Atatürk's Ambiguous Legacy

by Cengiz Çandar

As if nature had not been generous enough, history has endowed Istanbul with extraordinary beauty. Its skyline is a parade of mosques, with pencil-like minarets that climb toward the sun, more than a few of them touched by the genius of Sinan (1489–1588), the Michelangelo of the Ottoman Empire. Its streets and avenues are graced by aqueducts, obelisks, and great churches that survive from the Byzantine era, including the spectacular domed Hagia Sophia, completed by the emperor Justinian I in A.D. 537. This is the only city in the world that has served as the seat of two great empires.

Yet the first thing a visitor to Istanbul today would notice is the dominating presence of modern Turkey's founder, Mustapha Kemal Atatürk. A traveler arriving on the Turkish national airline would see the founder's picture on the wall of the passenger cabin and his name on the façade of Istanbul's perennially renovated airport. To reach the heart of the city he would take a taxi to Taksim Square, which is dominated by the imposing Atatürk Cultural Center. At some point he would have to cross Atatürk Boulevard; in almost every Turkish city the pattern is more or less the same. The personality cult surrounding Atatürk is perhaps as strong as the cults that existed in the Soviet Union, and is rivaled—though many Turks would consider it blasphemous to say so—by the officially orchestrated adulation that has been showered on some Arab leaders.

For the past 10 years, however, the sanctity of Atatürk and the domination of his self-proclaimed successors over this complex land have grown ever more precarious. Coming to power amid the debris of the 600-year-old Ottoman Empire in 1923 by leading a successful national struggle against invading foreign forces, the former general embarked on an ambitious program of modernization, replacing an absolute monarchy with

In Istanbul, Turkish soldiers march past an image of Atatürk in the annual Zafer Bayrami (Victory Day) parade that celebrates his crucial 1922 victory over Greek invaders.

a constitutional republic, a fractured administrative system with a centralized bureaucracy, and an Islamic identity with a commitment to secularism. There is no doubt that Atatürk's guiding principles were instrumental in the making of modern Turkey. But in the hands of the Kemalist elite, the soldiers and the bureaucrats who have retained control over Turkey since his death in 1938, those principles have hardened into an unyielding orthodoxy that has become an obstacle to further democratic and economic progress in a changing world.

The Kemalist elite that followed Atatürk envisaged a militantly secular, ethnically homogeneous republic ready to join the Western world. It banished Islam from school curricula, glorified Turkish history, and "purified" the Turkish language in order to foster national pride and unity. Intent on creating a new Turkish national consciousness, this elite denied the existence of the many non-Turk ethnic identities within Turkey, most notably that of the Kurds. Above all, Kemalists were determined to banish Islam from the public sphere. Only with religion confined to the home and mosque, Kemalists believed,

could Turkey become a functioning nation-state. The Caliphate was abolished in 1924, and with it, religious courts and schools. The reforms touched virtually every aspect of Turkish life. A 1925 law banned the fez, replacing it with the Western-style hat, and also banned Muslim religious leaders from wearing clerical garb outside of places of worship. As Atatürk explained two years after the fact: "It was necessary to abolish the fez, which sat on the heads of our nation as an emblem of ignorance, negligence, fanaticism, and hatred of progress and civilization, to accept in its place the hat, the headgear used by the whole civilized world, and in this way to demonstrate that the Turkish nation, in its mentality as in other respects, in no way diverges from civilized social life."

There are striking resemblances between Turkey's Republican People's Party (CHP), founded by Atatürk, and Mexico's Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). Both were revolutionary-nationalist movements that emerged from violent struggles in the 1920s. Both believed that the solution to their national problems lay in rapid economic and political modernization. Both resorted to autocratic rule, and both enjoyed unusual political longevity. (The PRI's reign ended only this past summer, when it lost a presidential election for the first time in 71 years.) The two parties' experiences diverged in one highly significant respect, however: While Mexico relied on a political party to modernize the nation, Turkey looked to the military. It abandoned one-party rule in the years after World War II in an effort to win the favor of the Western allies whose support it desperately needed to help keep the neighboring Soviet Union at bay. In the nation's first multiparty elections, in 1950, Atatürk's party was promptly voted out of office.

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The Turkish military, which had launched Atatürk into power, became the self-styled guardian of Kemalist values, particularly secularism. The army, which is the most respected institution of the Turkish state, vigorously defends the republic against what it perceives as imminent threats from Islamic fundamentalism. Three times between 1960 and 1980 the military overthrew governments it judged to be a danger to the secular state. Most recently, in 1980, a rash of violent, politically radical dissent prompted the army to suspend the constitution, impose martial law, arrest leading politicians, and dissolve the parliament, political parties, and trade unions.

