

Müslüman Dünyasında Sekülerleşme: Hükümet Performansı ve Dindarlık Arasındaki İlişki

Secularization in the Muslim World: Relationship Between Government Performance and Religiosity

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Özet

Uzun yıllar boyunca Müslüman ülkeler, dünyanın farklı bölgelerinde yaşanan sekülerleşme trendinin dışında kaldı. Ancak bu durum son yıllarda değişmiş gibi görünüyor. Birçok Müslüman ülkede yapılan anketler, Müslüman toplumların hızla dinden uzaklaştığını, dini liderlere ve İslamcı partilere olan güvenin azaldığını ve daha az insanın dinin siyaseti etkilemesini istediğini gösteriyor. Yine de modernleşme teorisinin revize edilmiş versiyonu veya dini piyasalar teorisi gibi sekülerleşme literatüründe sunulan açıklamaların, Müslüman ülkelerde yaşanan sekülerleşmeyi yeterince anlamamıza yardımcı olamadığı görülüyor. Bu makalede, insanların refah seviyesi ile dindarlık arasında bir ilişki olabileceğini iddia ediyor ve hükümetlerin düşen ekonomik performanslarının, Müslüman ülkelerdeki son gelişmeleri açıklayabileceğini savunuyorum. Çeşitli yazarlar, tıpkı dinin ve dindarlığın siyaseti etkilediği gibi, siyasetin de dini ve dindarlığı etkileyebileceğini farklı çalışmalarda göstermiştir. Bu çalışmada, siyasetin Müslüman ülkelerde dini ve dindarlığı hangi koşullar altında etkileyebileceğini göstermeye çalıştım. Dinin Müslümanların hayatının her alanını etkilediği düşünüldüğünde, bu çalışmadan elde edilen sonuçlar bize İslam dünyasındaki siyasetin geleceği hakkında bir fikir verebilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Sekülerleşme, Modernleşme, İslamcı Partiler, Dindarlık, Laiklik.*

Abstract

Why Are There More Atheists in the Muslim World? For many years, Muslim countries were outside the secularization trend experienced in different parts of the world. This situation seems to have changed in recent years. Surveys in many Muslim countries show that Muslim societies are rapidly moving away from religion, trust in religious leaders and Islamist parties is declining, and fewer people want religion to have an impact on politics. Yet, it seems that none of the explanations provided by secularization literature, such as revised modernization theory or religious markets theory, can help us adequately understand the decline in religiosity in Muslim countries. I claim that there could be a relationship between people's well-being and religiosity and argue that governments' declining economic performance can explain the recent developments taking place in Muslim countries. Various authors have already shown that politics can influence religion just as religion and religiosity influence politics. With this study, I tried to provide details about conditions under which politics can affect religion and religiosity in Muslim countries. Considering that religion affects every part of Muslims' lives, results from this study may give us an idea about the future of politics in the Muslim world.

Keywords: *Secularization, Modernization, Islamist Parties, Religiosity, Secularism.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The world has become a more secular place. Different research made in various parts of the globe repeatably shows that religiosity is decreasing among people, and fewer people are now attending religious services. Developed countries in the West have been seeing this decline for a long time (Inglehart 1997; Inglehart 2021), and currently, in most European countries, the number of unreligious people is higher than the number of people who define themselves as religious (Phil Zuckerman 2019). What is more interesting is that secularization now seems to be an important reality for other parts of the world too. For instance, in countries in Latin America, the number of people identifying themselves as nonreligious has seen a striking increase. According to a survey, the rate of people who identified themselves as nonreligious increased to 20% from 8% in 5 years (Phil Zuckerman 2019). In addition, Asia also seems to experience a similar trend; the number of people who identify themselves as unreligious or do not attend "ritual engagement" or "temple activity" has significantly increased in recent years (Phil Zuckerman 2019).

Secularization is spreading in many countries, and thus far, there have only been a few exceptions to this process in different parts of the world. Sub-Saharan Africa was one of the places that were not significantly affected by this movement, and the other was the Muslim world (Inglehart 2021). However, recent studies reveal that, even in the Muslim world, more people are now becoming less religious (Inglehart 2021; DW 2021), and the number of people who support secular politics is increasing (Tony Blair Institute 2021). A survey recently conducted in Iran found that about half of the population has "transitioned from religious to nonreligious" (Gamaan 2020; DW 2021). Another study conducted in Egypt showed that the number of those who supported the idea of separating religion and politics increased from 56% to 81% (Tony Blair Institute 2021). Furthermore, the World Values Survey (2018) data indicates that the number of people who define themselves as religious is decreasing in countries such as Tunisia, Morocco, Iraq, Jordan, Pakistan, and Turkey. In addition, reports of the Arab Barometer, which covers the attitudes of people in more than ten Muslim countries, also suggest that the level of trust in religious leaders, and Islamist parties have been declining, and fewer people favor religion's influence on politics in the Muslim world. Given these trends, this study inquires, "Under what conditions does religiosity decline in Muslim countries?"

From Tunisia to Egypt, from Saudi Arabia to Pakistan, and from Iran to Turkey, many Muslim countries go through similar processes (World Values Survey 2018; Tony Blair Institute 2021; DW 2021; Gamaan 2020), yet it seems that secularization literature still cannot account for the change taking place in these countries (Stolz 2021). When we look at the arguments given by the secularization literature, we can see that it generally offers two explanations for the change in religiosity in a country. The first explanation, the revised modernization theory (Inglehart and Welzel 2005) emphasizes the importance of factors such as urbanization, education, level of development (mostly measured through GDP per capita), and level of income or healthcare inequality (Norris and Inglehart 2015; Liang and Dong 2019; Inglehart 2021). The main argument of the revised modernization theory is that people become less religious as they become more secure against physical and economic threats and are exposed to different ways of thinking and lifestyles. According to this theory, religiosity has a negative relationship with factors such as education, urbanization, and level of income and a positive relationship with factors such as income and healthcare inequality.

The second explanation, religious market theory, emphasizes the importance of the state's regulation of religion and the variety of religions offered to people. According to this theory, when states do not regulate the religious sphere and when different religions or different religious groups compete freely in the market, people are more likely to find the religion that answers their needs (Hout and Fischer 2004; Hout and Fischer 2014; Stolz 2021). States having an official religion and the state's regulation of the religion have a negative effect on religiosity.

However, when we look at the developments in some Muslim countries, we can see that none of these explanations can give us a complete explanation for the increase in secularization in this part of the world. Comparison of data from the World Bank (2021) and World Values Survey (2018) indicate that although experiencing a decrease in income levels, or an increase in inequalities in income and healthcare, religiosity has seen a decline in some Muslim countries. It may be thought that

the increase in education and urbanization may explain the decrease in religiosity, but when we look at some years when education and urbanization increased, it is possible to see that religiousness also increased in those years. Thus, although both factors probably have explanatory power, they cannot explain the pace of secularization by themselves.

