

Relevance of the Turkish Revolution for the Next Century

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The citizens of Turkey have observed the 75th Anniversary (1923-98) of the declaration of their Republic. The generation I belong to saw, with the unblemished eyes of a small child, the last years of the great Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, and deeply felt assured by the remarkable way in which he guided us all. We stepped into adolescence putting our trust in the sweeping and profound changes, initiated by him. We were impressed with the respect that our forward paces as well as our past deeds evoked even in our former enemies.

Turkish diplomacy had been most active in all European capitals and in the League of Nations during the rule of Kelam Ataturk[1]. After his death, the world order started changing again. The League of Nations failed as a forum to hold the aggressors like Italy and Japan in check. The rise of fascist ideology in Europe finally led to the Second World War. Our youthful years were spent, nevertheless, in perfect tranquility when the entire Europe in our neighbourhood was reeling under the heat of the Second World War[2]. It was the time when we were experimenting with two-party systems, much earlier than the nations or communities that resembled us outwardly. Turkey enjoyed free elections and advocated change of governments through peaceful means. After the wars we found ourselves soon in the midst of a Cold War that dragged on for more than four decades[3].

The recent upheavals in Eastern Europe and in the erstwhile Soviet Union transformed the world order, as we had known it since the end of the Second World War. In our eastern neighbourhood, we saw the rise of five independent Turkic republics, formerly part of the Soviet Union, in Central Asia. Turkey promptly established close relations with these ethnic cousins, offering them a socio-political model based on the long 75 years of our experience with secularism democracy and republicanism[4].

Turkish Revolution: A Living Phenomenon

What are the experiences of the Turkish Revolution that can be carried to the 21st century? Unlike other revolutions like the French Revolution that negated the ideas that had inspired it and the Russian Revolution that eventually failed, the Turkish Revolution proved to be a living phenomenon[5]. Blending tradition with change, it keeps pace with the changing times and escaped the fate of the other two significant revolutions. It was a unique historical experience. The revolution that began against the victors of the First World War soon turned its tail and opposed traditionalism within the Turkish Islamic society. This revolution was progressive in outlook and sought to stir the depths of the Turkish nation. This revolution was the first of its kind in the entire Muslim world.

While all this was taking place in Turkey, and people were ushered into a revolutionary socio-political order, people everywhere else in Europe were visited by a growing sense of despair and disillusionment. Philosophers talked about meaninglessness of the universe. The literature of

this period reflected themes of frustration, disenchantment and cynicism. For instance, the American novelist Ernest Hemingway gave the reader, in his book entitled *The Sun Also Rises*, a powerful description of the essential tragedy of the so-called lost generation. The British poet T.S. Eliot presented, in his poem "The Waste Land", a philosophy of despair. Life was like a slow death, to be endured in boredom and frustration. The German playwright Bertolt Brecht proclaimed the corruption of the state. Artists like Rivera and Orozco responded by painting and expressing their pain and outrage.

It was not surprising that first Italy, then Germany, followed by Spain and some other states in Central and Eastern Europe, turned to fascism, racism, war, and imperialism. In the midst of all this chaos in politics, callousness towards the human being and the corruption of the morale, Republican Turkey stood out as a shining example of confidence in the common man, advancement through creativity, and the will for constant upliftment in all spheres of human activity. It was as if the past achievements of world civilization, that is, the Renaissance, the Reformation, the secular, scientific and technical revolution of subsequent centuries were all telescoped into a lifetime.

Conversely, at that time, most of Turkey's neighbours and many countries situated afar were rather retrogressive in outlook. British and French colonialism construed as "mandatory regimes" on behalf of the League of Nations, dominated crucial parts of the Middle East. Iran and Afghanistan were the only independent states in that part of the world, which looked upon Turkey as a model for modernization, but failed. The countries in the Balkan region, or the southeastern part of Europe, were ruled by authoritarian kings. Even Albania, which had started as a republic, turned into a diehard monarchy.

Turkey against Fascism, Nazism

The Italian fascists in the black-shirted uniforms, as fanatical nationalists with disciplined aggressiveness, marched into Rome and took over the government under Mussolini's leadership. In addition to exercising power over the lives of all their citizens, the Fascists in Italy embarked on the path of imprisoning and murdering their own people. Same was the case with the Nazis in Germany. Sweeping changes of the worst possible nature converted Germany from the Bismarckian federal state into a totalitarian Nazi regime, in which official paramilitary organisations imposed order on the populace through calculated intimidation, terror and violence. The Fascists and the Nazis pursued policies of expansion, occupation and imperialism abroad.

