

Western Kemalists do not Understand Turkey!

Some years ago I had an experience that a Turkish Kemalist would have liked a lot! I was invited by a British colleague (a solicitor, lawyer) to his home for a dinner. He was a person who was very fond of history and had a keen interest in Turkey. Our conversation was very nice at the beginning but after a while, the atmosphere became quite tense. As we were talking about Turkish history, inevitably, we touched upon the subject of Kemalism and its effect on Turkey. I said, "I believe many problems we face in Turkey now have their roots in the founding process of Turkish Republic". I felt my comments about Kemalism made my colleague uncomfortable, and at the end of the night he was quite angry and yelling, "You do not understand Atatürk, Orhan!" That night it dawned on me that Atatürkism and Kemalism have many supporters not only within the borders of Turkey but in Western countries too, and that some of these supporters were really huge fans of Atatürk and the "revolution" he and his friends brought about in our country. As time goes by I have come to understand that what I witnessed that night ten years ago in London was not an isolated incident and that many Westerners to some degree see Turkey and the role of the Atatürk in a similar way.

Turkish Kemalists may like this story in that they may find affirmation of their understanding of the "Turkish revolution". For me, however, this Western attitude is quite illuminating for analyzing why many Westerners are grossly failing in their attempt to understand Turkey. Westerners have a fundamental misunderstanding of the role of Atatürk and the Kemalist revolution because they presuppose the existence of some facts which did not exist in this country.

Wrong presumptions...

First of all there is this presupposition that Turkey before Atatürk was a backward country which was under Islamic law. A second and equally wrong presumption Westerners have in their mind is that the Turkish Republic was a brand new state which had no connection with the Ottoman Empire whatsoever. They think that basically there was an archaic state and political system and Kemalists abolished this system and replaced it with a new one which was in line with western values. If your presumptions are wrong, your ideas and theories based on these presumptions are inevitably seriously defective. Let us look at the first presumption. On the basis of what criteria can we assert that Ottoman Empire was a backward system in comparison with the newly founded republic? With the Republic in Turkey we established a nation state, but is this a step forward for an empire that was multinational, multi-ethnic? The fundamental mistake that Westerners are making in this analysis is thinking that the Ottoman Empire was a state ruled by religious law, namely by the sharia!

Nothing could be more wrong than this!

There is not one single example during the whole of Ottoman history of the Sultan not being able to justify a move with the support of the Şeyhülislam, the top cleric. For the Ottomans, the state was the first and foremost concept, and everything else was in the service of the state and its presumed interests, including religion. Ottoman sultans were quite successful in

covering all their actions with a religious cover. They even got approval from the religious authorities for the heinous crimes they committed such as the slaughter of their brothers, which obviously in no way can be justified by the Koran, the holy book of Muslims.

Therefore in this sense Islam had never ruled the Ottoman system but to the contrary, Islam and religion were used by the Ottoman ruling elite as a strong legitimizing tool. Likewise, for the legal system Islamic rules were confined to the area of private law. In this context we should understand that the “secularism” which was strongly held to by the newly established republic was not a tool to abolish the “sharia” but was part of an attempt to “create” a nation state! The Ottoman Empire conducted its relations with its citizens through the congregations (including non-Muslim ones) to which these citizens belonged. Turkish secularism served two purposes in this sense. One, it broke the power of the Ottoman Sultan who was supposed to be the Caliph, the religious leader of Muslims. Secondly, the republic put an end to the Ottoman multi-ethnic, multi-religious structure by destroying the relations between the state and the congregations (including non-Muslim ones).

Actually if you look at the history of the Turkish Republic you can observe clearly that Turkish state assumes the role of “atheist” when it deals with its Muslim citizens and the role of “Sunni Muslim” when it relates with its non-Muslims and Alevi citizens. Secularism in Turkey has never been a liberalizing tool; to the contrary it has been turned into an oppressive tool in the hands of Kemalist elites... “Western Kemalists” disregard the particularities of Turkey and try to understand it from an orientalist viewpoint as a result of their misconceptions about the Ottoman state and political life in that era. Ottoman Empire was not a backward Islamic state. Its imperial vision was much broader than today's nation state in Turkey. It was a mosaic of religious and ethnic diversity. After 80 years of the establishment of the Republic, it is really difficult to say that, in terms of mentality we are more advanced than the Ottomans.

The other thing I would like to mention is that many things are alive today coming from the Ottoman Era, for example the disease which had emerged in the last decades of the Empire, the Unionist mentality (Ittihat ve Terakki or “Union and Progress”) is still very alive and continues to affect our lives very deeply.

Consequently, Western Kemalists will not be able to understand today's Turkey unless they get rid of the orientalist stereotypes in their mind that the Ottoman Empire was a backward system and that the Republic is a purely civilized system. There is no such thing; we succeeded in keeping all of the Empire's pathetic political habits while leaving aside its richness. This is what we are suffering today...

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This essay has been taken from Orhan Kemal Cengiz's "Turkey and The World Around It: From A Democracy and Human Rights Perspective"

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