

History

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's Attitude towards Laicism and Islam

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Abstract. This paper presents the historical aspects of the interrelationship between laicism and Islam. It highlights the perspective of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the state structure of the Republic of Turkey, on the problems inherent in the relationship between secularism and Islam, which are analyzed through the method of critical analysis. Despite protests from opposition forces and internal resistance, the Kemalists implemented the principle of secularism without any retreat and established it as a cornerstone of Republican Turkey. Although Mustafa Kemal Atatürk supported a clear separation between state and religion and restricted public expressions of religion, he did not ban religious practices in private life and acknowledged the significance of Islam in the personal lives of the Turkish people. The reforms carried out by Atatürk have significantly shaped the country's present reality. Therefore, a proper understanding of secularism is essential, without which it is impossible to comprehend the Kemalist principles underpinning the construction of a secular, republican Turkish state. © 2026 *Bull. Natl. Acad. Sci. Georg.*

Keywords: Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, laicism, Islam

Introduction

The official state doctrine of the Republic of Turkey is based on the principles of its founder and great reformer, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881-1938), and is known as Kemalism. The historical development of modern Turkey is unimaginable without Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. He assumed leadership of the country during its most difficult period (1918-1923). His uniqueness lies in the fact that he was simultaneously a military leader, a defender of religion, a statesman, and a revolutionary (Makaradze, 2024). He significantly shaped the present-day reality of the country. His principles,

known as Kemalism, form the foundation of the statehood of Republican Turkey.

In 1923, at the initiative of Kemal Atatürk, the Republican People's Party was established, and its program became a defining guide for life in Republican Turkey. In May 1931, at the 3rd Congress of the Republican People's Party of Turkey, Atatürk's close associate, Prime Minister, İsmet İnönü, presented a report on the party's activities in which he formulated six theoretical principles that later became the cornerstone of the Republic of Turkey. These principles are republicanism, nationalism, populism, statism, secularism (laicism), and revolu-

tionism (Makaradze, 2025). These six principles were symbolically represented in the party's emblem, approved at the same congress: six white arrows on a red background. At this congress, the party's program was adopted for the first time, incorporating these principles. All six Kemalist principles are equally important for the Republic of Turkey. Each principle is autonomous and relates to the country's political and economic life; at the same time, the six principles are closely interconnected. Without a proper understanding of the principles of Kemalism, it is impossible to objectively assess the current situation in modern Turkey.

In Islamic countries, the unprecedented reforms carried out by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his supporters laid the foundation for the separation of secular and religious authority. Atatürk's concept of laicism played a vital role in the development of Turkish society and occupies a central place in the understanding of Turkish statehood. Laicism (Turkish *laiklik*, derived from the French word *laïcité*, meaning secularity) denotes the separation of religion from the state.

On November 1, 1922, through Atatürk's efforts, the Ottoman Sultanate was abolished, and shortly thereafter, on February 29, 1924, the Caliphate was dissolved. On March 1, at the opening session of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, Atatürk delivered a speech entitled "Against the Use of Islam as a Political Weapon," in which he reminded both deputies and the public of the true purpose of religion. On March 3, 1924, the Grand National Assembly adopted a significant law officially abolishing the Caliphate.

Although the Caliphate was abolished by law, the Kemalists were unable to easily detach society from the theocratic regime or to offer positive alternatives that were fully accepted by the population. As a result, supporters of the Caliphate portrayed the Kemalists as enemies of religion. Under the 1921 Constitution, Islam was not recognized as the state religion. However, a 1923 constitutional amendment declared Islam the official religion of

the state. This provision was retained in the 1924 Constitution but was ultimately removed by Law No. 1222 on April 10, 1928. Commenting on this development, Atatürk stated: "We respect religion. We do not oppose any beliefs or modes of thinking. We simply seek to prevent religious and state affairs from being mixed together" (Atatürk, 1975).

The formal incorporation of Atatürk's concept of secularism (laicism) as a constitutional principle occurred only on February 5, 1937, through Law No. 3115. Atatürk attached great importance to secularism in the governance of the country, as for centuries, Islam had served as the dominant ideological force shaping public life in Turkey. In this context, it is particularly important to examine how Atatürk conceptualized secularism and how he implemented it in the life of the nation (Makaradze, 2020).

From that point on, Turkey became a legally and constitutionally secular (laicist) state. The abolition of the Caliphate symbolized the new Turkish Republic's determination to sever ties with its Ottoman past finally and to construct a progressive state modeled on Western democracy.

