

Cato Institute, Washington

A respected political scientist, Dr. Atilla Yayla of the Gazi University of Ankara, Turkey, has been [dismissed from his teaching position](#) and [pilloried in the press](#) in Turkey for daring publicly to make critical remarks about the legacy of [Mustafa Kemal Atatürk](#), whose version of “secularism” has meant state control of and suppression of religion.

Kemalist secularism is not well understood by Americans and Europeans. As Dr. Yayla put it some years ago (about 10, I think) at a seminar on Islam and civil society I organized for him at the Cato Institute, “People say that you have separation of church and state in America and we have separation of mosque-and-church and state in Turkey. In America, that means freedom of religion. In Turkey, it means freedom from religion. There is a great difference between the two.” Private property, contract, and limited government, he argued, should create the framework for people to decide on their own, through voluntary cooperation, whether and how to build a mosque, a church, a synagogue, or anything else. Such decisions should not be made by state officials.

Atilla was calm during the hot discussion that followed and offered a voice of reason and true liberalism, as passionate secularists and Islamists around the seminar table argued against each other, the former for suppressing and controlling religion by force and the latter for imposing it by force. One secularist even showed a calculation of how many square meters a Muslim needs to pray, multiplied it by the Muslim population of Turkey, calculated the number of square meters of Mosque space in Turkey, and concluded that Turkey had a 50 percent surplus capacity of Mosque space, and therefore that no more should be allowed to be built. Dr. Yayla suggested that that decision should be left to the religious devotion of the faithful, whether Christian, Jewish, Muslim, or otherwise, and calmly appealed for peace by promoting freedom of religion: religion should be neither suppressed nor supported by the state.

Americans can be grateful that they enjoy the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” That is not the same as “secularism,” as it is understood in the Middle East. That’s why when I’m in the Middle East I promote freedom of religion, rather than secularism, for the simple reason that secularism in that context doesn’t mean the same as the term “secular state” does elsewhere. That is one element of the Kemalist legacy that Dr. Yayla dared to criticize.

Advocates of freedom the world over should support Dr. Atilla Yayla, a principled voice for freedom of speech, for toleration, and for the civilized values of limited government, protection of property, and freedom of contract, association, and trade.

Those who wish to express their support for Dr. Yayla should contact Ms. Ozlem Caglar Yilmaz, executive director of the Association for Liberal Thinking in Ankara, of which Dr. Yayla is the president. The email is ozlemcaglar@liberal.org.tr and the fax is +90 312 230 80 03.

Atlas Foundation, USA

Freedom of Expression under Attack in Turkey

By Prof. Dr. Atilla Yayla, President, [Association for Liberal Thinking](#) (Turkey)

What is the critical line between a civilized and an uncivilized country? Well, after events I have experienced since November 19th, 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.

Prof. Dr. Atilla Yayla

I am an academic and a university professor, dedicated to studying politics, political philosophy and political economy. In this capacity, I gave a speech on November 18th as part of a discussion panel in western coastal city Izmir. The panel was organized by the local branch of the governing Justice & Development Party (AKP). In my speech I said I have a paradigm called the “common civilization paradigm”. This paradigm includes the elements: 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, and widespread horizontal, instead of vertical, social relations.

I expressed that for this paradigm to have any analytical use it should be employed to evaluate different countries including Turkey. And in evaluating Turkey, we should avoid 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, the single-party system era, and second from 1950 onwards, the multi-party system era. Using my paradigm, I can state that the first period is not as progressive as claimed, despite widespread official propaganda. It is even, in some respects, backward. So, Kemalism, the local ideology created during the single-party era that has gained official status in Turkey, appears backward rather than progressive.

This was the essence of my speech. Among the panel participants was a female journalist from a local newspaper. She asked whether she had misheard my statement that Kemalism was somehow backward. I replied that she did not misunderstand me. And went on: We need to discuss these issues without swearing at each other or treating one another in a cold manner. If Turkey is to become a member of EU there will be more issues to debate. 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 6th and 11th centuries especially by reforms of the six Popes, Gregory I to VI. Second, even if it is true, it does not mean anything for the Islamic world as it has a different historical story. I added, in EU membership, Europeans who come to Turkey may or will ask: “Why is there everywhere 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 that I would receive such replies.

I was 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 a traitor who “swore at and insulted Ataturk heavily”. This was the beginning of a media defamation 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 TV shows to reply to their accusations. It was an impossible mission. They were biased. Their intention was not to discover the truth but to destroy me. For four days I struggled and could not eat or sleep. Before a TV discussion program on the evening of November 23rd, my body collapsed and I was hospitalized. I am still recovering at 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 to investigate me for leaving Ankara without official permission. The investigation will surely cover accusations of my teaching against Ataturk’s principles and reforms.

