

Turkey's Secularism Challenged (1)

By YAMAUCHI Masayuki

A historically popular Muslim proverb, likening Islam to the structure of a tent, reads: "The tent is Islam, the pole is its supreme religious leader, and the ropes and pegs are the people--and all are interdependent."

However, following its defeat in World War I, Turkey dissolved the Ottoman Empire and became the first Islamic nation to establish a secular republic. The concept of a separation between state and religion did not exist before in the Islamic community, which was founded by the Prophet Mohammed as a religious state. Allah's revelations--received by the prophets--were set forth not only as faithful Islamic teachings, but also the law of God (Sharia).

In the Christendom, the people followed Jesus' command: "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." This kind of thinking has never existed in the history of Islam. In Turkey, nonetheless, the founder of the modern Turkish republic, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, easily ousted the monarch of the Ottoman Empire, who had consolidated both political power as a sultan and religious authority as a caliph. The first president of the republic capitalized on his charismatic clout in the wake of his success in preventing the country being partitioned by Western colonial powers.

< Secular army's interference >

Ever since, the supreme Muslim religious authority--which used to bind Sunni followers together, regardless of nationality--has gone, blurring the relationship between religion and state even in independent Arab countries. In the Arab world, each country's stance differs from secularism-oriented Turkey, by providing a special constitutional privilege to Islam while stopping short of officially endorsing it as the state religion.

In this connection, what happened in the Turkish mejlis (parliament) in May manifested, quite by chance, the risks involved in separating state and religion, and how secularism is not necessarily compatible with the spirit of democracy. In other words, the recent developments in Turkey exposed contradictory aspects of secularism--the separation of Islam and state through the so-called Ataturk Reforms.

Ahead of a presidential election in the parliament, the Islamic-based ruling Justice and

Development (AK) Party fielded Turkish Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul as a presidential candidate. However, he was not nominated by the mejlis even though the AK Party holds the majority. Why? The Turkish Armed Forces and the secular political group, the Republican People's Party (CHP), boycotted the election, accusing the AK Party of being an Islamic-oriented group.

Subsequently, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan decided not only to dissolve the unicameral parliament and call new general elections in July, but also amend the Turkish Constitution to hold a popular vote to elect the country's president.

If the CHP--which has inherited Ataturk's mantle--had opposed the AK Party's candidate alone, the matter would have been a mere parliamentary confrontation involving political parties. However, things got complicated when the military moved against the AK Party in a bid to protect secularism.

The Turkish presidency, though titular in function, has the right to appoint the chief of general staff of the Turkish Armed Forces. The post has traditionally been assumed by secular military leaders or lawyers. On this occasion, however, the military became wary of the possibility of AK Party members taking the reins of the presidency, in addition to the posts of prime minister and parliamentary speaker. (Continued)

(This is the text of an article by Mr. YAMAUCHI Masayuki, Professor of Tokyo University, which was originally posted in "Daily Yomiuri" on June 10, 2007.)