

The Twin Precepts of the Turkish Republic

Nationalism and Secularism

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Summary

In recent months, there has been an increasingly visible nationalist rhetoric in mainstream public discourse in Turkey. It began during the Presidential elections with a discussion of the need to maintain the 'secular' nature of the Turkish republic. At first glance, this might seem like an important indicator of an advanced democracy. What is more, as a 'gateway' country linking East to West, those from the outside might see it as a sign of hope that fundamentalist interpretations of Islam will not continue to expand their reach. However, upon closer inspection, it is clear that recent discourse is anything but the sign of a healthy democracy. Issues of secularism remain intertwined with questions of nationalism and what it means to be Turkish in the country's political psyche. Recent discourse has served to demonstrate that Turkey's military still plays a major role in the politics of the country and that the constitutional tenet of the 'indivisibility of the Turkish Republic and the Turkish Nation' remains an obstacle to democracy and equal rights.

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Introduction

This paper will attempt to underline issues relating to nationalism and secularism in Turkey in the current social and political atmosphere. There will be a brief summary of past events followed by a discussion of the questions of nationalism and secularism facing Turkey today.

In 1923 the Turkish Republic was founded on six core principles, *nationalism* and *secularism* being chief amongst them.

Nationalist ideology has been the cause of numerous human rights violations in Turkey. Cases which KHRP has taken to the UN and the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), as well as the missions and the trial observations carried out in the Kurdish regions, have largely related to people who have been regarded as traitors, separatists or those who have insulted 'Turkishness'. *Nationalism* in Turkey is based on the idea that its citizens are all Turkish and that everyone should live with pride in being Turkish. All children growing up in Turkey are indoctrinated with this pride. They grow up being taught a narrow history of the nation seeing political and social events from a Turkish point of view. Until recently Kurdish children who began school not knowing how to speak a word of Turkish would be beaten for speaking Kurdish.

The importance of secularism to the Turkish Republic came from the

belief of the modern Republic's founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, that the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent threat of colonial rule were directly related to religious in-fighting. Therefore, he believed that the modern republic must adopt a modern stance, which was devoid of religious influence, and hence Turkey adopted the French model of secularism which goes a step further than many democracies' 'separation of church and state' model. Although an overwhelming majority of the population, at least nominally, adheres to Islam, the state has (a) no official religion nor (b) promotes any and (c) actively monitors the area between the religions. Turkish secularism involves an "active neutrality", which means that actions of the state related to religion must be carefully analyzed and evaluated by the government through the Ministry for Religious Affairs.

Protecting its Nationalism and Secularism

Since the Republic's inception, nationalism and secularism have not been separate but have been seen as interdependent. The doctrine of Turkish nationalism whereby all citizens are deemed ethnically homogenous and all citizens are Turkish is also fiercely secular. Embedded in school curricula is a disdain for religion and religious symbols. There are dress reforms which ban the wearing of the headscarf in official offices. This means that women who want to go

on to further education and build a career in an official position are not able to practice their religion as they wish. For Turkish politics, secularism has meant that no party can claim to represent a form of religious belief, unlike European and American politics where Christian parties are commonplace. The Turkish state has maintained the status quo through the cultivation of a constant paranoia about threats to its territory, its secular structure and to 'Turkishness'. The twin concepts of nationalism and secularism have been protected by suppressing conflicting views and the status quo has been upheld by the military through military coups, military operations, deep state actors supported by the military, extrajudicial killings, disappearances, arrests and banning of opposition. In the past two years there appeared to be a move away from this doctrine. Society was becoming more open on this matter and slightly more amenable to free expression in relation to identity. However, as recent events have shown, there has been a backlash to this. The doctrine of a homogeneous, single nation is once again becoming fiercely dominant, with a rise in moderate and extreme nationalist sentiments increasingly evident.

The present situation and the forthcoming elections

'Kemalism once transformed Turkey, but has now failed to transform itself'
Baskın Oran¹

Turkey has experienced three military coups and one post-modern coup, all of which damaged the causes of true democracy and freedom. Few people would have thought there would be another military intervention in 2007. And, far fewer people would have imagined there would be such a high level of support from civil society for such an intervention. The Chief of General Staff General Yaşar Büyükanıt, who has been rather flamboyant in his public reminders of the power of the Turkish military, posted a statement on the website of the Turkish Armed Forces on 27 April which was a message to the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) concerning the supposed increase in the influence of religion on society. In the note the army blames the government for fuelling religious sentiment within society. The statement finally condemned as an enemy of the Republic of Turkey anyone who disagrees with Atatürk's famous maxim 'what joy it is to be able to call yourself a Turk'. So, what seems to be a message regarding the threat posed to the secular state ends on a note of a nationalist dogma.

The recent events surrounding the presidential elections and the ongoing conflict in the southeast

¹ Turkey's Politics, the Economist, 3 May 2007

have created hostility between large sections of the public. Secular groups have reacted against the attempts made by the AKP to elect Abdullah Gül as President and nationalist groups have exploited this as they are angry, believing the government is not taking the right approach regarding the ongoing conflict in the southeast. Therefore they have united with the military to oppose a perceived threat to secularism and the ethnic homogeneity of the Turkish Republic.

