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Making the New Turkey

Reconfigurations of state and citizenship in an Istanbul neighbourhood

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Chapter One

Introduction

The Setting

During my first days in the Kayaşehir TOKİ (Toplu Konut Idaresi, Mass Housing Development Administration) neighbourhood in Istanbul, I arrived as a doctoral student and an unfamiliar visitor, carrying with me the common imagery of mass housing as lifeless and isolating. In the heat of summer, this assumption seemed to hold: the streets were quiet, and parks were nearly empty, a landscape that echoed the photographs of Soviet housing blocks or the concrete estates of Western Europe.

Yet, this desolate image soon unravelled as I attuned myself to the estate's own rhythm. During sunset, Kayaşehir comes to life. The parks and gardens fill with residents streaming out of their homes, and, on weekends, it becomes nearly impossible to find an empty picnic table after dusk. Families and groups of women settle into any patch of grass they can claim. Adults pour tea from giant thermoses brought from home while children of all ages chase one another under the streetlights.

It is in these moments, when parents call their children, that another layer of Kayaşehir becomes visible. The names echoing across the park reflect what matters here: boys named after Ottoman sultans or figures from the Quran, and, in some cases, names that combine political leaders with prophetic legacies, such as Tayyip Mustafa.[1]

1 Tayyip refers to Erdoğan's first name, and Mustafa is one of the names of the Prophet Muhammad.

These lively, crowded evenings not only disrupt the image of the housing estate as isolated and bleak. They also offer a glimpse into what resonates most strongly among Kayaşehir's residents: nationalism rooted in an Ottoman past, a deep Islamic orientation, and an unmistakable thread of political partisanship woven into everyday life.

I encountered similar political and religious intrusions in social life whenever I joined women on their evening walks. Whether with the intention of staying healthy or simply escaping the confines of their homes, many women in Kayaşehir walk the park trails in small groups. Moving in a steady rhythm, they share stories of everyday struggles. At times, they listen together to Islamic chants on their phones; at other times, they discuss the religious vocational schools their children might attend.

Even during the peak of summer heat, clothing remains a careful consideration. Several women explained to me that there is an unspoken understanding about what is considered appropriate attire. Even when temperatures soar above forty degrees Celsius, skirts or trousers are not expected to rise above the knee and shoulders should remain covered.

These embodied norms also shape interactions with men. One evening, while I was sitting with a group of women on the benches in the TOKİ gardens, one of them leaned towards me and whispered that trouble was approaching. A mother on a nearby balcony had spotted her young daughter speaking to a boy and rushed down to the park. The daughter followed behind her in silence as they returned home, the conflict left unspoken – at least until they had reached their apartment – but already clearly understood. Such moments underline that gender norms in Kayaşehir are not only visible but continuously monitored. Women navigate and uphold these norms, sometimes willingly, sometimes with hesitation, yet always with an acute awareness of the frameworks that organise what it means to be a woman here. This vigilant social environment also shapes broader neighbourhood life. Despite the hundreds of identical-looking high-rise apartment blocks,

anonymity has little place in Kayaşehir. Even when residents do not know one another personally, Islamic greetings circulate across courtyards and stairwells; people pass and say '*Selamünaleyküm*' and receive '*Aleykümselam*' in return. *Hoca*s in particular play central roles in these everyday exchanges. It was common to hear a warm '*Selamünaleyküm hocam*'[2] called out across the courtyard, marking their presence as both moral authorities and familiar figures in the social landscape.

It did not take me long to notice that there were female *hoca*s in almost every apartment block. These women act as informal religious authorities and organise Islamic lessons for women and children, often held in the living rooms of rented flats or in the shelter spaces on the ground floors of buildings. Many of these *hoca*s are connected to *cemaat*s, Islamic civil society groups that operate through local networks and teaching circles. Religious instruction is not limited to these intimate gatherings. The Diyanet, the state's Directorate of Religious Affairs, maintains a branch in the centre of Kayaşehir and offers classes for women and children almost every day in the surrounding mosques. The municipality also offers religious courses, and, although other social activities are available, these classes are by far the most popular according to an officer at the municipal social centre.

The widespread demand for and supply of Islamic education in Kayaşehir reflects the central place of religion in residents' lives. Many women I spoke to described these teachings as a way to cultivate good morality, a lifelong practice that shapes how one should live and behave as a Muslim in the world.

The Kayaşehir TOKİ reflects a modernist vision of urban development through its rational planning, with uniform high-rise apartment blocks, expansive parks, wide streets, and numerous public schools, all developed under Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP, Justice and Development Party) governments. Until the AKP's rise to power in 2002, a modern mass housing

2 Religious teacher; here, a woman refers to the teacher as my *hoca*, i.e. *hocam*.

estate in which Islamic religiosity could thrive was largely unimaginable given the long-established association between modernity and secularism in Turkey. Yet, the embodied practices observed in Kayaşehir tell a different story: women's choices to cover their bodies, the circulation of Islamic greetings and naming conventions, and the popularity of religious education are all practices once discouraged or marginalised by secular state policies. Kayaşehir therefore reveals how modernity in Turkey has been reconfigured through the AKP's political project, where Islam is not merely practised in private settings but increasingly woven into built environments, state services, and urban social life. The estate becomes a setting where Islamic norms, moralities, and social authorities flourish through the organisation of housing, amenities, and public life, producing a modernity that moves beyond its secular connotations. In this dissertation, I study this refashioning of secular modernity by attending to the entanglements of urban life and religious morality and the new forms of citizenship and statecraft that emerge from these entanglements.

The Story of Two Women

My encounters with two women who volunteer for opposing political parties, the Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (CHP, Republican People's Party) and the AKP, opened a window onto the political backdrop of a modernity in Kayaşehir that diverges from the secular framings that long dominated understandings of modernity in Turkey. The CHP, founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and long associated with the ideals of secular modernity, and the AKP, the conservative Islamic party led by Erdoğan, embody two competing political projects in Turkey. The ways in which these women engage in party activism allow us to observe how these two opposing political projects are woven into the everyday lives of Kayaşehir's residents.

I met Deniz, a volunteer of the CHP, in the early evening of May 2022 at a café in the shopping mall of the Kayaşehir. It was my first time visiting the

café at that hour as I knew it was uncommon for women to spend time there in the evenings – the café functioned much like a *kahvehane*, a traditional tea house where men typically gather to play cards and drink tea – given its association as a male space.

I forced myself to push my fears aside by reminding myself that this was the only time she could meet me due to her job. I focused instead on how glad I was to finally meet a volunteer from the CHP in the Kayaşehir neighbourhood of Istanbul, where the governing party, the AKP, has consistently won every election with at least 54% of the total votes. It took me a long time to find a CHP volunteer who actively worked and lived in the neighbourhood. The CHP is not favoured in this AKP stronghold, given the severe polarisation between the parties, which is most clearly reflected in the AKP associating involvement with the CHP with being a traitor. Therefore, Deniz lowered her voice every time she mentioned the name of the party to avoid any conflicts that might have arisen if someone in the café had heard us.

Deniz was born in a leftist rural town in the eastern Black Sea region and migrated to Istanbul in the late 1990s with her parents to get a better education. They ended up in a *gecekondu* (informal) neighbourhood, where others from their town also lived. It is common in Turkey for people to migrate to places where they have family or fellow villagers. Apart from sharing the same hometown, these neighbourhoods often have distinct political profiles, such as being leftist, *ülkücü* (nationalist), pro-Kurdish, or Islamist. Accordingly, their new neighbourhood in Istanbul had a leftist identity. Her brother, who migrated to this neighbourhood before Deniz and her parents did, was quite active in leftist politics. He was imprisoned and tortured during the 1980 military coup but continued to be active in politics after his release under a party with a radical left-wing identity. Deniz told me she grew up in the same political environment as her brother and joined him during political rallies and protests.

