

Divisive forces threaten Turkey's secularist legacy

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FROM the walls of every public office, bank and shop and many private homes in Turkey, the stern figure of Turkish military hero and nationalist leader Mustafa Kemal stares down at you.

On city squares, statues of Ataturk (Father of the Turks, as he is known here) dominate, and even in the countryside his name and slogans are spelled out on hillsides in white-painted stones for every traveller to see.

The greatest achievement of Ataturk, who died in 1938, was to replace the remnants of the Ottoman Empire with a republic ruled by a dictator - himself - who led his nation to turn its back on Islam and the East and embrace Western secularism and values.

Kemalism, still a strong ideological force in guiding Turkey toward reform and Western values, is now under fire from Islamists seeking to turn the Turkish nation back toward the East and from Kurds fighting for cultural and political autonomy.

The national identity that Ataturk forced upon the sultanate turned republic is crumbling.

"Turkey is suffering from an identity crisis, with three conflicting trends: Kemalists, Islamists and the Kurds," says Sami Kohen, a veteran analyst and a senior editor of the Milliyet newspaper.

All three forces will be pitted against each other on Sunday when Turkey goes to the polls in a premature election caused by the collapse of the conservative government of Tansu Ciller.

Ms. Ciller's most important achievement heading into the election was to twist the arms of the members of the European Union into signing a customs union with her country, mainly by asserting that Turkey's Islamists would profit from any economic downturn caused by a rejection. She is now optimistically promising voters that this is the first step toward Turkey being admitted as a full member of the EU.

Ironically, the Turkish government's determined campaign for membership in the European club is expected to further weaken many sectors of a sick economy, in the short term at least, as protection against foreign imports comes to an abrupt end on Jan. 1 after 70 years.

One should not seek merely an economic rationale behind Turkey's quest for EU membership. There is also a significant factor of prestige, Mr. Kohen notes.

Turkish Islamists, nurtured by the failure of nationalist promises of economic and social progress, are now asserting the superiority of Islamic values over those of the West.

The pro-Islamic Welfare Party (Refah), which until the release of an opinion poll yesterday was thought to have been heading for an election victory, is campaigning for an Islamic economic union and advocating the rejection of Westernism, which party leader Necmettin Erbakan says is the cause of moral corruption in Turkish society.

And for the first time, an openly pro-Kurdish party, The People's Democracy Party, is participating in the elections. Even a year ago the idea would have been scoffed at and party activists summarily thrown in jail - or worse.

With Turkey's sizable Kurdish minority (10 to 12 million out of a population of about 60 million) still brutally oppressed in its main stronghold of southeastern Turkey, more and more Turks, although not the establishment parties, are coming to recognize that progress toward true democratization and economic progress cannot take place while the army is fighting a "dirty war." The campaign against the separatist Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) is thought to have cost the lives of more than 18,000 people since 1984.

There remains a big step between permitting a pro-Kurdish party and granting Kurds any form of autonomy, even cultural. The appearance of moderation is rather to be seen as a calculated move to divert Kurdish voters from supporting the Welfare Party, partly out of protest and partly because Refah promises to create a non-nationalist Turkey where Kurds will finally be able to express their identity.

Refah is not expected to be allowed to form a government, even if it should emerge as the largest party after the election.

And the Kemalist establishment's lenient attitude toward pro-Kurdish political activity may evaporate as suddenly as it appeared. But the myth of Ataturk's national identity has been shaken beyond repair.