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## Turkey's Fault Lines and the Crisis of Kemalism

M. HAKAN YAVUZ

The powerful earthquake that struck Turkey in August 1999 killed as many as 23,000 people and injured and left homeless thousands of others. In the days and weeks that followed the quake, an incompetent, military-dominated government was exposed. With the state unable—and perhaps unwilling—to quickly and efficiently guide the massive rescue effort, Turkey's citizens joined together to launch their own rescue attempts.

The cooperation after the earthquake shown by Turks and Kurds, and by the religious and the secular elements of society, represents an important moment for Turkey. The social fault lines that divide these groups have yawned even wider in recent years. The growing gaps can be traced to the government's decision to shift to export-oriented economic policies and the relative political liberalization that began in the 1980s, which have allowed Turkey's ethnic, religious, and political groups to assert previously forbidden identity claims. These claims and the failure of the semi-authoritarian political system have activated a series of social fault lines in Turkish society, such as those between Turks and Kurds and between the secular and the religious. The fault lines threaten to disrupt an already tenuous democratization process, and have in turn been exploited by the state. Through incendiary media campaigns and direct military intervention in domestic politics, the state has justified its overlord position and has prevented Turkish society from forging its own social contract and path to full democratization.

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M. HAKAN YAVUZ is an assistant professor of political science at the University of Utah.

The fault lines have left contemporary Turkey facing three interwoven and chronic problems: tension between Islamic and state notions of secularism; a rigid state ideology of homogeneity overshadowing the cultural rights of the Kurds and other communal groups; and economic liberalization versus a state-guided economic system. These problems are linked to the governing regime in Turkey and its peculiar understanding of nationalism and laicism.

### KEMALIST THEOLOGY

In 1923 Mustafa Kemal, the founder of the Republic of Turkey, implemented a series of reforms to create a homogeneous nation-state by subordinating ethnic and religious identities into a state-determined and -regimented Turkish nationalism. These reforms, known as Kemalism, sought to control religion to create a new order.

The twin pillars of Kemalist ideology are republican nationalism and laicism. The Kemalist version of laicism differs markedly from the Anglo-Saxon understanding of secularism. Instead of a state that is generally neutral on the question of the religious practices and beliefs of its citizenry, the laicist state, with its origins in the Jacobin tradition of the French Revolution, seeks to remove all manifestations of religion from the public sphere and put it under the strict control of the state. Kemalist ideology has historically justified this authoritarian position by placing its “progressive” and “modernizing” mission in opposition to Turkey's Islamic heritage, which is still viewed by Kemalist zealots as something to be overcome. This struggle against the traditional “forces of darkness” uses a militant laicism to justify an authoritarian military-bureaucratic establishment.

Like its founding figure, Kemalism has been superficially Western in form while remaining rigidly authoritarian and dogmatic in substance. It continues to stress republicanism over democracy, homogeneity over difference, the military over the civilian, and the state over society. As the late Ernest Gellner once noted in a devastating critique, the Kemalist establishment became as “reactionary” and “dogmatic” in its redemptive mission as any religious orthodoxy.<sup>1</sup> Its quixotic quest to radically recast Turkish culture, history, and identity has ensured a permanent *kulturkampf* against society, guaranteeing, ironically, Turkey’s failure to make the transition to a Western-style liberal democracy.

The Kemalist military-bureaucratic establishment came to see its main mission and basis for legitimization as a defense not against foreign but domestic enemies, especially the observant Muslims and Turkish Kurds who comprise most of Turkish society. The state used all necessary means to create a modern laic nation-state by disestablishing Islamic-Ottoman practices and institutions. This *mission civilisatrice* has been the legitimizing ideology of the ruling Kemalist elite even though the organic Seljuk/Ottoman-Islamic civilization it has tried to depose enjoys much greater societal depth and historic resonance.

At the core of the contemporary crisis in Turkey lies three sociopolitical consequences of Kemalism: its uncritical modernization ideology prevents the open discussion that would lead to a new and inclusive social contract that recognizes the cultural diversity of Turkey; it does not tolerate the articulation of different identities and lifestyles in the public sphere since they undermine the Kemalist vision of an ideal society; and it treats politics as a process of guiding political development and engineering a new society.