In her early 30s, when the AKP was in its first decade of being in power, she started to volunteer for the CHP because she believed her former radical party would 'never win' and the CHP was the only viable opposition party she could join. Around the same time, she moved to Kayaşehir with her husband and daughter. As a low-income family, they could only afford housing in this neighbourhood. Despite her satisfaction with the buildings, which also provided an environment where her daughter could play safely, she confided that she often felt 'like a loser' here because, for her, the majority of residents 'came from *varoş*',[3] which she described as neighbourhoods with a lower cultural level. Although she also came from a *gecekondu* neighbourhood, she did not consider it '*varoş*' because, for her, being leftist and educated conferred a certain cultural status. As such, she perceived religious people who support the AKP as uneducated and of low culture.

At the beginning of her life in the Kayaşehir TOKİ flats in the 2010s, she thought she would never have neighbourly relations because other residents were radically different from her, illustrated by the many women wearing black chadors in her building. However, over time, she told me, she came to believe that she could 'actually educate them'. By this, she meant encouraging residents to follow her secular gender norms of neighbourly interaction. For instance, she explained how the male residents in her building never shook hands with her and never shared the same elevator because of their religious beliefs, which she found unacceptable. Over time, she proudly explained, their behaviour changed as she convinced them to act according to her wishes. Deniz's effort to change her neighbours' behaviour reflects not only her political mission but also the image of the neighbourhood to which she does not feel she belongs.

Within this environment, Deniz passionately reached out to residents in an effort to disseminate her political vision. As a CHP volunteer, she was respon-

3 *Varoş* is a pejorative term in Turkish used to describe informal, derelict, and impoverished residential areas (see Erman, 2001 for an in-depth discussion of the term).

sible for visiting people in their homes, organising breakfasts, and hosting charity events. Finding these tasks inadequate, she pursued her own agenda, which involved visiting nearly every housing estate in Kayaşehir and meeting with women to learn how they perceived the CHP while also explaining the party's mission. Her attempts, however, were largely unsuccessful, as most women would leave the meetings once they learned she was representing the CHP. Consequently, she abandoned her ambitious visits and instead followed the party's established practices. During one recent party activity, for instance, she joined home visits to a village near Kayaşehir. She showed me a photo of a veiled woman they had visited, making a victory sign, and remarked: 'You might think she is an AKP supporter because of the veil, but, you see, she is converted now [to the CHP].' For Deniz, wearing a veil was a direct marker of AKP support.

Deniz's association of religiosity with tradition, backwardness, low education, and, most notably, the AKP, is not an exception in the socio-political history of Turkey. Her view of religion and of religious political parties aligns with a long-standing and once dominant notion of modernisation in Turkey, in which secularism is considered an inseparable part of modernity. The CHP was the first to implement secular modern reforms, beginning in the 1920s under the leadership of Atatürk. As a political activist of the CHP, Deniz draws on this same ideology of secular modernity and applies it to her interactions with her neighbours. This is evident in her efforts to persuade them to adopt secular gender norms and in her commitment to converting them to the CHP.

In contrast to the CHP's minimal presence in the neighbourhood, I was able to find many volunteers working for the AKP. I met Demet, who was vice president of the local party branch at the time, in her workplace during her shift. Although her job was unrelated to the party, she hosted me to have a conversation about the party at her work. While Deniz had to meet in a café and speak in hushed tones, Demet's political affiliation allowed her to participate in party-related activities during working hours, comfortably expressing her political identity.

Demet grew up in a middle-class neighbourhood in Istanbul, where she lived with members of her extended family who owned the apartment. Until the establishment of the AKP, her family supported conservative centre-right parties. Demet entered politics with the establishment of the AKP in 2002, when she was 25 years old, following her experiences of exclusion as a religious, veiled woman in the 1990s. While attending high school, she was already wearing a headscarf, but, at the time, veils were not allowed in schools. Hence, she removed her veil every time she went to school. Because of this exclusionary experience, she decided not to attend university, where she would have to remove her veil again. Soon after graduating high school, she got married, moved to Başakşehir,[4] and had two children. When her children grew up, she decided to attend a distance-learning university, and she now holds a university diploma.

Although she has been a member of the AKP from its inception, she only started to be active in local volunteering during the last decade, after her children grew up and she got divorced. As part of her volunteering, she visited homes and asked people if they needed anything, which she defines as 'a duty of neighbourliness', from early in the morning until late at night. Over the years, she became quite skilled at volunteering and climbed the party ranks, resulting in her new position as vice president of the local branch. It was clear from her social media account that she remained actively engaged with residents. The photos she shared often showed her holding the hand of an elderly woman with affection, embodying a sense of care and familiarity. Through household visits, she and her colleagues gathered detailed information about residents' social and economic situations and guided them to municipal services when necessary. It was evident that she was well-suited to this role. The tone of her voice, her gestures, and the way she interacted with

4 Başakşehir is the name of both the broader district that includes Kayaşehir and also a specific neighbourhood, where Demet resides. When she moved there in the early 2000s, only her neighbourhood existed.

her audience were striking – she spoke like a seasoned rhetorician, skilled at steering the conversation towards her intended point.

During the interview, Demet constantly emphasised the discrimination she and other religious people experienced before the AKP came to power. According to her, 'the mentality of the CHP people' never changes, and, whenever they come to power, they will force her to change, as she bitterly experienced before. She added that she did not have any problems with the 'unchanging mentalities', but she demanded acceptance of her religiosity 'if we all want to coexist'. To illustrate this point, she added that the CHP accepts 'homosexuals' – a term she prefaced with 'pardon the expression,' signalling moral discomfort, as if their existence were morally questionable – yet they do not accept her veil, which leads her to believe that 'the CHP has a problem with religion.' She believed that, if the AKP was not elected, they would experience the same problems again.

Demet, a veiled, educated, and politically engaged single woman aligned with a religious party, embodies a figure that unsettles Deniz's image of religious people and religious politics: a modern yet pious woman, conservative but not necessarily traditional. What Deniz described as 'backward', 'traditional', and 'low-educated' bears little resemblance to Demet. Instead, it mirrors how CHP supporters are often imagined within religious circles. Through their contrasting lives, a different understanding of modernity comes into view – one that extends beyond the secular connotations usually attached to it. Kayaşehir, the neighbourhood where both women live, provides the ground on which this reconfigured vision of modernity unfolds, in tandem with emerging forms of citizenship and statehood.

The Old and the New Turkey[5]

The vignette describing the stories of these two women in the Kayaşehir neighbourhood reflects two distinct imaginaries of the ideal Turkish citizen, each situated within a different political project concerning Turkey – what I conceptualise as secular and post-secular modernity. In this dissertation, I am interested in how the transformation from one political project to the other is enacted and negotiated within everyday spaces of a neighbourhood.

Secular modernity was the founding project of Turkey, initiated during the early years of the republic. At its core was an effort to confine religion's predominance to the private realm, thereby establishing a republican democratic state unimpeded by religious beliefs and the Ottoman legacy.

