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What Was Revolutionary About the Turkish Revolution? *Türk Devriminde Devrimci Olan Neydi?*

Some years ago, I read an article in the *New York Review of Books* that I later discovered to have come from a short book bearing the same name: *What was Revolutionary About the French Revolution*. I remember reading this article by Robert Darnton with great excitement. Not surprisingly, not only did the article stimulate my thinking about revolutions in general but it also led me to ask the same question about the Turkish revolution. What was revolutionary about the Turkish revolution? I am going to share some of my thoughts on this question.

What is Revolution?

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Before rendering judgment on this or that revolution, it may be important to focus on the concept itself. What is a revolution? Needless to say, I am referring to political revolutions although the terminology is employed in many domains and we may, for example, argue that the discovery of antibiotics was a revolution in pharmaceuticals. Fear not, however, I will confine my discussion to the political.

Examining dictionaries, one may come to believe that revolution always involves a violent overthrow of government by the masses but when one thinks a bit more carefully about it, what distinguishes revolutions is that they represent an opening for comprehensive and irreversible change in how political power is organized and exercised in a society. Change is often sudden. That is, even if the conditions favoring change may have been evolving over a long period, the change itself occurs in a limited span of time. The tendency to associate revolutions with violence derives from the fact that some of the most noted revolutions, like the French and the Russian revolutions, have in fact involved a lot of violence, but violence may not constitute an indispensable part of revolutions. Although the Turkish revolution involved not recognizing the authority of the powers that be, no mass movement to take over the palaces in the capital occurred. In fact, another capital was developed to rival the old one where the new power base was located.

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Revolutions include a reasonably short critical period during which how political power is organized and exercised in a society change but then they unfold- that is, subsequent changes are introduced in many domains such as the legal, political and the cultural. Understandably, many of the changes introduced may aim, among others, to consolidate the new organization of political power and the position of its new holders.

But that is not all. Over the years, proponents of rapid transformation are most likely to have developed many ideas and proposals or even programs for bringing changes into society in the direction of their values, visions and dreams. Some of those are discarded, others adopted, some may be adopted only to be discarded later, yet others may undergo adjustments to remain in force. Darnton compared the French revolution to the collapse of a dam, suggesting that almost everything that was done after the revolution had precedents in the pre-revolutionary period but could not be introduced or implemented under the then existing order. Other societies undoubtedly possess similar experiences. But, what must precede all these developments is an irreversible change in who holds power and how the exercise of political power is organized.

Since revolutions are associated with comprehensive and rapid change, there is a temptation to think of them as bringing about wholesale change, devoid of elements of the past. A careful evaluation, however, would quickly belie such illusions. To begin with, the revolutionaries are products of the pre-revolutionary period. Inevitably they have been socialized into the ways of thinking and behaving of their society although they have been critical of it. They cannot simply be transformed into totally new, different individuals by undergoing a “revolution.” Second, projects to change society inevitably include some of the “present” in shaping the future, if for no other reason than the fact that the “present” is not all bad or sometimes a better alternative is not thought to be available. Alternatively, everything cannot be changed at the same time, some things have to be postponed either to be tended to later or to simply remain untouched. Third, change affects individuals and different groups in society in different ways, while some benefit from some kinds of change, not everyone benefits from all kinds of change. Therefore, there will always be groups among the revolutionaries who will stand in the way of some change, slow its pace and sometimes try to reconstitute what has been changed. Fourth, there are disagreements among the revolutionaries about how much change is needed or how much is enough, at least for now. In this context, we should not forget that those who conduct or more accurately lead a revolution are not a homogeneous bunch. Some are moderates and may represent more limited demands for change while others possess a more radical bent, demanding change of a more comprehensive nature. What unites them is the agreement on the need and the inability of the current political arrangement to accommodate demands for change, often for fear that, as a result, their powers will diminish. But, once the revolution takes place, a competition to dominate politics sets in among various “revolutionaries” each with its own agenda of what is to be done.

