

The Ottoman Constitution of 1908 and its Impact on the Movement of Nationalism and Independence of India

Naseem Ahmad Shah*

Introduction and Background of Ottoman Constitutional Reforms:

The first examples in Islamic lands of the use of the term freedom in a clearly defined political sense come from the Ottoman Empire in the 18th and early 19th centuries¹. Such ideas find official expression in the first of the great Ottoman Reform Edicts – the Rescript of the Rose Chamber (*Gulkhane*) of 1839, which recognizes and seeks to establish the rights of the masses to security of life, honour, property and to government under law².

The intensification of western influence during and after the Crimean War on the one hand and the growing internal political and economic pressures on the other, both helped to bring a revival of libertarian thought and activities in the Turkey of 1860s. The press provided a platform of a kind previously unknown. The first privately owned newspaper produced by a Turk, the *Tarjuman-i-Ahval*, began publication in 1860 and was followed in 1862, by a better-known *Tasvir-i-Efkar*. The poet and journalist Ibrahim Shinasi, in his introductory editorials to the first issues of both newspapers, laid great stress on the importance of freedom of expression.

The radical implications of these words – the replacement of justice by freedom as the anti-thesis of tyranny and the suggestion of a constitutional restriction of the sovereign's powers – were developed and made clear in the late sixties and seventies

* Professor and Director, Shah-i-Hamadan Institute of Islamic Studies,
University of Kashmir, Srinagar.

by the group of liberal patriots known as the Young (strictly "new") Ottomans.

This is what is conveyed by the silent statue in front of the Central gate at Ankara. She conveys: *when you look upon this fascinating display of human progress (in Turkey), do not forget that all those perfections are the work of freedom. It is under the protection of freedom that peoples and nations attain happiness. Without freedom there can be no security; without security, no endeavour; without endeavour, no prosperity; without prosperity, no happiness!*³

During the last decades of Ottoman Empire three different unifying ideologies competed for the loyalty of Ottoman subjects. They may be designated as the Islamic, the Ottoman and the Turkish principles of identity⁴. Islam was the traditional basis of the Ottoman state as of virtually all other states in the classical Islamic world. It provided the principles of authority, identity and of political and social cohesion and loyalty. The polity was conceived as the community of Muslims, its head as the successor of Sultans and Caliphs of the glorious past and as the holder of Islamic sovereignty dedicated to the maintenance of Islam and the extension of its domain⁵. Ottomanism was to embrace all ottoman subjects irrespective of religion or of ethnic origin in a single Ottoman nation inhabiting the Ottoman fatherland was a Chimera⁶.

Even during the Turkish War of Independence (1919-22), the Islamic component in Turkish identity was still very strong and many fighters (Kemal's supporters) certainly saw themselves as fighting for Islam against the unbeliever rather than for Turkey against the foreigners⁷.

The growth of autocracy in Turkey, on the eve of Constitutional Revolution, did not go unnoticed and in the Europe of mid-19th century there was no lack of ideologies of revolt. Islam was no longer insulated. France, England and

Germany were an inspiration to Turkey also. The mounting economic difficulties of the country, the replacement of the easy going Sultan Abdul Majid by more despotic Abdul Aziz, and the growing power of the central government and bureaucracy, brought matters to a head, and during the 1860's a new phase began in which the argument was no longer whether to accept or reject the Westernising Reforms, but whether — and how — to limit the autocratic power of the State⁹.

Turkey's long period of decline, with its incessant wars, had steadily impoverished her treasury. The Treaty of Carlowitz had deprived her of her richest European provinces and a succession of defeats and humiliating treaties had continued the process. In the nineteenth century recourse was had to foreign loans, in exchange for which various items of State revenue were mortgaged. By 1881, the ottoman Public debt amounted to well over 100 million gold pounds, and foreign banks were drawing the revenues of the salt and tobacco monopolies, stamp duties, fisheries, customs and fixed annual sums representing the tribute of eastern Rumelia, Bulgaria and Cyprus⁹.