5 I deliberately choose to use Turkey instead of Türkiye, which is now the country's official international name. Until 2021, when President Erdoğan announced his decision to initiate the change to Türkiye in the *T.C. Resmî Gazete*, Official Gazette of the Republic of Turkey, the issue had sparked little public debate. In this declaration, he argued that 'in the course of activities conducted at home and abroad … great care has been taken with the values stemming from the deep-rooted history of the Turkish nation, and the brand "Türkiye" has been accepted as the flagship brand of our country in the national and international arena' (*T.C. Resmî Gazete* cited in Yenen & Zürcher, 2023, p. 539). Upon the country's request, the United Nations adopted the new name in 2022 for use in formal communications. There are several interpretations of why Erdoğan pursued this change: avoiding confusion with the animal 'turkey', enhancing the country's marketing value, and emphasising Türk-ness in a way that distances the nation from Atatürk's secular-modernist 'Turkey' (Abdelbary, 2022; Dinçer, 2022; Selvi, 2024; Yenen & Zürcher, 2023; Wertheimer, 2022). This latter rationale aligns more directly with the AKP's neo-Ottoman and pan-Islamist outlook and its efforts to consolidate nationalist support, especially after its coalition with the MHP (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi), a far-right nationalist party. In short, the name change was driven by branding and (nationalist) ideological considerations rather than by democratic or participatory motivations, which have been central to many postcolonial renamings of states or cities (e.g. Mumbai, Sri Lanka, Zimbabwe). I therefore understand this shift as a top-down decision introduced without public consultation and not in response to citizen demand. As I interpret this shift as an undemocratic process, I continue to use Turkey throughout this dissertation.

These reforms were heavily influenced by the trajectories of European and Soviet nation-states at the time, which were characterised by secular modern structures of state and society.

When the AKP came to power in 2002, the secular modernity project began to be reconfigured into what I describe as post-secular modernity. I conceptualise the AKP's project as modern insofar as it advances its own vision of social transformation aimed at national development. Rather than building on the secular premises of earlier modernising reforms, it seeks to dismantle these foundations – treating secularism as a tradition to be superseded – and to remake the state and citizenship by aligning Islamic and conservative moral values with capitalist development. In doing so, it gives shape to a post-secular modernity. Within this project, elements that secular modernity had relegated to 'tradition' – most notably the perceived glory of the Ottoman Empire and Islamic sources – are reembraced as the moral and cultural foundations of Turkish society.

I argue that urban development and the de-privatisation of religion constitute the two key pillars of the AKP's political project that most effectively capture the dynamics of post-secular modernity. While cities have become the main arenas of capitalist development through extensive urban transformation projects, the growing social presence of religion in these modern urban landscapes shapes a new public morality. Importantly, these two key pillars are also central to the authoritarian, illiberal, and undemocratic modes of governance that characterise the AKP era. As critical scholarship emphasises, urban development projects function as tools for embedding Turkey more deeply into capitalist modernity, resulting in gentrification, displacement, and ecological destruction. Likewise, the de-privatisation of religion through the restructuring of state institutions has been widely criticised for undermining the secular right to education and reinforcing patriarchal gender policies.

I approach these two pillars as the central tenets through which new articulations of citizenship and statehood come into being. In this sense, I

understand them as the generative dimensions of the AKP's project rather than merely its destructive ones, as is often emphasised in critical accounts (e.g. Aslan-Akman, 2021; Çavdar, 2016; Gümüşçü, 2024; Kuyucu & Unsal, 2010; Lovering & Türkmen, 2011; Lüküslü, 2016). I contend that, to grasp the AKP's vision of citizenship and statehood in the New Turkey, we must take seriously what it means to live in a modern urban landscape as it unfolds alongside an embrace of Islamic morality.

The following subsections review how these two pillars provide the ground for new ways of living to take shape, influencing norms, morals, and ideals associated with post-secular modernity. In my discussion of the transformations within each pillar under the AKP's authoritarian, illiberal, and undemocratic leadership, I highlight the underexplored areas this dissertation intervenes in, showing how post-secular modernity under the AKP is embodied, negotiated, and contested by residents in their everyday lives as well as the kinds of citizens being crafted and the ideas about the state that emerge through this process.

Urban Development

Since 2002, consecutive AKP governments have implemented numerous economic reforms to transform Turkey within a globalising world under the banner of 'Strong Turkey' (Keyman, 2010). Coming to power following a devastating economic crisis, the AKP accelerated the neoliberalisation[6] of the economy. First, it implemented the International Monetary Fund (IMF) stability programme, which resulted in the institutional restructuring of the central bank, the founding of new regulatory institutions, and the establish-

6 In Turkey, neoliberalisation began in the 1980s, following the military coup, and was marked by a shift from an import-substitution industrialisation model to an export-oriented regime of capital accumulation (Yalman, 2009). Guided by structural adjustment policies recommended by the IMF, this transition involved the promotion of export-led trade, widespread privatisation, and the suppression of wage incomes (Bedirhanoğlu & Yalman, 2010).

ment of new financial organisations (Akçay, 2024). Second, state assets were privatised to an unprecedented extent, accounting for 90% of the total privatisation since the establishment of the republic (BirGun, 2025). The combination of these measures led to low inflation, an increase in foreign direct investment, and to growth in overall Gross Domestic Product (GDP; Öniş, 2012).

With the support of these economic reforms, the AKP launched a range of urban development projects. Under the names of 'urban transformation' and 'crazy projects', the built environment of cities has drastically changed. On the one hand, the *gecekondus*[7] and derelict historical buildings are being replaced by new housing and commercial projects. On the other, new mega infrastructural projects, such as the third bridge over the Bosphorus and the new airport in Istanbul, are being constructed. Materially, these changes reflect a distinct aesthetic of modernity in the built environment, characterised by an emphasis on newness, rapidness, technology, comfort, cleanliness, and efficiency.

Among other institutions, TOKİ has been a crucial vehicle for implementing urban development projects. Initially established in the 1980s to finance housing cooperatives, it evolved into the largest housing producer during the AKP era (Doğru, 2024). Beyond housing provision, TOKİ has also taken on roles as land broker, real estate developer, planner, and partner in various private urban projects, including stadiums and mosques (Çelik et al., 2016; Kuyucu, 2014). Operating through an exceptional institutional and legal framework, it carries out urban development projects rapidly and on a large scale. Directly linked to the prime ministry (now the presidency), TOKİ

7 *Gecekondu* refers to informal housing in Turkey. The term literally means 'built in a night'. Beginning in the 1950s, *gecekondu* settlements emerged as a self-developed solution to the housing shortage in cities (Erman, 1997). Over time, they became central to networks of clientelism: before each election, the ruling political parties would legalise *gecekondu*s in exchange for votes (Öncü, 1988). By the 1980s, *gecekondu*s constituted almost half of the entire housing stock in Istanbul (Danielson & Keles, 1985). The AKP was the first political party to introduce severe penalties against their construction.

functions through exemptions from public audits and exercises control over vast public lands,[8] making it a 'super institution' (Yeşilbağ, 2022) and 'the most powerful real estate developer' (Kuyucu & Ünsal, 2010). As a quasi-independent body with significant authority, TOKİ unilaterally decides where new housing is built and which *gecekondu* settlements are demolished, without engaging in participatory processes with former residents or consulting professional chambers[9] and universities.

By establishing partnerships with private companies, TOKİ has initiated numerous *gecekondu* transformation projects in cities. In Istanbul, in particular, these projects have significantly altered the physical layout of urban spaces. They involve demolishing existing *gecekondu*s and derelict housing to construct modern, high-end, and, supposedly, safer buildings. Scholars have demonstrated that these transformation projects often lead to gentrification and the displacement of former residents, especially tenants (Candan & Kolluoğlu, 2008; Karaman, 2008, 2013; Sakizlioglu, 2014; Türkün, 2011; Kuyucu & Ünsal, 2010; Lovering & Türkmen 2011).

Former *gecekondu* owners face varying outcomes depending on the legal status of their previous housing: they may be offered monetary compensation, a unit in the new project, housing in one of TOKİ's estates, or, in some cases, no compensation at all (Zayim, 2014). Some scholars argue that the rigid payment scheme[10] of TOKİ's housing programme forces many residents into further displacement as they struggle to keep up with instalment payments (Karaman, 2013). Accordingly, they contend that TOKİ's homeownership programme functions as a 'market disciplinary tool' (Karaman, 2013) designed

8 These public lands, amounting to approximately 64.5 million square metres, previously held by the Land Office, have been transferred for use by TOKİ (Özdemir, 2011).

