

10 · The Emergence of the One-Party State, 1923–27

The republic and the caliphate

As we have seen, Mustafa Kemal Pasha had started to consolidate his political position even before the independence war had formally come to an end with the signing and ratification of the Treaty of Lausanne. The means he had employed were: a change in the High Treason Law; the dissolution of the assembly and tightly controlled elections; the creation of a new party, the People's Party, and the takeover by this party of the whole Defence of Rights organization. This process of consolidation, of gathering power in the hands of Mustafa Kemal and an assembly and party that were both under his complete control, continued after the coming of peace.

The exact nature of the emerging new Turkish state was still somewhat indeterminate at this time. The Ottoman sultanate had been abolished nearly a year before. The country was ruled by the national assembly, which elected not only the president but also every minister or rather 'commissar' (*vekil*) directly. The constitutional relationship between the assembly and the caliph, Abdülmecit Efendi, was unclear. The caliphate as conceived in 1922 was a purely religious function, but it was inevitable that many people continued to see the caliph as the head of state, even if only in a ceremonial sense. Furthermore, as caliph, his jurisdiction transcended the boundaries of the Turkish state and – at least in theory – encompassed the whole Muslim world.

In his interviews with the Turkish press in January, Mustafa Kemal had already hinted that he intended to change this confused situation and declare a republic, and he reaffirmed this in an interview with a Viennese daily in September. An opportunity arose when, in October, the assembly elected Hüseyin Rauf (Orbay) and Sabit (Sağiroğlu) to the posts of vice-president of the assembly and home secretary respectively, in preference to the government candidates. Mustafa Kemal persuaded the government of Prime Minister Ali Fethi (Okyar) that this constituted a motion of no confidence, upon which the government

resigned. The assembly was automatically charged with replacing it with a new council of *vekils*, but once Mustafa Kemal had instructed his more prominent followers not to accept posts, this proved impossible. When the assembly then decided to consult the president, he submitted a proposal to proclaim a republic, with an elected president, a prime minister appointed by the president and a conventional cabinet system. The majority in the assembly accepted the proposals and, on 29 October 1923, the Turkish Republic was proclaimed, with Mustafa Kemal as its first president and İsmet (İnönü) as its first prime minister.

The decision was taken while a number of celebrities from the independence war, Hüseyin Rauf, Ali Fuat (Cebesoy), Adnan (Adıvar), Refet (Bele) and Kâzım (Karabekir) were not in the capital. They reacted angrily to the proclamation in interviews in the Istanbul press, calling the decision premature, and stressing that calling the state a republic did not in itself bring freedom and that the real difference was between despotism and democracy, whether under a republican or a monarchic system. The Istanbul papers took up their criticism with relish. The government was highly unpopular in Istanbul at the time, not so much because of the proclamation of the republic as because it had officially made Ankara the new capital of Turkey a fortnight earlier. This was something that not only hurt the pride of the inhabitants of the old capital, but it also meant continuing unemployment for the tens of thousands of civil servants among them. Rauf's critical remarks (with their implied accusation that the government was despotic despite its new name) led to a row within the PP parliamentary faction, which came close to splitting the party in December.

The anti-republican feeling was partly fuelled by concern over the future of the caliph. Many people, certainly in Istanbul, were emotionally attached to the dynasty, but it was also felt that the caliph was the only possible counterweight to Mustafa Kemal's dominance of the political scene. It was – rightly – feared that the proclamation of the republic sounded the death knell of the caliphate. In November the president of the Istanbul bar association, Lûtfi Fikri, sent an open letter to the press in which he pleaded for a more influential position for the caliph; and in December two eminent Indian Muslims, Ameer Ali and the Aga Khan, sent a similar letter both to the prime minister and to the press. Because of the difficulty of communications with Ankara, the letter was published in Istanbul before it had been delivered to Prime Minister İsmet, which was something that angered him and his followers in the assembly. It was decided to send an Independence Tribunal to Istanbul to investigate whether Lûtfi Fikri or the newspapers had committed treason. The newspaper editors were acquitted

but Fikri was sent to jail for five years. All this indicated growing tensions within the People's Party and between Ankara and Istanbul. In February talks between the president and the leading editors of the Istanbul newspapers failed to heal the rift.