When it comes to religious market theory, the religiosity levels of people in Middle Eastern countries by itself indicate the inadequacy of this explanation to understand the change in religiosity in Muslim countries (Inglehart 2021). In most Middle Eastern countries, states have either an official religion or are heavily regulated by the governments, yet they still have the highest levels of religiosity in the world (Inglehart 2021). In addition, comparing the change in the level of religiosity with the change in the level of religious freedoms in some Muslim countries indicates that this theory cannot account for the change in religiosity by itself.

Therefore, I claim that to fully understand the recent developments taking place in the Muslim world, we need to examine the relationship between government performance and religiosity. Recent findings show that just as religiosity and religion shape politics, politics also affect religion and religiosity ((Fischer et al. 2004; Hout and Fischer 2014; Margolis 2018). For instance, Michele Margolis, after examining the relationship between religiosity and voting behaviors in American politics, indicates that "Politics can drive whether you identify with a faith, how strongly you identify with that faith, and how religious you are and some people on the left are falling away from religion because they see it as so wrapped up with Republican politics" (Fivethirtyeight 2019). I believe that there might be a similar relationship between religiosity and politics in the Muslim world. For a long time, Islamist movements in the Middle East constituted one of the most serious oppositions against the authoritarian regimes in the region, and in recent years, countries like Egypt, Tunisia, and Turkey have had Islamist governments (Ozcan 2018). Nevertheless, findings suggest that people's trust in Islamist parties and religious leaders has been declining rapidly in Muslim countries. I believe that the failure of Islamist parties to deliver on the needs of citizens (Ozcan 2018), combined with the exploitation of religious leaders by authoritarian leaders in the Middle East, can explain the recent developments taking place in Muslim countries. A comparison of the two surveys conducted by the Arab Barometer 8 years apart (2014-2021) indicates that there might be a relationship between people's level of religiosity and their concerns about their country's economy. Comparing the two surveys reveals that people's level of religiosity has decreased in a period where their concerns about their country's economy have increased. Data from countries like Tunisia, Turkey, and Iran also indicate that religiosity has decreased in a period where the GDP per capita has decreased. All these findings suggest that there could be a relationship between religiosity and government performance. Chaves and Cann (1992) find that the identification of religion with a political identity causes some people to distance themselves from religion. I believe that the identification of religion with governments that failed to meet the expectations of citizens is one of the important factors that explain declining religiosity in Muslim countries. More specifically, I claim that if a Muslim country with an Islamist government experiences an economic decline, then we can expect to see religiosity decline in that country.

In this study, first, I utilized Turkey as a case study to underscore the constraints of secularization theory in explaining the decline in religiosity. Furthermore, I sought to demonstrate the potential association between government performance and religiosity. Subsequently, I performed a regression analysis to empirically examine the relationship between religiosity and government performance within the context of the Muslim world. For the regression analysis, I utilized data from the World Values Survey and Arab Barometer and relied upon the data from countries like Turkey, Tunisia, and Egypt who had experienced periods of Islamist governance around the time of data collection. Finally, for the conclusion section, I discussed future areas of research and inquiry.

2. THEORY

Religiosity has seen a significant decline in many parts of the world, including in places like America, which, for a long time, was one of the few developed countries that had a high level of religiosity (Inglehart 2021). Similarly, in Muslim countries, people resisted the secularization trend that was taking place in different parts of the world for a long time, yet it seems that they also started

to see the influence of religion waning in their societies. Although one can find various studies that try to explain decreasing religiosity, the roots of secularization literature can be found in early formulations of modernization theory (Norris and Inglehart 2015; Inglehart 2021). From Marx to Weber, many prominent social scientists and modernization theorists made the prediction that religion would lose its importance with the spread of scientific knowledge and education (Norris and Inglehart 2015; Foshaguen 2020; Inglehart 2021). Starting in the 1970s and 1980s, scholars like Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel made revisions to modernization theory and tried to explain developments taking place in different areas, including religiosity. The revised modernization theory, unlike the classical modernization theory, explains secularization as people's attainment of living standards that ensure their survival (Norris and Inglehart 2015). According to Inglehart, the reason why people in so many different countries are becoming secular is related to the changing conditions of life and the attainment of existential security. Inglehart claims that religiosity has a close relationship with people's physical and economic security, and when people feel economically or physically threatened, religion provides "assurance that the world was in the hands of an infallible higher power which ensured that, if one followed his rules, things would ultimately work out for the best" (p.5). Likewise, Jorg Stolz (2021) claims that religions supply "hope and promises of a better life to those who feel in some way deprived" (p.2-3). According to Inglehart (2021), in many places, factors related to modernization, such as industrialization, urbanization, and education, increase economic development and make religion dysfunctional by ensuring survival. And as these factors become more prevalent in different parts of the world, people become less religious.

However, recent developments taking place around the world indicate that revised modernization theory can only partially explain what is happening in the world. Research in places like the Middle East shows that even Muslim countries are now becoming less religious, and demand for secular politics has become more widespread in many of these countries. This trend is particularly surprising considering that many of these nations have faced economic challenges and increased migration, factors typically associated with heightened threat perception and, consequently, a stronger affinity for religiosity. Jorg Stolz (2021), after examining the progress made in secularization literature in the last 20 years, states that different research made in this literature cannot explain secularization in the Middle East. Nevertheless, I believe that some of the more recent studies of the mentioned authors can still help us understand the developments in Muslim countries.

Inglehart (2021), in his latest book, argues that "as religion weakens, the dominant causal flow can change direction, with one's political views increasingly shaping one's religious outlook" p.165. He argues that, in today's world, factors like industrialization, urbanization, and education make people value "freedom of choice in all aspects of life" and cause them to question the traditional/religious norms that limit individual liberties. According to Inglehart, when people see religious norms as conflicted with individual liberties, such as sexual preferences or abortion, they choose the side of individual liberties and become less religious. Therefore, starting in the 21st century, factors related to modernization have started to reverse the causal direction between religion and politics, and now, political values and attitudes of people determine their level of religiosity (Inglehart 2021). Similarly, Chivas and Can (1992) argue that when religion becomes closely aligned with a political identity, some people stop identifying themselves with religion. Hout and Fischer (2002) and Michele Margolis (2018) find that the politicization of religion and its identification with certain parties and policies (In the U.S. case, religion's identification with the Republican Party's conservative policies) causes people to distance themselves from religion. Given the intertwining of religion and politics in the Middle East, I believe that these recent findings on the impact of politics on religiosity can help us better understand the secularization trend in Muslim countries. Drawing on these findings, I argue that because Islam wants to regulate every aspect of life (Ertit 2018), as most authoritarian leaders in the Middle East use religion and religious leaders to legitimize their rule (Acemoglu and Robinson 2020), and since the majority of the Muslim countries have laws that take sharia as a source (CFR 2021), governments' wrongdoings or their inability to deliver services needed by the citizens causes people to question the validity of religious rules. Both Gerchewski (2013) and Inglehart (1997) argue that a government's legitimacy significantly depends on its performance and its ability to respond to citizens' needs. According to Inglehart (1997), when citizens are not satisfied with

their lives for a long time, they do not just blame the government; they also start to blame the regime for their dissatisfaction. Therefore, this study claims that since governments in Muslim countries use religion and religious leaders to justify their rules, their failure to satisfy their citizens' needs for a long time causes citizens to start to question the validity of religious rules, regulations, institutions, and even religion itself. This, I believe, combined with other factors such as education and urbanization, explains the secularization trend in Muslim countries.

