

OPINION

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Ottomania, sculpture-phobia and the conservative agenda

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Two interesting controversies have swamped the Turkish media in the past few days, and both have tested the tolerance of the conservative camp.

The first one was about a new TV series named "The Magnificent Century." It is a drama about the inner life of Süleyman the Magnificent, who ruled the Ottoman Empire during the 16th century, the zenith of its power. The drama's trailer included scenes showing the sultan drinking wine and having intimate moments with his significant other, the all-attractive Hürrem. (Some even took a hint of a homosexual relationship, which did not turn out to be the case.)

As normal as these can be for a tacky, rating-seeking soap opera, they were enough to enrage some religious conservatives, who see an Islamic golden age in the Ottoman Empire. With a strong conviction in the incorruptible piety of the Ottoman dynasty, these Islamic groups marched in Istanbul to protest the drama, even before its release. Meanwhile, tens of thousands called the Supreme Board of Radio and Television, or RTÜK, to ban this "mockery on our Ottoman ancestors." Even worse, Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç made a public remark criticizing the film and saying, "Whatever needs to be done will be done."

Thought-policing?

Luckily, the series' first episode was aired last Wednesday, and the tension calmed down a bit. Turks will probably be able to see the rest of it as well. Yet the conservative reaction to this drama marked problems worth pondering.

The first problem is the over-idealization of the Ottoman Empire. The readers of this column know that I, too, have great respect for that bygone state – mostly for its pluralism. But a realistic respect is different than romantic adoration. From a Muslim perspective, the Ottomans might be good "servants of Islam," but they were also humans with sins and temptations. Quite a few Ottoman sultans, for example, were

indeed wine drinkers. And while their harem was not the orgy-ground that filled the fantasies of some early Orientalists, it was not a sexless monastery either.

The more important problem is some of the conservatives' willingness to ban things that they don't like. They certainly had the right to criticize the film, or even organize public protests against it. But asking its removal from the screens by a state institution crosses the line. It becomes a clear manifestation of an authoritarian mindset.

Several commentators in the Turkish press noted the similarity the conservatives have shown to the Kemalists. The latter does the exact same thing with regards to Atatürk: They depict him as a perfect, supra-human leader devoid of any mistakes and weaknesses. And when they see a film or a book that differs from that surreal narrative, they open court cases to have it banned. The law that criminalizes "insulting Atatürk" stands exactly for that kind of thought-policing.

That's why my objection to the conservative hype here is not weaker than to the Kemalist ones: Those within the former camp who try to advance their values by relying on state authority are wrong, damn wrong. They rather should start to learn to play by the rules of a liberal democracy. If they want to honor the Ottoman Empire, and any other aspect of the Islamic civilization, for example, they should try producing their own films – and produce them in a way which will appeal to the unconverted as well.

Statue-hunting?

The second public controversy of these days is the "Monument of Humanity" that has stood near the city of Kars since 2009. Made by prominent Turkish artist Mehmet Aksoy, it is supposed to carry a reconciliatory message to Armenia, from which the 35-meter high huge statue can be seen.

Yet in a recent visit to Kars, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan called the monument "bizarre" and said it would be removed. Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu supported him in a more explanatory note, arguing, "the monument does not fit in with the architectural texture of Kars."

Well, I concede Erdoğan's and Davutoğlu's right to dislike the monument – I haven't fallen in love with it, either – but I don't think that they should call for its removal. Only the citizens of Kars should have the right to decide whether they want to keep the monument or not. The aesthetic preferences of politicians can just not be a national criterion.

Besides that political aspect, the Kars controversy seems to shed light on the cultural aversion some Muslims conservatives have against the art of sculpture. An Islamic film director recently made this obvious on the TV by saying, "any form of sculpture is simply banned in Islam."

I beg to differ. What is banned in Islam is idolatry, and the early Muslim tradition, like Judaism, extended this to all "graven images" and statues, fearing that they would encourage idol-worship. But we live in a different age now, in which people build statues not to worship them, but for artistic and cultural purposes, such as the peaceful messages the Monument of Humanity stands for.

That's why Erdoğan should let it stay. And the conservatives should start to understand that they cannot impose their values via state authority. They can only propose them within a medium of liberty.