

Exaggerating and Exploiting the Sheikh Said Rebellion of 1925 for Political Gains

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Abstract

The religious and nationalist nature of the Sheikh Said Rebellion in 1925 has been debated by the scholars for decades. For the Kurdish nationalists the rebellion symbolized the Kurdish struggle for an independent state. For the Turkish state, it was another deception by Great Britain to stir up the region for its colonialist interests. Newly available sources in the US diplomatic archives raise the question of the Turkish government's fomentation and/or manipulation of the Sheikh Said Rebellion. In addition, some of the Turkish oppositional leaders (such as Kazım Karabekir) of the time suggested that this rebellion was allowed to happen to suppress the political opposition in Turkey. This research examines the validity of these claims and how this rebellion was manipulated to silence political opposition in Turkey. More specifically, this paper will seek answers to the following questions: Was the Sheikh Said Rebellion fomented by the Turkish government to eliminate the political opposition? How was this rebellion manipulated to accomplish this aim?

Keywords: *Kurds, Sheikh Said Revolt, Turkey, Independence Tribunals, Progressive Republican Party*

Considering all he had gone through, it was almost touching to see Mustafa Kemal Pasha's exuberant joy.

"After you take Smyrna, Pasha, you will rest, you have struggled so hard."

"Rest, what rest? After the Greeks we will fight each other, we will eat each other."

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“Why should we?” I said. “There will be an enormous amount of work to do in the way of reconstruction.”

“What about the men who have opposed me?”

“Well, it was natural in a National Assembly.”

He had been talking in a bantering tone, but now his eyes sparkled dangerously as he mentioned the names of two men from the second group [the opposition party].

“I will have them lynched by the people. No, we will not rest, we will kill each other.”

Halide Edib Adivar, *The Turkish Ordeal*¹

This conversation, which must have taken place in 1922 between Halide Edib (Adivar), one of the most influential women in the War of Independence, and Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk), the founder of the new Turkish Republic, is indicative of the power struggle to come. Mustafa Kemal was keenly aware of this fact; he was readying himself for another battle on the political front.

Indeed, one of the most significant and consequential developments that shaped the nature and future of the Turkish state stems from the power struggle that took place in the early years of the new regime. Among the respected figures that led in the War of Independence, Mustafa Kemal was one of the earliest leaders to position himself for such a power struggle. There is no doubt that Mustafa Kemal emerged as the supreme leader of the new state after an initial and relatively short power struggle that lasted only five years, from 1920, when the Turkish Grand National Assembly was inaugurated, to 1925, when a law called *Takrir-i Sükun* (Law on the Maintenance of Order) was passed. This law eliminated virtually all opposition to Mustafa Kemal and his inner circle. Throughout republican history, it has been regarded as the most important sign of the dictatorial spirit and practice that the Kemalists embraced during the early years of the republic. In light of conclusive evidence, we can safely argue that the Kemalists did not question the undemocratic nature of the early Turkish Republic. Instead, they developed counter-arguments suggesting that such heavy-handed policies were necessary to protect the infant regime.

As will be discussed below, the *Takrir-i Sükun* was a direct result of the Sheikh Said Rebellion in 1925. It has often been postulated that this Kurdish/reactionary rebellion posed a very serious threat to the new

¹ Halide Edib Adivar, *The Turkish Ordeal* (New York, London: The Century Co., 1928), 355.

Turkish regime and required swift and decisive action.² However, it is the central thesis of this study that the rebellion greatly benefited the Kemalist government (the Republican People's Party, or RPP), by completely silencing the political opposition (the Progressive Republican Party, or PRP) in parliament. This law allowed Mustafa Kemal to implement his radical Westernizing reforms without any political challenge.³ In this context, the present study will examine the following questions: (1) Did the radicals in the Turkish government foment or manipulate the Sheikh Said Rebellion in order to silence the political, intellectual and possibly also popular opposition? (2) How did this rebellion affect the power struggle in parliament? In other words, this study will examine the process by which the radical wing in the RPP established itself as the only authority to shape the future of modern Turkey.

The Sheikh Said Rebellion commenced on 13 February 1925 in Piran (later Dicle, administratively tied to Diyarbakır). The rebels quickly captured many towns in the region and came as far as Diyarbakır. Initially, the rebels were successful in defeating several local military units; however, when the government mobilized and dispatched larger units, the rebellion was contained within two months. Sheikh Said and his 47 followers were tried and hung on 29 June 1925. Since many earlier studies have already dealt with the narrative of the Sheikh Said Rebellion and its Islamist *vs.* Kurdish nationalist nature,⁴ I will limit myself here to introducing a number of unexplored archival documents regarding the revolt. This exercise, I believe, will allow us to answer the questions posed above.

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- 2 Many Turkish daily newspapers at the time described the rebellion as both Kurdish nationalist and Islamists/reactionary movement. See Ebbuziyazade, "Hadisenin Ehemmiyet ve Fecaati," *Tevhid-i Efkar*, 25 February 1925, as printed in Nurer Uğurlu, *Kürt Milliyetçiliği: Kürtler ve Şeyh Said İsyanı* (Istanbul: Örgün, 2006), 536. Ahmet Emin Yalman in his article "İsyanın Saikleri" claims that this movement was a feudal and reactionary (*irticai*) movement and that Kurdish nationalism was not a primary motivation; see "İsyanın Saikleri," *Vatan*, 15 May 1925; in Uğurlu, *Kürt Milliyetçiliği*, 577. Nurer Uğurlu has collected and published newspaper clips related to this rebellion in 1925; see, *Kürt Milliyetçiliği*, 519-612. For a literature review on the nature of the rebellion, see Yaşar Kalafat, *Şark Meselesi Işığında Şeyh Said Olayı, Karakteri, Dönemindeki İç ve Dış Olaylar* (Ankara: Boğaziçi, 1992), 179-289.
- 3 According to Metin Toket, son-in-law of İsmet Pasha (İnönü), who became Prime Minister at the time of the revolt, the new reforms were incompatible with the freedom that the Kemalists pledged. Hence, in order to eliminate the opposition and introduce the reforms, the Kemalists postponed implementing democracy, and this revolt was instrumental in that regard Metin Toket, *Şeyh Said ve İsyanı* (Ankara: Akis, 1968), 44.
- 4 Ibid; Robert Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism* (Austin: University of Texas, 1991); Behçet Cemal, *Şeyh Said İsyanı* (Istanbul: Sel, 1955); Aziz Aşan, *Şeyh Said Ayaklanması* (Istanbul: n.p., 1991); Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan* (London and New Jersey: Zed, 1992); Wadie Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National Movement: Its Origins and Developments* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2006).

Some Observations on the Sheikh Said Rebellion and its Aftermath

The first observation concerns the cost of the rebellion, which reveals clues about the financial impact of the revolt on the new regime. If the Turkish government fomented the rebellion in order to conspire against the newly formed political opposition, it would be reasonable to expect that a sufficient budget had been allocated to it. On this aspect, much conflicting information exists.⁵ According to US consular reports, which so far have not been utilized to study this revolt, the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TGNA) approved a budget of 10 million Turkish Lira (USD 5 million) for the arms purchases from Poland.⁶ On 27 March 1925, the US military attaché in Turkey stated in his report that “[t]he Turkish Minister of National Defense told a foreign military attaché that the expenses of his department [for] the suppression of the Kurdish revolt would be 7,000,000 Turkish pounds [or Liras, approximately USD 3,5 million] up to the 1st of April.”⁷ Another US report confirms this number, indicating the Turkish Joint Chief of Staff as its source.⁸ The same figure of 7,000,000 Turkish pounds was given, this time to the Italian military attaché. The US observers seemed to be surprised about such a high expense for the suppression of the rebellion, for it seemed that the revolt was not a very successful one. However, the US diplomats concluded that the Turkish minister or Joint Chief of Staff had no reason to exaggerate.⁹

Another US document informs us of the total figure of the cost. Sheldon L. Crosby, the US *chargé d'affaires*, on 27 August 1925 relayed a valuable report by an unnamed US military attaché to Washington. This report details the Turkish budget for the year 1925 and the estimated cost of the Sheikh Said Rebellion.¹⁰ According to this report, the budget for the fiscal year from 1 March 1925 to 28 February 1926 was 153,046,854 Turkish pounds (USD 84,175,770), and the expendi-

5 Mete Tunçay has quoted Abdurrahman Chassem Lou (Gassemlou), who gives a figure of 20 million British Pound Sterling, and a Kurdish prince (Süreyya Bedirhan), who gives a figure of 60,000,000 Turkish Lira. See Mete Tunçay, *Türkiye Cumhuriyetinde Tek Parti Yönetiminin Kurulması* (Istanbul: Tarih Vakfı, 1999), 143, n. 16. Judging from the estimates on the loss of Turkish lives, which these authors give as 20,000 and 50,000 respectively, Tunçay has correctly concluded that these figures are gross exaggerations. Robert Olson has misquoted the figure of 20 million as 20,000 British Pound Sterling; see Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism*, 126.

