

LAICISM IN THE REPUBLIC OF TURKEY IN THE 1920-1930S

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Abstract

Purpose: The article deals with the Kemalists' policy of secularization and the inclusion of the laicism principle in the ideological doctrine of the Turkish Republic in the 1920-30s.

Methodology: Historical-genetic, historical-comparative and historical-system methods of research were underlain the given study.

Result: Under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk great radical transformations in all spheres of life of the former Ottoman Empire began, namely the state system, the reform of the school and its separation from religion. All these transformations summed up the previous history of Turkey as a dependent, semi-colonial feudal state, clearing the way to modernization and renewal of all aspects of life.

Applications: This research can be used for universities, teachers, and students.

Novelty/Originality: In this research, the model of Laicism in the Republic of Turkey in the 1920-1930s is presented in a comprehensive and complete manner.

Keywords: *laicism, Kemalism, westernization, Turkish Republic, Atatürk, ideology, nationalism.*

INTRODUCTION

The process of development of the secular state in Turkey is associated with the formation of the Republican system and a new national policy. The history of laicism, i.e. the principle of secularism, is at the same time the history of national ideology in Turkey ([Bakhtin, 2000](#)).

The Young Turks party "Unity and progress" did not accept laicism legally, although it pursued a common policy aimed at modernization in the social and economic spheres, and tried to unite representatives of various concepts around this goal. Since the formation of the party, there have been both groups of Laicism supporters and groups of opponents of the given principle who were convinced that political and social issues can be solved through the influence of Islam on society. This, in many respects, explains some uncertainty in the overall political party line.

The movement for the laicism establishment in Turkey took a new lease of life after the liberation struggle in Republican Turkey when Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was nominated. Even during the struggle against foreign intervention Atatürk understood the impossibility of the existence of the old order: "the very foundations of the Ottoman Empire were already crippled ... the entire territory of the Empire was carved up... In this situation, the decision should be the following - the creation of a new Turkish state which is based on national sovereignty and enjoys independence without any reservations and restrictions» ([Calhoun, 2006](#)). Subsequently, the same ideas were approved on January 13, 1920 in the National Pact. [Ter-Matevosyan, V. \(2017\)](#).

METHODS

Historical-genetic, historical-comparative and historical-system methods of research were underlain the given study.

The historical-genetic method allows to trace the development stages of Kemalist ideology and to explain the causes of the national idea in the Republic of Turkey. Thus, having overcome the ephemeral form of existence, the ideas of secularization, laicism, and westernization, which appeared in the era of the Ottoman Empire, emerge at the phase of the early Republican period in the form of implemented reforms.

The historical-system method which is aimed at studying political and cultural changes in the 1920-30s makes it possible to see not scattered events, but an integral ideological system, which was focused on the creation of a national state.

RESULTS

Changes in political boundaries¹ and ethnic "picture"² gave rise to the creation of a new state built on the national principle. The Arab Revolt also played its part against the Ottoman Empire in 1916, which demonstrated the power of nationalism. According to K. Kahun, the spread of the idea of nationalism was influenced by international communications: "reports of

¹Turkey refused from Arabia, Egypt, Syria, Sudan, Tripolitania, Mesopotamia, Palestine, the ridge of Islands in the Mediterranean sea, Western Thrace, etc.

²In the first decades of the XIX century. Turks were a little more than half of the population within its modern borders. The rest nations were Armenians, Greeks, Kurds, Arabs, lazy, Adzharians, Jews, Assyrians, Bulgarians, Albanians, Bosnians, Croats.

nationalist riots and their successes were spread through migration, conferences, books, newspapers, radio... Thus, the existence of some nationalist movements contributed to the emergence of other ones and set as a pattern and ideological basis" ([Izmaylov, Fakhrutdinov & Galimzyanova, 2017](#)).

The transformation of laicism into one of the foundations of state policy was the result of a process that began with the abolition of the Caliphate in 1924 and ended up in 1937 with the inclusion of laicism as a fundamental principle into the Constitution of the country. Mustafa Kemal set up a radical policy of laicism and pursued it since 1924. This policy brought the influence of religion on the state to naught and significantly reduced its social role ([Kireev, 2007](#)). It should be noted that this step was important because, as the researcher Ereemeev D. E. authoritatively stated for that period of time, "the only thing that united the Turks was Islam" ([Villalobos Antúnez, & Bello, 2014](#)). Permeating the entire structure of Muslim society, Islam was both a consolidating factor and a hindrance to the creation of national unity.