Based on these findings, I claim that the recent decrease in religiosity in Muslim countries can be closely related to the government's failure to meet the citizens' needs, demands, and expectations. Therefore, this study hypothesizes that:

H1: If a Muslim country experiences an economic decline under governments with an Islamist ideology, then it would expect to see its level of religiosity decline.

Alternative to the claims of this study, the literature about secularization offers two theories that are frequently used by different scholars to explain declining religiosity. We should also assess the plausibility of these two rival potential arguments. The first theory is Inglehart and Welzel's (2004) revised modernization theory which focuses on the demand side of religiosity (Liang and Dong 2019). According to this theory, a high level of existential security reduces the need for people to use religion to deal with their anxieties. Norris and Inglehart (2014) state that "religiosity helps individuals cope with stress and anxiety arising from uncontrollable life events" and that people who cannot meet their basic needs are much more likely to state that religion is important in their lives" p.4. Thus, factors that improve people's living standards, such as GDP per capita, income, or health equality, render religion less useful and cause a decline in religiosity (Karakoc and Baskan 2012; Norris and Inglehart 2014; Liang Dong 2019; Hekmoutpor 2020). For instance, Buser (2015) finds the level of income to be highly correlated with religiosity, and Norris and Inglehart (2015) explain the relatively high religiosity of the American public (compared with other developed countries) with unequal distribution of income in the U.S. Likewise, Norris and Inglehart (2015) argue that welfare expenditures can increase the level of existential security, and Hekmoutpor (2020) states that health inequality can be an important factor in reducing existential security and driving religiosity. Also, similar to classical modernization theory, revised modernization theory claims that an increase in urbanization and education has a negative impact on religiosity (Liang Dong 2019). An increase in education is argued to decrease religiosity, first because of education's positive relationship with rational and scientific thinking, and second, education's positive relationship with skills that help people find high-income jobs (Liang Dong 2019). When it comes to urbanization, first, it is thought to have a positive relationship with existential security with "public health infrastructure provided by the government can replace the function of religious activities to resist risks"(Liang and Dong 2019, 334). Second, it has a negative impact on religiosity by providing people with alternative lifestyles and, generally, an abundance of information at a low cost (Liang and Dong 2019; Ertit 2020). Since more information helps people think about religion more "rationally," urbanization decreases religiosity (Liang and Dong 2019). Therefore;

H2: If income, income and health equality, urbanization, and education increase in a country, then it would expect to see its level of religiosity decline.

The other alternative theory that a good deal of researchers use to explain the change in religiosity is the religious market theory, which focuses more on the supply side of religiosity (Liang and Dong 2019). Applying the tenets of the Rational Choice Theory, religious market theorists argue that religiosity will thrive when there is free competition between religions and when citizens are able to freely make their choice among the competing religions (Hout and Fischer 2002; Fox and Tabory 2008; Hout and Fischer 2014; Hekmatpour 2020; Inglehart 2021).

Fox and Tabory (2008) find that diversity creates motivation for religions to offer better products, and Chaves and Cann (1992) argue that "more competition should produce a religious product that is more to the liking of consumers" p.272. According to this theory, the demand for religion is constant among the public, but since people have different needs and divergent expectations of religion, the variety of religions offered to the public has an effect on people's level of religiosity

(Karakoc and Baskan 2012). Since government regulation limits this competition or causes one religion to have a monopoly in the market, religiosity will be higher when there is no government intervention in the religious market (Hout and Fischer 2002; Fox and Tabory 2008; Hout and Fischer 2014; Hekmatpour 2020). Therefore,

H3: If the degree of religious regulation increases in a country, then it would expect to see its level of religiosity decline.

3. METHODS

A variety of surveys were used to understand the relationship between religiosity, government performance, and various factors provided by the secularization literature. To indicate the inadequacy of secularization theory to explain declining religiosity in Turkey and check the plausibility of the argument about the relationship between government performance and religiosity, first, I used the data collected by the World Values Survey for the years between 2000 and 2018. Second, I benefitted from Konda Research and Consultancy's surveys to show the change in religiosity between the years 2011 and 2021. To understand whether there can be a relationship between government performance and religiosity, I compared the change in GDP per capita with the change in religiosity, the change in the level of trust in religious leaders, and people's demand for secular politics. I used the World Bank's data to show the change in the level of inequality, GDP per capita, and the level of religious freedoms. I benefitted from OECD data to examine the change in healthcare inequality and overall education level in the country. To track the changes in the level of trust in religious leaders I used the data gathered from World Values Survey, Barem, and Ipsos.

Lastly, I drew on the World Values Survey and Arab Barometer's data to check if there is a significant relationship between government performance and religiosity.

The case of Turkey was chosen to illustrate the potential conditions under which religiosity declines in Muslim countries for several key reasons. First, recent developments in Turkey make it an ideal case to apply the theory presented here regarding declining religiosity in the Muslim world. For years, the current Turkish government criticized the secular reforms of the republic's founders, accusing them of oppressing religious people and distancing the country from its religious values (Yilmaz et al., 2021). The ruling party often blamed previous secular governments for national problems. However, under the rule of an Islamist government, there has been a growing demand for secular politics (Tepav 2021). A recent survey shows that 73% of participants now recognize the value of Atatürk, the republic's founding father (Metropol 2021). This increasing secularization during a period of economic decline suggests that government performance may play a role in the secularization trends in Muslim countries. Given that the AKP is an Islamist party and that Islamism "refers to turning religion into an ideology and an instrumental use of Islam in politics" (Yilmaz 2021, p. 104), it is plausible that public discontent with the government could extend to religious institutions, making Turkey's experience a critical case for examining the relationship between politics and religion. Furthermore, Turkey holds historical significance as the first country to elect an Islamist party through democratic processes, first with the Refah Party and later with the AKP. Since democratic elections confer legitimacy, it is vital to explore how the policies of a democratically elected Islamist government impact public religiosity.

Second, Turkey's case may explain similar secularization trends observed in other Muslim-majority countries that have experienced Islamist governments. Over the past 20 years, Turkey has been ruled by an Islamist party, and its democratic and economic conditions have deteriorated, with GDP per capita declining since 2013 and inflation reaching record highs. Investigating whether the decline in democracy and economic conditions under Islamist party rule affects religiosity can help us understand similar trends in other countries like Egypt, Lebanon, Algeria, and Tunisia, where Islamist movements have also challenged secular politics (Ozcan 2018). Data from the Arab Barometer show declining trust in Islamist parties across the Muslim world. For instance, the Ennahda party in Tunisia lost support in the 2014 elections partly due to its failure to address economic problems (Ozcan 2018), and the AKP has similarly lost votes amid Turkey's economic struggles, suggesting a relationship between religiosity and political disillusionment in Muslim countries.

