

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

It has been nearly 80 years since Ataturk began the secularization of Turkish society and orientated the nation to look to the west as a role model. The Republic of Turkey today is a secular democracy wherein the principle of secularism was adopted in its constitution in February 1937. 98% of its 70 million people are Muslims. Contrary to what is commonly perceived when the subject of the secularization of Turkish society under the Kemalist regime is discussed, religion was never eliminated from Turkish social and cultural life. Ataturk merely side-lined or as some writers put it, 'subordinated' religion to other aspects of Turkish life. Ataturk himself had acknowledged that Islam is a natural and rational religion. By separating religion from the state, he wanted to ensure that it would not be used as a tool to exploit the masses as he believed had happened in the past, for political and vested interests.

Far from disuniting the Muslim community by his secular reforms, especially by abolishing the caliphate as his critics pointed out, Ataturk had formed the Society of Unitarians (Muvahhidin) in 1919. Its aim was to save the Muslim community from its own inherent weaknesses which included superstitions and fear of technological advancement. The society even tried to organize the first International Muslim Congress in 1919 to bring Muslims from all over the world as

one united political body. It is interesting and noteworthy that despite criticisms over the abolition of the caliphate, there has never been any attempt to restore it.

Ataturk's secular reforms may be described as 'elitist' in that it affected mainly the urban professional, educated and intellectual classes in society. This is not to say that they were in any way less spiritual or less a believer in the faith. On the contrary. Rosey Ma, a Turkish Muslim now resident in Malaysia recalls growing up in Turkey during the fifties and sixties. While benefiting from a modern secular education and exposure to western values and practices, her friends and siblings were never deprived of an Islamic upbringing or strayed from its teachings. Captain Evrim, Military Attache' in the Turkish Embassy in Kuala Lumpur shared the same view and opined that for all their western ways, Turks are inherently committed to Islam but most do not share the fanaticism or agree with the outward form and expressions as practised by some Muslims.

However, these reforms had little impact on the majority of the masses, especially the peasants in the rural and far-flung areas outside the capital and major cities, and the majority of people lived their lives without experiencing the effects of these changes. Islam, the religion of the Turkish people, continued to be an important and integral part of people's lives. Nationalism, adoption of western values and practices and the rewards of modernity would and could not fill the spiritual need or vacuum of the people. Despite the closure of monasteries and the ban on the tarikats, this writer witnessed the thriving community of the Mevlana

Sufi sect during a visit to Konya, Turkey in 1997 and observed that the dervishes and their followers gather there for a big festival each December.

The religious revival in Turkey since the fifties is a testimony of the strength and the entrenchment of the faith in the people. Critics claim that this is a reaction against the secularization of past decades. The argument of some 19th century intellectuals that the Ottoman Empire lost its glory and power because it had failed to follow the true teachings of Islam is being resurrected. They argue that for Turkey to be strong again it must return to Islamic morals and virtues as secularism and Islam are innately incompatible. This has become the platform of political parties who have increasingly gained support by combining social and economic issues with an appeal to the religious and traditional sentiments of the people. However, a platform of solely Islamic reforms and Islamic rhetoric show that while religious and traditional sentiments may appeal to the peasantry, and even to the professional and intellectual classes, religion alone is not a crucial factor for electoral success. This is evident in the failure of Erbakan's Islamist parties such as the NOP, NSP, WP and subsequent off-shoots to gain substantial support on a strictly religious agenda.

Their aim was to modernize the country through both spiritual and technical development programmes. Its party platform merged implicit religious appeals with a programme of cultural revival that rejected western cultural influences and emphasized what it termed as 'national moral consciousness'. The high percentage

of professionals in the party's leadership showed that it had good support from the older, urban and professional section of the population, giving rise to the emergence of a counter-elite with a different cultural orientation than that of the predominantly Kemalist-secularist elite.

One can make the observation that while Turkish society remains Islamic, it also wants to remain secular. Perhaps nearly 80 years of intense and purposeful secularization would be difficult to wipe out from Turkish life. It is also possible that the lessons from the Islamic experiences of Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan will render it unlikely that Turkey would ever return to a state of theocracy again. As recently as in 1999, a Turkish Member of Parliament who wore a headscarf to her first sitting in Parliament was promptly jeered and booed out. Not only that. She was also stripped of her Turkish citizenship after it was investigated that she had dual citizenship. University students wearing headscarves on campuses have also become an issue today. A small matter, one may say, but it illustrates how deeply entrenched Islam is in Turkey - as is secularism- paradoxically.

This paradox also extends to its identity. Geographically, Turkey occupies a strategic location. It covers a total area of 301,000 square miles or 779,452 square kilometres or nearly two and a half times the size of Malaysia. It straddles both Europe on the west and Asia in the east. While it has chosen Anatolia in Asia as the nation's heartland, it seeks a European identity as evident from its application to join the European Union (EU) – a community of European states with specific aims

for social and economic cooperation and growth. She wishes to join and benefit from the EU. The measure of the success of the state's economic policy can be seen. Turkey today remains a poor country with one of the lowest per capita incomes in Europe. The gap between the rich and poor is wide, inflation rate is double digit, foreign debt is high and so is unemployment, as seen by the flow of both legal and illegal immigrants to Europe to seek work. Privatization of state enterprises is also necessary to improve efficiency.

Ataturk's call for unity under a new nationalism is under test as Turkey wrestles with the problems of Kurdish rebellions and the fight for a Kurdish independent state. Demands for Kurdish as a second language, ban on Kurdish cultural practices, frequent guerilla warfare with rebel groups, etc put a question on national integration. The suppression and abuse of human rights is a key issue taken to task for Turkey's admission to the European Union and also a test of democracy. The past military coups are also an aberration of the popular vote.

In Turkey, this paradox is in many ways a reflection of the dilemma many Muslim nations face today. A dilemma of what or who they are and where their loyalty should be directed to, first and foremost. Should it be to the nation or to the faith? In Turkey, modernization and secularism was the clarion call to unite the people for a common goal of achieving development and economic progress in the new nation state. It demanded loyalty from the people to the nation first above all else. It meant leaving behind or breaking away from old loyalties and attachments

to traditions and cultures, which for the majority of the people was so integral to their way of life, and more importantly, in their psyche or mental construct.

This dilemma is essentially a crisis of identity, a crisis brought about by the rapid process of modernization, often in the guise of westernization, planted in an alien soil that is still steeped in religious traditions and values. Some would call it a 'civilizational clash' between modernization and Islam. The process of modernization is inevitable as it is necessary and involves a process of change. Inherent in all change is the element of conflict. In conflict is crisis, whatever the degree and magnitude. What is needed is an ability to manage this change and conflict effectively, for in a crisis also lies opportunities. This writer believes that the new generation of Turks today, with a strong grounding in their faith and cultural heritage, armed with scientific knowledge and a competent grasp of modern technology are well placed to synthesize their skills and knowledge to seize these opportunities – without having to compromise their sense of self. This is the essence of modernization.