6 See the report numbered 867.00/1863 by Bristol to the Department of State, dated 13 March 1925, in “Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Turkey, 1910-29,” (The United States Department of State).

7 Ibid., file numbered 867.00/1866.

8 Ibid., 867.00/1864.

9 Ibid., 867.00/1852.

10 Ibid., 867.00/1889, from Sheldon Levitt Crosby to the Secretary of the State, 27 August 1925.

ture 183,932,777 Turkish pounds (USD 101,163,030), which created a deficit of 30,885,923 Turkish pounds (USD 15,987,250).¹¹ Another report, entitled “Cost of Suppression of Kurdish Rebellion,” indicates that

[t]he [Turkish] government officially published ten million Turkish pounds as the cost of the suppression of the uprising. However, government officials now admit that the cost is twenty million pounds, and information comes from a reliable source that the cost is thirty million pounds. The latter estimate is believed to be nearer correct. The amount does include the pay and upkeep of the forces mobilized.¹²

These figures indicate that 16.3 percent of the total budget of the fiscal year 1925/26 went to the suppression of the rebellion.

If the US estimates on the cost of the rebellion were correct, then this figure nearly matched the budget deficit. By all accounts, the cost of 60,000,000 Liras given by Süreyya Bedirhan seems to be an exaggeration, as was the estimation by Hamit Bozarslan, who claims that 35 percent of the total budget went to the suppression of this revolt.¹³ In any case, the cost of the rebellion was an additional burden on the Turkish government. Accordingly, we can safely assume that the rebellion was a major reason for the budget deficit and that the government was unprepared for the revolt, at least financially. In other words, even if the Turkish government planted the rebellion, financially it was not prepared for it. However, this certainly does not mean that Ankara did not exaggerate and manipulate the rebellion in terms of its danger to the emerging state and its potential for a counter-revolution supported by the political opposition.

True, two US consular reports (files no. 867.00/1853 and 1855) inform us that the general view in Turkey was that Sheikh Said had been on the British payroll from 1918 to 1922. These reports hardly go beyond informing Washington of the rumors circulating in Turkey, and no conclusive evidence is presented to substantiate this claim.¹⁴ The Turk-

11 Ibid., 867.00/1889, “General State Budget, 1925-1926-Turkey,” # 4471, 21 July 1925.

12 Ibid., 867.00/1889, “Cost of Suppression of Kurdish Rebellion,” # 4515, 14 August 1925.

13 For Bedirhan’s claim, see Tunçay, *Tek Parti Yönetimi*, 143, n. 16. For Bozarslan, see “Les Revoltes Kurdes En Turquie Kemaliste (Quelques Aspects),” *Guerres Mondiales et Conflits Contemporains*, no. 151 (1988), particularly n. 3 on p. 121; also Hamid Bozarslan, “Türkiye’de Kürt Milliyetçiliği: Zimni Sözleşmeden Ayaklanmaya (1919-1925),” in *İmparatorluktan Cumhuriyete Türkiye’de Etnik Çatışma*, ed. Erik Jan Zürcher (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2005), 90.

14 Another report, also in 867.00/1853, mentions the belief that the Ottoman dynasty supported the

ish side had long maintained that the British incited the rebellion in order to get concessions on the Mosul issue. However, a British archival document is significant here, for it entertains the possible Turkish association with the revolt. Coming from a British intelligence analyst, this is an extraordinary allegation. If properly documented, this claim could certainly present the conclusive evidence we have been seeking regarding the Kemalists' involvement in the revolt. However, this report does not go beyond speculation either. We encounter this British report in F. O. 371/10867, where James Morgan, a British intelligence analyst, speculates as to the reasons why Turkey would support and benefit from the Sheikh Said Rebellion:

It is known that His Majesty's Government at *one time or another have interested themselves in a Kurdish State* [emphasis mine], and a good portion of the inhabitants of the Mosul Vilayet are Kurds. The Turks seek to regain possession of the Mosul Vilayet partly because they do not wish the Kurds of that Vilayet to remain under British control, and in time to become the nucleus of an independent Kurdistan under British influence which would attract to itself Kurdish territories now under Turkish rule, or at least from a focus of dissatisfaction against Turkey to the Kurds inhabiting Turkey.

If the present rising has been engineered by Angora and exists, attracting to itself, numerous "deserters" from the Turkish regular forces. We may hear that the successful rebels have determined to free their brothers in the Mosul Vilayet, and for that purpose have crossed the present frontier, aided by the deserting Turkish troops, in order to take possession of Mosul. If this were so, they would, on obtaining possession of the Mosul Vilayet, probably surrender to Turkey, leaving Turkey in possession of the conquered territory.

Another possibility is that a successful rising in Turkey (countenanced by Angora) might be taken as a pretext for a rising of Kurds in Irak (also engineered by Angora) to throw off the Irak yoke and proclaim union with the Turkish Kurds, all ultimately submitting to Angora.

A further possibility is that the rising may afford a pretext for a concentration of Turkish troops on the Irak frontier, who might ultimately find it their duty to pursue flying Turkish rebels across the Irak border.

rebellion. This claim was not substantiated either.

The [Turkish]¹⁵ government pretended to take the view that the movement is reactionary and due to certain influences playing on the religious instincts of the rebels. The attempt to use religion as a cloak for treason is strongly condemned. At the same time reactionary and religious movement afford the Government the opportunity of seeking out under cover of martial law of its opponents of whatever colour and of dealing with them. While martial law has not been declared in Constantinople, the idea has been mooted, and it may be that 'Independence Tribunals' will again be set up there.¹⁶

First of all, it must be noted that this view was not uniformly accepted by British intelligence analysts.¹⁷ Nevertheless, what is interesting about this report is that it reverses the Turkish claim that the Mosul issue was the primary motive for the belief that Great Britain incited or supported the Sheikh Said Rebellion. This report suggests that the very same issue could be interpreted to support the opposite claim—that is, the Turks fomented the revolt in order to control Mosul. Incidentally, this report is also a rare one by a British officer to solidly confirm the interests of the British government in establishing a Kurdish state.

However, James Morgan's "Memorandum" is particularly insightful, as it suspected that another reason for the Turks planting the revolt would be the elimination of the religious opposition. Here we should remember that this report was dated 4 March 1925, the same date as the passing of the *Takrir-i Sükun* in parliament. It is very likely that the report was sent before the British had full knowledge of the content of the *Takrir-i Sükun*, which would certainly further validate the British suspicion that the rebellion could be used as a pretext to deal with the religious opposition. Furthermore, the British analysts also entertained the possibility that the same revolt could be used to silence the entire political and intellectual opposition in Turkey, not just the religious one. It must be repeated that there exists no conclusive evidence to substantiate the Kemalist instigation of the revolt. We have the court reports and eyewitness accounts regarding the trial of Sheikh Said.¹⁸ We know that Sheikh Said did not make any such claim, even after he was sentenced to death by hanging, or during his execution. Therefore, bolstering this

15 The word "Turkish" is inserted into the document in handwriting.

16 "Memorandum: The Kurdish Revolt," by James Morgan, 4 March 1925. FO 371/10867, E 1360/1091/44.

17 A cover letter by D. A. Osborne in the same file disagrees with James Morgan's speculation.

18 See Ahmet Süreyya Örguevren, *Şeyh Said İsyanı ve Şark İstiklal Mahkemesi* (Istanbul: Temel, 2002), 171-280. These pages are entirely devoted to the trial and based on court documents.

claim there is only circumstantial evidence and the fact that the revolt helped the Kemalists more than it did the Kurds.