Thus the Ottoman exclusivism won only limited support among Ottoman Muslims and less among the Christian peoples of the empire. It was undermined both by the traditional Islamic supermacism of the rulers of the Empire and at the same time by the growing nationalism of the subject peoples and the roles of the last Sultans in cooperating with the victorious allies and opposing the nationalists discredited the monarchy¹⁰.

The years of defeat, surrender and occupation, the conduct of the Sultans government, the rift with the Arab subjects of the Empire, the indifference of the Muslim world to Turkey's fate — all combined to bring about radical changes to Turks' perception of themselves and of their place in the world. Ottomanism was dead; Islam gravely weakened. The change of Turks' perception raised new questions and evolved new answers.

The problem of how to save the Empire from collapse or overthrow was old and familiar, even when the formulations and the solutions propounded bore a sociological aspect. In discussing it, however, the writers and thinkers of this time found themselves face to face with a new and radical question, barely considered in earlier times; what was the nature of this entity that was to be saved? Official spokesmen and others continued to speak piously of 'the union of elements' – the common Ottoman citizenship that was to unite all the Sultan's subjects, irrespective of race, creed or language, in a single nationality and loyalty. Already during the Hamidian period, there were some among the Young Turks with sufficient perception – and sufficient frankness – to reject Ottomanism as an impossible fantasy. Their judgment was amply confirmed by the conduct both of the Turks and of their subjects during the years following the Revolution. What existed was not a nation but a domination, the hegemony of the conquerors of an empire over the peoples they had conquered.

The question of whether the Muslim community or the Turkish nation was to be the basis of identity and focus of loyalty was one of the most hotly debated of the time. Much would depend on the answer – the social and cultural policies of the state, its international friendships and alignments, even, it might be, its territorial limits.

Linked with this question of corporate political identity were the deeper and vaster problems of civilization. To what civilization did the Turks belong – and in what civilization did their future lie?

In the early years of twentieth century revolutionary societies multiplied inside the Empire and by 1908, however, the underground stream of revolt was running so high that the Sultan could no longer rely on the repressive activity of his secret police.

On 24th July, the Sultan's astonished subjects looked at their newspapers, to see words which had been proscribed for

years: such words as 'freedom', 'nation', 'fatherland' and 'chamber of deputies', which formerly would have meant the ruin of any editor rash enough to print them... The description of unprecedented demonstrations of popular joy are too enormously portrayed to make a mention of¹¹.

Ahmad Emin, an eyewitness of the celebrations, describes the reactions as follows:

The effect was amazing. The sleeping city became at once ablaze with excitement and enthusiasm. The streets where people did not usually even feel free to walk fast, lest they attract the attention of spies, were filled with noisy crowds, listening joyfully to the revolutionists' speeches, or making demonstrations in front of public buildings, newspaper offices and foreign embassies... People belonging to different races and creeds that had always avoided friendly intercourse, took delight in fraternizing with one another. Blame for the unconciliatory attitude they formerly showed was ascribed to the policy of the old government. "*We loved each other, but the despotic government did not let us become aware of it*", were words to be heard in every part of the city, on that first day of enthusiasm¹²...

The Constitutional Revolution was the ultimate answer to these questions¹³.

The new phase of reform was opened not only by government enactments by literary manifestoes. The literary movements of Young Ottomans and Young Turks represent the intellectual background of the Second Constitutional period. Liberalism and Islam are related to these movements from the point of view of intellectual heritage. Indeed, the practical cooperation of Islamists and Liberals with Young Turks at the beginning of the Second Constitutional period makes examining the Young Turk Movement especially necessary. The thoughts of the Young Ottomans and the Young Turks are crucial in order to understand and examine "Second Constitutional Revolution", for it is relevant to keep in mind that the first leaders of Young

