

Islam and Kemalism in Turkey (1)

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How do Islamists and Kemalists in Turkey today deal with the laicistic inheritance of the state's founder Kemal Atatürk? And what are the ideal forms of state and society which lie behind their positions? An analysis by Bekim Agai.

On 29th October, 1923, the Republic of Turkey was proclaimed in Ankara. Its first president was Mustafa Kemal, later named Atatürk. The old caliphate gave way to a laicistic nation state, with new state structures and a new legal system. For the revolutionary modernisers Islam was a barrier on the way to a republic.

The religious education system founded on Madrassas, or religious schools, was broken up and replaced with secular schools and a unified national curriculum. Popular religious meeting places were closed down.

Kemalism, Laicism and Islam in the early republic

Between 1933 and 1948 it was virtually impossible to study religion in Turkey. Laws were passed requiring western-style clothing. Between 1934 and 1947 it was prohibited to go on the pilgrimage to Mecca. The language was reformed and a national history created to strengthen Turkish national identity.

The idea that this "civilising project" could be forced through even against the will of the people was based less on a kind of "oriental despotism" than on the "Jacobin" approach to power of the elites of the time.

During its development into an ideology, early Kemalism clearly understood Islam as a potential danger for the modern national state. Among Kemalism's most typical characteristics were Turkish nationalism and a commitment to the laicistic republic.

But the idea that Islam had no place in Kemalism is only true at first glance. Paradoxically Islam plays a significant role in the Kemalistic understanding of the nation state in its role as part of the Turkish national culture. Indeed, it was Islam which made a nation out of the multi-ethnic leftovers of the Ottoman empire, and which turned Kurds, Caucasians, Albanians, Bosnians, Tartars and so on into "Turks."

A change of Kemalistic principles

So Islam remained important in the early republic in spite of the antireligious measures taken by the government. And the introduction of democracy in 1946 led to a change in the principles of Kemalism. From then on, laicism meant the control of religious expression through the state. By taking over religious tasks, the state hoped to depoliticise religion and integrate it into its "civilising project."

Repressive policies had not had the desired effect of weakening the people's ties to religion, but had led to the emergence of authorities over which the state had no influence and whose training it could not control.

From then on, the secular parties developed policies to meet the religious needs of the people. But until

the late seventies this “re-Islamisation” was not accompanied by any concept of an Islamic political utopia. Islamic groups may have supported the secular parties, but they for their part rejected Islamic involvement at the state level.

The laicistic state takes on a religious role

Thus, from the fifties onwards, the Kemalist state became an important actor on the Islamic stage. With the declaration of the republic, religious issues and public religious observance were given over to a Directorate for Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, Diyanet for short), which increased its influence over the following years.

The job of the Diyanet according to the constitution and the Kemalistic desire for a homogenisation of society, was to secure national unity. The paradoxical result of Turkish laicism was a Sunni state Islam which preached the policies of the state.

This “state religion” became the basis for religious education in schools and the state-sponsored training of religious leaders. However, 20-30% of the population, the Alevites, are not represented by the system. Günter Seufert, Turkey expert, draws the conclusion: “Turkish laicism does not fulfil its claim to secularism by separating religion and state and regulating the relationship between them, but by giving the state a monopoly over the definition of religion and by bureaucratising legal religious life.”

Political Islam

Islam has always been part of the platform of centre-right parties. In the early seventies, however, Necmettin Erbakan founded the National Salvation Party (Milli Selamet Partisi) as a product of a specifically religious milieu. Around the party gathered Islamic groups which oriented themselves on examples of Islamist states abroad. They didn’t just want a more Islamic Turkey, they wanted an entirely different kind of state.

The late eighties and early nineties saw the rise of Erbakan’s Welfare Party (Refah Partisi RP), which reached its zenith when it narrowly won the parliamentary elections of January 1996. The RP succeeded like no party before it in developing grass-roots politics and in integrating ordinary people who were not otherwise involved in the political process.

At leadership levels however, it soon became clear that there were different camps with different ideological aims. Influential figures within the party wanted to create their “just order” within an Islamic state.

When, before he took office, Erbakan expressed his rejection of integration with the European Union, describing it as a “Zionist conspiracy”, his comments were met with suspicion. His first foreign trips as prime minister were to Libya and Iran and were seen as a clear break with Turkey’s traditional western orientation. Erbakan’s several carefully directed provocations led to a change in the way Islam was seen by the Kemalist elites in the country.

On 28th February, 1997, the military intervened publicly by publishing a memorandum which described Islamism as the greatest danger to the country. The so-called “28th February process” culminated in Erbakan’s resignation as prime minister, a ban on the RP (and in June of its successor party) as well the trials of a number of Refah Party mayors.

Erbakan’s confrontational politics had gone too far for some leading members of the party. Since the early nineties these so-called “modernisers” (yenilikçiler) had been criticising the party’s insistence on the state’s cultural hegemony.

From these elements, centred on the former Istanbul mayor Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, emerged the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP).

To be continued...