

# The Secular Leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk: A Critical Review from a Sufi Perspective

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## Abstract

The leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk marked a major change in the political history of the Islamic world, particularly through the implementation of radical secularism in post-Ottoman Caliphate Turkey. This research aims to examine the form of Atatürk's secular leadership and its impact on the spiritual dimension of society, using the Sufism approach as an ethical and philosophical analysis knife. The research method used is descriptive qualitative with literature study techniques to analyze Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's secular leadership with a review of Sufism perspective. The primary sources are historical documents, political policies, and archives related to Atatürk's secular reforms. Secondary sources include Islamic political literature, studies on secularism, and academic works on Sufism from both classical thinkers such as Al-Ghazali, Al-Qusyairi, and Ibn Arabi. The results of the study show that Atatürk's policies such as the prohibition of Sufi orders, the removal of religious symbols from public spaces, and the westernization of the legal system have severed the relationship between political leadership and the spiritual dimension of society. A Sufistic analysis of this leadership reveals the absence of values such as tazkiyatun nafs (purification of the soul), ikhlas (sincerity), and adl (justice), which are central to the prophetic leadership model. This study concludes that the Sufism approach can be a constructive critique of secular leadership models, while offering an alternative to leadership rooted in moral and spiritual transformation.

**Keywords:** *Sufism, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Secularism, Leadership, Political Islam*

## 1. Introduction

The collapse of the Ottoman Caliphate in 1924 marked a major turning point in the political history of the Islamic world. For centuries, the caliphate had embodied the unity of Muslims by integrating political authority and spiritual leadership. Its dissolution not only ended a governing system but also severed the deep-rooted bond between religion and state in Islamic civilization. In this context, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk emerged to establish the Republic of Turkey, promoting radical secularism as a means to modernize the nation and align it with Western ideals an effort that, while seen as progressive, also distanced Turkey from its Islamic spiritual heritage[1]. Atatürk's leadership was characterized by sweeping reforms that touched almost all aspects of state life. In the legal field, he dissolved the Islamic judicial system and replaced it with civil law adapted from European models, particularly Swiss and Italian. In the field of education, traditional madrassas were closed and replaced with secular schools, while the religious curriculum was abolished or severely restricted. Religious symbols in

public spaces were removed, including a ban on wearing the fez for men and restrictions on wearing the headscarf in public institutions. One of the most controversial policies was the banning of Sufi order activities and the closure of tekke (Sufi huts) that had been centers of spiritual formation for centuries. Atatürk also replaced the Arabic alphabet used in Turkish writing with the Latin alphabet, a move intended to cut cultural ties with the Arab-Islamic world and draw closer to Europe[2].

These changes have had profound social and spiritual consequences. The total separation of religion and state shifted the role of religion from the center of public life to a purely private affair. The tradition of tazkiyatun nafs (purification of the soul), which had been an important part of public life, was institutionalized due to the prohibition of the tarekat (religious order)[3]. This has resulted in the diminishing role of ulama and Sufi murshids in spiritually guiding society. People who previously lived in a collective pattern of religiosity are now encouraged to adopt an instrumental rationality that focuses on material progress. This change in orientation created tensions between political elites who adopted modern Western values and traditional communities who still adhered to Islamic values. In the long run, this has created a deep social and cultural divide in Turkey.

Sufism, as the inner dimension of Islam, offers a fundamentally different view from secularism. In the paradigm of Sufism, the life of the world and the hereafter are inseparable. Leadership is seen as a mandate that must be carried out on the basis of ikhlas (sincerity), adl (justice), and orientation to islah (moral-spiritual improvement)[4]. For a leader, success is not only measured by material progress or military strength, but also by the extent to which he is able to form a society that is noble and aware of its true purpose in life. These values demand integration between public policy and spiritual development, so that development is not trapped in the physical dimension alone. This is where Sufism's critique of secular leadership becomes relevant, as secularism tends to separate the moral-spiritual dimension from political decision-making[5].