Turkey were not only politicians but poets and writers¹⁴. The Young Turks outside the Ottoman borders published 95 Turkish, 8 Arabic, 12 French and 1 Hebrew newspapers. The pioneers of this literary trend were Ibrahim Sinasi (1826-71), Ziya Pasha (1825-80) and Namik Kemal (1840-88). These ideologues, though with slightly different outlooks¹⁵ advocated many of the ideas that had become prominent during the European Enlightenment, such as liberty, justice and patriotism¹⁶. The Constitutionalist believed that a parliamentary system and a popular participation in government decisions would strengthen the unity of the land. They also believed that the multi-religious Ottoman state could be turned into a cohesive political unit if the population were properly informed about the advantages of Ottomanism¹⁷. Namik Kemal and other Young Ottoman ideologues propounded that the Constitutionalism, representation and *mushwara* (consultation) are primarily the essential principles of Islamic ideology itself¹⁸. Namik Kemal introduced two new concepts in Islamic political thought by contributing the words *Vatan* (Fatherland) and *Hurriyet* (Freedom).

Namik Kemal declared that only a constitutional regime could restore the former strength and prestige of the Ottoman Empire¹⁹. To him, a constitutional regime was not only necessary to assure a fair administration for Ottoman subjects, to undo the Russian assertions of the pretexts to protect the Sultan's Christian subjects but it would also convince Europe about the fairness of the Ottoman administration²⁰.

This would win for Turkey the respect of the West — always an important point with the Young Turks — and open the way to the political, social and economic reforms that the country needed.

Namik Kemal's patriotism was concretized in Pan-Ottomanism and his loyalty to the Islamic heritage. For him, the concept of fatherland was not limited to the Ottoman lands but

encompassed all Islamic realms, which were united by the memory of a common and brilliant past. Namik Kemal's vision of a fatherland was influenced by nostalgia and romanticism. Nevertheless, despite his strong emphasis on Islam as the basis of his patriotism, Namik Kemal did not exclude non-Muslim elements of the Empire from his construction of the fatherland. He was strongly committed to the feasibility of a pan-Ottoman union, which would include the Empire's non-Muslim communities. In Namik Kemal's opinion the different religions, languages, and races existing in the Ottoman Empire did not form an obstacle to the formation of an Ottoman nation²¹. He concluded that a proper education would be the key to reducing cultural differences among diverse elements of the Empire. This policy would include a uniform syllabus, which would instill patriotism in the minds of the new generation.

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It was the policy which seemed natural and at first dominated the society for Union and progress. This Ottomanism envisaged a modernized Ottoman empire, so well equipped with liberal institutions that the conflicting religious and racial groups among the Sultan's subjects would be happy to belong to it²³.

All these hopes and presumptions of Ottomanists perished forever in the Balkan wars of 1912-13, in which Turkey lost the Aegean islands and all her European possessions, except part of Thrace²⁴. It soon became apparent that the Turks and non-Turks, who had congratulated one another on the proclamation of Constitution, had no more in common than joy at the downfall of Abdul Hamid's tyranny. Their ideas about what was to succeed it

were very different²⁵. Nor were the nations of Europe happy and sincere on the fact that Turkey was on the road to recovery. The immediate reaction to Ottoman recovery was that Austria promptly annexed Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Bulgars proclaimed their independence.

In 1910 there were revolts in Yemen and in Albania. In 1911 Italy invaded Tripolitania, and in the following year Greece annexed Crete. At this stage unfortunately there did not seem any unity of purpose among the Turks themselves. As pointed out earlier three distinct creeds vied for supremacy amongst them: Ottomanism, pan-Islamism and pan-Turkism²⁶.

After the Young Turk revolution of 1908 the establishment, for a while, of effective freedom of thought and expression initiated a period of vigorous debate, in which the problem of freedom, with others was examined, analyzed and discussed from many points of view; political, social, economic and religious freedom all found their exponents and defenders. But as the bonds of autocracy and censorship were bound tighter by the Young Turks, the debate dwindled into insignificance.