Discussion

As noted above, the literal meaning of "laicism" is the separation of religion from the state. However, Atatürk's concept of "laicism" carries a broader and, at the same time, more specific meaning: it asserts that separating religious ideas from state affairs is a fundamental factor in the nation's progress (Atatürkçülük, 1997). According to the Kemalists, the principle of laicism in Republican Turkey guaranteed individual spiritual, physical, and religious freedom, the inviolability of religious and secular institutions, the advancement of science and technology, the protection of religious rights, and, most importantly, the separation of religion from the state.

On this issue, Atatürk stated in his speeches: "People cannot be influenced by God, religion, or belief; faith and politics are contradictory concepts,

and therefore the application of religious teachings in political life is inconceivable. Faith exists – it is necessary and essential, without which the survival of society is impossible. Our faith is justified, most honorable, and most natural” (Atatürkçülük, 1997).

In Turkey’s reality, for many years, members of the clergy were actively involved in governance and state administration, which hindered the country’s development and kept it in a stagnant, monotonous state. For this reason, Atatürk declared “laicism” a fundamental principle of the Republic of Turkey and of modern Turkish society more broadly. However, this does not imply that laicism is an anti-faith or disrespectful toward religion. Atatürk emphasized that their faith embodies the resilience and strength of the Turkish nation – two principal virtues of the people – and that this virtue cannot be removed from the nation’s collective conscience (Atatürkçülük, 1997). In his view, the governance of the state, its laws, and its constitution must be grounded not in religious elements, but in scientific knowledge and modern technology. This approach enabled the activation and development of all institutions in Turkey using forms and methods consistent with modernity. Atatürk strongly opposed the misuse of religion, stating: “Our muses do not descend from the heavens or from an idealistic world – life itself prepares them for us. The guide to our path is the state in which the Turkish people live, and it is we who create our own history. The harsh fate and suffering come from our muses” (Atatürkçülük, 1997).

Atatürk’s expression, “Our muses do not descend from the heavens or from an idealistic world,” reflects one of the key foundations of laicism. We believe that Atatürk intended to govern the state not by religious principles, but through enlightened, scientific foundations. Regarding society, he argued that the national will and desire are a heavy burden for the people, and that the most sacred principle – the freedom of belief – not only requires the separation of religion from the state but also the

protection of each citizen’s soul, prayer, and faith (Armaner, 1997).

In this framework, laicism safeguards religion from misguidance by religious authorities, while ensuring it occupies its rightful place. From this perspective, Atatürk’s model of laicism allowed religion to fully fulfill its social and spiritual responsibilities.

Kemalist laicism separated religious and state authority by assigning state rights to the state and religious rights to religion. Proponents of secular governance argued that limiting religion solely to religious rights would prevent potential conflicts with the state, thereby enabling the Republic of Turkey to progress and develop. There are, however, differing perspectives on this issue within Turkish society.

Turkish professor F. Ahmad defines laicism as follows: “Laicism is the governance of the state not according to religious principles, but in accordance with the laws passed by the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, elected by the people. Under the principle of laicism, every citizen is free and has the right to perform religious rituals. Propaganda – whether in favor of religion or against it – is not permissible” (Ahmad, 1976).

Similarly, Professor M. Toker wrote in the newspaper *Milliyet*: “They want to present laicism as godlessness. Every laicist force in Turkey must act cautiously and unite in order to protect laicism, one of the key principles of Kemalism” (*Milliyet*, 1986).

These perspectives underscore that laicism is the governance of the state in accordance with the laws established by the Constitution of Turkey.

Numerous Georgian scholars of the history of Kemalism (Svanidze, 2007; Apkhazava, 2006; Kopaliani, 2024; Batiashvili, 2000; Manchkhvili, 2014; Gigineishvili, 1983) have attempted to explain how a secular government was able, within a short period, to align Turkish society with a framework of a civilization that opened the path toward the country’s democratic modernization.

This development in Turkey is particularly striking because, unlike in European countries, laicism in Turkey was not the result of evolutionary change or the centuries-long influence of progressive philosophical ideas on society. The Kemalists pursued Europeanization through legislative means. For them, laicism was a core political choice, as avoiding its implementation could have resulted in the loss of power in confrontations with conservative forces.

The history of laicism as a principle of the secular state in Turkey underscores the country's Europeanization: laicism did not emerge from the independent development of Turkish culture, but rather as a product of European influence – an issue that has often been the subject of scholarly debate. Throughout the 19th century, there was virtually no philosophical or cultural foundation for laicism in Turkish society that would have allowed laicism to take root in the political sphere. Laicism did not emerge as a serious movement until the era of Sultan Abdul Hamid II (1876-1908). During this period, the revolution led by the Young Turks and the Committee of Union and Progress resulted in the implementation of the 1876 Constitution. However, the Committee of Union and Progress did not officially adopt laicism and instead followed a general political strategy.

