

# Comparing notes with Turkey

By Edwin Madunagu

**T**URKEY is in the news again. Or, rather Turkey is again capturing world news headlines, since the country has been in the news – in the literal and metaphorical sense – since its re-creation in 1923. The current news is about a rather stiff struggle to defend the country's secular constitution. Secularity of the state is at the core of the Turkish Constitution. I think what is happening in that Euro-Asian country should be of interest to those Nigerians concerned with the arduous task of formulating – not solving! – The Nigerian question. But if we are not moved by the need to compare notes with Turkey, the history of that country – as it relates to world history – is of interest in itself. It is, in a sense, a fascinating story.

The internationally recognised boundary between the continents of Europe and Asia passes through Turkey. This means that Turkey is both in Europe and Asia. Although the larger segment of the country is in Asia most Turks, according to opinion polls, wish the country to be part of political Europe. And they themselves wish to be taken as Europeans. This aspiration has a sub-history of its own. Reputable world almanacs and encyclopedias report that 99.8 per cent of the population is Muslim – perhaps the highest percentage in the world. Yet the country is a secular state. With a land area of 780,580 square kilometres and a population of 71 million, Turkey shares borders with the Black Sea to the north; Georgia and Armenia to the northeast; Iran to the east; Iraq, Syria, the Mediterranean Sea to the south; Aegean Sea and Greece to the west; and Bulgaria to the northwest.

For anyone who is not preparing for any examination and yet has reasons to appreciate world history and the broad problems which humankind has encountered, a good starting-point might be the study of the history of modern Turkey. I am not suggesting that the “origin” of the world is in Turkey. Not by any means. If I am search-

ing for “origins” – which would be a useless exercise any way – I would stay in Africa, or go to China. It is purely for practical reasons that I recommend Turkey for non-academic self-education in the trajectories of human history. From Turkey you may then spread out in time and in space. The method worked for me long ago. It has recently worked again for me. And I think it might work for you.

I had one of my earliest contacts with Turkish history in my study of the Russian Revolution. The Union of Socialist Soviet Republics (USSR), or the Soviet Union, had been formed in 1922 with Russia as the largest constituent republic. After the death of the leader of that revolution, Vladimir Illych Lenin, in 1924, a bitter struggle for the leadership and direction of the socialist revolution broke out among his successors. The Stalin faction won the struggle, and liquidated the defeated. Leon Trotsky, the most prominent personage in the ranks of the defeated, initially got away with a relatively mild punishment: He was sent to Alma Ata on internal exile. Ala Ata (now Almaty) was the capital of the Soviet Republic of Kazakhstan. That was at the beginning of 1928.

Leon Trotsky spent a year in Alma Ata. When security reports indicated that he had continued with his anti-establishment politics, Stalin threw him out of the country. Turkey accepted to take him.

The question that arose for me was: Why Turkey? I did not and, perhaps, could not, pursue the question then. I continued with the narrative. That was in late 1970s. It was many years later that I was able to understand why Turkey was chosen, and why Turkey accepted. This took me directly beyond the Soviet Union and beyond Turkey – to World War I, to the Ottoman Empire, and to the Roman Empire. It was an endless expansion in all directions in space

and in both directions in time.

The rulers of America and Europe are very conscious of the importance of Turkey. In one of the editorial opinions in its issue of May 5, 2007, *The Economist* weekly newsmagazine wrote: “Turkey is big and strategically important country, has the largest army in NATO after America’s, offers a crucial energy route into Europe that avoids Russia and is the source of much of the water in the Middle East. If the negotiations underway for its entry into the European Union succeeds, it will be EU’s biggest country by population. But the reason that the world’s eyes are fixed on it this week is the possibility that the army might intervene to limit Islam’s role in government. For if Turkey cannot reconcile Islam and democracy, who can?”

The whole of modern Turkey was incorporated into the Roman Empire by the end of first century AD. Emperor Constantine founded the city of Constantinople and decreed it the eastern capital of the Empire in 330. Following the decline of the Western Roman Empire in the seventh century, “Constantinople became the capital of the independent Eastern (Byzantine) Empire”. Constantinople came under the control of Persia in the eleventh century. “At the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Ottomans, a small Turkish tribe, expanded from their stronghold in Western Anatolia, and within a century captured most of Turkey, Bulgaria, and Serbia. Constantinople itself fell to the Ottomans in 1453. By the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Ottoman Empire extended from southeast Europe into the Crimea and Iran and included most of the Middle East, Egypt and Arabia”.

In World War I (1914 – 1918), the Ottoman Empire, now in decline, sided with the central powers (Germany and Aus-

tria-Hungary, in the main) against the Entente powers (France, Russia and Britain).

The central powers lost the war, and the victors proceeded to dissolve the Ottoman Empire, restricting Turkey to a fraction of its modern size. Turkey became the successor to state to the Ottoman Empire. But before the treaty was signed in 1920, a Turkish rebel movement, which had been formed before the war, refused the settlement and initiated a struggle to regain part of the lost territories. They were supported by the Russian (Soviet) revolutionary state. This explains the Leon Trotsky connection.