However, Turkey took an entirely different path. Fascism, Nazism, racism, colonialism, imperialism and war, ran counter to modern Turkey's cherished ideals. They threatened to tear the whole structure of peace, which was the prerequisite for any meaningful progress of the world. Therefore, the Turkey of the 1920s and the 1930s was a haven for the liberal intellectuals, who sought asylum in Turkey. We are proud that we received with open arms the university professors, writers and artists who escaped from Hitler's and Mussolini's suppression and gave them ample opportunities to teach and take to creative pursuits in the newly-founded Turkish institutions of higher learning.

Turkey was also very active against the expansionist policies of the European Fascist states. It was one of the leading spirits in the League of Nations and opposed Italy's aggression in Africa. Turkey was a member of the "Group of Five" that drew up plans for discouraging Mussolini's adventures into Ethiopia and Eritrea. The Turkish Red Crescent did relief work among the victims of aggression Turkish offices were secretly sent to Ethiopia to help train the Ethiopian army. Turkey was on the side of the democracies during the Second World War.

In the meantime, a whole series of social and political reforms gave the Turkish people representative political institutions and responsible governments. Turkey also introduced two-party system as early as in 1925. The Turkish people voted the opposition party into office in the general elections of 1950, which was acclaimed as free and fair based on secret ballot, with no intimidation from the governmental side. No wonder, the celebrated British historian, Arnold J. Toynbee, described the triumph of the unfettered will of the Turkish people in that election as "signifying a turn of the tide in the world as a whole"[6]. In other words, there was a non-Western society whose leaders helped educate the people in democratic principles and accepted the will of the electorate. An example, if repeated by similar communities and nations, could have ushered in democracy and freedom through the establishment of the rule of law, and justice in all fields of human endeavour everywhere.

Stress on Secularism

As part of their new look at life, the Turks distinguished between the religious and the non-religious aspects of life. Secularism or the separation of religion and state was a significant contribution of the Turkish Revolution, not only to the history of that country, but also to Islam. The Turkish Revolution perceived no contradiction between secularism and religion as it saw that their spheres were entirely distinct. By emphasising on the secular aspect of governance, Turkey did not reject the importance of Islam as a religion, a way of life. After years of experience with republicanism and secularism, even today, both religion and secularism together present the reality of Turkish society.

This approach was certainly a departure from the view that Islam is a comprehensive, totalitarian way life, where different aspects of life (spirited and temporal) merge together to make a well synthesized whole, which cannot be split into compartments. Some orthodox people may perceive secularism as an assault on religion itself. But secularism in Turkey is not meant to replace Islam. It sought to establish the primacy of the individual in religious experience and free him or her from the tutelage of intermediaries. I share the view that this expression of individual freedom may offend traditional religious consciousness, but the emphasis on the personal experience of religion is the logical corollary of recognition of the idea of human dignity. Turkish secularism will be transmitted into the next century, on the basis of the established harmony between change and heritage.

Science and Religion

Science occupied a supreme position in the philosophical thinking of our Revolution. Our leadership was aware that the Scientific Revolution had fundamentally changed the individual's conception of his position in nature. The universe was no longer a network of hidden omnipotence

with the man at the center. Man was removed from the focal point of the stage in the saga of creation, but the Scientific Revolution envisaged an unprecedented optimism for human capabilities. By the end of the 17th century, beliefs in witchcraft and magical healing had already weakened. Scientific knowledge would bring progress and promote human welfare.

Turkish state emphasised on the primacy of ‘Scientific Knowledge’. In his famous public speech in 1933 on the 10th Anniversary of our Republic, Ataturk, stated that the light to illuminate the path of the Turkish nation was “Scientific knowledge’. His slogan which says, “Science is the truest guide” is written in huge letters on the entrance of the first school of Ankara University, where I personally taught for 41 years. Turkey’s approach in this realm may be defined as coordinated attempt to encourage the growth of independent knowledge purged of supernatural presuppositions. It emphasised the truth perceptible by human reason, which can operate in verifiable experience[7].

