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TRENDS

Hearing the midday Islamic call to prayer emanating from loudspeakers propped atop the minarets of the mosques of Istanbul, one immediately becomes aware of the pervasive influence of religion on the modern state of Turkey.

Although portraits of the secularist Western-oriented founder of the republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, continue to hang in offices, shops, and schools throughout the country, the solemn serenity of the cry, "*Allahu Akbar*", "God is great!" plays a greater part in Turkish culture than has perhaps previously been acknowledged by either the West, which Turkey has tried so earnestly to emulate, or by the Turks themselves.

More than seventy years ago, Atatürk, through a series of social, economic, political and cultural reforms, strived to build a modern Turkey divested of the remnants of the once omnipotent Ottoman Empire. The Arabic script in which Ottoman Turkish had been written for centuries was replaced with a Latinized alphabet, and a European code of law was adopted in lieu of the Islamic law which had been predominant in the empire for centuries.

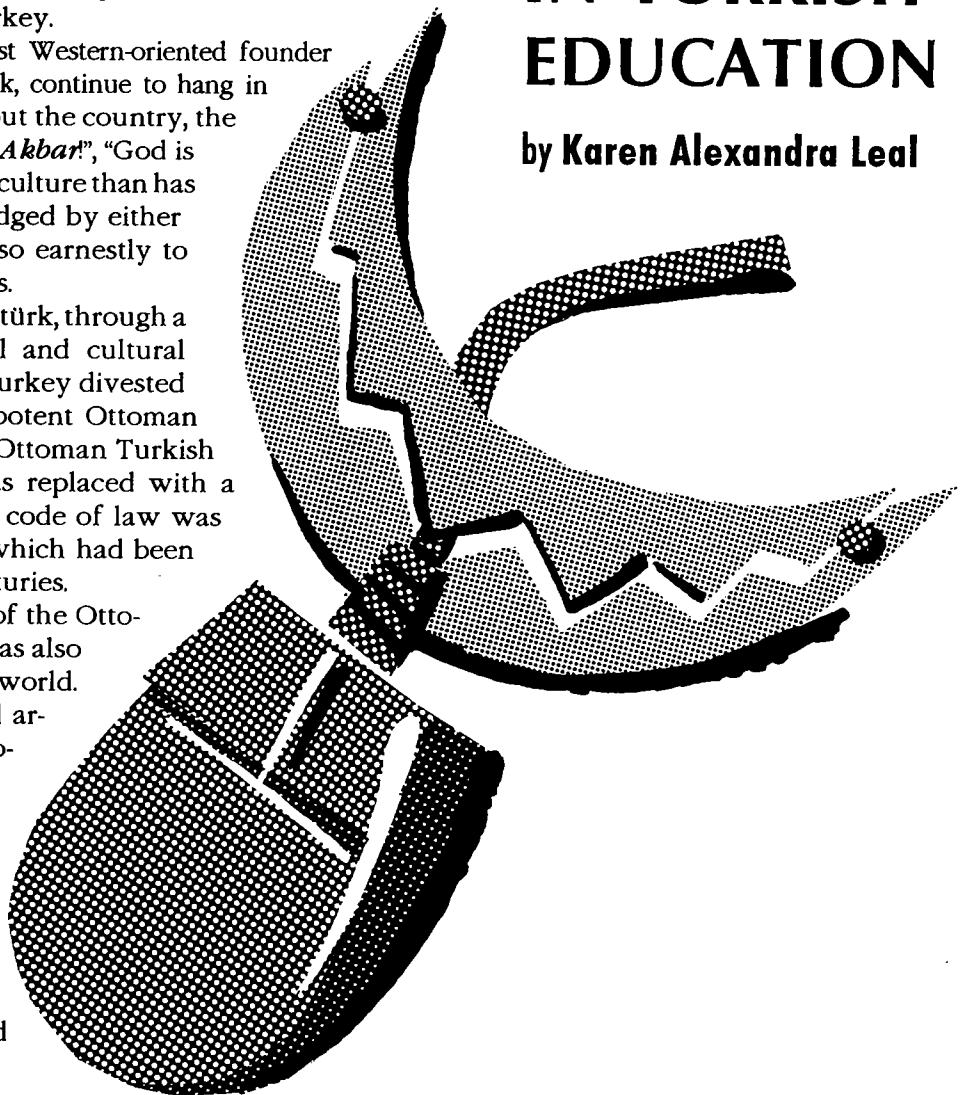
Throughout the final centuries of the Ottoman Empire (1299-1920), its sultan was also the *caliph*, or guardian of the Islamic world. At lower levels, particularly in rural areas, education was primarily the domain of the *imams*, local religious leaders. *Madrasas*, theological schools where law, philosophy, history, mathematics, and lan-

