

Kemalism and the Republican People's Party (CHP)



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Abstract From the late 18th century onward, the twin revolutions of industrialization and nationalism posed existential threats to multireligious, multiethnic, multicultural territorial empires like those of the Hapsburgs and the Ottomans. During this period, the imperial ruling elite responded to these new challenges using various ideological interventions. In the Ottoman Empire, these were, respectively, Ottomanism, Islamism, and Turkism. Kemalism is the offspring of this turbulent process, borne out of the rise and fall of the three ideologies of Ottomanism, Islamism, and Turkism and the experience of a decade of war and destruction between 1912 and 1922. It emerged as the ideology of revolutionary Westernization from above, conceived and carried out by the modernized intelligentsia of a largely premodern society.

Keywords Turkey · Kemalism

Where should we locate Kemalism in the genealogy of governing ideologies of the Ottoman Empire and Turkey?

From the late 18th century onward, the twin revolutions of industrialization and nationalism posed existential threats to multireligious, multiethnic, multicultural territorial empires like those of the Hapsburgs and the Ottomans. During this period, the imperial ruling elite responded to these new challenges using various ideological interventions. In the Ottoman Empire, these were, respectively, Ottomanism, Islamism, and Turkism.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, a group of Ottoman bureaucrats and intellectuals sought to keep the empire's territories intact and its subjects content

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through a series of Westernizing reforms, particularly in the education and justice systems. They promoted a civic Ottoman identity, whereby all subjects of the empire would be treated as equal citizens before the law, regardless of their faith (Çiçek 2010). But it was too late; these reforms failed to stem the rising tide of nationalism, especially among the Christian populations of the Balkans. The Greeks rose against the sultan and became independent in 1829, followed by Serbia, then Bulgaria, and so on.

They also proved deeply unpopular with the empire's Muslims, who, thanks to the Ottoman *millet* (religious community) system, had enjoyed a superior legal status over non-Muslims for centuries, but had their social status threatened with the rise of a wealthy and European-backed non-Muslim bourgeoisie. The failure of Ottomanism and many Christian uprisings led to an attempt to forge a new bond among the empire's diverse Muslim communities. The rise and decline of Islamism followed the fate of its main sponsor, Sultan Abdülhamid II (r. 1876–1909). Its final collapse came with the British-backed Arab uprising against the Ottoman Empire in 1916 and the advent of World War I.

The third ideology, Turkism, became the empire's final governing idea following the coup d'état of January 1913, which brought to power the Committee of Union and Progress (*İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti*), the radical wing of the Young Turk movement. Inspired by the pan-ideologies of Europe and Russia (some of its main ideologues, such as Yusuf Akçura, had escaped persecution in tsarist Russia) the Turkists imagined a land for all ethnic Turks, called Turan, extending from the Adriatic Sea to the Bering Strait (Ersoy 2010). It was discredited with the Ottoman defeat and the annihilation of the Anatolian Armenians in World War I.

Kemalism is the offspring of this turbulent process, borne out of the rise and fall of the three ideologies of Ottomanism, Islamism, and Turkism and the experience of a decade of war and destruction between 1912 and 1922. It emerged as the ideology of revolutionary Westernization from above, conceived and carried out by the modernized intelligentsia of a largely premodern society.

How much did the Kemalists borrow from their Young Ottoman and Young Turk predecessors? What was the Kemalist vision for Turkey and to what extent were they successful in bringing this vision to life?

In terms of cadres and ideology, Kemalism's closest next of kin is the Committee of Union and Progress and their Turkism. After all, almost all leading Kemalists, including Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) himself, were former Unionists. But there are two crucial differences between the political program of the Unionists and the Kemalists. The first is that the Kemalists did not make irredentist claims based on the patronage of all ethnic Turks. Unlike Unionist leaders like Enver Pasha, the Ottoman War Minister during WWI, who went chasing pan-Turkist utopian dreams in the Caucasus and Central Asia, Mustafa Kemal had no interest in the so-called external Turks. The disasters caused by the Turkist utopia were still fresh in the minds of Mustafa Kemal and others. These included not only shocking military debacles during WWI, most notably in Sarıkamış on the Caucasian front, where nearly an entire army led by vainglorious Enver perished under harsh winter

conditions, but also the catastrophic fate of the Ottoman Christians. Ottoman officers mobilizing against the empire's post-WWI occupation, including Mustafa Kemal, were aware of the violence the Unionist government had unleashed upon the Armenians during the war and were troubled by the potential fallout on the Turkish state's international standing and claim to sovereignty.¹