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On the streets of Istanbul, 1994

However, as they have after each takeover, the generals voluntarily restored civilian rule, and in 1983 a newly elected government took office.

The army draws support from two vitally important groups in Turkish society: the urban middle class, which has reaped many of the economic benefits of Atatürk's modernization, and the formidable state bureaucracy, which is itself a product of Kemalism's strong centralizing tendencies. The military has carte blanche to intervene when these groups feel threatened by public manifestations of Islamic sentiment. Few in the Turkish elite objected in 1997, for example, when the army engineered the removal of the elected coalition government led by Necmettin Erbakan, the leader of the Islamist Welfare (Refah) Party. The constitution promulgated by the generals who carried out the 1980 coup also provides formal channels for military influence, notably through its five seats on the National Security Council, which oversees national defense, a term defined so broadly that topics from education to foreign policy fall under its umbrella.

Turkey, as the writer Çetin Altan observes, is "squeezed in the struggle between the mosque and [military] barracks." But Islam is not the only problem for Kemalist orthodoxy. The rise of supranational governments such as the European Union (EU) has reduced the primacy of the nation-state and unleashed new centripetal forces, while the advent of a global free-market economy has rendered Kemalism's statist economic policies increasingly obsolete. In the decades after Atatürk's rule, Turkey's large government-owned industrial sector and its fervent pursuit of a policy of "import substitution" (building the capacity to manufacture goods at home rather than buy them abroad) helped transform the agrarian cradle of the Ottoman Empire into

The Father of the Turks

Among dictators of recent times, Mustapha Kemal, who later took the honorific name Atatürk, is the exception. In common with the others, he believed that social engineering justified whatever means were required, and he had no qualms about destruction and murder. But where the others left behind nothing but the memory of their evil, Mustapha Kemal, out of the wreck of the Ottoman empire, fashioned Turkey into the thriving nation-state it is today. Official photographs of his handsome if haughty face, prominent in public places throughout the country, attest to his enduring and genuine popularity. The Turkish military, in particular, sees itself as the steadfast guardian of the nationalism he taught Turks to value above other ideals. . . .

Mustapha Kemal was born about 1880, in Salonika, then a cosmopolitan city. The empire was already in its last throes. For 13 years, he attended a military school. As a junior officer, he served in Syria, in Libya against the Italians, and afterward as military attaché in the formerly Ottoman-held city of Sofia, Bulgaria. Like many in his position, he despaired of reform, and dabbled in conspiracy to overthrow the regime.

In 1908, other officers undertook an unfinished or rolling coup against the sultan. These so-called Young Turks proved as incompetent as they were ambitious. At the outbreak of World War I, they struck an alliance with Germany that would consummate the ruin of the empire they meant to save.

In the meantime, recognizing in Mustapha Kemal someone as ambitious as themselves, they kept him at arm's length. Much of his career during the war would consist of skillful maneuvering to capitalize on the mistakes and limitations of the Young Turks, to come out on top at the end. . . .

After the war, extreme foolishness on the part of the victorious Allies played into his hands. They had already occupied the empire's Arab and European provinces. In search of spoils, French, British, Italian, and Greek forces then invaded the Ottoman heartlands. As the sultan and his ministers in Istanbul pursued a policy of appeasement and surrender, Mustapha Kemal built in Anatolia the means of resistance. In a brilliant solo performance, he set up a tame assembly to certify his powers and mobilized the Turkish army to pick off the invaders one by one. Undoubtedly, this was his finest hour.

Though he might with justice have despised the European countries in whose imperial quarrels and vanities his people had been so disastrously caught up and ruined, Kemal was no hater of Europe. On the contrary: In many a speech and many an incident, he revealed that he admired his enemies almost uncritically, while at the same time he viewed his own compatriots as contemptibly backward and superstitious, "ignoramuses" living in dirty and tightly packed "oriental" towns. This shame could no longer be endured. Turkey, he insisted, had to become "a progressive member of the civilized world," and by "civilization," a favorite word of his, he meant Westernization. There was to be no distinctly Turkish or isolationist future.

In 1923, Mustapha Kemal declared himself president of the new Turkish republic. The sultan, accepting the loss of his temporal power, pleaded to be allowed to continue as caliph, even if this was only "fancy-dress," as Andrew Mango wrote recently in *Atatürk: The Biography of the Founder of Modern Turkey*. He was instead sent into exile, and would die in Paris in 1944. At home, the changes introduced by Mustapha Kemal were radical and immediate. New legal and penal codes were imported from countries like Switzerland and Italy. The Roman alphabet replaced traditional Arabic script, effectively cutting off much of the Ottoman past. Culture, manners, and dress were Westernized,

down to such apparently insignificant details as the compulsory replacement of the fez by a hat. Atatürk himself read and wrote French, and frequently resorted to that language among friends. A womanizer, he enjoyed nightclubs, waltzing, and drinking with his cronies. Alcoholism would contribute to his premature death in 1938.

