their work life. The students mostly believe that mobbing influences women, and that this mobbing arises through physical and psychological processes. Additionally, they believe that married women face more challenges in their work lives. This situation might have

relied upon their understanding of family values.' In this image, the woman almost always paints with her child. The option of working for women may be related to this context for the student participants.



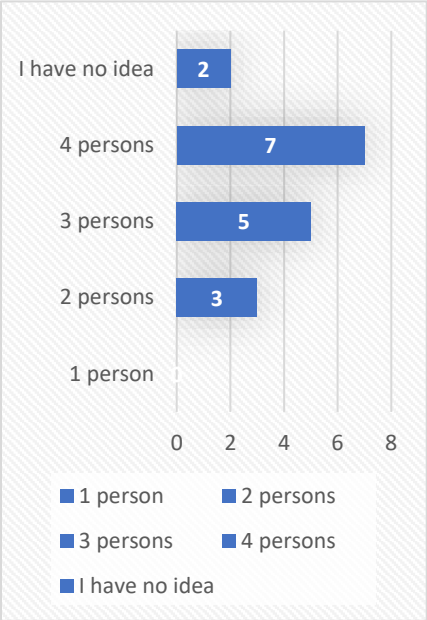
Graph 1: Do you think that the mobbing that women are exposed to in work life increases due to the effects of birth and physiological processes (e.g. menstrual period)?



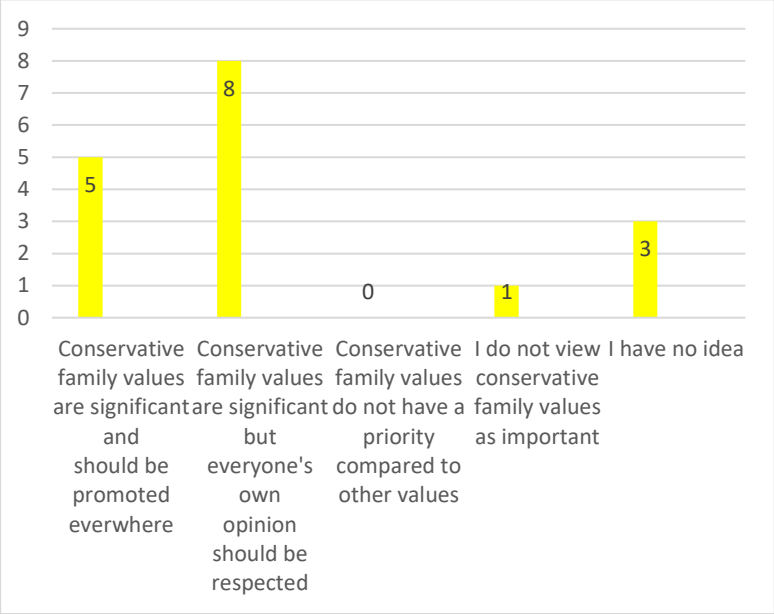
Graph 2: Do you think married women or single women face more obstacles in work life?

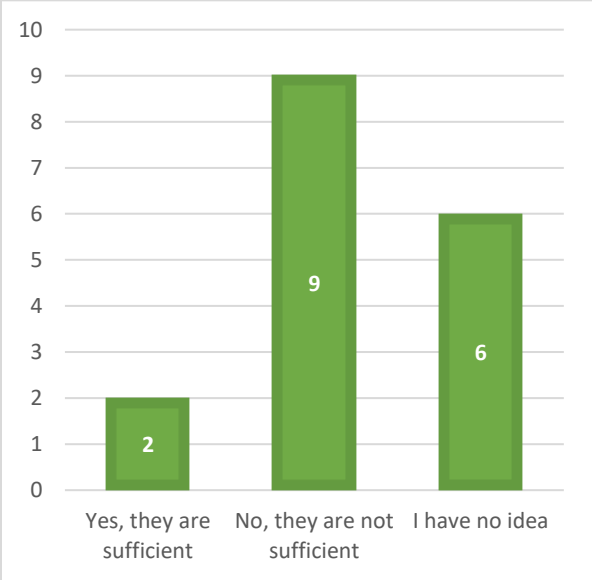
The following four graphs present reflections on the concept of the family. In Graph 3, many students state that a family comprises 3 or 4 people. As stated earlier, they are familiar with a large family structure. This is likely what they have learned from their families and environments in their childhood. In Graph 4, the participants were asked about conservative family values in the media. These values signify patriarchy, the relative mobility of women within the family, and children's absolute respect for the father (man). Most of the answers emphasize conservative values with a necessary relation to individuals' decisions, whereas the second one is focused on promoting conservative values everywhere. This is an indicator that theology students prefer pluralism. Nevertheless, they view the government's recent family support positively. In this context, the family becomes a prominent field where theology students can conserve their fundamental norms and beliefs. In Graph 6, they do not perceive the Family and Youth Fund's efforts to support working women as sufficient. For the participants, remote or flexible working does not appear to be a significant solution.

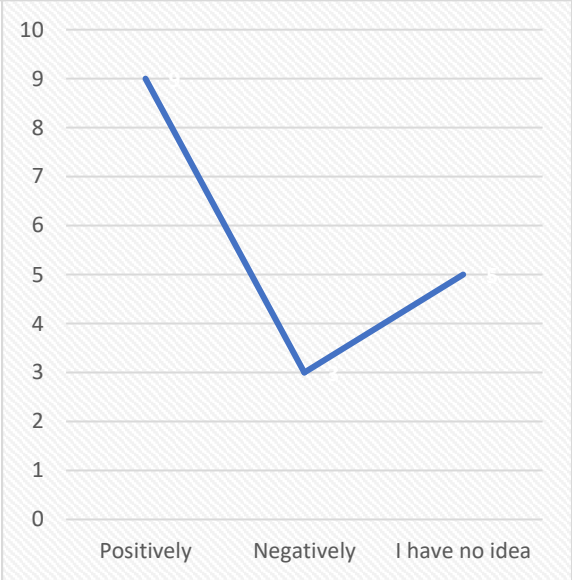
Graph 3: For you, how many people does a family consist of?