D. A. Osborne, another British officer in the Foreign Office, informs us that even French authorities in Syria entertained the possibility that the revolt was “fictitious” or exaggerated. Osborne stated that “we have seen in a telegram from Aleppo that the French authorities in Syria are inclined to regard the [Sheikh Said] rising as fictitious or largely exaggerated, which implies some ulterior purpose.”¹⁹ Foreign observers seemed to agree that the government in Ankara was trying to exaggerate the rebellion; however, for what purpose was a question that remained unanswered.

In order to look further into the circumstantial evidence on the exploitation of the rebellion for political gains, we should turn our attention to political developments in Ankara. For example, a close examination of the timetable of the revolt can shed light on the issue under examination—that is, the silencing of the opposition, embodied by the PRP under the leadership of Kazım (Karabekir), Rauf (Orbay), Ali Fuat (Cebesoy), all one-time close associates of Mustafa Kemal.

When the rebellion broke out on 13 February, the government was headed by the moderate Fethi Bey (Okyar) of the RPP. After assessing the urgency of the rebellion based on the telegrams he irregularly received (due to the rebels cutting off the telegram lines), on 23 February the government declared a one-month-long state of emergency in the “rebellion territories.” Fethi Bey was able to collect sufficient information to prepare his first report to the TGNA eleven days after the rebellion had broken out.²⁰ In his speech, Fethi Bey described the rebellion as local and explained his government’s policy in dealing with the rebels.²¹ Ahmet Süreyya Bey (Örgeevren), then a member of the Turkish Parliament and later a prosecutor for the Eastern Independence Tribunals that tried Sheikh Said and his followers, is one of the most informative primary sources on Ankara’s response to this rebellion. In his memoir, Süreyya Bey remembers that, prior to Fethi Bey’s speech, Mustafa Kemal in private meetings showed grave concern that the rebellion would spread nationwide.²² Mustafa Kemal’s concern is also documented in

19 FO 371/10867, E 1360/1091/44. Osborne goes on to disagree with the claim that the uprising was entirely fictitious.

20 It was first Cemil Bey, the Minister of Internal Affairs, who informed the TGNA about a rebellion in Kurdistan on 18 February 1925; this report described the rebellion as the activities of brigands headed by Sheikh Said. Hence, the first assessment of the revolt did not categorize it either as a religious or Kurdish uprising. Örgeevren, *Şeyh Said İsyanı*, 46-47.

21 US Department of State, file numbered 867.00/1852.

22 Örgeevren, *Şeyh Said İsyanı*, 48.

another source. Kazım (Özalp) Pasha, the President of the Turkish Parliament, informs us of a meeting that took place in his office. We do not know the exact date of this meeting, but it must have taken place before 3 March 1925, when Fethi Bey resigned from his position as Prime Minister. Present at this meeting were Fethi Bey, Mustafa Kemal Pasha and Kazım Pasha (Özalp), who in his memoir remembers this meeting as follows:

Mustafa Kemal asked Fethi Bey in my room what kind of preparations the government has been undertaking [regarding the rebellion]. Fethi Bey responded, "Rebels and inciters will be sent to military courts (*Divan-ı Harb*). Mustafa Kemal was not satisfied and stated that "*the real inciters are hiding in different parts of the country. Do you not think that the government needs to expand its area of investigation?*" [Emphasis mine.] Fethi responded, "If you like, I can resign."²³

Offering his resignation rather than complying with Mustafa Kemal's inquiry certainly suggests that Fethi Bey was not convinced of the president's argument. Thus, a striking question arises: Did Mustafa Kemal have better intelligence on the rebellion than the government, did he not share it with the government, or was he simply exaggerating? How is it possible that looking at the same data, Mustafa Kemal Pasha and Fethi Bey arrived at conclusions strikingly contradictory to each other? Kemalist historiography tends to question the statesmanship of Fethi Bey in failing to immediately recognize the severity of the rebellion.²⁴ It seems highly unlikely that Mustafa Kemal would have been able collect better intelligence in such a short time (less than ten days) to warrant such caution.

It is possible that Mustafa Kemal regarded this rebellion as the commencement of a nationwide counter-revolution and was extremely

23 Kazım Özalp, *Atatürk'ten Anılar* (Ankara: Türkiye İş Bankası, 1992), 38.

24 An often-cited story narrates that, when the news of the rebellion arrived in Ankara, Fethi Bey was in Çankaya, at the president's residence, playing a card game. After reading the telegram, Mustafa Kemal, at another table, asked his aide to pass it on to Fethi, who, after looking at the news only in a cursory manner, continued to play cards. Then Mustafa Kemal forwarded the message to İsmet Pasha (İnönü) at the third table. İsmet's reaction to the telegram was in stark contrast to that of Fethi. İsmet immediately stood up and looked very nervous. Then Mustafa Kemal turned to his guests at his table and pointed out the difference between the two men in regard to their attentiveness to the problems faced by the country. One of the men at the table was Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu, Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu, *Politikada 45 Yıl* (İstanbul: Bilgi, 1968), 78. See also Toker, *Şeyh Said ve İsyanı*, 48-49. Needless to say, this is a very crude and incorrect observation, but an important one to show Mustafa Kemal's favoritism of İsmet Pasha. For the criticism of Fethi Bey, see Örguevren, *Şeyh Said İsyanı*, 45-46.

suspicious about it. Yet, it is equally possible that he wanted to benefit from this “timely” rebellion in order to silence his critics and, therefore, needed to exaggerate it. Rıza Nur, a former Minister of Health and a one-time close associate and later opponent of Mustafa Kemal, echoed a view to which many of Mustafa Kemal’s opponents subscribed when he describes the rebellion as “god-sent” to eradicate the opposition.²⁵ Here it should be mentioned that we lack conclusive evidence to subscribe to either possibility. However, we may have once more circumstantial evidence suggesting that the radicals in the Ankara Government intentionally overestimated the strength of the revolt. For example, the known scale and strength of the rebellion in the first weeks did not justify the vigilance that Mustafa Kemal demonstrated. Fethi Bey’s report to the TGNA clearly indicated that the government was convinced of the limited scope of the rebellion and confirmed the military’s ability to crush it.²⁶ The US consular reports also indicate that the Sheikh Said Rebellion was not spreading.²⁷ In another report dated as late as 8 April 1925, the US military attaché observed:

From a strictly military point of view, the revolt was never sufficiently widespread as to cause alarm, and the steady advance of the regulars [Turkish military], since the inception of their offensive, gives good reason to believe that order and tranquility will be restored in the near future except in certain mountainous regions.²⁸

The statement that “the revolt was *never* sufficiently widespread as to cause alarm” is also consistent with the position adopted by Fethi Bey and contradicts the hard-line position of İsmet Pasha’s government that came to power on 4 March 1925. As mentioned above, the exaggeration of the rebellion was also an alternate view of some British military analysts. D. A. Osborne at the Foreign Office, for example, suggested that, “once the revolt broke out its seriousness may have been exaggerated to enable [Mustafa] Kemal to reinstate İsmet [İnönü] as Prime Minister and to institute a variety of repressive measures against the rising tide of criticism and oppression.”²⁹ Osborne’s assessment seems to be a valid one. Indeed, İsmet Pasha became Prime Minister one more time as a

25 Rıza Nur, *Hayat ve Hatıralarım*, vol. 4 (İstanbul: Altındağ, 1968), 1324.

26 For the full text of Fethi Bey’s report to the parliament, see *Ibid.*, 49–55.

27 See the file numbered 867.00/1852 in “Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Turkey, 1910–29,” (The United States Department of State).

28 US Department of State, file numbered 867.00/1864.

29 FO 371/10867, E 1360/1091/44.

result of this revolt.

