

Turkey's Quest for Freedom

Modern Turkey rose from the remnants of the Ottoman empire after World War I under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, who reinvented the country on the model of a European nation-state. Today, with its credentials as a secular democracy with a majority Muslim society located between Europe, Asia and the Middle East, Turkey is frequently used to counter fears of an impending clash of civilisations between Islam and the West. But Ataturk's legacy has become an ossified ideology, indeed a theology—Kemalism—that clings to the idea of an all-powerful state.



Susan Windybank and Atilla Yayla at ALT's offices in Ankara

It was in this intellectual climate that three like-minded Turkish academics established the Association for Liberal Thinking (ALT) in 1992. Based in the capital, Ankara, ALT remains the lone voice of classical liberalism in Turkey. A non-profit, non-governmental organisation with no direct links to any political party or movement, it publishes reports, books and journals; holds national and international symposia; and develops and carries out educational programmes on freedom and the individual, the rule of law, limited constitutional government, the free market economy and private property.

On a recent trip to Turkey, SUSAN WINDYBANK spoke with Association co-founder and current president ATILLA YAYLA about the challenges to economic and political liberalisation, Islam and democracy, and Turkey's bid for EU membership.

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Susan Windybank: The per capita income of Turkey has grown by about 2% p.a. since 1975. This looks good compared to the (partly) oil-rich Muslim Middle East where incomes have stagnated but not so good when compared to the East Asian region at around 3.6% p.a. Why has Turkey, a country with good starting conditions for economic growth, not done better?

Atilla Yayla: To understand the economic performance of Turkey we need to separate the history of modern Turkey into two parts. The first was the era of single party dictatorship, which lasted from 1923 until 1950, and the second was the period of democratic development, which started in 1950. Whatever success we have now, we gained in the democratic period when we had some freedom.

If you look at data from the first era you will see that Turkey was very unsuccessful in economic terms. The single party dictatorship did not deliver rising living standards and people were very unhappy. If it had gone on for much longer, there would have been a revolt. Fortunately, in 1950 things changed peacefully and we moved towards democracy. Since then we've had four military coups, but in the periods where the people dominated and politicians were elected we made some progress economically.

It's true that we have not had as much success as countries like South Korea. In 1960, in per capita income terms, Turkey was in a much better position than South Korea. Now we are three or four times behind. Why? There are many reasons, but as a classical liberal I must say that lack of freedom is the main reason. This is a statist country. The state dominates or tries to dominate society in every respect—in social, political and economic life, in ideology, and in religion. So while Turkey has the potential to be very rich, the lack of freedom and its reflections in different segments of social life has made it a poor country.

SW: Why do you think many Middle Eastern countries have fared relatively poorly despite enormous oil wealth in some cases?

AY: Some Arabic countries have had brutal dictatorships. In Turkey, despite everything, we

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have had more freedom—for example, freedom to advertise, to have private property, to express yourself. We still have some problems in these areas but we are better off than many Arabic countries.

We are also the descendants of the Ottoman empire, which was very successful in its early centuries as a multicultural, multiethnic, multireligious empire. So Turkish people have a sort of self-confidence. They do not identify themselves in opposition to the West. By contrast, some Arab people don't feel proud because they were colonised by Western countries and then there is the Palestinian problem, which is a very sensitive issue for all Muslims. So they are taking some unusual paths, which not only harm them, but also the West—like terrorism. They are rejecting Western culture as a whole, rejecting universal values, because they think they are only Western values. For example, they don't respect multiparty politics. They think that this is something unique to Western civilisation and that there is no need for political competition. Even Egypt is, in reality, a single party dictatorship.

SW: Do you see some parallels between the period from 1923 to 1950 in Turkey and a similar period of dictatorship in countries like Spain and Italy? If so, why do you think the legacy from this era has been allowed to linger longer in Turkey when Spain, for example, gradually jettisoned its authoritarian, statist past and experienced faster economic growth as a result?

AY: This is such a difficult subject. There are some similarities between countries like Spain, Italy and Turkey because we all emerged from dictatorship. But they had a big advantage because they wanted to join the European community and this promoted their attempts to create a democratic

system. There are also some cultural differences. Despite the fact that they had fallen behind Western Europe, they were European countries.

In Turkey, the situation is quite different. It's so difficult for Westerners to understand Turkey. In 1950 we took down a dictatorship not through civil war but through the ballot box and created a sort of democracy. This resulted in two political traditions: a totalitarian understanding of republicanism, which dominated the first era, and a democratic understanding of republicanism, in which political parties competed to run Turkey. A cleavage developed between democratic political power and bureaucratic power so that in Turkey today there are two governments. One is the government of bureaucrats, who appoint themselves, who make their own budgets, who are not responsible to the people. The second is the political government, which is democratically elected by the people.