To the extent that revolutions are dynamic processes, at different times, moderates and radicals may gain the upper hand in directing change. Students of revolutions have noted that, irrespective of how radical a revolution may have been, there comes a period where radicals lose their clout while more moderates assume political power, allowing some of the practices, understandings and institutions of the past to be restored.

I have so far tried to develop a broad framework within which we may take a closer look to the Turkish revolution. We may now proceed to make some specific observation on “our” revolution.

The Origins of the Turkish Revolution

We may begin by remembering that the beginnings of ferment that eventually led to the Turkish revolution is the evolution of defeat as an expected outcome in Ottoman military engagements with the West. The initial solution to the challenge was trying to imitate the military techniques and technology that accounted for Western military superiority. While such measures may have slowed down military decline, they failed to arrest or reverse it, guiding the Sultan’s government to turn to more comprehensive measures. Imitating techniques and the purchase of more sophisticated arms gave way to the opening of initially military schools and then schools in related areas including medicine and veterinary medicine and eventually even in public administration.

By way of summary, these developments may have slowed down territorial losses, they did not stop it and the Empire became the target of the imperialist greed of European powers.

This process of defensive modernization also produced unintended consequences. The products of the new schools may have become more sophisticated soldiers, but in the process of their education, they also became more familiar with Western societies, what kinds of political systems they possessed, what kind of values prevailed in politics and how societies were administered. Many among them eventually concluded that the problem of being behind the West was not simply a question of weapons and military training but, among others, one of how a society was ruled, how laws were made and enforced, how the economies were run and how the citizens were incorporated into the system of rule.

As the newly rising military-bureaucratic elite were pondering over these questions, a powerful political movement called nationalism, initially exported by France to Italy to undermine unity of the Austro-Hungarian empire that was trying to neutralize the challenge the French Revolution presented it, reached the empire and often backed by European powers, began to undermine its unity.

The challenge nationalism presented for the unity of the empire proved to be a unifying force among the newly rising Ottoman elites and the Sultan, possibly postponing the question of how society should be ruled. Search for ideologies that would hold society together led

the elites first to Ottomanism, later to Islamism and finally to Turkism. These ideological experiments failed to produce the desired outcomes, however. None offered the magic glue that would hold the entire imperial society together. One by one, first the European provinces acquired their independence, and not long after, nationalism began to affect Arab populations as well. Almost two thirds of the territories of the empire was lost between 1876-1909.

The loss of territories coupled with the highly personalistic style with which Abdülhamid ruled society, having suspended the constitution of 1876 and closed down the parliament, finally led the new military-bureaucratic elite in 1908 to force the Sultan to bring back the constitution and to open the parliament and finally to depose him in 1909. From then on until the end of the First World War, the empire was ruled for the most part, in an authoritarian manner by the Union and Progress, a political party of the military-bureaucratic elite. Occupied with military challenges, this elite hardly found time to affect comprehensive reforms in all walks of life. They led the country into the First World War, possibly judging that they would be dragged into it anyhow. They also hoped to recover some of the lost territories. The war ended in disaster, however, reducing the territory left to the empire into a small area in central Anatolia. Union and Progress left the government while the Sultan, trying to fill the political void, displayed a cooperative attitude with the allies, especially Britain, in the hope of preserving the little estate that was left to the “Ottomans.”

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You must forgive me for this very simplistic description of the last decades of the Empire. I intended to offer you a brief description of the political side of Ottoman modernization mainly to show that the demands for change in the last decades of the Empire did not amount to revolution but, at best, reform. Even the strongest proponents of political change wanted no more than a constitutional system that limited, on the one hand, the powers of the Sultan and on the other hand, allowed for public participation in government through an elected parliament. Political power changed hands between military-bureaucratic elite and the palace several times, but there occurred no irreversible change. Remember, revolution means irreversible change.