Immediately after the opening of the new parliamentary year on 1 March the expected blow fell: the caliphate was abolished and all members of the Ottoman dynasty were ordered out of the country. After extensive discussions, a new republican constitution was adopted in April. This replaced the old Ottoman constitution of 1876, which had been modified in 1909 and again in January 1921 when the first assembly adopted the Law on Fundamental Organization (*Teşkilât-i Esasye Kanunu*), the *de facto* constitution of the resistance movement, which had allowed it to function to all practical purposes as a republic within the legal framework of the Ottoman Empire.

The nationalist movement is split: the establishment of the Progressive Republican Party

All through the winter and spring of 1924, the radical wing of the People's Party led by Mustafa Kemal and İsmet continued to increase the pressure on the smaller moderate group led by Hüseyin Rauf, which had objected to the way in which the republic had been proclaimed. Continued opposition to this group from within the party became stronger and stronger and by late summer it was clear that the minority had no option but to found a separate opposition party. The actual split took place in the context of a debate over how the government had handled the resettlement of Muslims from Greece, especially with respect to the possessions of the Greeks who had had to leave, which was something that had given rise to widespread corruption. When, after a heated debate in the assembly, İsmet asked for a vote of confidence and easily won it, 32 deputies around Hüseyin Rauf left the party and founded the Progressive Republican Party (*Terakkiperver Cumhuriyet Fırkası*) on 17 November. The rumour that the new party would use the adjective 'Republican' led the People's Party to change its name to 'Republican People's Party' (RPP).

When the new party published its manifesto and its programme, it became evident that it was a party in the Western European liberal mould. It stood for secular and nationalist policies, like the majority party, but it clearly opposed its radical, centralist and authoritarian tendencies. Instead it advocated decentralization, separation of powers and evolutionary rather than revolutionary change. It also had a more liberal economic policy, accepting foreign loans as necessary.

It was clear that the mood in many parts of the country, certainly in

the conservative east, in Istanbul and in the areas where resettlement problems were particularly bad (such as the area around İzmir), favoured an opposition party. The leadership of the RPP recognized the danger and took countermeasures. Discipline within the parliamentary party was tightened (deputies being bound to vote in the assembly according to the majority decision in the closed session of the faction), and an accord was reached with a group of conservative representatives from the east. Most importantly, İsmet, who had had a personal feud with Rauf since Lausanne and who was considered an outspoken radical, was replaced by the much more conciliatory Ali Fethi (Okyar) on 21 November. These measures prevented mass desertions from the RPP.

The conciliatory line was only a temporary expedient, however. A number of hardliners, led by Recep (Peker), the interior minister, were put into the cabinet as watchdogs and by the beginning of 1925 it was clear that the radical wing was putting more and more pressure on Fethi to deal with the opposition, which was gradually building up a grass-roots organization in Istanbul and the east. For a time Fethi resisted the pressure, but outside events gave the radical wing its chance.

The Sheikh Sait rebellion and Kurdish nationalism

The event that the hardliners and the president used to put an end to political opposition was the eruption of Kurdish discontent into an armed rebellion to the north of Diyarbakır in February 1925.

Kurdish nationalism was a relative newcomer among the ideologies of the region. The Kurds had always been divided along tribal lines and since the suppression of the Kurdish emirates under Sultan Mahmut II their society had been increasingly fragmented. Sultan Abdülhamit had exploited the divisions among the Kurds, and at the same time used their martial qualities when he created his Cossack-like *Hamidiye* regiments out of some (but by no means all) of the tribes after 1891. The Young Turks had abolished the *Hamidiye* but law and order problems had soon forced them to reinstate them in the form of a militia. Regiments of this militia fought in the Balkan War and in the First World War.

After the constitutional revolution in 1908, members of the Kurdish elite in the capital had founded the *Kürt Teavun ve Terakki Cemiyeti* (Society for Support and Progress of the Kurds), of which Sait Nursi, the religious reformer, had also been a member. This, however, had social and not political aims and it kept aloof from the mass of the population in the southeast. In 1912 a number of Kurdish students in Istanbul formed *Hevi* (Hope), a society with a more pronounced nationalist tendency.

During the war, the removal of the Armenian population from the eastern Anatolian provinces left the Kurds masters of the terrain, but this and the collapse of the Russian front also meant that the Kurds' and Turks' common enemies disappeared and that the two communities were left in competition with each other. In 1918, the *Kürdistan Teali Cemiyeti* (Society for the Elevation of Kurdistan) was founded in Istanbul, with branches in Kurdistan itself, both among the Kormanci-speaking majority and among the Zaza-speaking groups to the north-west of Diyarbakır and both among Sunnis and Alevis.