However, on the other hand, Religion, like some other manifestations of social organisation, material techniques and even the fine arts, has a continuity that goes back to the thousands of years. Compared to religion, Science is of recent origin. It cannot be said that it was established before the 17th century. Certainly, there were earlier initial steps that were also important, but its intensive growth dates only from the last century.

Throughout the human history, men had some relationship with what was described as “holy”. All religions had their own versions of the supernatural spirit, but there were also common elements such as holy men, holy books, blessed days, sacred places and ceremonies. Their moral imperatives were summarised in codes, such as the Ten Commandments of Judaism, the Five Rules of Islam or the Eight-fold Path of Buddhism. Rigorous disputes and at times bloodshed took place between the traditionalists who adhered to the old practices and the revisionists who opted to march with the changing circumstances.

Religious institutions are increasing their activity nowadays, which sometimes create conflicts and sometimes help solve a number of problems. Some have become, in certain countries, agents of change. For instance, the Iranian Revolution of 1979 is a significant mass-based uprising of this century. Large parts of the clergy in South Africa and Namibia have condemned racism, apartheid, and various forms of colonialism. But there is also a revival of orthodox religious beliefs and new kinds of worships, ranging from fanatical to mystical cults. Some of these extremist groups considered a nuclear war, for instance, not only inevitable, but also desirable because Jesus, they thought, would guide them anyway to a purified earth.

The two greatest intellectual achievements of the 20th century, were: (a) the theory of relativity which dealt with the large scale structure of the universe, and (b) the quantum mechanics which is concerned with the forces that operate at the atomic level and below. Stephen Hawking’s survey of modern cosmology in his *A Brief History of Time*, searches for the magnificently named “Grand Unification”, linking relativity with quantum mechanics.

The accomplishment of modern science is spectacular. Just like the Industrial Revolution of the 18th and the 20th centuries, the current Scientific and Technological Revolution caused an upheaval, affecting changes in energy resources, environment, overall production in industry and

agriculture, communications and daily life. It is converting science into a direct productive force to serve the society. Science leads to industrialisation and growth of material production. This development is inevitable as new source of energy is being discovered, and the computer systems are penetrating all walks of life.

The current Scientific and Technological Revolution is also a socio-economic phenomenon. It has also triggered off enormous ecological changes. This brings us to the question of delimitation. The bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki shows that modern weapons of war today have much greater destructive capacity threatening the mankind. The Turkish Revolution considered science as the only true guiding beacon enabling advancement with the limitless possibilities it offered. The destructive use of science was not yet in view. Its utilisation for technical progress and service to making was undeniably obvious. Turkish leadership of the 1920s and the 1930s based its philosophical preferences on scientific thinking.

Women's Rights

Republican Turkey was the first country in the East to recognise women's rights to participate in public life. This recognition came much earlier than in a number of European states such as Belgium, France, Switzerland, Italy, Greece and Portugal. Turkish leadership was preoccupied in the 1920s with the idea of radically changing the status of our women[8].

Even in many contemporary societies, although not in all, multitudes of women obey their fathers when unmarried, their husbands when married and their sons when widowed. Such patriarchal system, whether in the Third World or elsewhere, have been the product of historical developments rather than an indication of man's natural superiority. If Aristotle, believed that men were by nature superior or if later prominent thinkers such as Schopenhauer, Comte and Hegel maintained that a woman should only rear children and that their place was *Kinder Küche und Kirche* (kitchen children and church), they merely reflected the institutionalised, stereotypical role of the sexes.

It may be appropriate to remember that, at the dawn of human civilization, women played a leading role in society. Since it was impossible to establish fatherhood, descent was traced through the maternal line. As tools developed, men took the leading place in society, becoming the hunter or the breadwinner and the soldier or the defender. And the functions of women being increasingly limited to managing the household, they were kept away from participating in social production and hence became economically and morally dependent on men. But since the technological changes of the Industrial Revolution transformed production, women were drawn into the factories. It is not surprising that women's rights came to the fore in the first place in the industrialised states. Charles Fourier, a prominent French Utopian Socialist, was perhaps the first among those who underlined that the degree of emancipation of women was a yardstick for measuring the degree of general emancipation in a society.

