

# Abandoning Ataturk

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Articles & Testimony

In the 18th and 19th centuries, the Ottoman Empire, having suffered military defeats at the hands of Europe, realized it could match its rivals only by becoming a European society itself. So it embarked on a program of intense reforms. In 1863, Sultan Abdulaziz established Darussafaka, the empire's first high school with a secular Western curriculum in Turkish. In the early 20th century, Kemal Ataturk followed through on the sultan's dreams, making Turkey a staunchly secular state. Institutions such as Darussafaka, my alma mater, thrived.

Not now. Last month, Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) decided to start a training academy for imams in Darussafaka's iconic, 130-year-old former campus, abandoned by Darussafaka for a new facility in 1994. Such a step would have been unfathomable even two years ago. But it's a sign of how the era of Ataturk and Abdulaziz is coming to an end.

Since coming to power in 2002, the Islamist AKP has transformed Turkey. Bureaucrats in Ankara now feel compelled to attend prayers lest they be bypassed for promotions. Religious observance has become a necessity for those seeking government appointments or lucrative state contracts. The AKP firmly controls the country's executive and legislative branches and is extending its power by appointing sympathetic judges, university presidents, and the heads of major civil organizations. The party has used legal loopholes to raise the share of Turkey's media held by pro-AKP businessmen from 20 percent to about 50 percent.

The increasingly marginalized secular elite is largely to blame for its own downfall. After 1946, when Turkey became a multiparty democracy, the country ran on autopilot. Turkey's secular establishment grew fatigued and stopped doing what it takes to maintain popular support. After the collapse of communism, Turkey's working and lower-middle classes largely abandoned the left. Rather than cultivate them, secular parties waited for the masses to come to them. The AKP, by contrast, went to the people, establishing a vast, Tammany Hall-style network to distribute jobs and benefits while preaching traditional Islamist values. The result was its historic 2002 victory.

Ataturk's followers also neglected key institutions. Consider Darus-safaka. After the school moved to a new campus in the suburbs in 1994, the elite let the handsome, 19th-century buildings with a Bosphorus view lay fallow for 15 years. Not one secular business, NGO, or university took interest in them.

And consider the media. While nonreligious and liberal Turks continue to rely on newspapers -- the old media -- to get their message out, the Islamists have taken over the new. They now dominate the Internet, using a proliferating number of sites to spin news with an anti-Western and pro-AKP twist. This helps shape ordinary Turks' attitudes. When the global economy collapsed in 2008, for example, these Web sites placed blame for the crisis on a supposed transfer by Lehman Brothers of \$40 billion to Israel. Islamist Web sites have also played a major role in shaping the debate around the Ergenekon case, branding liberal and secular opposition figures as "terrorists" for allegedly supporting a coup plot against the AKP government and intimidating some into submission.

Not only do Turkey's secular forces seem to regard politics as a 9-to-5 job, they also lack a positive vision. The AKP, on the other hand, works around the clock. And while they may seek to undermine Ataturk's reforms, no one can

accuse the Islamists of lacking vision.

This doesn't mean that secular Turks should give up the game. Instead, they need to learn from their opponents. This means reengaging in retail politics, from grassroots activism to canvassing to voter drives. Secular Turks also need to assert a positive vision for their country's future. In years past, the sultans, and then Ataturk, used Europe as their model. Secular Turks must update this vision today, defining a liberal, 21st-century Turkey. And they must make that vision more appealing than the AKP's; otherwise, the people will choose the Islamists. And who can blame them?

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