There seems to be no explanation for the ferocity with which Mustapha Kemal attacked Islam. "The evils which had sapped the nation's strength," he declared, "had all been wrought in the name of religion." In a swift and brutal reversal, Turks were obliged to repudiate the Ottoman assumption that their faith had entailed superiority over others.

Revolutionary as all these changes were, however, they concerned only the outward forms of Westernization, and were at a complete remove from its spirit. Western strength derived in the final analysis from the spectrum of institutions, political and otherwise, through which a citizenry could express its energy. The Ottomans had had no such institutions, and the Turks did not now acquire them. Mustapha Kemal's powers were every bit as absolute as the sultan's, but, thanks to improved techniques of communication, far more effectively applied. Much as the sultan had relied on faithful janissaries to execute orders, Atatürk recruited his People's Party, which held all but one seat in the assembly, to do his bidding.

Atatürk framed by a train window, in 1932

Tailored to one-man rule, the resultant party-state had no place for a loyal opposition, for accountability, for free association, for civil rights, or indeed for any of the essentials of democracy. Whoever stood in Mustapha Kemal's way was murdered, either secretly or through scandalous judicial fixes. . . .

Luckily—and it has been as much by luck as by skillful management—Mustapha Kemal's heirs have been able to proceed further down the road to Westernization. Turkey is now the only Islamic country (leaving aside the questionable example of Pakistan) in which a free and fair election has led to a change of government. Even so, it still suffers from the repercussions of Atatürk's rule. The military has taken power several times on dubious nationalist pretexts, while extremists of one kind or another have engaged in campaigns of mutual and reciprocal murder. Kurds, even if they do not engage in terrorism but strive for a pluralist solution to their plight, encounter state terror in response. Immune to extirpation by decree, Islam has made a comeback, and about a quarter of the Turkish electorate now votes for the Islamic fundamentalist party.

—David Pryce-Jones

David Pryce-Jones is the author of The Closed Circle: An Interpretation of Arabs *(1989). Reprinted from* Commentary *(July/August 2000) by permission; all rights reserved.*

a semi-industrial nation, but in more recent times they have bred budget deficits and runaway inflation. Economic development has suffered. In 1950, Turkey's gross domestic product per person was greater than Spain's; today Spaniards can claim four times the wealth of Turks.

Even as the Turkish economy sputters, the Kemalist tenet of a homogeneous Turkish identity has come under challenge. Turkey is hardly alone among the nations of the world in confronting a revival of ethnic loyalties, but its historical circumstances are certainly unique. The territory occupied by modern Turkey was once the heartland of the Ottoman Empire, serving as the refuge for a variety of Muslim peoples. Crimean Tatars arrived in Anatolia following Russia's invasion of the northern shores of the Black Sea in 1774. They were succeeded by wave after wave of Muslim communities from the Northern Caucasus once Russia's greedy eyes turned in their direction. Beginning in the 1860s, these Circassians, from the Abkhaz to the Chechens, were forced to flee to the Ottoman Empire. Tens of thousands of Muslims came from Bosnia-Herzegovina when it was annexed by Austria in 1877. The Balkan Wars of 1912–13, which ended Ottoman Turkey's dominion over present-day Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia, Greece, Romania, and Bulgaria, brought yet another flood of immigrants. Finally, under the terms of the Lausanne Treaty of 1923, Muslim Turks living in parts of Greece exchanged places with a sizable portion of the Greek Orthodox population of Turkey. All of these groups lived easily under the Ottoman mantle and had little difficulty shifting their allegiance to Atatürk's new nation. And why not? To the outside world, the Ottoman, the Turk, and the Muslim were all one and the same anyway. But today, many of these groups, including the Circassians, Georgians, and Laz, express a heightened awareness of their distinct identities (although not to the same extent as the Kurds).

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However momentous these new challenges to Kemalist orthodoxy may be, one looms over all the others: the challenge to the Kemalist concept of secularism. Western observers praise Turkey's secularist commitments, holding the Turkish example up as a model for other Muslim states. The eminent Princeton University historian Bernard Lewis, for example, approvingly points out that "Turkey alone [among Muslim countries] has formally enacted the separation of religion

and the state." Yet Turkey's secularism is not what it seems to be. Many outside political observers have been seduced by a simplistic understanding of the clash between "secularism" and "fundamentalism." In reality, Turkish secularism is not as democratic as it appears to some Westerners, and Turkish Islam is not as fundamentalist as it is portrayed.

