

Islam and Kemalism in Turkey (2)

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How do Islamists and Kemalists in Turkey today deal with the laicistic inheritance of the state's founder Kemal Ataturk? And what are the ideal forms of state and society which lie behind their positions? An analysis by Bekim Agai.

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New Islamic politics ? The AKP

The AKP won a landslide victory in the general election on 3rd November, 2002, and the fact that smaller parties failed to get into parliament because of the rule that a party must have 10% of the vote to qualify for any seats almost gave the AKP a two-thirds majority and meant that the years of unstable coalitions of several equally strong parties would be coming to an end. Shares went up, not least because of the AKP's political platform.

The founders of the party, centred on the current foreign minister, Abdullah Gül, and prime minister Erdoğan, had drawn up their policies taking full account of the Kemalistic reality of the country.

The AKP describes itself as middle-class, civic and conservative and compares itself with the German Christian Democrats. During the election campaign, the party presented itself as business-friendly and called for the privatisation of nationalised industries, further democratisation and more participation for civil society.

The AKP's policies on Europe

The party's policies on Europe, which have a significant effect on its domestic policies and its political philosophy, have surprised many observers, since they conform neither to the traditions of the Refah Party nor to those of classical Kemalism.

Following eighteen months of AKP rule the Turkish political system is more European than ever before. In accordance with the requirements of the EU, many laws have been passed which affect core elements of Kemalistic political philosophy.

For example, finally, after many previous attempts, there will be Kurdish-language programmes on state television. Kurdish is now also permitted in educational institutions and people may carry Kurdish names.

There have been changes too in the field of religious freedom. According to both Kemalism and the Refah Party, Turkish identity was based on a Turkish-Sunni culture. The legal recognition of other religious communities as equal with Sunni Islam is a milestone. On the two issues of language and religion, pluralism is not just tolerated, it's guaranteed by law.

Why the "Islamist" AKP has carried out these reforms and hasn't continued Erbakan's policies can best be understood in the context of developments in Islamic thought over the last ten years.

The failure of political Islam

Islamism as a revolutionary mass political ideology aiming at a complete change in the system has failed in Turkey. There are a number of reasons for this: firstly Erbakan's government didn't make the state more Islamic, it just led to a crisis in the political climate.

Turkish Islamist terrorism directed at domestic targets also had an influence. Surveys show that the number of those who are in favour of basing Turkish law on the Sharia has gone down drastically over the last few years.

In addition, the Turkish middle class which was close to Erbakan's has become more pragmatic. It is interested in Europe rather than Libya. Erdogan's first foreign trip as prime minister was appropriately to Greece. Erbakan's vision of stronger links to the Arab world has proved to be unworkable.

At the same time as these developments have come changes in the political philosophy of influential Muslim intellectuals. The idea of the Islamic state was utopian; it saw the real problems as ending with the achievement of power—after that it relied on the inner logic of its ideology. But the reality in other Muslim countries told a different story.

The Islamic state became the subject of controversy. The Islamic journalist and intellectual Ali Bulaç, for example, raised fundamental criticisms of the modern national state but also objected that the attempts at Islamic states so far have themselves been oriented towards the concept of a totalitarian, culturally homogeneous national state.

Many political realists see that Turkey will either become part of a liberal Europe, with reforms leading in a Western direction towards more freedom, or it will remain a national state under the protection of the United States—a stable outpost in the Middle East and a good example for countries like Pakistan and Afghanistan, where the rights of the people are also being sacrificed in favour of stability.

So when the European Union made a sincere offer in Helsinki in 1999, there was a majority in Turkey in favour of taking it up.

Conclusion

It must be considered that the reformist Islamists within Turkey will only be to assert themselves if Turkey is offered the challenge that comes with a realistic option that it will be able to join the EU. If negotiations fail, there must be a real fear that elements in Turkish society believed to belong to the past—not just Islamic elements—may re-emerge.

The Kemalists should see the Islamic renewal as a success for the Turkish republic and not as a danger. It's now time for Kemalism to adapt itself to the political realities if it wants to complete Mustafa Kemal's project of giving Turkey a firm place in the European community of nations. The conditions for reconciliation between the old enemies are better than ever before.