There is a fight between these two governments. The bureaucratic government tolerates democracy, but it sets limits. Within these limits the political governments can do what they wish. If they try to step outside these limits, however, the bureaucratic government stops them. A Prime Minister elected by the people, for example, does not have the last say on educational issues. Bureaucrats claim the right to decide on such issues. This is the main problem in Turkey. The bureaucratic apparatus has the real power as far as critical issues go and in critical times.



Ataturk's Mausoleum in Ankara speaks for itself, says Atilla Yayla.

The military is the essence of this bureaucratic government, and it has a unique position in Turkey. Until recently, the parliament could not even control the military financially. The generals do not like politicians and usually accuse them of the same sorts of crimes. They use problems like Kurdish separatism or fundamentalist religious groups to strengthen their position. It is easy to understand this when you consider that we have had four military coups in the past 50 years.

SW: The military and bureaucratic elites would argue that they are the guardians of Ataturk's vision of Turkey as a modern, secular, democratic state—

AY: —but under Ataturk there was no democracy! There was a single party dictatorship. Ataturk was not directly elected by the people. At some point in Turkish republican history, the party and the state became the same entity. Democracy is a rejection of the Kemalist heritage, which is why some people call Turkey's democratic development a counter-revolution. I am not a revolutionary. I believe in evolution. But if we are to become a real democracy then we have to reject at least a large part of Kemalism. The bureaucratic elites are not prepared to accept this.

SW: Given how entrenched you say Kemalism is, what do you think will be the catalyst or circuit-breaker that will lead to a reappraisal of, or debate over, the Kemalist legacy?

AY: The problem is that Kemalism is not an ideology like socialism or liberalism. It is a religion and that makes it difficult to fight. You cannot have a rational debate with Kemalists. They are not debaters, they are true believers.

Another problem is the level of propaganda in compulsory education. The average Turkish person believes that everything started with Mustafa Kemal. This is not true. We experienced quite a free era before the republic was founded. In 1876, under the Ottoman empire, we had our first constitution and our first parliament.

By the early 1900s we had political parties and many intellectual movements. There was political competition. When the Turkish republic was established in 1923, however, we became a single party dictatorship.

There are people and groups in Turkey who challenge Kemalism but this does not affect the Kemalist establishment. Pressure from the outside world, such as the European Union or the United States, is useful but in the end we need domestic dynamics. For these dynamics to flourish, freedom and the rule of law should come first. Without this, we cannot have a fully-fledged democracy.

SW: How do you go about promoting freedom when freedom of expression is repressed or curtailed, and the rule of law is poor?

AY: I am an optimist by nature. There are positive elements and by supporting them and trying to develop them we can break the vicious cycle we seem to be in. But we need to pick our battles wisely, to take calculated risks. This has been the Association's strategy and the key to its survival and success. If freedom is blocked, for example, in politics, there might be things to do in economic reform. There is an entrepreneurial culture in Turkey. People want to live better lives and they are ready to work hard. But according to recent studies the Turkish state has 60% of the wealth in Turkey, so we need to privatise and reduce legal and bureaucratic formalities. Defending and promoting privatisation may, in turn, help us limit the uniformed bureaucracy in the future. If we succeed in these areas, I think we can make a lot of progress. But the main task is to break the ideological monopoly of Kemalism.

I must stress that I am not against people who believe in Kemalism and adore Atatürk. It is their choice. They have the right to organise their lives according to the ideas they believe in. I am not saying that Kemalism should not exist. Maybe Turkey even needs Kemalism. However, it should cease to exist as an official ideology and become one of a number of competing ideologies. If we can break this ideological monopoly, then I think that in 20 years or so we could become one of the most developed countries in the region, both economically and politically.

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Muslim democracy?

SW: You see the Kemalist ideology as the principal obstacle to progress in Turkey, yet in the West some people argue that Islam is the main obstacle. They see Islam as incompatible with the values of freedom that you believe in. What do you make of this?

AY: My friends in the West say that such values are Western because they come from Christian, Judean and Greek traditions. This is nonsense. Of course, they have influenced these values. But what is the West? Fascism and communism were both Western phenomena. Look at the problems between Protestant Christians and Catholics, between Orthodox and non-Orthodox believers.

The values of freedom are not Western values, they are universal values. By calling them Western values you automatically alienate Muslims. Who can say that freedom is something needed only by Christians? Everybody needs freedom. Who can say that it is only in Christian countries that political power should be limited? This should be the case in every civilised country.