9 Chambers are key professional associations in Turkey, providing regulatory frameworks for various professions, including guidelines and standards to ensure safety.

10 TOKİ social housing is a homeownership programme that offers long-term instalment plans, with plans extending up to 20 years.

to formalise previously informal land by integrating it into the market and binding the urban poor to the financial credit system (Kuyucu & Ünsal, 2010; Üçoğlu, 2021).

Parallel to inner-city transformations, TOKİ has also undertaken mega infrastructure projects in the peripheries of cities. Large-scale developments, such as the construction of a new airport and a bridge in northern Istanbul, have driven the city's expansion towards its regional boundaries (Gündoğan, 2021; Güney, 2019). These projects have faced strong criticism from experts for their destructive impact on vital water sources and forests (Doğan & Stupar, 2017; Sert, 2024).

Beyond infrastructure, many of TOKİ's social housing projects are also located in peripheral areas. Former *gecekondu* dwellers whose homes are undergoing transformation in the inner city are often relocated to these distant housing estates. However, scholars argue that, due to their remoteness, inadequate public transportation, and the breakdown of former social networks, these projects effectively displace urban poverty from the centre to the periphery rather than resolving it (Candan & Kolluoğlu, 2008). Above all, critical literature highlights that urban development projects under the AKP governments are highly authoritarian, non-transparent, undemocratic, and pro-capitalist. However, these projects also possess another dimension that is only briefly acknowledged in some critical accounts. Whether or not every citizen directly benefits from an airport, such mega projects legitimise the construction business as a necessary development tool (Karatepe, 2021) and cultivate a sense of glamour (Tuğal, 2023) tied to the country's modernity and progress. Moreover, the construction business generates new job opportunities and social housing partially addresses housing demands. Even if access to these developments is unequal, their broad appeal is evident. In the case of housing, for instance, demand remains exceptionally high. In 2022 alone, 475,000 people applied for 50,000 TOKİ housing units in Istanbul's peripheries (Sozcu, 2023). TOKİ projects frequently have long waiting lists, and applicants often try their luck with multiple projects due to the scarcity of available apartments.

Yet, beyond statistics, we lack a clear understanding of what these projects mean for the people who experience them first-hand – how residents come to embrace these apartment blocks as home and develop social relations. I argue that it is precisely within these urban projects that we should examine the realisation of the AKP's modernity project – not only in terms of its speculative, authoritarian, and corrupt dimensions but also in its generative aspects, such as the formation of new modes of citizenry and evolving ideals of the state shaped by everyday, mundane socio-spatial relations. By focusing on everyday urban life in modern TOKİ housing estates, I aim to show how residents' housing experiences generate new imaginaries of citizenship and statehood, thereby contributing to broader scholarly debates on modernity, the state, and citizenship.

De-privatisation of Religion

The post-secular character of the AKP's modernity project stems from its efforts to de-privatise religion through the restructuring of state institutions and state-backed civil organisations, such as *cemaat*s – informal religious organisations. According to the AKP's 2002 election manifesto, the party defines itself as 'a democratic, conservative, innovative, and modern party' (AKP, 2002), where conservative[11] signifies its religious orientation. Addressing the exclusion of citizens who identified as religious was a key priority during the party's 2002 election campaign. At the time, visibly religious individuals – particularly women who wore the veil[12] – had long faced restrictions, such as being barred from universities, as illustrated in Demet's story, and from employment in the civil service.

11 In the Turkish context, the term 'conservative' corresponds to 'being religious' (see Aktay, 2006).

12 Konda's survey in 2017 reveals that 64% of the women in Turkey wear headscarves (Konda, 2017).

After coming to power, the AKP advanced its post-secular agenda by reforming state institutions, such as the Diyanet (Directorate of Religious Affairs) and the national education system, to disseminate Islamic moral values beyond mosques. Additionally, the AKP decriminalised *cemaat*s, which had been historically stigmatised by secular governments.

The Diyanet plays a pivotal role in the expansion of Islamic knowledge and practice. Initially established by early Republican leaders to regulate and promote 'correct' Islamic practices as part of Turkey's secular modernisation project (Gözaydın, 2009), the Diyanet has evolved into a key instrument of post-secularisation under the AKP. While its foundational role – providing moral education and religious services – predates the AKP, the institution's influence and capacity have expanded to unprecedented levels during the party's tenure.

Under AKP rule, for the first time, the Diyanet began employing female preachers, established Family Guidance Bureaus, launched its own broadcast channels (e.g. television and radio), initiated spiritual counselling services in various institutions (e.g. hospitals, prisons), and introduced religious education programmes for preschool children. These new services aimed to disseminate moral values and religious knowledge across society, extending beyond the confines of mosques and marking a clear departure from the privatisation of religion characteristic of the early republican period. To support this ambitious programme, the AKP government significantly increased the Diyanet's budget, doubling its share of the total state budget compared to the pre-AKP period. As a result, the Diyanet became one of the largest state institutions, with a budget exceeding those of six ministries, including the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Internal Affairs (Büyüktunca, 2024).

The Diyanet's expansive growth under the AKP has been the subject of extensive critical scholarship. Many studies argue that the Diyanet functions not only as a provider of Islamic knowledge and religious services but also as an instrument for disseminating the state's conservative ideology

(Öztürk, 2016; Çıtak, 2020; Gümüşçü, 2024; Lord, 2018; Yılmaz, 2022). In this context, Mutluer (2019) contends that the Diyanet has been pivotal in redefining Turkish national identity, positioning Islam as the primary common denominator among Turkish citizens. Several scholars have highlighted how this emphasis on Muslim identity is propagated through the Diyanet's sermons and educational materials (Lüküslü, 2016; Yılmaz, 2018; Yılmaz & Ertürk, 2021). One notable theme, according to Yılmaz & Ertürk (2023), is the glorification of martyrdom in the name of Islam, which is promoted through educational books for young children and Friday sermons. In this narrative, the ideal citizen is not only a devout Muslim but also someone who is willing to sacrifice their life for the cause of Islam.

For Adak (2021), the Diyanet also reshapes family and gender relations through the activities of female preachers both inside and outside of mosques, through collaborations with ministries and municipalities (such as the Ministry of Family and Social Policies), and by opening Family Guidance Bureaus. By analysing sermons, seminars, reports, and guidance books produced by these institutions, she argues that issues related to women are primarily framed within the context of family relations (2021, p. 213). Despite the Diyanet's apparent pro-woman policies during recent decades, Aslan-Akman (2021) highlights the persistence of gender-based segregation within the institution, noting that women with the same qualifications as their male counterparts are still relegated to subsidiary positions (p. 249). At the same time, Maritato (2016) points out that the inclusion of female preachers in the Diyanet also enables the state to extend its influence into private domains that were previously beyond its reach. Through their work, female preachers create new avenues for state intervention in shaping religious morality, particularly among women, thereby reinforcing the Diyanet's role in everyday life.

Compared to the restructuring of the Diyanet, the de-criminalisation of *cemaat*s and *tarikat*s[13] has been realised through less formal channels, aside from their official recognition by the state as religious associations. The secular cadres of early republican Turkey were staunchly opposed to informal religious communities as these groups operated beyond state control and were perceived as potential catalysts for uprisings in favour of a religious state. Consequently, all *cemaat*s were banned in 1925. Nevertheless, due to the widespread distrust of the Diyanet – perceived as overly secular during the pre-AKP era – *cemaat*s continued to provide religious education covertly (Çakır, 1990). With the AKP's rise to power, these groups began to gain legal recognition as associations, enabling them to offer religious education and establish Quranic boarding schools within a legitimate framework.