Political participation, thus, has been confined to those who subscribe to and promote Kemalist goals. For Kemalism, the nation is understood as a historical necessity requiring all citizens to have the same culture, identity, and worldview; it is not a voluntary union of citizens allowed different subidentities within an overarching Turkish citizenship. The conflict in Turkey is not far removed from conflicts in the countries that once composed the former Soviet bloc, where ideologically driven movements sought to redraw their traditional societies in accordance with their radical leftist vision

and were met with social-based movements demanding inclusion and representation.

Kemalism is not the only source of friction in Turkish society; growing economic inequality is another. The wealthiest 20 percent of the population received more than 50 percent of the national income in 1998. This 20 percent of the population also dominates social and economic policy through a tightly woven network comprising the military, the bureaucracy, large state-supported industrial conglomerates grouped in the Association of Turkish Industrialists and Businessmen (TUSIAD), and their close media outlets. Also, Mafia figures employed in the late 1980s and early 1990s by the state to engage in assassinations and other “dirty work” are playing an increasing role in the state sector of the economy, acquiring a number of prominent privatization tenders.

#### THE FORCES OF INSECURITY: THE MILITARY

The social fault lines that have emerged in Turkey because of the crisis of Kemalism and growing economic inequalities involve four major actors: the military, which uses Kemalism to legitimize its dominant institutional position; the TUSIAD, which also controls the major media outlets; Sunni Islamic groups, which are divided into four major factions; and Turkish ethnic and sectarian minorities, mainly the Kurds and Alevis. The fault lines these actors straddle do not represent “ancient hatreds” between competing groups. They are instead a product of a closed political system whose military-bureaucratic guardians have played an active role in aggravating societal divisions.

The modern Turkish state is based on an autonomous military, un beholden to society and to civilian institutions. Military officers played a key role in the founding of the modern Turkish republic; since 1923 they have insisted that they know what is best for the country. To ensure its dominance, the military engaged in coups against civilian governments in 1960, 1971, and 1980. The main goal of each coup was the “preservation of the Republic as defined by Mustafa Kemal.” The military has formalized its role in governing Turkey through the establishment of the National Security Council (NSC), which consists of the president, prime minister, foreign minister, the minister of internal affairs, and five top generals. The NSC allows the military to supervise the establishment of all major domestic and foreign policy decisions made by civilian government. The military has also become the major

<sup>1</sup>Ernest Gellner, *Encounters with Nationalism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 81–91.

partner in governing and disciplining the anti-Kemalist identity claims of the Kurds and Islamists.

In 1997 the NSC once again directly intervened in the civilian sphere when it declared peaceful and democratic Turkish, Islamic, and Kurdish identity aspirations as “national security threats” and orchestrated a “soft” coup against the pro-Islamic Welfare Party coalition government. On June 18, 1997 the military forced the Welfare Party–led government to resign. And in January 1998, the Constitutional Court assented to the wishes of the powerful military and banned Welfare. The military was also instrumental in jailing and removing from politics Tayyip Erdogan, the most popular political leader in the country and the former mayor of Istanbul; Erdogan was charged with inciting religious hatred after he

publicly read a poem of Ziya Gökalp declaring that “Turkey’s mosques will be our barracks, the minarets our bayonets, the domes our hamlets, and the faithful our soldiers.” Finally, in 1998 the Higher Educational Board issued new regulations that made Kurdish and Islamic dress and symbols illegal in educational institutions. The new regulations also empowered university administrators to fire those who “acted against the republic and its values.” Violators also could “lose their pensions and face a life-long ban in state sector employment.”

The militarization of domestic politics led to the erosion of the two major center-right parties—the Motherland Party and the True Path Party—and weakened the religious right, preventing democratic transformation of the Welfare Party. (Before the closure of the Welfare Party, there had been a lively debate over the issues of democratization and secularism.) The April 1999 electoral victories of the two nationalist parties—the Nationalist Action Party and the Democratic Left Party—indicate that the electorate (especially the young) can be radicalized in the absence of legitimate political outlets, parties, associations, and networks, which has spawned fears of a return to the left–right bloodletting of the late 1970s in which more than 5,000 people died. By concentrating its power on marginalizing the pro-Islamic Virtue Party (parliamentarians from the Welfare Party formed the Virtue Party after Welfare was banned), the military unintentionally prepared the ground for the nationalist takeover. And by portraying ethnic and religious identity claims as a threat, the NSC institutionalized a new framework for insecurity.