In any event, on 2 March 1925, the RPP, the party in power, convened a closed meeting in order to re-consider their position towards the government's response to the rebellion. It was an extraordinary move since only several days before, in a parliamentary session, Fethi Bey's program for suppressing the rebellion had been overwhelmingly endorsed.³⁰ In the party meeting, Recep Bey (Peker), the spokesperson for the radical wing of the RPP, suggested that the government's response to the rebellion was inadequate and that harsh measures were necessary.³¹ Fethi Bey could not hide his astonishment at this move, but responded:

I am surprised by Recep Bey's objection [to the government's handling of the revolt]. Because we inherited this last rebellion, which was the continuation of the previous Nasturi rebellion [...] from Recep Bey. He was then the Minister of the Interior. At that time, he did not take any [concerned] measure. Now what is the reason for him subscribing to violence and anger?³²

A newspaper article is useful to demonstrate the attitude of the only opposition party, the PRP, regarding the radicals' new move. Published on 1 April 1925 by the daily *Hakimiyet-i Milliye*, an RPP organ, the article mentions a speech by Kazım Karabekir, the leader of the opposition party: "Kazım Karabekir Pasha's speech astonished us. According to the respectful General, the government knew that a rebellion was in the making. Yet it did not do anything to prevent it in order to use it possibly as a pretext to crush the opposition party."³³ The article does not specify as to where and when Kazım Karabekir made such a statement; however, there is no reason to doubt that such an accusation was leveled against the government. What is significant here is that Kazım Karabekir's accusation matches that of Fethi Bey. Clearly, Kazım Karabekir, like Fethi Bey, was implying that the previous İsmet Pasha Government ignored the warnings. Kazım Karabekir went further and boldly suggested that the government's aim was to silence the opposition.

Based on Fethi Bey's and Kazım Karabekir's statements, can one suggest that the government purposefully allowed the Sheikh Said Rebellion to happen? It is very tempting to respond to this question positively. After all, the same accusation came from members of two opposing par-

30 Ali Fuat Cebesoy, *Siyasi Hatıralar*, vol. 2 (Istanbul: Doğan Kardeş, 1960), 146-147.

31 Feridun Kandemir, *Siyasi Dargınlıklar*, vol. 3 (Istanbul: Ekicigil, 1955), 70.

32 Ibid., 71.

33 The article was published in Ibid., 85-87.

ties. However, we cannot go any further than pointing out that the accusations came from different credible sources, yet fall short of providing any hard evidence. What we can state with any degree of confidence is the following: the radicals in the RPP wanted to topple Fethi Bey's government, and they were encouraged by Mustafa Kemal to increase their criticism of the moderate government.

At this point, it is important to note that there were attempts by Mustafa Kemal and İsmet Pasha to tame the İstanbul Press and the newly formed opposition party, the PRP, with the accusation that these two groups intentionally incited reactionaries. Avni Doğan, a member of the TGNA, remembers a secret meeting requested by Mustafa Kemal in an RPP meeting. Doğan does not give us any specific date for this meeting, but mentions that the İsmet Pasha Government resigned and that Fethi Bey formed a new government the next day. He must have been referring to 21 November 1924, for we know that İsmet Pasha resigned from his premiership on this date and that Fethi Bey became the new Prime Minister the following day. In this meeting, Mustafa Kemal shared his concern regarding the İstanbul Press and the newly formed opposition party, the PRP, which had been established on 17 October 1924, a month before this meeting. The worried Mustafa Kemal began by stating:

I invited you here to decide on a significant issue. Negative incitements (*menfi tahrikat*) in the country have reached dangerous levels. Propagation by the İstanbul Press and the PRP encourages reactionaries who have been hiding here and there. [...] Available laws are far from protecting our reforms and the new Republic. [...] Even in the most progressive democracies harsh measures have been taken. We also need preventive measures to protect [our] reforms. Therefore, the Prime Minister and I examined the situation. İsmet Pasha is of the opinion that we need some legislative measurements to support the executive branch and the police. What do you think?³⁴

Avni Doğan informs us that the majority in the meeting did not share Mustafa Kemal's pessimism and the proposed harsh legislative adjustments. Upon hearing this, Mustafa Kemal smiled and said:

I smell blood and gunpowder. I hope I am wrong. Fethi Bey thinks he can govern the country without such a precaution. Today Prime

34 Avni Doğan, *Kurtuluş, Kuruluş ve Sonrası* (İstanbul: Dünya, 1964), 165-166.

Minister İsmet Pasha will resign and the new government will be formed by Fethi Bey. Keep our meeting a secret.³⁵

Considering that this meeting took place before the Sheikh Said Rebellion, it should not be far-fetched to suggest that Mustafa Kemal and İsmet Pasha were exploring the possibilities of silencing the opposition in the name of protecting the infant regime. This discussion provides valuable evidence that the Sheikh Said Rebellion was open to exploitation and manipulation and that specific motives certainly existed.

Fethi Bey remained in power only 103 days. On 3 March 1925, Fethi Bey gave his resignation to Mustafa Kemal, and consequently İsmet Pasha was again appointed Prime Minister. The very next day the *Takrir-i Sükun* passed through parliament. Before looking at how İsmet Pasha's government dealt with the revolt in the region and the political opposition nationwide, a very significant but often overlooked detail needs to be examined. This will give us further clues about the intentions of Mustafa Kemal and his close associates to dominate the political landscape by muting the opposition.

We know that on 25 February 1925, only twelve days after the break-up of the Sheikh Said Rebellion, Prime Minister Fethi (Okyar) Bey invited Kazım Karabekir, the chairman of the PRP, Rauf Bey, and Ali Fuat Pasha to a private meeting. During the meeting, Fethi Bey said: "I was charged with the duty to ask you to close down your party on your own. Otherwise, I see the future very dark. Much blood will be shed."³⁶ To this open threat, Kazım Karabekir replied: "On legal grounds we can form a political party; but closing it down is beyond our ability. You are in the government. You possess the power and the means [to close down our party]. If this is your wish, you can certainly accomplish it by yourself."³⁷ After hearing that Kazım Karabekir had no intention of surrendering, Fethi Bey apologized, stating: "I am deeply sorry to come to you with such a demand. As you well know, I oppose all forced action (*örfi muamele*). [But] I am afraid that I will be in the minority."³⁸ Who did charge Fethi Bey, the Prime Minister, with such an improper mission? Ergün Aybars, a specialist on the Independence Tribunals, and Metin Toker, the son-in-law of İsmet Pasha, suggest that nobody but Mustafa

35 Ibid., 166.

36 Fethi Bey asked Şükri Bey (Kaya), the Minister of Foreign Affairs, to carry out the invitation. Ali Fuat Bey was not able to attend the meeting; instead Dr. Adnan Bey (Adivar) participated in the meeting. See Cebesoy, *Siyasi Hatıralar*, 143.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

Kemal had the means to order Fethi Bey to carry this message.³⁹ On this subject, Aybars and Toker cannot be challenged. Fethi was probably carrying Mustafa Kemal Pasha's note, which clearly indicates that political opposition would not be tolerated. In any case, Ali Fuat Pasha in his memoir stated that before the meeting was concluded, Kazım Karabekir Pasha confirmed his party's support for the government in dealing with the rebellion.⁴⁰

Kazım Karabekir Pasha's refusal to comply with the "suggestion" of dissolving his party indicates that he must have been keenly aware of the intention of the radical group in the RPP to take every measure to eliminate the opposition. Yet, the following events proved that neither Kazım Karabekir nor the other members of the PRP had any idea of the extremes to which the radicals were willing to go in order to establish their rule without any political opposition. Aware that the radical faction in the RPP was undermining the moderate Fethi Bey government, the PRP decided to do all it could to keep Fethi Bey's government in power. Therefore, it should not be a surprise that the very next day the PRP joined in the RPP to pass Law No. 556, which banned the use of religion for political gains.⁴¹ Ironically, although it was not this law but the infamous *Takrir-i Sükun* that was utilized for the closing of the PRP several months later, the use of religion for political gains was one of the major accusations leveled against the members of the PRP. We can now turn our attention to the *Takrir-i Sükun*, the law that effectively silenced the opposition.

Parliamentary Discussions About the *Takrir-i Sükun*⁴²

When Fethi Bey resigned from his position as Prime Minister, İsmet Pasha became the new Premier and immediately introduced a new bill to the TGNA in its meeting on 4 March 1925, a bill that caused much controversy. This bill, numbered 1/638 and named *Takrir-i Sükun*, played a decisive role in the future of the new Republic. With its draconian content, the bill (later Law No. 589) became the most significant instrument for the radical Kemalists to silence the internal opposition,

39 Ergün Aybars, *İstiklal Mahkemeleri 1920-1927* (İzmir: 9 Eylül Üniversitesi, 1988), 359. See also Toker, *Şeyh Said ve İsyanı*, 47.

