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# The survival of kemalism

Sami ZUBAIDA

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- 1 Kemalism, and in particular its secularist components, occupies an ambiguous site in Turkish public life today. It remains, officially, the state ideology. "Respectable" political figures, including the leadership of the (Islamic) *Refah Partisi* (Welfare Party), affirm their adherence to its basic tenets. Those who attack it in public, mostly Islamists nowadays, are doing so consciously to break conventions and taboos. To advocate the application of the *seriat*, for instance, is reprehensible and "extremist". The term *seriatçı*, is used to discredit public figures with Islamic leanings. Unlike their counterparts in other Middle Eastern countries, the mainstream Islamic leaders in Turkey are restrained on this question. The programme of the *Refah Partisi* includes many elements of economic and nationalist statism, and its leader, Erbakan, declared at one point that he is *devletçi* ("statist", a term associated with Kemalism).
- 2 In practice, however, secularist or *laiklik* principles are widely flouted. This is not new, but goes back historically to the first triumph of the Democrat Party in the first free elections in 1950. One of the principal constituencies of this party were provincial conservatives. Many of the rigours imposed on religious practice by Atatürk were relaxed, including, crucially, the return to the Arabic *izan* (call to prayer). Since then, Islam has gradually re-emerged in public life and in many social spheres, including, crucially, education and politics.
- 3 The rise and increasing success of an Islamic party (under different names since its first emergence in the 1960's, currently the *Refah Partisi* (RP), or Welfare Party), and its participation in government coalitions in the 1970's, are in direct contravention of one of the basic principles of the Kemalist constitution: that no political party should be formed on the basis of religion, class or ethnicity. Sufi orders, which were banished by Atatürk, have emerged under the guise of charities and *vakıfs* (foundations) some of which, notably some
- 4 Naksibandi offshoots, command great wealth and influence. The leading elites of Özal's *Anavatan Partisi* (Motherland Party) in the 1980's, including Özal himself, were Naksi. Many leading parliamentary deputies of the currently ruling DYP (Right Path Party) are outspoken supporters of Islamic causes, most notably the periodic attempts to

restore Aya Sofia as a mosque, in direct contravention of Atatürk's decree which made it a non-religious monument.

- 5 The Ministry of Education is known to be controlled by high functionaries with Islamic inclinations. School curricula, school books and teacher recruitment reflect these commitments. *Imam-Hatip* schools have the ostensible function of training religious functionaries. In practice many of them provide mainstream secondary education alongside a religious curriculum. In addition, religious organizations and *vakıfs*, notably the Fethullahci (*Nurcu*) organization, fund an extensive network of schools and educational charities. The graduates of these religious schools are increasingly represented in elite university faculties, such as the Ankara University Political Science Faculty, which lead to high ranking government posts.
- 6 It is widely noted that the Kemalist *laiklik* doctrines were never "secular" in the sense of the separation of religion from politics. Instead, it has meant the control of religion by the state. What we have witnessed over the years is the erosion of this control, the emergence of autonomous religious organizations, and their increasing influence in public life.
- 7 Kemalism remains, however, the "foundation myth" of the Turkish state, and Turkish political culture remains overwhelmingly statist. Mainstream Islamists are no less committed to a strong nationalist state than the other main political parties. They see Islam as an integral part of this national/nationalist identity, and in this they are no different from leading elements in the two major parties of the right. Apart from Kurdish parties, only marginal, though important and interesting groups express opposition to Kemalist statism : the economic and social liberals, sometimes referred to as "Second Republicans", who are associated with Cem Boyner's New Democracy Movement, anti-statist Muslim intellectuals such as the group associated with Ali Bulaç, and groups of the left who are now active in the defence of human rights.
- 8 It is the very fact of increasing Islamic influence and electoral success which is giving a new impetus to Kemalist loyalties and advocacies. Powerful and influential sectors in Turkish public life espouse strong secularist identification and see political Islam as a threat to their interests and, crucially, styles of life. The "modern" middle and upper classes of Istanbul and Ankara, including the leading political families, officers of the armed forces and the most prominent sectors of writers and journalists are all ranged in this *laiklik* camp. Their allegiance is tied to profound social divisions, of a class and a regional nature, which are at the core of contemporary Turkish society. The bourgeoisie of Istanbul in particular associate Islamic advocacy with the massive Anatolian migrations into the city. The poor of the ever expanding *gecekondus*, the multitude of constructions, legal and illicit, which are changing the face of the city, the crowding, the traffic, the pollution, all these are seen as an invasion and ever present threat to their city and their way of life. It is not only the poor, but, also crucially, the *nouveau riche*, also from Anatolia, who are equally held responsible for the deterioration of the city from property speculation, ugly constructions and corruption in Mafia-like activity. For the Istanbul bourgeoisie, this Anatolian invasion is the barbarians not just at the gate, but now in the very heart of the city. Islam is firmly associated by them with this Anatolian invasion : the poor provide the votes for the Islamic party and the rich finance it; indeed, one hears frequently that these votes are bought. The poor reciprocate these sentiments : they feel the contempt of their compatriots which adds to their feelings of deprivation