Graph 4: What are your thoughts regarding the 'conservative family values' campaign that appears in some media outlets?





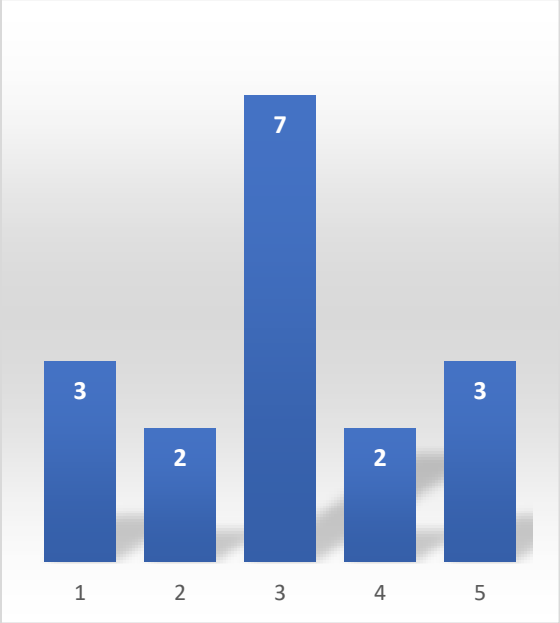


Graph 5: How do you evaluate the recent government promotions on family and demographic policies (financial support, parental leave, right to work flexibly, etc.)?

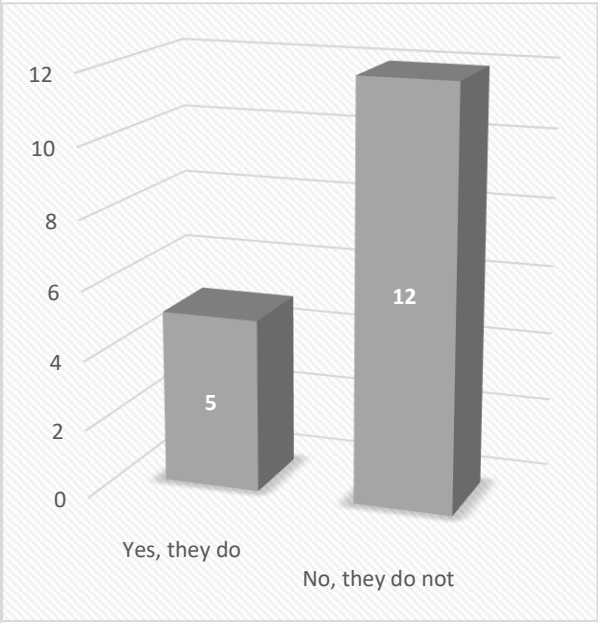
Graph 6: Within the scope of the Family and Youth Fund, it is planned to increase the number of nurseries to develop a flexible and remote working model for women. Are all these implications sufficient for you?

The government's policies concerning the promotion of religious education through courses and schools in Graph 7 represent a balanced approach. For this question, which was designed on a Likert scale, both the excessively positive and negative sides received three votes; the sections' relatively positive and negative aspects received two votes, and the middle range received seven votes. In this case, it reflects an equal distribution.

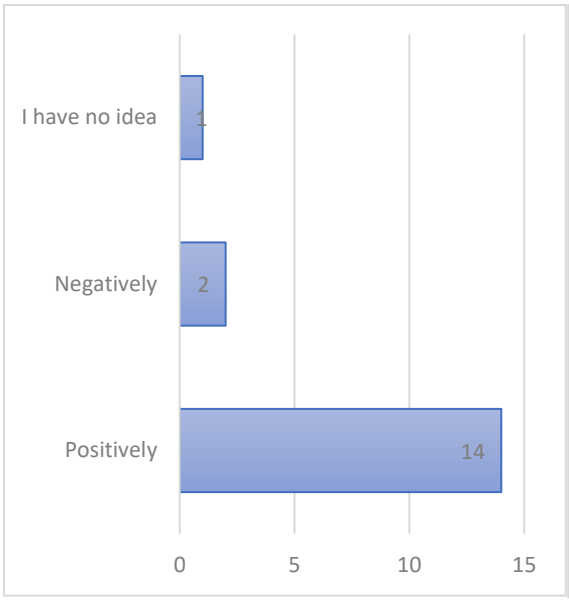
The questions and their answers to theology faculties cover the questions starting from Graph 8. Graph 8 clearly shows that almost 75% of the participants thought that theology faculties did not offer comprehensive education. The reasons for this were discussed in the sectio on open-ended questions. The responses to new philosophy and religious education departments are dominantly positive in Graph 9. Public religious education attracted supporters among theology students. Graph 10 illustrates the responses to the claims of the politicization of Quran courses (public and private). When those who think they have been excessively politicized and those who believe that they have been politicized are combined, approximately 70% of the participants attribute a political meaning to these courses. On the other hand, almost 30% of the respondents say that there is no politicization.