They focused, instead, on nation building within defined boundaries, which more or less corresponded to the borders of modern Turkey, plus parts of western Thrace and northern Iraq. This was, of course, a pragmatic decision, first, as Muslims now constituted an overwhelming majority of the population within these boundaries, and second, as any claim on external Turks would have brought the Kemalists in conflict with the Soviet Union. Let us not forget that the Bolsheviks had provided crucial financial and military assistance to the Anatolian resistance led by Mustafa Kemal and fellow patriotic officers against the post-WWI occupation of Ottoman lands, also known as the Turkish War of Independence, 1919–1922.

The second difference is the idea of a *republic*, which was absent in the Unionists' thinking. Enver's ambitions most probably included being crowned sultan. Mustafa Kemal, in contrast, appears to have regarded republicanism as the epitome of civilized government. He abolished the Ottoman monarchy and declared Turkey a republic in 1923, even though this was not a popular idea either among the populace or even among his fellow officers. That he went on to become a sultan-like president does not historically present a contradiction, as few countries during this period associated republicanism with democracy, much less with liberal democracy. We are talking about the interwar era of the 1920s and 1930s, when totalitarianism increasingly became the international zeitgeist, especially after the Great Depression of 1929.

The Kemalists shared with their Young Ottoman predecessors, who espoused Ottomanism and advocated for constitutional government during the final quarter of the 19th century, the belief in achieving modernity through Westernization. This was Mustafa Kemal's ultimate goal. Ending foreign (Western) military occupation and constructing a Turkish nation-state were prerequisites to achieving modernity. To be modern, the dominant thinking went, one needed to *become* Western, and to be Western one had to have an independent national state and identity.

Like many other state-led nation-building projects, the attempt to forge a homogenous national identity on multicultural communities was carried out through assimilation (of non-Turkish Muslims) and ethno-religious cleansing (of non-Muslims). In fact, this process had already started in earnest under the Unionists and continued throughout the republic (Zürcher 2010). It has only been

¹Mustafa Kemal denounced pan-Turkist irredentism in a speech to the Grand National Assembly in Ankara on 1 December 1921: "Gentlemen, we drew the animosity of the entire world upon this country and this nation because of the grand and chimerical things we said we would do but didn't. [...] Instead of provoking our enemies by chasing notions that we will not and cannot realise, let us return to our natural and legitimate boundaries. Let us know our limits. For, gentlemen, we are a nation who wants life and independence. And only for this should we sacrifice our lives." (Arsan 1989: 216; quote translated by Akkoyunlu).

partially successful and remains incomplete to this day, having created many victims and sources of resentment and resistance against the Turkish state, which still constitute the main points of tension in Turkey's politics and society.

When did the Kemalists lose their grip over Turkey's state and society? Can we still talk about a Kemalist Turkey after the Democrat Party victory of 1950, during the Cold War, or after the 1980 coup? Or was it finally dismantled with the AKP government in the 2000s?

Kemalism was a product of its time. But the times changed fundamentally after the Second World War. The defeat of fascism and Nazism, and the rise of the United States as a global superpower promoting democracy and capitalism, led to a division within the ruling elites in Turkey, all of whom were then part of the CHP. Led by Celal Bayar, a prominent former Unionist who became prime minister in Atatürk's final years (1937–1939), and the charismatic Adnan Menderes (prime minister, 1950–1960), a group of CHP members influenced by this change went on to form the Democratic Party, which came to power in 1950 in the first competitive multiparty election.

In other words, both the Democratic Party government—which ruled Turkey for a decade, aligned it with the US axis, and turned increasingly authoritarian in its final years—and the opposition CHP—which put up stubborn resistance to the DP under the leadership of former President İsmet İnönü (1938–1950)—were in fact led by Kemalists. Yet they had rival interpretations of the Kemalist ideology due to its internal contradictions, and, therefore, the contradictions inherent to Turkey's position in the changing world. One internal contradiction, for instance, concerned the state's role over the economy. Mustafa Kemal favored a relatively liberal approach in the 1920s, supporting the rise of a national bourgeoisie. But that had to change with the Great Depression of 1929 and the global rise of statism in the 1930s. So both the economic liberals in the DP and the statist in the CHP could justify their rival position with reference to Kemalism and Mustafa Kemal himself.