The Russian orientalist N. D. Kireev argues that active actions that were launched in accordance with declamation were associated with the Mustafa Kemal's personal attitude to religious leaders. The researcher quotes Atatürk who said August 30, 1925 the following: the Turkish Republic cannot be a country of sheikhs, dervishes, murid sects and their adherents. The right way (tariqa) is the way to civilization. Civilization has one requirement – to be a human and this is enough" ([Vieira Alves, 2018](#)).

It was necessary to undermine the centuries-old religious hegemony, and it was done in 1924. Abolition of the Caliphate followed immediately by the Ministry of Sharia trial and waqfs allowed to do first important steps like unified secular education and legal proceeding. It was the principle of laicism that was entrusted with the task of reducing the influence of Islam on society. At the same time, the national policy required the political elite got along with and the masses, as well as the creation of a system of national education.

The first legislative act that defined the system of education was the "Law of Unification of Instruction", adopted on 3 March 1924 that placed all the scientific and educational institutions under the control of the Ministry of Education. And in April of the same year, the Constitution of the country was adopted. The article 87 states: "Primary education is compulsory for all male and female Turks; it is free of charge in public schools" ([Issaliyeva, Ospanova, & Alibekul, 2018](#)).

At that time, the illiteracy of the population, as well as the lack of a secular education system, was of major importance. After World War I the percentage of the literate people was about 4% of the population, thus there was a lack of 35000 schools and 70000 teachers ([Luo, Li, Peng, & Fan, 2018](#)).

The reform of the education system in 1924 became possible only after the Kemalists were able to remove the clergy, various organizations as well as private people from the education guidance and transferred it entirely into the hands of the state. According to the Constitution, all public and private educational institutions were secular. As a result, lots of religious colleges (medrese) were closed with the exception of the faculty of theology of Istanbul University, where a few dozen students-theologians continued to study ([Singh, & Singha, 2016](#)).

In 1925, according to a special decree, the government eliminated the dervish ordos and monasteries. This decree was of great political importance, because the Kemalists, having eliminated these ordos, deprived the Turkish clergy of its influence on the masses. A.F. Miller emphasizes that the influence of the dervish ordos was so strong that the orders of the sheikhs were carried out faster than the orders of the government.

At the same time together with the elimination of the spiritual education system, the Kemalist government made a resolution to restore secondary schools that were closed during the national liberation war. And during 1922-1924 1655 such schools were opened again. [skanderovich Izmaylov, R., Fakhrutdinov, R. R., & Galimzyanova, L. R. \(2017\)](#).

Atatürk himself was an ardent supporter of the creation of a new, secular education system. He called for the inclusion of everything new and progressive that programs of Western European schools contained. In May 1926, the government invited a number of foreign educationalists to implement their goals. With their help, new curricula were developed, which formed the basis of a new, secular education system. This project called for the elimination of religious subjects and the Arabic language. [Ter-Matevosyan, V. \(2017\)](#).

By 1927, the number of literate populations reached 10.6%, but it was not enough due to the lack of funding and to the presence of Arabic script. This was the reason why the Turkish government undertook the transition from Arabic to Latin graphics in the Turkish language that influenced the life and consciousness of society. The creation of a new cultural "content" required the complete elimination of the echoes of the old ideology, but the Arabic script firmly merged with the religious worldview. The radical nature of this reform is noted by the Russian historian Kireev N. G.: "One of the most decisive steps of the Kemalists on the way to the reformation, westernization of culture was the reform of the Turkish language. It was not limited to the gradual replacement of Arabic and Persian vocabulary and grammatical phrases into Turkish. In 1928, with the personal participation of Mustafa Kemal, a campaign of replacing the Arabic alphabet with the Latin one was carried out. In November, the Grand National Assembly of Turkey adopted a relevant law, and in December 1928 signs where Turkish words were written in Latin alphabet, began to appear" ([Yazdekhashti, Erfan, & Nazari, 2015](#)). Thus, the government desired to introduce a new worldview into society, not European, but national one, as it is the language that plays an important role in the translation of ideology and the formation of public consciousness. So,

according to Bakhtin: “Public psychology is, first of all, the element of diverse speech performances, which washes all forms and types of sustainable ideological creativity from all sides” ([Oliveira, Oliveira, Gomes, & Queiros, 2018](#)).