and inferiorisation. They call their social superiors "Beyaz Türk", White Turks, which gives a racial dimension to the conflict.

- 9 The success of the RP in the municipal elections of March 1994, and the triumphalist demonstrations by pro-Islamic forces, mostly young men, in the following days in Ankara and Istanbul heightened the fears of the metropolitan bourgeoisie. The demonstrators openly demanded, among other things, the defeat of the *laiklik* state and the implementation of the *seriat*. The effect on the secular bourgeoisie was traumatic. *Cumhuriyet*, the organ of *laiklik* in Turkey, was indignant at the fact that the *seriat* could be openly demanded with impunity. To the secularists the demonstrations showed the true colours of political Islam, removing the veil drawn by the insincere moderate stance of RP leaders and other respectable Muslims. The *seriat* to them means women in veils, segregation of the sexes in public places, the end of arts and entertainments, of the *meyhanes*, clubs and theatres so much part of the modern, European style of life so central to their identity. It is a backward step, *irtica*, to an Asiatic closed society.
- 10 These, then, are the forces and sentiments behind the demands for the reiteration and the enforcement of the secularist founding principles of the Republic, to banish and suppress the Islamic menace. The Özal regime in the 1980's saw the relaxation of Kemalist principles and even some rituals, such as the commemoration of Atatürk's death by a complete standstill at 9.05, the hour of his death on 10 November 1938. In the liberal atmosphere of that regime, these steps did not arouse undue alarm. With the "Islamic threat", however, there are now insistent demands on the authorities and media to affirm Kemalist principles, and to observe the Republican rituals. On 10 November 1995, for instance, it was reported that large crowds processed to Atatürk's mausoleum in Ankara, most major newspapers gave their front pages to Atatürk features, most radio and TV stations interrupted their diffusion at 9.05, and those that did not faced a barrage of complaints. In many places traffic came to a respectful standstill at that hour. Many newspapers and organizations marked the occasion with strong statements on Atatürk's principles of modernity, science, reason and secularism, all these being the preconditions for democracy. Kemalism, it would seem, is alive and well.
- 11 In this contested political field, the power of Kemalism remains as that of a state religion, much like socialism in the former communist world. As state religion, it is used a weapon in public disputations, bent by each side to its own stance. President Demirel and former Prime Minister Çiller, for instance, maintain a facade of Kemalism, always insisting on the inviolable, secular nature of the Turkish state. This is not only obeissance to the state religion, but also for international consumption, a firmly secular Turkey is presented to Western governments and public opinion as a bastion of democracy against the dark forces of fundamentalism sweeping the region. This stance is taken in the ideological confrontations with the RP. A notable occasion was in March 1994, in the campaigning for the municipal elections. In the face of opinion polls giving the RP considerable chances of winning, Çiller played the *Kemalist/laiklik* card by calling a rally of all the secular forces in Taksim Square. This was widely seen as an electoral gimmick, and the only leaders to appear at her side in the rally were those of the loyal SHP (Social Democrats) coalition partners and the MHP's (Nationalist Party) Alparslan Türkeş, who has a close affiliation with Çiller. At the same time, both Demirel and Çiller have made sure that they appear in the media on religious occasions as pious observers of the faith. Examples of such occasions were the funerals of political notables, in which the two leaders were shown alongside the officiating imam, Çiller with her head covered, standing in supplication with two cupped hands in

front. The cynicism of observers is strengthened by the tolerance of both leaders for the activities of pro-Islamic deputies and notables in their own party. It is clearly perceived that these leaders are playing politics with both religion and secularism.