Critical scholarship on the relationship between *cemaat*s and the AKP highlights how their interactions have contributed to the formation of new religiously identified middle classes. Çavdar's (2016) research illustrates how Başakşehir's religious middle-class identity has been shaped through the political-economic collaborations between various *cemaat*s and the AKP. Similarly, Özet's (2019) study in the same neighbourhood connects the emergence of Islamic middle classes to the spatial transformation of urban environments, demonstrating how the class positions of Islamic groups evolved in parallel with AKP-led urban development projects. Both scholars emphasise that, despite ideological differences, the exclusionary tendencies of both secular and Islamic middle classes towards economically disadvantaged groups reveal class aspirations that transcend secular–religious divides.

The AKP's post-secular modernity project encompasses both the restructuring of state institutions, such as the Diyanet, and the reconfiguration of

13 *Tarikat* refers to broader religious orders and *cemaat*s refer to specific groups within those *tarikat*s. For instance, the Gülen Cemaat, who attempted a coup in Turkey in 2016, was part of the Nakşibendi order, which is the most influential one in Turkey and many different *cemaat*s are connected to it.

relationships with Islamic civil society organisations, such as *cemaat*s. While these two processes go hand in hand, we still lack in-depth insight into what it means for citizens to socialise in increasingly religious settings – for instance, what kinds of norms and moral frameworks are adopted, and how do social relations evolve as a result? Moreover, an important unresolved question is how the Diyanet and the *cemaat*s interact in everyday settings, shaping emergent cooperations and tensions and influencing the ideal Turkish citizen. Although the relationship between the state and religion has undergone a radical transformation in the AKP era, the internal diversity within religious populations (e.g. followers of state-sanctioned Islam versus adherents of different *cemaat*s) remains underexplored. Given the AKP's substantial investment in the Diyanet and the widespread influence of *cemaat*s, I argue that it is crucial to examine these religious institutions' implications on citizens' everyday lives, where differences in religious interpretation may become visible. This approach will reveal both the conflicts and commonalities in religious interpretation that underpin the post-secular character of the AKP's modernity project. By examining the practices of different religious authorities, I aim to illuminate how they generate evolving norms, moralities, and visions of citizenship, offering new insight into wider scholarly debates on modernity, state formation, and citizenship.

How to Understand the New Turkey?

Despite a growing body of scholarship on the AKP's political project through the lenses of urban development and religion, our understanding remains partial. Existing studies have illuminated how the AKP finances its development initiatives, the societal and ecological costs of these projects, the expanding authority of the Diyanet, and the gendered dimensions of its conservative policies. Yet, these works largely privilege structural and institutional analyses, leaving underexamined the lived, affective, and moral worlds that sustain the AKP's post-secular modernity. We still know little about how the pious popular classes inhabit and make sense of this project

in their everyday lives – how they navigate its material promises, its spiritual appeals, and its moral contradictions. Empirically, there is a scarcity of ethnographic research that traces these experiences on the ground; theoretically, we lack frameworks that account for how political projects are realised, reinterpreted, and sometimes unsettled through everyday socio-spatial practices; and, methodologically, few studies engage with the fine-grained, situated encounters through which this reconfigured modernity takes shape.

To better understand what it means to live within the AKP's political projects and to account for different perspectives, including tensions and contradictions, I focus on the experiences of low-income pious citizens residing in one of the AKP's modern housing projects. Focusing on the Kayaşehir housing neighbourhood in Istanbul, this dissertation seeks to answer: *How are state and citizenship reconfigured in everyday spaces under AKP governments?* To answer this question, we need a framework that examines the AKP's project not only through the lens of oppression, authoritarianism, and illiberalism but also through its generative role in shaping particular citizen-subjects and conceptions of the state – forms that legitimise the AKP's political authority and foster new conceptions of the world. Drawing on Gramsci's concept of hegemony – which understands power as operating through both consent and coercion and as encompassing ethico-political as well as economic aims – I approach the AKP's political project as outlined above from a hegemonic perspective.

The New Turkey as a Hegemonic Project

This dissertation builds on the broader insights of modernity and citizenship studies to explore how certain political ideological projects *generate* new ideals of state and citizenship. Both the secular modernity project of the CHP and the post-secular modernity project of the AKP have been the subject of numerous studies that demonstrate their authoritarian state structures and exclusionary citizenship agendas (e.g. Lord, 2018; Navaro-Yashin,

2002; Turam, 2007). However, as this dissertation argues, such projects may simultaneously offer a good life to specific groups, rendering these state projects legitimate and desirable, while also shaping citizen-subjects aligned with the state's ideology.

My approach to understanding the AKP's political project and the new ideals of citizenship and statehood it produces draws on Gramsci's (2000) concept of 'hegemony'. Gramsci developed this concept to analyse power dynamics beyond explanations rooted in the domination of a ruling class. According to Gramsci, hegemony refers to the ethico-political and economic leadership of a class alliance, characterised by 'the combination of force and consent variously balancing one another, without force exceeding consent too much' (Gramsci, 2000, p. 261).

For Gramsci, the critical aspect of this consent is achieved through the 'intellectual and moral unity' (p. 205) of the masses. This unity involves shared conceptions of the world – referred to as common sense – that align with the political ideals of a group claiming to lead the state and society. Such conceptions are mediated through state institutions (e.g. schools, media) and aim to create 'new and higher types of civilization … even physically new types of humanity' (p. 210). In this sense, the state, for Gramsci, is both productive and educative, shaping moral and cultural norms and fostering related subjectivities within civil society (p. 234).

This approach to power relations allows us to explore how consent is organised around the AKP's political project, whose coercive[14] aspects have already

14 While focusing on the consensual dimensions of hegemony, I do not interpret it as devoid of coercion – a tendency found in some approaches that has been widely criticised for overlooking the complex interplay between consent and coercion (Civelek, 2019; Fischer & Benson, 2005; Roseberry, 1994). Rather, building on the well-developed literature on hegemony in the Turkish context, which emphasises the multiple ways in which coercion is exercised, I seek to foreground the production of consent, which often receives less attention in these discussions.

been extensively discussed in the literature.[15] Specifically, I examine how post-secular modernity – the political vision through which the AKP asserts its claim to 'intellectual and moral unity' (Gramsci, 2000, p. 205) – functions to generate consent, thereby shaping new forms of citizenship and statehood.

As an attempt to 'think our problems in a Gramscian way' (Hall, 1988, p. 161), Stuart Hall applied the perspective of hegemony to understand the political transformation realised under Thatcher's government in the UK. For Hall (1988), the question of how Thatcher was able to gain power despite her authoritarian and neoliberal policies is closely tied to the hegemonic character of her project. He defines this as 'the winning of a strategic measure of popular consent; and, thus, the securing of a social authority sufficiently deep to conform society into a new historic project' (p. 7). Crucially, following Gramsci, Hall does not view Thatcherism as a completed project or an already achieved hegemony but rather as a 'hegemonic project', which is 'always in process' (ibid.).

This conceptualisation of hegemony aligns with this thesis's approach to the AKP's political project. Throughout the thesis, I explore *in what ways* the AKP has become a 'social authority' and has generated a new conception of the world based on religious norms and moralities through its hegemonic vision of post-secular modernity. Crucially, this analysis focuses on 'strategic consent' (Hall, 1988, p. 7), as well as the struggles, negotiations, and challenges posed by pious citizens. In doing so, the varying forms of engagement that citizens have with post-secular modernity are brought into view.

