

Freedom of Expression and Civilized Turkey

Prof. Dr. Atilla Yayla

What is the critical line between a civilized and uncivilized country? Well, after events I have lived since November 19, I can certainly say that it is the lack or existence of freedom of expression. A civilized country is one in which freedom of expression lives.

I am an academic, a university professor, studying politics, political philosophy and political economy. In this capacity I gave a speech in a panel in western coastal city Izmir on 18th November. The panel was organized by the local branch of the governing party AKP. In my speech I said I have a paradigm called “common civilization paradigm”. Like any other paradigm it has some elements. These are private property, free exchange, limited and responsible government, freedom of expression, religious freedom including minorities and non-believers, the absence or narrowness of political crimes category, the legitimacy of political opposition, rule of law, widespread horizontal, instead of vertical, social relations.

I expressed that if this paradigm has any analytical use we can employ it to evaluate different countries including Turkey. And in evaluating Turkey we should escape from the mistake of treating the history of Turkish Republic as a whole. Turkish Republic’s history consists of at least two main periods: First, between 1925-45, single party system era, and second 1950 and afterwards, multi-party system era. Adapting my paradigm, I can say, despite widespread official propaganda, the first period is not as progressive as it is claimed. It is even, in some respects, backward. So, Kemalism, the local ideology that has gained official status in Turkey, appears backward rather than being progressive.

This was the essence of my speech. The panel was very badly organized. There were only 37 participants. Among them was a women journalist from a local newspaper. She raised a question and asked whether she had misheard my expression that Kemalism was somehow backward. I replied that she did not misunderstand me. And went on: We need to discuss these issues without swearing each other and in a cold manner. If Turkey is to become a member of EU there will be more issues to debate on. For example, the official propaganda that “the Republic saved us from the darkness of Middle Ages” does not make sense for two reasons. First, recent academic studies have proved that middle ages were not that dark, in

contrast, the foundations of the progress Europe made in new age had been prepared between VI-XI centuries especially by reforms of six Popes from I. to VI. Gregory. Second, even it is true, it does not mean anything for Islamic world as it has a different historical story. I added, in EU membership, Europeans who come to Turkey may well ask: “Why everywhere is there this (same) man’s pictures and busts” I ended with this: I would like to have reasonable replies to my views from Kemalists, but I am doubtful about it. I would be proved right the following day.

The journalist left the meeting in a hurry. I expected to see a bad headline next day in her newspaper. But it surpassed my expectation. I was declared as traitor who “swearing and insulting Ataturk heavily”. This was the beginning of a media lynch campaign against me. I have never experienced anything like this. Some newspapers and television stations were judging and hanging me. For four days I tried to resist. I appeared on tvs to reply accusations. It was an impossible mission. They were biased. Their intention was not to discover the truth but to destroy me. Four days I struggled, could not eat and sleep. Before a TV discussion program on 23rd November night, my body collapsed and I was hospitalized. I am still in rest at my home.

Gazi University, where I work, also took action against me instead of defending academic freedom. It decided to kick me out of my classes and started an investigation for leaving Ankara without official permission. Investigation is sure also to cover accusations of conducting education against Ataturk’ principles and reforms.

This was something unbelievable. I thought that I was in a dream. Later I came to realize the reasons behind the lynching campaign of these newspapers and TV channels

I am a well known classical liberal. I openly defend human rights for everybody. That naturally includes the rights of Kurds and conservative Muslim masses. The Kemalists hate my attitude; but they are not able to challenge and refute my ideas. Whenever I speak or write I completely destroy their arguments and put them in an undefendable position. My recent challenge was against the general director of one of the biggest and most selling dailies. In an open letter, I questioned his arguments with respect to the reflections of negative freedom in social life, and he could not reply even in a word. I think that step fulfilled the glass. I had the

feeling that they would look for opportunities to take revenge. The opportunity come with this event.

Another reason of the lynching camping against me was that the speech took place in the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) meeting. The Kemalists hate AKP. Since its coming to power in November 2002 they have been living in a trauma. And coming presidential election in April 2007 has been intensifying their trauma. This is why they severely assaulted me. They wanted to beat AKP by using my ideas for which I am fully responsible.

Now, I am not a politician, addressing masses in thousands. I usually speak to academic circles. In the panel I made a scientific analysis. True that it was critical of Kemalism. But I am a scientist; to doubt, to criticize and to evaluate is my job. And everything I said falls into freedom of expression. Nobody can play the God. Nobody holds the eternal truth in her/his hands. What is needed is free competition of ideas, paradigms. The Kemalist circles attacked my personality and tried to replace my criticism of Kemalism as an insult against Atatürk, as it was the only way they could employ to harm me.

Freedom of expression is important for everybody. But for academics like me it is a matter of life or death. To take my freedom of expression away is equal to attacking my right to life. To be honest, I was shocked, I can still not understand what happened. But unethical assaults made me quite determined. I declared that I am a student of Voltaire and J. S. Mill and until my ideas are refuted scientifically I am behind them. No matter how much they suppress me, I will defend them. Because I love Turkey and I want it to be a civilized country. If there is a price on my part to pay for that I am ready. Indeed the unfair reaction in itself perfectly proves Turkey does not have sufficient freedom of expression. I pledge to God to give me the courage to be ready to be Turkey's Socrates for the sake of freedom of expression.

yaylaatilla@gmail.com

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