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Kemalism, as an authoritarian modernization project, is poorly suited to a society-centered quest for multicultural identity and democracy. The increasingly obvious contradiction between Kemalism’s proclamation of “progress” and “Westernization” and its glaringly un-Western dogmatism and authoritarianism has created both a legitimization crisis and a fiercely indignant reaction among the elite. One of the newest characteristics of the Turkish military in the late 1990s is its willingness to employ anti-Western rhetoric and accuse opponents of being the “tools of Europe” because of growing pressure from the European Union on human rights, the need for civilian control, and resolution of the Kurdish question. The military has adopted a wounded nationalistic tone and increasingly

denounces the discourses on globalization. This development is reflected in the current nationalistic coalition government of Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit. The Democratic Left Party and the Nationalist Action Party, the

two major nationalist parties that formed a coalition with the Motherland Party in the 1999 elections, have no notable presence in Kurdish-populated southeast Anatolia. Both parties’ electoral victories are based on their uncompromising stance on the Kurdish question and laicism. They have internalized the military presentation of the Kurdish ethno-nationalism and Islamic activism as the “enemies of the Kemalist Republic.”

## THE ISLAMIC MOVEMENTS

In addition to the military, another major force that shapes Turkey’s political landscape is the Islamic movements, which consist of political Islam, state Islam, and cultural Islam.

There is a close connection between laicism and Islamism in Turkey: they mutually constitute each other. One needs the other to exist. In response to the state policies of building a homogeneous nation, Islamic groups have pursued a successive strategy of withdrawal, confrontation, and engagement. Indeed, one of the key fault lines confronting laicism is political Islam, that is, using religion to control the government and imposing Islamic values on public space.

Although political Islam in Turkey is spread from the center-right parties, the dominant force that represents political Islam is the National Outlook Movement (NOM), which over the years has been

banned and has reconstituted itself as the National Order, National Salvation, Welfare, and Virtue parties, in succession. Before the 1997 coup, the NOM had been transforming itself from a strictly religious-right to a center-right party. During this period it was the party of a new bourgeoisie that had evolved during the economic liberalization program in the 1980s, the urban poor, and excluded Kurds (Welfare was more popular than any other non-Kurdish party among the Kurdish population).

Although the Virtue Party (VP) that was formed after Welfare's banning constitutes the third-largest party in the parliament, it has been "domesticated." Instead of transforming itself into an alternative dynamic party to tackle the problems of Turkey, the VP has preferred to "assimilate" into the present political structure to maintain its legal existence. Fear of being banned is the main context of politics for the VP. This fear, in turn, forces it not to engage in politics but rather to become an apolitical party.

The Islamic sector also includes a "state Islam" that is used to disarm the political Islamic movement. To subordinate religion to the political establishment, the new Kemalist republic created its own version of state Islam by establishing a well-funded Directorate of Religious Affairs. The directorate's main task is to control and domesticate Islam in accordance with the needs of the laicist state. The state controls all 80,000 mosques in Turkey and employs the imams as state functionaries. Although a sizable number of Alevi Muslims have a more liberal interpretation of Islam, Sunni Islam constitutes the endorsed form of Islam of the Directorate of Religious Affairs.

### THE PROPONENTS OF CULTURAL ISLAM

The third Islamic element in Turkey is cultural Islam. The major cultural Islamic group in Turkey is the Nurcus, the followers of Said Nursi, an ethnic Turkish Kurd who authored several volumes of exegesis of the Koran, known as *The Epistles of Light*. More than 10 Nurcu communities can be found in Turkey. The goals of this dynamic movement are the synthesis of Islam and science; acceptance of democracy as the best form of governance within the rule of law; raising the level of Islamic consciousness by showing the connection between reason and revelation; and achieving this salvation within a free market and through quality education.

One of the most powerful Nurcu communities is led by Fethullah Gülen. This community seeks to

redefine laicism along more Anglo-Saxon lines and to form a more neutral relationship between religion and the state. For instance, the Gülen-led Abant Declaration of July 1998—named for the town at which it was drafted—not only sought to redefine the meaning of laicism as practiced in Europe but also to reinterpret Islamic theology to respond to contemporary challenges. The declaration's main point was that "revelation and reason do not conflict; individuals should use their reason to organize their social life; the state should be neutral on the beliefs, faith, and philosophical orientation of society; governance of the state cannot be based on the dominance of one religious tradition; and secularism should expand individual freedoms and rights and should not exclude any person from the public sphere." The Gülen-led Nurcu group hopes to construct a new form of modernity that is consistent with the fundamental precepts of Islam as well as the emerging global paradigm of democracy and respect for individual human rights.