Ultimately it was the military-bureaucratic wing of the state that stepped into halt Kemalist Turkey's soft landing into the post-WWII world order. The bureaucrats and the officers, especially the junior ones who carried out the coup d'état of May 27, 1960, opposed the DP's political excesses. Crucially, they also lost out severely because of the DP's economic policies, especially after the currency devaluation and crisis of 1958. As a child, I remember cheering for this coup, which brought down the DP and ended in Menderes' execution. But in hindsight, it was a most unfortunate turning point that not only set the stage for future military interventions and kept the bulk of Kemalists frozen in time, but also, in my view, prevented this soft landing into the postwar era.

From 1960 onwards, we see a continual power struggle between elected officials and appointed bureaucrats and officers, who saw themselves as the custodians of the Kemalist order and justified their interventions in the name of safeguarding Atatürk's legacy, however this legacy was defined. Changing or amending the constitution after every military intervention, the custodians made sure they always had the upper hand over elected governments. This arrangement changed with the

rise of the AKP in the 2000s. The AKP government did put an end to this arrangement, but Erdoğan has since replaced it with something more terrible.

You mentioned the collapse of the Islamist ideology during World War I. But Islamism experienced a revival in Turkey after the 1960s. It became a major political force in the 1990s and the dominant ideology by the 2000s. Islamism and Kemalism are often seen as two irreconcilable poles in Turkish politics, the ideological antitheses of one another. How do they differ, and where do they converge, in their approach to state and society?

Kemalism was the ideology of secular nation building, of creating a single, homogenous Turkish national identity. Nationalism, by definition, is intolerant of pluralism and tries either to assimilate or eliminate those who openly espouse a different identity. In contrast, the Islamists look back to a premodern arrangement: the *millet* system of the Ottoman Empire in which religious communities were legally recognized as distinct and autonomous groups under the sovereign's rule. In this sense, Islamists can be much more accommodating toward (religious) minorities than the Kemalists, at least in theory. But in the Ottoman Empire that accommodation came with a price: the acceptance of an unequal status before the law vis-à-vis Muslims. In short, inferior status in exchange for recognition.

In Kemalism, on the other hand, we could talk about a promise of equality before the law in exchange for subdual of identities. This is what Mustafa Kemal implied when he said, "Happy is he who calls himself a Turk," meaning, accept the new Turkish identity and you can enjoy the benefits of a full citizen. Of course, this only applied to non-Turkish Muslims, such as the Kurds. Non-Muslims could not become Turks; they were legally defined as minorities by the Lausanne Treaty of 1923, the legitimizing text of the Turkish republic (Özkırımlı and Sofos 2008). So the *millet* system is actually at the root of Kemalist nationalism too.

Again, this is all in theory. In practice, neither did the Kemalists truly extend equal citizenship to non-Turkish Muslims, nor have the Islamists displayed a great deal of tolerance toward non-Muslims. When possible, both groups used state power to impose their singular will on society and crush dissent. In this sense, they are not too different from each other.

However, in contemporary Turkey under President Erdoğan, I don't think we can meaningfully talk about Islamism as the governing ideology any longer. As Erdoğan has come to dominate Turkey's politics, his ego and hubris have overtaken the cause of Islamism. Therefore, in the context of Turkey today, instead of Islamism, it is more appropriate to talk about *Erdoğanism*, which is little more than leadership cult, rather than a coherent ideology.

Ironically, what the Erdoğanists are trying to achieve in Turkey looks not so much like a revival of the Ottoman Empire, as they often claim, but rather like a return to the autocratic arrangement of the 1930s, with its strictly hierarchical vision of one leader, one party, and one people. Whether this is what Erdoğan always aimed for, or if he changed his mind along the way, moving from being a genuine Islamist to a conservative reformist and finally to an autocrat, is an issue of endless polemic in Turkey.

