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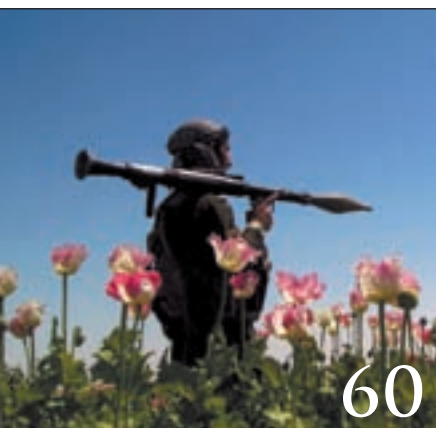
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Turkey's general elections last July might well mark a milestone in the history of this overwhelmingly Muslim yet resolutely secular republic. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) not only secured what is by Turkish standards an astonishing victory—46.6 percent of the votes and 340 of 550 seats in parliament. It has also sent a signal that Turkey now nurtures an interpretation of Islam that is in harmony with modern values such as democracy, liberalism and capitalism.

This synthesis has never before been seen. In Turkey, as in the Muslim world generally, modernization has typically been regarded as a cause advanced by secularists and resisted by religious people, both traditionalist and fundamentalist. In the past decade, however, Turkey has presented a striking reversal of this truism. While the “Islamists” of the AKP arose as the most dedicated proponents of liberal reforms and integration with global markets, most of Turkey's staunch secularists have turned bitterly anti-EU and anti-American. A devout, mosque-going Turkish Muslim is today much more likely to support the country's EU accession bid than a resolutely secular follower of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the country's modernist founder.

What does this mean? Is this just an odd fluctuation in Turkey's ever-roiling political waters? Or does it reflect a deeper and more durable transformation?

The Sultanic Verses

To find the answer, one needs to distinguish actual history from the Kemalist kind. The official Turkish narrative, with which virtually all Turks have been indoctrinated, declares the modern Turkish Republic to be the shining star of the Muslim world and a clean break from the Ottoman (i.e., Islamic) past. “We were in darkness”, my primary school textbooks proclaimed, “but then came Mustafa Kemal Atatürk who shone on us like the sun.”

Mustafa Akyol is deputy editor of the Turkish Daily News.



Many Turks believe they would still be living in a Taliban-esque nightmare had not the secularist modernization project of the Kemalist regime saved them. To the question, “Why is Turkey the most advanced democracy in the Islamic world?”, the standard answer is: “Because Atatürk created it *ex nihilo*.”

This is a very dramatic “creation story”, but it is not even remotely true. In fact, it is the Ottoman legacy itself that gave rise both to Atatürk and modern Turkey.

Unlike the desert Arabs, whose societies stagnated after the 13th century, the Ottoman Turks had good reason to modernize: From



Turkey's Veiled Democracy

BY MUSTAFA AKYOL

epa/Corbis

the 15th century onwards, their empire was the superpower of the Islamic world that sat beside an ascendant Europe. That is why the Ottomans took a keen interest in the advances of the West before other Islamic nations, for they alone among Muslims were hard pressed to cope with them.

The sultans and their advisers started by reforming the military, but soon realized the need to incorporate not only the hardware of modernity but also its “software”, including its political and legal concepts. Hence the reform edicts of 1839 and 1856—the sultanic verses, so to speak—which limited the powers of the

Ottoman Sultan and introduced the idea of modern citizenship. The non-Muslim subjects of the empire, who had formerly enjoyed “protected” (*dhimmi*) but nevertheless second-class status according to traditional Islamic law, were granted equal rights. In 1876, the Ottoman Empire promulgated a constitution—much earlier than did Russia, Spain or Portugal. Ahmet Cevdet Pasha, an Ottoman bureaucrat and an Islamic scholar, prepared the Mecelle, a new legal code based on traditional Islamic law but that also included many important modifications, thanks to the juristic injunction that “as time changes, the laws should also change.”