There are elements in Islamic culture that support a free market economy—respect for private property and inheritance, promoting trade, keeping your word. These are basic values and they exist in Islamic culture. It is matter of interpretation. This does not mean that every Islamic interpretation is compatible with universal values. There are radical groups who interpret Islam as the only way, as a complete rejection of these universal values. But we have to make a distinction. I have the right to say that I think Christians are wrong, that they are against God and that the only way is to live as a Muslim to have the chance to go to heaven. I can believe in this and live my life accordingly. But if I were to set up

a political and legal system that depended on this interpretation, it would be dangerous. It would be against humanity, and in the end it would be against Islam itself.

What we need is framework values, which I depend on as a classical liberal. These are freedom, justice and peace. We need a system in which everyone can live in his/her way and accept other ways of life as long as they obey these framework rules.

SW: There has been a resurgence of Islam in Turkey with the emergence of what is called political Islam, which the military has suppressed in the past. Now the Islamic Justice and Development Party is in power and they seem quite pragmatic. Yet some observers argue that their pragmatism is just a guise and that they want to islamise Turkey by stealth. Do you think the long-term benefits of democracy exceed the potential short-term costs of giving Islamists a voice in government?

Islam is an integral part of Turkish culture. By excluding it from social and political life, we cannot have democracy.

AY: Freedom and democracy are the solution to radicalism of every kind—religious, ideological and other sorts. When you compare the Islamists in Turkey with the Islamists in Egypt or Algeria, it is clear that ours are much more moderate and civilised. Why? You can argue that the difference is that they are Arabs, but the truer explanation is political. In Turkey the political system was transformed into a sort of democracy in 1950. Democracy means participation of the people. People were able to participate in political life, including religious and conservative people. They were able to share power, at the level of municipal assemblies and at the level of central government. They saw that it was possible to be a part of a coalition. This helped them to understand democracy. For example, Necmettin Erbakan, former leader of the Islamic-oriented

political tradition, was a scapegoat of the Kemalist establishment but he contributed much more to Turkish democracy than the military because he tried to establish political parties and he always led his followers through the ballot box, not through weapons and force. He believed in the process. That's why we have more moderate Islamists in Turkey.

Political Islam is not a good term in any case. What does it mean? Islam is an integral part of Turkish culture. By excluding it from social and political life, we cannot have democracy. In every democratic country, religion influences politics. Just look at the United States right now and the influence of the evangelists. We cannot have a democracy in Turkey without Islam. In the early years of the Turkish republic the elites tried to exclude Islam completely from political and social life, which required an authoritarian political system.

Many Islamic countries still have authoritarian regimes, and the Islamic movements in opposition reflect the characteristics of those regimes. Look at Egypt. The Egyptian government uses Islam in two ways. They tell people that Islam gives character to the country and they encourage Islamist movements. But then they turn to the West and argue that the Islamists will take over if they do not stay in power, and that this will create problems for the West. So Western governments support these repressive regimes, which are seen as immoral by their own people. That's why Americans are not liked in the Middle East.

East or West?

SW: Turkey is often described—indeed, romanticised—as a bridge between East and West. Yet European leaders don't seem to be sure whether they want Turkey in or out, some of the former Soviet Union regimes in Central Asia and the Caucasus don't trust Ankara, and Arab leaders are often hostile towards Turkey for historical reasons and because of Turkey's ties with the United States and Israel.

Does it matter that Turkey always seems to be the odd man out? Samuel Huntington has argued that countries that do not clearly identify with one

civilisation or another will fare poorly in possible future 'clashes of civilisations'. He dubbed Turkey and Australia 'torn' countries because of their dual European and Asian identities, claiming that Australians were 'torn' between their Anglo-Saxon heritage yet geographic location in, and growing engagements with and immigration from, Asia. So it's of interest to Australians to know what you think of Huntington's thesis.

AY: Most of what Huntington says is wrong. I reject the concept of a country having an identity. Countries don't have identities, individuals do. What is important for me is to respect freedom and the rule of law. If you say that countries should have identities, it might mean that you might have to impose an identity on some groups or individuals.

I do not see anyone in Turkey who is torn between East and West. People are finding their own way. There are some very religious people who try to obey every rule of Islam and who regularly attend the mosque and there are others who respect religion but who also follow other rules. For example, during Ramadan you can see Turkish men in restaurants waiting to break the fast with a bottle of *raki* on the table. There are women who cover their head, women in mini-skirts, people who live like rich Westerners and others who live like the mullahs in Iran. I like this variety. I reject the idea that a good society is a homogenous society. A good society is a rules-based society. What we need is common rules—rule of law, freedom for everybody.

