

Is Turkey Still A Secular Muslim Model?

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Until now, Turkey has modeled how an Islamic state can modernize and democratize. When the Ottoman Empire crumbled after World War I, the Turks retreated to what they considered their original homeland in Anatolia, once the homeland of the Byzantine Christian Roman Empire until the Ottomans conquered it in 1453. Constantinople was renamed Istanbul.

Under cover of World War I, the Turkish military carried out the century's first ethnic cleansing, a deliberate massacre of the Christian Armenian population that had lived there for millennia, well before the Turks arrived.

This nasty history aside, modern Turkey was midwifed by a respected Turkish general, Kamal Ataturk, who devoted his life to transforming the abysmal remnant of Ottoman rule into a modern, European-oriented state. In his republic, women discarded the veil and men the fez (a brimless hat that allowed men to touch their foreheads to the ground in Muslim prayer). He changed the alphabet from the Arabic to the Latin, which greatly increased literacy and was another blow at Islam. Without Arabic, Turks could no longer understand the Koran. Ataturk admitted that if he could free Turks from Islam altogether, he would, Islam was an impediment to modernizing and westernizing.

In neighboring Iran, Reza Shah Pahlavi had a similar problem in trying to modernize an even more backward country. He also unveiled women and outlawed the fez. But he had more difficulty in breaking the stifling hold of Shiite Islam on Iran. He tried public education, a civil service, and modern banking and jurisprudence to wrench these institutions from the grip of the clerics. The country did start modernizing, even more rapidly under Reza Shah's son, until the 1979 Islamic Revolution ousted the Pahlavis. Today Iran has become a monstrous mixture of the worst of Islam and the most fraudulent of democracies. Iran's next government, after an inevitable revolution, will not be Islamist.

For most of a century, Ataturk's efforts proved more successful than those of Reza Shah. Turkey's resolutely secular military, a much-respected institution, intervened periodically when Turkish democracy spun out of control or when Islam threatened a resurgence. But demographics on the ground, little noticed, were threatening secular Turkey by stealth, through democratic elections. The poor, pious, and ignorant Turks living in the underdeveloped eastern part of Turkey have been pouring into the large cities, including Ankara and Istanbul, where their votes have brought to power an Islamist government under Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. In the June 12 election, Erdogan came close to getting the majority he would need to be able to change the constitution without challenge from secular parties.

Erdogan has intimidated the military with threats of state trials for treason so that there is no longer a military to protect the secular state. In addition, the free press is under attack. Turkey has more than 2,000 journalists under prosecution and 4,000 others under investigation. The government is blocking thousands of websites it considers insulting, which means either insulting to the government, or insulting to Islam, and has jailed offenders.

Even The Economist (May 14, 2011) had to acknowledge that Turkey's mildly Islamic government is hypocritical regarding its so-called reforms to protect women. Human Rights Watch notes that 42% of women over 15 have suffered physical or sexual violence, vulnerable even when pregnant. Turkey and Russia are now rated the worst in Europe for women's battery and murder rates. Erdogan wants women to have babies, not divorce, and stay at home (Economist June 11). Turkey's feminists are outraged. Turkey is now 126 among 134 countries in the 2010 Global Gender Gap Index.

Fifty percent of the electorate voted for secular opposition parties, but Erdogan's party won a plurality, giving him a third term as President. He didn't win enough votes to revise the constitution without input from the secularist parties. For the moment, an Erdogan dictatorship is not in the cards. But with Erdogan in charge, Turkey is no longer one of the good guys, with serious consequences for Turks and the rest of the Middle East.

670 words

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