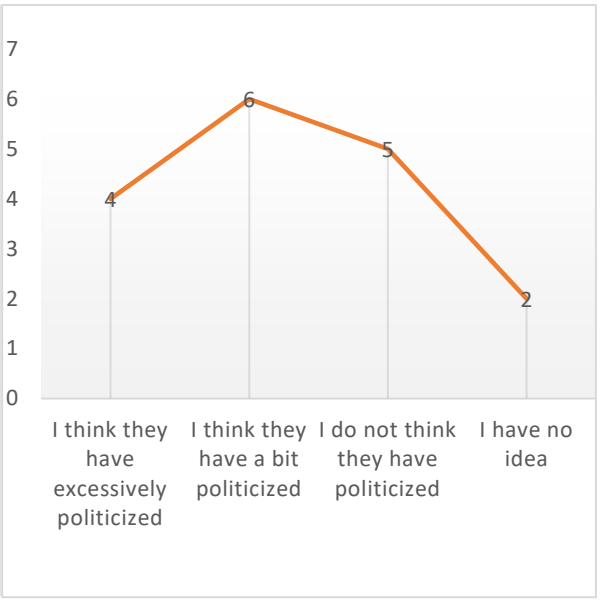
Graph 7: How do you evaluate the government policies on qualitatively and quantitatively increasing the religious education? (5: Very positive, 1: Very negative)



Graph 8: According to you, do the theology faculties in Türkiye offer a comprehensive and qualified education?



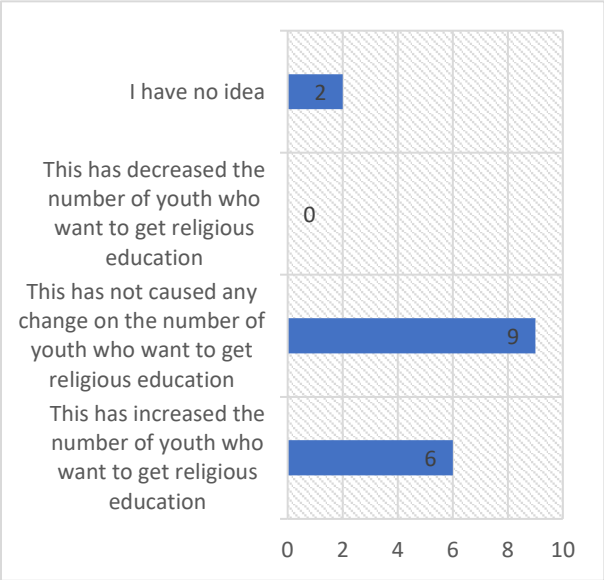
Graph 9: How do you evaluate the opening of philosophy and religious sciences departments more than philosophy departments?



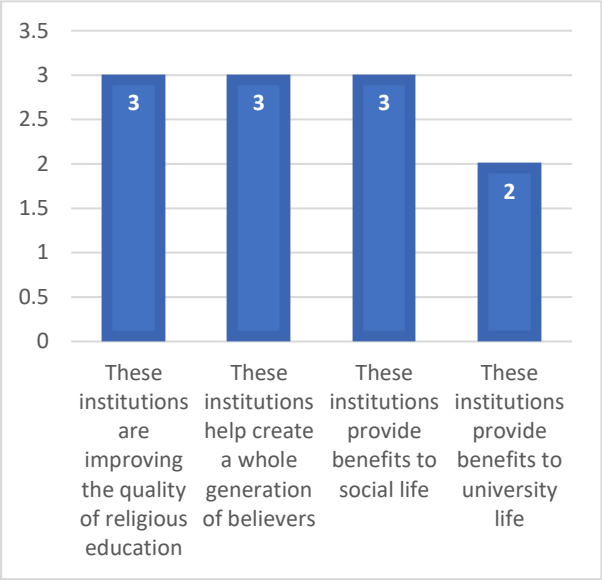
Graph 10: What do you think regarding the claim that the Qur'an courseshave been politicized (being exposed to the government's or several groups' political influence)?

Graph 11 illustrates the impact of the quantitative increase in sources of religious education, including *imam hatip* high schools, theology faculties, and Qur'an courses, on young people who are willing to receive religious education. Almost half of the respondents expressed that it has not paved the way for change in the number of people in this category, whereas nearly 30% believe it has raised the number of people who want to get religious training. A relatively equal distribution occurs among the positive respondents to this question who think they have raised interest in religious education (in graph 12). Thirty percent believe that these institutions increase the quality of religious education, 30% believe that they help create a whole generation of believers, and 30% advocate that they benefit social life.

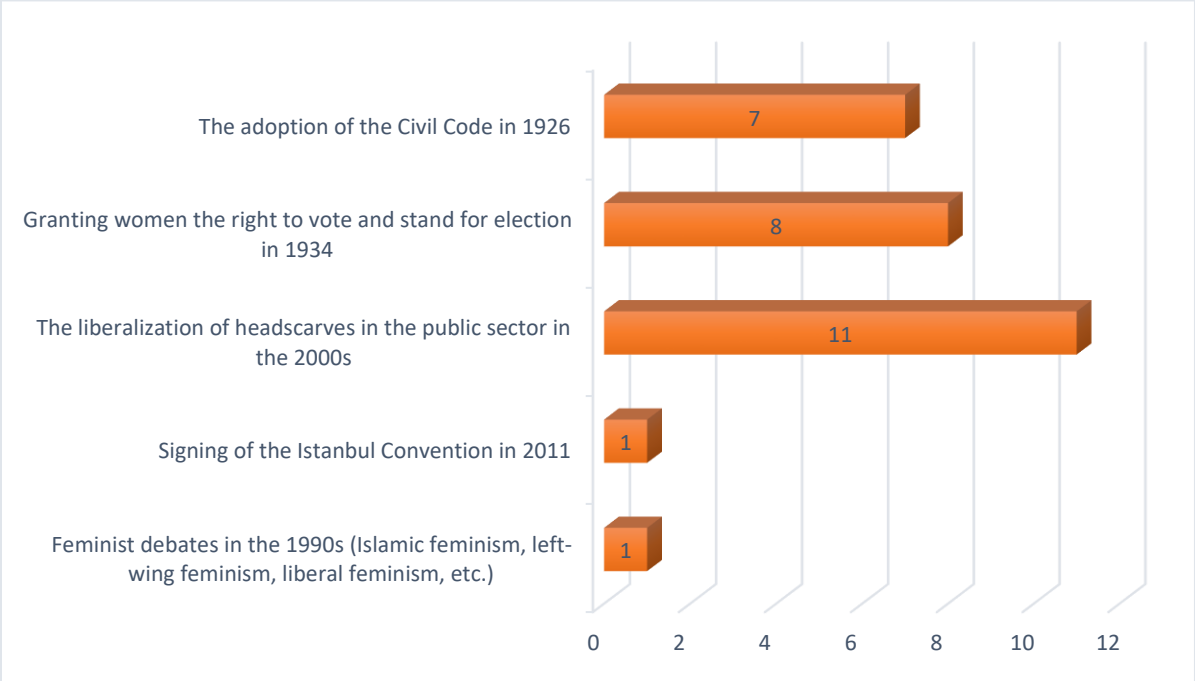
Graph 11: According to you, what changes have the increasing number of *imam hatip* high schools, theology faculties, and Qur'an courses caused in the number of young people who want to



