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Fatwas as Tools of Religious Populism: The Case of Turkish Islamist Scholar Hayrettin Karaman

Bulent Kenes

European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS)
bkenes@populismstudies.org

Ihsan Yilmaz

Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation, Deakin University
ihsan.yilmaz@deakin.edu.au

Abstract

This paper investigates the entanglement of religious authority, religious populism, political narratives, and societal transformation within the complex terrain of Turkish politics, through the influential role of Hayrettin Karaman, an Islamist scholar closely aligned with the AKP government under Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Karaman's fatwas and writings, disseminated through various media channels, have significantly impacted AKP supporters, fostering a radicalization that manifests in hate speech, intimidation, and reported acts of aggression toward political dissenters. The fusion of religious interpretations with political discourse has been crucial in legitimizing controversial governmental actions and policies, extending beyond domestic issues to global dynamics and defense strategies, including Karaman's advocacy for the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction.

Keywords: *religious populism, radicalism, Islamism, fatwas, unofficial law, Turkey, Erdogan, AKP, Hayrettin Karaman*

Introduction: AKP's Religious Populism and Radicalization

Recent scholarly works have explored the convergence of authoritarianism, democracy, and Islamic movements across diverse regions. These studies delve into religious and pro-violence populism and assess the societal impacts of various far-right Islamist movements. Additionally, there's a significant emphasis on the collaboration between Islamist populist parties and secularist far-right parties, examining how these partnerships influence and shape political landscapes. Further academic investigations have probed the relationship between populism, violence, and the stability of authoritarian regimes, including consideration of the concept of necropolitics within specific national contexts. Studies also dissect the role of religion in generating populist appeal, examining, for instance, the impact of the Friday sermons and the utilization of diverse populist narratives for political mobilization (Barton et al., 2021a; Barton et al., 2021b).

The Erdogan regime has cultivated a parallel legal system underpinned by unofficial and clandestine fatwas. To appease its religious constituents, the regime seeks validation for its actions from Islamist legal scholars. This article uses the case study of one such scholar, Hayrettin Karaman, to demonstrate how these Islamist figures can generate an ideological defense and validation for repressive Erdoganist policies, appeals and practices.

The Legitimizing Role of Hayrettin Karaman for the AKP

Hayrettin Karaman, a prominent Islamic Law professor and columnist for the pro-Erdogan daily *Yeni Safak*, has become one of the most influential figures in supporting the Erdogan's parallel legal system. Karaman serves as an Islamist authority issuing fatwas which often legitimize illicit and corrupt practices among Islamist politicians and businessmen. These fatwas are connected to a range of political and social agendas, such as obtaining interest-based credit from banks and funneling substantial donations to politicians' charities in exchange for lucrative public tenders and contracts.

Aligned with Karaman, numerous pro-Erdogan Islamist preachers espouse the belief that Turkey exists within a *dar al-harb*, an un-Islamic territory where their activities are considered *jihad*. In light of this argument, they argue for the circumvention of Islamic rules out of necessity, and they disregard official laws, which they perceive as products of the "infidel West." They assert that the Erdogan's AKP is the sole political representation of Islam in Turkey, and argue it is a religious duty for Muslims to vote for the party to prevent the division (*fitnah*, *tafriqa*) of the *ummah*, which is seen as being a graver offence than killing a fellow Muslim. The preachers propagate the idea that winning elections is akin to winning a *jihad*.

Political observers recognize the significant influence of figures like Karaman and the preachers supporting him within the AKP government and Erdogan's inner circle. His fatwas and policy recommendations are perceived as authoritative in Islamic contexts, giving his statements substantial weight and warranting serious consideration. The remainder of this article presents and analyzes various statements, fatwas, and opinions

provided by Karaman, which have helped legitimize and entrench Islamist ideas in Turkish society and support the Islamist populist agenda of the ruling AKP and authoritarian Erdogan regime.

Karaman's support for the AKP and Erdogan extends to justifying even their controversial or morally contested actions, using interpretations of Islamic principles that benefit the ruling party. An illustrative instance is the 2010 incident involving Deniz Baykal, the former leader of the main opposition party, Republican People Party (CHP), and the release of a purportedly scandalous sex video he participated in. The surfacing of this scandal provoked reactions and criticisms from both sides, but significantly from those with the view that prying into an individual's private life contradicts Islamic values.