We should nevertheless also add that much distance had been covered in the domain of the evolution of political ideas such the transformation of the subjects into citizens, the acceptance of the idea that citizens irrespective of color or creed were equal and that the power of the ruler derived not so much from God as from the society he ruled. These constituted important inputs into the forthcoming revolution.

The Beginnings of the Revolution- Abolition of the Sultanate

Was the development of a resistance movement revolutionary? While some leaders of the resistance may have entertained such ideas, these were never made public since pronouncing such intentions might have killed the resistance movement from the start. True, the resistance

or liberation movement organized itself without the approval of the Sultan and it refused to take orders from him or his government and its leaders were sentenced to death in absentia while a military campaign was organized to suppress them. But many among them believed that they were fighting to liberate the Sultan's government from captivity. Had the Sultan's government expressed an interest or willingness in assuming the leadership of the movement, there is little question that he would have been welcomed by many. The change of the system, the way power is organized and practiced in an irreversible way came later. It is to that development that I will now turn.

What was the critical step that made the liberation movement a revolutionary movement? The national liberation movement proved successful in defeating the Armenians in the East, the French in the South while the Italians withdrew from the areas that they had occupied. A final blow came to the Greeks that had occupied Western Turkey in the hope of reconstructing "Greater Greece." But this was also a blow to the British who had been the main supporters of the Greek adventure. After the truce signed in Mudanya, peace negotiations were scheduled to be held in Lausanne. Although the Sultan's government had played no role in liberating the country, the Allies also invited it to take part in the peace negotiations. This was no more than a ploy to undermine the status and the bargaining power of the Ankara government that had conducted a successful war of liberation despite opposition from the Istanbul government. Probably without intending to, the Allies provided the government of the Grand National Assembly, to take the irreversible step of abolishing the Sultanate on November 1, 1922. In this way, Ankara's acquisition of the monopoly of political power in the country that was in the process of being formed, but whose exercise and legitimacy could be questioned by Istanbul became confirmed. Different observers have identified different developments such as the emergence of the liberation movement or the declaration of the republic as marking the critical step of the Turkish revolution. I beg to differ. The liberation movement might have well ended up in restoring an independent sultanate. The declaration of the republic, on the other hand, only constituted a natural step after the Sultanate was abolished. After all, the abolition of the Sultanate established who sovereignty did not belong to but did not clearly specify to whom it belonged. The republic constituted an answer to that question. But the question itself arose after the abolition of the Sultanate.

The Establishment of the Republic

While the establishment of the republic, as I just argued, constituted a natural step that came after the abolishment of the Sultanate, it brought two irreversible changes with it that render it revolutionary in and of itself. First, although it was not particularly well defined and awaited evolution, sovereignty belonged to the nation. The concept of nation had been used in various ways during the empire and had been the founding concept of the opening

of the Grand National Assembly, but from now on, the “nation”, however defined, would constitute the collectivity on which political legitimacy of the regime would be based. This also ended any possible confusion about whether these people were subjects or servants of the ruler. Irreversibly, since the founding of the republic, the nation has constituted the basic unit around which politics have been organized.

We might justifiably ask what is the Turkish nation or how do you define it? I need not elaborate that the debate on how to answer this question continues to this day. The official answer is clear. All persons that are tied to the Turkish republic by ties of citizenship are members of the Turkish nation. The behavioral answer as also practiced by the officialdom is somewhat more confusing. Here are some questions that either wait to be answered or are answered differently by different governments, political parties and different segments of the public. Do you have to be a Muslim or at least possess “Islamic credentials” to be a member of the basic political community called the nation while others are minorities; that is, legally they are citizens, but socially and politically, minorities who are not members of the political community? Or, is the Turkish nation a political identity that allows citizens to claim different ethnic identities or should these two types of identity converge into an ethno-political identity shared by all, rendering assertions of separate ethnic identity unacceptable? To conclude, while the revolution succeeded in placing the nation as the basic sociological unit on which the territorial state is built, efforts to shape that imprecise concept called the “nation” are continuing, reflecting influences of the past and the variety of interpretations of the concept in contemporary times. I sometimes wonder if the legacy of the Empire does not continue to haunt us.