In their secularism (and in their statecraft generally), Atatürk and the Kemalist elites were powerfully influenced by French ideas, particularly those of French revolutionary Jacobinism. There is no word in Turkish for "secularism," for example, except for the approximations *laisizm* and *laiklik*, which are borrowed from the French *laïcisme*, a term steeped in the French Revolution's anticlericalism and hostility to religion. Unlike the secularism of the Anglo-Saxon tradition, with its emphasis on religious tolerance and pluralism, this idea of secularism carries overtones of irreligion and atheism. The advocates of this radical secularism consider Islam a totalist worldview that is incompatible with pluralism and democracy—a view bolstered by the Euro-Christian perception of Islam as an inherently militant or subversive faith.

In the late 19th century, a number of the army's reform-minded Young Turks—a group to which Atatürk belonged—absorbed such ideas directly as exiles in Paris. They concluded that, just as the Catholic Church was said by French liberals to pose a threat to the French Third Republic, so Islam presented a threat to modern Turkey. Since Islam does not have an institution that functions as a church, their attempt to enforce secularism was transformed into a quasi-atheist crusade against individuals. The Kemalist authorities ruthlessly manipulated the law to quiet those they considered dangerous, a practice that continues today. In 1998 Tayyip Erdogan, the popular Islamist mayor of Istanbul, was banned from politics for quoting a poem that allegedly "fomented public discord," an accusation that is broadly interpreted and widely invoked by Kemalists. Necmettin Erbakan, former prime minister of Turkey and chairman of the banned Welfare Party, was barred from political life for five years in 1999 and is now under the threat of a ban from politics for life. Many of Turkey's universities have expelled students and instructors who wear headscarves, the garb of observant Muslim women. In the hands of today's leaders, secularism has become as "radical" as the purportedly "fundamentalist" Islam it aims to defeat. Kemalism is now a kind of state religion in its own right.

Surprisingly, political Islam in Turkey takes perhaps the most benign and benevolent form found in the Muslim world. Although three major Turkish Islamist parties have been banned during the past 30 years—most recently the Welfare Party in 1998—activists have never resorted to subversive activities or violence but have simply established new parties. Erbakan is perhaps the closest equivalent in Turkish public life to a fundamentalist Islamist, but it is he who established, led, and then re-established each of these parties, actively participating in Turkey's electoral process and always remaining well within the limits of the constitution-

al system. His "fundamentalist" credentials mainly consist of his efforts to foster closer relations with Islamic nations such as Iran and Libya, yet he has served as vice premier in many of the coalition governments led by secularist politicians, including one led by Bülent Ecevit, the current prime minister of Turkey. From 1996 to 1997 he briefly served as prime minister, leading a coalition government with one of the most pro-Western politicians in Turkey, Tansu Çiller, until he was ousted in response to pressure from the military.

Turkey's Islamic parties, most significantly the Virtue (Fazilet) Party, resemble Europe's Christian Democratic parties far more than they do the fundamentalist Islamic political organizations found elsewhere in the Middle East. The Virtue Party embraces the free market and electoral democracy, advocates social justice, and frames its defense of Islam in terms of civil liberties, arguing, for example, that it is a violation of individual rights to deny Turks the freedom to wear a headscarf or military officers the freedom to express Islamic sentiments. Its ranks include conservative technocrats and some secular-minded women, as well as many of the more traditional Muslim faithful.

It is the unwillingness of the Kemalist "secular fundamentalists" to endure a peaceful cohabitation with the country's popular Islamic groups that has kept Turkey in a state of political turmoil. And, ironically, that unwillingness is now one of the major obstacles to securing a place for Turkey within the EU, and thus to fulfilling the Kemalist dream of winning a secure place for Turkey in the Western constellation. Just as ironically, Turkey's traditionally anti-Western Islamists have become enthusiastic supporters of accession to the EU, which they view as the best path to strong guarantees of civil liberties, through institutions such as the European Court of Justice. No group now seems less enthusiastic about joining the EU than the traditionally pro-Western Kemalists, who are anxious about sacrificing "national sovereignty" and object to democratizing political reforms that might reduce the military's role in the political process.

Kemalism today finds itself in the absurd position of threatening to negate the ultimate purpose of its founding figure and of denying the Turkish people the democratic rights and responsibilities treasured elsewhere in the "civilized world" Atatürk was so eager to have Turkey join. This is not a Kemalism of Atatürk's making. It is the product of a narrow, authoritarian interpretation of his ideas and policies by successors who transformed Atatürk into an untouchable national icon and Kemalism into an inflexible dogma. Turks must begin to see Atatürk clearly, not as an icon but as an outstanding historical personality who invented the tools necessary to make an empire into a republic. Now Turks must use those tools to become a more inclusive and flexible democracy. Only then can Turkey hope to contain its many contradictions and complete its transformation into a fully modern nation—democratic, secular, European, and Muslim. ❑