Sufism's critique of secularism is paradigmatic, covering ontological, epistemological and axiological aspects. Ontologically, secularism separates spiritual reality from worldly life, while Sufism sees both as manifestations of divine unity (tawhid)[6]. Epistemologically, secularism relies on instrumental rationality and empiricism, while Sufism emphasizes ma'rifah - inner knowledge born from a heart purified through tazkiyatun nafs[7]. Axiologically, secularism is oriented towards material progress and individual freedom, while Sufism places ultimate happiness in connection with God and the harmony of society. This difference in paradigm makes Sufism a critical framework capable of reassessing the direction of Atatürk's policies, as well as offering an alternative that integrates material progress with moral-spiritual development` [8].

Based on this historical context and paradigm differences, this research seeks to answer two main questions: first, what are the problematic elements of Atatürk's secular leadership when viewed through the perspective of Sufism? Second, how does

the Sufism paradigm critique secularism as a political ideology? Using a descriptive qualitative method based on a literature study that combines historical sources, Islamic political literature, and classical and contemporary works of Sufism, this study aims to present a constructive critique of the secular leadership model while offering an alternative prophetic leadership model rooted in moral and spiritual transformation. As such, this study is not only relevant for understanding modern Turkish history, but also provides important lessons for the contemporary Islamic world in formulating the ideal relationship between politics and spirituality.

## **2. Research Method**

This research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive research type. The qualitative approach was chosen because the focus of the study lies on understanding the meanings, values and paradigms contained in Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's leadership, especially when viewed from a Sufism perspective. Descriptive research allows the author to systematically describe how Atatürk's secular policies were implemented and their impact on the spiritual dimension of society, while examining them through a Sufistic ethical-philosophical framework[9]. The data collection technique is done through library research[10]. The primary sources are historical documents, political policies, and archives related to Atatürk's secular reforms. Secondary sources include Islamic political literature, studies on secularism, and academic works on Sufism from both classical thinkers such as Al-Ghazali, Al-Qusyairi, and Ibn Arabi, as well as contemporary thinkers who emphasize the relevance of Sufism to the challenges of modernity.

Data were analyzed using the content analysis method, which interprets texts and documents to find the meaning behind political policies and their relationship with spiritual values. The analysis is interpretive in nature, where historical data is combined with key concepts in Sufism such as tazkiyatun nafs, ikhlas and adl. Thus, this research method not only explains Atatürk's secular policies within a historical framework, but also assesses their ethical and philosophical implications through a Sufistic paradigm.

## **3. Elements of Ataturk's Secular Leadership Critiqued through a Sufism Framework**

### **3.1 Total separation of religion and politics**

One of the most fundamental elements of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's leadership was the total separation of religion and politics. This policy was realized through the removal of Islamic institutions from the state structure and the establishment of secularism as the ideological foundation of the republic[11]. In the perspective of Sufism, this step is problematic because it is ontologically contrary to the principle of tawhid, which is a view of the unity of life that unites the worldly and ukhrawi dimensions. For Sufis, human life cannot be separated between spiritual and material aspects, because both are interrelated in the framework of devotion to Allah. When politics is completely separated from religion, the state operates in a space that is

reduced only to the material dimension, losing the moral and spiritual direction that should guide every public policy[12].

Furthermore, Atatürk's secularism paradigm creates a contradiction with the basic values of Sufism. Secularism places religion as a private matter, while Sufism views spirituality as a transformative energy that animates all aspects of life, including politics. Politics without spiritual values risks giving birth to leadership that is dry from *ikhlas* and *adl*, because its orientation is only on worldly interests, power, or material progress. As a result, political decisions lose moral legitimacy in the eyes of society, because they no longer reflect the divine will that should be the highest goal in Islam[13]. From a Sufism perspective, the total separation of religion and politics is not just an administrative policy, but a reduction to the unified nature of life, which ultimately weakens the spiritual foundations of society and distances politics from its original function as a means of *islah* or repair of the people[14].