Thus the Constitutional Revolution of 1908 opened the way for a new identity and loyalty based not on community and empire but on nation and country. The revolution produced its effects with a slow speed. It affected the Turkish attitudes. Very soon the Turkish Republic became triumphant. The Greek hand was seen no more in the bureaucracy and administration, the allied powers; the former victors over the Ottoman Empire were divided, in disarray and unable to offer any effective resistance to Turkish recovery. The Russian empire was rent by revolution and Civil War, and far from constituting a threat, seemed instead to offer a tempting opportunity.

The most momentous post-Constitutional Revolution scenario in Turkey was the denouncing the fruitless adventurism. The Republic set to direct its energies and those of its people to the

difficult and unglamorous task of development at home. In his speech of 1st December, 1921, Father of the Republic defined the attitudes of Modern Turkey in these words which seem crucially relevant even today:

Every one of our compatriots and co-religionists may nourish a high deal in his mind; he is free to do so, and no one will interfere. The government of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey has a firm, positive, material policy, and that, gentlemen, is directed to the preservation of life and independence... within defined national frontiers. The Grand National Assembly and government of Turkey, in the name of the nation they represent, are very modest, very far from fantasies, and completely realistic... Gentlemen, we are not men who run after great fantasies and present a fraudulent appearance of doing things which in fact we cannot do. Gentlemen, by looking as though we were doing great and fantastic things, without actually doing them, we have brought the hatred, rancor, and malice of the whole world on this country and this people. We did not serve pan-Islamism. We said that we had and we would, but we didn't, and our enemies said: 'let us kill them at once before they do!' We did not serve pan-Turanianism. We said that we could and we would, and again they said: 'let us kill them!' There you have the whole problem.... Rather than run after ideas which we did not and could not realize and thus increase the number of our enemies and the pressure upon us, let us return to our natural, legitimate limits. And let us know our limits. Gentlemen, we are a nation desiring life and independence. For that and that alone may we give our lives.

The Turkish Impact on the Movement of Indian Nationalism and Independence:

Constitutional Reforms of Ottoman Turkey exercised profound impact on the existing political scenario of India. Turkey also felt a big sounding support for its struggle for Reform and democracy from Indian masses as well as political elite because the existence of Turkey as a symbol of Islamic civilization was of a

crucial importance for the contemporary Muslim world. The Turkish Parliamentary democracy and the Constitution of 1908 was looked at as milestone of statecraft, governance and popular politics by the champions of freedom struggle in India. First a *strong Turkey as the centre of Caliphate and later a sovereign Turkey with its stable political Institutions of democracy and religious freedom* was the slogan of Indians throughout the Constitutional period²⁷.

The Muslims of Indian subcontinent have, as a civilizational obligation, always stood firm in their support for Turkey whether it was Turkey's struggle against the colonial powers, or their endeavour to establish the Constitutional Reforms within their own country. The eco of the political developments in Turkey, as the centre of Muslim civilization, was directly felt in India since both the nations were fighting the war, the former for Reforms and Defence and the later for independence²⁸.

The Indian masses have never been as much affected by any part of the Muslim world as they have been by the events and developments in Turkey. The diplomatic and moral support of Indians to the struggle for sovereignty and Constitutional movement of Turkey is demonstrated not only before and during the Turkey's Constitutional struggle but even in the days following the Constitutional Revolution of Turkey. In this process the Indian means have always made supreme sacrifices of life and property. It was out of the sincere concern, love and belongingness for the later that more than five lakh soldiers and an equal number of non-combatants from India fought in favour of Turkey alongside the Britishers. But on coming across the real face of Allies the whole Indian population was outraged against the British Empire.

Earlier too in 1897 on the eve of Greek invasion of Turkey a very popular fund raising movement in support of Turkey was raised in India and the hearts of Indian masses were brimming

with support for Ottoman Empire on the occasion of Balkan War in 1912. The famous seminary Darul-Uloom of Deoband was closed for some time and its Rector Shaikh al-Hind Maulana Mehmud al-Hassan headed the teams of students to raise the funds for war torn brothers in Turkey. Maulana M. Ali in his *Comrade* and Hamdard Abul Kalam Azad in *Al-Hilal* and Zafar Ali Khan in his *Zamindar* along with all leaders of Indian National Movement launched a crusade to popularize "Turkish Relief Fund". Maulana M. Ali dispatched a medical mission to Turkey under the leadership of Dr. Mukhtar A. Ansari that helped the Turkish soldiers on the battlefield in Tripoli in 1911.

