



Turkish Secularism on the Ropes

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Turkish secularism is gravely threatened, and millions of Turks are deeply concerned that their country could become an Islamic state. The secularist Republican People's Party (CHP) and Democratic Left Party (DSP) have [combined forces](#) to try to stop the ruling AK Party, amid widespread fears that the AKP intends to destroy the secular foundation of the Turkish state. Turkish citizens have demonstrated in three immense pro-secularist rallies: [500,000 people](#) demonstrated in Ankara, almost [a million in Istanbul](#), and [a million and a half in Izmir](#).

These large-scale rallies are most encouraging, and show that while there is widespread popular support for an Islamic state in Turkey (otherwise the Prime Minister and others would not be in office), there is also widespread support for Kemal-

ism, the philosophy of Turkish secularism devised by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who abolished the caliphate in 1924 and instituted a number of other controls on political Islam in Turkey, many of which remain in place to this day. He instituted restrictions on various Islamic observances, secularized marriage law, mandated that Turkish be written in Roman rather than in Arabic characters, and above all monitored mosques and regulated preaching within them, making sure that the tenets of political Islam were not taught. Consequently the chief opposition to Kemalism has always been religious, as it is now.

At the same time, because most of the participants in these pro-secularist rallies are nominally Muslims, they illuminate certain important aspects of the way forward for

opposition to Islamic Sharia rule in Islamic societies. Onur Oymen of the secularist Republican People's Party recently denied that the secularist ralliers represented "moderate Islam." He declared: "You can't have democracy without secularism. The notion of moderate Islam to check radical Islam is nonsense. This idea being promoted by certain countries should be abandoned."

At first glance Oymen's distinction between secularism and moderate Islam may seem to be a distinction without a difference. Wouldn't a secular government in Turkey, and a movement in favor of that secularism, be essentially a movement of moderate Islam? After all, almost all of those who are protesting against Islamic rule in Turkey would identify themselves as Muslims.

However, identification as a Muslim is one thing, and acceptance of the principles of political Islam is quite another. All over the world today jihadists are targeting peaceful Muslims in their recruitment efforts, and presenting themselves as the exponents of "true" and "pure" Islam, including - as the title of a widely-circulated publication had it - jihad, "the forgotten obligation." Part of this presentation centers on a reassertion of political Islam. Cultural Muslims who have no desire to live in an Islamic state nonetheless have been able to formulate no response on Islamic grounds to the jihadist challenge. The only response that has ever gained traction in the Islamic world has been not just a de facto laying-aside of Islam's political and social character, but a self-

conscious elimination of that character - and Ataturk's Turkey has been the site of the greatest success of this approach. Ataturk realized that there would be a recrudescence and reassertion of political Islam whenever there was a revival of religious fervor. Thus Kemalism presented itself not as "moderate Islam," nor as an Islamic construct at all, but as an explicit rejection of political Islam in favor of secularism. That is, it was never presented as an Islamic construct or justified by Islamic teachings, but was an explicit rejection of certain traditional aspects of Islam.

Ataturk became the first political figure ever in the Islamic world to reject -- avowedly and without apology -- political Islam in favor of a Western model of the separation of the religion from the state. While this would not forever prevent -- as recent events in Turkey clearly show -- a reassertion of political Islam, it would give the state greater ability to resist this reassertion, while a state that was nominally an Islamic one or that paid even lip service to Sharia in its Constitution would not have that ability. So Turkish secularism is predicated not on moderate Islam, but on premises that are not Islamic at all. And Oymen knows that any modification of Turkish law to change that will simply open the door to a full reassertion of Sharia -- Islamic law -- in Turkey.

It's a principle with a much wider application than Turkey alone: for peaceful Muslims to prevail over the proponents of jihad and Sharia, they must be prepared not just to ignore,

but to reject explicitly, the elements of Sharia that are at variance with accepted norms of human rights and with government that does not establish a state religion. Only then will they have a chance of defending

those rights and standing up against the theological and societal challenge of jihadism. That is not just the Turks, but all free people, have a stake in the survival of Turkish secularism.

Robert Spencer is a scholar of Islamic history, theology, and law and the director of [Jihad Watch](#). He is the author of five books, seven monographs, and hundreds of articles about jihad and Islamic terrorism, including [Islam Unveiled: Disturbing Questions About the World's Fastest Growing Faith](#) and [The Politically Incorrect Guide to Islam \(and the Crusades\)](#). He is also an Adjunct Fellow with the Free Congress Foundation.