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Turkey: Recalling secularism after 93 years

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Currently going through one of its most traumatic years in 2016, the Turkish Republic celebrates its 93rd anniversary on Oct. 29 embroiled in a number of problems.

The coup attempt on July 15 was the main source of trauma. At a time when many people thought military coups – three of which took place in the Republican era, all during the Cold War in 1960, 1971 and 1980 - were over in Turkey, a junta within the army attempted an incredible move to overthrow the government and seize parliament. Unlike previous coups, this one was not conspired by those claiming that Turkey has diverted from its Kemalist path. On the contrary, both the government and the opposition accuse Fethullah Gülen, an Islamist preacher living in the U.S., and his network in the Turkish system of being behind the coup attempt.

Underlining that Gülen was also tolerated by governments before the ruling Justice and Development Party (AK Parti), President Tayyip Erdoğan has admitted that he was “wrong” to trust Gülen purely out of religious sympathy. It is indeed a fact that the Gülenists have been infiltrating the Turkish bureaucracy, including the military, the police and the judiciary for nearly four decades. But it is also a fact that they secured all of their key positions during the rule of the AK Parti.

Since the coup attempt, one of the biggest political cleansing campaigns in Turkish history has

been ongoing in the bureaucracy and the judiciary, which has naturally become the source of many complaints.

Now, in the atmosphere of the ongoing state of emergency, Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım is pushing the AK Parti and other parties in parliament to hold a referendum on shifting Turkey from a parliamentary system to an executive presidential system, in line with the targets of President Erdoğan. Erdoğan has never hidden that he is not in favor of parliamentary and judicial checks and balances over the elected executive, and the desired system change is likely to continue to be a major debate in the Turkish Republic's 93rd year.

But there is something else going on too. A quiet debate has started within the AK Parti following the July 15 coup attempt. The outrage caused by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) has irritated most Muslims in Turkey, and now they are further embittered by the actions of the Gülen network, which also acted in the name of Islam. Now, it is not only the parties with secular roots - like the social democratic main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), and the Kurdish problem-focused Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) – but also certain opinion-holders within the AK Parti who have started to value the secular system of Turkey more.

One year before the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk pushed for the parliament in Ankara to abolish the Caliphate. He later announced that the state and religious affairs were officially separated. Today, Turkey is the only country with a predominantly Muslim population that also has a multi-party, secular democracy. Extremist movements like al-Qaeda and ISIL have been greeted coldly by many Muslims in the world, particularly in Turkey. And now those in Turkey also have the Gülen movement to consider when it comes to mixing religion and politics.

It is true that the implementation of secularism in Turkey in the past sometimes went to extremes, putting extra pressure on pious Muslims. But it is also clear that the secular nature of Turkish democracy, perhaps with certain modifications, should be maintained. It needs that in order not to lose the country's Western-oriented political and economic perspective, which might ultimately help Turkey return to being seen as an example for other Muslim-majority countries.