40 Cebesoy, *Siyasi Hatıralar*, 143.

41 This point was also raised by İsmail Göldaş. He has suggested that the main reason for the support that Kazım Karabekir gave the government regarding Law No. 556 was to keep the moderate wing of the Kemalists in power. Another reason would be that the PRP equally feared the use of religion for political gain. See İsmail Göldaş, *Takrir-i Sükun Görüşmeleri* (İstanbul: Belge, 1997), 402.

42 Unless otherwise indicated, the text of the discussions derive from TGNA's *Zabıt Cerideleri*, vol. XV, 131-149. Translation mine.

by legitimizing its suppression.

In the session held on 4 March 1925, the new Prime Minister İsmet Pasha introduced the new bill to parliament as follows:

To the exalted Presidium and the Grand National Assembly of Turkey.

Because of the necessity demonstrated by the recent extraordinary circumstances and events, in order to strengthen the power of the Turkish Republic and to safeguard the foundations of the revolution and in order to persecute and subject quickly the foolhardy ones who are harming and humiliating the innocent masses, through the adoption of the necessary measures against the reactionary and subversive actions and initiatives which may threaten the safety, law and order and social structures in the country, I request you to agree that this bill, which has been approved in the cabinet meeting of 4 March 1925, be submitted to the exalted Assembly for the approval and adoption.

The bill contained three articles:

Article 1: The government is empowered to prohibit on its own initiative and by administrative measure (subject to approval of the President) all organizations, provocations, exhortations, initiatives and publications which cause disturbance of the social structures, law and order and safety and incite to reaction and subversion. The government can hand over the perpetrators of these acts to an Independence tribunal.

Article 2: This law will be in force for a period of two years from the date of its promulgation.

Article 3: The cabinet is entrusted with the implementation of this law.⁴³

Naturally, when it was discussed in parliament, the bill encountered staunch objection from the opposition members embodied by the PRP. After the *Takrir-i Sükun* was introduced in the TGNA, Gümüşhane representative Zeki Bey, a member of the opposition, objected to the bill on the grounds that it contradicted the constitution. Since perpetrators could be referred to the Independence Tribunals, which could

43 *Zabit Cerideleri*, Vol. XV, 131. I utilized Zürcher's translation of this text; see Erik Jan Zürcher, *The Political Opposition in the Early Turkish Republic* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 160.

impose capital punishment without parliamentary approval, the opposition members were uneasy. “This bill violates the constitution,” suggested Zeki Bey, “Article 26 of the constitution is quite clear. [It stipulates that] the TGNA is responsible for [the confirmation of] capital punishment. First, Article 26 of the constitution needs to be amended; then we should be able to deliberate on the [*Takrir-i Sükun*].” In response, Karesi representative Ahmet Süreyya Bey, who later became a prosecutor with the Independence Tribunals formed to enforce the *Takrir-i Sükun*, stated that this bill had already been discussed in the Judicial Committee of the TGNA, which had decided that it did not violate the constitution.

The Dersim representative Feridun Fikri Bey’s opposition was more to the content of the bill. In his speech, Feridun Fikri objected to the bill on another ground, that it would give extraordinary power to the government, which could misuse this power by labeling people’s ordinary political activities (*faaliyet-i beşeriye*) as a threat to the security of the regime. “It is possible,” maintained Feridun Fikri, “to provide security (*emniyet*), happiness (*huzur*) and order (*sükun*), which the motherland needs, without [the *Takrir-i Sükun*].”

Drawing on this foundation, Kazım Karabekir, the chairperson of the opposing PRP, presented his objection to the bill as follows:

Dear friends, as I indicated earlier from this very lectern, we [the PRP] have supported all the legal business of the government in the region where this [Sheikh Said] incident occurred, and I repeat the pledge of our support. However, we do not support a process that puts pressures on the natural [inalienable] rights of people in this particular incident. The bill that is now before you is not clear (*gayri vazıh*) and expandable. If this bill becomes a law and if it attempts to limit the political structuring (*siyasi taazzuv*), to which our constitution has given birth, and efforts to pressure the newspapers are intended, that would mean that the people’s sovereignty will be abandoned. For this would mean that the voices of people’s representatives will not [be heard]. Passing this bill is not an honor for the history of the Republic.

As for the Independence Tribunals, as its name suggests, these courts were established during our War of Independence... If İsmet Pasha thinks that he can use these tribunals as a tool to tame [the opposition], he is gravely mistaken.

Kazım Karabekir’s fear was entirely justified, and in fact it was exactly what the government intended to do. This law would severely limit the

PRP's political activities and hence their ability to constitute any opposition in the parliament. However, they lacked the necessary political strength to stop the radicals, who constituted the majority. The Sheikh Said Revolt provided Mustafa Kemal and his radical supporters in the Republican People's Party (RPP) with an exceptional opportunity to silence the political opposition. It is not a misjudgment to suggest that the law's primary aim was not handling the Sheikh Said Revolt, but the opposition. The law contributed very little to the success of the military action taken by the government against the revolt. Fethi Bey's statement in parliament on 3 March 1925 concerning his resignation from the office of Prime Minister is noteworthy:

I understand that my colleagues do not consider the actions taken by my government concerning the rebellion adequate, and advocate for broader and stronger measures. I am of the opinion that all necessary measures required by the rebellion are in place and these measures are sufficient to suppress the rebellion. I do not want the responsibility for shedding much blood by promoting stronger measurements. Therefore, I resign from my post.⁴⁴

Although memoirs describing the Sheikh Said Rebellion deemed the revolt a significant one and criticized Fethi Bey for not being vigorous enough to undertake the necessary measures, during the *Takrir-i Sükun* deliberations speakers in favor of the bill did not make any case for the severity of the rebellion.⁴⁵ The radicals framed their argument for the necessity of the *Takrir-i Sükun* by suggesting that this revolt was the tip of an iceberg. The real problem, as they suggested, consisted in the unknown inciters of the rebellion, as they hid in many different segments of society. İsmet Pasha, responding to Kazım Karabekir's accusations of abusing the authority of the Independence Tribunals, stated that the tribunals were the only tools to provide the nation with security and order. However, in response to Rauf Bey's assertion of "I do not see the Republic in danger. Therefore, such a [drastic] law is not necessary," İsmet Pasha was polemical. After confirming that the regime was safe, İsmet Pasha rhetorically asked: "Can a Republic [like ours], which recognizes the dangers and takes necessary measures, be in danger?" This answer did not really respond to the question posed by Rauf, who wanted to learn whether or not the government considered the revolt an immi-

44 Quoted in Örguevren, *Şeyh Said İsyanı*, 60.

45 Örgueveren's memoir can be considered an example of those which described the rebellion an urgent danger to the republic; see, *Ibid.*, 47-48.

ment threat to the state. In parliamentary discussions, İsmet Pasha did not speak to the specific danger that the Sheikh Said Revolt posed, but instead chose to present the issue as a general security concern instigated by unnamed individuals and groups hiding outside the rebellion's area. However, there was little doubt in the TGNA that the real target was the political opposition. For that reason, the discussions on the 69th parliamentary session dated 4 March 1925 focused on how this law would affect general individual liberty in the country, not on how this law would help suppress the rebellion.

In fact, almost exactly two years later, İsmet Pasha clearly stated that the real danger was not the Sheikh Said Revolt; it was the general confusion and the degenerate intellectuals (*mütereddi münevverler*).⁴⁶ These people were hiding within the general population as journalists and politicians and needed to be weeded out. Thus, while in appearance this law was serving a noble cause, in reality the *Takrir-i Sükun* conferred an extraordinary power upon the government to monopolize the definition of these "degenerate intellectuals" and the newspapers and political parties in which they hid themselves. In general it was the oppositional press (mainly in İstanbul) and the PRP that were targeted as the main opposition in parliament.

In any case, the bill became Law No. 589 on 4 March 1925, with 122 votes in favor and 22 votes against, all of which were cast by the PRP members present at the voting. The PRP did not muster enough votes to block the *Takrir-i Sükun*. After this vote, in the same session, İsmet Pasha requested the formation of two Independence Tribunals, one in Ankara and one in the region where the military operations were taking place (*harekat-ı askeriye muntıkası*). What is most consequential about this development is that, while the Ankara tribunal still needed the parliament's approval to carry out capital punishment, the other tribunal—based mainly in Diyarbakır—did not need such approval.⁴⁷ The judgment of the latter would be final and carried out immediately.⁴⁸ This tribunal was going to judge cases that were related to the rebellion and that took place within the defined region where the rebellion took place. The Ankara tribunal was assigned to deal with cases outside the jurisdiction of the Eastern Independence Tribunal. In practice, the Eastern tribunal was involved in cases that were technically beyond their

46 Quoted in Tunçay, *Tek Parti Yönetimi*, 145.

47 For the text, see *Ibid.*, 146, n. 19. Later the Ankara Tribunal was also granted the right to carry out capital punishment without the TGNA's approval.