### **3.2 Removal of Islamic symbols from public spaces**

Atatürk's policy of removing Islamic symbols from the public sphere, such as the ban on the use of the *fez*, the restriction of headscarves in state institutions, and the replacement of Arabic letters with the Latin alphabet, reflected a vision of secularism that rejected religious identity as part of public expression[15]. From a Sufism perspective, this is not just an administrative change, but the removal of the symbolic meaning that serves as a medium for collective *dhikr*. Symbols in Islam, whether in the form of clothing, writings or rituals, serve as reminders of God's presence in everyday life. When these symbols are removed, the community loses the means of spiritual binding that previously animated their socio-political life. Sufism views symbols as not merely outward forms, but pathways to inner meaning; thus, the removal of religious symbols amounts to cutting off the pathways of transcendence that connect people to divine values[16]. Critically, this policy shows a secular political reduction of human reality, which is seen as sufficiently managed materially without paying attention to the symbolic and spiritual needs that support the moral sustainability of society.

### **3.3 Prohibition of Sufi orders**

One of Atatürk's most controversial policies was the banning of Sufi orders and the closure of *tekke*, which had been centers of spiritual formation for centuries in Turkish society. This policy reflected the state's attempt to control and limit religious expressions that were perceived as hindering modernization[17]. However, from the perspective of Sufism, this action results in the disconnection of the *tazkiyatun nafs* (purification of the soul) which is the core of Muslim moral transformation. *Tarekat* is not just a religious organization, but a place for spiritual development that instills the values of sincerity, patience, *zuhud*, and *mahabbah* (love of God). By closing *tarekat* institutions, the state deprives people of access to deep spiritual education, so that their life orientation shifts towards materialism and instrumental rationality. Moreover, the prohibition of *tarekat* also breaks the tradition of spiritual lineage that has

maintained the continuity of prophetic teachings in Islamic history [18]. Academically, this can be seen as a form of deconstruction of collective spirituality, where the secular state seeks to organize society based solely on the modern political paradigm, without realizing that the strength of Islamic civilization rests precisely on the continuous cultivation of the soul.

### **3.4 Westernization of the legal and education systems**

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's legal and educational reforms were one of the main pillars of Turkey's secularization project. The previous Islamic legal system based on sharia was replaced by European civil law, particularly the Swiss and Italian models. Similarly, traditional madrassas were closed and replaced with secular schools that adopted Western curricula[19]. On the one hand, this policy is considered a progressive step to adapt Turkey to the standards of global modernity, but from a Sufism perspective, the westernization of law and education creates serious problems because it breaks the continuity of Islamic wisdom that functions not only as a legal instrument, but also as a means of moral-spiritual development. In the Islamic tradition, law does not stand neutral, but is closely related to the values of *adl* (justice) and *rahmah* (compassion), while education is understood as *ta'dib* the formation of civilized human beings not just the transfer of knowledge[15].

Tasawwuf views true education as a process of perfecting the inner and outer man, where cognitive, moral and spiritual aspects are balanced. By replacing the Islamic education system with a secular model oriented towards instrumental rationality, Atatürk indirectly encouraged the formation of a generation that excelled in technical aspects, but was weak in the spiritual dimension. Similarly, in the legal system, separation from spiritual values made the law function only as a formal regulation without the spirit of true justice. In the eyes of Sufism, the westernization of law and education is not just a technical adoption, but a form of radical separation between knowledge and wisdom. As a result, this modernization project failed to provide an ethical and spiritual framework capable of maintaining the direction of societal development, so modern Turkey lost the balance between material progress and moral transformation.

### **3.5 Authoritarian top-down leadership**

In addition to structural reforms, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's leadership style also displayed a very strong authoritarian character. The secularization project was carried out with a top-down approach without involving the participation of the wider community, often through repression against groups that rejected his policies. Criticism of the government was silenced, and political opposition was suppressed under the pretext of maintaining state stability. From the point of view of modern secular politics, this approach may be considered effective to accelerate the modernization process. However, from a Sufism perspective, authoritarian leadership contradicts the principle of *shura* (deliberation), which is one of the fundamental values in Islamic leadership



ethics[20]. *Shura* is not only a political mechanism, but also a manifestation of *adl* (justice) and respect for human dignity as caliphs on earth.

