

Turkish Political History and Geographical Context

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Introduction

This paper analyses the political history of the Turkish Republic and the construction of Turkish national identity in its time and space contexts. The paper argues that many social and political problems that modern Turkey faces are in fact embedded in its complex history and conflicting identities. Therefore, without a deep understanding of Turkish history, it is very difficult to map out its social and political geography. The paper focuses on nationalism and secularism, two crucial principals for the formation of modern Turkey. It finally concludes that these two principles have been major sources of identity struggles and cultural clashes in Turkey.

Breaking away from the Past

The modern Turkish nation state emerged out of the ashes of the multi-ethnic and multi-religious Ottoman Empire. The most disruptive ideology that threatened and later tore the Empire apart was nationalism. Influenced by the French Revolution and ideas of nationalism, peoples of different ethnic and religious groups struggled to carve new nation states out of the Ottoman Empire throughout the 19th century and early 20th centuries. The outcome was many new states in the Balkans, North Africa and the Middle East. Turkish nationalism was a product of a context in which battles with insurgent nationalities within the Empire encouraged a sense of cohesion among the remaining peoples, as the Ottoman Empire was reduced to Turks and Muslim groups such as Arabs and Kurds. However, as more and more Muslim ethnic groups abandoned the Ottomans, the only practical alternative left for the Ottoman Turks to follow was Turkish nationalism. In the Ottoman *Millet* system, different groups were organized on the basis of religion rather than ethnicity, regardless of the diversity within each religious tradition. With the collapse of Ottoman Empire, Turkey lost its cosmopolitan character and vast chunks of territory, which left important imprints on Turkish political culture. The fear of division and rebellion continually disturbed the Turkish elite and caused increasing suspicion of outsiders, who were suspected of harboring the intention of dividing up the country.

The founding elite of the Turkish Republic consisted of the young military and civilian officers of the Ottoman administration. Among this elite group were the Young Turks who were actively participating in the politics of the Ottoman Empire in its later years. The Young Turks challenged the absolutism of Ottoman rule and built a rich tradition of opposition that shaped late Ottoman life both intellectually and politically. This tradition of opposition laid the foundation for Atatürk's revolution. These elites had very strong centralist tendencies and a great desire to break totally away from the dynastic and religious past, with the intention of creating a country based on national and secular values, which then let them legitimize their position as the new ruling elite (Ergil, 2000). This intention of disassociation from the past became the elite group's main policy, allowing them to see the Turkish people as an entity ready to be shaped consistent with their vision of what a society and nation should be (Ergil, 2000).

The years following Turkey's independence (1923) were the times of reformation and re-creation of Turkey and Turkishness. History was re-written, language reforms were

implemented, and social life was engineered. The Arabic alphabet was replaced with the Latin alphabet and Arabic and Persian words were eliminated from the daily language. The Ottoman legal and civil laws were diminished and replaced by Swiss, French and Italian ones. As Anderson states (1983, p. 48), “to heighten Turkish-Turkey’s national identity consciousness at the expense of any wider Islamic identification, Atatürk imposed compulsory romanticization.” For the quest for a new unifying identity, long forgotten pre-Ottoman and pre-Islamic roots were re-introduced to provide an ideological glue for national unity (Ergil, 2000).

The new regime cut ties with the past and religion. This was done in a number of ways such as abolishing the Sultanate, the Ottoman dynasty, and the Caliphate, the spiritual pinnacle of Sunni Muslims. These kinds of reforms not only served to break from the past but also from the Islamic world as the Ottoman sultan had been recognized by Muslims as the head of the Islamic world. The secularization of the educational system and the encouragement of modern clothing were other revolutions for the formation of new identities of Turkishness (Lewis, 1961).

Equally important, the new government took control over all religious institutions and their financial resources. This was, in a way, nationalization and appropriation of religion for the purpose of creating national unity among different ethnic Muslim groups whose commonality was Islam (Yavuz, 2000). This in and of itself was paradoxical because the Turkish establishment (the ruling elite) strictly enforced secularism. In fact, they have gradually transformed secularism (or laicism) to a religion-like political ideology called “Kemalism” (Guvenc, 1998). The majority of these policies were enforced mainly in urban Turkey, while traditional life in rural areas, which made up about 80 percent of the population during the second quarter of the 20th century, remained very much the same. As Ergil (2000, 47) puts it, “this change created a volatile social fabric where the new and old, the modern and the traditional, East and West, the secular and the anti-secular, and the rich and the poor lived side by side with few points of contact.”

Like modernists elsewhere, the Turkish ruling elite believed that the new Turkish identity would make ethnic and cultural differences disappear and all groups would become alike under the same secular laws (Hennayake, 1992). Islam was appropriated for creating unity among Turkish citizens including minorities because Turkishness was not accepted by all the ethnic groups in Turkey. For instance, the Kurds were called “Mountain Turks,” implying that the Kurds were not actually a separate ethnic group but were people of Turkish origin who lived in the mountainous areas of Turkey (Olson, 1998). As Yavuz (2001, 7) puts it,

Turkish national identity was modeled on the Islamic conception of community and was disseminated through Islamic terms. The incorporation of religious vocabulary helped to nationalize Islamic identity. Examples of this include the incorporation of words, such as *millet* (referring to a religious community in the Ottoman empire, appropriated by the Republic to mean "nation"), *vatan* (homeland), *gazi* (the title of Mustafa Kemal, referring to those who fought in the name of Islam) and *shhid* (those who died for the protection and dissemination of Islam), into the nationalist lexicon.

