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A Lasting Legacy: The Proclamation of the Republic

Alp Yenen

The proclamation of the Republic by the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (*Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi*) on 29 October 1923 marks one of the most important dates in modern Turkish history, known by heart by all school children and designated a public holiday commemorated with official celebrations since its tenth anniversary in 1933. The proclamation signalled the end of the transitional period of the “National Struggle” (*Millî Mücadele*) in Turkey’s official historiography from the Ottoman Empire to the Republic of Turkey.

The proclamation of the Republic was, however, neither determined nor rendered self-evident by earlier developments in the National Struggle; rather, it was contingent on the global crisis of empire and the decade of war through which the Ottoman Empire had fought. After the Armistice of Mudros took effect in November 1918, bringing an end to the First World War in the Middle East, the Ottoman government in İstanbul found itself caught up in a crisis of legitimacy as it faced occupation and partition by a bloc of Allied powers comprised of Britain, France, Italy, and Greece. Before the leaders of the “Young Turk” Committee of Union and Progress (*İttihat ve Terakki Fırkası*, CUP), who were largely responsible for the Ottoman defeat in the war, went into hiding at the onset of the armistice, they had already laid the groundwork for a continuation of the armed struggle against the Allied occupation through a network of resistance cells and rogue officers. This “Unionist” resistance and subversion of the military demobilisation led to an increase in the violence and lawlessness plaguing Anatolia, especially in contested intercommunal territories, thereby destabilising Allied control. Under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Pasha (Atatürk, 1881–1938), the initial resistance movement was transformed into a conventional war during what came to be known as the War of Independence (*İstiklâl Harbi*), which concluded in a victory for the Turkish resistance with the signing of the Armistice of Mudanya with the Allied powers in October of 1922.

During the National Struggle, republicanism was neither a policy per se nor a popular discourse. Nevertheless, notions of national sovereignty (commonly referred to as *saltanat-ı milliye* or *hakimiyet-i milliye*) had gained wide popularity and currency in the debates carried out by the Grand National Assembly in Ankara, which was founded on 23 April 1920 as a revolutionary parliament with legislative and executive powers outside of Allied-controlled territories. While the personal subservience of Sultan Mehmed VI Vahideddin (1861–1926) to the Allied occupation in İstanbul and his opposition to the National Forces (*kuvva-yı milliye*) marred the reputation of the Ottoman sultanate, Muslim nationalism and transnational

Islamic solidarity increased the status of the symbolic power of the Ottoman caliphate in Anatolia and the wider Muslim world. This led the Ankara government to separate the office of the caliphate from the Ottoman sultanate and abolish the latter on 1 November 1922 (which was celebrated thereafter as a public holiday of “national sovereignty” until 1935, when it was combined with the celebrations of 23 April). However, the abolition of the sultanate and Vahideddin’s exile did not resolve the ongoing constitutional ambiguity between the Grand National Assembly in the newly declared capital city of Ankara and the Ottoman caliphate in İstanbul, which was taken over by another Ottoman successor, Abdülmecid Efendi (1868–1944). This ambiguous status was a matter of concern for Mustafa Kemal at a time when the sovereignty of Turkey was on the cusp of being established at the Lausanne Conference.

The Lausanne Conference also coincided with the emergence of political opposition in Ankara. During the negotiations at Lausanne, Foreign Minister İsmet Pasha (İnönü, 1884–1973) opted to follow the instructions of Mustafa Kemal, who was the president of the Assembly, and not those of Prime Minister Hüseyin Rauf (Orbay, 1881–1964). Out of protest, Rauf resigned on 4 August 1923. After Mustafa Kemal’s ally Ali Fethi (Okyar, 1880–1943) was elected prime minister, an oppositional group emerged among the deputies. Mustafa Kemal established a commission of experts to draft a proposal for the founding of the country as a republic, but there was some opposition among the deputies, since, as they argued, it would grant too many powers to Mustafa Kemal. When Rauf, as the opposition’s candidate, was elected deputy president of the Assembly on October 25, Mustafa Kemal created a crisis in the cabinet by calling on Fethi and his cabinet to resign. In the evening of 28 October, he revealed to his close friends, “Tomorrow we will proclaim the Republic.” Indeed, the proposal for the proclamation of the Republic was first discussed in a closed morning session held by the People’s Party and then accepted “unanimously” by the Grand National Assembly—although it remains doubtful whether there was a clear two-thirds majority since the votes were not officially counted.

*The Proclamation of the Republic**

First Article: Sovereignty belongs unconditionally to the Nation. The form of the administration is based on the fact that the people will administer their destiny in person and in deeds. The State of Turkey’s form of government is a republic.

Second Article: The State of Turkey’s religion is the religion of Islam. Its official language is Turkish.

Third Article: The State of Turkey is administered by the Grand National Assembly of Turkey. The Assembly administers the government’s division of administrative affairs through executive ministers.

* Translated from the original Turkish document in Murat Bardakçı, “94. Yıldönümünde İlk Defa Yayınlanıyor: İşte, Cumhuriyet’in Kuruluş Belgeleri,” *HaberTürk*, 29 October 2017. <https://www.haberturk.com/yazarlar/murat-bardakci/1691337-94-yildonumunde-ilk-defa-yayinlaniyor-iste-cumhuriyetin-kurulus-belgeleri>

Fourth Article: Turkey's President of the Republic is elected by a plenum of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey from among its deputies during the legislative period. The term of office of the presidency continues until a new President of the Republic is elected. It is permissible to be re-elected.