In 1908, the Ottoman Parliament opened with dozens of Greek, Armenian and Jewish members. At the time, the most popular maxim among the Ottoman intelligentsia, which included many devoutly religious figures, was “freedom.” Prince Sabahattin, the Sultan’s nephew, promoted the principles of individual entrepreneurship and a limited, decentralized government. The compatibility of Islam and popular sovereignty had long since been declared by Islamic modernists such as Namik Kemal. In the last decades of the empire, societies emerged with names like *Taal-i Nisvan* (“The Advancement of Women”) or *Mudafaa-i Hukuk-u Nisvan* (“The Defense of the Rights of Women”). In 1910, Ottoman feminist Fatma Nesibe, a follower of both Islam and John Stuart Mill, argued that the Empire was on the eve of a “feminine revolution.”

In short, the Ottoman Empire found its path to modernization at least a century before the Turkish Republic was born, and had traveled far on that route.

The Kemalists themselves owed much to their Ottoman predecessors. Its leaders, after all, Mustafa Kemal included, had been educated in the modern schools founded by the Sultan Abdulhamid II.

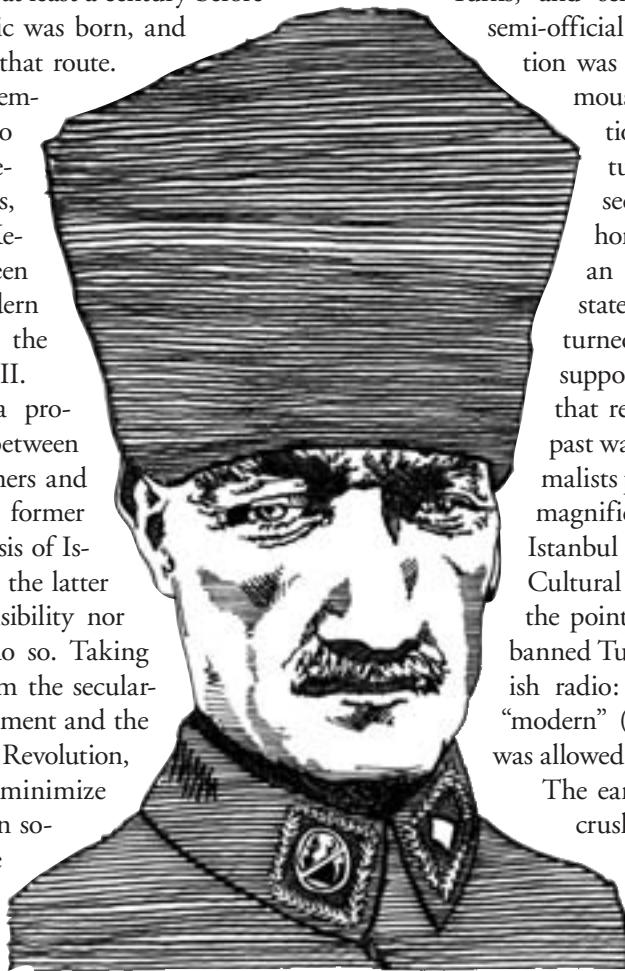
Yet there was a profound difference between the Ottoman reformers and the Kemalists. The former had sought a synthesis of Islam and modernity; the latter had neither the sensibility nor the inclination to do so. Taking their inspiration from the secularist French Enlightenment and the anti-clerical French Revolution, they tried instead to minimize the role of religion in society by dint of state power. They needed such power, too, for the Kemalist project, carried out

by Atatürk’s People’s Party, was not then the only available vision for republican Turkey. Another political party with a more Ottoman-like mindset, the Progressive Party, founded by war heroes such as Kâzım Karabekir, Refet Bele and Rauf Orbay, proposed a free-market economy, a less radical reform process, a conciliatory approach toward the Kurds and, most important, esteem for religion within a republican framework. The party survived for only six months: It was banned by Turkey’s still-armed Kemalist elite on June 5, 1925, and its leaders were exiled from politics. The announced reason was Article 6 in the Progressive Party program: “We are respectful to religious ideas and sentiments.”