What all this suggests is that while the new Turkish state claimed a secular Turkish identity, it did not hesitate to appropriate Islam as the glue for forming unity among its peoples with different ethnic backgrounds.

The ruling elite implemented reforms and policies to erase differences for the purpose of creating a homogeneous “nation state.” While most Armenians were deported during the last few years of the Ottoman rule, population exchanges of Turks (or rather Muslims) in the Balkans with the remaining Greeks during the early years of the Republic helped this homogenization process. Nevertheless, while differences could not be erased, the new Turkish identity did not fully replace the Ottoman identity, which was ethnically neutral. With the processes of urbanization, migration and globalization, people from these different segments and classes of Turkish society came into contact, and in these contacts there were clashes of identities.

The Struggle for Power and Clash of Identities

While the mentality of the ruling elite, Kemalism, an authoritarian Westernization project, has not changed much, Turkey as a nation has changed greatly both socially and politically since it was founded in 1923. With the impacts of globalization, rising educational levels, and the introduction of new ideas, ordinary people demand more democracy and freedoms. Turkey’s candidacy for EU membership and integration has increased such demands. The official Turkish identity has often been challenged and questioned. Turkey has become confused and hesitant in terms of what it is and what it wants to be as the demands of the ruling elite and ordinary people differ. Turks have mainly embraced modernity and want less government involvement in their lives.

The people’s identity claims, which emphasize freedom of speech, thought, religion, and expression, do not overlap with the official identity that the ruling elite stresses (Ozdalga, 1998). Such conflicting identity demands and negotiations threaten the privileged status of the establishment, which causes constant tensions and crises in Turkey. Former *New York Times* correspondent Stephen Kinzer (2001, 10), who lived in Turkey for four years, writes: “In the generations that have passed since then (since Ataturk), Turkey has become an entirely different nation. It is as vigorous and as thirsty for democracy as any on earth. But its leaders, who fancy themselves Atatürk’s heirs, fiercely resist change. They believe that Turks cannot yet be trusted with the fate of their nation that an elite must continue to make all important decisions because the people are not mature enough to do so.”

Groups such as Leftists, Kurds, and Islamic activists have challenged Kemalism since the beginning of Turkey. They have confronted the policies and practices of the ruling elite, the ultimate power holder (Ozdalga, 1998). During the 1960s, vibrant leftist movements shaped politics for the following two decades as they pushed for more freedoms. Although the state held strong control over politics, there was also a rise of populist nationalism and religious revivalism during this period. Religious organizations grew rapidly in the 1970s as they helped those of lesser means cope with the problems of modernization and became clubs for excluded groups seeking solidarity in a changing world. These were also times when the Nationalist Action Party, with an emphasis on Turkish nationalism, and the Nationalist Order Party, with its Islamist emphasis, came into existence to play a role in Turkish politics. While the Nationalist Action party was closed after the 1980 military coup, four parties from the Nationalist Order Party tradition, including the Welfare Party, whose leader became prime minister after 1995 elections, have been banned from politics (Yavuz, 2000). Although Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi=AKP), which won last to general elections with great victories, also comes from the same political tradition, its political direction has been towards the West and its economic and social policies have been liberal.

After the 1980 military coup, all political parties were banned. In the following years, the head of the Turkish military became president and new parties were established. However, Turgut Ozal founded the Motherland Party in 1983. Ozal, the future president of Turkey, was able to incorporate different political and ideological trends into the party structure, which helped to ease existing political tensions as the years of polarization created tensions of all kinds among different groups. Ozal implemented a series of economic and social reforms that led to an economic boom and opened the country to the outside world despite high inflation, low productivity, and a skewed income distribution. Regardless of Ozal's efforts for social reforms, the issues of modernization, change management and legal and political liberalisation remained unresolved. Ozal suddenly died in 1993, and his reforms did not continue.

Today, large segments of the Turkish society do not accept what is being imposed on them and are unhappy with elitist practices. Ethnic, religious and ideological identities are polarized and room for reconciliation is lacking. The official nationalism is seen as isolationist and statist as it puts the state in the center of social life as the provider and protector, as well as the source of political power (Kinzer, 2001).

This process of othering and exclusion by the ruling elite, or what some call "White Turks" or "deep state," has marginalized the Muslim Turkish masses and minorities such as the Kurds. Islam and minority politics have been the oppositional identity for the marginalized and excluded segments of the Turkish society. While over 90 percent of Kurds do not want an independent state, their desire for cultural recognition is viewed as separatist (Ergil, 2000). Broadcasting and education in Kurdish was only allowed in August 2002, when the parliament passed a series of laws as part of their plans for European integration. Even then, the state has not yet allowed private parties to broadcast in Kurdish and a government television channel is preparing for this purpose. The state's fears and desires for control are not helping the democratization process in this venue.