A new treaty, which was signed in 1923, established the present Turkish boundaries. Turkey was proclaimed a secular, multi-ethnic, unitary, democratic republic in October 1923, with Ankara as the new capital. The leader of the rebellion (The Young Turks) – Kemal Mustapha Atatürk – became the first President of the republic. In 1930, Constantinople was officially renamed Istanbul, which is today the largest city in Turkey. The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire by the Entente powers was followed by the renunciation of Ottomans’ claim to spiritual leadership in the Islamic world.

The creation of the modern Turkish State entailed much violence – internally and externally: “Large numbers of Armenians had been killed or driven from the country in widespread campaigns of persecution in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries: after 1923, most Greek and Bulgarian residents were forcibly repatriated. The large minority of Kurds in southeastern Turkey were pressured to abandon their ethnic identity”. In 1974, Turkish forces invaded Cyprus and partitioned it. The island is still partitioned into Turkish and Greek sectors. And in 1999, Kurdish revolutionary nation-

alist leader, Abdallah Ocalan, was captured in Nairobi, blindfolded and brought back to Turkey – where he was sentenced to death by hanging. The sentence is yet to be carried out.

The current political crisis in Turkey was triggered in the attempt to elect a successor to the President whose tenure ended on May 16, 2007. The Turkish President, a largely ceremonial figure, is elected by Parliament for a seven-year tenure. In April, the ruling party nominated one of its leaders, the current Foreign Minister, to stand for election. Mass protests immediately erupted in major Turkish cities against the candidate. The public perception is that the man has a hidden religious agenda and that his public image and that of his family offend the secular character of the Turkish State. Opposition members of Parliament tried to prevent the election by boycotting parliamentary sittings.

The general staff of the Armed Forces then issued statement warning against threats to the secularity of the state. Then the Constitutional Court ruled that the parliamentary session that conducted the first ballot for the choice of president had no quorum, and consequently that the ballot was invalid. The Prime Minister responded to all these by first rebuking the Armed Forces which the law gives the responsibility of protecting the Turkish constitution, the unity of the country and the secularity of the state. He then called a general election for July. His party followed by proposing a review of the constitution which would allow the President of the Republic to be elected directly by the people, rather than by Parliament.

The question, for me, is not who is right, or what is right, in this struggle. The significant point for me is that the entire civil society and the main institutions of state are actively involved in the struggle – each detachment using the particular weapons which not only the law, but also history, have given to it. That is the lesson for us in Nigeria.

**R**EADING the Constitution of the Republic of Turkey is, indeed, pleasurable. The document is - on the surface or at first reading - coherent, logical, systematic and ambiguous. In short, it is beautiful. Presented as an abstract essay, it would be described as brilliant. And the author would easily be voted not only a militant nationalist, but also a popular democrat. But, alas, apart from contradictions which are papered over in the Constitution, Turkish history and aspects of the country's current reality are not nearly as beautiful as the document that was intended to regulate them.

This issue should be of interest to us in Nigeria because if the truth must be told, Nigeria has no Constitution at present. Mercifully, a new draft constitution has recently been presented by the pro-National Conference Organisation (PRONACO). This will be taken up in future. In the meantime we lose nothing but may gain a lot - by examining the Turkish "example". We shall look at the pillars and core elements of the Turkish Constitution and note that contradictions. We shall also look at Turkish history and the current reality, and relate these to the Constitution. But it has to be stated, right from the start, that some aspects of the Constitution are admirable, and their defence equally so.

The most recent estimates put the population of Turkey at about 72.6 million. Ethnic Turks constitute the largest ethnic nationality. Minority nationalities include Kurds, Circassians, Roma, Arabs, Greeks, Armenians and Jews. Now, every citizen of the Turkish State is called a "Turk" and this is enshrined in the Constitution. The Turkish State holds up this definition as irreducible. But the minorities - especially the Kurds - while recognising this constitutional definition also emphasise the fact that they are distinct ethnic nationalities. This is the formal bone of contention between the Turkish State and the Kurds who constitute about 20 per cent of the population.

The Republic of Turkey is

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defined as a Parliamentary Representative Democracy. However, in spite of the ethnic heterogeneity of the population, the political system is not only unitary but also highly centralised. The Constitution is secular, by which is meant that there is a strict separation between state and religion, the fact that about 98 per cent of the population are recorded as adherents of one religion-Islam-notwithstanding. This is clearly admirable. The 550-member Parliament is unicameral, a provision that is consistent with the centralised and unitary nature of the Constitution. The existence of two Houses of Parliament (bicameral legislature) is often a recognition and reflection of a heterogeneous ethnic or national composition, or regional disparities. But under a unitary Turkish state such recognition is rendered useless in practice.