The second irreversible change may be a bit more subtle but closely related to the conceptualization of the basic political community as nation. Nations, in contrast to multinational empires, occupy an identifiable political space. That is not to say that there may not be debates about the borders of such a space or the possibility that more than one nation may claim parts of the same territory. But delineated borders, often claimed to be unchangeable, characterize the territorial existence of the nation state in contrast to the multi-national empire that hopes to expand to the extent its power permits it, and contract when it loses wars only to try to expand again when conditions allow. Much of Ottoman history as that of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Czarist Russia contained wars to acquire new or recover lost territories.

The national liberation movement identified its territorial aspirations in the “National Pact” that was adopted by the last Ottoman parliament. These territories corresponded to no more than those that were under Ottoman control when the Mudros armistice was signed. That aim, already violated by the occupying forces were never fully achieved. Predictably then, the republic did have some outstanding territorial issues when it was born that were settled one way or another later, but the republic subscribed to the basic ideology that as a

nation state, it had defined borders. In the words of many political leaders, “we neither claim the territory of others nor shall we give an inch of our territory to anyone.” This approach, deeply engrained in the minds of the ruling elite and the citizens, has characterized how the republic has related to the world. One might argue that it has also protected the republic from engaging in conflicts whose purpose might be no more than the acquisition of territory from neighboring countries.

Laicization: Was it a Revolutionary Step?

Turkey is seen to be different than all other societies in the world with majority Muslim populations in that it subscribes to laicism, that is a strict separation of religion from governmental affairs. Some steps that were taken within that context may indeed be judged to be irreversible while others must come under closer scrutiny. We have already divulged the first irreversible step. With the opening of the Grand National Assembly on 23 April 1920, it was announced that sovereignty belonged to the nation. In this way, the basis of authority and therefore political legitimacy based on religion (and tradition) of the Ottoman State was challenged. With the abolition of the Sultanate, another step that confirmed the shift in the basis of authority was taken, but yet the Caliphate remained with the Ottoman Sultan confined exclusively to his religious duties as the Caliph.

Two types of problems remained with the abolition of the Sultanate but the continuation of the Caliphate. First, the fine distinction made between the Sultan and the Caliph hardly existed in the minds of the public who perceived the head of the state as the Sultan-Caliph. Therefore, any claims that would be made by the Caliph that he was also the rightful ruler of the state would have found many supporters among the general public. But second, the distinction appears not to have persuaded the Caliph that he was no longer the Sultan, that is the head of the political framework that was established by the Republic. The imprecision of distinction between the political and religious community provided the Caliph with sufficient flexibility such that his public “religious” undertakings inevitably acquired political meaning, posing a challenge to the national government on who ruled and who had the authority to do what. It quickly became apparent that a caliph that pretended to be the chief of universal Islam but not a domestic political actor was an impossible dream to achieve. This difficult situation was brought to an end on March 3, 1924 when the Grand National Assembly abolished the Caliphate.

The end of the Caliphate constituted another irreversible step in Turkish laicization by ending a religious office that had been challenging and would likely continue to challenge the monopoly of power of the nationalists and their efforts to keep religion out of politics. Why was the step irreversible? Could not someone else assume the title and the functions? The answer is contained in what transpired afterwards. While the leaders of some societies with

Muslim populations protested the Turkish action, none of the leaders that offered themselves as potential candidates to become the Caliph, including the King of Egypt, the Sharif Hussein of Mecca and leader of the House of Saud, managed to generate sufficient consensus that they should assume the position. I would judge that it is even more difficult these days to reconstitute the institution and choose someone to head it, especially in view of the fact that the position brings together religious and political powers which are difficult to separate and political leaders are not interested in sharing their power with outside actors. But more importantly, sovereign states are unlikely to recognize the legitimacy of whoever claims to be the caliph.