Describing the reforms of the country which were held by Atatürk, S. Huntington writes: “This approach is based on the assumption that modernization is desirable and necessary and local culture is incompatible with modernization, so it should be forgotten or banned, and that society needs to be fully westernized” (5, p.103-104). As a result, according to S. Huntington, such a strategy leads to what he calls a “torn country” and “schizophrenia of culture”. The author, arguing about the modernization held by the Kemalists in the sphere of culture, apparently does not take into account the circumstances that the Atatürk’s reformism was also aimed at overcoming both economic and cultural underdevelopment of Turkey. In this vein, the Romanization of the alphabet and the creation of the state national system of education are carried out ([skanderovich Izmaylov, R., Fakhrutdinov, R. R., & Galimzyanova, L. R. \(2017\)](#)).

While struggling for the creation of the national culture free from religious ideology, progressive Turkish public faced with the issue of the alphabet. There is no doubt that this issue was the matter of not only culture but of politics as well. The conflict around the alphabet is a kind of reflection of the oppositional moods that could not act politically, therefore, in this at first sight purely cultural issue, they expressed less as cultural, than as political aspirations.

One of the supporters of the transition to the Latin alphabet Yolcu, who wrote a letter in support of Romanization which was published in the Soviet magazine “Novy Vostok”, identified three formations who supported the alphabet. Considering the arguments of the Arabic alphabet supporters, he showed the editor of the newspaper “İkdam” Ahmed Dzhevdet’s attitude to this issue. “Ahmed Dzhevdet bitterly complains, as the author writes, that the introduction of a new alphabet will break the cultural link between the old culture, brought up on Arab samples, and the new one”.

According to him, the group, united around the newspaper “İkdam”, connects Turkish culture with Arabic transcription and believes that Turkish literature will lose its artistry and originality. He believed that Ahmed Dzhevdet agreed with the point of view of the mullahs and imams, who feared that “the introduction of the new alphabet would break not so many cultural ties, but would help the Turks to get rid of underdeveloped Muslim religious ideology”.

It was difficult to find pure supporters of the Arabic language in Turkey. This fact was taken into account by Muslim reactionaries and even by the newspaper “İkdam” whose editor Ahmed Dzhevdet recognized that the Arabic language was somewhat outdated and that some reforms in spelling should be introduced. ([skanderovich Izmaylov, R., Fakhrutdinov, R. R., & Galimzyanova, L. R. \(2017\)](#)).

The second movement, which stands for the adoption of the new alphabet published a number of articles in newspapers like “Akşam” and “Cumhuriyet” and broke the arguments of the reactionaries. The newspaper “Akşam” pointed out that the reformed Arabic alphabet would become in fact a new alphabet and the only thing that remained the same would be its name. The editor of “Akşam” Nijmeddin Sadyk wrote that the drastically reformed alphabet would have the same shortcomings as the European one that is it must, according to the supporters of the Arabic language, break the cultural continuity between the old and the new culture. Yolcu believed “the second movement is under pressure of the first one; they are afraid of being accused of excessive sympathy for Bolshevism, as the reactionaries the alphabet issue is associated with the “corrupt” influence of the Bolshevik contagion from the North”. ([Akbarov, A. \(2018\)](#)).

Supporters of the third movement were grouped around the “Milliyet”, which was actually the representative of Ankara in Constantinople, and the radical “Halk”. “Milliyet” and “Halk” indicate that the experience of the Turkic people of the USSR gave excellent results. According to Yolcu, Turkey needs to benefit from the experience of the Baku Congress and proceed to the immediate introduction of the new alphabet. The third movement, the most radical one, does not deny that for a generation the Latin script will appear alongside the Arabic one. Gradually, when the classical literature will be reprinted into the Latin script, the Arabic spelling will finally disappear and give way to the existing new alphabet that Turkic people of the USSR have, and which is keeping with the spirit of the Turkish language than the old Arabic alphabet.

According to the issued decree, the Arabic alphabet was replaced by the Turkish one on a Latin basis; a new Turkish grammar was developed; a commission for the alphabet and grammar development was organized, and a 15-year period was given for the final conversion into the Turkish script. When the government’s decision was declared, there was not a single person in Turkey who dared to raise his voice against the Latin alphabet. In any case, the press published only articles in favor of the Latin script. ([Akbarov, A. \(2018\)](#)).

CONCLUSIONS

In the new conditions of existence of the national state, using nationalism as the main means of political mobilization of all social strata for the implementation of a broad program of reforms and for the development of the country, the Kemalists had to set the state and society free from any influence of religion.

Having declared itself a secular state and focusing on the European level of development, Republican Turkey at the same time created its own system of national education, culture, language, ideology. It was contributed by drastic and authoritarian transformations. But it is worth noting that the aim of the reforms was not only transformations but the creation of a national Turkish state. ([Akbarov, A. \(2018\)](#)).

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