Thus was born by fiat Turkey’s “single-party regime” (1925–46), whose iron-fisted policies aimed at secularizing the public square. Sufi orders, Islamic schools and even religious garments were outlawed. Textbooks and state rhetoric glorified the pagan culture of pre-Islamic Turks, and scientism became the semi-official faith. Moderniza-

tion was taken to be synonymous with Westernization, and the latter in turn synonymous with secularization, social homogenization and an all-encompassing state (all of which have turned out to be debatable suppositions). Anything that resembled the Islamic past was rejected. Some Kemalists proposed turning the magnificent Blue Mosque of Istanbul into an art gallery. Cultural self-loathing reached the point that the authorities banned Turkish songs on Turkish radio: For a period, only “modern” (i.e., Western) music was allowed.

The early Turkish Republic crushed not only all political opposition but also civil society. Among others, the feminist societies of late



Mustafa Kemal Atatürk *Amara 2007*

Ottoman times were closed down. The regime did not oppose feminism *per se*, but assumed that, like everything else, it had to be in tune with the zeitgeist “of the state, by the state and for the state.”

The Emerging Crescent

Democracy came to Turkey in the aftermath of World War II, and the Kemalist elite had to adapt to a democratic ethos. The Cold War, however, furnished a pretext for the continuation of many authoritarian habits of mind. At the same time, Turkey’s tumultuous political energies were supplied by contending secular radicalisms that had little to do directly with religion. Gradually, however, the republicanist debate cut short in 1924 re-emerged, and with the end of the Cold War it took center stage in Turkey’s political-intellectual life. For the first time since 1925, two models of Turkish modernization—Ottoman and Kemalist—could engage in open debate in a democratic context.

For that debate to become focused, however, several distortions of the preceding half century needed to be corrected. Turkey’s secularist establishment had worked so hard to erase Islamic tradition that it inadvertently contributed to radicalizing that tradition. “In Turkey, the closure of madrasahs . . . meant that the more educated, sober and responsible element in Islam declined”, observed Karen Armstrong in *A History of God* (1993). “The more extravagant forms of underground Sufism were the only form of religion left.” Turkey’s secularists now regret that they did not more vigorously suppress such extravagant forms of folk Islam, ignorant of their own role in elevating them.

“The more educated, sober and responsible element” in Turkish Islam survived nevertheless. It did so thanks to popular scholars such as Said Nursi (1878–1960), who opposed Western materialism but supported Turkey’s democratization and entry into NATO. Nursi emphasized faith and morality—and a healthy distance from politics. His books inspired millions who constituted the “Nur” (Light) movement, which has been a beacon of both theological and socio-political moderation. Today the most powerful

Islamic group in Turkey is led by a follower of Nursi, Fethullah Gülen, and its members have made stunning achievements in the media, modern education and interfaith dialogue.

Thus did the tradition of Ottoman Islam persist within Turkey, at least on the social periphery. It emerged from the periphery the more Turkey modernized, something Western social science did not foresee. Western sociologists, too, had associated religion with resistance to change, modernization with secularism. They did not understand their own history (as Walter Russell Mead has shown in these pages), let alone the real dynamics of Islamic societies.¹

The greatest recent transformation in Turkish society has been the migration from villages and towns into the big cities, a process that began in the 1950s and still continues today. Most immigrants were traditionally religious, whereas the cities they poured into were secular citadels. The newcomers automatically became the underclass, which the secular urban elite took for granted. “The nation-state belonged more to us than to the religious poor”, says Orhan Pamuk, Turkey’s Nobel laureate in literature, remembering his childhood. However, he adds that his secular folk were at the same time afraid of “being outclassed by people who had no taste for secularism.”