Third, the election results in Turkey align with the developments discussed in this study. Surveys indicate a significant decline in religiosity beginning in 2012, coinciding with periods of political and economic instability and a series of elections. Public support for the ruling AKP, which increasingly intertwined religious rhetoric with political identity, has declined, particularly during the 2018 and 2023 elections, reflecting dissatisfaction with economic management and high inflation. This discontent has also affected religious institutions linked to the state, as data reveal a shift towards secular preferences.

2014 Local Elections: The AKP performed well, benefiting from a stable economy and limited migration.

2018 General and Presidential Elections: The AKP experienced losses alongside declining religiosity amidst economic downturns.

2023 General Elections: Despite Erdoğan's re-election, public demand for secular governance increased, signaling disillusionment with religiously affiliated leadership.

These trends suggest that political and economic dissatisfaction may drive a broader secularization trend in Turkey and potentially across the Muslim world.

Finally, examining Turkey from 2002 to 2022 allows for testing a popular theory in secularization literature: the revised modernization theory, which posits that improvements in physical or economic security reduce religiosity. When people feel more secure in their survival, the protective role of religion becomes less important. Factors like GDP per capita, health, and income equality influence this sense of security, and thus, religiosity. However, in Turkey, religiosity increased during periods of strong economic performance and declined during downturns. This suggests that in contexts where religion and politics are deeply intertwined, government performance may influence religiosity in unique ways.

Cases of Tunisia and Egypt were also added to the analysis due to their shared experience with Islamist governments and a similar decline in public trust toward Islamist parties. In Tunisia, the Ennahda party's defeat in the 2014 elections was largely attributed to its poor handling of economic issues (Ozcan 2018). Similarly, the AKP in Turkey has faced voter backlash due to economic challenges, which may indicate a broader connection between religiosity and political dissatisfaction in Muslim countries. Additionally, the Arab Barometer's third wave reveals that many in Egypt felt their quality of life had not improved under the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood government.

Dependent and Independent Variables

Most of the terms that I will use to present the results of this study will be self-explaining. However, it is still important to clearly articulate how I define some of the concepts that I used throughout the paper.

Dependent variable: Dependent variable is religiosity in countries such as Turkey, Tunisia, and Egypt, all of which have had experience with Islamist parties in government. Similar to many other researchers, I will use people's self-definition to measure religiosity. There are small differences in the terminology used by WVS, Konda, and Tesev, but they all indicate the levels of religiosity based on participants' self-definition. Furthermore, for the case of Turkey, I analyze changes in demand for secular politics and trust toward religious leaders as an indicator of the shift in the level of secularization within the country. To measure the demand for secular politics, I use the data from the World Values Survey, and I look at the number of people who stated, "religious leaders interpreting the laws is an essential characteristic of democracy." To measure the trust for religious leaders, I utilize the data collected by WVS, Ipsos, and Barem and look at the number of people who stated: "they have a great deal of confidence in religious leaders" (WVS) and a number of people who found religious leaders trustworthy (Ipsos and Barem). The reason why I look at the change in demand for secular politics and trust for religious leaders is; first, data from the Arab Barometer and World Values Survey show that there might be a correlation between trust in religious leaders, Islamist parties, and religiosity in Muslim countries. Chaves and Cann (1992) find that when religiosity is closely aligned with a political identity, it may have a negative effect on religiosity. Considering that many

governments, especially the Islamist governments in the Middle East, use religion to legitimize their rule and gather more support, there could be a connection between government performance, demand for secular politics, trust in religious leaders, and religiosity. Second, studies made by Ozturk (2016) and Yilmaz et al. (2021) demonstrate that AKP has frequently used religious leaders to justify some of their controversial policies and get more support from the public. Some of the statements of religious leaders about these controversial policies created a negative reaction from the opposition parties (Yilmaz et al. 2021) and created a backlash, especially among the young segments of society. Therefore, I believe that analyzing the relationship between government performance, demand for secular politics, trust in religious leaders, and religiosity could be useful in understanding the decline in religiosity in Turkey and in other Muslim countries.

Independent Variable: In this study, I examine government performance as the independent variable, assessed through individuals' evaluations of government effectiveness. For Turkey, these evaluations are drawn from a specific question in the World Values Survey (WVS), which asks respondents to rate the government's performance on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 indicating the lowest and 10 the highest. To analyze whether there is a significant relationship between religiosity and government performance, I conduct regression analyses using the WVS data on government effectiveness. Alongside individuals' evaluations, I look at changes in income by tracking fluctuations in GDP per capita. For the income inequality variable, I use the data from the World Bank and look at the values of the Gini coefficient, which varies between the values of 0 and 1. The coefficient's value for complete inequality is 1 (100%), and the value for complete equality is 0 (0%). To estimate healthcare inequality, I use the same method as Hekmatpour (2020). Hekmatpour (2020) uses data from the Global Health Expenditure Database (GHED) of the World Health Organization published in the World Development Indicators (World Bank) database and looks at Out-of-Pocket expenditure indicators to quantify the inequality in healthcare. Out-of-Pocket indicator "measures the percent share of the total expenditure on health in a country paid by the households" (Hekmatpour 2020, p.8). The reasoning behind the usage of the Out-of-Pocket expenditure indicator to estimate healthcare inequality is "that when greater shares of health expenses are paid by the households, few people can have reliable access to healthcare." this situation creates inequality in people's ability to reach health services. (Hekmatpour 2020, p.8). Therefore, according to Hekmatpour (2020), as out-of-pocket expenditure increases, equality in the healthcare sector decreases. In addition, Kaminska and Wulfgramm (2019) state that as out-of-pocket payments increase, the probability of reporting unmet health needs also increases. Therefore, examining the change in out-of-pocket spending seems to be a good way to measure inequality in the health sector.

The Cases of Tunisia and Egypt

To understand whether there is a significant relationship between religiosity and government performance in the other two countries that had an experience with Islamist governments, I conducted a regression analysis utilizing data sourced from the Arab Barometer. Specifically, I relied on the data from the third wave of the Arab Barometer (2012-2014), collected during periods when Islamist parties either held government control or played a significant role within the governing coalition.

To measure government performance, I relied on a survey question that directly asked participants to evaluate it. The question was: "To what extent are you satisfied with the government's performance?" Responses were rated on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 indicated complete dissatisfaction and 10 indicated complete satisfaction.