Tasawwuf emphasizes that an ideal leader is one who functions as a *murabbi* who guides the community through moral example and sincerity, not just a ruler who imposes his will[21]. Political authoritarianism as practiced by Atatürk makes the people mere objects of policy, not subjects who participate in determining the direction of civilization. This leads to spiritual alienation, as people are not involved in the collective process of achieving *islah* (moral-spiritual improvement). From a Sufistic perspective, this kind of leadership risks giving birth to a society that is administratively obedient, but inwardly empty, so that the stability achieved is false and fragile. Thus, Atatürk's authoritarian leadership style is not only a political problem, but also a spiritual one, as it ignores the spiritual dimension in the process of building a society[22].

#### 4. A Critique of the Tasawwuf Paradigm of Secularism

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's secularism was not a natural outcome of the internal dynamics of Turkish society, but a direct adoption of the Western paradigm of modernity. Describing Turkey during Atatürk's time as the "West in the Middle East" because its secularism mimicked the patterns of European and American states, Turner argues that secularism was the result of regime coercion, not a natural consequence of modernization. Asserting that the modern Turkish state was born out of European ideas of modernity transmitted through Mustafa Kemal, with secularism as an integral part of Kemalism alongside nationalism and Westernism, Turner argues that the modern Turkish state was born out of European ideas of modernity[23].

Atatürk's secularism took the form of a rigid French-style *laïcité*, supported by legal, educational and cultural reforms based on Western models. This view is in line with Al-Attas' (1993) critique, which asserts that secularization is rooted in the Western historical experience of the combination of Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian heritage that gave birth to a dualistic and relativistic framework. Secularization is interpreted as the liberation of humans from the control of religion and metaphysics, resulting in historical relativism and the separation between spiritual and material dimensions. Thus, Atatürk's secularism reflected a radical adoption of Western philosophical paradigms that were used to shape the new face of Turkey. In contrast, Islam offers a different paradigm through the concept of *dīn*, which encompasses the meanings of submission to God, justice, law, and the natural human tendency to civilize (*tamaddun*)[14]. This concept emphasizes the unity of the spiritual and material dimensions in one coherent worldview. The perspective of Sufism is in line with this framework, as al-Ghazālī asserts in *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm ad-Dīn* that the highest knowledge is *mukāsyafah* (revelation of the heart), while outward deeds (*mu'āmalah*) are only a means towards inner purification.

Thus, Sufism positions leadership not just as an instrument of worldly politics, but as a path of moral and spiritual transformation, an alternative paradigm to modern

Western secularism that emphasizes instrumental rationality. Secularism is a view that is only concerned with worldly life and ignores the *ukhrawi* and from an ontological point of view is concerned with the material, ignoring the spiritual[24]. This has led to what is known as Secularism. A worldview that separates science from religion and separates religion from public life. This secular worldview has been inherited by the Modern West to this day. In addition to secularism, the development of Western science and civilization was also founded on the notion of Materialism. An understanding developed from the legacy of Ancient Greece, which believes that matter is the source of everything and the purpose of this life, and that this life is only the life of the world[25].

#### 4.1 Ontological

Ontologically, secularism is based on a perspective that divides reality into two separate realms: the sacred and the profane, religion and the world. The roots of this view can be traced to Western intellectual history, particularly the post-Enlightenment Christian tradition, when religion was relegated to the private sphere, while the material world was understood as an autonomous realm with no connection to transcendent values[14]. In the Turkish context, this paradigm is evident in Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's policies. He systematically removed religious symbols from the public sphere, such as the prohibition of wearing religious clothing, the closure of Sufi orders, and the abolition of the *khilafah* institution[26]. These measures reflect a secular ontology, where politics, law and culture are understood as merely worldly affairs that should be free from religious influence. In contrast, Sufism rejects this kind of separation. Sufism's ontology is rooted in the principle of *tawhid*, the unity of all aspects of life with Allah as the center of reality. In the Sufi view, the world never stands as a separate profane space, but rather a field of charity directly connected to *ukhrawi* goals. Therefore, all dimensions of political, economic and social life cannot be separated from the spiritual dimension.