48 On 31 March 1925, a proposal empowered even the lowest-ranking field commanders to execute death sentences without delay and appeal. See Law No. 595.

jurisdiction.⁴⁹

Another significant development that sealed the fortune of the PRP was the election of the members of the Independence Tribunals. The election took place on 7 March 1925. Expectedly, the members elected for these tribunals were close associates of Mustafa Kemal, and many of them belonged to the most radical wing of the RPP.⁵⁰

The Closing of the PRP

Mustafa Kemal was not favorably disposed towards the formation of the new party, fearing mainly that such a division would encourage the opponents of the emerging and fragile regime. There were also some radicals in the government who did not like any criticism and were threatened by the high prestige and outstanding reputation of some members of the PRP leaders (such as Rauf Orbay, General Ali Fuat Cebesoy, and General Kazım Karabekir) among the populace. A US consular report sent by Admiral Mark L. Bristol, the US High Commissioner, to the US Secretary of State evinces this point. In this particular dispatch, Mark Bristol included his "War Diary" that informed Washington DC about his trip to Ankara to meet Turkish ministers and also Prime Minister İsmet Pasha. The entry dated 25 April 1925 gives a transcript of the conversation that took place between İsmet Pasha and Admiral Bristol, as interpreted by Mr. Shaw. This meeting took place in İsmet Pasha's residence in Ankara and lasted one hour, during which time Bristol brought up the issue of political opposition. Below is the translation of this conversation by Mr. Shaw, a member of the US consulate:

The conversation then drifted to the difficulties of political life, especially the difficulty of handling a parliament. The Admiral asked İsmet Pasha point blank what he thought of a two-party system. İsmet Pasha replied that two parties were clearly desirable. He made this statement; however, it seemed to me, with very little conviction. The Admiral pointed out that the advantage of having two parties

49 See Örguevren, *Şeyh Said İsyanı*, 132-149.

50 The Rebellion Region Tribunal consisted of the following persons: Chair: Mazhar Müfit (Kansu) of Denizli, later replaced by Ali Saib (Ursavaş) of Urfa; Prosecutor: Süreyya (Örguevren) of Karesi; Member: Ali Saib (when he became the chair, he was replaced by İbrahim of Kocaeli); Member: Lütfi Müfit (Özdeş) of Kırşehir; Substitute: Avni Doğan of Bozok. The Ankara Independence Tribunal was chaired by Ali (Çetinkaya) of Afyon. He was responsible for the killing of Halit Pasha in the corridor of the assembly at the beginning of February 1925. Ali Bey emerged from the incident without any prosecution. The prosecutor of this court was Necip Ali (Küçüka) of Denizli, and the members were Kılıç Ali of Gaziantep and Ali (Zırh) of Rize. The substitute was Dr. Reşit Galip of Aydın. The tribunal is also known as the *Dört Ali'ler* (Four Alis).

was that the various questions brought up in parliament were looked at and discussed from several points of view. İsmet Pasha admitted the truth of this. He asked how many members of Congress we had in America. The Admiral replied that we had some 420. İsmet Pasha expressed the greatest horror at this and was inclined to sympathize with the United States Government, even more when learned that besides 420 Congressmen we had a number of Senators. Apparently İsmet Pasha felt that 288 Deputies was more than sufficient as a source of trouble. He said that an opposition in a parliament was quite all right, but not an opposition which was opposed to the Constitution and to the foundation of the society.⁵¹

Bristol and his translator Mr. Shaw from the High Commission described the meeting as cordial and frank, but seem to have been surprised at İsmet Pasha's remark about deputies in the Turkish Assembly as a source of trouble. It was in this meeting that Bristol received first-hand information regarding the government's unfavorable attitude towards the opposition party in Turkey. It is noteworthy that the conversation took place two months before the closing of the PRP offices nationwide.

The legal political opposition was no doubt a source of anxiety for the RPP, for the PRP recruited very prestigious leaders into its ranks. Hence, it is fair to say that without the charisma of Mustafa Kemal, the RPP in all likelihood would not have been able to enjoy any popular majority in parliament. The possibility that, had the PRP continued to attract former CUP members in particular, it could have been a major contender for power was not too remote. However, among the rank-and-file members of the two parties, personal enmities were very visible, as demonstrated in the number of accusations leveled by RPP members against PRP members. According to Ahmet Yeşil, the author of a comprehensive study on the PRP, there were three commonalities in the accusations leveled against the PRP. The first is the fact that all accusations included complaints that the new party was manipulating religion for the purpose of gaining political power and registering members based on the claim that their party respected religion while the government party did not; second, that all accusers came from the ranks of the RPP; and third, that accusers had preexisting enmities against the accused in or outside the political arena.⁵²

51 "Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Turkey, 1910-29," 867.00/1872, Bristol to the Secretary of State, 6 May 1925.

52 Ahmet Yeşil, *Türkiye Cumhuriyetinde İlk Teşkilatlı Muhalefet Hareketi: Terakkiperver Cumhuriyet Fırkası*

By the same token, we do know that some leaders of the Progressive Republican Party (PRP) harbored envy against Mustafa Kemal and his close associates. The US archives house documents that demonstrate this point. For example, the “War Diary” of Rear Admiral Mark L. Bristol, the US High Commissioner who served in Turkey between 1919 and 1927, has an entry dated to 25 October 1923, dealing with the status of the caliph *vis-à-vis* the president. As is known, the sultanate was separated from the caliphate in 1922, and the former was abolished. The Ankara Government elected Abdülmecid Efendi as the new caliph. However, between 1922 and 1924, the legal and political status of the new caliph *vis-à-vis* the president of the Republic was a source of confusion, particularly for the diplomats in İstanbul. On this subject, Mark Bristol recorded in his diary a conversation between a certain Mr. Scotten, a member of the US diplomatic mission under Bristol, and Refet Pasha, who was the representative of the Ankara Government in İstanbul, but later became a member of the opposition:

I [Mr. Scotten] tried to ascertain Refet’s view as to the relative rank of the Calif and the “head of the State.” I stated that it was conceivable, for instance, that a ship of war might be in Constantinople when the head of the State arrived and it would be necessary to fire a salute both to him and to the Calif, and I asked him what he conceived to be the proper salute to be rendered to each one. He laughed uproariously, and stated, “Fire as many guns as you wish for that spiritual gentleman up there in the palace at Dolma Baghche. Give him all the honors you choose, but don’t salute the head of the State at all. Leave that poor fellow alone.” He said, “He is simply a man who is unhappy enough to have fallen into a disagreeable job and who in a few years may have to be riding on a tram car again.”⁵³

This conversation demonstrates that a certain level of confusion about the relative rank of the caliph existed. It is also possible that the question was geared towards understanding Ankara’s attitude towards the caliph. However, this piece of information is even more significant for scholars whose research concerns the personal rivalries among the rul-

(Ankara: Cedit, 2002), 323. The author has examined the TGNA Archives for the accusation files; hence, his statements certainly carry authority. However, for this particular conclusion, Yeşil does not offer any specific reference.

53 “Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Turkey, 1910-29,” 867.00/1745, Bristol to the Secretary of State, entry dated 23 October 1925.

ing elite in Turkey. We know that Refet Pasha, one of the leaders of the Turkish War of Independence, joined the ranks of the opposition party (PRP) in 1924. This information clearly demonstrates that even before the formation of the PRP, there was a certain level of jealousy. In fact, Mr. Scotten and Mr. Bristol specifically noted in the same entry that Refet Pasha came across in the interview as very envious of Mustafa Kemal.

This level of personal rivalry and struggle for power may be understandable during a period in which the power vacuum was not entirely filled. However, with Mustafa Kemal's solid support of the RPP, the playing ground was certainly not level, and the PRP was very vulnerable to government sanctions. Moreover, the closing of the opposition party did clearly contradict Mustafa Kemal's expressed desire for democracy. Although there were earlier indications that the government wanted to silence the political opposition by intimidation, such as the previously mentioned request of Prime Minister Fethi Bey from Kazım Karabekir for the PRP to dissolve itself on 25 February 1925, it was, as mentioned repeatedly, the Sheikh Said Rebellion that provided the government with a pretext for silencing the political and intellectual opposition.