That is exactly what happened. The sons and daughters of the “religious poor” began to flourish in business, intellectual life and politics. Not just major cities like Istanbul and Ankara were reclaimed by Muslims via mosques and headscarves; some conservative Anatolian towns like Kayseri and Konya began writing their own success stories with their own entrepreneurial bourgeoisie. Especially during the years of Turgut Özal’s political ascendancy (1983–93), the idea of political, economic and religious freedom flourished in Turkey. Özal, whose own personality was a synthesis of liberalism and Islam, helped empower the marginalized and silenced elements of society, which included conservative Muslims and even the Kurds.

Meanwhile, the transition from the illiterate folk Islam of the countryside to the “high” literate Islam of the city was creating what Ernest

¹Mead, “Faith and Progress” (September/October 2007).

Gellner once called “neo-orthodoxy”: modern Muslims who are less traditional but more devout than their parents, whose advanced level of religious observance is enabled by literacy and urbanization, and is therefore taken as a concomitant of upward mobility and, yes, of modernization itself. The socially ascending bourgeois Muslim woman wears the veil not because her mother did so, but precisely because she did not. The difference between the tight but modern “turban” of Istanbulers and the lax but unstylish “headgear” of villagers—a distinction much emphasized by Turkey’s secularists—corresponds precisely to that distinction.

Neo-orthodoxy can be a breeding ground for Islamism, a “modern” ideology that re-constructs Islam not only as a religion but also a “system.” However, neo-orthodoxy can also be a vehicle for creating a non-Islamist yet mod-

Turkey’s Muslims now recognize that Western democracies give their citizens all the religious freedoms that the Turkish state has withheld.

ern Islamic identity. Turkey’s experience shows that it is possible. Indeed, Turkey’s traditional Islamic communities, such as those associated with the Nur movement, never adopted any form of Islamism despite their own intensified piety. They remained loyal to democracy and supported center-right democratic parties such as Özal’s Motherland Party. But the secular Turkish state saw even this mild form of Islam as a threat and suppressed it. The religious vacuum thus created was soon filled with radical Islamist ideas pouring in from the Arab world, Pakistan and Iran. From the 1970s onward, Islamic bookstores in Turkey began to feature more works of radical thinkers such as Sayyid Qutb and Sayyid Abul A’la Maududi than of thinkers like Nursi. The new Turkish Islamists dismissed Nursi’s views as “the Islam of flowers and bugs”, since his major theme was natural theology, not political ideology.

The meteoric Islamist movement led by Necmeddin Erbakan, the Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*), was a manifestation of the new radical current in Turkish Islam. Erbakan’s rhetoric was never violent, but it was clearly anti-Western,

anti-secular and, to a degree, anti-Semitic. His first and only term as prime minister (1996–97) was forced to a quick end by a “postmodern coup” during which the Turkish military forced the government to resign. That dramatic failure was both an important lesson and a sign for the reformist wing of Erbakan’s party, which soon broke away to create the AKP in 2001. From day one of the new party, AKP leaders emphasized that they had abandoned Islamism. They even refused the term “Muslim democrats” suggested by some, defining themselves instead as “conservative.” In a sense they reverted to, or rather resurrected, Turkey’s authentic Islamic political tradition—the late Ottoman one.

To this day, Turkey’s secular fundamentalists have not acknowledged that fact. They cannot: The return of Ottoman modernism contradicts the Kemalist creation myth. The Turkish people, however, have acknowledged it.

In Turkey’s November 2002 election, the AKP won 34.3 percent of the votes and a clear majority in Parliament. Its leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, soon became prime minister, and his government introduced many liberal reforms, boldly advanced Turkey’s EU admission process, and created an economic success story. The AKP proved to be, as Fareed Zakaria has put it, “the most open, modern and liberal political movement in Turkey’s history.”