The emotions of Indian people in favour of Ottoman Empire could be viewed by the fact that once the said medical mission was being seen off on Lucknow Railway Station, the famous scholar and leader Allama Shibli kissed the shoes of team leader, Dr. Ansari. Other Ghazis in the mission included Chowdery Khaleeq al-Zaman, Ab. Rehman Siddiqui and Shoaib Qurashi. Allama Shibli wrote a famous poem of tribute on the successful achievements of this mission on their return²⁹.

In June, 1912, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad started *Al-Hilal*. Maulana M. Ali Jauhar initiated weekly *Comrade* and *Hamdard* and Maulana Zafar Ali Khan started *Zamindar*. The Balkan War was a strong motivation for Indian Nationalist leaders to mobilize the opinion of Indian people in favour of Turkey and it is in this direction that a host of newspapers were launched³⁰.

The Tripoli and Balkan Wars of 1911-12 infused a new revolutionary spirit among the Muslims with Maulana Muhammad Ali and Showkat Ali at the top. The Italian moral support to the Balkan States was an indirect effort of the Christian States for the extinction of Islam. Winston Churchill, the then Cabinet Minister of the British, supported Balkan States and justified Italy's attack on Turks. The harrowing accounts of Christian barbarity in Tripoli and Balkan States pained the

Muslims of India. Their sentiments were roused and there were some Christian-Muslim riots in Calcutta.

Maulana M. Ali (1878-1931) and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad (1888-1958) started their papers, *The Comrade* and *Al-Balagh*, as a natural corollary to the growing strained relations of Muslim world and British that was manifest by the British repressive policies in Turkey. Indiscriminate slaughter of Muslims in Tripoli and Balkans was the subject very much talked of in Muslim circles. As a result, in place of Red Cross, Red Crescent was introduced in every city of India³¹.

Immediately after the declaration of war by Turkey in November, 1914, Maulana M. Ali wrote a fierce editorial, "*Choice of the Turks*", in his "*Comrade*" in reply of an article that had appeared in *London Times*. M. Ali had vehemently favoured and appreciated the Turkish choice to go against the Allies. The result was that M. Ali was imprisoned along with his brother Showkat Ahmad and the whole country was in a mayhem against the arrest. Apart from protests in all cities of India one and a half lac telegrams were dispatched to the British Viceroy to cancel the arrest³².

As a result of the atrocities of the Allies on Turkish population Maulana Muhammad Ali (on 18th July, 1921) declared in one of his famous speeches to serve (*Haram*). The great general leaders like Saif ud-Din Kuchloo, Showkat Ali, Hussain Ahmad Madani, Jagat Guru, Swami Shankar Acharya, Peer Ghulam Muhammad and Maulana Nisar Ahmad too seconded the proposition. As a result Muhammad Ali and Mahatma Gandhi were arrested³³. Swami Shankaracharya and other leaders were sentenced to one and two years imprisonment respectively. It was in support of the Turkish cause that Mahatma Gandhi boycotted the British commodities especially the dress and continued to live as a half-naked (*Darwesh*). Addressing the Meerut Khilafat Conference on 22 March, 1920 Mahatma Gandhi announced, "*If the ottoman territories are divided against the wish of Turks, the whole India will launch a non-*