The President of the Republic, is elected by Parliament for a seven-year term. The functions are largely ceremonial, except in periods of political crisis. Executive power is vested in the Prime Minister and the Council of Ministers. Neither the Prime Minister nor the ministers need be a Member of Parliament. The Prime Minister is usually the leader of the party which commands a majority in Parliament. Election into Parliament is by proportional representation, but a political party must obtain at least 10 per cent of the popular vote to have representation. There is a provision for independent candidates, but the conditions for election are also stringent. On account of the principle and practice of proportional representation, only two of the more than 50 political parties - from the far left to the far right - that are active in Turkish politics are represented in the outgoing Parliament.

There is a clear separation of powers. Legislative power is vested in the unicameral Parliament called the Grand National Assembly of Turkey. Executive power is vested in the Prime Minister and the Council of Ministers. The Judiciary is

independent of both the Legislature and the Executive. There is a Constitutional Court, which is "charged with ruling on the conformity of laws and decrees with the Constitution." Beyond this, it is the Constitutional Court, and this court alone, that can discipline a political party, or ban it "if the Court deems it anti-secular or separatist".

There is a National Security Council (NS) in which the Turkish Armed Forces are strongly represented. This council is named the "guardian of the secular unitary nature of the Republic". The Republic of Turkey is divided into 81 provinces purely for administrative purposes. Ethnic or national diversity is no criterion for the structure. And there are 85 electoral districts, whose boundaries are blind to ethnic or national diversity. But then, there a maxim that when unequal entities - especially social entities - receive equal treatment the inequality is not only retained, but also reproduced, and therefore perpetuated. But the irony is that although there is the appearance of equality, inequality persists and may, in fact, deepen as in the case of Turkey where, on the excuse of "separatist" activities in the Kurdish regions, the citizens there are denied even those basic rights guaranteed in the constitution. In reality, therefore, the Turkish democracy is democracy for Turks only.

To understand the role of the Turkish Armed Forces one has to go back to the foundation of the modern Turkish State. The state grew out of the ruins of the Ottoman Empire and it was created by a radical wing of the Ottoman army which was defeated in World War I. This radical wing (the "Young Turks") led by the young army officer, Mustafa Kemal Pasha, rejected the surrender conditions imposed by the victors and rather initiated war of liberation against the occupation forces. They won, abolished the Sultanate, and established the

Turkish State. The Republic was recognised internationally as the successor to the Ottoman Empire.

The Turkish Armed Forces have remained, since 1923, not only the strongest, but also the "most trusted" national institution in Turkey. The institution is, by law, the ultimate guarantor of the Turkish State, its constitution, and it is secular. It upholds the security and unity of the country. And the institution has played this role by sometimes seizing power or issuing warnings to the government and other political institutions.

The President of the Republic appoints the Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces; the Council of Ministers is responsible to the Parliament on matters relating to the preparation of the Armed Forces to defend the country". However, the power to deploy Turkish troops outside the country or allow foreign troops to pass through, or be stationed in, Turkey, rests solely with the Turkish Parliament. But this same military is committed to crushing every nationalist stirring among the minority ethnic groups, the Kurds in particular.

They carry this commitment beyond the borders of Turkey - pursuing the Kurds of Iraq and Syria within their own countries. The Turkish Military High Command - with adequate threats - regularly frustrates even the feeble efforts made by the civil authorities to grant minimum concessions to the minorities.

Turkey's Military High Command has even threatened to invade northern Iraq should the Kurds who inhabit the region be granted substantial autonomy - an eventuality the High Command believes would encourage or strengthen Turkish Kurds. The Turkish state has no official motto; but the unofficial motto is "peace at home; peace abroad". But at home, this "peace" is for Turks ago, not for the Kurds. And outside Turkey's borders the peace is also not for Kurds or for Greek Cypriots.

Turkey belong to the United Nations Organisation (UN) as a founding members' it belongs to all European organisations, except the European Union of which it is an associate member. Although Turkey is a fiercely secular country, it belongs to the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC). Turkey has very close ties with the state of Israel, the closest in the Islamic world. Beyond all these, Turkey is a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and, in this organisation, it is second only to America in the number of people under arms.

Although Turkey's relations with ex-Soviet Republics have generally improved since the collapse of the Soviet Union, its relations with Armenia remains strained. This is because the Turkish State violently rejects an suggestion that the death of up 1.5 million Armenians in the events leading to the break up of the Ottoman Empire was an act of genocide committed by Turks against Armenians. The Turkish State and the ruling classes insist that these deaths were as a "result of inter-ethnic strife, disease and famine". Any Turkish citizen who expresses a contrary opinion is signing his or her death warrant. A prominent Armenian journalist was murdered this year for this "offence" - after being set free by the court. Turkey is the only country in the world that recognises the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), which it created following its invasion and partition of the island of Cyprus in 1974.

As for Turkish economy, the story is a standard one: "Turkey had adhered to a *quasi statist* approach with strict government controls over private sector participation, foreign trade, and foreign direct investment". But with the triumph of global capitalist neoliberalism, things have changed - with the adoption of a "more private sector, market-based model". The result is that Turkey is today "one of the fastest growing economies in the world". The questions not asked are: At whose expense? Who are the beneficiaries? Who are the victims of this "economic miracle"?