Translating Gramsci's perspective to contemporary times, scholars have demonstrated how hegemonic projects are concretely configured through spatial processes (Ekers, 2013; Jessop, 2005; Kipfer, 2002). Urban development

15 See Akça, 2014; Bodirsky, 2024; Bozkurt-Güngen, 2018; Bashirov & Lancaster, 2018; Bilgiç, 2018; Çavuşoğlu & Strutz, 2014; Eraydin & Taşan-Kok, 2014; Esen & Gümüşçü, 2021; Hoşgör, 2015; Öniş, 2013; Özen, 2020, 2022.

projects, such as gentrification in Antwerp (Loopmans, 2008) and the physical renewal of social housing in France (de Santos Barbosa & Oosterlynck, 2024), provide clear examples of how consent is organised among different classes to legitimise projects representing specific political ideologies. Claims to hegemony through urban projects are particularly relevant in the Turkish context and have been predominantly discussed within political economy and anthropology scholarships (e.g. Bayırbağ, 2013; Civelek, 2019; Çavuşoğlu & Strutz, 2014; Karatepe, 2020; Tuğal, 2009).

In addition to these macro-level approaches to hegemony building, Kipfer (2002) emphasises the role of everyday practices in urban hegemonic projects. He connects common sense – the ethico-political basis for claiming the unity of the masses – to macro-level political economy analyses of urban development that focus on class dynamics. As particular political visions become woven into common sense, their legitimacy ceases to be questioned and is instead assumed as self-evident. Highlighting this connection, Kipfer positions urban projects as the 'terrain and medium' (2002, p. 146) of hegemony, where everyday life is intertwined with broader political-economic processes.

Kipfer's emphasis on everyday urban life is crucial, I argue, for understanding how post-secular modernity, as a hegemonic vision, translates into embodied forms, encompassing its affirmation, negotiation, and contestation. Empirical studies that expand on Kipfer's theoretical insights are particularly valuable in illustrating how this translation materialises. For example, struggles over access to water in Inanda, South Africa, demonstrate how the daily production of urban waterscapes can challenge the hegemonic claims of the state (Loftus & Lumsden, 2008). Such everyday engagements with hegemonic claims contribute to the formation of specific understandings of subjecthood as well. Sevilla-Buitrago's (2017) research on New York City's Central Park, for instance, shows how state-imposed uses of the park – such as banning particular activities and employing a specialised park police force – establish new moral and cultural norms, or a 'common sense of public space' (p. 172), which are gradually embodied by residents.

The spatial dimension of hegemonic projects in shaping common sense is evident in the stories of the two women introduced at the start of this chapter. Deniz's socialisation in a left-wing *gecekondu* neighbourhood and her later efforts to mobilise her political views within a pro-AKP social housing estate underscore the significance of place in shaping and sustaining political ideas. Similarly, Demet's new life in the same social housing estate has transformed her into a working, educated woman who aligns with the hegemonic post-secular modern vision of the AKP – a vision shaped in tandem with the establishment of the estate. These two narratives, while illustrating distinct hegemonic projects in Turkey, also highlight the critical role of place in building hegemony and the AKP's strategic investments in this domain.

In examining the AKP's hegemonic project, I use place-making as a conceptual lens to analyse how everyday socio-spatial relations shape the production of consent and the formation of state and citizen imaginaries. Rather than viewing places as static containers, this lens foregrounds the ongoing practices – ranging from the construction of modern social housing estates to the daily routines enacted within them – through which political ideals become tangible and lived. Approaching everyday environments in this way highlights how residents are not passive recipients of hegemonic projects but active participants who interpret, negotiate, and sometimes subtly challenge these ideals. The relational and processual focus of this lens enables a deeper understanding of how hegemonic projects take hold, how they are sustained, and where their limits become visible.

The approach I develop here – centred on political ideals, consent generation, and place-making – builds on and extends literature on the relationship between modernity and citizenship (e.g. Berman, 2010; Ghannam 2002; Holston, 2008; Scott, 1998). While discussions in this field often emphasise the exclusionary, illiberal, and authoritarian dimensions of urban political projects, this thesis shifts the lens to explore the generative aspects of the AKP's hegemonic project, particularly in shaping worldviews, subjectivities, and statehood. In doing so, it focuses on the place-based practices of residents,

political parties, and religious organisations within one of the AKP's urban projects, examining how these practices lead to the embodiment of, negotiations with, and oppositions to the AKP's political project. My emphasis on the generative aspects of the AKP's project is not intended to suggest that this hegemonic project is egalitarian or democratic for all. Rather, by exploring how the AKP's project has enabled better lives for certain groups, I aim to deepen our understanding of how political projects – even those that are authoritarian and undemocratic – can generate consent and enthusiasm.

Building on this place-based approach, the research question of this thesis addresses how state and citizenship are reconfigured as part of the AKP's political project in everyday spaces, attending in particular to the emergent imaginaries of state and citizenship that are embodied, negotiated, and challenged by residents in their daily lives. As such, this question aims to uncover and understand the generative dimensions of hegemonic projects as they unfold in the ordinary spaces of residents' lives.

By answering this question, my aim is to illuminate how broader political projects are translated into everyday life, particularly how the common sense that hegemonic projects seek to cultivate as the ethico-political foundation of society becomes embedded in daily practices. To address this, I focus on the place-based practices of various actors in Kayaşehir. From the ways political parties engage with residents to the educative initiatives of religious authorities such as the Diyanet and *cemaat*s, political visions are materially and symbolically anchored in the neighbourhood. For instance, Demet's engagement with residents through her activism produces a particular understanding of the AKP's political project. At the same time, the numerous religious courses organised by the Diyanet and *cemaat*s render the AKP's post-secular vision a lived reality. I therefore approach place-making as a lens through which the translation of political projects into everyday life becomes visible – along with the negotiations, appropriations, and frictions that accompany this process.

By focusing on these everyday enactments of political projects, I investigate how imaginaries of citizenship and statehood are reconfigured in practice. As hegemonic projects are lived and reworked in daily life, they generate particular understandings of what it means to be a good citizen and how the state should appear in moral and social terms. The lens of place-making illuminates the norms and moralities that underpin these emerging forms of citizenship and statehood. From gender norms to Islamic moralities, the criteria that define the good citizen and the proper state are articulated and reinforced through ordinary practices and interactions. The strict rules governing the proximity of different sexes, as illustrated by the mother's reaction to her daughter speaking with boys, delineate what constitutes an appropriate woman and, by extension, a gendered ideal of citizenship. Similarly, the embedding of Islamic moralities in residents' everyday spaces reflects a moralised vision of the good citizen aligned with religious imaginaries.

I examine the reconfiguration of state and citizenship through three themes that structure the empirical chapters of this dissertation: party politics, religious education, and gender norms. These themes reflect key domains in which the AKP's project challenges and reworks the earlier secular modernity project. The theme of party politics explores how the AKP constructs itself as the political authority by fusing party and state into a single entity through the practices of local activists, religious institutions, and residents. This analysis illuminates the imaginaries of statehood that crystallise within the AKP's political project. The following two themes – religious education and gender norms – shift the focus to the ideals of citizenship promoted by the AKP. By examining the religious education practices of the Diyanet and the Muhammedi Cemaat[16] in the neighbourhood, I show how religious morality becomes a defining feature of citizenship. Alongside this moralised ideal of citizenship, the AKP's project also advances a particular gendered configuration of citizenship. Through an analysis of residents' neighbourly relations, I examine the struggles surrounding Islamic gender norms, demonstrating

16 I do not use the Muhammedi Cemaat's real name but a pseudonym.

that, while the AKP's conservative gender ideals are embodied in everyday life, they are also negotiated and contested through residents' diverse Islamic interpretations.

Researching these dimensions together advances an understanding of how particular conceptions of citizenship and statehood take form within the everyday enactments of post-secular modernity as part of the AKP's broader hegemonic project. At the same time, it is important to clarify the analytical boundaries of this focus. While I approach post-secular modernity as the AKP's political project, I do not intend to subsume all of the party's political dealings under this rubric. Rather, my aim is to argue that post-secular modernity constitutes one of the AKP's key political projects – one that has enabled the party to manufacture consent across broad sections of society. The AKP's broader political agenda, however, also encompasses other dimensions – such as neoliberal economic reforms and conservative gender and family policies – that are not directly tied to its post-secular vision of modernity. I engage with these dimensions insofar as they intersect with or illuminate the workings of post-secular modernity, even when they are not directly part of it.