Turkey is not a small country. Some 70 million people live here and since it is a crossroads we have influences from many different cultures. In some ways Turkey is a European country, a Mediterranean country like Greece, Italy and Spain. In other ways it's a Middle Eastern country like Egypt. Although some Turkish people despise Arabic culture we actually share many things in common with Egypt. Our music is similar, our food is similar, even our mentality is similar in some senses. So Turkey is not like Chile or Ireland. In a country located in this part of the world with this history, social pluralism is inevitable. We need a political and legal framework to safeguard this pluralism. In this respect, we need secularism—not

Turkish-style secularism which is authoritarian, but democratic secularism—together with the rule of law and a free market economy. I emphasise the latter because markets do not recognise religious differences. Markets unite people.

The Kemalists say that if we decentralise the system, Turkey will disintegrate. [But] freedom does not lead to disintegration. Authoritarianism does. Just look at what happened in the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia.

SW: On the subject of pluralism and markets, what about the Kurdish question? Kurdish regions have been lagging behind. Do you think that things would improve with greater decentralisation and Kurdish autonomy, and if so, do you think the Kemalists would let this happen?

AY: This is something the Kemalists would not allow, but as a classical liberal I definitely believe in decentralisation. People should be able to take decisions that directly affect their lives. Theoretically, one might speak in support of federalism and respect for local authorities. Some of the problems in the Kurdish area stem from our unitary centralised system. Some groups in Ankara try to control everything. There is no competition in taxing. There is cultural suppression. The Kurdish people cannot establish their own cultural institutes. They cannot broadcast in their own language. There have been some so-called reforms but until now they are only on paper.

The Kemalists say that if we decentralise the system, Turkey will disintegrate. I don't think so, because freedom does not lead to disintegration. Authoritarianism does. Just look at what happened in the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. But the Kemalists do not understand this and they try to centralise everything. This is not good. You cannot solve local problems by centralisation and those at the centre do not have the right to take all decisions on behalf of the local people. The current

government recently tried to introduce a new law which would have decentralised the system, but it was strongly opposed by the Kemalists and their supporters. They argued that the government was trying to bring about the disintegration of Turkey under the guise of their bid for EU membership.

On joining the European Union

SW: Given that you think decentralisation would be beneficial for Turkey and that you consider the centralist, Kemalist ideology as a fundamental obstacle to progress and freedom in Turkey, does it make sense to join the European Union which is becoming more and more centralised?

AY: I support Turkey's bid for EU membership for political reasons. Some people are surprised by this because Turks normally support EU membership for economic reasons. They think that by joining the EU they will get rich overnight. It's not true of course. It can help but in the long run it is our own abilities and the opening up of our economy that will make us rich.

We are in such a bad position that by joining the EU things can only get better. Political problems are the biggest obstacle to a free market in Turkey. We need some outside pressure to bring about reform. The EU is one source of this pressure.

So my support is not for economic but political reasons. For example, until now we have not been able to control the military in terms of its budget. The EU pressed Turkey to adopt EU standards and one of these was that the military should be controlled by civilian politicians. So Turkey passed a law to this effect. It is one of the reasons why the establishment is not happy these days.

As a classical liberal it might seem strange to put the stress on politics and democracy, but by democracy in Turkey I also mean rule of law and freedom. If Turkey followed these universal values I would object to EU membership, but this is not the case.

I know that there are many problems in the EU, especially economically, that it is becoming more and more centralised, and that bureaucrats have more power than the representatives of the people. On behalf of harmonisation they are stifling local cultures. And the EU is protectionist. But we are in such a bad position that by joining the EU things can only get better. In economic terms, if we followed the free market fully, in 20 or 30 years we could overtake the EU, but we are not able to do this. Political problems are the biggest obstacle to a free market in Turkey. We need some outside pressure to bring about reform. The EU is one source of this pressure. If EU membership helps bring political reform, this should help us to develop a better economy.

SW: What do you think will happen if Turkey's EU membership bid is rejected, or keeps getting endlessly delayed?

AY: If the EU keeps delaying membership there might be very bad repercussions for Turkey. The Turkish government is obsessed with beginning negotiations for membership by the end of the year. There are two main camps in Turkey, one for and one against the EU, and those against are waiting to see what will happen. If we can get a date, things will be easier for the reformers. If we cannot get a date, the conservatives—the military and some political movements—will say, 'You see, those Europeans do not want to accept us as a member so Turkey should take a different way'. And what would this different way be? It would be an authoritarian way. I fear this. For those people like my organisation and myself who are recognised as supporters of EU membership, if we cannot get a date we might find ourselves in a very difficult position.