cooperation movement against the British. Imperial titles will be returned, official positions resigned, police and military services shall be shunned and no taxes will be paid. Hakim Ajmal Khan was the first to take the lead to return the British Gold Medals of *Qaisir-i-Hind* and *Haziq al-Mulk*. Mahatma Gandhi too returned all official titles and medals to the British Viceroy. Shah Badr al-Din Phulwari returned the title of *Shams al-Ulama*. Shah Sulaiman and Nur al-Hasan resigned from the post of Magistrate and Council membership, respectively. Dr. Rajendra Prasad gave up his legal practice in protest and Jai Prakash Narainan left his studies. In support of Turkey total strikes were observed in all major cities of the country like Delhi, Calcutta, Lahore, Bombay, Lucknow, Bijnor, Mirzapur, Janpur, Kanpur and Banaras and massive demonstrations were held³⁴. Maulana Mehmud al-Hasan Sheikh al-Hind and his associates Maulana Hussain Ahmad Madani, Maulana Uzair Gul, Hakim Nusrat Hussain and Moulvi Waheed Ahmad were deported to the Mediterranean Island of Malta in 1917 where they remained till 1920.

On 14 October, 1921, Swami Vishwanand appealed to the masses to raise funds for the Ankara victims and in the same congregation Baba Nursing Das put off his clothes and vowed that he will not wear the clothes unless he collects Rs 10,000 for Ankara Relief Fund³⁵.

At the time of the proclamation of the Republic, in 1923, several decades had already gone by since the beginning of the secularization process in Turkey. In their anxiety to transform the country into a modern power, able to compete with the great nations of Europe and the New world, the Ottoman Reformers had, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, judged it necessary to take certain liberties with the institutions. This movement enjoyed, both inside and outside the country, considerable prestige. Through their determination Turkey got engaged in its march on the path of continued progress and prosperity.

The love of Indians for Mustafa Kamal Ataturk and the Turkish nation is historic and the name of Turkish patriots

continued to remain on the lips of every Indian young and old.
The following Punjabi verses substantiates this view:

Gazi Mustafa pasha kamal we teryeyan Dur

Balayan deren Hind Yannu An Jamal we

Kahanu Deryan Nein Laya

(Gazi Mustafa May all Your Suffering End for ever, Come
and Show us Your Beautiful Face, Why You Made Us Wait
for so Long)

References and End Notes

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- ² *Ibid.*, p. 327.
- ³ Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, Oxford, 1968, p. 129.
- ⁴ Bernard Lewis, *Islam in History: Ideas, People and Events in the Middle East*, *op. cit.*, p. 223
- ⁵ *Ibid*
- ⁶ Bernard Lewis, *Islam in History: Ideas, People and Events in the Middle East*, *op. cit.*, pp. 224-25
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 224.
- ⁸ Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, *op. cit.*, pp. 134-35.
- ⁹ Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, *op. cit.*, pp. 42-43.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 225.
- ¹¹ Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, *op. cit.*, p. 44.
- ¹² Hassan Kayali, *Arabs and Young Turks, Ottomanism, Arabism and Islamism in the Ottoman Empire, 1908-1918*, University of California Press, 1997, p. 52.
- ¹³ Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, *op. cit.*, p. 226.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 135.
- ¹⁵ One striking divergence between these ideologues was the case of Ziya Pasha who, despite his conviction regarding the necessity of establishing a Constitutional government in the Ottoman Empire, stressed preservation of the imperial privileges of the Sultan. (Mardin, *The Genesis*, pp. 340-44)
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- ¹⁷ Kemal Karpat, *The Politicization of Islam: Reconstructing Identity, State, Faith and Community in the Late Ottoman State*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001, p. 316.
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- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 237
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- ²² Kemal Karpat, *op. cit.*, p. 316.
- ²³ Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, *op. cit.*, pp. 46-47.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 47.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 46.
- ²⁶ *Idem*
- ²⁷ Abu Salman, ed., *The Paygam*, Patna, 1921, p. 60.
- ²⁸ *Ibid*
- ²⁹ Mukhtar Ahmad Makki, *Tehreek-i-Azadi Aur Hindustani Musalman*, New Delhi, 2003, p. 110.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

³¹ Makki, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 112.

³³ Maulana Azad, *Vide Rashid ud-Din Khan*, p. 378.

³⁴ Makki, *op. cit.*, pp. 119-20.

³⁵ K. K. Datta, *History of Freedom Movement in Bihar*, Patna, 1968, p. 213.