

# The Consequences of Ataturk's Secularization on Turkey

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## Abstract

Mustafa Kamal Ataturk was known as one of the important figures responsible in making new modern Turkey. Resulting from his modernization and secularization process, there were several consequences upon Turkish nations in particular that related to social and religious as well as political aspects. This paper discusses some of those consequences in the contexts of modern Turkey. Using a secondary data analysis, published materials written by scholars and writers in the field, the study found that Kemal's reforms had totally brought a new system of life based on the western style whilst rejecting Islamic tradition and its culture. This includes his policy to terminate the political role of Islam or taking Islam out of politics. Kemal's modernization could be regarded as one of the main factors for the social and religious changes in modern Turkey.

**Keywords:** Islam, Modern Turkey, Secularization

## 1. Introduction

After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey began to emerge as a newly established republic under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk (1881-1938) whose administration adopted Western norms and culture to create a new society and nation-state. After World War I, the country progressed in the spirit of Kemalist ideology thus becoming a modern, Westernized republic with a parliamentary government. Kemal's ideology, has one important goal: to raise Turkish nation, society, politics, education, and institutions to the level of Western civilization. As Hakan (2005) argues, Turkey pursues its overall goal, modernization, and its more specific goal, membership in the European Union. Despite the many promises and systematic process of modernization, Kemal's revolution for the modernization of Turkey to some other extents, brought many consequences to the Turkish people socially, religiously and politically including the rejection of the Islamic traditions. This paper discusses those consequences and to see how Ataturk's secularization finally eliminated the Turkish own Islamic heritage and traditions arguing that the progress of a nation need not to eliminate its own heritage and traditions as happen to some other countries.

## 2. Methods

This paper aims to analyze the consequences of Ataturk's secularization in Turkey. Data for this study is based on secondary data and materials written on Modern Turkey and Kemal's Reforms in particular. Using content analysis technique and a descriptive approach, Kemal's life and his modernization and secularization process are reviewed and analyzed. Content analysis refers to any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages (Stemler, 2001). A descriptive analysis is also employed by examining those works which manifest Kemal's thought and reforms besides identifying some major themes relevant to the study objectives.

## 3. Result and Discussions

### 3.1 Mustafa Kemal's Life and Reforms

Mustafa Kemal later known as 'Kemal Ataturk' was born in Salonica in 1881. He was the son of Ali Riza and Zubaida. During his father's death, he was about seven years old. He then was brought up by his mother with religious knowledge as she wanted him to become a good Muslim. In 1893, he entered the Military cadet. In the same year, he went on to the Military Academy in Monastir and entered the War Collage in Istanbul. In 1902, he

got a promotion from the college to a teaching position on the staff. In January 1905, he graduated from the college with the rank of staff-captain (Lewis 1968, p. 244). The discussion in this paper will firstly concentrate on Kemal's ideology and his political structure since both gives important contributions towards the establishment of modern secular Turkey. It seems to be clear that his years at the War College in 1899 was the starting point of his nationalist ideology when he began to keep in touch with the works of Namik Kemal, an Ottoman Turkish writer, intellectual, reformer, journalist and political activist who was influential in the formation of the Young Ottomans and their struggles against the administration of the Ottoman authority. Kemal's early life in fact, had already brought him away from religious up-bringing. He got religious knowledge from his mother when he was about seven years old. His religious education lasted for five years when he chose military career while he was twelve years old. In fact, twelve years old was too young for him to get involve in military career and leaving out his early religious education. The environment at the War college, had in many respects, influenced Kemal towards his later reforms for the Modern Turkey.

Need to mention that the hardness and the struggles of Namik Kemal for the liberation of the Turkish nations also attracted Kemal to involve himself in nationalist movement. Thus, terms like *vatan* (fatherland), *hurriyet* (freedom) and *mesrutiyet* (constitutional government) were very influential in increasing Kemal's later nationalist motivation. It should be noted that Kemal's involvement with the nationalist movement was for several reasons. First, he was attracted with the struggle of the movement to assimilate the Turkish nationality with the Western civilization. In this case, the movement tried to convince the Ottoman authority that, the Turks should be free, proud and creative like the Western people. In order to be a great nation, the Ottoman authority must also put limits on the sovereign, adopted and lived by a constitution and swept away what they saw as the superstitions of the past. Kemal seemed to agree with the idea, since it was the only mean Turkish people became modern socially and culturally. Secondly, the movement's attempt to interpret Islam in accordance with the Modern liberal viewpoint without referring to the traditional '*ulama*' was in line with Kemal's early inspirations arguing that the existence of traditional *ulama* was one of the reasons led the Turkish nation in backwardness. Kemal's early involvement in the Young Turks movement has nothing when he failed to prosper the political structure of the movement itself. His relation with the Young Turks leaders was also very cordial. Therefore, the Young Turks revolution in 1908 did not bring him to any positions (Lewis, 1968, p. 244).