Complaints about the PRP members and their political activities were finding their way into the TGNA soon after it was formed. A complaint mentioned in a document dated 1 February 1925 claimed that the PRP recruiters signed up new members by asking the question: "Do you prefer the Sultan or Mustafa Kemal?"⁵⁴ The rivals of the PRP soon realized that the most effective complaint was the use of religion in the political arena, as the party program of the PRP included an article (Article 6) confirming its respect for religion. Accordingly, a great many complaints came after the *Takrir-i Sükun* Law was passed on 4 March 1925. In the TGNA Archives, as Ahmet Yeşil informs us, there exist 68 different documents and one notebook of court proceedings against several PRP members.⁵⁵ The court proceedings include 14 sessions about complaints against the PRP. As a result of the investigation of these complaints, the Ankara Independence Tribunal, which was formed on 7 March 1925,⁵⁶ decided to confiscate all documents in possession of the PRP's İstanbul headquarters and other İstanbul branches

54 TGNA Archive, T3, D22 (Tasnif # 28), in Yeşil, *TCF*, 322, n. 41.

55 Ahmet Yeşil gives very detailed and well-documented information about the closing of the PRP based on the TGNA Archives (see *Ibid.*, particularly 321-76). For information about the TGNA Archives, I rely on Yeşil.

56 Ergün Aybars' *Aybars, İstiklal Mahkemeleri*. is a good source on these infamous tribunals, even though it is biased. For the Ankara Independence Tribunal, see 353-474.

on 11 April 1925. The tribunal was also interested in examining the documents related to the accounting of the PRP and ordered that all branches and headquarters be entered simultaneously.⁵⁷ Two large sacks of documents were confiscated by the police and sent to Ankara on 13 April 1925. Ahmet Yeşil has mentioned that the PRP's former Beykoz Branch director, Hüseyin Bey, the branch secretary, Hayri Bey, and Nuri Bey were taken into custody and sent to Ankara for questioning on the same day.⁵⁸ There were other members of the PRP—such as Salih Paşo and Kamil Efendi—who were accused of using religious propaganda for political gains.

The verdict of the Ankara Tribunal after examining the documents and questioning the accused was that the crime of religious propaganda in politics did take place. Accordingly, the court sentenced the accused to imprisonment, ranging from life-sentence to one year. One accused, Resul Hoca, was exiled to Ayaş, a small town in Anatolia.⁵⁹ It is important to note, however, that the tribunal did not limit itself to individuals committing the crime. It decided to “warn” the government about the PRP's activities. In other words, the PRP became entirely responsible for the actions of every single registered member. This was certainly a heavy burden for the PRP, as it was impossible to control every member of the party.

The major blow to the PRP did not come from the Ankara but the Eastern (Diyarbakır) Independence Tribunal. While the proceedings of the Ankara Tribunal continued, a similar case was brought before the Eastern Independence Tribunal. Mehmet Fethi Bey, the Urfa-Siverek representative of the PRP, was accused of manipulating religion for political gain. The case was significant, for it resulted in the closing-down of the PRP branches in Eastern Anatolia on 25 May 1925. Correspondingly, eight days later, on 3 June 1925, the government, based on the *Takrir-i Sükun*, ordered the closing-down (*sedd*) of all branches of the

57 The branches were Eminönü, Galata, Erenköy, Beykoz, Makriköy (Bakırköy), Rami, Kağıthane, Samatya, Arnavutköy, and Şile. Ahmet Yeşil also indicates that this list was taken from the Istanbul Governor Süleyman Sami's letter to the tribunal. In the daily newspapers, these branches were slightly different; see Yeşil, *TCF*, 339, n. 92.

58 Yeşil implies that there existed a bias in court against the arrested Beykoz members, for the date of their departure to Ankara coincides with that of the confiscated documents. In other words, the tribunal jumped to conclusions without examining the documents. However, Yeşil does admit that the initial contact with the members of the PRP was not an official arrest, since the police only took them into custody for questioning. The actual arrest came after their court appearance. See *Ibid.*, 339-340, n. 93.

59 Only Hüseyin Bey was acquitted. The verdict is in the TGNA Archives T3, D22, Karar 24, as quoted in Aybars, *İstiklal Mahkemeleri*, 363 and as referred to in Yeşil, *TCF*. The date given by Aybars is 3 May 1925; yet, Yeşil gives the date as 4 May 1924.

PRP. It is noteworthy that the party—technically speaking—was not dissolved, but all of its offices were closed. The PRP members continued to vote as a block in parliament. Nevertheless, for all practical purposes, this was the beginning of the single-party era, which lasted until 1946. The PRP was not allowed to re-open.

Was the closure of the PRP justified? A quick glance at Fethi Bey's case before the Eastern Independence Tribunal may raise doubts about the impartiality of the verdict. For that reason, let us first look more closely at the case. The most useful primary source in this context consists of the proceedings that can be found in the TGNA Archives.⁶⁰ The official records of the case indicate that those who accused Fethi Bey came from the ranks of the opposition party, the RPP.⁶¹ Ahmet Yeşil has drawn attention to the fact that the accusers used the exact same sentences and failed to bring any witnesses to the stand but each other. The accusers' identical sentences, claimed to be uttered by Fethi Bey, were the following:

They [the government] shut the *Madrasas* down. They did away with the Shari'a. We [the PRP] want the Shari'a of the Prophet (*Şeriat-ı Muhammediye*). Our party will advance the religion [Islam]. Let's work together.⁶²

These statements certainly fell into the category of treason and were punishable under the High Treason Law and the *Takrir-i Sükun*. Based on the above-mentioned accusation, Fethi Bey appeared before the tribunal on 30 April 1925. His trial was rather swift and lasted only three sessions (on 30 April, 12 May and 18 May 1925). Fethi Bey denied all accusations of himself manipulating religion and instead accused Mehmet Emin Bey, the director of the Urfa/Siverek branch of the RPP and the mayor of the town, of manufacturing such baseless rumors to harm the PRP.⁶³ Next, the prosecutor, Süreyya Bey, asked questions about Article 6 of the PRP's party program, which stated that "the party respects religion." The prosecutor wanted to know whether or not Fethi Bey ever considered this article being the culprit for the public's thinking of the PRP as religious party. The implication was simple: The PRP had included this article about religion in its program in the hope that it

60 TGNA Archives, T12, D3. These proceedings have been examined by Ahmet Yeşil, whose text includes some of the original documents. See Yeşil, *TCF*, 356-376.

61 *Ibid.*, n. 129.

62 *Ibid.*, n. 129, see also n. 130, 131, 132.

63 TGNA Archives, T12, D3, 3-4. The interrogation is quoted in *Ibid.*, 366-367.

would attract more conservative-minded people. This may be the case; however, Article 6 itself did not constitute a crime. In fact, the party had been formed with this program in November of 1924, with the permission of the government. The only crime would have been the abuse of the article for political gains. Aware of this, Fethi Bey's response was more political: "It is the responsibility of the TGNA to judge the legality of our 6th article. For this reason, I never referred to this article in my political activities."⁶⁴ In other words, Fethi Bey denied the charge that he had manipulated religion.

Other than the accounts of the accusers belonging to the rival party, as mentioned above, the prosecutor also utilized the statements of Sheikh Eyüp, the director of the Siverek branch of Fethi Bey's own party. In his accounts, Sheikh Eyüp stated that Fethi Bey stayed in his house for 15 days when they were trying to form the Siverek branch. Sheikh Eyüp added:

[Fethi Bey] was trying to establish the PRP branch here and was recruiting members. He was indicating that Mustafa Kemal gave permission for this, and their party has respect for religion. The other party [RPP] does not comply with religion that much. He said this openly.⁶⁵

Ahmet Yeşil has speculated that such an accusation could be the result of possible false promises made to him.⁶⁶ However, we do not have any record of such a deal, except that such a possibility did exist. Fethi Bey categorically denied the charge but was not able to escape the verdict that found him guilty as charged. He was sentenced to five years in prison, in Sinop. Because of his previous good standing as a citizen and his service to the nation, the sentence was reduced to three years.

