**Turkiye through the ages**

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History remembers Emperor Constantine as one who legalized and made Christianity integral to the Roman Empire. He is also credited with laying the foundations of post-classical European civilization.In May 330 AD, he relocated his capital to Byzantium and the Eastern Roman Empire became the Byzantine Empire. Byzantium was renamed Constantinople – the city of Constantine. It would be 1,123 years later that on the warm afternoon of May 29, 1453, a victorious 21-year-old Sultan Mehmed II would enter Constantinople, consigning the Byzantine Empire to the annals of history.

Within a few years, Sultan Mehmed extended his Ottoman Empire to over 2.2 million square kilometres. With a literary sense matching his military genius, the sultan’s vast library had – apart from Homer’s Iliad and Ptolemy’s ancient world map – books on religion, astronomy and sciences authored by the greatest names of those times. Constantinople, now home to 72 nationalities, became a refuge of the world. In a span of 29 years, Sultan Mehmed created an Ottoman Empire that would leave an indelible mark on history.Five centuries later Mustafa Kemal Pasha subdued the British and French forces in Anatolia. Dubbed Gazi Kemal Ataturk, he proclaimed the creation of modern Turkey and abolished the caliphate by expelling the last Ottoman sultan to Paris. He replaced Arabic script with Roman, forbade azaan in Arabic, abolished the Hijri calendar, outlawed salaam as a greeting, persecuted the Sufi dervish order and ordered the fez to be replaced by trilby hats. Ayasofya – its beautiful prayer carpet torn to shreds and its school demolished – was decreed a museum.

Turkey, the seat of the Ottoman Empire, saw the imposition of a secular identity dubbed Kemalism with a single arbiter of political power, Turkey’s military. In his putsch for a secular Turkey, Kemal forced a nation rooted in Islamic history to ape Western norms and culture. It created a Turkey bereft of identity. Mustafa Kemal, the debonair westernized Turk chose to live in the Ottoman Dolmabahce Palace till his demise in 1938 that would see the culmination of his 15-year rule.In the 1950 elections, Adnan Menderes’s Democrat Party won a landslide victory and also won the subsequent elections. As prime minister, Menderes relaxed some Kemalist edicts. Azaan was allowed in Arabic again, new religious schools opened up whereas the tenure of military service was decreased. In 1960, an infuriated General Cemal Gursel-led military took over with the general occupying both presidential and prime ministerial offices.

A pro-military constitution was adopted after getting it endorsed by a fraudulent referendum. Menderes was arrested along with president Celal Bayar, foreign minister Fatin Zorlu and finance minister Hasan Polatkan; all four were sentenced to death. President Bayar’s sentence was commuted to imprisonment because of his age. In September 1961, Adnan Menderes and his two cabinet colleagues were executed. The brutal message: no Islamic or democratic expression whatsoever would be tolerated.The following overly oppressive years saw elected prime ministers repeatedly forced out for not towing the military’s line. The economy nose-dived, and violent clashes saw thousands perish. Children were prevented from going to religious schools, a ban on women wearing headscarves was enforced and some political parties were banned.

In 1994, despite years of repression, a young Recep Tayyip Erdogan was elected as Istanbul’s mayor. The once glorious Constantinople was now an impoverished and decaying city. Erdogan solved the two perennial problems faced by the residents. He supplied freshwater and had the streets cleared of garbage. He also paid off the $2 billion debt owned by the Istanbul Municipality and attracted investments worth $4 billion. In 2001, Erdogan and a few others established the Justice and Development Party. Two years later, it won an outright majority in the general elections. The rest, as they say, is history.Five years ago, Turkish President Erdogan surpassed Mustafa Kemal’s 15 years in Turkiye’s top post. Last week, he won his fifth election in a row. This remarkable achievement is a testament to the trust he has earned by propelling Turkiye to a $1 trillion economy, the 19th largest in the world. Erdogan’s election slogan was ‘Turkiye Century’ entailing an inclusive society with robust economic and defence development. Kemal Kilicdaroglu, his main opponent, was a proponent of secularism and had vowed to “kick all refugees out of Turkiye” if voted to power.

High inflation and a bleak economic outlook since the last few years could not dampen the pro-Erdogan sentiment. This is because he has displayed a deep commitment to the development of education, healthcare, transportation and infrastructure. He has taken a firm and just stance on contentious international issues. In education, Turkiye is placed highest among OECD countries in terms of enrolment of school-going children. In healthcare, Sehir Hastaneleri – a chain of city hospitals – offers top-quality health services across the country. The defence industry too has progressed admirably in the production of aircraft, armoured vehicles, drones and naval vessels.However, President Erdogan’s most notable achievement – a Herculean feat indeed – has been his transforming a military-dictated Turkiye into a vibrant democracy. This was evident in the unprecedented thwarting of a 2016 military coup attempt. On President Erdogan’s call, millions swarmed into the streets of Istanbul and other major cities. In a matter of hours, the unarmed people forced the coup perpetrators into submission; 265 people lost their lives, over 2000 were wounded.

This fervour and upbeat faith in democracy reinforced itself in last week’s free and fair election that saw a truly exceptional 87.4 per cent voter turnout. This was despite the recent devastating earthquake that saw nearly 45,000 perish with 160,000 buildings containing 520,000 apartments razed to the ground. This is the grit, courage and faith that defines the Turkiye of today, a truly vibrant nation hailing a truly delivering democracy.

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