Graph 12: For you, what are the reasons for this? [Follow-up question for graph 11 respondents on positive evaluation; multiple selection]

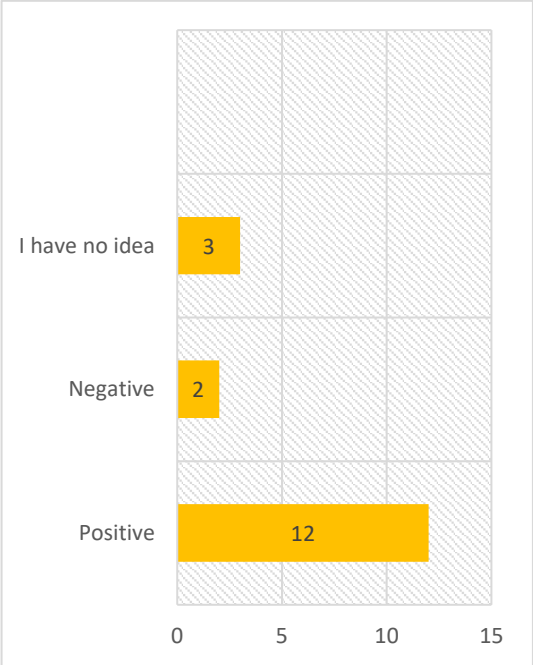


Graph 13: What events and actions can be described as positive developments for women throughout the history of the Republic of Turkey (1923-)? [multiple selection]

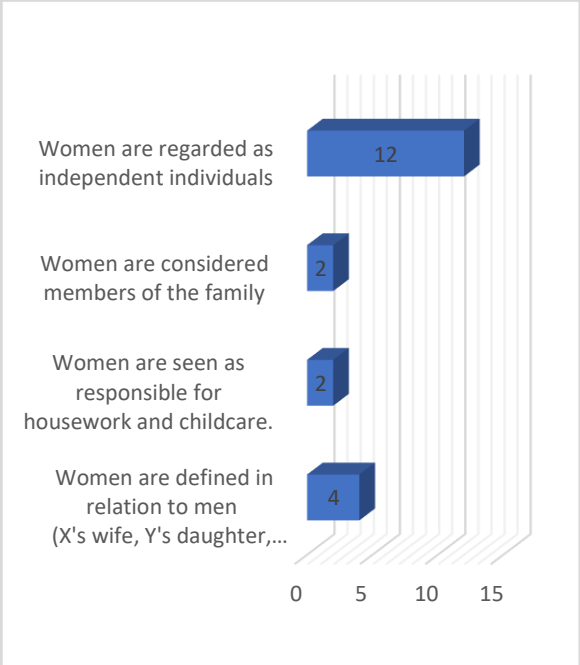


In Graph 13, participants were asked about legal changes and political developments aimed at maintaining gender equality in the social space in modern Turkish history. One of the most significant moments in social life since the founding of the Republic of Türkiye was the adoption of the Civil Code in 1926, which included legal regulations concerning women. On this basis, gender equality has been achieved, and the pillars for social gender