It is instructive to note that some women were not permitted to reach even matriculation level in Germany until the Universities of Heidelberg and Friburg granted them that right as late as the year 1901. In England, Girton College in Cambridge (1869) was the first women's schools of university rank. But no woman was qualified to practise law in England until 1922. One may also

remember that the National Socialist government in Germany decreed in 1934 that women might not exceed 10% of the total student body in the universities. As to the women's rights, voting privileges in England were not extended to women on the same terms as to the men until 1928. The attempts to enfranchise women were defeated in the Upper House of the Swedish Parliament until 1921.

Turkey, on the other hand, promulgated in 1924 the Law for the Unification of Instructions bringing all religious schools under unified control. The introduction of the Turkish Civil Code, two years later, which made no discrimination between the sexes, as well as the widening of secular co-educational systems were quite revolutionary for a society with traditional Islamic norms. When Turkey's leader stated in 1923 that "everything on earth had been created by women", he was merely emphasising the role that women played in society. He accentuated the same idea when he said, in the same year, that the Anatolian peasant women had toiled enormously for centuries contributing to the creation of social wealth.

It is true that most of the major progressive reforms, including those in favour of Turkish women, were provided rather than fought for. But these reforms in the "superstructure" facilitated the qualitative changes in society. Kemal Ataturk played an outstanding role in introducing the Turkish population to such revolutionary ideas. He played a great role in institutionalising these ideas too.

Consequently, while in most Muslim societies girls and women still hid themselves under the veil, a young Turkish woman (Keriman Halis) was first elected "Miss Turkey" and later (1932) "Miss Universe" in the international contest of that year. Another young Turkish girl (Sabiha Gokcen) became in the early 1930s the country's first female military pilot surprising the Western male fliers with her abilities. These achievements were symptoms of a basic and fundamental change that had taken place in the Turkish society. Turkish women enrolled themselves in schools, became professionals, entered the political arena and earned fame as writers and artists in the earlier part of the 20th century.

Republican Turkey was the first in the Third World to have linked progress with women liberation by enabling the women to play their justified role in society. The Turks believed that the position of women in society was a barometer of democracy in any community.

Turkish Nationalism on Foreign Policy

Turkish nationalism was not chauvinistic or racist in nature. By choosing not to look beyond its border, it harboured no irredentist aspirations and did not nourish Napoleonic or Bolshevik ambitions. Lust for conquest was out of the question for the Turks. By "nationalist" policy Ataturk meant, "to work for the happiness of the whole nation within our national frontiers". Moreover, Turkish nationalism was based on "full and complete independence", by which Ataturk meant, "unfettered independence in the political, economic, juridical, cultural, in fact, in every sphere". Decades had to pass before the United Nations would declare that nations enjoyed sovereignty over their own natural resources.

The ideas that helped shape Ataturk's foreign policy may sound familiar today, but they were pioneering thought for the 1920s. He had then stated categorically that the whole of Asia would march on the path to independence. He properly evaluated the revolts in India, the armed actions of the Afghans and the ferment in the Arab lands. He had said: "Just as I see clearly the dawning of the sun in front of me, all the subjected peoples and nations will break their shackles and attain liberation". This was a virtuous prophecy that came true. His perception is even more valuable when one remembers that the framers of the United Nations Charter did not envisage an early end to the colonial system and gave orders for the construction of a General Assembly hall that would seat, at the most, only seventy delegations. Now, they have reached 185.

The following words of Ataturk should guide our thoughts and actions today: "Just like a pain at a finger's tip affects the whole body, a malady at any corner of the world should not fail to attract our attention... No matter how far the catastrophe may be, one should not fail to consider it close. Such an approach to international affairs will save the human beings, nations and governments from selfishness. If we desire a lasting peace, we should take fundamental precautions at an international level."

It was these qualities of the young Turkish Republic and its leader that urged Mr. Eleftherios Venizelos, the Prime Minister of Greece, in the 1930s, to put up Ataturk as a candidate for the Nobel International Peace Prize. The great Ataturk, who had inflicted a crushing defeat on the invading Greek army, had convinced even the Prime Minister of that country that he was a man of peace, as his candidacy for the leading international peace award was suggested by no other than his former arch-enemy, whom he defeated in the battlefield.

