BIGOTRY IN TURKEY AND IN EUROPE

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Category: Opinions

Haroon Siddiqui, Ankara, thestar.com, 14 July 2011

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This is not another variation of the old Quebec separatist refrain about who was a true Quebecer — only the pure laine. This goes to the core of how, even whether, Turkey can move beyond multi-party elections and evolve into a liberal democracy in which all citizens are truly equal.
Turkey is an important emerging power, the only Muslim member of NATO, a model for many in the Arab Awakening, and a bridge between the West and the East.

Its $1 trillion market-driven economy is booming, recording a growth rate second only to China's. Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan has also succeeded in asserting civilian control over the shadowy "deep state," the unelected trinity of army, judiciary and bureaucracy that for decades dominated elected governments, even toppling them.

Turkey's next challenge is to end a century of discrimination against minorities, the largest being the separatist Kurds, nearly a fifth in a population of 75 million.

That would mean confronting the authoritarian political and social legacy of Kemal Ataturk, founder of the Turkish republic in 1923. That was a time of great chaos amid the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The 1915-16 genocide of Armenians had eliminated up to a million people. Post-World War I, the Allies plotted to divide the Ottoman Turkish heartland — a plan Ataturk thwarted. The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne sanctioned the deportation of 270,000 Christians to Greece and the acceptance of 130,000 Muslims from there.

The territorial integrity of the new republic was paramount. Non-Muslims — Armenians, Greek-Orthodox, Christian Arabs, Jews, etc. — were deemed fifth columnists. The new "Turk" was going to be a Turkish-speaking Muslim — a Sunni, at that, who subscribed to Hanafi theology (one of five schools of Islamic jurisprudence).

That formulation also excluded the Alevis (an offshoot of Shiite Islam), the Kurds (who were both Sunni and Alevis) and the Laz (an ancient people related to Georgians and living on the Black Sea).

All would be "Turkified."

This was ironic. The new secular order that had abolished the sultanate and the caliphate, switched the day of rest from Friday to Sunday, banned the hijab, and changed the Turkish script from Arabic to Latin, was resorting to a religious identity to define citizenship.

Yet the new state also wanted to control Islam. It ordered the new Sunni Muslim citizen to subscribe to laiklik, secularism. But unlike the French laicite, which separated state and religion, the Turkish model empowered the state to dictate all religious observances, including how to pray and dress.

All this Stalinesque social engineering also entailed a complete denial of what had been done to the Armenians. It led to genocides and pogroms against the Kurds, Alevis, Greeks, Jews, etc.

The tension between Islam and secularism that Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk so famously wrote about is but one slice of a larger complex picture.

The 2002 election of Erdogan's mildly religious Justice and Development Party ended the political and social exclusion of the religiously conservative class. But the marginalization of others remains.

The Kurds want their ethnicity, language, culture and autonomy recognized (a nation within a united Turkey, if you will). They want to teach their kids in Kurdish (as Quebec has French language schools).

In the 1980s, the Kurds took to guerrilla warfare. More than 40,000 people were killed in the conflict. Kurdish leader Abdullah Ocalan was captured in 1999. From jail he has renounced terrorism and separatism and wants to negotiate.

Now that Erdogan has won a third straight majority, expectations are high that he would launch a rapprochement. That would mean taking on the Kemalists who have long viewed concessions to the Kurds as a slippery slope to dismemberment of the nation, and any nod to multicultural equality as a threat to the false security of forced homogeneity.

Turkey is at a new crossroads. So is Europe, especially those who oppose the entry of Turkey into the European Union. The task for the leaders in Turkey as well as Europe is to confront their respective bigots.

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