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ISLAM STILL A FORCE IN TURKISH EDUCATION

by Karen Alexandra Leal



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Islam Still a Force...

guages were also taught, were the foremost institutions of higher education, though Ottoman palace schools trained the empire's bureaucrats. It is estimated that only 10% of the empire's subjects were literate.

A modern secular educational system, particularly at the tertiary level, gradually began to develop in the 18th and 19th centuries, beginning with the establishment of the Military Engineering School in 1773. But it was only with Atatürk's founding of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 that the problems of organizing a modern secularized educational system began to be addressed in a methodical way.

The caliphate was abolished and *madradas* and other religious institutions of higher learning were closed. Education was placed under the control of the Ministry of Education and the system began to undergo massive expansion. The Higher Educational Council decided that the new system would reinforce the state's aims of nationalism, secularism, and Turkism, goals considered essential to fostering the scientific and technological research necessary to an industrial society.

Instead, in the post-war period, the educational system, particularly at the tertiary level, became a microcosm of the country's myriad problems.

Overcrowding, poor accommodations, inadequate research facilities, teaching methods which emphasized rote learning, and a shortage of funding formed a backdrop for the increased politicization of both right- and left-wing students in the 1960s and 1970s, a period of rapid expansion of, and high enrollment at, universities. By the mid-1970s, it appeared that the right controlled the Ministry of Education and the left, the faculties.

Bill Williamson, in *Education and Social Change in Egypt and Turkey*, suggests that the 1970s was also the decade in which religiously-oriented groups first began to make significant inroads into modern Turkish society. In particular, the anti-Communist rhetoric of rightist groups attracted the religious. Religious organizations secretly were established at universities and began to provide social services such as housing, funding, and refuge during riots, services which the universities failed to provide.

Ironically, the military, the guardian of Turkish secularism, may also have been at least partly responsible for the heightened prominence of religion in Turkish society, particularly in the educational system, in the last decade and a half. In 1980, with the country on the verge of civil war, the military, which had intervened in 1960 and again in 1971, staged a coup. Viewing Islam as a force capable of unifying disparate factions, the military junta (1980-1983) decided to use religious ideology to counter what was regarded as leftist tendencies among the students and workers in the midst of the turmoil which characterized Turkey in the 1970s.

The generals, decrying the lack of knowledge of Islam among the Turkish youth, made religion a required subject in primary and middle schools, encouraging the establishment of Islamic schools at these levels.

Prime Minister Turgut Özal, whose Motherland Party came into power after the military withdrew, continued the policy of using religion to counter the perceived threat from the left. It seems that, besides viewing religion as a political weapon, politicians such as Özal readily identified with the renewed emphasis on religion and a shared Muslim culture in Turkish society. To them, the rise of Islam was not a fundamentalist movement, but a reintegrating of an essential aspect of Turkish life, which Atatürk had erroneously tried to suppress.

Furthermore, post-Cold War events such as the wars in the Persian Gulf, Bosnia, and Chechnya and the emergence of the Turkic Muslim republics have forced the Turks to reconsider their place in the Muslim world as well as Turkey's relationship with ethnic Turks outside the borders of their state. The ongoing war with the Kurds in the southeast of Turkey, hunger strikes by prisoners, and Turkey's rapid urbanization as well as its rampant inflation have also exposed ethnic, social, cultural, and economic divisions within the country.

The educational system is one of the prime arenas in which these divisions, particularly religious ones, have recently manifested themselves.