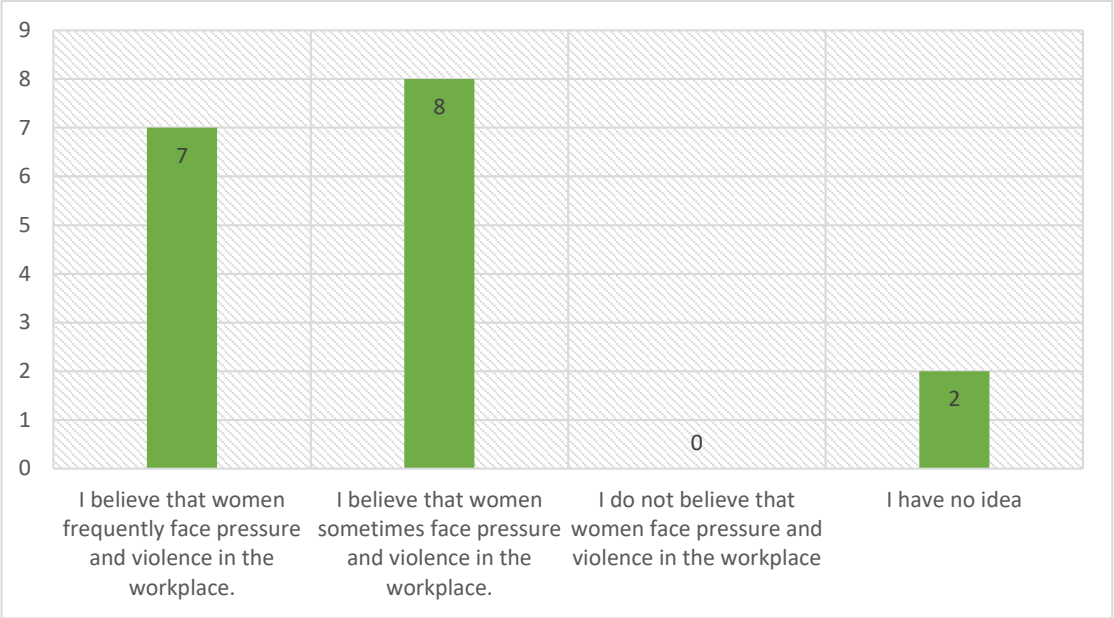
equality have been laid. With the granting of the right to vote and be elected in 1934, women who gained political rights continued to pursue their political rights and demands in subsequent periods. The positive contributions of the Istanbul Convention in the context of gender equality for women and society developed from this legal basis, with the feminism and headscarf debates of the 1990s and the liberalization of the headscarf in public spaces in the 2000s. More than half of the participants considered lifting the headscarf ban to be a positive development for women. The participants viewed the granting of the right to vote and be elected and the adoption of the civil code positively, but did not view the Istanbul Convention, signed under the AKP government, as sufficiently positive.



Graph 14: What do you think about some municipal governments introducing measures aimed solely at women (such as pink buses/trams) to improve women's safety?

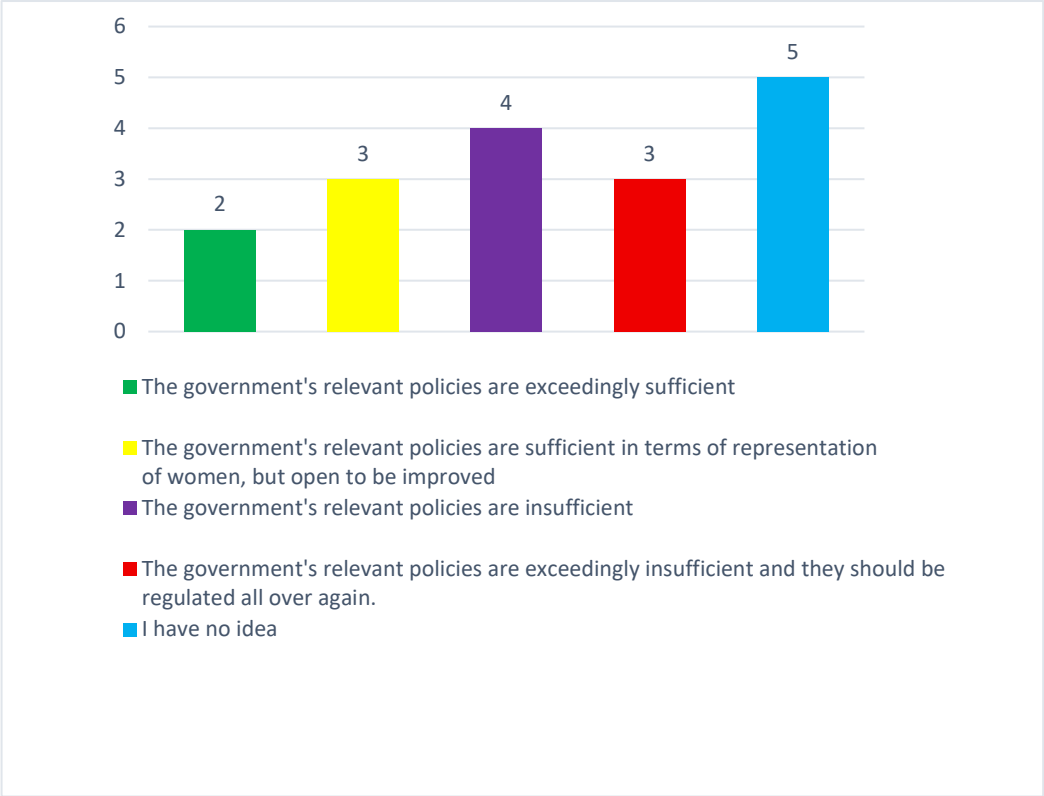


Graph 15: How do you think women are generally portrayed in the media?



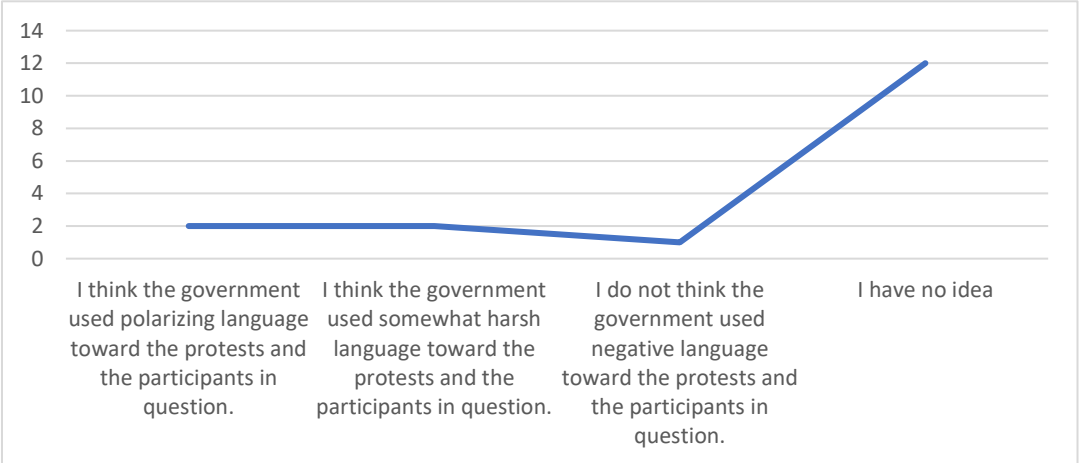
Graph 16: What is your opinion on the claim that women are sometimes subjected to pressure and violence (psychological, symbolic, sexual, etc.) by their male superiors and colleagues in the workplace?