The AKP government proved to be a political and an economic success—all the more reason for Turkey’s secularists, especially its die-hard Kemalists, to fear it. The secularists watched the AKP’s transformation out of the old Erbakan Welfare Party movement, waiting anxiously for the time when it would unveil its “true face.” Meanwhile, they trusted their man at the top of the state, President Ahmet Necdet Sezer, to keep the AKP at bay. The breaking point came this past May, when Sezer’s term came to an end and the AKP announced its candidate for the post: Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül. Gül is widely respected outside of Turkey, but is deeply resented by some Ankara elders for his Islamist past and his wife’s headscarf. The resentment led the Turkish mili-

tary to issue a harsh “secularism warning” on April 27, leading the Constitutional Court to cancel the presidential voting process based on a newly invented and controversial argument about what constituted a valid quorum. Faced with deadlock, the AKP announced early elections for July 22, which it then won by an astounding margin.

The 46.7 percent that the AKP won was most remarkable because this was an election of 14 parties and 699 independent candidates. Only the Democratic Party of the 1950s had won a higher percentage of votes, but there were only three parties then. The AKP’s main rival, the die-hard Kemalist CHP, won 20.8 percent of the votes, but that amounted to a drop when compared to the 2002 elections and the support it received from the small center-left party that it allied with was subtracted.

This powerful mandate allowed the AKP not only to form a strong government but also to elect Gül as Turkey’s 11th President on August 28. It was the first time that the Turkish presidency, which has more extensive powers than in most parliamentary systems (such as vetoing laws or appointing top judges or university rectors), was held by a practicing Muslim whose wife wears a headscarf. The generals hinted that they were not very happy with Gül’s presidency, but they soon showed signs of resignation.

The AKP’s triumph and Gül’s presidency has disappointed Turkey’s secularists, but they remain determined. Their main argument is that these smart “Islamists” have a “hidden agenda” and will reveal their “true”, Taliban-like face when they find the right moment. Such conspiracy theories are very popular among Kemalist bureaucrats and pundits, but the empirical evidence suggests nothing of the sort.

For example, a survey entitled “Religion, Society and Politics in a Changing Turkey”, carried out in 2006 by political scientists Binaz Toprak and Ali Çarkoğlu, revealed that not only is religiosity thriving in Turkey; it is also moving away from political Islam. In response to the question, “Should there be political parties based on religion?” the percentage of respondents answering “yes” has dropped from 41 to 25 percent in the past seven years. Moreover, demand for “a religious state based

on *sharia*” has dropped dramatically from 21 percent to 9 percent. Only 2 percent support harsh *sharia* measures such as stoning. Turkish Islam is flourishing, but not as an obscurantist or anti-modern movement—just the reverse.

Why is Turkey’s vast Muslim majority on this democratic path? Why does it favor Turkey’s EU bid? Why has the AKP consistently taken a pro-Western stance? In a nutshell, because Turkey’s observant Muslims now see that the West today is better than the Westernizers of half a century ago. They recognize that Western democracies give their citizens all the religious freedoms that the Turkish state has withheld from its own people. No country in the free world has devised and imposed a secularism as illiberal as Turkey’s version of French *laïcité*. Any society or club with an Islamic name or purpose is *ipso facto* illegal, and religious education is very limited. A woman wearing a headscarf has no entrée to higher education in Turkey, whether in public or private schools. Secular elites call such women “cockroaches.”

Devout Muslims in Turkey used to perceive Turkey’s secular fundamentalism as a product of the West and hoped that de-Westernization would end their feelings of being “a pariah in their own land”, as the late Islamic poet Necip Fazil once put it. Yet the more they learned about the West, the more they realized that the problem was in Ankara, not Washington, London or Brussels. Having realized that the real West is preferable to the caricatured version they have at home, Turkish Muslims have re-routed their search for freedom. Instead of trying to Islamize the state, they have decided to liberalize it, a policy that helped the AKP get support from Turkey’s secular liberals, Kurds and even Armenians.