Turkey fortified its laicization process with other steps. In February 17, 1926, a Civil Code that accepted the equality of all citizens before the law was enacted. Of particular importance was the principle of male-female equality in contrast to religious conceptualization placing women in an inferior position to men in questions of inheritance, marriage and testimony in courts among others. And then in April 10, 1928, the article of the Constitution that depicted Islam as the religion of the state was removed from the constitution. Were these irreversible steps? In a way no, but in another way, it is debatable. I do not think that the idea that the state has an official religion will make its way back to the constitution. I also suspect that it will be politically difficult to challenge the basics of male-female equality. Logically these steps may be reversed, though I would judge them to be “politically” irreversible.

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The Turkish state, however, despite claims that it subscribes to laicism, has, in fact, a highly problematical relationship with religion, partly deriving from historical reasons. In contrast to Christian practice where the Church is a separate and financially somewhat independent entity that has historically competed with the secular rulers to delineate the areas in which they and in which the secular authority will prevail, in Ottoman practice Sunni Islam, representing a majority of the Muslim population, constituted another area of activity for the state. Although the Sheikh-ul-Islam would presumably monitor the state to ensure that its activities conformed with the tenets of religion, since his appointment was a prerogative of the Sultan, often his job evolved into legitimizing what the Sultan and his government did. Education was religion based except in the few modern schools. Religious orders prevailed in organizing religious life.

The republic inherited the office of the Sheik-ul-Islam and its bureaucracy, i.e. the Bab-ı Meşihat, and converted into Directorate of Religious Affairs. It also banned religious orders which it perceived as challenges to its authority. In return, it assumed the responsibility of meeting the religious needs of the Sunni segment off the population. What the state does in this domain has varied over time but has exhibited a general tendency to expand, particularly after the commencement of political competition. These days the state is engaged in the business of building and repairing mosques, supporting an army of civil servant preachers, teaching religion in primary and secondary schools and supporting a large number of faculties of theology at public universities, all catering to the needs of the Sunni-Hanefi majority.

The laicization of the political system, which constituted a revolutionary step when initiated has proven to be of limited success in the sense that the state does not stand equidistant to all religions and religious sects. The religious activities of the Turkish state are directed toward servicing the Sunni-Hanefi population and the state displays some of the prejudices of that sect toward other Islamic groups which are expected to come around to subscribing to the Sunni-Hanefi rite. On the other hand, no laws may be proposed so as to legislate religion into public policy. That appears unlikely to change.

Turning to the specific question of the role of women in society, the principle of the equality of men and women has registered slow progress over the years. Although different governments, depending on their own political preferences, have pronounced that men and women are different, progress has been toward greater equality. Is this irreversible? Not necessarily. But the constant progress toward greater equality suggests that there are considerable pressures in society not to push women back to the secondary position that characterized the pre-Republican period.

What Did Not Change?

I have already noted that there is a proclivity to treat revolutions as producing wholesale change and that this was an inaccurate depiction of what transpires. Many elements of the past, in the form of ways of thinking, habits of thought and behavior continue to exercise significant influence on how revolutionaries behave, how the average citizen responds to change, how government relates to people etc. I thought it might be appropriate to take a few moments to discuss what did not change during the Turkish revolution.

The Prevalence of the State

We might begin by restating what must have already become evident in our initial discussion. The Turkish revolution was a movement that took shape and implemented among the ruling elite, mainly the Ottoman military; it was not manifestation of a popular rebellion by the people against the then ruling elite. Segments of the ruling elite that we may appropriately call the state elite because of their strong identification with the state assumed responsibility for implementing “revolutionary” change. The search for change had started with the search for ways to avert military defeat, developed into a more comprehensive program for change over the years, but it was centrally directed. The so called “people” were not perceived as the driving force for change, nor were they conceptualized to justify change. The state which was thought to be the ultimate protector of everyone had to be saved. The idea that “government” is an organization whose purpose is to serve society is a thought of recent vintage that has developed many decades after the introduction of democracy to the country. This shift in attitude may be explained in part by the reality that initially much of the population lived

in villages in isolation. Their integration into a society that is closely affected by what the government does emerged after considerable economic development and demographic change such that the population evolved economically, sociologically and therefore politically into a nation.