In elections held last December, the Islamic Welfare (*Refah*) Party, which highlighted issues such as the right of religious women to cover their heads in Turkish universities, a practice frowned upon, garnered 21.4% of the vote. While hardly a mandate, it was nevertheless the lead. This summer, Welfare assumed power in a coalition government with the True Path Party of former Prime Minister Tansu Çiller. It is the first time in the 73-year history of the Republic of Turkey that a political party with a distinct religious character has come to power.

Western and Turkish secularist leaders have observed the Welfare Party's rise in Turkey with some trepidation. However, the assumption of power by the Welfare Party represents, if anything, the success of the Turkish political system, in that the leading party was actually given the right to form a government in spite of the suspicion in which it is held by the firmly entrenched, if out of touch, secular political elite. Nevertheless, while religion has come to play a more prominent role in this predominantly Muslim country (99% of the citizenry is Muslim) than perhaps even a decade ago, it is premature to assume that it is exerting the same type of influence that has been seen in Iran, Algeria, or the Sudan.

The Welfare Party's assumption of power is as much a result of the failure of the two leading secular center-right parties to form a coalition due to personal rivalries and animosities among their respective leaders as it is of Welfare's actual appeal.

The Welfare Party has espoused many opinions which indicate its Islamic point of view, but it is not led by clerics. Its leader, the 69-year-old Necmettin Erbakan, is a seasoned politician who served in two coalition governments in the 1970s. It remains to be seen what effect the Welfare Party will have on Turkey's educational system.

THE CURRENT EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

Turkey's current population is 65 million and is increasing at the rate of 2.5% a year. Unemployment is officially 8.1%, but privately considered to be much higher.

In 1990, the illiteracy rate for those 15 and above was 19.3%. Of OECD countries, Turkey has the largest proportion of the population aged 5-29. Turkey also has the lowest GDP (\$3,960). Since the GDP can be taken as a measure of a country's ability to finance education, it becomes apparent that the least prosperous OECD nation also has the most children to educate.

The educational system is highly centralized and primarily public. Primary and secondary education are supervised by the National Education, Youth and Sports Ministry. School is compulsory from ages 6 to 14. The five years of primary education, required by law of all citizens since 1924, actually has a 98% participation rate, although the government's goal is 100% by 2005.

Primary education usually ends at ages 11-12 with the awarding of the primary school certificate. Six years of secondary education are divided into three years of middle school (*ortaokul* [ages 12-15]) and three years of education at academic or vocational/

technical schools known as academies, institutes, or lycees (*akademi, enstitü, lise* [ages 15-18]).

The vocational religious training schools, known as *Imam-Hatip* schools, offer a seven-year, post-primary school program to train prayer leaders for the mosques, which are run by the state. Courses in national safety, religion, social sciences, tourism, language and literature must be taught in Turkish.

According to the Ministry of Education, in the 1992-93 academic year there were 6,707,725 primary school students at 49,770 schools, as compared to 3,767,488 students in 1966; there were 2,556,339 middle school students and 1,743,471 secondary school students at 7,544 middle schools and 4,239 secondary schools, respectively (compared to 353,990 middle school and 261,000 secondary students in 1966).

The system has clearly expanded greatly, but still not at a pace to keep up with the demands of the students or the economy. Problems, such as lack of opportunity after primary school and centrally-standardized curricula which do not meet local needs, continue to plague the system. Less than half of the students who finish their primary education go on to middle school; only a third of 15- to 17-year-olds are in secondary school. Full-time secondary participation drops below 80% at age 16.

All graduates of academic and vocational/technical secondary schools are eligible to take the highly competitive two-part university entrance examination administered by the Inter-University Student Selection and Placement Center (ÖSYM). In 1989-1990 only 100,000 passed out of the 700,000 students taking the test.

The number of students enrolled in universities and other institutions of higher education, (i.e. military and police academies as well as vocational schools) has increased tenfold in the past 30 years: in 1991, there were 760,000 students enrolled at 424 schools compared to 65,000 students at 66 schools in 1962. Higher education has undergone a dramatic expansion in Turkey in the past four years. There are now 53 state universities in Turkey, 25 of which have been established by the government since 1992 in response to the demands of the growing student population. In addition, the government has increased the faculties at many of the 28 older state universities.