During the independence war there was one major Kurdish insurrection against the nationalists in the Dersim (now Tunceli) area, led by tribal chiefs who demanded autonomy, but it was easily suppressed. By and large, the Kurds supported the resistance movement, despite the efforts of British agents to influence them and despite the fact that they were granted autonomy under the Treaty of Sèvres. There were Kurdish representatives at Erzurum and at Sivas and even on the nationalists' representative committee.

Within the new borders of the republic (which, incidentally, in the southeast ran right across traditional pasture areas of the tribes) about 20 per cent of the population was Kurdish, but they were not mentioned in the peace treaty of Lausanne and promises of autonomy made by the nationalist leaders, including Mustafa Kemal himself, during the independence struggle,¹ were forgotten. This was a great disappointment to the Kurdish nationalists. In 1923 former militia officers founded the *Azadi* (Freedom Society), which held its first congress in 1924. One person at that congress whose performance drew attention was Sheikh Sait of Palu, who was very influential among the Zaza tribes.

That a sheikh, a religious leader, exerted great political influence was not at all extraordinary in Kurdistan, where the two great dervish orders of the Kadiriyya and – especially – the Nakşibendi were the only organizations that transcended tribal differences. The leaders of these dervish orders were often called in to decide quarrels between different tribes and this brought them prestige, connections and, often, considerable wealth. Sheikh Sait was himself an influential member of the Nakşibendi order.

Relations between the Kurds and the predominantly Turkish republican government deteriorated in 1924. The abolition of the caliphate removed an important religious symbol that bound the two communities together. At the same time, the nationalist republic, in its efforts to construct a new national consciousness, developed a repressive policy towards Kurdish identity: the public use of Kurdish and the teaching of Kurdish were prohibited. Influential Kurdish landowners

and tribal chiefs were forcibly resettled in the west of the country. The first sign of resistance against these policies was an abortive rebellion by the garrison in Beytüşşebap in the extreme southeast in August 1924.

The great rebellion, which the *Azadi* and Sheikh Sait planned for May 1925, broke out prematurely when a shooting incident with the gendarmes in the little town of Piran got out of hand on 8 February. Nearly all the Zaza tribes and two large Kormanci tribes took part in the insurrection, but the divisions between the Kurds showed themselves again: the Alevi Kurds fiercely attacked the Sunni insurgents. That they did so is understandable given the dual character of the rebellion. While the leadership was undoubtedly motivated by the desire for an autonomous or even independent Kurdistan, the rank and file acted from religious motives, demanding the restoration of the holy law and the caliphate. The Alevis, as a heterodox community, generally supported the republic's secularist tendencies against the partisans of the caliphate and orthodox establishment – for good reason because prejudice against the Alevis was and is deeply rooted among the Sunnis.

Although at one time they threatened Diyarbakır, the only town the rebels managed to seize was Elazığ and that only for a short time. The government in Ankara took strong countermeasures as soon as the extent of the insurrection became clear. The assembly was informed about the situation on 25 February. The same day, martial law was declared in the eastern provinces for one month and the High Treason Law was amended to include the political use of religion among the treasonable offences. Around this time the prime minister, Fethi, asked the PRP leaders to disband voluntarily. This they refused to do, but the party chairman, Kâzım Karabekir, did support the government policy in the east very emphatically, both in the assembly and in the press.

Meanwhile, the pressure of the hawks within the RPP on Fethi was rising. İsmet had already returned to Ankara and attended the cabinet meetings. On 2 March Fethi lost a vote of confidence by the RPP faction, when Mustafa Kemal himself sided with the hardliners who demanded stronger measures.² He resigned and the next day İsmet became prime minister. His first act was to have the assembly pass the *Takrir-i Sükkân Kanunu* (Law on the Maintenance of Order). This empowered the government for two years to ban by administrative measure any organization or publication it considered might cause disturbance to law and order. The law, which the PRP opposed as being too elastic, would be in force in the whole country, not only in the southeast. At the same time two independence tribunals were reinstated, one for the eastern provinces and one for the rest of the country.