Under the AKP government, some municipal governments have developed services for women. The participants (graphs 14-15), overwhelmingly viewed the provision of public transportation services exclusively for women by municipal governments as positive. The issue of women's safety is essential to participants here. Theology students also analyze this point, where we can see the paternalistic approach of the state, from a positive perspective. Although participants stated that women are generally portrayed in the media as independent and free individuals, it was also noted that women are defined in terms of motherhood and a paternalistic structure. This paternalistic structure exposes women to mobbing in the workplace. The participants also confirmed this (graph 16). The pressure, psychological and physical violence that women encounter in their professional lives, was considered negative by the participants.



Graph 17: What are your thoughts on the government's policies regarding women's visibility in civil society?

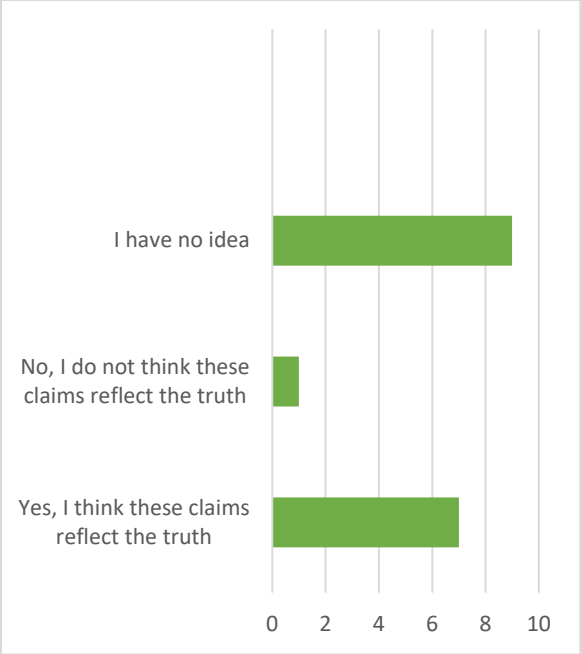
Graph 18: What is your opinion on the statements made by government officials regarding the demonstrations organized in the context of women's rights on dates such as March 8 and November 25, and those who participated in these demonstrations?



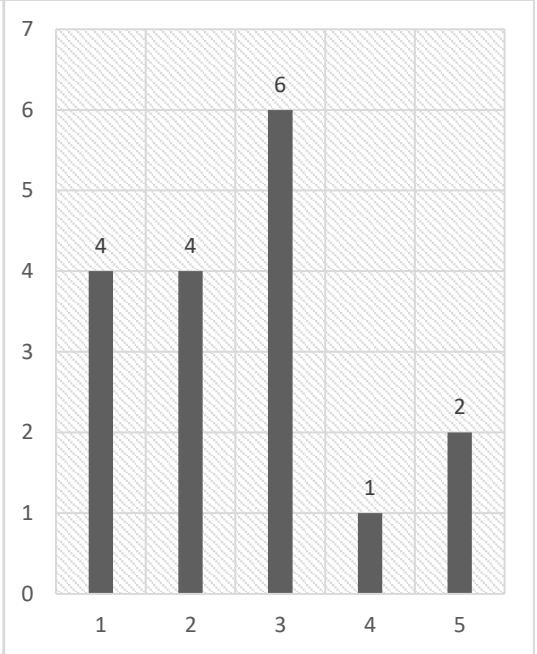
When asked about the AKP government's policies aimed at increasing the visibility of women in civil society (graph 17), there was no consensus among participants regarding policies targeting women. When

considered alongside the polarizing and confrontational discourse of post-Kemalist politics, which is viewed as inadequate and in need of improvement by some, partially positive by others, and ignored by others, this question becomes even more apparent. In response to the question asking for their opinions on government officials' statements regarding dates such as March 8 and November 25 (graph 18), when women's activism and politicization increased worldwide, participants overwhelmingly chose not to express an opinion. In response to the previous question regarding fragmented and inadequate women's policies, theology students were reluctant primarily to express their views when asked about the statements and attitudes of those implementing these policies. Social polarization and authoritarian tendencies are evident in post-Kemalist Türkiye.

Graph 19: How do you assess the protocols signed by the government with specific religious communities and associations, particularly in the areas of education and cultural activities? (5: I find it extremely positive, 1: I find it extremely negative)



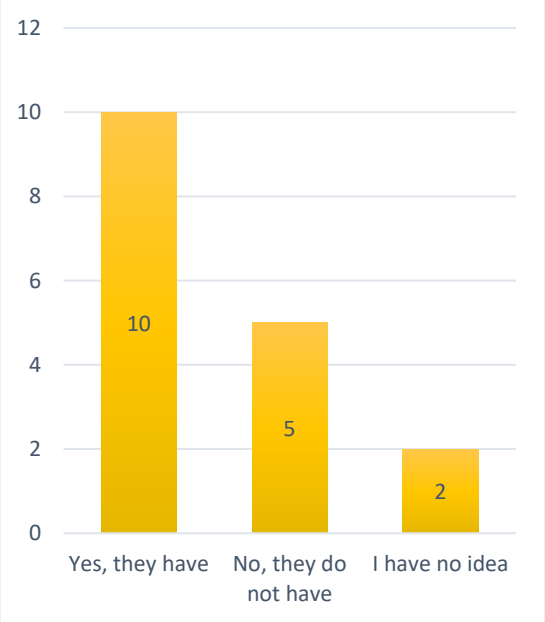
Graph 20: There are allegations that members of certain religious communities are being employed in some ministries. Do you agree with this?