Control Variables: Revised Modernization Theory and Religious Market Theory

I included control variables such as threat perception, education, income, and urbanization, which are commonly associated with revised modernization theory. To estimate changes in education levels, I used data from the OECD and examined the percentage of people with tertiary education. The OECD defines this group as those who have "completed the highest level of education, by age group" (OECD 2022). For this study, I focused on the percentage of 25-34-year-olds with tertiary education. For the urbanization variable, I relied on data from Our World In Data (Ritchie and Roser 2018), which defines urban population as "people living in urban areas as defined by national statistical

offices." Urbanization levels are estimated using World Bank population data and urban ratios from the United Nations World Urbanization Prospect. To measure threat perception, I considered respondents' levels of concern regarding four situations: a war involving their country, civil war, terrorist attacks, and feelings of insecurity at home. For this variable, as well as education, urbanization, income, and age, I utilized data from the World Values Survey (WVS).

Lastly, while I do not conduct regression analysis to test it, I also explore whether there could be a relationship between changes in religious freedom and shifts in religiosity. To measure the level of religious freedom, I use the World Bank's Freedom of Religion Index, which assigns each country a score ranging from 0 (least free) to 1 (most free). The World Bank describes the Freedom of Religion Index as "a sub-component index comprised of two V-Dem general indicators on religious freedom, based on expert surveys, along with an in-house coded variable from CLD. These three indicators are aggregated into the freedom of religion sub-component using BFA." The reason why I use the World Bank's Freedom of Religion Index rather than similar datasets is related to the limitations of these datasets. Other datasets used by various authors to test religious market theory do not cover the years after 2014. For instance, Karakoc and Baskan (2012) use indexes such as the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA) and Kuru (2009); and Dhima and Golder (2020) use the International Religious Freedom dataset (Grim and Finke 2006) to test this theory, but none of these datasets cover the period after 2014. Since I wanted to analyze the relationship between government performance and religiosity, I had to find reliable data that covered the whole AKP period in Turkey. That's why I preferred the World Bank's Freedom of Religion Index to test the religious market theory.

Regression Analysis

I employed Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression to test the hypothesis that government performance is significantly related to changes in religiosity in Turkey, Tunisia, and Egypt. The analysis controlled for several variables associated with modernization theory to isolate the effect of government performance.

The regression models are structured to include several key variables. The dependent variable, religiosity, is measured through self-reported religiosity. The main independent variable is government performance, which is captured by individual evaluations of government effectiveness. Control variables include education (measured as the percentage of individuals with tertiary education), urbanization (urban population percentage), income (individual or household income), health inequality (measured by out-of-pocket healthcare expenditures), and perceived threat (a composite index of perceived security threats). These controls are included based on their theoretical relevance: education and urbanization are controlled as key components of modernization theory, which posits that higher education and urban living promote secularization, while income and health inequality are included to capture existential security, another factor that modernization theory suggests influences religiosity. Perceived threats are included to account for the role that insecurity plays in driving individuals toward religion. Significance tests were performed for both independent and control variables, with the significance level set at $p < 0.05$ to determine statistical relevance.

4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS



Table 1 shows the changing religiosity levels in Turkey between the years 2000- 2017. The table indicates that there was an increase in the number of religiosity between 2000 and 2012 but this trend was reversed starting from 2012. Source: World Values Survey Waves 4-7

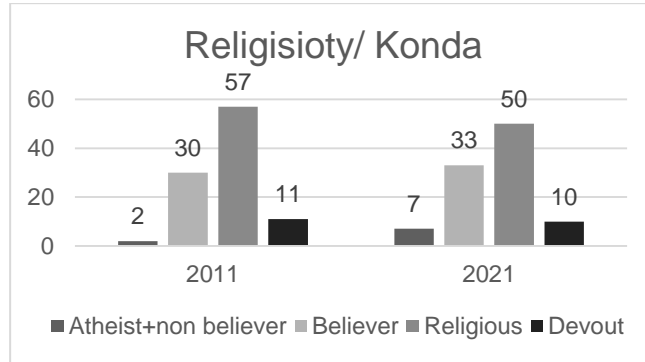


Table 2 shows the change in religiosity levels in Turkey from 2011 to 2021. The data indicates a 7% decrease in the proportion of individuals identifying as religious, alongside a 5% increase in those identifying themselves as atheists. Source: Konda

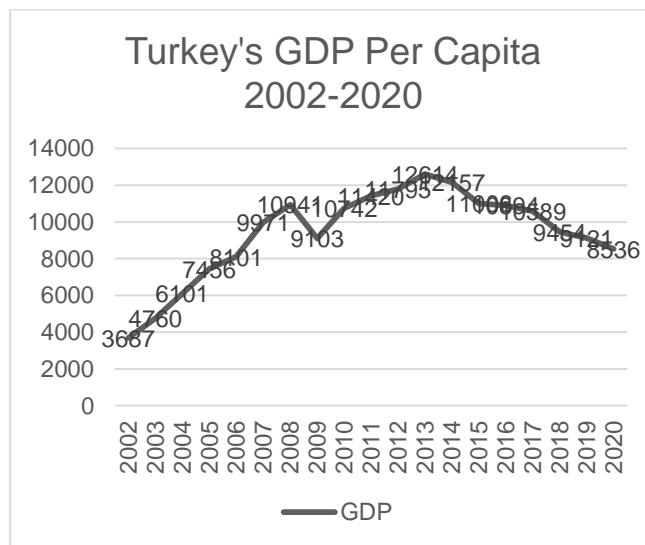


Table 3 shows the change in GDP per capita in Turkey after AKP came to power. As can be seen, there has been a constant decline in GDP per capita after 2017 which matches with the decline in religiosity observed in the data provided by World Values Survey and Konda.

The initial analysis, using data from various sources, supports the hypothesis presented in this study regarding the decline in religiosity, though it did not align with the last two hypotheses concerning modernization and religious market theory. To explore the reasons behind decreasing religiosity in the Middle East, I first selected Turkey as a representative case. I began by examining the correlation between religiosity and the government's economic performance, followed by a regression analysis to assess the relationship between religiosity and government performance. For this, I used data from the World Values Survey (WVS) for Turkey and the Arab Barometer for Tunisia and Egypt.

For the initial analysis for Turkey, valuable insights were gathered from surveys conducted by WVS and Konda. The first WVS survey in Turkey, conducted in 2001, included a sample size of 3,401 respondents. The second, carried out in 2007, had 1,346 participants. In 2012, the third survey had 1,605 respondents, and the most recent in 2018 surveyed 2,405 people. These surveys provided compelling evidence suggesting a potential causal relationship between government performance and religiosity in Turkey.

For Konda's survey, the number of people that participated in the study is not precise, but they state that all of their surveys are conducted with at least 2700, and at most with 33 thousand people (Data about the change in religiosity was also taken from the website). When it comes to Ipsos, they conducted each of their surveys with approximately 500 people in Turkey. Lastly, Barem conducted its survey with approximately 1000 participants in Turkey.