The CHP was established by Mustafa Kemal as the young republic's main political vehicle for mediating between the state and the people. But since the end of the single-party era in 1950, with the exception of a brief surge in popularity under Bülent Ecevit in the 1970s, it has failed to capture the imagination of large swathes of the population. It has been the main parliamentary opposition party since 2002, but has almost no expectation of being in government. What do you make of this underwhelming electoral performance and what does it mean for democracy in Turkey?

Kemalism was the project of reforming the state and society from above, carried out by the modernized intelligentsia in a largely premodern setting. One of the six principles of Kemalism—populism—was put into practice with the express aim of acting “for the people, despite the people.” It is little wonder that a party founded on such a premise and mission would struggle to adapt to popular politics in a multiparty electoral setting.

What Bülent Ecevit briefly succeeded in doing in the early 1970s, as the new leader of the CHP and as prime minister, was to replace this elitist attitude with a more relatable social democratic platform that reflected both the spirit of the times and the socioeconomic needs of larger segments of the population. He framed his politics as “for the people, *with* the people,” not despite them.

Of course, we should remember that what made Ecevit temporarily a hero in the eyes of so many people was not only the bread-and-butter politics of the CHP. It was also very much his role as head of government ordering the military operation into Cyprus in 1974 (Oran 2010). He was dubbed the “Conqueror of Cyprus” and his popularity soared for the first time above 40% in the following election. Offering a sacrifice on the altar of nationalism has always been a guaranteed way of shoring up popular support, especially in otherwise difficult times. This is something that populist politicians like Menderes or Erdoğan know well and exploit masterfully.

The CHP of today has been suffering from a different but not entirely unrelated malaise (Ciddi 2009). For years the party has been split into two wings: anachronists who look back to the single-party era of the 1930s with nostalgia and those who are in tune with the social democratic norms of our time. Not being able to fully reconcile or formally divorce, these two poles give the party a schizophrenic character. One side supports the EU, the other side views EU reforms as a plot to weaken secularist Turkey. Some speak up for minority rights, others stick steadfast to nationalist bans under the guise of anti-imperialism. Trying to be both pro- and anti-globalization, social democratic and nationalist at the same time, it ends up being none of them. As a result, it has become a stagnant party, not going away, but not seriously challenging the government either. And this is one of the pillars that enables the Erdoğanist regime to carry on: no meaningful rival.

What do the key symbols of the republic's foundational period represent in today's Turkey? I have in mind, for instance, the Atatürk flags at the Gezi Park protests in 2013 or even at some of the HDP rallies during 2015. Can these symbols serve as popular banners of a secular, democratic, and inclusive Turkey in the 21st century?

Symbols represent what people see in them. Of course, as the world changes, so can the meanings associated with flags, figures, or slogans. For decades, the face of Atatürk, present in every schoolyard, classroom, and public office around the country, symbolized the omnipresent authority of the Kemalist state. For many a Kurd or devout Muslim, that face was—and still is—a symbol of the suppression of their identity or faith. It is not impossible to change that perception, but it would take a lot of time and effort, as it touches on many open wounds and deep-seated resentments. And in Turkey, far from healing our wounds, we have a tendency to dig them even deeper.

Yet at the same time, the context in which such symbols are being used is changing. Previously the symbol of state authority, the face of Atatürk is now used in opposition to an increasingly repressive political authority. In the mid-2000s, it was part of the monochrome secularist rallies against the AKP and the West, including the liberal democratic norms championed by the European Union. During Gezi, it became part of a colorful protest against a government that, in pursuit of its dream of a new Ottoman Empire, violated the very basic democratic rights and liberties of its citizens. Perhaps we could say that in Gezi, Atatürk came to symbolize modernity, understood in the context of the EU and the 21st century, and not in terms of a nostalgia for the interwar years. In a sense, it caught up with the times.

What made Gezi or some of the pro-Kurdish HDP rallies you mentioned special was not the presence of a single symbol or flag, but the presence of many flags, many symbols, and people from very different, even clashing backgrounds, all in the same square. Remember that famous photograph in Gezi of a Kemalist, a Turkish nationalist, and a supporter of the Kurdish movement, standing side by side? That was the kind of synthesis that made Gezi such a powerful moment and, of course, such a potent threat to Erdoğan's hegemonic ambitions. It showed that on their own, no single symbol, party, flag, or person can symbolize the vision of a democratic, pluralistic Turkey. It can only be symbolized by a synthesis, a picture of pluralistic coexistence itself.

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