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*Turkey requires a new social contract that recognizes the diversity of its society.*

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In the past, Gülen believed in placating the military and courted the state by endorsing its 1998 anti-

Islamic campaign against other groups. But Gülen's willingness to accept the most draconian antireligious edicts of the military soft-coup authorities did not placate them; it only increased their contempt for his own accommodationist movement. On June 21, 1999 the state-dominated media launched a fierce and orchestrated attack on Fethullah Gülen and his activities as "reactionary" and a "threat" to the "secular" nature of the Turkish state. For the first time, this attack was met with a fierce and hitherto unprecedented counterattack by major media outlets controlled by Fethullah Gülen's group. The anti-Gülen campaign forced Gülen and his group to respond aggressively to certain elements of the Kemalist establishment, a confrontation he has always judiciously sought to avoid.

The latest attack on Gülen also was aimed at civilian authority, particularly the popular leftist Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit. According to many journalists and members of Gülen's inner circle, a radical clique within the Turkish army was behind this attempt to further curtail civilian authority. Some statist and Kemalist circles feel very uneasy with Gülen's external connections and cooperation with other Ottoman and Turkic communities, particularly in the Balkans, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. They see these ties as potentially undermin-

ing the authority of Kemalist ideology in Turkey. The clique within the army worries that Gülen could use his foreign connections to pressure the state on human rights issues and democratization.

### THE KURDISH QUESTION

In addition to Islamic identity, the Kemalist state also considers Kurdish ethnonationalism a threat to its unity and ideology. The Kemalist policy of creating a homogeneous Turkish nation has led the military to adapt an exclusive Turkish ethnocentricity. The nation-building process did not allow space for the emergence of a “hyphenated citizenship” such as Kurdish-Turk, Bosnian-Turk, or Albanian-Turk. Many of the Kurds, who constitute between 10 and 15 percent of the country's population, are attached to Turkey today by a thin cord woven from two threads: terror and fear. The Kurds are excluded from the national body politic and are denied basic cultural rights, such as using their language. The Kurdish-Turkish fault line has been the country's most active fault line, and its management has become increasingly more difficult than Turkey's other social fault lines. The policies of emergency rule in southeastern Turkey, the village guard system (the state employs a large number of villagers—around 70,000—to fight against the guerrilla Kurdistan Workers' Party), and the evacuation of the Kurdish population from their villages, have further deepened the problem. The February 1998 arrest of Abdullah Ocalan, the often ruthless leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, has opened new opportunities for other, more civic Kurdish associations and movements, but has not solved the problem.

As long as Kemalism remains the ideology of the Turkish state, Turkey will remain hostage to its own imagined enemies: Kurds and pious Muslims. By defining Kurdish identity claims as a threat, the military has expanded its role of guarding the “territorial integrity and national unity of the Turkish nation.” This, in turn, militarizes political life and undermines democracy. In short, stability in Turkey depends on the full recognition of the cultural rights of the Kurds within a democracy centered on the rule of law. There is no long history of Turkish-Kurdish ethnic conflict and it is still rare for individual Turks and Kurds to face off on a strictly ethnic basis. The early Kemalist leaders, by dissolving the Islamic bonds that had united Turks and Kurds, ironically created the problem they have been unable to solve through brute force.

### THE ALEVIS: THE ORPHANS OF TURKEY

Some flash points and issues could create communal violence along the fault lines that afflict Turkey; the most salient is the tension between the Sunni majority and the Alevi minority.

The Alevi comprise between 11 and 20 percent of Turkey's total population and are spread throughout Turkey. They form a syncretic Muslim religious group that combines elements of Shamanism, Christianity, Shiism, and Turkish Sufism in its understanding of Islam. These different methods and contexts of Islamization create a constant religious cleavage between the Orthodox (Sunni) and syncretic (Alevi) Muslims that goes beyond the religious realm to form sociopolitical and cultural fault lines.

The Alevi experience of oppression at the hands of the Ottoman state made the community a supporter of Kemalist reforms, which aimed at instituting a state not as closely identified with Sunni Islam as it had been under the Ottoman rule. As a result of the Sunni-based Islamic revival in the late 1950s, the Alevi formed a separate confessional Unity Party of Turkey in 1966. During the 1970s, left-leaning groups saw the Alevi as susceptible to the secular progressive tenants of Marxism. Gradually, socialism became the surrogate identity for the Alevi community.