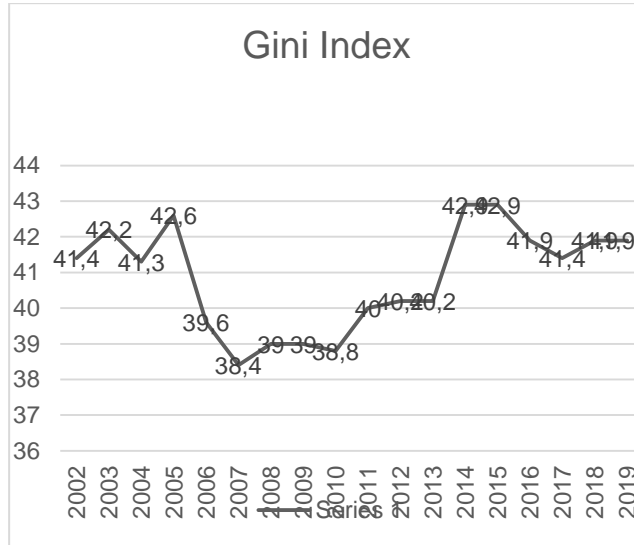


Table 4 presents changes in equality levels in Turkey following the rise of the AKP to power. The Gini coefficient, which ranges from 0 (indicating complete equality) to 1 (indicating complete inequality), suggests a growing trend of inequality beginning in 2017, similar to the observed changes in GDP per capita. Source: World Bank

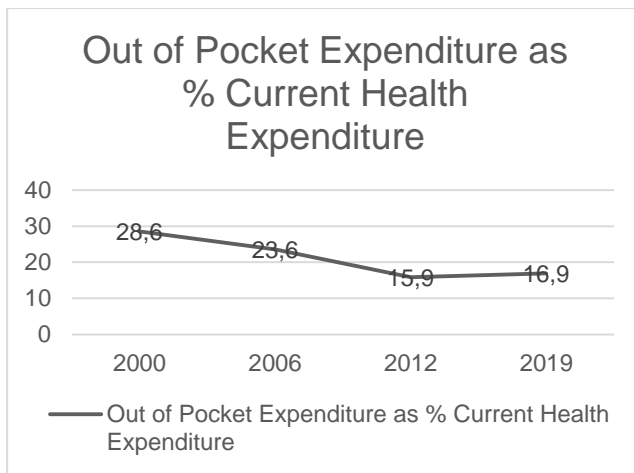


Table 5 shows the change in out-of-pocket spending as a percentage of current health expenditure from 2000 to 2019. Similar to trends in GDP per capita and income inequality, healthcare inequality appears to have risen between the years 2012 and 2019. Source: World Health Organization

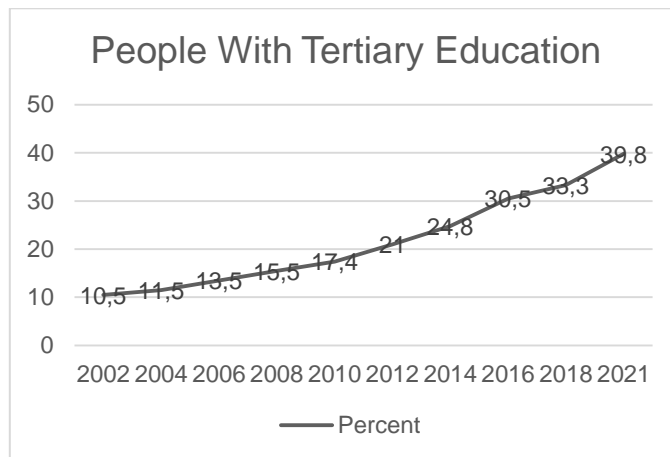


Table 6 displays the change in the number of people with higher education in Turkey since the AKP assumed power. There has been a consistent and significant increase in the number of individuals with tertiary education. Source: OECD

Before presenting the results, let me first revisit the initial hypothesis. The first hypothesis posits that if a Muslim country experiences an economic decline under a government with an Islamist ideology, religiosity is expected to decrease. While controlling for all variables is not feasible, a comparison of Turkey's GDP per capita and religiosity levels reveals a notable pattern: religiosity rose during periods of economic prosperity but declined following the onset of economic downturn. For example, when we look at the year in which religiosity was highest in Turkey, which was 2012, it is possible to see that it coincides with the period when GDP per capita reached its peak in the country. In addition, it also seems that trust in religious leaders and demand for secular politics have a connection with the economic downturn in the country. Chaves and Cann (1992) and Margolis (2018) find that when religiosity is closely aligned with a political identity, it may have a negative effect on religiosity. In the context of Turkey, since the ruling party has an Islamist ideology, and since Islamism "refers to turning religion into an ideology and an instrumental use of Islam in politics" (Yilmaz 2021, p. 104), it is highly likely for religiosity in Turkey to be negatively affected by government's wrongdoings or its inability to deliver services needed by the citizens. The relationship between religiosity and government performance becomes more meaningful, especially given that religious leaders are one of the least trusted professions in the last two surveys by Ipsos (2019; 2021) and that the AKP frequently uses religious leaders to justify some of its controversial policies and gain greater support from the public (Ozturk 2016; Yilmaz et al. 2021).

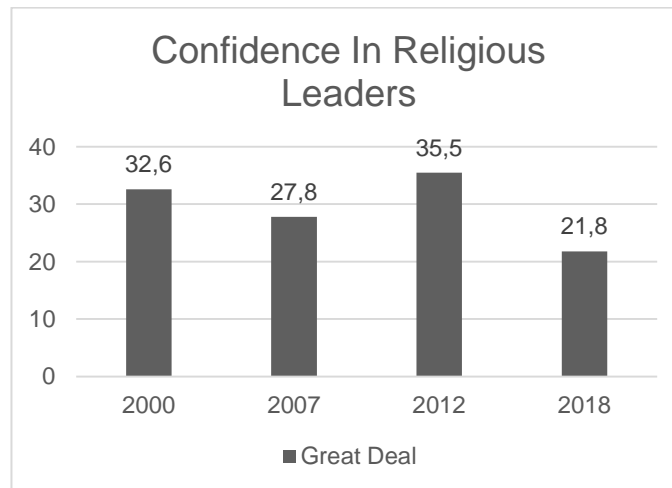


Table 7 presents the change in Turkish people's level of confidence in religious leaders between the years 2000-2018. It seems that, in line with trends in religiosity levels, the confidence in religious leaders declined after 2012. Source: World Values Survey Waves 4-7

We know that some of the statements of religious leaders about these controversial policies caused a negative reaction from the opposition parties (Yilmaz et al. 2021) and created a backlash, especially among the young segments of society. Therefore, religion's identification with the government and its performance seems to have caused many people to turn away from religion and increase their demand for secular politics in the last ten years of the AKP's rule. Considering that there is a similar pattern in Arab countries where a decrease in religiosity is accompanied by a decrease in trust in Islamist parties (Arab Barometer 2020) and an increase in the demand for secular politics (Tony Blair Institute 2021), this study has a potential to explain declining religiosity in other Muslim countries as well.