This was something unbelievable. I thought that I was in a dream. Later I came to realize the reasons behind the defamation 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. He could not reply even in a word. I think that step tipped the scale. I had the feeling that they would look for opportunities to take revenge. The opportunity came with this event.

Prof. Dr. Atilla Yayla

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

Now, I am not a politician addressing thousands of people. I usually speak to academic circles numbering from the tens to the hundreds. In the panel on November 18th, I made a scientific analysis. True, it was critical of Kemalism. But I am a scientist -- to doubt, criticize and evaluate is my job. And everything I said falls under freedom of expression. Nobody can play God. Nobody holds the eternal truth in her/his hands. What is needed is free competition of ideas and of paradigms. The Kemalist circles attacked my personality and tried to change my criticism of Kemalism into an insult against Ataturk, since it was the only method they could use 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 still cannot understand what happened. But these unethical assaults make me quite determined. I declare that I am a student of Voltaire and J. S. Mill and until my ideas are refuted scientifically I stand behind them. No matter how much they try to suppress me, I will defend my ideas. 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 that Turkey does not have sufficient freedom of expression. I pray to God to give me the courage to be ready to be Turkey's Socrates for the sake of freedom of expression.

Turkish Professor under Assault for Criticizing Kemalism

Ozlem Caglar-Yilmaz

Atilla Yayla, a politics professor at Gazi University of Ankara leads a think-tank to promote limited government, civil liberties and liberal democracy in Turkey as well. He was invited to a panel discussion on the November 18th, 2006 on "*Social Influence of the Relations between EU and Turkey*" by a local branch of the governing Justice and Development Party. One local newspaper pointed him as "**Traitor**" in its headlines claiming that Yayla accused Kemalism as a back-warding ideology in the sense of enhancing the institutions of human civilization. Dr Yayla was also accused of "calling Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the founding president of the Turkish republic as 'this man'". Following that, national newspapers and TV channels of the mass media sent out this news and announced that "*howcome a professor of the Turkish Republic who owes his career and his existence to the modern Turkish Republic created by its grand leader Ataturk, ignores the inevitable role of Kemalism and Ataturk in modernizing the country and calls Ataturk as 'this man'*". Well, this probably sounds quite nonsense for those who are aware of the fundamentals of a free and democratic system. Some people expressed their reaction with slogans and curses among the readers' letters.

His claims and arguments have totally been crooked by the mass media which supports the reservations of the establishment restricting civil liberties. And the mass media started a **lynching campaign against Dr Yayla**, instead of supporting freedom of expression.

Not only the media, but also the hosting head of the local branch of the governing party left their panelist alone. On the contrary, the local executives expressed to the media that they are surprised with what he has told. Indeed, here the governing party feels on tender hooks. They kept silent in every other critical occasion like the Semdinli case ending up with the expel of the public prosecutor and did not want to frighten the establishment. However, this attitude has never done good for the Turkish government. They had lost both their constituency and their legitimacy in supporting the Copenhagen criteria of EU.

Prof. Dr. Atilla Yayla

On the other hand, the lynching campaign over Dr. Yayla did not stop at the media. The university he lectures could not resist the pressure and **the Rector of Gazi University** commenced an investigation about Dr Yayla and prevented him lecturing until the investigation is over. The rector also claims that he is going to be sued to object the article obliging the academicians "to educate the Turkish students in accordance with Ataturk's principles and revolutions". The situation is unacceptable at least in terms of academic freedom. In addition, a rector in Turkey could still consider himself in a position to judge prior to any legal procedure.

Actually what Dr. Yayla did in the panel was to list the fundamental institutions of human civilization, as freedom of expression and freedom of religion, limited and responsible government, rule of law, freedom of contract, private property, free exchange, division of labor etc. And he compared the yields of the Turkish Republic with these parameters. In this respect, he argued that Kemalism and the single party era of Turkish Republic from 1925 – the founding of the Republic-, until 1950-the transformation of the system to democracy- had not done much in promoting constitutional democracy and prosperity. Instead after the democratization and liberalization of the system in 1950s, in 90s and lately in the integration process to EU, Turkey has moved ahead. Dr Yayla mentioned the pictures and statues of Ataturk being put everywhere due to legal regulations and asked what if the EU officials points the oddness of putting "this man"s picture everywhere and asks the reason of this. He was suspicious about how Turkish people would legitimize the idolization of one person to the people's of other countries as such things have only been regarded in former communist and some other present totalitarian countries.