Kemal's political involvement began when he got in touch with the secret Committee of Union and Progress, and took part in their works. His ideas were much more influenced by the ideas of one Turkish famous writer Ziya Gokalp. In this regard, as claimed by Maryam Jameelah, most of Ziya Gokalp's ideas about nationalism and the adoption of Western civilization had been later implemented by Mustafa Kemal (Jameelah, 1975, pp. 122-130). Furthermore, Gokalp's ideas from Kemal's view point, were very effective towards the modernization of the Turkish nations since it would expose people of Turkey with new technique, political form and institutional structures of other nations (Western civilizations). Up to this point, Gokalp's ideas gradually look the process of assimilation as the only way to bring the Turkish nation far more advanced in terms of social aspects, politics and economy. Another important aspect of Gokalp's ideas, perhaps the most important one, the reinterpretation of Islam in line with the needs of modern society. This means that Islam must be carried by the Turks into their new civilization as another faith alongside Catholicism or Protestantism in Western Europe. This idea seems to put aside the influence of the old Perso-Arabic tradition as practiced by the traditional *ulama* and scholars. Kemal, who had already expressed his resentment to the traditional '*ulama*', later implemented the idea and modified Islam in line with his modern reforms. This was the beginning of Kemal secular reforms in which religion should be westernized like everything else. In Mustafa Kemal's own words, he describes the importance of Turkish identity and the insignificance of Islam as he sees it:

"Even before accepting the religion of the Arabs [Islam], the Turks were a great nation. After accepting the religion of the Arabs, this religion, didn't effect to combine the Arabs, the Persians and Egyptians with the Turks to constitute a nation. (This religion) rather, loosened the national nexus of Turkish nation, got national excitement numb. This was very natural. Because the purpose of the religion founded by Muhammad, over all nations, was to drag to an including Arab national politics."— Mustafa Kemal, *Medeni Bilgiler* (<http://lostislamichistory.com/article/>).

A conference called at Erzurum in 1919 that involved all resistance movements created another development for Kemal's career in politics when he was elected as a chairman. On 23 April he became president for a new national assembly, meeting at Ankara. These movements had expressed their decision to maintain national independence and integrity through a new government they had elected called the Grand National Assembly. Mustafa Kemal who was the president of this organization began to point out the idea of national sovereignty and independence of the Turkish nations. His policy was to make Turkey as a prosperous modern state respected

by all other nations of the world. In 1921, the Assembly had passed the Constitutional Act that recognized the principle of national sovereignty assembled all powers including the execution of the Sharia' in the National Assembly (Kemal, 1970, p. 532).

This Constitution however had given a critical impact to the role of Sultan in the government. Even there was a considerable body of the Turkish opinion suggesting the retention of the Sultanate monarchy, but Mustafa Kemal, through the Assembly as his tool, proposed the abolition of the Sultanate and banish from Turkey all members of the Ottoman dynasty. At this point, Kemal gradually implemented Gokalp's idea when the national sovereignty was recognized and the authority of Islam was eliminated in the National Assembly. Regarding the elimination of Islamic authority, Kemal made a clear statement as to show how Islam from his view point, became a major obstacle to the progress of Turkey:

“For nearly five hundred years, these rules and theories of an Arab Shaikh and the interpretations of generations of lazy and good-for-nothing priests have decided the civil and criminal law of Turkey....Islam-this theology of an immoral Arab- is a dead thing. Possibly it might have suited tribes in the desert. It is no good for modern, progressive state. God's revelation! There is no God!..” (H. G. Armstrong, 1961, pp. 199-200).

From Kemal's statement, nothing can be said unless to see his another revolutionary reforms that gradually marginalized Islam as the way of life among the Turks. More importantly, his reform for disestablishment of Islam politically and culturally was completed. In 1939 Turkey became a secular state and modern in her constitution, her law and her aspirations (Lewis, 1968, p. 276). Mustafa Kemal was absolute Dictator of this modern Turkey. There were critics and comments from writers and scholars regarding Kemal's revolution that was very controversial and drastic. In describing Kemal's ideas towards Secular Turkey, R. D. Robinson stated that: “Kemal was an authoritarian ruler, but, unlike some, his record was unstained by personal corruption....The ideals toward which he strove were: (1) the creation of a national political state in full possession of its sovereign power. (2) the development of some element of national power and international stature so that Turkey might have a chance to live, (3) a steady advance to a western standard of living by marching the physical and human resources of the country, (4) a slow but continued movement towards more liberal political and economic institutions” (Robinson, 1963, p. 90).