- 12 One of the elements of the lingering force of Kemalism is that it is a "reference ideology". That is to say, all political and ideological constructions have to refer to it, to situate themselves in relation to it, if not to justify themselves in its terms. Religious ideology is no exception. Kemalism inferiorised religion in terms of modernity and progress : in these terms religion is "reaction", *irtica* and conservative/backward. Being modern is being secular. Modernism and secularism are associated with Western models, extending to the minutiae of everyday life, such as dress, family relations and personal comportment. The traditional religious response is to reject all this as heresy and innovation, but to keep quiet about it in public, in many respects confirming the negative image of religion so advanced. A more interesting response is to challenge this view of modernity and progress in terms of another in which faith and conviction play an important part. Such was the thought of Said Nursi from the early years of the Republic, and of the *Nurcu* movement he founded and which continues to be an important feature of the present political scene. He held a view of science and modernity which accorded with religious ideas and with pan-theistic themes of Sufi Islam.
- 13 Many cultural and political elements in modern Turkish Islam are concerned to counter the Kemalist image of religion. Muslim businessmen (with their own organization, MÜSIAD) point out that many modern and successful entrepreneurs and leaders of business in America and Europe are devout Christians and Jews, and make no secret of it. Why, then, they ask, should Turkish businessmen abandon their religious heritage in the name of modernity and progress ? In fact, there is no contradiction. Political leaders are constantly harping on these themes. One set of slogans in recent electoral campaigns is that it is not us, the Muslims, who are reactionary and conservative, but them the *laiklik* who keep fast to their old outdated ideas, while we, Muslims, are introducing innovative ideas and policies for a new society, economy and world order. The more respectable leaders emphasise that their stances and policies do not contradict the spirit of Atatürk, his Turkish nationalism with the state at its centre. Only, religion is held to be a central part of that nation, and should, as such, be represented in the state.
- 14 There is, then, a broad consensus in mainstream Turkish politics on nationalist statism, largely faithful to the spirit of Atatürk. The element at issue is the *laiklik* principle. Can we have Kemalism without secularism ? Given the firm historical association between the two, written into the Republican constitution, and the iconic place Kemalism (with secularism) occupies in public life, Kemalism without secularism is inconceivable. The electoral success of the Islamic party, and the increasing religious influence in public life will only strengthen the re-assertion of Kemalist secularist principles by the social forces to whom they represent a guarantee of decent life. With the added support of dominant sectors of the military, Kemalist secularism is likely to be invoked and re-invoked against the religious forces. In the meantime, mainstream politicians, religious and secular will continue to play politics with religion and secularism.

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## ABSTRACTS

Kemalism is the founding myth of the Turkish Republic, and secularism is an integral part of it. It has become a « reference ideology » for all subsequent generations and to the present, in the sense that all discourses in political contest, including the Islamist, situate themselves in relation to it. The taboos it imposed on these discourses, notably that on the advocacy of the *shariat*, remain largely unbroken except by outright rebels and « extremists ». The respectable leaders of the Islamist party pay lip service to it, and even claim its mantle in defence of the Turkish nation and the state as its core, but with the addition of Islam as an essential component of heritage. In practice, however, this ideological hegemony has been gradually eroded from the 1950's, but significantly in recent times, not only by the rise and electoral success of Islamic political advocacy, but also through the prominence of different Muslim forces and institutions in various spheres of public life and discourse : education, media, publishing, political parties and government service and in terms of general public visibility. This has led to the sharpening of social tensions between the religious and the secular, superimposed on divisions of class, styles of life and regional affiliations. The affirmation of Kemalism and secularism becomes an essential line of defence for the Westernized bourgeoisie of the main cities and the institutions they control, especially in the media and the political class, and the military is their main refuge.