Fifth Article: Turkey's President of the Republic is the head of state. He presides over the Assembly and the cabinet of ministers as he deems necessary within that capacity.

Article Six: The Prime Minister is elected by the President of the Republic from among the deputies of the Assembly. After the other ministers are elected by the Prime Minister from among the deputies of the Assembly, they are collectively presented for the approval of the Assembly by the President of the Republic. If the Assembly is not currently holding sessions, the matter of approval will be postponed until the [next] session of the Assembly is held.

29 October 1923

In content, the proclamation of the Republic was not a foundational document, but rather a series of amendments to the Law on the Fundamental Order (*Teşkilât-ı Esasiye Kanunu*) consisting of twenty-three articles which was passed by the Grand National Assembly two years earlier on 10 January 1921. This “first constitution” of 1921, as it was later labelled, had already declared national sovereignty and the legislative and executive mandate of the Grand National Assembly, but the proclamation of Republic redefined the form of the government and the character of the state. In terms of the form of the state, the new Republic resembled the Third Republic in France and also drew upon the Ottoman tradition of constitutional monarchy. As in France, the president was elected by the Assembly, though only a single chamber existed (the parliamentary sessions of the People's Party more or less comprised an exclusive second chamber, though it consisted of the same members), and the president nominated a prime minister who then appointed an executive cabinet of ministers to be approved by the parliament. Like the Ottoman sultan, the president was the head of the state, but he enjoyed the liberty of being able to lead parliamentary sessions or cabinet meetings whenever he pleased.

After the proclamation of the Republic, Mustafa Kemal was elected as the first president and his loyal companion İsmet was appointed as the first prime minister of the Republic of Turkey. The leaders of the opposition, who were absent from Ankara at the time, were surprised by the issuance of these decisions and publicly criticised the move, stating that such a radical regime change as calling the country a “republic” did not necessarily make it democratic. In doing so, they either remained loyal to the principles of Ottoman constitutionalism laid out in 1908 or proposed a more democratic transition—that is, if they did not simply oppose Mustafa Kemal's growing powers. Despite the continued existence of a Young Turk zeitgeist in Republican Turkey, the proclamation of the Republic entailed a clear

departure from the Ottomanist and imperialist notions embedded within the Young Turk political framework.

Continuing and consolidating certain aspects of identity politics that had been in place since the Young Turks came to power, the proclamation openly declared that the Turkish state's religion was Islam and its official language was Turkish. In 1928, the declaration that Islam was the state religion was removed from the constitution, but Sunni-Islamic beliefs have remained an underlying feature of Turkish nationalism ever since. In the proclamation of the Republic, there was no mention of the office of the caliphate in İstanbul, but later, on 3 March 1924, the caliphate was abolished. All of the members of the House of Osman were exiled and prohibited from returning to Turkey (until 1952 for female members and 1974 for male members). On 20 April 1924, the Grand National Assembly approved a new and more comprehensive constitution which was replaced only in 1961, ending the "first republic" of Turkey.

From a global perspective, the proclamation of the Republic of Turkey was not a singular event. The popularity of notions of national sovereignty was related to the Wilsonian and Leninist campaigns of national self-determination in international politics. As such, the Republic of Turkey was one of the last to do so in a global wave of proclamations of independent republics during the crisis of empires after the end of the First World War. Although other short-lived experiments with republics had taken place in the Muslim world, such as the various Muslim republics that were declared during the Russian civil war and the proclamations of the Tripoli Republic in Libya and the Rif Republic in Morocco, all of which predated the founding of the Turkish Republic, Turkey remains the longest-lasting uninterrupted republican regime in the Muslim world. Despite multiple instances of resistance to and rebellions against the Ankara regime in the interwar years, no popular movements arose with the aim of reinstating the Ottoman monarchy or abandoning the republican system.

Considering its fundamental importance, the history of the proclamation of the Republic received relatively little attention in the official historiography, which uncritically depicted the Republic as the ultimate outcome of the secret agenda and singular agency of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk starting with the National Struggle in 1919. Hence, in the Kemalist logic, the proclamation of the Republic is considered a necessary, inevitable step in the natural evolution of a modern state and society away from the cultural backwardness and Oriental despotism of the Ottoman Empire. Nevertheless, such singular and teleological narratives have been subjected to their fair share of revisions and corrections in past decades, which point out the roles played by the collective action of elites, Ottoman institutional and intellectual legacies, historical contingencies, and the undemocratic measures put forward by Mustafa Kemal during his rise to power. Despite a growing sense of nostalgia for the imperial Ottoman past as well as increasing criticism, particularly since the 1990s, of the processes that went into the formation of the Kemalist nation-state, republicanism—in its various interpretations—remains a major feature of contemporary Turkish political culture. The idea

of the Republic unifies in a unique way the three core tenets of Kemalism: a commitment to Atatürk's personality, Turkey's national sovereignty, and Turkey's path to modernity.

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