Expressions of Islamic identity (e.g., headscarves) are banned from public space such as government offices and universities. Regardless of all bans and restrictions, the Islamic movement has managed to be a source of power for the marginalized and excluded (Ozdalga, 1998). The religious-based Welfare Party finished first in the 1995 elections, with 21.7 percent of the vote, gaining the largest number of seats in the parliament. The leader of the party was later forced to leave the office, and the party was closed with the claims that it did not comply with the secular rule of the country. The party's leader, Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan was banned from politics by the constitutional court influenced by the establishment. However, just before the 2002 elections, a new conservative party, AK Party (Justice and Development Party) emerged. The former mayor of Istanbul and charismatic leader of the AK Party, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, was a former member of the Welfare Party. His AK Party won 363 seats in the 550-seat Turkish parliament (Time, 2002). Erdogan became Prime Minister regardless of the large media campaign against him and his party. AK Party's popularity did not decrease since 2002 election, as it increases its votes %13 in July elections 2007. Tayyip Erdogan's foreign minister Abdullah Gul has also been elected as the new Turkish president after months of political debates, controversies and tensions.

Today, most Islamic and Kurdish groups support the EU membership for economic, political and social reasons regardless of the EU's undecided position on Turkey's membership. The belief is that if Turkey becomes a member of the EU, it will not only help economic prosperity, but also normalize the country politically and socially, as they see Western practices of secularism and pluralism as being more democratic and inclusive (Kosebalaban,

2002). The 1997 coup had the greatest influence on political Islam as it forced its proponents to reexamine their political agendas as well as their language of discourse. They have framed their discussions of democracy, law, and justice in more universal terms, consistently emphasized the virtues of secularism and identified themselves as Muslim democrats, an Islamic form of the Christian Democratic movement in Europe.

According to Kinzer (2001), the position of the Turkish ruling elite along with its Kemalist ideology has been viewed by the public as the source of the contemporary crisis and the main obstacle for Turkey's democratization, economic and social development because it refuses to accept the changes in the Turkish society. The ruling elite including bureaucrats such as military commanders and prosecutors, and "loyal" newspaper editors are trapped in the 1920s of Turkey. They resist increasing pressure from worldly Turks who want their country to break free of its chains to become more democratic (Kinzer, 2001).

The problems of state and political authoritarianism have haunted Turkey for almost 80 years. Regardless of all the efforts of state institutions, particularly educational institutions at all levels, and the media, an ideal homogenous national identity has never been achieved. As a result, the least integrated segments of society have been ethnic groups such as the Kurds and religious groups who have not found the identity being imposed on them as being inclusive, but rather as being exclusive. The lack of clear definitions of separatism (*boluculuk*) and fundamentalism (*irtica*) makes it difficult to discriminate separatists from cultural rights defender and fundamentalists from devout Muslims. It is all subjective and arbitrary. Today, the most sensitive issues of discussion in Turkey are the issues of secularization and ethnic nationalism as the hegemonic power of the ruling elite still remains unchallenged. As Ergil (2001, 54) puts it,

All of these elements demonstrate the potency and significance of the debate around the nature of the regime in Turkey. Can we come to a consensus on the regime to reconcile and to include all groups, opinions and convictions? The lack of such a consensus has not served the interest of society and has failed to bring the prominence and prosperity for which the nation yearns so much. It remains to be seen if Turkey perpetuates its anti-democratic secularist policy; or decides to create a new democratic constitution where traditional groups with religious sensitivities, as well as citizens with other ethnic backgrounds, can feel included. If the official policy of laicism has failed to secularize society because it has not been supported by commercialization, industrialization, modern education and urbanization, then religious affairs should be taken from state control and left to civil society. Only then can the sociological process of secularization proceed.

Turkey's modernization project started with revolutions and success; but Kinzer (2001, 21) argues that "something about the concept of diversity frightens Turkey's ruling elite. It triggers the deep insecurity that has gripped Turkish rulers ever since the Republic was founded in 1923."

Closing Thoughts

In this paper, I provided a brief political history of Turkey and its role in the creation of multiple identities. The role of institutions (e.g., state, media) in the creation and reconstruction of identities has been highlighted, as Giddens (1991) argues that modernity and identity must be understood at institutional levels. Turkish political history provides a great example in terms of the fluidity, complexity, and temporality of identity (Keith & Pile, 1993).

Turkey has not been able to create a system that includes all segments of society with all of its diversity (Kinzer, 2001). In fact, since politics have been so much polarized and social life has been disrupted, there has been a clash of identities. The clash is between the ruling elite and ordinary Turks, and it is the central fact and dilemma of this state striving to be more modern. The Kemalist coalition (White Turks or what some call the deep state) that includes wealthy businessmen, eagerly supportive media forces, powerful military, and state courts and prosecutors has taken part in this process of exclusion or polarization. The lack of dialogue and negotiation, which are fundamental for democracy, has left little space for differences (Ergil, 2000). Fears and lack of understanding determine the nature of conversation.

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