Between Divides: Researching in a Polarised Context

In many ways, my identity starkly contrasts with the dominant cultural and political profile of Kayaşehir. I was born in Izmir – one of Turkey's most secular cities – into a secular family and environment where religion had little influence on daily life. I attended a university in Turkey known for its critical stance towards the AKP and am currently pursuing a PhD in the Netherlands, a country often stigmatised in conservative circles due to its acceptance of homosexuality and relaxed stance on drugs. Moreover, as an unmarried, working woman in my thirties, my personal and professional trajectory diverges significantly from the prevailing norms in Kayaşehir. If

this neighbourhood represents one pole of Turkey's highly polarised political spectrum, my background positions me at the opposite end. In essence, I am a product of the secular modernity project that the AKP governments have sought to contest through their post-secular modernity project.

In this research, I use this contrasting identity as a reflexive tool to better understand the lived experience of the AKP's hegemonic project. My unfamiliarity with Islamic practices and AKP politics made these elements stand out to me as distinct from what I was accustomed to, prompting me to scrutinise them more thoroughly rather than taking them for granted. Additionally, my perceived association with secular modernity sometimes led my interlocutors to view me as a representative of the 'CHP mentality', which they associated with discrimination against religious individuals and AKP supporters. While this bias could have been a barrier, it instead provided an opportunity to observe how the AKP's hegemonic project – rooted in the binary opposition of secularism and religiosity – was experienced on the ground. My presence in the field elicited reactions ranging from acceptance and negotiation to contestation, allowing me to examine not only how residents interacted with the post-secular modernity project but also how they engaged with me as an embodiment of secular modernity. Epistemologically, this approach builds on Laliberté and Schurr's (2016) emphasis on corporeal encounters, highlighting how interactions between bodies – marked by differences in gender, religion, or ideology – are not merely personal but are shaped by broader historical and political contexts (p. 74). As Ahmed (2004) argues, such encounters are informed by past histories of contact, influencing how individuals perceive and respond to one another (p. 7).

However, my positionality also raises important ethical considerations. Critical scholarship has long debated the implications of researchers' class, gender, and racial differences from their interlocutors, particularly regarding the reproduction of unequal power relations (Asad, 2011; Dirlik, 1994; Spivak, 2010). White, upper-class researchers from the Global North and West studying marginalised communities in postcolonial contexts have been

criticised for exoticising their subjects and reinforcing existing hierarchies (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997). While my presence does not directly replicate this 'West and the Rest' dynamic – given that I was born and raised in Turkey and am conducting research 'at home' – it carries the risk of a different form of exoticisation: that of a secular researcher studying religious groups who have historically been stigmatised and marginalised by secular elites. Despite the AKP having been in power as a religiously oriented party for over 20 years, fears of renewed discrimination persist among religious communities. In this context, while these groups may no longer be in a traditionally disadvantaged position, polarisation has created new forms of othering within ideological 'bubbles'. Thus, the question whether I occupy a position of privilege while researching 'at home' (Shakti, 2020) or not (Muwwakkil, 2023) does not have a straightforward answer.

This concern, to some extent, echoes debates surrounding politically progressive researchers conducting fieldwork in right-wing communities. The political and religious views of my interlocutors differ from mine not only in terms of our opposing stances on the AKP and faith but also on broader issues such as whether to label the Kurdish political movement as terrorist, whether to view LGBTQ+ individuals as deviant, and whether to define women primarily through the framework of family. While most of my interlocutors align with the former positions in these debates, I stand on the opposite side. In this sense, my research involves navigating a politically opposed relationship between researcher and field. My journey to Kayaşehir – shaped by my background in Izmir and Amsterdam – bears similarities to Hochschild's (2016) study in Louisiana, where she sought to understand right-wing conservatives from a left-leaning academic perspective in Berkeley. Similar ethnographic engagements with far-right, radical right, and nationalist movements (Saglam, 2021; Shoshan, 2021; Pasieka, 2017; Goodale, 2020; Teitelbaum, 2019) have deepened critical reflections on positionality, emphasising the layered power dynamics involved in knowledge production.

Some scholars have described such fieldwork encounters as 'uncomfortable' (Wilson, 2020), with the potential to 'challenge the researcher's moral and legal boundaries' (Faust & Pfeifer, 2021, p. 82). These discussions have been framed through concepts such as 'dark ethnography' (Ortner, 2016), the 'uncomfortable other' (Faust & Pfeifer, 2021), and 'uncomfortable geographies' (Owen et al., 2022). They raise critical questions about whether researchers must sympathise with their interlocutors as in engaged anthropology (Goodale, 2020) and to what extent ethnographic engagement implies complicity with the politics of those being studied (De Koning, 2021; Faust, 2021). Bangstad (2017) underscores the importance of conducting research with 'people we don't (necessarily) like', arguing that discomfort can serve as a productive lens for understanding both everyday life and broader structural dynamics.

The key, however, is to take so-called 'people we do not necessarily like' seriously (Faust & Pfeifer, 2021) rather than treating them as merely instrumental or manipulated. This means moving beyond exoticisation and recognising shared references, frameworks, and imaginaries – even when these include ideologies that are exclusionary, patriarchal, or authoritarian. As Pasieka (2019) argues, acknowledging the values of our interlocutors, even when they are fascist or sexist, is essential to avoiding their reduction to mere 'exceptions' or 'marginals'. Instead of treating them as aberrations, this approach encourages a more nuanced understanding of how political and moral worldviews are constituted, maintained, and negotiated within everyday life.

Informed by these reflections on reflexivity and positionality, I approached my field and interlocutors not simply as the 'antithesis' of my progressive-left political stance – for example, as inherently homophobic individuals – but rather as 'fully-fledged individuals, as people who – yes – hold "unlikeable beliefs" and put them into practice, but who can also be funny, ironic, self-critical, and who have varied interests, skills, and roles to play' (Pasieka, 2019, p. 6). In highly polarised contexts such as that of Turkey, where political and social divisions run deep, I found it crucial to take my interlocutors seriously

and engage in genuine dialogue with them, without immediate judgement. However, establishing such a space for dialogue was neither straightforward nor always comfortable. At times, I felt unsettled by the questions my interlocutors asked me, and I occasionally felt angered by their interpretations of political issues with which I strongly identified. Learning to manage these emotions and steer conversations towards meaningful dialogue was a process that unfolded throughout my fieldwork.

One of the most pronounced challenges I encountered in this regard related to gender relations. At the outset of my research, I identified several male interlocutors who were central figures in Kayaşehir's social and political life, possessing extensive knowledge of the neighbourhood, its networks, and its transformations. However, despite their apparent relevance to my research, they declined my interview requests without offering explanations. Initially, I found this rejection frustrating as it seemed to limit my access to key insights. Over time, however, I came to understand that their reluctance stemmed from religious considerations that discouraged them from sharing space with an unrelated woman. While this posed an obstacle, recognising the underlying rationale helped me overcome my initial frustration and adapt my research methods accordingly. One effective strategy was conducting online interviews with male interlocutors, which eliminated the physical proximity that had been a barrier. Nevertheless, the majority of my interlocutors were women – a natural outcome of Kayaşehir's predominantly female daytime social life and of men's reluctance to share the same spaces with me in person. However, the limited number of male participants did not substantially hinder my research.