The verdicts of the Ankara Independence Tribunal on 3 May 1925,⁶⁷ as well as of the Eastern (Diyarbakır) Independence Tribunal on 19 May 1925,⁶⁸ resulted in a government (cabinet) decree on 3 June 1925 to close down all offices of the PRP nationwide.⁶⁹ The decree was signed

64 Contradicting this account is the memoir of Süreyya Bey, the prosecutor of the Eastern Tribunal. Süreyya Bey claimed that Fethi Bey did not favor Article 6 of his party program and that he clearly stated this view in court. See Örgüven, *Şeyh Said İsyanı*, 130.

65 For a more complete treatment, see Yeşil, *TCF*, 370, n. 160.

66 *Ibid.*, 369, n. 157.

67 Karar No: 24/Esas No: 3, in TGNA, T3, D22. The full text can be found in *Ibid.*, 482-484.

68 Karar No: 30/Esas No: 32, in TGNA, T12, D3. The full text can be found in *Ibid.*, 485-487.

69 For the full text in English, see Zürcher, *Political Opposition*, 160-162; for the Turkish text, see Tarık Zafer Tunaya, *Türkiye'de Siyasal Partiler, 1859-1952* (İstanbul: n.p., 1952), 621-622 and Yeşil, *TCF*, 488-

by Mustafa Kemal Pasha (the President), İsmet Pasha (the Prime Minister), and six other ministers of the government.⁷⁰ According to the decree:

During the [prosecutions] and trials concerning a number of provocations taking place before the Independence Tribunal of Ankara, it has been established that a number of persons holding official functions within the Progressive Republican Party in the İstanbul area have used the principle of respect for religious opinions and beliefs, included in the party's program, as a means to deceive public opinion and to stimulate religious incitement, and the decision of the tribunal, to the effect that it has been decided to draw the government's attention to the current attitude of the party, has been laid before the government by the public prosecutor's office.

During the [prosecutions] and trials of the Independence Tribunal of Diyarbakır it has been established that official representatives of the Progressive Republican Party have used the principle of respect for religious ideas and beliefs, included in the party program, as a means to gain support for the propaganda of reactionaries who pretend to save the country from atheists and that this has led to many serious incidents during the manifestations of the latest [Sheikh Said] insurrection. [...] Under these circumstances, it is impossible to allow a movement aimed at the use of religion for political purposes to exist.⁷¹

Conclusion

In this study, I have tried to examine several questions. The first and most consequential question concerns the relationship between the Sheikh Said Rebellion and the radical Kemalists. Although foreign observers—American, French, and British—entertained the possibility and even suggested that the Ankara Government fomented the rebellion, this view was of the minority. These sources hardly went beyond speculation and are inconclusive. They based their claim on circumstantial evidence that the Sheikh Said Rebellion benefited the Kemalists more than the Kurds or the British.

We have more convincing evidence to support the claim that the

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70 Dr. Tevfik (Foreign Minister), Rüştü Recep (Minister of Defense), Dr. Tevfik Rüştü (Minister of Justice), Mehmet Sabri (Naval Minister), and Ali Cenani (Minister of Commerce).

71 I use the English translation by Zürcher. I have corrected the mistranslation of the word *takibat* from "persecution" to "prosecution."

Sheikh Said Rebellion was manipulated by way of exaggerating its possible overall effects in the country. It is well documented that even before the Sheikh Said Revolt Mustafa Kemal, İsmet İnönü and the radical wing of the RPP were very insecure about and sensitive towards any criticism, let alone political opposition. Therefore, they were highly suspicious of the formation of a new political party, the PRP, in opposition. It was almost a natural reflex to force the opposition to dissolve, for it was obvious that the aims of the radical Kemalists and their methods to accomplish these would be hindered by any political opposition. They were aware that the use of religion would be a great weapon for the opposition in elections and that the new radical reforms required total silence.

In many primary sources, even those written by members of Mustafa Kemal's inner circle, the methods to accomplish the new reforms were regarded as despotic.⁷² However, it should be noted that the political landscape of the early Republic presented a dilemma for Mustafa Kemal. He would either deal with the opposition within democratic means, at the expense of risking his reforms and position in power; or he would entirely eliminate the opposition in such a way that they could not recover at all. Such a dilemma did not exist in the minds of Mustafa Kemal's radical followers, such as Recep (Peker). To them, the end justified the means, and the new regime (or their hold on power) had to be protected by any means. The radical wing of the Kemalist faction—who controlled the means of power—opted for the latter; by doing so, however, they laid the very foundation of the political culture of Republican Turkey. In the following decades, the successive governments' main goal was to tame, if not to eliminate, the opposition as much as possible and to monopolize the government. Such a lack of respect for a healthy political opposition is also one of the problems that modern Turkey faces even in the twenty-first century.

At this point, one may pose another significant question: If Mustafa Kemal and the radicals did not have much respect for political opposition, why did they insist on creating the new regime as a republic based on democratic principles? In my judgment, republicanism was the only viable regime for Mustafa Kemal and his friends after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. Mustafa Kemal's assuming the title of "caliph" was not realistic and contradicted his own political orientation. However,

72 For example, in reference to the Alphabet Reform, Falih Rıfık Atay, a close friend of Mustafa Kemal's, claimed that "[t]his was a top-down (*tepeden inme*) surprise. The TGNA did not even know about it. There is no doubt that the method [of implementing this reform] was dictatorial." See Falih Rıfık Atay, *Atatürkçülük Nedir?* (Istanbul: Ak, 1966), 34.

as a soldier and a statesman who was influenced by the political ideals of the West, Mustafa Kemal's commitment to republicanism was only in a practical sense. The power struggle and the political realities of the country made it impossible for Mustafa Kemal to fully commit himself to the practice of true democracy. Therefore, lip service was always paid to this ideal; yet, in reality, as the *Takrir-i Sükun* and the Independence Tribunal experience teach us, there was no obligation to practice it. Nor was there any remorse within the ranks of the RPP radicals that the regime was not a republic with room for political opposition.

The closure of the PRP, the only legal opposition in Turkey, was also a direct result of the Sheikh Said Revolt. Although the government suggested a link between the revolt and PRP activities, this was never proven. It was the use of religion for political gains that was utilized as pretext for the decision. Article 6 of the PRP program—the party's respect for religious opinions and beliefs—created an environment in which one could connect individual activities to the party in general. This article gave the government an opportunity to blame the entire party apparatus for the actions of individuals. It must be mentioned that the prosecutors clearly failed to prove beyond reasonable doubt that even those individuals who were accused of manipulating religion for political purposes were guilty as charged. Verdicts were handed down based upon suspicious accounts by eyewitnesses, most of whom were active members of the rival party.

Foreign observers followed the developments in Ankara with great interest and made rather intriguing observations. After the passing of the *Takrir-i Sükun* and the re-activation of the Independence Tribunals, Admiral Bristol, the US High Commissioner in İstanbul, sent his assessments to the Secretary of State in Washington DC on 8 May 1925. It reads as follows:

Angora is rapidly modeling itself on the Tcheka. Its aim is seemingly to remove all political opposition; its methods are to convict on the basis of a settled policy and not on the evidence presented; its victims, in addition to nonconsequential citizens, are men of influence and standing. It has tried editors not only for the offensive use of a word, but for a state of mind. It has succeeded in so terrorizing the press, that its most flagrant lapses from equity have not even been criticized; it has so terrorized the opposition that protests are no longer being made against its unconstitutionality.

This diatribe may seem strong to the [State] Department, but I do not think it stronger than the circumstances justify. The atmo-

sphere of suspicion and distrust which the activities of the Tribunal have engendered recalls the atmosphere of Hamidian days, and there is a distinct danger, if the appetite of the Tribunal grows with the eating, personal liberty may well be entirely suppressed in Turkey [...]

[The trials of the journalists] may be regarded as yet further manifestations of the Government's decision to stamp out by strong measures all open opposition. Thus policy was perhaps never stated more forcibly and clearly than by Redjeb Bey, Minister of National Defense, who gave out the following interview to the "Hur-Fikir" (Free Thought) of Ismid: "All individuals or associations, whomsoever they may be, whose actions on Turkish soil are to the detriment of the Turk or Turkism, have no right to life, and are condemned to destruction. We will amputate all gangrenous limbs."⁷³

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