Souked Up

Another striking feature of the AKP is its unabashed championship of the free market, which differs from the anti-capitalist stance shared by many Islamic movements and even by some “modernist” Muslim intellectuals. Indeed, the Islamic world has been dominated by socialist thought since the early 20th century, but close study of Islamic religious texts and the early his-

tory of Islamic civilization shows that Islam and free markets are compatible. This argument is outlined by Maxime Rodinson in his classic work, *Islam and Capitalism* (1966), which he wrote to refute Max Weber's dour view of Islam and its supposedly stultifying effects on capitalist development. Here Rodinson followed, probably without realizing, the great Turkish sociologist Sabri F. Ülgener—both a student and a critic of Weber—who also argued that Weber misjudged Islam and overlooked its inherent compatibility with a “liberal market system.”

Ülgener's prediction is now coming true with the rise of an Islamic-inspired capitalism. The European Stability Initiative (ESI), a Berlin-based think tank, conducted an extensive study in 2005 of the “Anatolian tigers”—booming Turkish companies in the heartland of conservative Turkey. ESI researchers discovered that “individualistic, pro-business currents have become prominent within Turkish Islam” and that a “quiet Islamic Reformation” was taking place in the hands of Muslim entrepreneurs. They called Turkey's religious capitalists “Islamic Calvinists.” If only Weber could have lived to read it.

The rise of an Islamic entrepreneurial class is a remarkable phenomenon, marking the beginning of a new stage for Islamic civilization. Most people understand religion not only to its textual teachings, but also according to its function within their everyday social environment. Islam's social environment has been feudal, imperial and bureaucratic in the past and present for the most part. Now, in Turkey and in a few other Muslim countries such as Malaysia, Islam is being transformed into a religion of the middle class and its rational, independent, individualist ethos. Anyone who thinks this social transformation won't change religion knows nothing about the sociology of religion.

In the new Turkey, therefore, models parade down the fashion catwalk in fancy headscarves. Quranic courses are promoted by clowns handing out ice cream. “Islamic feminists” argue against the “male-domination ideology within Islamic thought.” Just last year, the Turkish Diyanet, the official religious body which controls every mosque in the country, announced that it will cleanse the traditional collections of *hadith* (sayings attributed to the Prophet Muham-

mad) of misogyny. The head of the Diyanet, Ali Bardakoğlu, a liberal theologian appointed by the AKP government in 2002, was recently asked if Christian missionary activity was a threat to Turkey, as some nationalists claim. “No”, he replied. “It is their natural right to evangelize their faith; we must learn to respect even the personal choice of an atheist, let alone other religions.”

For many decades, Arabs and other Muslim nations saw Turkey as a lost cause, a country that had abandoned its own faith and civilization. This is why, despite the popular trope in the West, Turkey could never serve as an example of the compatibility of Islam and modernity. It represented instead the abandonment and even suppression of the former for the sake of the latter. Yet that's a bad message to send to the Islamic world: When a devout believer is forced to choose between religion and modernity, he will opt, and even fight, for the former. The right message is a synthesis of Islamic and modern values. With its Ottoman heritage and a deepening democracy, Turkey has the potential to create that synthesis and send that message. That potential was denied and marginalized for many decades, but it is coming back. That is good news not only for Turkey, but for the world.

Above all, the experience of Turkish Islam also suggests how the ultimate reform of the Islamic world will come about—through democracy and free markets. These are the social dynamics that create individuals and communities willing to embrace modernity and shape it to their own historical imaginations. When Muslim societies are forced instead to accept some elite's version of modernity—whether rough secularist tyrannies or Western military interventions—they invariably react against it, and the backlash just as invariably fuels an even more ferocious, reactionary religious radicalism.

Alas, there are no shortcuts to genuine social reform. The quick fixes and forced marches of the impatient do not herald progress; they push it away. Turkey's Muslim liberalism announced its ascendancy on July 22, roughly a century after its genesis in late Ottoman reform. Can our Western friends take “yes” for an answer? 🌍