The AKP and Erdogan defended the video's release and were interestingly supported by Karaman, who stepped in to provide religious legitimacy to their defense. Karaman's argument revolved around the idea of prioritizing the state's interests over individual rights to privacy, aligning with the AKP's stance that the exposure of such scandalous content was warranted for the greater good. Karaman wrote in his column:

"If one committing a sin in secret is a public office holder or trying to be one, in this case, 'the duty of protecting people from its harm' forestalls the duty of concealing of dishonor. The related people should be informed regarding the scandal. This sin and dishonor should not be concealed. If the law, without permission, forbids the prying and recording of the private activity, this law must be respected, unless there is no state of necessity (zaruret). According to Islamic ethic, it is also forbidden to attempt for prying and disclosing the secret behaviors of the individuals. However, if the concealed sin and misconduct bear upon the public and the act of concealing harms the public, the state of necessity becomes effective. In this case, this sin or misconduct can be released and publicized within the limits of the state of necessity allows" (Karaman, 2011).

His interpretation offered religious legitimacy by emphasizing the preservation of Islamic values within the context of governance and the political landscape.

Karaman's Defense for the AKP During the 2013 Corruption Probe

During the notorious corruption probe of December 17-25, 2013 Karaman staunchly supported Erdogan and the AKP, fabricating religious fatwas in favor of the party's politicians (Karaman, 2014a). Under this proposed system, elected Islamist officials may receive bribes, such as a 10—or 20 percent commission on billion-dollar public tenders from construction contractors, a practice Karaman likens to the share of "alms collectors" in the early days of Islamic civilization.

Karaman's articles following the December 17-25, 2013, graft and bribery investigations take an intriguing turn, openly addressing the bribery and corruption associated with Erdogan. In an apparent effort to sway religious Erdogan supporters, Karaman endeavored to portray these actions not as personal misconduct but as contributions to the Islamic cause – a form of dawah and jihad, ostensibly carried out for the Islamist movement rather than Erdogan's personal gain. Karaman defended the AKP's actions in

his minimizing statement that “corruption is not theft” (Yilmaz & Bashirov, 2018).

Karaman’s Framing of the 2017 Referendum as a Religious Obligation

Intensifying his explicit support for the AKP and Erdogan, Karaman was also notably involved in discriminating against voters based on their political choices before the April 2017 referendum on Turkey's Constitution, which facilitated the shift to an executive presidential system. His statements aligned voters' preferences with fatwas, adding a religious connotation to the political decision. Karaman disseminated the view that casting a "yes vote" was not just a political act but also an Islamic obligation, intertwining religious obligation with the referendum. In another article, he openly states that Naysayers are those who are standing against the Islam (Karaman, 2017f).

This stance concurred with that of Erdogan and his affiliated media outlets, who emphatically emphasized that a devout Muslim should support the "Yes" vote, and that "No voters will go to hell." The entanglement of religious authority and political discourse was crucial to the public debate, with religious rhetoric explicitly influencing the referendum's outcome (Yayla, 2017). According to Karaman, since Erdogan’s actions are aimed at fulfilling a religious obligation (to form an Islamic state), "every action that brings us closer to this goal is a religious obligation (fardh), including a 'yes' vote in the referendum."

Karaman as a Key Agitator Against the West

Karaman has been outspoken in his disdain and distrust towards the West. Karaman utilizes his platform to critique the behavior of Western countries, particularly regarding their interactions with Turkey under Erdogan regime, and has become an important figure in broader discussions on international relations and perceptions of Turkey within global contexts (O’Brien, 2017).

In a statement attributed to the scholar, Karaman blames the US for employing strategies that contradict conscience, religious values, and legal principles (Karaman, 2017b). He reflects on the perceived intentions and actions of the US in the Middle East and globally, suggesting that the US sought dominance over the Middle East and the entire world, driven by insatiable interests. Karaman implies that any entity attempting to challenge or impede US interests faced coercion, manipulation, and subjugation through various, potentially unethical means (Karaman, 2017b). He accuses the US of using alliances and collaborations within different countries to incite unrest, create chaos, provoke conflicts, propagate terrorism, and manipulate perceptions to serve its agenda (Karaman, 2017b).

Karaman is also a vocal critic of Western countries, particularly in Europe, for their negative attitudes towards Turkey and Islam. In an online post for instance, Karaman addressed Christian countries in the West, accusing them of egotism and racism and claiming their negative sentiments towards Turkey have been rapidly escalating (O’Brien, 2017). In another statement, Karaman (2017a) shares his perspective on Europe's attitude toward religion, particularly Islam, and the economic aspects associated with it. He portrays Europe as a continent disconnected from a fulfilling religion that

guides human life in both this world and the afterlife. He criticizes Europe for rejecting its original religion, conforming religious beliefs to fit personal desires, and even embracing atheism when conformity fails.

Karaman also alleges that Europe does not welcome Islam as a potential replacement for this void in religious guidance. He draws parallels between historical exploitation, mentioning the use of workers from Muslim countries for labor-intensive jobs, and a contemporary narrative where Europe, facing economic decline, turns its attention to the assets of Muslims residing in the continent (Karaman, 2017a).