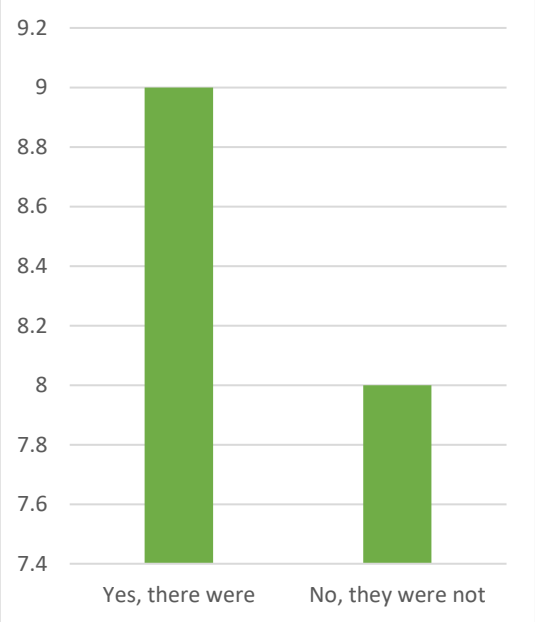
The AKP government has signed protocols with some religious communities and associations, particularly in education and cultural activities. These protocols, which aim to harmonize young people with religious communities and associations in education and culture, were presented to the participants. The participants found them to be predominantly negative. In Türkiye, the recent attempt by a religious organization to stage a coup is still fresh in public memory. Theology students also view these protocols negatively. When asked about allegations that members of a number of religious communities were employed in some ministries, most participants did not wish to express an opinion, whereas the second most common response was that the allegations were factual. This situation can be coded as anti-rational and unethical behavior seen in politics, such as clientelism, patronage, and nepotism, but it can also be considered incompetence.

In the section that asked about the reflections of post-Kemalist policies on the cultural space, the actors and ideas in the cultural space in Türkiye were first analyzed. There have been many different answers to the question of who and what the actors and ideas are in the cultural field in Türkiye. While conservatives' and Islamists' definitions of kemalism as elitism are also practical here, the participants also define religious sects and communities as actors in the cultural space because the AKP, which has been in power for a long time, has tried to establish hegemony through sects, communities and religious associations. Some participants noted that Kemalism influenced the cultural landscape through its connections with the West and its emphasis on secularism.

Graph 21: Do you think art and cultural policies have an ideology?



Graph 22: Do you think there were elites in the early Republic (1923-1945) administrations?



In response to a question posed to participants about the elites of modern Türkiye, which could be considered the zenith of Ottoman-Turkish modernization, answers were given in parallel with discussions in the cultural space. When asked who the elites were during the early republican period between 1923 and 1945, some theology students cite the founding leaders of the Kemalist regime, the ideologues of the single-party period, and the activists of the Kemalist revolutions, whereas others cite the religious leaders of the single-party period. According to participants who associate the military and bureaucratic character of kemalism with elitism, the single-party period is among the answers given to open-ended questions about the relationship between secularism and elitism.

Discussion

The stance of theology faculty students, within this study, offers not an entirely clear, yet a critical insight. Although they adhere to their fundamental conservative norms, some aspects lead them to divergent views on the current socio-political order in Türkiye.

The two aspects display ‘the conservative side’ for the students. Even though the family values they mentioned do not reflect a specific criterion, during the interviews, they tended to describe family primarily from a patriarchal image: father at the center as the head of household, mother as the caregiver, and kids who are loyal to their family and values. This narrative, to some extent, reconfigures the gender roles within the family. Patriarchal (father-centered) norms still play a significant role in students’ minds. Furthermore, some emphasized ethical and religious structure as core values. Given the Islamic perception that the family is embedded in a strong loyalty of women (mothers) under the strong leadership and protection of men (fathers), it is not surprising to see its projections in the students' responses. In addition, the question of gender reveals similar patterns. Most of them stated that they viewed gender equality as the legal equality of women and men. Although gender equality in social life is a frequently discussed topic with diverse pillars, many of students prefer to ‘soften' the discussion of gender issues. They were likely to accept equal responsibilities and equal opportunities in work life. The norms constructed within the family, society, and public spheres are, however, relatively ignored in this perspective. On the other hand, some students rejected the concept of gender equality. While they highlighted that this concept exaggerated the case of this concept, they believed that women and men, by nature, cannot be equal. However, the critical point was not this so-called 'radical' stance: Even those who rejected gender equality accepted the legal and other rights of women and the promotion of these rights. Their opinions seem to contradict the ideological stance of gender equality. Put another way, they seem to reflect their objection to discussions on gender issues in the public sphere/traditional media/social media. The students who rejected this concept often referred to the different creations of women and men from birth. In short, these two questions suggest that some of them have strongly maintained their fundamental conservative values.

