WHY IS IT SO EASY TO INSULT ATATÜRK?

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By Mustafa Akyol, Hürriyet, 22 December 2009

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Mr. Dündar is a renowned public intellectual. He writes a column for the daily Milliyet, an established center-left paper, and hosts a TV show on NTV, a centrist news channel. He is a secular democrat and is certainly among the admirers of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the godfather of Turkey's secularism. Several years ago Dündar had made a documentary about Atatürk named "Sarı Zeybek." All the Kemalists loved it, for it was a very emotional tribute to the Supreme Leader. The film was presented to students in schools across the country, and Dündar received praise from all over.

Those adorable fingers

Enthused by his previous success, Dündar decided to launch another Atatürk documentary two years ago. The Office of the Chief of General Staff, which welcomed the idea, opened its private archives exclusively to Dündar's service, and the latter worked meticulously to access little-known facts about the national hero. "I want to find the real Atatürk," he once said in an interview. "I want to show the human being there."

Ah, he should have known better. When he launched his documentary, "Mustafa," a year ago, he faced harsh criticism that he did not expect. Soon, one of the critics, Ali Berham Şahbudak, head of a Kemalist nongovernmental organization, took Mr. Dündar to court for "insulting Atatürk," a serious crime in Turkey. The documentary, Mr. Şahbudak argued, was "eroding the respectability of Atatürk, thus weakening national values, and therefore opening the way to Turkey's destruction."

The court first dismissed the charges. But then a higher court, the one in Sincan, Ankara, intervened and opened the way for Dündar's trial. Now, Mr. Dündar is likely to be tried, and his penalty could be as harsh as seven years in prison.

But what in the world is it in this film that is so "insulting"?

Well, we got the answer from the "expert witness" the prosecutors called to the stand: Professor Ahmet Mumcu of Başkent Law Faculty, another passionate Kemalist. He soon submitted a report about the film to court, which is a must-read.

Let me give you at least a few highlights:

- Dündar's film mentioned an affair the young Kemal had with a certain Madame Corinna, and said,

"Mustafa spent that night in her arms." This was, according to Mumcu, a cherry-picked note to show the Supreme Leader as an immoral person.

- Dündar's film mentioned that the young Kemal "got to know women and alcohol in his war academy years." Professor Mumcu finds this offensive, too. "Why are these themes mentioned," he asks in his report, "and not Atatürk's love for books and his brilliant skills in French?"

- The film noted that the young Kemal felt "alone and melancholic" in his days in Sofia, where he went as a military attaché on the eve of the Great War. "How could such a huge charisma feel alone," Professor Mumcu objects, and finds yet another insult to the Supreme Leader.

- The film also said, "Mustafa could not sleep in the dark." This, as you can guess, is another offence according to Professor Mumcu. "With this," he writes, "Atatürk is depicted as a cowardly commander."

There are many other details of the film, which are just facts about Atatürk's life, that Professor Mumcu considers as insults in his report. I will give you just one more of his points, which is a real gem. He writes:

"In the scene in which Atatürk's handwriting was animated, the hand that held the pen had no resemblance to Atatürk's. He had long and elegant hands, but the fingers in the scene are thick and short."

Really… I am not kidding, exaggerating or mistranslating … Our official expert witness, in all seriousness, believes that Atatürk is insulted because those lovely fingers of him were not adequately represented in front of the camera.

Bordering on insanity

If you are a foreigner, you might find all this hard to believe. But for us Turks, this is business as usual. It is just a part of our national insanity.

We all grow up by taking oaths of allegiance to the persona of Atatürk. We all start every school week by thanking the Supreme Leader for "giving us this day." In classes, we are taught that every single thing he did was absolutely right. Our sole mission, we are told, is to fight for his goals and against his "internal and external enemies." We visit Atatürk's shrine in drones, and ask for his help and guidance. "Let us go into that grave," some of us even recite the famous poem, "and you, Father, please get up !"

We, in other words, live in one of the world's last remaining regimes based on a cult of personality. It is outdone only by North Korea.

Here lies the answer to the question in my headline. It is so easy to "insult" Atatürk, because we have turned him into a supra-human figure with a spotless beauty, wisdom and virtue. (And don't forget his adorable fingers.)

To "insult" him, therefore, all you need to do is to show the real, human Atatürk, who was a great man with a great many failings and mistakes.