Pushing an Islamist Agenda for Turkey, the Muslim World and the Ummah.

Karaman has also disseminated a range of Islamist ideas that often align with or presumably generate interest in Erdoganist Islamist populism. He portrays Turkey under Erdogan rule as representing an Islamic movement that can liberate the Ummah from various forms of perceived oppression and take a stance against exploitation and subjugation (Karaman, 2017b). Karaman has also made statements that deepen religio-political tensions in society, such as in his writing about the Gulen movement, when he insinuated that the movement acts against the state's interests, fostering division (*fitnah*), thus legitimizing state intervention to counter it (Yilmaz, 2015b).

Moreover, a sense of Islamist victimhood is identifiable in the scholar's statements. His statements evoke a sense of crisis, which helps justify the Islamist agenda in Turkish politics and beyond. In one statement, for example, he claims, *"the opposition and enmity that began when our prophet openly started to invite people to Islam in Mecca, has, to date, found members from almost all corners of the world, and their destructive activities are ongoing. They have tried everything to destroy Islam and Muslims or to deviate the religion from its original form to achieve their aims. One of their methods was to divide Muslims and ensure that the divided parts consume each other"* (Karaman, 2017d).

Promoting the View that Turkey Should Strengthen Its Military and Acquire WMDs

Karaman's discourse reflects a strong belief in the need for Turkey to strengthen its military capabilities. He underscores the necessity for Turkey to maintain comprehensive power, including a robust military, to safeguard its interests. Karaman expresses hope that Turkey will become powerful across various domains, emphasizing the importance of strength in addressing geopolitical challenges (Karaman, 2017c).

Karaman pushes his view that Turkey needs to achieve a balance with the Western and non-Muslim world, and this will be achieved in part by matching or attaining comparable weaponry to counter potential adversaries (Karaman, 2017c). He envisions the unification of all Muslims, the 'ummah,' as a force to deter external threats, particularly those stemming from the West (Karaman, 2017c).

Concerningly, the Islamist scholar has expressed a deep interest in Turkey acquiring nuclear capabilities, which he positions as a means of establishing a balance of power

against imperialist forces and as a deterrent against oppression (Karaman, 2017c). Karaman's stance, as articulated in the *Yeni Safak* daily, strongly advocates for Turkey's acquisition and production of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), including nuclear arms, to counter the perceived dominance of Western powers (Karaman, 2017c). He emphasizes the need for Turkey to consider creating these weapons autonomously, disregarding any opposition or constraints from Western entities (Karaman, 2017c).

In a notable example, Karaman not only sanctioned the government's acquisition of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) but also urged Turkish leadership to pursue this path. The gravity of his statements shouldn't be underestimated, considering their potential impact on policy directions, especially concerning the alarming proposal for WMDs (Bozkurt, 2017).

Karaman justifies this perspective by advocating for a realist approach in world politics, suggesting that smaller states with nuclear arsenals can exert considerable influence over larger populations (Karaman, 2017c). Karaman claims that the US and the West have attempted to control or restrict Muslim nations like Pakistan (possessing nuclear weapons) and have concerns about Iran acquiring similar capabilities. However, Karaman highlights a perceived shift in Turkey's approach under the leadership of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. He presents Erdogan as a determined leader who seeks to resist oppression and support the oppressed. Indeed, in 2018 President Erdogan expressed Turkey's initiative in producing similar military capabilities as Western nations (El, 2018).

Conclusion

The context of Turkey's political landscape involves a multifaceted interplay between religious authority, political narratives, and societal dynamics. Hayrettin Karaman's influential role as an Islamist scholar and his ideological alignment with the AKP government under Islamist authoritarian populist Erdogan underscore a significant fusion of religious interpretation and political discourse. Karaman's fatwas and writings, disseminated through media channels, have wielded substantial influence, particularly among the supporters of the Erdogan regime.

The influence of excommunicative fatwas and the narratives propagated by Islamist figures like Karaman within the media have had a notable impact on AKP/Erdogan followers. Karaman's interpretations have bolstered the Erdogan regime's stance on contentious issues and contributed to a radicalization of AKP/Erdogan followers. This radicalization is evident in the propagation of hate speech, intimidation tactics, and reported instances of physical aggression toward those holding opposing political affiliations.

Furthermore, Karaman's narratives have extended beyond domestic matters, delving into geopolitical dynamics, defense strategies, and international relations. His assertions advocating the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and narratives concerning global powers highlight a vision of Turkey reliant on a robust stance against perceived adversaries.

The significance and widespread impact of Karaman's controversial religious fatwas and recommendations within Islamist circles in Turkey and among Muslims should not be underestimated. They also have the potential to influence Turkey's foreign policy and its relationships with other nations, particularly in defense and regional dynamics.

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