However, a different kind of discomfort related to gender persisted in my interactions with women. Whenever I introduced myself to female interlocutors, I noticed that they would immediately glance at my fingers, searching for a wedding ring. If my hands were not visible, they would often inquire directly about my marital status, my living arrangements in Istanbul, and with whom I shared my residence. Initially, these questions felt intrusive,

almost like an interrogation, and they caused a degree of unease. Over time, I realised that their curiosity was shaped by two interrelated factors: first, the prevailing gender norms in Kayaşehir, where being an unmarried woman over 30 is an exception rather than the norm; and, second, concerns about whether my presence could pose a threat to their marriages, given the widespread rumours about extramarital affairs in the neighbourhood. It was only after familiarising myself with these local dynamics that my discomfort subsided. More importantly, this discomfort proved analytically valuable as it not only heightened my awareness of these social norms but also led me to critically examine gender relations as a fundamental component of the hegemonic project I was studying.

My reflexive engagement with the field extended beyond the fieldwork itself. Outside the field, particularly in conversations with friends and family, my research often sparked interest among secular circles, where religious identity and support for the AKP were frequently perceived either as exotic curiosities or viewed with disdain. I frequently found myself explaining to my secular acquaintances how 'we' (secular individuals) actually share many common values, practices, and aspirations with 'them' (religious individuals and AKP supporters). I consider these interactions an extension of my ethical responsibility as a researcher as the way I discuss my fieldwork can either reinforce or challenge existing polarisations.

This ethical responsibility also extended into the writing phase. Just as my discussions with secular acquaintances shape perceptions of religious groups and AKP supporters, my presentation of this field in academic writing contributes to how they are understood both within and beyond academia. Accordingly, while writing my thesis, I deliberately avoided judgemental language while maintaining a critical approach. Rather than evaluating whether something is inherently good or bad, my goal is to reveal what Butler (2001, p. 3) terms 'the framework of evaluation' – the underlying structures and logics that inform people's perspectives and practices. This understanding of what it means to be critical differs from approaches that

frame the AKP's Turkey primarily as illiberal or authoritarian. Instead, it aligns with what María José Álvarez-Rivadulla (2025) describes as being critical when conducting research in the Global South: 'being critical means listening carefully to situated perspectives and remaining open to transforming our own understandings' (p. 2). Even when such 'careful listening' involves residents' aspirations towards projects that might appear unequal to us – for instance, a social housing development in Bogotá that is fenced, peripheral, and devoid of public spaces – 'we must also listen to citizens whose voices are less represented, those who, for the first time, gain access to amenities that others take for granted' (p. 3).

Outline of Chapters

This introductory chapter has clarified the main questions that guide this dissertation. Chapter 2 develops the theoretical framework by engaging with debates on modernity and citizenship and introduces place-making as the conceptual lens through which I intervene in these discussions. Chapter 3 explains the selection of Kayaşehir as a case study and details the methodological approach of the research. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 each address a distinct dimension of the research question. Taken together, they demonstrate that post-secular modernity – understood here as the AKP's hegemonic project – relies on the place-based practices of various actors. These practices enact a particular conception of the state, characterised by the fusion of party and state, and a particular form of citizenship, defined by piety as the dominant moral conduct and by conservative Islamic gender norms. In each chapter, I show how these new forms of statehood and citizenship both shape and are shaped by everyday place-based practices.

Chapter 2 – *Reconfiguring Modernity, Secularism, and Citizenship through Place-Making* – outlines the theoretical framework that underpins this study, drawing on debates on modernity and citizenship to show how place-making enables us to observe post-secular modernity as it is lived, negotiated, and

contested in everyday spaces. I identify key research gaps within these frameworks and discuss how my study of Turkey contributes to broader debates on post-secular modernity. I argue that adopting the lens of place-making is essential for understanding how the AKP's political project generates new ideas of statehood and citizenship in the spaces of everyday life.

Chapter 3 – *Case Study and Methods* – presents Kayaşehir as a paradigmatic case through which to study the AKP's hegemonic project in relation to the neighbourhood's modern built environment, its religious infrastructure, and its strong support for the party. The chapter then elaborates on my ethnographic research approach, which is informed by political ethnography and feminist geography.

Chapter 4 – *Making a Party/State: Everyday Engagements with the AKP as the State* – discusses how the AKP claims political authority – central to hegemonic projects (Hall, 1988) – by exploring the ways the party forges ties with citizens, and how citizens, in turn, respond to these claims. I look at the place-based practices of local AKP activists and members of the Muhammedi Cemaat as key figures striving to link residents to the party. I argue that these actors contribute to the construction of a particular vision of the state – what I refer to as the party/state. Through their place-based efforts, these figures do not merely mobilise support for the AKP; rather, they enact and normalise a specific understanding of politics and statehood – a form of common sense that the AKP's hegemonic project seeks to establish. Together, party activists and the Muhammedi Cemaat assert the party's authority through a continuum, with one end grounded in the profane and the other in the sacred. This continuum aptly illustrates the post-secular modernity project, in which party activists strive to inscribe the party into place by emphasising its everyday, caring qualities while the Muhammedi Cemaat renders this modernity beyond secular terms by cultivating an affective atmosphere in which the party is positioned as the protector of Islam and the nation.

Chapter 5 – *Making the Pious Citizen: Everyday Engagements with Religious Morality* – explores how Kayaşehir has emerged as a new site for Islamic living – a place where diverse Islamic lifestyles and ideas can flourish within the AKP's post-secular modernity project. I examine how spaces dedicated to religious instruction and moral formation in Kayaşehir contribute to the making of this citizen-subject. Central to this process are the intertwined roles of the Diyanet and the Muhammedi Cemaat. No longer positioned in overt opposition as they were during the pre-AKP era, their relationship today is marked by both cooperation and subtle tensions. This chapter explores how these dynamics play out on the ground, shedding light on their joint – and, at times, divergent – roles in shaping religious morality under the AKP's post-secular project. The Diyanet's renewed authority under the AKP represents a modern reconfiguration of religion, while Islamic tradition, embodied by the Muhammedi Cemaat, continues to exert strong influence at the neighbourhood level. I argue that neither the Muhammedi Cemaat nor the Diyanet alone embodies post-secular modernity; rather, it is through their combined yet tension-filled relationship that this hegemonic project succeeds in forming pious citizens, where the citizen and the believer – as subjects of both the state and religion – are fused into a single entity.

Chapter 6 – *Making Pious Womanhood: Everyday Engagements with Gender Norms* – explores how pious women experience, negotiate, and, at times, transgress conservative gender norms – central to the AKP's hegemonic project of cultivating new citizen-subjects – in their daily lives. The chapter examines how Kayaşehir has become a place where both the AKP's gendered citizenship agenda and its discontents take shape and unfold. I argue that, although conservative Islamic norms are widespread, women's diverse interpretations of piety – combined with the neighbourhood's relative newness and lack of long-established traditions – make Kayaşehir a setting where alternative forms of pious womanhood, beyond the AKP's imaginary, can emerge and flourish. While the residents of the Kayaşehir TOKİ agreed on the characterisation of their neighbourhood as pious, the interpretation of religion and gender norms varied significantly. I contend that this diversity

in interpretations of pious womanhood stems from women's refusal to rely solely on the conservative Islamic gender norms promoted by the AKP. Instead, they explore alternative Islamic interpretations that better align with their aspirations and the conditions of modern life. Moreover, the newness of the housing estate – its lack of long-established gender traditions common in older neighbourhoods – creates room for women to articulate these aspirations through distinct place-based practices. While some of these practices may align with the AKP's hegemonic vision of gendered citizenship, a closer look at women's everyday lives reveals that they also actively shape places in ways that reflect their own understandings of how to live piously. I argue that these alternative understandings form part of post-secular modernity – not as an extension of the AKP's political project but as a challenge to it.

Chapter 7 – *Conclusion*. In the final chapter, I return to the overarching research questions and discuss how place-making, as the central conceptual lens, has informed the analyses presented in Chapters 4 to 6. I then outline the theoretical and empirical contributions of this dissertation and position my research within broader Turkish scholarly debates. I conclude by offering suggestions for future research that builds on the insights developed here.