Not many private schools have been established to meet the increased demand for tertiary education. There were over 50 private institutions run by for-profit organizations by the late 1960s, but amid charges that the schools were luring away professors who taught at the state universities, the Supreme Court declared these unconstitutional in 1971 and national-

ized them. There also was a widespread perception that private universities allowed the right to "purchase" an education.

The Higher Education Law of 1981 authorized the establishment of private schools by not-for-profit organizations. In addition to Bilkent University (est. 1984), Koç and Baskent Universities have opened since 1992.

Since 1981, Turkish universities have been managed under the auspices of the Higher Education Council (*Yüksek Öğretim Konseyi-YÖK*). Though nominally still autonomous, the universities saw much of their previous powers curtailed as staffs were purged of academics considered politically suspect. To reinforce a sense of nationalism, courses on founder Atatürk's principles were introduced into the curriculum, as well as classes in Turkish and foreign languages.

THE RISE OF ISLAMIC SCHOOLS

Feroz Ahmad, in *The Making of Modern Turkey*, has shown that the number of lower-grade *Quranic* schools, where the tenets of Islam are taught together with reading, writing, and arithmetic, almost doubled (from 2,600 to 4,715) by the end of the 1980s.

The number of *Imam-Hatip* schools increased by 35% in the three years the junta remained in power, and the number of students attending reached 270,000. Indeed, since the 1980s, graduates from these schools have increased fourteenfold as opposed to the tripling of graduates from secular state schools. Graduates become a part of the state bureaucracy when they are employed in the mosques, which are run by the government. In the 1980s, *Imam-Hatip* schools soon outnumbered vocational/technical schools, whose graduates are critical to the economy's development.

The rise of the *Quranic* and *Imam-Hatip* schools was unquestionably advantageous to certain segments of the population—both migrants to the cities and those in villages, for whom the schools provided jobs as well as education. The religiously-oriented schools appealed to a part of the population previously on the periphery of the Turkish educational system and may have facilitated the entry of this group into mainstream Turkish political life. While encouraging religion to offset leftist tendencies, the generals were vigilant in maintaining the secular tradition of the Turkish military. Graduates of religious schools were not permitted into the armed forces. There was also concern that when graduates of these schools entered the state bureaucracy, they could threaten the foundations of the republic with reactionary ideas.

This summer, in response to that growing concern, the Educational National Congress assembled by the Ministry of Education every five years recommended that the religious training schools be shut down and integrated into the main educational system. Originally, graduates of these schools were only able to study theology at the universities, but a supreme court ruling made every subject of study available to them.

The entry of these religious-trained students into the main university system could eventually have an effect on the secular basis of the state. As one professor pointed out, over two-fifths of the law faculty of Istanbul University come from the *Imam-Hatip* schools. When these students one day become the country's lawyers and judges, their influence could be great.

While many supporters of the Turkish secularist tradition applauded the recommendation of the National Education Congress to eliminate the *Imam-Hatip* schools, it is not yet clear whether this proposal will be adopted, as it must be approved by a parliament now dominated by the Welfare party. The Welfare Party also wants graduates of the *Imam-Hatip* schools to have access to the military academies, currently denied them. "Refah into the government, *Imam-Hatip* graduates into the army" was one of the party's slogans in the 1995 campaign.

Abdullah Gül, general secretary of the Welfare Party, said recently, "The people who attended the congress do not represent the majority—they're only interested in their left-wing agenda which wants to ignore and exclude religion in our society."

CONCLUSION

Until Atatürk secularized the educational system, religion was a fundamental aspect of the schooling of an Ottoman Muslim. Islam no longer plays such a role in the education of Turkish citizens today, but its heightened prominence in the last few years suggests that Islam may be more closely connected to the Turkish identity than had been previously realized or acknowledged.

Secularization and its advantages seem too firmly entrenched in the educational as well as the political systems to be radically altered at this point. Those educated in the religious schools should perhaps be seen as a new voice in the political system rather than as a force trying to alter that system. For observers of the region, the future holds great interest and no sure predictions.