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A moderate in Umno's mould

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I WAS schooled by my grandmother to believe (wrongly) that Turkey (she meant Ottoman Empire) was "the most powerful empire in the universe and cannot be beaten since it has Allah's blessing, because it has generated a great cultural outpouring of Islamic art, architecture and literature". The latter is true, of course, until the empire began a protracted decline through decadence.

It was, she added (this time rightly, though she was illiterate), the Arabs whose descendants now rule Jordan and Saudi Arabia who caused the humiliating defeat of Turkey by the Allied troops and Greeks.

I have been to Turkey, though only Istanbul, twice, and seen the remnants of the Ottomans' achievements and also the causes of its decline, which stimulated the republican revolt and the accession of Kemal Ataturk.

Turkey has been a republic since 1923. After slightly less than eight decades, a party with strong Islamic, albeit reformist, roots has formed the government.

I have taken no heart from any attempt to set up an Islamic state in recent times, either in Iran, Afghanistan or the Sudan. Even in these largely monoreligious societies, the theocracies that came into power zealously managed to reverse what little modernisation had been achieved.

The post-colonial struggle for independence and national viability in the lands of the ummah has shown few successes. In this self-avowed trio of the vanguard of political Islam, it was reduced to the nuts and bolts of a mediaeval pogrom - executions for apostasy, the cutting off of hands, the burning of books, the whipping of women in the streets - by a slavering Western press.

I mean no offence to my Muslim brethren in the three countries. But their mullahs have done poorly for Islam as well as for their countrymen. I fear our own power-hungry mullahs, ustaz, ustazah, Tok Guru and other holier-than-thou types will make the same errors and rush headlong into the same calamity.

In slaving to set themselves as far as possible from what they consider to be the heretical (and secular) influences of the Christian West, they are unthinkingly aping the worst aspects of it.

Observers in the West see the regression in what they mistakenly call Islamic fundamentalism. It has become easy for them to confuse the hankerings of the revolutionary extremists with the religion of Islam itself. However, the most acute among them, Professor Bernard Lewis, does not, as he illustrates the irony in the theory and practice of the radical Islamists.

Like mediaeval Christendom, he says the mullahs have "already endowed Iran with the functional equivalents of a pontificate, a college of cardinals, a bench of bishops and, especially, an inquisition, all previously alien to Islam. They may in time provoke a Reformation".

Iran's ever-restless students are certainly shaping up for one. But if Christian history is any guide, the process of reform into a separation of spiritual and temporal powers may take a long time and only be won at great cost.

Islamic countries, already far behind, cannot afford any experiment to turn back the clock to the foundation myths of the great caliphs, only to turn around again to catch up lost ground.

For a long time, I believed Malaysia stood alone in achieving a

consensual balance. No other country has succeeded as far as we have in keeping Islam above, yet in many respects central to politics and government.

So when the Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP) won parliamentary elections in Turkey last November, I was at first in two minds. Turkey, the rump state of the Ottoman Empire, has lessons for all Muslims and plenty to prove.

From the ruins of the empire's collapse after World War I, Attaturk set about establishing a Republic of Turkey by obliterating the decay of the past. Famously or infamously, in 1925 the government abolished religious orders, changed the Arabic script to the Roman alphabet for writing the Turkish language, forbade polygamy and prohibited the wearing of the traditional fez as it strove to remove religion from public life.

Attaturk transformed and pulled his country into modernity by the scruff of the fundamentalist neck.

For many Muslims, therefore, his legacy is dubious. In the course of Turkey's fitful democratisation, the chance that it would go the way of Iran via the ballot box was never fanciful. Yet it didn't.

Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the AKP leader, had been barred from standing in elections because of a minor criminal conviction for reading an Islamist poem at a political rally, an action foolishly deemed to amount to sedition.

As mayor of Istanbul in the mid-1990s Erdogan banned alcohol in official municipal buildings (but not elsewhere) and won popularity for improving services, to the universal approval of the people.

In 1997 the military, Attaturk's successors, became alarmed over what it saw as a threat to Turkey's secularism and banned the Welfare Party, the AKP's precursor, and forced him to resign.

The generals relented after Erdogan insisted that he was committed to secularism. Soon after the November elections changes to the constitution paved the way for him to run for parliament in a by-election in March, after which he was made prime minister.

In an earlier column, I warned that our own radical Islamists had no reason to crow at the election outcome in Turkey and pointed out that the AKP had more in common with moderate Umno than extremist Pas. As if to prove the point, Erdogan paid an official visit to Malaysia less than three months after taking office.

Like Umno, the AKP is an Islamic party operating within a national constitution; like Umno, it is chiefly concerned with upholding the country's welfare and independence through popular support. Unlike Pas, it separates the perfection of Islam from the fallibilities of politics. And perhaps most unlike Pas of all, the AKP is not dressed in clerical robes but in highly contemporary business suits. Indeed, the Turkish delegation was one to do business with, not to exchange sermons.

On Sunday, I had the welcome opportunity to interview Erdogan and came away suitably impressed, by the handsome cut of his bespoke tailoring as much as his dignity and self-confidence. His is the figure of moderate Islam that even non-Muslims could vote for.

Even so, I could not resist the temptation of asking him about his party's affinity with Pas. He said that, on the contrary, the AKP had made representations to Umno, with a view to becoming a sister party. Turkey could learn much from Malaysia, and vice-versa, he stressed.

I took that as a compliment and a tribute to Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, with whom he shared similar views. He admired our multiracial, multi-religious pluralism. Erdogan went on to say that Turkey and Malaysia could become models of the harmony of Islam with constitutional democracy, with competing civilisations, with peace and goodwill for all, Muslims and

non-Muslims equally.

Turkey would try its best to enter the European Union, he said, to fulfil his nation's yearning to bridge East and West, Europe and Asia. But he was candid about his chances against the impositions and impediments placed in Turkey's way: "If it happens, it happens," he said.

Erdogan is something of a working class hero who is looked up to by many Turks. He worked as a street seller to help pay for an education. He attended Quranic school before studying economics at university. For those Umno leaders who have lost their way and, indeed, for Pas stalwarts who have never found one, his is an example to follow.

I spoke to him for an hour, with no holds barred. I found him astute; he acknowledges realpolitik, globalisation and tries to deftly accommodate what he desires with what is achievable. If the Opposition here is as practical as Erdogan, the Government will surely have to sweat more than it ever has. Fortunately, they are woolly-headed dreamers.

The good thing is that the Opposition is as dogmatic, impractical and vague as it has always been and will be in future. That is our salvation.

Pas is a real threat to modernisation, progress and multi-religious unity. Fortunately, it is not only myopic but has infinitely incensed the 45 per cent non-Muslim Malaysian constituency and made the majority Malay moderates wary.