The responses concerning the dominant socio-cultural paradigms in Türkiye focus on three views: Kemalism, nationalism and Islamism. Each view includes positive and negative adaptations in the responses. Even though this question received responses from fewer participants, they mostly expressed Kemalism as the dominant perspective. Some of their answers refer to the founding principles, and they believe that Kemalism still retains its importance in the social and cultural spheres of everyday life. In this context, theology students have an undeniable respect for the republican values such as republicanism, nationalism, and popularism. Atatürk's image and policies, for some of them, occupy a special place in their understanding. Thus, Kemalism is one of the most remarkable views that most shapes social and cultural life. Despite a few negative expressions (such as the claim that includes Kemalism from materialist and hedonist perspectives), it is ascribed a relatively positive meaning. Nationalism (as Turkish nationalism) was the second most common answer. Some participants referred to the national loyalty and feelings of the Turkish nation. Naturally, they expressed that it was a leading socio-cultural paradigm in the country. A few of them included Islamism in this basket, but one participant approached it very pejoratively, claiming that Islamism paved the way for religious exploitation. Given the current emergence of secular nationalism in Türkiye, the theology students appear to be influenced by this trend. This trend has empowered a laic and nationalist image, including that of republican principles. Even some young conservatives have accepted these principles and

defended Atatürk's ideas. In the interviews, some participants were seen as having relevant thoughts. The question regarding whether there were elites in the early Republican period was intended to open up the students' comments, but it did not wholly succeed. However, it revealed something different. Most of them expressed that the elites consisted of the military and the civic bureaucracy at that time. Even though they knew these people (mostly Kemalist cadres) had been the elite, they continued defending their (mostly Atatürk's) ideas. This is a critical milestone, because their positive belief in the founding Kemalist cadres does not decrease, unlike the post-Kemalist thought's claims.

Problems with theology faculty hit the participants differently. The essential problems with education programs, curricula, and a shortage of academic staff have led participants to question the quality of theology faculties. The findings of our study provide the clearest indication that theology students do not find education in their faculties to be sufficient. Similar to *Imam Hatip* schools, the government's efforts to advance religious education have faced significant obstacles. In particular, administrative decisions by faculty members are subject to major criticism from students. Other structural problems include economic crises and worries about unemployment. Moving from this point, it can be said that while the number of theology faculties is growing, the abstracts have not been able to keep pace with this quantitative rise.

When all these factors are considered, along with the results of the supportive survey, whose findings are not specifically interpreted owing to the small sample size, it becomes apparent that post-Kemalist policies have not achieved the expected outcome in the field of religious higher education. From an Althusserian perspective, the expansion of theology faculties was designed to function as an ideological state apparatus: reproducing a compliant, pious subject aligned with the AKP's socio-cultural vision. However, the findings suggest a fundamental contradiction inherent in this project. The students produced by these institutions — the supposed beneficiaries of the post-Kemalist educational apparatus — exhibit scepticism toward the government's policies, dissatisfaction with the quality of religious education, and awareness of the political instrumentalization of religious institutions. In Gramscian terms, the AKP's hegemonic project has encountered significant limits at the grassroots level. The "war of position" waged through religious education has not secured the durable consent it sought among the very generation it targeted. Theology students, while broadly conservative in their values, resist full ideological capture: they critique institutional failures, retain attachment to republican legal norms (particularly regarding women's rights), and express unease about social polarization and economic insecurity. This partial and contested reproduction of hegemony — rather than its seamless transmission — points to the inherent instability of any hegemonic project that mistakes quantitative institutional expansion for qualitative ideological transformation.

Conclusion

This article has examined the AKP's post-Kemalist hegemonic project through the lens of its most direct institutional investment: the expansion of theology faculties as Althusserian Ideological State Apparatuses designed to produce a religiously committed generation. Drawing on Gramsci's theory of hegemony, the analysis has traced how post-Kemalism provided the ideological scaffolding for the AKP's reorganisation of the state — displacing Kemalism's symbolic capital and repositioning religious education as the cultural cornerstone of a new

social order. Theology faculties, as nodes of this ideological apparatus, serve as critical sites for assessing whether the *war of position* waged through education has actually secured the grassroots consent it sought.

The findings reveal a significant disjuncture between institutional design and ideological outcomes. Despite their conservative formation, theology students approach the government's socio-cultural policies with measurable scepticism: they criticise the quality and political instrumentalisation of religious education, affirm women's republican legal rights, and express anxiety about social polarization. In Althusserian terms, interpellation has partially failed — the subjects produced by the ISA resist full identification with the ideology it transmits. Their primary frame of reference is not the AKP's cultural agenda but the acute socio-economic insecurity that ideological expansion has done nothing to address.

These findings carry broader implications for understanding the limits of state-led hegemonic projects. The evidence suggests that the post-Kemalist transformation has coincided with increasing political centralization and concerns regarding democratic backsliding, while falling short of fully realizing the pluralistic and culturally rooted social vision that it initially claimed to promote. More broadly, the findings indicate that hegemonic projects constructed primarily through top-down institutional mechanisms, including curriculum reforms, administrative restructuring, and presidential interventions, may struggle to generate durable forms of consent associated with deeper societal embeddedness. Theology students exemplified this tension. Although they are commonly regarded as part of the AKP's core social base, they simultaneously express a range of critical attitudes toward the party and its policies. Theology students exemplify this tension: although they are commonly regarded as part of the AKP's core constituency, they also emerge as one of the groups expressing more critical attitudes toward the party. Given the limited size of the sample, these findings should be interpreted with caution. Future research based on larger and more representative samples of theology and imam hatip students would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics, limits, and contradictions of this contested hegemonic project.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Ethical standards

For this article no studies with human participants or animals were performed by any of the authors. All studies mentioned were in accordance with the ethical standards indicated in each case.

Author Contribution

The authors independently conducted all stages of the review, including study design, data collection and analysis, literature review, methodological development, and article preparation.

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Interview with Participant 10 (June 2025), online

Interview with Participant 11 (July 2025), online

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