The 1980 military coup introduced Sunni Islam-based Turkish nationalism as a new glue to unify the nation against Kurdish and Alevi assertiveness. This Islamization of Turkish nationalism further alienated the Turkish Alevi community from the state. In response to this process of Islamization or Sunnification of nationalism, along with the collapse of the left in Turkish politics and the privatization of media (which allowed identity groups to form their own radio stations, television stations, and websites), the Alevi gradually asserted an identity distinct from the Sunnis and the state. To form a separate identity, Alevi intellectuals started to organize meetings and publish books and journals.

When a group of Alevi cultural associations organized a meeting in July 1993 in the city of Sivas, a Sunni majority responded with an attack on the meeting that left 37 Alevi intellectuals dead. The Sivas incident became a turning point for the organization of the Alevi community. Since the state did not attempt to protect the Alevi, many Alevi intellectuals perceived the state's attitude as pro-Sunni, which in turn created a search for security among the Alevi.

The Alevis' sense of alienation from the state came to an end with the 1997 coup. In an attempt to balance Sunni Islamic assertivism, the coup leaders promoted the Alevi interpretation of Islam to expand the social basis of Kemalism; the military perceived Sunni Islamic assertiveness as homogeneous and a security threat. The Alevization of Kemalism, in turn, reactivated the Alevi-Sunni fault line and led the Sunni majority to question the legitimacy of the state.

This questioning was deepened by the earthquake of August 1999. When the state failed to quickly and effectively react to the death, destruction, and injury caused by the earthquake, the Sunni majority realized the state's weakness. In addition to killing more than 20,000 people and destroying much of the industrial center of the country, the quake also shook people's faith in the Kemalist republic and led them to realize the significance of civil society. The shock and seething anger that have since gripped much of Turkish society stem from the indifference and incompetence on the part of authorities, especially the military. If a silver lining can be found in this calamity, it is the dawning realization for much of Turkey's weak civil society that it can and must take charge of its own destiny. Sami Selcuk, the head of the State Court of Appeals, voiced this public sentiment at a September ceremony marking the opening of the judicial year when he described Turkey as an unsecular (since the state controls Islam through the Directorate of Religious Affairs), antidemocratic state. He charged that the 1982 constitution "does not restrict the power of the state, it restricted the freedoms of the citizens, disrupted the unity of the judiciary and stipulated a republican administration rather than a democratic system." Selcuk's words struck a chord with broad segments of Turkish society; newspapers and civic associations welcomed his speech.

### UNITY THROUGH FEAR

Given the position of the Kemalist military, there is little hope for deep reform in Turkey. On February 28, 1999 the National Security Council demanded that civilian government take all neces-

sary measures to protect the Kemalist (laicist) nature of the state, including the closure of religious schools and pro-Islamic foundations. The February 28 process has institutionalized the role of the military as the country's main decision-making body. Without democracy and without recognition of its multicultural nature, Turkey faces the balkanization of its society, media, higher education, and market along social fault lines. For example, each identity group has its own television stations, newspapers, and economic outlets to protect itself against the state and other groups. Thus, not only vertical ties between the state and society are breaking, but societal groups themselves are falling apart. The main unifying force in Turkey is fear, which breeds resentment against the Kemalist establishment. Since 1995, this sense of fear has helped to galvanize nationalist feelings, such as in the April 1999 elections, which brought nationalist parties to government. Because many people increasingly believe that national politics does not solve their problems, they are withdrawing from national politics to ethnic, communal, and regional politics.

Turkey must build bridges across these fault lines and recognize its multicultural nature. The generational change in society, increasingly diversified education (more Turks than ever before have university degrees and foreign PhDs), and the expansion of market forces are causes for optimism. According to some recent surveys, many young people identify freedom of thought as more important than republicanism and religiosity; the second most important value is democracy. Other bridge-building activities are the diversification of education through private education and easing access to new media technologies such as the Internet.

Turkey requires a new social contract that recognizes the diversity of its society. But this social contract can be shaped only within a liberal-democratic political arena and free market system; market-based interests and identities are more unifying than Kemalism or Islamism. Turkey can only overcome its divisions by recognizing cultural diversity and by replacing Kemalist dogmatism with a more genuinely Western understanding of democracy and freedom of thought and expression. ■