Modernization and Westernization in the Late Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic—A Prelude for Democracy?

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Today’s Turkey lives through a deep identity crisis. Several political-cultural currents fight for the future direction of the country. The culmination point will be the presidential elections in May 2007, by which the moderate Islamists of the ruling Party for Justice and Development under Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan might even gain the highest position in the Turkish state. Determined secularists are still longing for the days of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk when religion was strictly controlled by the state and restricted to the private sphere. Different Islamist currents, however, even if they do not intend to change secular law into Islamic law, at least want to base public life on a Sharia inspired rigid morality. Radical nationalists and Pan-Turkists try to reverse the integration process into the European Union and dream of a self-sufficient Turkey as dominating power in Eurasia. At the same time they still fight the demons of World War I like the Armenian question, the enmity with the Greeks and the Kurdish problem. As all this is not only a fight about politics and culture, but also about power and resources, the rifts between different strata of society, economy and state seem to widen day by day. Old power holders like the army may lose their once dominant position and new ones like Islamist business circles gained powerful positions in the society.

A radical change of the society forms the background of these conflicts. A formerly mainly agricultural society with a population first and foremost living in the countryside left their homes behind and migrated to towns, new metropolises or even Western Europe. Consequently, towns like Istanbul, Adana, Izmir or Ankara multiplied their population during the last thirty years. Nowadays, thousands of villages are dominated by elderly people or are even half emptied. This is especially true for mainly Kurdish inhabited southeastern Turkey,
where the armed conflicts between the Turkish state and Kurdish rebels led to death, destruction and flight. On the other hand, western Turkey, especially the Marmara region and Greater Istanbul became a dynamic industrial hub. Today vast suburbs inhabited by migrants with different local, religious and political background encircle the city centers. In these suburbs, the so-called gecekondu, quite often the building industry is dominated by the construction mafia. Each of these new city quarters dispose the regional origin, religious and cultural orientation, and grade of economic success of its inhabitants varying from quarters dominated by luxury apartments to no-go areas for the police or non-Islamic dressed women. Traditionally, the Turkish state fulfills the management duties of a modern state only partly and by this leaves the migrants alone in many respects. This is where Islamist organizations set in. This is especially true for the period after the military coup of 1980 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union when the Turkish left lost its competitive power against the Islamists. They focused their propaganda and manifold activities on the migrant quarters of the towns and by this gained the mayoralities in most of the major towns.

Often it is argued that the resurrection of religion and the emergence of thousands of religio-social organizations is a reaction against the pro-Western Kemalist reforms and that it was encouraged by global trends. This might be partly true. However, much more important is the described process of societal change caused by migration, urbanization and industrialization. In this framework Islam seems to serve for many Turks as a system of values, which gives life a meaning and imparts a sense of self-esteem, which helps large parts of the society to endure the tremendous changes and hardships of the last decades. We may not forget that religious networks, not to speak from Islamist organizations, and their milieus also create solidarity groups, which can be of direct help for the survival in the new metropolises. In contrast with many other Muslim countries Turkey’s Islamist opposition by and large could be integrated into to political system and by this a radicalization process did not gain momentum. The significant exception is the mainly Kurdish populated southeast where a radical grouping named Hizbollah emerged, of which one wing closely cooperated with the state against the PKK. This leads us to the question of the character of Turkey’s political regime and if the republican system, which was established after World War I, is a success story overall. To answer these questions one has to under-
stand the modernization process of the Ottoman Empire and its successor state, the Turkish Republic.

Modernization in the Islamic Ottoman Empire through the 18th and 19th centuries was caused by the loss of competitive power against the Christian (Western) European states.

After 1683, the second siege of Vienna by an Ottoman army, the Empire could never again pose a comparable threat to Christian Europe as it was before. This was partly due to growing internal problems as economic crisis, a falling state income combined with higher state expenditures, a growing weakness of the center against peripheral tendencies, and weak personalities of the Sultans. On the other hand the Renaissance, the enlightenment movement and the European expansion helped Christian Europe to set up new dynamics in science, politics, economy, and military. These led to new techniques, more effective states and armies, as well as a widened economic basis. With the expansion of Czarist Russia a new competitor emerged in the northeast of the Empire, which soon became a threat for the very existence of the Ottoman Empire by occupying the northern and eastern shores of the Black Sea coast and parts of eastern Anatolia. To counter all this the Ottomans had no other choice than to look for alternative models to reorganize their state and army.