From the party's inception, various pro-Islamic factions began to take shape. On one hand, there were groups that viewed Islam as an active political force and believed that contemporary political and social problems could only be resolved through reliance on Islam. On the other hand, a smaller group supported laicism and favored a hybrid model. In addition, the Turkish national movement was active during this period. In this complex environment, the party sought to maintain loyal relations with all of these groups.

As noted, the movement for laicism in Turkey gained momentum after the national liberation struggle, when Atatürk declared laicism the central ideology of the country. This policy curtailed the

influence of religion in state governance and, at a certain stage, reduced its formal rights within the state. In this regard, the opinion of Turkish scholar Toprak is noteworthy: during the era of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, religion in Turkey was used as a form of protest against one-party rule (Toprak, 1981), and it later became an active force in the life of the Republic.

In 1930, Mustafa Kemal stated regarding laicism: "In the separation of religious ideas from state affairs, the Republic sees a fundamental factor in the progress of our nation."

The abolition of the caliphate symbolized the new Turkey's determination to sever ties with the Ottoman past and to construct a progressive state modeled on Western democracy.

Although Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was not anti-religious, he limited the influence of religious institutions on public life. He believed that traditional interpretations of Islam impeded Turkey's modernization and therefore implemented reforms aimed at reforming and modernizing Islam. These reforms included the translation of the Quran into Turkish and efforts to conduct prayers in the Turkish language. Laicism subsequently became one of the six fundamental principles of the Republic of Turkey, as part of the ideology of Kemalism, and was formally incorporated into the Turkish Constitution in 1937.

In contemporary Turkey, there is ongoing tension between secular and religious forces. On one hand, there exists a liberal, Western-oriented secular elite; on the other, more conservative and religiously oriented groups continue to exert influence.

Constitutionally, Turkey remains a secular state, but in practice, Islam continues to play a significant role in political and social discourse.

Conclusion

The issue of laicism and Islam is fundamental to the formation of the modern Turkish state and continues to shape its political and social life to this day.

The majority of the population of the Republic of Turkey adheres to Sunni Islam, which positions the country uniquely at the intersection of Islamic civilization and secular, European-influenced governance.

The phenomenon of Atatürk and the ideology of Kemalism remains one of the most significant and compelling subjects in the study of contemporary Turkish domestic politics.

ისტორია

მუსტაფა ქემალ ათათურქის დამოკიდებულება ლაიციზმისა და ისლამის საკითხებზე

ე. მაკარაძე

ბათუმის შოთა რუსთაველის სახელმწიფო უნივერსიტეტი, ჰუმანიტარულ მეცნიერებათა ფაკულტეტი, საქართველო

(წარმოდგენილია აკადემიის წევრის რ. მეტრეველის მიერ)

წინამდებარე ნაშრომში წარმოდგენილია ისლამისა და ლაიციზმის ურთიერთკავშირის ისტორიული ასპექტები. ხაზგასმულია თურქეთის რესპუბლიკის სახელმწიფოებრივი მოწყობის ფუძემდებლის, მუსტაფა ქემალ ათათურქისეული ხედვა ისლამსა და ლაიციზმს შორის ურთიერთკავშირში არსებული პრობლემებისადმი, რომლებიც გაანალიზებულია კრიტიკული ანალიზის მეთოდით. ქემალისტებმა, მიუხედავად ოპოზიციური ძალების გამოსვლებისა და მათ შორის არსებული წინააღმდეგობისა, ყოველგვარი უკანდახევის გარეშე გამოიყენეს ლაიციზმის პრინციპი და ის მთავარ დასაყრდენად აქციეს რესპუბლიკურ თურქეთში. მიუხედავად იმისა, რომ მუსტაფა ქემალ ათათურქი მხარს უჭერდა სახელმწიფოსა და რელიგიის მკაფიო გამოჯენას და შეზღუდა რელიგიის საჯარო გამოვლინებები, მან არ აკრძალა რელიგიური პრაქტიკა კერძო სივრცეში და აღიარებდა ისლამის მნიშვნელობას თურქების პირად ცხოვრებაში. ათათურქის მიერ გატარებულმა რეფორმამ მნიშვნელოვანწილად განსაზღვრა ქვეყნის დღევანდელი მდგომარეობა. ამგვარად, ლაიციზმის გაგება სწორ გააზრებას მოითხოვს, რის გარეშეც შეუძლებელია საერო, რესპუბლიკური თურქეთის სახელმწიფოს მშენებლობის ქემალისტური პრინციპების გაგება.

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Received May, 2025