

Dr. Europe 11/08/04

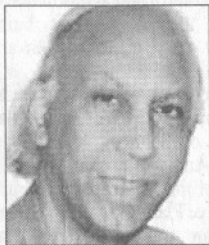
Turkish Republic Vs Otto

FARISH A NOOR'S DESCRIPTION OF GHAZI Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his comparison of modern Turkey with the Ottoman Sultanate (Bush's Turkish delight, *Daily Times* July 3, 2004) is arbitrary. The impression Mr Noor gives is that Turkey is a police state. But many of us who visit Turkey regularly and have relatives and friends there come back profoundly impressed by its unique ability to provide scope for both religious and profane freedoms. This is because the country's constitution unambiguously upholds secularism.

There is a tendency among the detractors of Turkey in the Muslim world to idealise the Ottoman Sultanate and demean the secular republic. There have been virulent statements from critics calling Atatürk a Zionist agent, a Freemason and so on. Those are outbursts from people who think anything which moved an inch from the golden age of the 7th century is a heresy and therefore a legitimate target for eradication. Mr Noor has done the same.

Informed readers know that the Turkish war of independence served as a role model for the anti-imperialist freedom-struggles in much of Asia and Africa. In South Asia all the political leaders — Jinnah, Gandhi, Nehru — praised Atatürk's great contribution to social reform. Thanks to Atatürk's progressive vision, the decadent feudal-harem culture — at that time prevalent from Morocco to Indonesia — began to crumble wherever modernising elites replaced the old feudal incumbents. Between 1923, when he abolished the caliphate, and his death in 1938, Atatürk carried out a number of radical reforms whose overall impact on

COMMENT



ISHTIAQ AHMED

None would dispute that the Ottomans were great conquerors and left behind impressive architectural monuments.

But from the 18th century onwards, that empire began to decay and disintegrate

Turkey has been benign. It is, however, true that although Atatürk was a most popular ruler as were those who emulated him — Habib Bourguiba, Ben Bella, Nasser etc — they did not practise multi-party democracy. Their model remained top-down reforms and modernisation.

But the moot point is that the opposition to such regimes did not represent a democratic alternative. It is at this point that we need to invest original and daring intellectual labour. We need to pose the following question: Why do Muslim societies fail to develop a strong and stable base for robust democracy?

That Turkey has not developed entirely as a robust democracy is not Atatürk's fault. He is on record as wanting Turkey to become a modern Western, liberal society and admired the British system. The problem is that one cannot foster liberal democracy only from the above. It needs a strong social constituency to sustain it. It further requires that individual freedom and separation of state and religion become widely shared values of the political culture. Such a constituency is weakly developed in the Muslim world. Therefore, during this period of transition one may have to settle for modernising regimes which are committed to democracy but control the political system so that it is not captured by the Islamists. Else, we may hope that Islamist regimes will eventually learn to become democracies at some point in the future.

There is little doubt that Turkey is the most advanced country in the Muslim world destined to become a full-fledged democracy. The secular establishment must develop enough confidence to let people elect governments that are not openly hostile to the ideological foundations of the state. Similarly, parties such as the AKP (which is in power) must understand that they can exercise

man Sultanate

power only if they respect the secular basis of the polity. In this process a workable synthesis is likely to emerge.

None would dispute that the Ottomans were great conquerors and left behind impressive architectural monuments. But from the 18th century onwards, that empire began to decay and disintegrate. This was largely because it failed to create the material and intellectual basis for a modern society.

From the time of Murat I (1360-1389) a personalised, centralised structure of power was established. It aimed at making the bureaucratic functionaries directly dependent and answerable to the sultan. The method adopted to acquire recruits to this structure was periodic raids on Christian villages in the Balkans in which male youths were separated from their families, brought to Constantinople, converted to Islam and isolated from the rest of society and groomed to serve the sultan. Some of them were recruited into the army and became known as the *Janissaries*. Others joined the imperial bureaucracy while some were emasculated and sent to serve in the elaborate harems. Technically, these men were slaves of the sultan and thus his private property. He could take their lives and confiscate their possessions. Normally, therefore, they were in no position to challenge the sultan's authority. On the other hand, the sultan could employ them to crush all opposition.

In general, ownership of land remained with the state. Those allotted fiefs could collect taxes and supervise the peasants and in return provide soldiers. Economic policy did not seek to foster a

Muslim merchant class. Rather the ethnic minorities of Greeks, Armenians and Jews monopolised commerce and international trade. These groups were alienated from the state apparatuses and did not have widespread cultural linkages in the Muslim society. Consequently, they were unable to convert themselves into a significant political force in society.

Given this situation, no autonomous power bases evolved either among the functionaries of the state or in the larger society or in a strategic class that could lead a struggle against the despotic rule. Everyone was technically and in reality dependent on the sultan. A leading Turkish historian Ergun Özbudun sums up the implications of such factors in the following words:

"Thus, with no feudalism comparable to that of Western Europe, no hereditary aristocracy, no independent church hierarchy, no strong and independent merchant class, no powerful guilds, no self-governing cities, and with a ruling institution (i.e. the administration and the army) staffed with slaves, the Ottoman Empire represented a close approximation of an Oriental despotism." (The Development of Representative and Democratic Government in Özbudun, E. (ed.), *Perspectives on Democracy in Turkey*, Ankara: Turkish Political Science Association, 1988, p. 4).

The author is an associate professor of Political Science at Stockholm University. He is the author of two books. His email address is Ishtiaq.Ahmed@statsvet.su.se