### 3.2 Consequences of Kemal's Reforms

In fact, Kemal's revolution to the modernization of Turkey brought many consequences to the Turkish people socially, religiously and politically;

#### 3.2.1 Social and Religious Aspects

The rejection of the Islamic tradition and its culture could be regarded as one of the main factors for the social and religious changes in modern Turkey. Kemal's reforms had totally brought a new system of life based on the western style. Turkey was henceforth a purely secular state. In fact, Kemal's policy to terminate the political role of Islam or taking Islam out of politic seemed to be an attempt to take Islam out of much of social life as well (Yapp, 1991, p. 158). Up to the years 1990s, the religious institutions only function at a marginal role or take charge on a smaller religious administration not as it was during the Ottoman day (Bein, 2011). In this context, the urban society seemed to be much more affected by Kemal's reforms rather than those living in rural areas. In Istanbul and Ankara for instance, many people started to pay no attention to Ramadhan. Children were not taught to observe their daily prayer (Fisher, 1959, pp. 394-395). Since the Shariah law was collapse, thus there was no more religious force that could prevent people from doing whatever they like; good or bad things. However there were different phenomena in rural areas when many Muslims refused to accept Kemal's reforms. They quietly ignored and avoid the institutions of the secular state and continued to practice the Islamic traditions and its institutions (Yapp, 1991, p. 158).

With the abolition of all tariqah orders, there was no more Sufis teachings in the mosques and *khanaqahs*. In fact, Sufis teachings that put more emphasis on soul cleansing and the creation of the good and righteous man, had contributed a great deal to the Islamic awareness among the Muslim community in Turkey. After its suppression by the Kemalist regime, there was nothing to be said about this teaching unless to see some Sufis teachers who practiced Sufis order privately in their houses.

The introduction of a civil law based on Europeans law created another social problem in modern Turkey when there was the increase in number of illegitimate births among the teenagers. Rather more, many of the new generations got involve in alcohol since there was a law permitted them to do so.

### 3.2.2 Political Aspects

Kemal's reforms that based on the ideology of Western secularism brought a new political structure of Modern Turkey. He put the blame for the backwardness of Turkish nation not only on the Ottoman empire but also on Islam. He believed that through the elimination of the social and political power of the Islamic religious authorities, thus Turkey would become thoroughly modernized. Even though the government established by the Kemalist regime seemed to be in form of democracy but in fact, at that time and for twenty years to follow, there was only a one party government controlled by Mustafa Kemal and his close political associates (Fisher, 1959, p. 392). That was why his secular republic survived without any major challenges as long as he maintained a one party dictatorship under which any opposition to his policies or actions was not allowed. Mustafa Kemal's political structure seemed to be opposed by many Muslims scholars because it was totally contradictory to Islam. The Kurdish rebellion in 1925 was a clear evidence when they lasted for several month. The emancipation of women was one of his most essential reform when they were given the right to vote and be candidates in election. By enhancing women in their social and political life, Kemal thought that he had made a great departure from Islamic principles. Actually, in Islam, women can and do enjoy full political rights; for example, the political situation in Pakistan when a woman candidate for presidential election in 1964 was supported by all opposition parties including the so-called fundamentalist party-Jamaat-i-Islami. Thus, Islam as we have elaborated, is not against giving women political roles.

What is clear to us that Kemal's reform on the emancipation of women seem to show his apparent prejudice against Islam. Therefore, the emergence of Secular Turkey was regarded as a starting point of the adoption of Western political elements into Muslims country. The abolition of Sultanate and the caliphate that declared the sovereignty of God was later followed by the replacement of republic by which all sovereignty only belongs to Turkish nations.

### 4. Conclusion

Turkey was regarded as the first Muslims country that declared as a secular state. Mustafa Kemal Ataturk was responsible for the establishment of modern Turkey. His revolutions and reforms has brought Turkey into a new era of modernization which were not based on any Islamic tradition. Looking at Kemal's reforms it was clear that he has failed to recognize the significance of preserving the historical, cultural and heritage of the Turkish people (Ottoman Empire) when he consciously amended the constitution of his country only for achieving his personal will. The abolition of the Sultanate and the caliphate for instance, gave a great impact for the Islamic political institution since they were the symbol of unity among Muslims all over the world. The emergence of rebellion groups and opposition movements against the Kemalist regime was a clear evidence of his controversial acts.

In fact Mustafa Kemal had forced his will upon the party and nation. The People's Party for instance, seemed to be his tools to dominate in the political scene. Through the reforms imposed, it was clear that he failed to recognize that the progress of a nation need not to eliminate its own heritage and traditions. There are certain countries with ancient civilizations, such as China, Korea and Japan which have become vast progress and development without sacrificing their traditions and heritage. Thus the secularization of Turkey under Kemalist regime would remain as a historical account that could not be forgotten by any Turkish nations since they looked at Kemal's reforms as having positive and negative impacts for Turkey and the new generations in particular.

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