This event seems to be an oppression over the opposition against the collectivist official ideology of Turkish Republic. Meanwhile, Dr Yayla asserts that the reaction against him is exaggerated, instead the supporters of his ideas are the majority, and however they don't fight and stand upright for their civil liberties and freedom of expression. The numerous phone calls, and visits from individuals and NGOs to Yayla and the newspaper columns in three days might be a vital sign of the support both to the disperse of Kemalism from the position of officially imposed ideology, but also to the freedom of expression. If Turkey wants to be part of the pluralist democratic society, this would be the right time for the Turkish people to pass the examination.

[Turkish Daily News](#)

Students defend 'heretic' professor who criticized Atatürk

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While prominent Turkish liberal Professor Atilla Yayla is under fire for criticizing Kemalism, young liberals stand up for his right to speak out

MUSTAFA AKYOL

ISTANBUL - Turkish Daily News

A professor hauled to the dock for criticism of Turkey 's founder was defended by a group of supportive students Sunday who gathered on a cold morning in normally hectic Şirkeci, wearing masks of the academic as they posted a carton of gags to the university who suspended last week.

"We are here to defend Professor Atilla Yayla's freedom of speech," said one young defender, Soner Tunç. "His only 'crime' is to think heretically."

Yayla, a professor of political thought at Gazi University and a renowned defender of liberalism, criticized Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and Kemalism in a speech he gave at a conference in İzmir a week

Prof. Dr. Atilla Yayla

ago. He was swiftly suspended by Dr. Kadri Yamaç, Gazi University's rector and quickly became the subject of both vigorous attacks and a lively defense in Turkey's media.

"We are sending this to Dr. Yamaç," Tunç said of the gag tape they mailed from the post, "so that he can use it in the future whenever he wants to censor the ideas of the scholars in his university by forcing them to shut up." The small group of about 10 protestors posed for cameras wearing masks of Yayla with his mouth gagged in black wrapping tape.

The problems began when the "heretic" argued that the era of Mustafa Kemal was "a period of regression, not progress." He also criticized the abundance of photos and statues of Mustafa Kemal all around Turkey and warned that Turkey couldn't continue like this in its EU-driven process of democratization and liberalization. "Europeans will ask us," said Yayla, "why this man's photos and statues are everywhere."

These words created a spontaneous uproar in the Turkish media. Yeni Asır, an Izmir-based daily, put Professor Yayla's photo on its first page with a single-word headline: "Traitor." Many other newspapers and columnists denounced Professor Yayla for defining Kemalism as "regression" and for daring to refer to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk disrespectfully as "this man." In Turkey, the appropriate way to refer to Atatürk is to use titles like "Our Forefather" or "the Exalted Leader."

Subsequently, Yamaç held a press conference at which he described Yayla as "a man who lacks manners to such a degree that he talks about Atatürk as 'this man'," and announced that he would no longer be allowed to teach at the university. Yamaç also revealed that an official investigation of Yayla had been initiated by the university administration after his controversial comments and because "he traveled to Izmir without permission." Academics here must take leave from the state-appointed university administration in order to travel outside their university's city limits. The rule is commonly ignored, but it is sometimes used to harass scholars seen as traveling to make trouble.

The Turkish press reports that a public prosecutor has also initiated an investigation into Yayla's "heretical" thoughts. It is therefore possible that Yayla will join the group of Turkish intellectuals like Orhan Pamuk or Elif Şafak, tried for insulting "Turkishness" and its sacred pillars.

However Professor Yayla stands firm behind his views. He said his accusers were trying to "counter ideas with bullets" and challenged Turkey's Kemalists to discuss the legacy of Atatürk with him in a fair intellectual debate. "Galileo was persecuted for speaking out, too," Yayla said. "The reaction I am getting only shows the lack of freedom of thought in Turkey."

Many liberal commentators in the Turkish press and several human rights organizations have declared support for Professor Yayla's freedom of speech. Soli Özel, a political scientist at Bilgi University and a columnist for daily Sabah, described Gazi University's denial of Professor Yayla's freedom of speech as a "shame." İsmet Berkan, editor in chief of daily Radikal, criticized both the "crucifixion" of Professor Yayla and the tendency in Turkey to see Atatürk's words as "divine speech." Hasan Cemal, a columnist for Milliyet, noted, "Nobody has to love Atatürk ... and he cannot be protected by laws."

The liberal students at Sirkeci also referred to Atatürk to defend their hero. With Yayla masks on their faces, they held two posters with quotes from Turkey's revered founder: "Ideas cannot be silenced by canons and guns," and "Never refrain from saying what you think."