Al-Attas through the concept of *dīn* asserts that reality in Islam is a unity of meaning that includes obedience to Allah, justice, law, and human tendency to civilize (*tamaddun*). This is in line with al-Ghazālī's view in *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm ad-Dīn*, which divides knowledge into *mu'āmalah* (outward deeds) and *mukāsyafah* (inner revelation). Outward deeds are only understood as a means to the highest inner goal, which is *ma'rifatullah*[27]. Thus, the ontology of Sufism builds integration between the outer and inner dimensions, the world and the hereafter, and rejects the fragmentation of reality offered by secularism.

Sufism's main critique of Atatürk's secular ontology lies in the absence of the spiritual dimension in leadership. By removing religion from the public sphere, secularism ultimately erases the spiritual foundation that should be the moral orientation of politics. In the Sufi tradition, the Prophet Muhammad is seen as a model of prophetic leadership, where political affairs are always based on spirituality, justice and purification of the soul. Therefore, the ontological paradigm of Sufism not only

rejects the sacred-profane dichotomy, but also offers a complete integration between material and spiritual reality as the basis for civilized leadership[28].

## 4.2 Epistemological

Epistemologically, secularism is based on reason, science, and empiricism as the main foundations of knowledge[29]. This approach does indeed have great benefits, especially in regulating the technical aspects of social life and government administration. Through rational and empirical foundations, efficient, measurable, and data-based policies are born. However, problems arise when secularism is made the sole source of knowledge. In such a position, it becomes reductive because it tends to negate the spiritual dimension, moral intuition, and inner experiences that cannot be reached by empirical instruments alone[24].

On the contrary, Sufi epistemology emphasizes the importance of *ma'rifah*, which is intuitive knowledge born from spiritual purification (*tazkiyatun nafs*) and profound spiritual experience[30]. In the Sufi view, reason and the senses are not rejected, but are seen as limited and must be complemented by the light of the heart (*nur al-qalb*). Therefore, a leader in the Sufi perspective is not only required to master technical matters of economics, politics, and social issues, but is also expected to possess spiritual depth. With this spiritual foundation, a leader is able to assess societal issues in a more holistic manner: not only material well-being, but also moral health and inner purity.

The main criticism of the secular model is its tendency to produce “technocratic leaders”: skilled in administration, proficient in management, but lacking in ethical and spiritual dimensions. Such leadership may be efficient, but it is devoid of moral vision and transcendent orientation. In contrast, the Sufi paradigm or worldview offers a more comprehensive epistemological integration. Knowledge does not stop at data and reason but is guided by moral principles, justice, and spiritual concern. Within this framework, political and social decisions not only serve worldly needs but also guide society toward moral perfection and closeness to God.

## 4.3 Axiological

Axiologically, secularism places human values and goals primarily in the earthly dimension. The main orientation of this paradigm is material progress, efficiency, and social welfare that can be measured empirically. Values are considered relative and determined by social consensus, not by transcendent foundations. As a result, morality within a secular framework tends to be pragmatic: good and evil are determined by practical benefits, not by the ultimate truth derived from revelation. Such an axiological model can promote technological progress and development, but it is also prone to creating a crisis of meaning, as humans lose their spiritual orientation in life[31].

In contrast, Sufism offers an axiological foundation based on the principle of *tawhid*. All values in Islam are rooted in the recognition that Allah alone is the ultimate



goal. All political, social, economic, and cultural activities are interpreted as paths of devotion and obedience. Thus, values are not relative but are bound to the absolute truth revealed through divine revelation. In the Sufi perspective, true happiness does not lie in material achievements but in attaining closeness to Allah[32]. Al-Ghazālī asserts in *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm ad-Dīn* that outward actions are merely a means to an end, while the ultimate goal is the purification of the heart and union with Allah. This means that the ethical dimension in Sufism cannot be separated from the spiritual dimension. A leader, within the framework of Sufi axiology, is not only required to achieve the material well-being of his people, but also has the obligation to guide society toward a meaningful and moral life.