Consequently, the modernization of the army, the administration, the fiscal system and the educational sector was oriented according to western European models and mainly organized by Western advisors, or men educated in the West or at educational facilities with European background.

It is not surprising that several parts of the Ottoman elite did not want to follow this shift away from traditional methods of ruling. Some of them understood very well that these reforms also meant a major cultural change. The superior model was no more the Islamic civilization, but the infidel West. Sometimes the reactions against the reforms even reached dramatic dimensions directly threatening the existence of the Ottoman dynasty. There were manifold reasons for this. Some social groups were losing their old positions, this was especially true for the former core group of the army, the Janissaries, or the religious functionaries, the ilmiye, which had dominated the juridical and educational sectors. Because of the bad economical situation and the incompetent administration in many parts of the Empire discontent of large parts of the population, especially of the non-
Muslims, grew steadily. However, during this modernization process the Ottomans could also fall back on a set of traditional methods of integration. The Ottoman state lasted about 600 years and, at its zenith, stretched from Budapest in the north to Yemen and Asmara in Eritrea in the south and from Algeria in the west to the steppes of southern Russia and the Caucasus in the east. It was a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural Empire governed by a mainly Muslim elite of various ethnic and religious origins by means of Islamic law—the sharia—Sultanic decisions (kanunname) and, mostly in newly conquered regions, by local customary law (‘örf).

Due to the Empire’s extension and composition, its ruling class was obliged to use various methods of political integration into the system. Therefore the despotic and autocratic character of the regime always was accompanied by methods of political integration, which today are seen as indispensable elements of a democratic regime: the rule of law or the representation of certain groups of the population by their own representatives like in the case of the recognized religious minorities. Counseling with notables was another method widely used at different levels of the administrative system. Widespread and legal was also the possibility to complain, e.g. against decisions or practices of the lower ranks of the administration.

First elements of a democratization process in the modern sense of the word were introduced between 1839 and 1876, during the so-called Tanzimat (re-ordering) period. Democratic elements of this reform process, however, were as much a by-product of modernization and westernization as an attempt to integrate unruly parts of the population and to reduce outside pressure, but not an aim by itself. The most important steps in this respect were the Sultanic reform edicts of 1839 and 1856, by which the non-Muslims received the same legal status as the Muslim subjects of the Sultan. During these years local and regional councils comprising of notables of different backgrounds convened on a regular basis for the first time. Western pressure was decisive for these reforms because the European states were interested in the continuation of the Empire. This not only served their economical and political interests, but also was aimed against the Russian intention of grasping as much Ottoman territory as possible. Another important cause for this reform pressure was the growing concern about the fate of the Christian subjects of the Ottoman Empire. During the 19th century the public debt grew also
dramatically, which lead to even more European influence on the state and the economy.

The next decisive event in this reform process was the proclamation of the first Ottoman constitution in 1876 followed by the establishment of an indirectly elected parliament. This first parliament in Ottoman history convened in 1877, but together with the constitution was suspended only some months later for twenty years until 1908. Between 1876 and 1909 the Ottoman Empire was ruled by Abdülhamit II., a kind of enlightened despot. During his reign the structural reforms of the army, the administration and the educational sector continued, but without attempts to integrate wider parts of the population via institutional participation. Instead he tried to use Sunni Islam as a kind of uniting state ideology, which was also true for foreign policy where pan-Islamism served as a tool for Ottoman interests against the Western and Russian rivals.

Up to the present to a great extent democratization in Turkey is the result of outside pressure, government policy, or the breakdown of the old regime and not an outcome of the struggle for democracy of popular movements. This does not mean that there were no pressure groups for democratization in the population and parts of the old elite, the administration or the military. This was true for the re-establishment of the constitution and the parliament in 1908 when reform minded army officers collaborated with long-time activists of different wings of the opposition. Unfortunately, the democratic spring was short-lived. In 1913 the government of the “Unionists” (so called after the Party for Union and Progress) changed to an autocratic and repressive regime, eventually leading the country into World War I.

A remarkable fact is that members of religious and ethnic minorities often were the most active parts of pro-democracy movements, be it the non-Muslims in the late Ottoman Empire or the Alevi—an anti-Sharia Muslim current comprising ten to fifteen percent of Turkey’s population—in the Turkish Republic.