The Kurdish rebels were now rapidly pushed back into the moun-

tains. The capture on 27 April of Sheikh Sait really marked the end of the rebellion, although small groups continued a guerrilla war all through the summer. In 1926, a new Kurdish insurrection broke out on the slopes of Mount Ararat, which lasted for four years and can be considered a direct sequel to the Sheikh Sait rebellion, but it did not spread. After the rebellion was over, the government through the military authorities and the independence tribunals dealt very harshly with the Kurds. Many of their leaders were executed and large numbers of Kurds, more than 20,000 in all, were deported from the southeast and forcibly settled in the west of the country.³ From now on, the existence of a separate Kurdish identity was officially denied.

The Law on the Maintenance of Order was not, however, only used to suppress the Kurds. Eight of the most important newspapers and periodicals (conservative, liberal and even Marxist) in Istanbul were closed down, as were several provincial papers, leaving the government organs *Hâkimiyet-i Milliye* (National Sovereignty) in Ankara and *Cumhuriyet* (Republic) in Istanbul as the only national papers. All the leading journalists from Istanbul were arrested and brought before the Independence Tribunal in the east. Eventually they were released, but they were not allowed to resume their work. With the press out of the way, on the advice of the Independence Tribunal the government closed down the Progressive Republican Party on 3 June. According to the tribunal, members of the party had supported the rebellion and tried to exploit religion for political purposes.

Reforms and executions

With complete domination of the political scene assured, Mustafa Kemal and his government embarked on an extensive programme of reforms. There is an interesting parallel here with the second constitutional period, when a movement that had started out as a campaign for the restoration of the constitution had gained power (in 1908), shared that power for a certain period (until 1913) with others in a pluralistic and relatively free environment, and finally had established its own power monopoly, which it used to push through a radical programme of secularization and modernization (1913–18).

The same pattern now repeated itself with a movement for national sovereignty being victorious (1922), going through a pluralistic phase (until 1925) and then establishing an authoritarian regime, which embarked on a programme of reforms. The authoritarian nationalist phases of both the Unionist and the Kemalist eras also witnessed the brutal suppression of minority communities: the Armenians in the first case, the Kurds in the second. This seems to suggest that in both these phases of

the Young Turk movement, when the choice was between a democratic system with a slower pace of reform and an authoritarian one with more opportunities for radical measures, the second alternative won out because what counted for the Young Turks in the end was the strengthening and survival of the state, democracy (or ‘constitutionalism’ or ‘national sovereignty’) being a means to that end, not an end in itself.

Like those of 1913–18, the Kemalist reforms aimed to secularize and modernize society. In September 1925 the religious shrines (*türbes*) and dervish convents (*tekkes*) were closed down and in November the turban and fez, the red felt cap that had been the Ottoman gentleman’s traditional headgear since the days of Sultan Mahmut II, were prohibited and replaced by the Western-style hat or cap. These measures met with stubborn resistance from the population. *Tekkes* and *türbes* played an important role in everyday Muslim life and the hat was considered a symbol of Christian Europe. The Independence Tribunals played their part in suppressing this resistance. Under the Law on the Maintenance of Order nearly 7500 people were arrested and 660 were executed.⁴

In the first half of 1926, the European calendar was adopted, as were the Swiss civil code and the penal code from Mussolini’s Italy. A number of laws restructuring the banking sector were passed and, except in the army, all courtesy titles (like *Bey*, *Efendi* or *Paşa*) were abolished.

Together with the abolition of the sultanate and caliphate and the proclamation of the republic, these measures form the first wave of the Kemalist reforms. It is clear that they constituted an extension of the *Tanzimat* and Unionist reforms, which had secularized most of the legal and educational systems. With the relegation of the sultan-caliph to the role of ornament and the removal of the *Şeyhülislam* from the cabinet, the state itself had been secularized to a large extent already. Islam had been the state religion of the empire, but so it was under the early republic.

The major new step of the Kemalists was the complete secularization of family law, which, through the abolition of religious marriages and polygamy, touched the daily life of the population. They also went much further in the secularization of society (see below). That the sartorial aspects of the reforms (for example the ‘hat reform’) played such an important role (under the supporters of reform as well as under its enemies) fits into a tradition that went back to the new Western-style uniforms, the fezzes and the stamboulines of Mahmut II’s servants. That this tradition lives on to the present day is shown by the recent debates about the wearing of scarves by female Muslim students.

Like the Unionist reformers before them, the Kemalists stopped short of unleashing a real socio-economic revolution or reform programme. There was no attempt to change the ownership relations in the country.