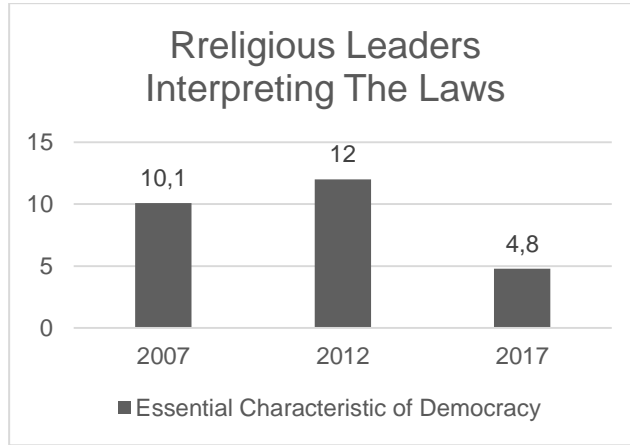


Table 8 shows the change in the number of respondents who agreed with the statement, "Religious leaders' interpretation of laws is a fundamental feature of democracy," from 2007 to 2017. In line with trends in religiosity levels, the demand for secular politics increased during this period. Source: World Values Survey Waves 5-7

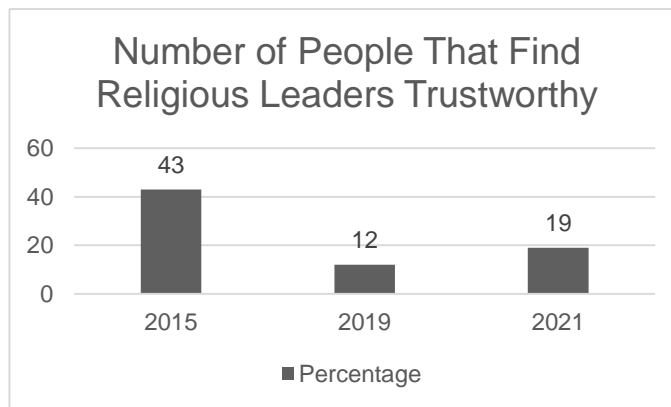


Table 9 shows the change in the number of people who find religious leaders trustworthy in Turkey between the years 2015-2021. Similar to the data provided by the World Values Survey (2000-2018), data provided by Barem and Ipsos indicate a significant decline in the number of people who find religious leaders trustworthy. Source: Barem and Ipsos

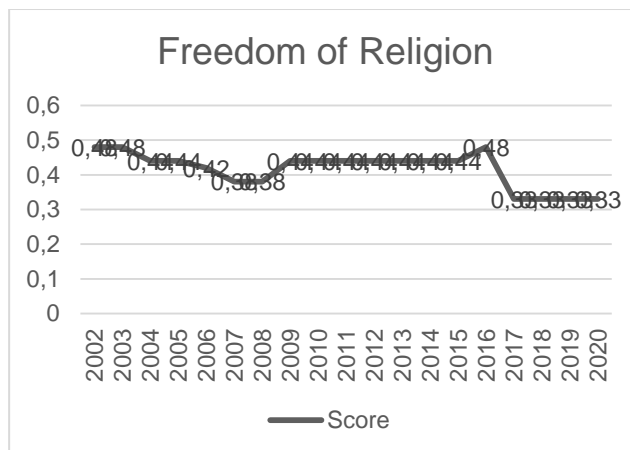


Table 10 shows the changes in religious freedom in Turkey from 2002 to 2020. The data indicates relatively stable levels of religious freedom until 2016, followed by a decline, as reported by the World Bank. Source: World Bank

Regression analysis**The Case of Turkey**

The result of the regression analysis shows that there is a significant relationship between government performance and religiosity even when controlling variables that are associated with modernization theory. However, it's important to note that not all modernization theory-related variables exhibit a significant relationship with religiosity. For instance, while education and income levels are significantly related to religiosity, variables such as threat perception, income, and urbanization do not show a significant relationship with religiosity in this analysis. The lack of significance in the income variable may be attributed to the strong link between income levels and people's evaluation of government performance.

Regression Results: Determinants of Religiosity in Turkey

	(1) religiosity
threat perception	0.007* (0.004)
urbanization	-0.012 (0.022)
income level	-0.003 (0.020)
education	-0.037*** (0.014)
age	0.042*** (0.007)
government performance	0.033*** (0.005)
Constant	0.328*** (0.078)
Observations	2,263
R ²	0.047
AIC	-
BIC	-

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Table 11 presents regression results based on data from the World Values Survey in Turkey. The findings indicate a significant relationship between religiosity and factors like threat perception, education, age, and government performance. Source: World Values Survey Wave 7

However, the fact that there is a correlation between religiosity and government performance does not mean that the theory presented here is the only explanation that can explain declining religiosity in Turkey and other Muslim countries. However, examination of alternative explanations shows that they may not give us an adequate answer as to why religiosity is declining in Muslim countries all the time. If we remember the first alternative explanation, it was especially emphasizing the importance of modernization and offering a relationship between the level of existential security (Feeling safe against physical and economic threats) and religiosity. More specifically, it claimed that: if factors like income, income and health equality, urbanization, and education increase in a country, then it would expect to see religiosity decline.

However, comparing the change in religiosity with the changes in per capita income, and equality in income and health services in Turkey shows that religiosity may have a positive relationship with all these factors, contrary to what modernization theorists expect. We already mentioned that the year in which religiosity was highest in Turkey coincides with the period when GDP per capita reached its peak in the country. It is possible to observe a similar situation when the change in income and healthcare inequality with the change in religiosity is compared. For income inequality, the Gini coefficient had the lowest values when religiosity was increasing in Turkey. According to the revised modernization theory, religiosity should decrease when the level of inequality decreases, and the public should become more religious when inequality increases. However, World Bank data indicates that although inequality increased in Turkey after 2012, religiosity did not. The same is true when we look at the healthcare inequality variable. It is seen that the periods in which religiosity increases in Turkey coincide with the periods when out-of-pocket expenditures in healthcare fell. If Norris and Inglehart's (2005) revised modernization theory could

explain the change in religiosity in Muslim countries, we would not be able to see such a result. It seems that education and urbanization are the only variables that can have some explanatory power for the decline in religiosity in Turkey.

Both the education and urbanization levels of the Turkish people have been increasing in the last 20 years, and both of these factors are generally associated with secularization (Inglehart 1997; Ruiters and van Tubergen 2009; Norris and Inglehart 2015; Liang and Dong 2019; Masuda and Yudhistira 2020; Inglehart 2021). In particular, we can see that the increase in the number of people with higher education has accelerated in recent years. Yet, although these two factors are likely to affect religiosity negatively, the increase in education and urbanization in years of increased religiosity shows that these factors alone cannot explain the change in religiosity (especially considering the results of regression analysis). Thus, the results from testing the first alternative explanation reinforce the idea that people's religiosity in Muslim countries may be affected by their level of satisfaction with government performance.