Comparable with Iran, the loosening of governmental control regularly resulted in an outbreak of public political activities as could be observed after the overthrow of Sultan Abdülhamid in 1908/09, but also led to strong centrifugal tendencies in the periphery of the state’s territory, mostly by ethnic or religious minorities. Therefore, up to the present democratization is regarded by many Turks as a possible menace to the territorial integrity of the state.
The foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923 was the outcome of the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I and not of a popular revolution. However, the old regime had completely lost its legitimacy due to the defeat, the cooperation with the victorious powers and its inability to organize the defense against the attempts of some European powers and of Greece and Armenia to occupy parts of Anatolia.

Another important development was that wide parts of the modernized elite of the late Ottoman Empire regarded the Islamic religion as one of the main causes for the decline of the Ottoman state. This resulted also from their positivistic education at Western or Western-influenced educational institutions. Besides, the reactionary behavior of most parts of the Islamic clergy also contributed to their bad image in the eyes of the modernizing elite. Consequently, the Ottoman dynasty as well as Islam were widely delegitimized in the eyes of the most active and modern parts of the population. During and after the so-called war of liberation from 1919 to 1922 these circles under the leadership of the prestigious general of World War I, Mustafa Kemal Pasha, were able to gain power and founded a completely new political system—a republic theoretically based on the will of the people and no more on the decisions of the Sultan-Caliph or the pretended will of God as according to traditional Islamic political thought.

During World War I and the early years of the Republic the ethnic and religious composition of Anatolia was completely changed by the flight, expulsion and mass killings of the Armenians in eastern and central Anatolia (ca. 1,5 millions) and by the so-called population exchange with Greece, which led to the loss of their homes for more than 1,2 Million Ottoman Greeks (and 400,000 Muslims living on Greek territory). Parallel to the extinction of the Christian population of Anatolia in the 19th and early 20th century hundreds of thousands of Muslim refugees from the Balkans and the Caucasus migrated to Anatolia thereby altering the historical ethnic composition of Anatolia. The disastrous war and post-war situation led also to the flight, deprivation and death of hundreds of thousands of Anatolian Muslims. With a population of only 12 million after the war all this had a tremendous influence on all aspects of public and economic life. The open wounds of these events, of World War I and its aftermath are one of the main obstacles for democratization even today.
After the consolidation of its power the republican leadership carried out radical reforms in the political, religious and cultural fields, which led to a seemingly complete break with the imperial and Islamic past. To name only a few: abolition of the caliphate in 1924, in 1925 closure of the dervish convents, ban of the traditional headgear (fez) and change from the Islamic lunar calendar to the Georgian solar calendar, in 1926 acceptance of European civil and penal laws and civil marriage, in 1928 alphabet reform from the Arabic to the Latin script, and in 1930 communal suffrage for women followed by national suffrage in 1934. With these reforms Islam and its functionaries were completely excluded from their traditional monopolies in the educational and juridical systems, also high culture and to some extent even everyday culture was secularized and Europeanized. Formally it was the Parliament, which decided about these reforms, in reality it was the inner circle of the republican leadership, which had the decisive power.

The enforcement of the new centralist Turkish national state as well as the implementation of most of the reforms was met by severe resistance, be it by the Kurds or by deprived social classes like the clergy. But, overall the regime was never really threatened by any form of opposition. This was partly due to the charisma and sophisticated policy of the victorious leader of the war of independence 1919–22 and founder of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal, to whom the Turkish parliament in 1935 bestowed the family name Atatürk, father of the Turks. Another reason for this was also the non-existence of any realistic alternative to the republican project, which could have mobilized wider parts of the population. The Republican project was also able to attract a great number of administrative and military functionaries, which were bound together by their common experience during the war of independence and united by the newly emerged secular Turkish nationalism. Soon, the Republican establishment tried to widen its basis by the opening of People’s Houses and Village Institutes all over Anatolia in order to educate a new secular and “modern” youth. Consequently, new Turkey differed very much from Iran under the rule of Reza Shah who tried to carry out a similar reform program, but without having the personal charisma of Atatürk and such a wide social basis. The deep respect for and high esteem of the Turkish army in the Turkish population is one of the main pillars of Republican Turkey even today.
The new state was a secular republic with some democratic procedures, but especially after the consolidation of the power of the Republican People’s Party, the state party, and after an attempt to kill Atatürk in 1926 the regime became more and more autocratic, if not despotic. This was especially true for the years 1925 to 1937. The ideology of the party and the policy of its leaders at the control levers of the state in many respects reminded of the totalitarian movements of that period, be it Mussolini’s fascists or the Soviet communists. Real opposition was suppressed, state and party became one and the parliament served as camouflage for the autocratic character of the regime. Nevertheless, the acceptance of the rule of secular law, formally democratic procedures, a parliament and the mobilization of interest groups via party structures was popularized during that period.