Non-alignment and Disarmament

"Non-alignment" as a movement and as a world phenomenon arose from the specific conditions of the Cold War era. The term itself came into use more frequently after the early 1960s. In my opinion, the Turkey of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk (1881-1938) was truly non-aligned so far as its international behaviour was concerned.[9]

It is true that the countries, which decades later embarked more or less on the same road as that of Ataturk's Turkey, developed a particular identity and, which national policies and joint proclamations, formed a category alienated from bloc interests. During the decades of Ataturk's leadership (1919-38), however, there could be no such formal grouping with an organised voting strength. That was still the age of colonialism. The victory of the anti-colonial struggles, for which Turkey was already a living example, had to precede the appearance of non-alignment as a universal movement. There are some decades between him and the almost universal realization of what he stood for. The wide consciousness and the material basis of the NAM were the result of the trends born out of the Cold War.

It was long before the Bandung Conference and the Brioni meeting that Ataturk based his foreign policy on the concept of respect for territorial integrity, non-aggression, non-interference in domestic affairs of the countries, equality in international affairs and the peaceful coexistence of different regimes. Turkey's attitude against the drives to change frontiers in Europe and in Africa was very clear. Turkey actively supported the victims of aggression. Turkey did not become part of

the spheres of influence or got entangled in the alliances. It did not seek its own sphere of influence and never intervened in the domestic affairs of others. The records of the League of Nations may be consulted to see how sincere Ataturk's Turkey had been on the crucial question of disarmament. Ataturk's Foreign Minister (Tevfik Rustu Aras) was active in Geneva and many capitals in Europe, trying his best to bring about a consensus on the question of reduction of arms. There were even then different social systems in the world, but Turkey's own choice of regime and national objectives did not prevent it from co-existing peacefully in Asia and the Balkans. Certainly, Kemalist Turkey had a preferred set of values, but Ataturk himself welcomed, not only the Soviet leaders, but also the Amir of Afghanistan (Amanullah Khan), the Shah of Iran (Reza Shah Pahlavi), the Kings of Britain (Edward VIII), Jordan (Abdullah) and Yugoslavia (Alexander I) and the Crown Prince of Sweden (Gustav Adolf) on his country's soil.

Turkey in the Post-Cold War era

The end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the disappearance of bipolarism are all significant developments. The pursuit of non-aligned world outlook is even more relevant now than ever before. Non-alignment may also be considered as a new label for an old struggle of the medium and small powers against great power hegemony. Since the sovereign state system is in existence for about three and-a-half centuries, the conflict between the great powers and others has affected the developmental processes in the developing and the underdeveloped world. As such, even after the end of the Cold War, non-alignment can act as a guarantee against the formation of a bipolar world order all over again, if it can act as a united forum.

It is true that although the NAM spearheaded the case for nuclear arms control and disarmament, the China-India border war and the ten-year old war between Iran and Iraq dealt a severe blow to the movement; it could play no role in settling the armed conflicts in Angola, Kampuchea and Mozambique. However, even if it is difficult to plot the future political profile of the NAM in this still turbulent world, the last three Summit Conferences in Indonesia (1992), Columbia (1995) and South Africa (1998) reaffirmed the continuing relevance of non-alignment. It is well known that the membership of the NAM has regularly increased since its formation. The number of full-fledged members has reached 113, which constitutes two-thirds of U.N. membership. Now, it includes as "Observers" three major ex-Cold War warriors – Russia, China and Germany. The movement rightly feels that its new role would be to create South-South cooperation, which means, by and large, cooperation among the countries in the developing and the under-developed world.

The NAM needs; however, to be more institutionalized, with a Secretariat, a secretary-general and headquarters, which can build a pool of services for all in terms of gathering information for trade opportunities, technology transfer and joint ventures. The movement stands the best chance of becoming the strongest "lobby" of the developing countries within the United Nations. The ideals of the NAM will probably be valid until the democratisation of international relations and of international organisations. Ataturk's overall prophecy has come true. He would have felt at home with the overriding concern of the NAM during the Cold War years for a radical change in the then international system.

In summary, the Turkish experiment with democracy, freedom and secularism, that was started in the early 1920s by the founder of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, has succeeded as a model for nations in the developing and the underdeveloped world. One could even say that as far as the spirit was concerned, Kemal Ataturk's policy of staying away from power blocks might well be regarded as the conceptual precursor of the policy of non-alignment that emerged at the international level with the onset of the Cold War. Hopefully quite, in the years to come, Turkey will go ahead with the cherished ideals of its founder and be a beacon light for the nations fraught with fundamentalism, violence and illiberal systems of governance.

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