Thus, Sufi axiology presents a critique of secularism, which tends to reduce the purpose of human life to worldly interests. The Sufi paradigm does not reject material achievements, but positions them as part of the path toward spiritual perfection. This integration of worldly and spiritual values is what enables Sufism to provide a stronger moral compass, ensuring that leadership does not merely focus on pragmatic administration but serves as a means of fostering a civilized society (*tamaddun*)[33]. The main criticism of secularism lies in its tendency to limit the meaning of life to material aspects only, which can ultimately lead to an existential crisis[34]. Sufism offers an alternative path by uniting worldly and spiritual values through purification of the soul and closeness to Allah. Thus, Sufism not only fills the spiritual void left by secularism, but also builds a comprehensive paradigm that balances material social reality by emphasizing purity of the soul, moral values, and worship[30].

## **5. Proposal for an Alternative Leadership Model Based on Sufism**

Sufism views leadership as a mandate that not only serves to regulate the lives of society administratively, but also to guide them toward moral and spiritual perfection. From this perspective, the secular leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk reveals a void in the prophetic values that form the core of Islamic teachings. Radical secularist policies, such as the separation of religion from politics and the prohibition of Sufi orders, fundamentally disregard the principle of *tazkiyatun nafs* (purification of the soul), which in Sufism is understood as the foundation for the creation of a morally healthy society. When *tazkiyah* is severed from the public sphere, state policies lose the inner dimension that should guide material development toward transcendental goals[35].

Furthermore, the principle of sincerity (*ikhlas*), which is strongly emphasized in Sufism, was also neglected in Atatürk's secular leadership project. The modernization that was carried out was no longer driven by a desire to serve Allah or to serve the people sincerely, but rather by political ambitions to seek international recognition and catch up with the West. In Sufism, sincerity is not merely an individual attitude but also the foundation of political ethics: public policy should arise from noble motivations, not worldly interests. The loss of this principle makes secular leadership tend toward pragmatism and a focus on material outcomes alone, without considering the spiritual dimension of society[36].

Furthermore, the value of *adl* (justice) in the Sufi perspective is not only understood as the enforcement of formal law or administrative equality, but also includes a balance between the physical and spiritual dimensions of humanity. Atatürk's secular leadership did succeed in creating a uniform civil legal system, but by removing the spiritual dimension from the public sphere, justice became imbalanced[37]. People get administrative rights, but lose the space to meet their spiritual needs as a group. From a Sufi point of view, this is a more subtle form of injustice: the state fails to meet the deepest aspect of humanity, which is the need for spiritual guidance[38].

Finally, a Sufi analysis of Atatürk's secular leadership reveals a paradigmatic crisis. Secularism, which rejects the involvement of religion in politics, reduces politics to merely a means of power and material progress[39]. Sufism actually emphasizes that politics is part of the spiritual path to God, so it must be imbued with moral values, compassion, and transcendental awareness. Thus, the prophetic leadership offered by Sufism is not the antithesis of modernization, but rather an alternative path that combines material progress with spiritual transformation. This critique suggests that the absence of Sufi values in secular leadership results in a society that may be physically modern but spiritually fragile, having lost sight of the true meaning of life[40].

## **Conclusion**

This study shows that Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's leadership, based on radical secularism, had a significant impact on the political structure and spiritual life of Turkish society. The elements of his leadership from the complete separation of religion and politics, the removal of Islamic symbols from public spaces, the banning of Sufi orders, the westernization of law and education, to his authoritarian leadership style reflect a model of modernization focused on material aspects, yet simultaneously severing the spiritual nurturing that had long been an integral part of Islamic civilization. This policy successfully ushered Turkey into the format of a modern nation-state, but at the cost of severing the continuity between political leadership and the spiritual dimension of society.

From a Sufi perspective, Atatürk's secular leadership contains paradigmatic weaknesses because it ignores the core values of prophetic leadership, namely *tazkiyatun nafs* (purification of the soul), *ikhlas* (sincerity), and *adl* (justice). Sufism offers constructive criticism by emphasizing that politics cannot be separated from spirituality, as both are part of the unity of life within the framework of *tawhid*. Therefore, the Sufi approach can function not only as a critique of secularism but also as an alternative model of leadership that integrates the vision of modernization with moral-spiritual transformation. This prophetic leadership model rooted in Sufism is relevant to the contemporary Islamic world, which is facing the challenges of modernization while also needing to preserve the ethical and spiritual foundations of society.

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