

Darwin versus Erdogan

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To the Government of Turkey, Darwin's Theory of Evolution has now become a "controversial subject", so much so that it will no longer be taught in the Turkish secondary schools from the next academic year, a move reported to be 'personally approved' by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Apparently, according to his Education Minister Ismet Yilmaz, evolution is a subject "above the students' level and not directly relevant." Thus while attempting to 'simplify' the curriculum and educate the children in line with 'local and national values', Turkey's new school curriculum will now also teach the concept of Jihad, the real meaning of which, according to Yilmaz, is 'loving your nation'. The founder of the modern Turkish state, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, who banned Islam from public life, must be turning in his grave now.

"We have excluded controversial subjects for students at an age unable yet to understand the issues' scientific background," the head of the Education Ministry's Curriculum Board, Alpaslan Durmuş, asserted, "As the students at ninth grade are not endowed with antecedents to discuss the 'Origin of Life and Evolution' section in biology classes, this section will be delayed until undergraduate study." To this, a member of the opposition Republican People's Party, Mustafa Balbay, reacted angrily, "You go and give an 18-year old student the right to elect and be elected, but don't give him the right to learn about the theory of evolution...This is being close minded and ignorant."

Saudi Arabia expectedly happens to be the only other country to exclude evolutionary theory from school curriculum, but debates about the theory of evolution date back to the late Ottoman Empire (1299-1922). Both Christian and Muslim creationists reject the theory of evolution, claiming instead that God had created the world as described in the Bible and the Qur'an, and made the world and all living things within a span of six days. Secular Turkey taught evolution, but under the rule of Mr. Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP), the clock has now been firmly set backwards.

Erdogan was the Prime Minister of Turkey from 2003 to 2014 when he became the President and further consolidated his powers after a failed coup on July 15, 2016. Turkey has a history of multiple military coups, but the coup leaders were strictly secular which gave them added legitimacy. Only this time it had failed because citizens overwhelmingly supported Erdogan. Erdogan has since detained more than 50,000 people and put 170,000 people under investigation, a record worse than perhaps China's. A constitutional referendum in 2010 gave him control over the judicial system, with extraordinary powers to prosecute secular military officers. In April this year, he claimed vast powers after a narrow victory in a referendum on a Constitutional Bill that gave him unprecedented authority to appoint and dismiss ministers and to stay in power for another 12 years. The Guardian commented that democracy was dying in Turkey by the

¹ <http://www.livemint.com/Opinion/uMtuJLLeSHpX4KaTRoFQaN/Darwin-versus-Erdogan.html>

day. It is now becoming very close to dictatorship. In fact, Erdogan had earlier said that democracy was “a vehicle, not a goal”. He has successfully used it to solidify his powers and subverting democracy.

Turkey, once seen as a model democratic state in the Islamic world, combining Islamism and political pluralism, seems to be sliding back into medieval times. Islamic fundamentalism which had earlier remained dormant has been making a comeback in the country since early 2000s. Erdogan’s Islamist AKP came to power on the promise of advancing a constitutional form of Islamism integrating secular democratic values with moderate, conservative Islamic ideals. But since then, religious conservatives have steadily been gaining ground, becoming ever more powerful. Now they have shed the last veneer of moderate Islamic values. Opposition parties have always accused them of imposing Shariah by stealth, and now they are entrenching their powers through mosques and religious schools. Ever since they assumed power, thousands of new mosques have been built and tens of thousands of students have been attending religious schools called Imam Hatip. Erdogan is now effectively using Islamism for consolidating his powers. Turkey’s application for membership of the European Union may be in jeopardy, but Erdogan couldn’t care less.

The AKP always had a distaste for the theory of evolution which challenges the scripture. Deputy Prime Minister Numan Kurtulmus had earlier said that Darwin’s theory, published in 1859, was ‘old and rotten’ and did not necessarily have to be taught. Now, under the revised curriculum, a chapter entitled ‘Beginning of Life and Evolution’ will be deleted from the standard school biology textbooks, available only for university studies. One doesn’t know for how long even this will be permitted.

“The forces of darkness and ignorance are never permanently defeated”, the celebrated scientist and science-writer Asimov had noted. Even in USA, in 1925, a high school biology teacher named John Thomas Scopes was fined a hundred dollars by a court at Tennessee for teaching that humans had evolved from lower forms of life, against a law passed by the Tennessee legislature forbidding teachers in publicly supported schools to teach evolution. Even now, equal time has to be given for teaching evolution and creationism in many of the public funded schools in USA. Turkey, after all, is not a solitary fighter against rationality.