The day of reckoning: the İzmir conspiracy

The political opposition and its press had been silenced in 1925, but Mustafa Kemal, being well aware of the capabilities of his opponents and of their expertise in underground organization (going back to the days before the revolution of 1908), still felt insecure. As long as the former leaders of the CUP and the PRP were still around, with their prestige as heroes from the independence war intact, they could exploit the prevailing discontent arising from the continuing bad economic situation and the unpopularity of the reforms.

Mustafa Kemal spent May and June 1926 on an extended inspection tour of the south and west of the country. When he was about to arrive in İzmir on 15 June (he was unexpectedly delayed), a plot to assassinate him was uncovered. The plotters were arrested and turned out to be a small band of professional gunmen, led by a former representative in the national assembly (and secretary of the Defence of Rights Group), Ziya Hurşit. The Ankara Independence Tribunal was sent to İzmir and immediately after its arrival on 18 June waves of arrests began.

Almost all the surviving prominent Unionists were arrested, as well as the former PRP members of the assembly, except for Hüseyin Rauf (Orbay) and Adnan (Adıvar), who were abroad at the time. During the trial, held from 26 June to 12 July, the arrested politicians were accused of having supported the assassination plot and of having planned a coup d'état. Of the accused, 16 were condemned to death, despite the fact that most of them had not been proved to be involved. The military heroes associated with the PRP, Kâzım Karabekir, Ali Fuat (Cebesoy), Refet (Bele), and Cafer Tayyar (Eğilmez), were released under the pressure of public opinion and of signs of discontent from the army. It was clear, however, that their position in politics had been irretrievably lost.

A second trial opened in Ankara in August against more than 50 important former Unionists. Even more than the first, this was a show trial during which the policies of the CUP leaders when in power and their opposition to Mustafa Kemal were the real themes and the conspiracy of June 1926 was a side issue. Four of the accused were hanged, while a number of others received prison sentences. Hüseyin Rauf, who was officially regarded as the main culprit, was sentenced *in absentia* to ten years imprisonment. *Kara Kemal*, whom the prosecution regarded as the brains behind the actual assassination attempt, had been sentenced to death *in absentia* during the first part of the trial. When his hiding place in Istanbul was discovered, he shot himself.

End of an era: 'The Speech'

The troubled postwar period was symbolically closed with Mustafa

Kemal's 36-hour speech before the congress of the Republican People's Party from 15 to 20 October 1927. This is a remarkable and hugely influential text, which deserves consideration.

He presented it as a report on the history of the Turkish national movement from 1919 to 1927 and generally the historical character he claimed for his text has been accepted, although later generations in Turkey have debated whether it should be considered a historical source or as a piece of historiography. The author's prestige and the political climate of the period have seen to it that the text has become the basis for nearly all Turkish historiography on the period to the present day. It was translated into German, French and English in 1928–29 and has been deeply influential in foreign historiography as well.

In reality, the *Nutuk* (Speech), as it is simply known, is not a history of the period from 1919 to 1927, but it ends with the emergence of the Progressive Republican Party in November 1924. Only 1.5 per cent of the text is concerned with later events. The reason is that the speech is not really a survey of modern Turkish history at all. It is a vindication of the purges of 1925–26, and criticizing the former leaders of the PRP is its main theme, just as criticism of the old CUP leaders had been the theme of Mustafa Kemal's 'memoirs' published in March 1926. In his attempt to disgrace his former colleagues, he presents them throughout as doubters, incompetents and traitors, and depicts himself as the one who led the movement from the outset. It is significant that the speech begins with his arrival in Anatolia in May 1919, disregarding the earlier phase of the national resistance movement. In what is obviously a distortion of the historical truth, it presents the independence struggle not as one to preserve parts of the Ottoman Empire, but as a movement for the establishment of a new Turkish state.

The context in which the speech was given also served to distort the historical picture. The RPP called its 1927 congress – and it is generally described as such – the 'second congress of the RPP' though in fact it was the first. The RPP called it the second because it retrospectively adopted the congress at Sivas in 1919 as its first, thus emphasizing the (false) identification of the RPP with the national liberation movement and monopolizing its heritage. While the period from 1923 to 1926 decisively influenced political life in Turkey in an authoritarian sense for the next 20 years, the congress of 1927 and Mustafa Kemal's speech determined the historical vision of the genesis of the new Turkish state for generations.