It was World War II and again pressure from the outside world, which led to a tremendous political change in Turkey. Shortly before the end of the war neutral Turkey declared war on Germany. This was caused by the prospect of being part of the post-war world order and followed by a pro-Western political stance in order to get U.S.-American backing against the growing Soviet menace and material support for the Turkish economy. American pressure to democratize the regime coincided with a largely delegitimized Republican People’s Party. Consequently, a multi-party system was (re-)introduced in 1946 and after the elections of 1950 the oppositional Democratic Party came to power. With the rise of this party formerly marginalized social groups like the conservative traditional middle class of Anatolia gained new influence. The Democratic Party also opened new possibilities for the Islamic religion to regain some positions in the public it had lost during the 1920s and 1930s.

As mentioned above the Turkish army plays a central role in the Kemalist republic, mainly due to its historical prestige and its reputation of being the safe-guard of the nation. So, it was widely accepted by the Turkish populace that the military took over the power from the elected governments when they seemed to be unable to work for the best of the nation. The first military coup in 1960 was directed against the Democratic Party government of Adnan Menderes, who reigned more and more autocratic and seemed to threaten the secular character of the Republic. The military returned to the barracks after some months and the new constitution was the most liberal Turkey
ever had. However, the civilian politicians seemed unable to cope with the problems of the country, which led to the military intervention of 1971–1973. Unfortunately, the rapidly changing governments of the 70s could neither solve the economic problems of the population nor prevent the radicalization of large parts of the youth. Armed clashes between radical right wing groups and leftists and numerous political killings led Turkey to the edge of a civil war. So, nobody was wondering when the army once again took power, but this time more brutally and with longer lasting effects then before.

Today, the most important impetus for further democratization stems from Turkey’s wish to become member of the European Union. The integration process leads to an enormous pressure on Ankara to change many aspects of the political and juridical system. Without this outside pressure the non-governmental organizations active for more democracy inside the country hardly would have had a chance to change the anti-democratic elements of the existing system in the near future.

Conclusion

Democratization in Turkey is the outcome of a development of nearly 200 years and deeply rooted in the reforms of the late Ottoman Empire. The Republican years of the 1920s and 1930s show a mixed legacy: on the one hand the establishment of a secular national state with the rule of law and democratic procedures, on the other hand the leading role for the military in the state and an undemocratic nationalism with tremendous effects on the relations between the different ethnic and religious groups of the country.

According to many public opinion polls democratic institutions and procedures have found wide acceptance in the Turkish population. However, this generally positive picture is counterbalanced by a deeply-rooted authoritarian way of thinking and authoritarian social and political structures, be it on the family level, in the leader-centered political parties, or with the role of the military. Part of the historical legacy is also that democratic values are regarded by many as less important than principles like territorial integrity, national independence and “Turkishness,” which can bear several meanings.
A lasting problem is also the question of the relationship between state and religion. After the 1920s and 1930s, which had seen the pushing back of Islam to the private sphere, the Republican People’s Party started as early as in the 1940s to re-integrate Islam into the state and public life. The question whether this development was a step towards democracy or not is still discussed today. One important argument in this respect is that the majority of the Turkish populace was and is faithful to Islam and most of its rulings and never would have agreed to the radical anti-clerical and somewhat anti-Islamic reforms of the early Republican period. This new policy reached a climax after the military coup of 1980 after which the military leaders tried to use Sunni Islam combined with nationalism as uniting national ideology. The last step in this development was the election of the pro-Islamic Party for Justice and Development under the current leadership of Prime Minister Erdoğan. Others see these developments as the return of sinister reactionary forces, which have nothing else in mind than the destruction of democracy and the Republic.

The year 2007 is decisive for Turkey’s future development in many respects. We will learn if the major actors of the political arena learned their lessons and are willing to act according to democratic principles and the interest of their people.

Titles for further reading: