

11 · The Kemalist One-Party State, 1925-45

The political system of Kemalist Turkey: party and state

From the promulgation of the Law on the Maintenance of Order in March 1925, Turkey's government was an authoritarian one-party regime and, not to put too fine a point on it, a dictatorship. We have seen how the law and the tribunals established under it were used in 1925-26 to silence all opposition and how, in his great speech of 1927, Mustafa Kemal Pasha vindicated this repression. The Law on the Maintenance of Order remained in force until 1929, when the government felt secure enough to allow it to lapse. To all intents and purposes, the Republican People's Party had established a power monopoly and, at the party congress of 1931, Turkey's political system was officially declared to be that of a one-party state.¹

Apart from an experiment with a 'tame' opposition party in 1930, no legal opposition was active in Turkey until after the Second World War. Underground opposition was limited to an insignificant communist movement and more important actions of Kurdish nationalists. There were almost continuous small uprisings in the mountains of the south-east and one major insurrection in Dersim (Tunceli) in 1937-38. This was again suppressed with the utmost severity and again tens of thousands of Kurds were forcibly resettled in the west of the country. Small groups of *émigrés* of different political colours (royalists, liberals, Islamists and socialists) continued to attack the regime in pamphlets and periodicals from places as far apart as Paris, Sofia, Damascus and Cairo, but none carried any real weight.²

According to the 1924 constitution, all power resided in the Great National Assembly of Turkey, which was the only legitimate representative of the nation's sovereign will. But one of the reactions of the RPP leadership to the emergence of opposition in 1924 had been to tighten party discipline to the extent that free discussion was only allowed in the (closed) meetings of the parliamentary party. After a decision on any topic had been reached in these meetings, delegates were bound by

the majority decision and were required to vote for it in the assembly. This meant that even before March 1925 the assembly votes were a foregone conclusion. During the one-party era they became a mere formality. Discussion was restricted, even within the meetings of the parliamentary party, which served as the forum in which the cabinet announced and explained its decisions. Although the leeway of the faction varied according to the field of policy concerned (the economy being debated much more freely than foreign affairs, for instance, which were left almost completely to the cabinet), the function of its meetings was essentially to ratify and legitimize cabinet decisions.

While the RPP had a rank-and-file organization throughout the country, which its secretary-general led, the members of the national assembly, the cabinet, the prime minister (who was also executive chairman of the party) and the president (who doubled as party chairman) dominated it. State and party were closely identified. One important result was that the party itself never developed an independent ideological or organizational 'personality' and became heavily bureaucratized. Attempts by the party's long-serving secretary-general, Recep (Peker), to make the party more independent and to develop an independent 'Kemalist' ideology failed when, at the 1936 congress, İsmet (İnönü) declared the congruency between the state apparatus and the party organization to be official policy. This meant that, to take just one example, the governor of a province would automatically be the head of the RPP branch in his province.

Four-yearly parliamentary elections were held throughout the one-party period, but they served only a ceremonial function. The slates of candidates for parliamentary seats were drawn up by the chairman of the party, the executive chairman and the secretary-general and then ratified by the party congress and there was no way in which citizens, even if they were active party members, could stand for parliament on their own initiative. Even if elections were tightly controlled, the fact that women were given the right to vote and to be elected on 5 December 1934 was still an important step in the emancipation of Turkish women. From March 1935 onwards, 18 women deputies took their places in the Great National Assembly in Ankara. In this respect at least Turkey had caught up with the most advanced countries of Europe.

Tutelary democracy: the Free Republican Party

The monolithic political system established after 1925 left very little room for the ventilation of competing ideas within the leadership, and none at all for the expression of social discontent from without. At the same time, the authoritarian behaviour of the RPP and of its regional

and local representatives, the attendant favouritism and corruption, the lack of civil liberties, and also the reform policies of the government, created widespread resentment. By the end of the 1920s, the world economic crisis, which hit Turkey very hard as it did other agricultural producers, had compounded this situation. The RPP had no real means of managing this discontent (other than suppressing its expression) since its authoritarian structure left it without the means of communication with the mass of the population. The crisis in the country was not reflected in more lively debates in the assembly at all. At the opening of the 1931 party congress party chairman İsmet not once mentioned the economic crisis.

In 1930, Mustafa Kemal, who was aware of the existence of discontent (though probably not of its scale) through reports and through his frequent inspection tours in the country, decided to allow and even encourage the founding of a loyal opposition party, with the twin aims of channelling the social discontent and of shaking up the lethargic RPP. He may also have wanted to put pressure on İsmet who, after five years in power, had gradually built up his own power base and was no longer only the president's puppet.

Mustafa Kemal approached his old friend Fethi (Okyar) with an offer to found a new party. Fethi had recently returned from a tour of duty as ambassador in Paris (where he had been sent after his defeat as prime minister in March 1925) and he had submitted a highly critical report on the state of the country and İsmet's policies to the president. The two men discussed the proposal for a few days. Fethi asked for guarantees that the government would allow his party to function and that Mustafa Kemal himself would remain impartial. For his part, Mustafa Kemal demanded that the new party remain faithful to the ideals of republicanism and secularism. When they agreed, Fethi proceeded to found the *Serbest Cumhuriyet Fırkası* (Free Republican Party). Mustafa Kemal ordered a number of his closest collaborators, among them his oldest friend Nuri (Conker), to join the new party. To prove his good faith, he also announced that his own sister, Makbule, had joined it.

In the end, only 15 representatives joined the FRP but they were all eminent members of the Kemalist establishment. The party produced an 11-point manifesto, which echoed that of the Progressive Republican Party of 1924 in that it advocated a liberal economic policy and encouragement of foreign investment, as well as freedom of speech and direct elections (Turkey still had a system of two-tier elections).

The new party was greeted with widespread enthusiasm. Its branch offices were literally inundated with applications for membership. Huge and ecstatic crowds met Fethi when he visited İzmir early in September.

There were skirmishes with the police, and when the police fired into the crowd a number of people were wounded and a boy was killed. This was a turning point in the party's short history. The RPP leaders were alarmed and demanded that Mustafa Kemal should state openly that he was and would remain at the head of their party, which he did on 10 September.³

In October 1930, local elections were held and the FRP managed to win in 30 of the 502 councils.⁴ Even though this was only a small minority of the seats, the governing party was surprised and alarmed. Then, in an assembly debate directly after the elections, Fethi accused the governing party of large-scale irregularities and electoral fraud. This in turn led to fierce attacks on the FRP, in which it and its leader were accused of high treason. Mustafa Kemal now told Fethi privately that he could no longer remain impartial in this atmosphere. Unwilling to conduct political opposition against the president himself, Fethi felt he had no choice but to close down the FRP on 16 November 1930. For the rest of his life he remained bitter about what he felt to be Mustafa Kemal's desertion at this juncture.⁵

A month later, on 23 December, an incident occurred in the town of Menemen, not far from İzmir. A group of young dervishes from Manisa, led by a certain Mehmet, walked into town, unfurled a green banner and called for the restoration of the *şariat* and the caliphate. When word of this reached the headquarters of the gendarmerie, it sent out a company of soldiers under reserve lieutenant Mustafa Fehmi Kubilay. When he demanded the surrender of the dervishes, they attacked him and cut off his head, which they then paraded on a stick. A gendarmerie unit arrived and opened fire, killing three of the ring-leaders, including Mehmet. The aspect of the matter that was really shocking to the Kemalist leadership was not so much the action of the dervishes, however, but the fact that over a thousand bystanders had watched these events unfold without anyone raising his voice in protest. This could be, and was, interpreted as tacit support by the public for the rebels. The government took stern action, with martial law being declared and over 2000 arrests made (among them many former FRP supporters). Some 28 people were executed, but the bill envisaging the razing to the ground of Menemen and the deportation of its inhabitants, though initially supported by Mustafa Kemal, was eventually dropped.⁶

The RPP's totalitarian tendencies

The extent of resentment and opposition to the RPP regime, which the Free Party episode had brought to light were a sobering experience for Mustafa Kemal and his followers, who thereafter tightened their hold

on the country by bringing under their direct control all the country's cultural and intellectual life, suppressing those independent social and cultural organizations that had survived from the CUP era. There were no more experiments with opposition, although Mustafa Kemal tried to combat the lethargy of the assembly by having a number of seats (30 in the 1931 elections, 16 in 1935) reserved for independents. In the prevailing climate, however, this was not very effective: in 1931 not even the 30 seats left vacant by the People's Party for independent candidates could be filled and in 1935 the number of independents dropped to 13.⁷

First and foremost among the social and cultural institutions to be suppressed was the *Türk Ocakları* (the Turkish Hearth movement). It had been reactivated under the leadership of the minister of education, Hamdullah Suphi (Tanrıöver), and it tried to spread nationalist, positivist and secularist ideas in the country through lectures, courses and exhibitions. When it was closed down in 1931, it had more than 30,000 members and 267 branches.⁸ From 1932 it was replaced by the so-called *Halk Evleri* (People's Homes) in towns and by *Halk Odaları* (People's Rooms) in large villages; they served essentially the same function but were tightly controlled by the provincial branches of the party. By the end of the Second World War there were nearly 500 of these People's Homes in all parts of the country.

Another organization to be closed down was the *Türk Kadınlar Birliği* (Turkish Women's Union), which women who had been active in the national resistance movement had founded in 1924. At an extraordinary congress in May 1935 it decided, at the request of the RPP leadership, to disband officially because its aims (equal rights for Turkish women) had been achieved with the granting of the vote to Turkey's women. The Turkish Freemasons' lodges, whose members had often been prominent in the Young Turk movement from the beginning of the century, were closed down in the same year, as was the union of journalists.

All newspapers and periodicals leaning towards the liberal or socialist opposition had been closed down in 1925. From then on only government-controlled newspapers appeared, with the one exception of *Yarın* (Tomorrow), published in 1929–30 by Arif (Oruç), a left-wing journalist and – significantly – an old friend of Mustafa Kemal and Fethi. *Yarın* had been allowed to attack İsmet's economic policies (and as such it was a kind of forerunner of the FRP), but it was closed down in 1931 after the adoption of a new press law that gave the government powers to close down any paper that published anything contradicting the 'general policies of the country'.

Finally, in 1933, the old *Darülfünun* ('House of Sciences', the university) in Istanbul was given a new charter and reconstituted as the University of Istanbul. In the process two-thirds of its teaching staff, more than 100 people, lost their tenure and only the most dependable followers of the Kemalist line were kept on. It was the first of many purges the Turkish universities were to experience in the following 50 years. Starting in 1933, however, academic life in Turkey was also strengthened by an influx of German scholars and scientists, who left Germany after Hitler came to power. The Turkish government invited 63 German professors to come and teach in Turkey, where they raised the level of academic learning dramatically and provided a formative influence on several generations of students.⁹

Both the press and the educational institutions were mobilized to spread the Kemalist message. The stifling political and intellectual climate that resulted has often been overlooked in traditional historiography and needs to be given due attention. Nevertheless, it should also be pointed out that the Kemalist leadership did inspire a great many people – mostly writers, teachers, doctors and other professionals and students – with its vision of a modern, secular, independent Turkey. These people, who saw themselves as an elite, with a mission to guide their ignorant compatriots, often worked very hard and with great personal sacrifice for their ideals. This 'noblesse oblige' attitude of the Kemalist elite is something that modern revisionist writers of the right and the left tend to overlook.

The Kemalist message

The set of ideas or ideals that together formed *Kemalizm* (Kemalism) or *Atatürkçülük* (Atatürkism) as it came to be called in the 1930s, evolved gradually. It never became a coherent, all-embracing ideology, but can best be described as a set of attitudes and opinions that were never defined in any detail. As we have seen, Recep Peker's attempts to do so failed. As a result, Kemalism remained a flexible concept and people with widely differing worldviews have been able to call themselves Kemalist. The basic principles of Kemalism were laid down in the party programme of 1931. They were republicanism, secularism, nationalism, populism, statism and revolutionism (or reformism).

Secularism and nationalism had of course been among the distinctive characteristics of Young Turk ideology at least since 1913. During the 1930s both were carried to extremes, secularism being interpreted not only as a separation of state and religion, but as the removal of religion from public life and the establishment of complete state control over remaining religious institutions. An extreme form of nationalism, with

the attendant creation of historical myths, was used as the prime instrument in the building of a new national identity, and as such was intended to take the place of religion in many respects.

Republicanism had been a basic principle since 1923 (when, it will be remembered, political activity in favour of a return of the monarchy had been outlawed). 'Populism' meant the notion, first emphasized during the First World War, of national solidarity and putting the interests of the whole nation before those of any group or class. In a negative sense it entailed a denial of class interests (according to Kemalism, Turkey did not have classes in the European sense) and a prohibition of political activity based on class (and thus of all socialist or communist activity). Revolutionism – or reformism, as Atatürk's more conservative followers have preferred to interpret the Turkish term *İnkılapçılık* – meant a commitment to ongoing (but orderly and state-led) change and support for the Kemalist reform programme. Statism was a new concept that recognized the pre-eminence of the state in the economic field; and it was probably the most widely discussed issue in Turkey in the 1930s and 1940s. It is treated in more detail below.

These six principles, symbolized in the party emblem as six arrows (the *Altı Ok*), were incorporated into the Turkish constitution in 1937. Together they formed the state ideology of Kemalism and the basis for indoctrination in schools, the media and the army. Sometimes Kemalism was even described as the 'Turkish religion'. Nevertheless, as an ideology it lacked coherence and, perhaps even more importantly, emotional appeal. This ideological void was filled to some extent by the personality cult that grew up around Mustafa Kemal during and even more so after his lifetime. From 1926 onwards statues of him were erected in the major towns. He was presented as the father of the nation, its saviour and its teacher. Indoctrination in schools and universities (where 'History of the Turkish Revolution' became a compulsory subject in 1934) focused on him to an extraordinary degree. The fact that he was not associated with a very definite ideology that could be discredited, as fascism, national socialism and Marxism–Leninism have been, has meant that his personality cult could survive changes in the political climate. At the time of writing it is still very much part of the official culture of Turkey.

Friction within the leadership

While the political leadership was in complete control over both party and parliament, tensions gradually built up within the leadership, notably between İsmet, who served as prime minister for 12 consecutive years from 1925 to 1937, and the president, Mustafa Kemal. In his

later years the president largely withdrew from politics and left the day-to-day running of the country in İsmet's hands, while he interested himself in specific reform projects such as that of the script and language. He surrounded himself with a small group of supporters and friends with whom he spent most nights eating, drinking and discussing the country's problems and future. Experts from different walks of life were often invited to these sessions in the presidential villa in Çankaya, which as a rule lasted from late in the evening until the break of day. Suggestions were made, criticisms voiced, plans drawn up and decisions taken.

What made the situation potentially dangerous was Mustafa Kemal's relative isolation from the daily affairs of the government. His plans and decisions therefore tended to become increasingly poorly coordinated with those of the prime minister, İsmet. The fact that, even in semi-retirement, Mustafa Kemal remained the undisputed master of the country meant that he could overrule the prime minister and his cabinet if he chose to do so under the influence of his circle of friends and advisers. Over the years there were several instances of this happening, in internal, economic and foreign affairs. Twice the president forced a cabinet minister to resign without consulting İsmet. His interference irritated İsmet, who became increasingly wary of what he saw as the president's kitchen cabinet in Çankaya.¹⁰

Finally, in September 1937, there was an open row between the two men, which led to Atatürk (as he had become in 1934 with the introduction of family names) demanding İsmet's resignation. İnönü duly resigned, ostensibly for health reasons. Mahmut Celâl (Bayar), a former CUP secretary and *Teşkilât-i Mahsusa* chief in İzmir, first head of the Business Bank of Turkey (*Türkiye İş Bankası*) created in 1924 and minister of economic affairs since 1932, replaced him.

Atatürk's death and İsmet's return to power

Some of Atatürk's irritability and erratic behaviour during 1937–38 may have been due to his deteriorating health. Apart from two heart attacks, in 1923 and 1927, which seem to have left no permanent damage, he was generally healthy until early in 1937, when the symptoms of advanced cirrhosis of the liver, due to excessive consumption of alcohol over many years, started to become apparent. The illness was officially diagnosed only at the beginning of 1938 and from March onwards his condition deteriorated quickly. His illness was kept a secret from the public (even in October a newspaper that mentioned it was immediately closed for three months), but leading political circles were well aware of the impending end and a struggle for power began.

Despite the events of the previous year, İsmet İnönü was clearly the

leading candidate for the succession, but he had made many enemies during his years in office, the most determined being the members of Atatürk's 'kitchen cabinet'. They attempted to remove him (by having him appointed ambassador to Washington) and to engineer new elections for the assembly, which would have to elect Atatürk's successor and which was still packed with İsmet's supporters. There was even talk of a verbal political testament of the president, in which he pronounced himself against İsmet's succession.¹¹

All these attempts, however, proved fruitless. Mustafa Kemal Pasha Atatürk died on 10 November 1938 in the Dolmabahçe Palace in Istanbul, where he had been lying ill for the past few months. On 11 November the national assembly elected İsmet İnönü the second president of the republic. His succession was due to four factors: the refusal of the prime minister, Bayar, to cooperate with his adversaries (Bayar had kept in touch with İnönü throughout this period); his adversaries' inability to come up with a credible candidate; the fact that the parliamentary deputies, as well as the party bureaucrats, were people who had been picked by İnönü himself years before; and the decision of the military leaders to support İnönü and of the Chief of General Staff, Marshal Fevzi Çakmak, not to stand as a candidate, even though it was made clear to him that his candidacy would have considerable support in the assembly.

Atatürk's body was brought to Ankara amid widespread demonstrations of grief and mourning and laid to rest temporarily in the Ethnographic Museum. In 1953 it was finally interred in an imposing purpose-built mausoleum on what was then a hill on the outskirts of the capital but is now right in its centre.

An obituary

Under the influence of the official historiography of the Turkish Republic (and ultimately of Atatürk himself in his great speech), historians have depicted the emergence of modern Turkey as the single-handed achievement of one man. The reader will have noticed that in this book an attempt has been made to paint a different picture. Nevertheless, it remains true that it is doubtful whether Turkey would have survived as an independent state without his unique combination of tactical mastery, ruthlessness, realism and sense of purpose. Up to 1919 he had been a member of the military inner circle of the CUP with a reputation as both a brilliant staff officer and commander and a quarrelsome and over ambitious personality. His rule after 1925 may be regarded both as a daring attempt at achieving a modernization leap for Turkish society and as a regressive phase in the development of mature and democratic

political institutions in Turkey, but there can be hardly any doubt that he was absolutely the right man on the right spot during the greatest crisis in the history of his country and that he contributed more than anyone else to its survival.

İsmet İnönü as 'National Leader'

Around the time of Atatürk's death there had been widespread speculation about whether there would be a change in policy and even about whether the republic would endure. It was soon clear, however, that İsmet İnönü meant to continue the basic policies of his predecessor. His position as leader was formalized at an extraordinary party congress in December 1938, at which the party statutes were changed to make Atatürk the 'eternal party chairman', while İnönü was made 'permanent party chairman'. The term *millî şef* (national leader), which from time to time had been used for Atatürk in the 1930s, now became İnönü's official title.

For a few months İnönü kept Bayar as prime minister, but on 25 January 1939 the latter handed in his resignation. The main reason was the basic difference of opinion between the president and the prime minister over economic policies, but İnönü had also made life difficult for the cabinet by inspiring a number of press campaigns, inquiries and lawsuits aimed at the administration that had been in power in 1937-38. At the same time İnönü tried to broaden his political base by a policy of reconciliation with the old leaders of the independence movement who had been purged in 1926. Two of these, Ali Fuat Cebesoy and Refet Bele had made their peace with Atatürk during his last years, but the rest had remained in limbo. A number of them had lived abroad since 1926. They now returned to the country and were given parliamentary seats.

Celâl Bayar was succeeded by Dr Refik Saydam who served as prime minister until his death in July 1942. He in turn was succeeded by the foreign minister, Şükrü Saraçoğlu, who remained in power until 1945, but during these years, which were of course entirely dominated by the Second World War, İsmet İnönü was in complete control and his prime ministers (who were always at the same time vice-chairmen of the party) executed the policies determined by the president.¹²

The Turkish regime of the 1930s and 1940s, of which the main characteristics have been outlined above, thus in many ways resembled the other authoritarian regimes that sprang up all over southern Europe in this era (such as the regimes of Salazar in Portugal, Franco in Spain and Metaxas in Greece). It differed from them, however, in that it was not culturally and religiously conservative, but on the contrary attempted a far-reaching cultural revolution in a conservatively religious society.

The example of the most important dictatorship in the Mediterranean, fascist Italy, was certainly important to the Turkish leadership. The way in which Mussolini seemed to forge national unity and to energize Italian society impressed many in Turkey (as, indeed, it did in many other European countries), and a number of new laws promulgated under the republic were straight copies of Italian legislation.

There were many similarities between the Italian fascist regime and the Kemalists: the extreme nationalism, with its attendant development of a legitimizing historical mythology and racist rhetoric, the authoritarian character of the regime and its efforts to establish a complete totalitarian monopoly for its party of the political, social and cultural scene, the personality cult that developed around both Mussolini on the one hand and Atatürk and İnönü on the other, and the emphasis on national unity and solidarity with its attendant denial of class conflicts.

Nevertheless, the differences between the two regimes are greater than the similarities. Fascism came into being as a genuinely (albeit orchestrated) popular movement, in reaction to the disruption of traditional society brought about by the industrial revolution and to the threat posed by the socialist movement to the middle class; the Young Turk regimes in Turkey imposed their policies from above on an indifferent population. Unlike the fascists, the Kemalists never attempted any large-scale or permanent mobilization of the population for its goals. It has been pointed out that of all the speeches made by Atatürk in these years not a single one took place before a mass rally in the fascist style. Also, while the Kemalist state was undoubtedly authoritarian and totalitarian, the existence of an all-powerful leader was not made into a guiding political principle with its own legitimacy, a 'leader principle'. Atatürk intensely disliked being called a dictator.¹³ The semblance of a democratic system with a parliament and elections was carefully left in place. Finally, one great, and possibly decisive, difference from the Italian example is the lack of militarist rhetoric and expansionist (or irredentist) propaganda and policies in the Turkish case and the cautious, defensive and realistic policies of Turkey's leaders.

Reform policies 1925–35: secularism and nationalism

In the secularist drive, which was the most characteristic element of Kemalist reform, three areas can be discerned. The first was the secularization of state, education and law: the attack on the traditional strongholds of the institutionalized Islam of the *ulema*. The second was the attack on religious symbols and their replacement by the symbols of European civilization. The third was the secularization of social life and the attack on popular Islam it entailed.

It can be argued that the first wave of Kemalist reforms had finished the process of secularization of state, education and law, which had begun under Sultan Mahmut a century before and which had been almost completed under the CUP during its rule from 1913 to 1918. The abolition of the sultanate and caliphate, the proclamation of the republic and the new constitution in 1922–24 were the final stages in the secularization of the state, and the seal was set on this development with the removal from the 1928 constitution of the clause that made Islam the state religion of Turkey.¹⁴

Even before the birth of the republic, the role of the *şariat*, the holy law, had been limited almost exclusively to the realm of family law. Now this sector too was taken from the jurisdiction of the *ulema* with the adoption of the Swiss civil code and the Italian penal code in 1926. The penal code prohibited the forming of associations on a religious basis. The educational system, which had already been brought into the control of the Ministry of Education under the CUP, was now completely secularized through the Law on the Unification of Education in March 1924. At the same time the *medreses*, or religious colleges, were abolished, and their place was taken by schools for preachers and by a theological faculty established at the University of Istanbul.

The year 1924 also witnessed the abolition of the venerable function of *Şeyhülislam* and of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Pious Foundations. Two directorates were created in its place, the *Diyanet İşleri Müdürlüğü* (Directorate for Religious Affairs) and the *Evkaf Umum Müdürlüğü* (Directorate-General for Pious Foundations). Both were attached directly to the prime minister's office. The establishment of these directorates clearly shows that the Kemalist perception of secularism meant not so much separation of state and religion as state control of religion.

The second area in which secularization took place was that of religious symbols. This was the most important aspect of measures like banning traditional headgear (such as the fez and turban) for men in 1925 and restricting religious attire to prayer services in the mosques, which was ordered in September of that year. It also inspired the attacks made by Atatürk and his followers on wearing the veil (although this was never actually forbidden) and, for instance, the decree of 1935, which made Sunday the official day of rest instead of Friday.

It is clear from Atatürk's own statements that measures such as the ban on religious attire were motivated as much by the desire to claim all visible expression of authority as a monopoly of the state (and its uniformed servants) as by the wish to secularize society.

A number of other reforms, which were not specifically aimed at