The second alternative explanation, the religious market theory, claims that the diversity of religions offered to the public and state regulation of religion have an impact on the public's religiosity. More specifically, it argues that: if religion is subjected to government regulation, then it would expect to see religiosity decline.

According to this theory, when religions compete freely in the market, they make an effort to offer the product that best suits the needs of the people, and increasing diversity in the religious market allows consumers to find and choose the religion that appeals to them the most. Competition disappears when the government interferes with religion, and as a result, a specific religion or group becomes a monopoly in the market (Stolz 2021). Without competition and diversity, there is less incentive to spend the effort to offer a better product, and it is less likely for consumers to find a religion that is better suited to their needs. As a result, "As fewer and fewer diverse religious demands are satisfied, people develop more secular attitudes toward religion." (Karakoc and Baskan 2012, p.1520). Therefore, religious markets theory claims that for religiosity to thrive, free competition of religions or religious groups should be maximized, and government regulation on religion should be minimized (Hout and Fischer 2004; Hout and Fischer 2014; Stolz 2021). However, comparing the change in freedom of religion in Turkey and the change in religiosity indicates that religious market theory cannot, by itself, adequately explain the decline in religiosity in Turkey. For instance, data from the World Bank indicates that freedom of religion decreased between 2002 and 2007 in Turkey but considering that religiosity increased in the same period, it looks like a less free environment for religions did not negatively affect religiosity. Although religious freedom has experienced a drastic decline since 2017, it is unlikely that this decline has had an immediate impact on religiosity, especially if we consider that there has not been much change in freedom of religion in the ten years before 2017. If religious market theory could explain the change in religiosity by itself, we would see an increase in religiosity when there is an increase in freedom of religion and a decrease in religiosity when freedom of religion decreases. However, when we compare the change in religiousness in Turkey with the change in freedom of religion, we see that this does not happen. Therefore, although I was unable to test the religious market theory using statistical methods, the data does not appear to support this alternative theory either.

The cases of Tunisia and Egypt

Regression Results: Determinants of Religiosity In Tunisia

	(1) religious gender attitudes
government performance	0.026*** (0.006)
age	0.112*** (0.015)
urbanization	-0.017 (0.043)
education level	0.022 (0.017)
sex	-0.276*** (0.041)
income	-0.006 (0.022)
threat perception	-0.046** (0.022)
Constant	1.879*** (0.102)
Observations	1,067
R ²	0.109
F-statistic	18.42
Prob > F	0.000

Standard errors in parentheses
* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Table 12 presents regression results based on data from the Arab Barometer in Tunisia. The findings indicate a significant relationship between religiosity and factors such as government performance, age, sex, and threat perception. Source: Arab Barometer Wave 3

The results from Tunisia indicate that there is a significant relationship between government performance and religiosity even after accounting for variables that are closely associated with modernization theory. In addition, variables such as age, urbanization, sex, and threat perception also appear to have a significant relationship with religiosity.

Similar to Tunisia, the results from Egypt indicate that there is a significant relationship between government performance and religiosity even after accounting for variables that are closely associated with modernization theory. In addition, variables such as age, urbanization, sex, and threat perception also appear to have a significant relationship with religiosity.

Regression Results: Determinants of Religiosity in Egypt

	(1) religious attitudes
government performance	0.015*** (0.005)
sex	-0.088*** (0.033)
urbanization	-0.154*** (0.033)
education level	0.004 (0.010)
threat perception	-0.055** (0.023)
income	-0.090*** (0.019)
age	0.043*** (0.013)
Constant	2.605*** (0.074)
Observations	1,060
R ²	0.076
F-statistic	12.33
Prob > F	0.000

Standard errors in parentheses
* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Table 13 presents regression results based on data from the Arab Barometer in Egypt. The findings indicate a significant relationship between religiosity and factors such as government performance, sex, urbanization, threat perception, income, and age. Source: Arab Barometer Wave 3

5. CONCLUSION

In this study, I aimed to understand the reasons behind the declining religiosity in Muslim-majority countries. The analysis revealed that the close alignment between religion and politics in these countries, particularly under Islamist governments, plays a significant role in this process. The findings suggest that when governments fail to meet citizens' expectations, particularly in terms of economic performance, this failure extends beyond political dissatisfaction to affect religious institutions and religiosity itself. For many years, Muslim-majority countries were seen as exceptions

to the global trend of secularization, but recent developments indicate that this is no longer the case. Surveys in countries like Turkey, Tunisia, and Egypt show that trust in religious leaders and Islamist parties is declining, and fewer people want religion to influence politics. The findings offer a novel perspective by showing that traditional theories of secularization and religious markets are insufficient to fully explain the secularization occurring in Muslim countries today. This study demonstrates that government performance—specifically the failure of Islamist governments to deliver on economic and political promises—can be a critical factor driving the decline in religiosity. This insight highlights the need for a deeper consideration of how governance and political outcomes influence religious trends, especially in contexts where religion and state are closely linked. The results of this study suggest that declining religiosity may not merely be a function of socioeconomic modernization but is also significantly shaped by the political failures of governments that have used religion as a source of legitimacy. In Muslim countries, where religion influences all aspects of life, dissatisfaction with political governance appears to translate into broader skepticism toward religious authority and the role of religion in public life. Based on the results presented here, I believe that there is a potential shift in the political-religious landscape of the Muslim world, where citizens might increasingly prefer more secular governance structures as they grow disillusioned with religiously infused political systems. While this study focuses on Turkey, Tunisia, and Egypt, future research could investigate whether similar patterns of declining religiosity and disillusionment with Islamist parties are occurring in other Muslim-majority countries with different political contexts. Additionally, qualitative research could help uncover the psychological and social mechanisms that drive this shift. Moreover, future studies should explore the role of media, education, and public discourse in shaping perceptions of the relationship between religion and government. By expanding the scope to include these factors, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of secularization processes in the Muslim world. For policymakers, the results suggest that intertwining religion and governance, especially during times of economic downturn, could lead to long-term challenges not only for political stability but also for religious institutions. To mitigate these risks, governments in Muslim-majority countries might benefit from promoting clearer separations between religion and the state. This could help prevent a backlash against religious institutions during periods of political failure and improve overall governance and public trust. It is important to note that making generalizations based on three case studies has limitations. While Turkey, Tunisia, and Egypt provide valuable insights, the findings may not be entirely applicable to all Muslim-majority countries, particularly those that have not experienced governance by Islamist parties. Additionally, secularization is a complex process influenced by many variables that may not have been fully captured in this study. However, these limitations do not diminish the significance of the observed trends and the theoretical implications for future research.

Etik Kurul Onayı Hakkında Bilgi: Etik kurulu onayına ihtiyaç duyulmamıştır.

Information About Ethics Committee Approval: Ethics committee approval was not required.

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Contribution Rate Statement: Orhan DOĞAN, have contributed to all parts and stages of the study. The authors contributed equally to the study

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