It might be pointed out that the political culture inherited from the empire and that prevailed during the republic assigned a unique role to the state that was widely internalized by the population. In the Ottoman cultural tradition, the state was responsible for protecting the balance between various social groups in society, to ensure that the needs of all social groups were met and finally to make sure that the state would not get impoverished since it had these critical obligations toward society. The state continues to constitute an institution that should be nurtured, protected and not challenged by the population. This, of course, equips those in power with a powerful instrument to extract obedience from society and place the individual, the building bloc of a democratic society, in a secondary position when the interests or the security of the state is threatened. I fear that this has been and continues to be one of the major impediments to the evolution of a fully democratic society in Turkey.

Suspicion of Civil Society

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A complementary attitude to attaching great importance to the state is the suspecting approach that the state displays toward the evolution of civil society and its activities. Suspicion of civil society has deep historical roots. For example, the fact that the original Turkish ruling tradition of the father dividing the estate among his sons was replaced by a single ruler, usually determined by primogeniture, was challenged by younger sons who tried to mobilize societal support to claim their share constituted a major source of concern for the rulers who tried to prevent formation of civil society groups, suspecting that their target could only be their rule.

But more generally, those who wanted change in the empire tried to achieve their goals by instigating crowds in the capital to stage marches toward government offices including the palace and asking for the resignation or sometimes even the “head” of a particular person. To the extent that public manifestations were utilized as a major instrument to affect public policy, the government was always suspicious of large numbers of people getting together. In fact, this is why coffee houses as places where the public might gather were not allowed in the empire long after the diffusion of coffee as a social drink. Similarly, students of medreses and later also modern schools were used as instruments for demanding change always rendering governments sensitive to student activity.

Finally, with the expectation from the state the general population holds and, in return, its acquiescence to the state has allowed the state to develop instruments to monitor the civil society. To this day, the state has maintained an effective system of monitoring the activities of all voluntary associations, in particular preventing activities of oppositional political nature.

The state, which in practice means the government, is capable of limiting and often terminating the activities of organizations that it finds from its own perspective problematical or harmful for the public good by which it means what the government does.

Corporatism and Centralization

The desire to have the state exercise control in all activities of society has, understandably also led to corporatism. It may be recalled that corporatism was initially developed in fascist Italy where each area of activity or profession would be organized into an entity through which the state could control that area and communicate its expectations from it. Presumably, in return, the state would cater to their needs and address their problems. The Turkish state has a law for every major group of activity. Lawyers, engineers, industrialists, small merchants, shopkeepers, accountants, you name it, all have their own laws and people have to register with these legally established associations that collect obligatory dues and authorize people to practice their professions or conduct their activities. While the need for organizing professions into associations or chambers to maintain standards etc. is understandable, the semi-official status these organizations are accorded, easily allow them to become extensions of government. Although not all such associations acquire the appearance of a semi-official government agency, many do. In any case, governments irrespective of who is in power, are engaged in a constant struggle to render “corporations” obedient servants of the government rather than as autonomous actors representing the interests and concerns of their members.

Corporatism is manifestation of a more comprehensive tendency to keep everything under control through centralization. We might recall that centralization of administration and power were initiated during the last century of the Ottoman Empire and the republic continued the tradition and, I believe, perfected it. It continues today. Turkey may be the only country in the world, for example, where the central government can remove an elected mayor without due process when it judges that the local elected official is failing in its duties.

Conclusion

We began this discussion by examining what was revolutionary about the Turkish revolution. We noted significant irreversible changes had been affected in the political domain. We also noted, however, that this was not a mass induced but elite led change. We also argued that while revolutions harbor a lot of change, they also carry various elements of the past with them. Like all revolutions, the Turkish revolution brought many new things, but also like them, it carries forward in one way or another, many elements of the past.