The tensions between the military and the AKP have led to mass demonstrations aimed at supporting and upholding the secular Turkish Republic. These recent demonstrations illustrate the degree to which nationalism and secularism are intertwined in Turkey. Over the last month millions of Turkish citizens took to the street in their various cities, Turkish flags in hand, in order to make clear to the AKP their adherence to the principle of a secular state and to face down those described by Büyükanıt as 'enemies of the Republic of Turkey'. The protests began as a reaction to the presidential nomination of Abdullah Gül, who many see as pro-Islamist. Although Gül himself is viewed by many sections of Turkish civil and political society as a moderate politician and a good diplomat, he is also a religious man, whose wife wears a headscarf. Such public displays of religious affiliation are seen as a symbol of political Islam in Turkey and therefore not in keeping with the ideals of Atatürk's republic.

Though the question of secularism was the spur for these demonstrations, they have had very nationalist elements, heavy with symbolic references to the greatness and wholeness of the Turkish nation.

The degree of nationalist sentiment evident during these protests is a serious cause of concern. However most Turkish and international media sources have limited discussion of the demonstrations to that of a people taking to the streets in defence of the secular state. There has been very limited analysis of the underlying ultra-nationalist sentiment pervading these protests. Without doubt, there are many democratic groups taking part in these demonstrations who want to support a democratic civil movement and express their fears about the threat of religion within politics. However, the exploitation of this fear by nationalist sentiment seems to have largely escaped the radar of the international community and even many participating in the demonstrations themselves.

Calls for military intervention have become commonplace during these demonstrations, with those attending seemingly forgetting the atrocities carried out by the military junta during the 1980s, the repercussions of which continued into the late 80s and early 90s in terms of pressure on civil society and civic freedoms. However, nationalist groups fan the secularists' fear that the AKP are attempting to reverse Turkey's Western orientation and create an

Islamic state. For example, images of little girls wearing headscarves in schools during the national children's festival on 23 April were presented in the media as atrocities. Since then there has been great media amplification of the issue in an attempt to keep the public wary of the threat to secularism and to national unity.

As Turkey approaches the general elections, all political parties and politicians are forming their electoral bases. The nationalist opposition to the expression of non-Turkish ethnic identity has been both reflected and further fuelled by the media and the military. The mainstream media in Turkey attacks sections of society seen to be against the status quo in Turkey. Kurdish political parties are often associated with the terrorism and the PKK by the media in order to create hostility towards them as the elections approach. This rising tide of nationalism means that the ultra-nationalist MHP could reach the 10 per cent threshold to enter parliament.

The targets of the state and the military seem to be Kurdish groups and pro-Islamic groups. Thus anyone who believes in the freedom to wear a headscarf or who does not agree with the statement 'what joy it is to be able to call yourself a Turk' is likely to be a target, if not of the state, of the media.

As the upholder of the secular Republic of Turkey during the recent events the army has become

increasingly involved in politics. The General Chief of Staff Yaşar Büyükanıt is making public announcements in relation to any and all political developments, further stoking nationalist sentiments. Even the mass demonstrations, which seem to symbolise a manifestation of civil sentiment, have been influenced by the military. They have largely been organised by the elite Kemalist group *Association of Atatürkist Thinking*, which is headed by a retired general and has the full backing of the army.

Fear of the threat to secularism and nationalism has also become increasingly dominant during the EU Accession process. In the past two years Turkey has attempted to make political, social and civil reforms in order to move towards a more democratic society and guarantee EU membership. There were some rather positive steps taken which led to improvements in its human rights record. However, there has recently been a great backlash to these reforms. The reforms have been viewed by some sections of Turkish society as a threat to the idea of a homogeneous and united republic. Nationalist groups often view the EU reforms with suspicion, especially reforms dealing with the rights of ethnic minorities.

The reforms made as part of the EU harmonisation packages were welcomed by secular sections of society who were pleased with Turkey moving closer towards the West. However there is now a

serious backlash which will be difficult to shake off, especially if the media and military continue to fuel the tension and hostility.

Conclusion

Recent events in Turkey surrounding the issue of AKP presidential nominations demonstrate the enormous importance that the principle of secularism, a founding principle of the Turkish Republic, has for many Turkish people. These events equally demonstrate, however, the degree to which secularism and nationalism remain intertwined and interdependent in the Turkish political psyche. It is the opinion of KHRP that manifestations of civil support for the republic's secular nature could, and should, be the sign of a healthy and dynamic democracy. It is of grave concern to KHRP however that the political controversy over the nomination of Abdullah Gül, and the resultant demonstrations, have been characterised not simply by manifestations of opposition to a ruling party's politics, but, more insidiously, by an underlying current of ultra-nationalist sentiment and a tacit support of a military which throughout the episode has behaved in a posturing and threatening manner. The episode has highlighted the Army's and others' continuing intolerance of free expression of religious and ethnic affiliation in Turkey. Such intolerance is justified in the name of the republic's indivisible unity and secular nature. The Turkish Army should have no

place in what is a political controversy, and its involvement in the recent Presidential question demonstrates the enormous influence that Turkey's military continues to hold in the country's politics. This recent episode has certainly not been a sign of a healthy Turkish democracy.



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The Kurdish Human Rights Project (KHRP) is an independent, non-political, non-governmental human rights organisation founded and based in London, England. KHRP is a registered charity and is committed to the promotion and protection of the human rights of all persons living with the Kurdish regions of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria and elsewhere, irrespective of race, religion, sex, political persuasion or other belief or opinion. Its supporters include both Kurdish and non-Kurdish people.